

**IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**

MASTER'S THESIS

**GATHERING KNOWLEDGE, SHAPING SELVES:
ETHNOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS INTO YOUNG
ARAB WOMEN'S INFORMAL LEARNING
EXPERIENCES IN ISTANBUL**

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**THESIS ADVISOR
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ISTANBUL, 2025

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by

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fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
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ÖZ

BİLGİ TOPLAMAK, KENDİNİ ŞEKİLLENDİRMEK: İSTANBUL'DAKİ GENÇ ARAP KADINLARININ RESMİ OLMAYAN ÖĞRENME DENEYİMLERİNE ETNOGRAFİK BAKIŞLAR

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Bu etnografik çalışma, İstanbul'daki genç Arap kadınlar arasında yaygın olan gayri resmi öğrenme ve bilgi paylaşım uygulamalarını ve bu uygulamaların, Müslüman ve Arap olma ortak kimlikleriyle topluluk oluşturmalarına nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu inceliyor. Bu toplantıların (dini çalışma gruplarından kitap kulüplerine veya siyaset, tarih ve sosyal konular üzerine konferanslara kadar) göç ve yerinden edilme bağlamında eğitim, anlam oluşturma, kimlik oluşumu ve kolektif iyileşme için kritik alanlar olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü ele alıyor.

Bu etnografik araştırma, katılımcı gözlem ve bu toplantılara haftalık olarak düzenli katılan 15 genç kadınla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanmaktadır. Ayrıca, katılımcıların WhatsApp, Telegram grupları ve sosyal medya platformları aracılığıyla katılımlarını ve topluluk oluşturmalarını nasıl genişlettiklerini anlamak için dijital etnografiden de yararlandım.

Genellikle kültür merkezlerinde, kafelerde, vakıf kuruluşlarında, evlerde, camilerde veya parklarda düzenlenen bu buluşmalar, katılımcıların göçün, dindarlığın karmaşıklıklarıyla başa çıkmalarına ve din, siyaset, tarih, sosyal konular ve yaşam becerileri alanlarındaki büyük bilginlerden deneysel bilgiler edinmelerine olanak

tanırken, yeni aidiyet ve öz-anlayış biçimleri geliştirmelerini sağlıyor. Hem dışsal hem de içsel düzeyde onlara yardımcı olan bir topluluk inşa ediyorlar.

Teorik olarak, bu çalışma, İbn Haldun'un asabiyye (sosyal dayanışma) kavramı, Bourdieu'nun sosyal sermaye teorisi ve Wenger'in Uygulama Toplulukları kavramından yola çıkarak, bu genç kadınların nasıl yeni arkadaşlıklar kurduklarını, bir topluluk oluşturdıklarını ve yeni fırsatlar bulduklarını analiz ediyor.

Bu öğrenme çemberlerinin hem epistemik topluluklar hem de duygusal sığınaklar olarak işlev gördüğünü, katılımcıların bir araya gelerek yeni aidiyet biçimleri geliştirdiğini, anlamı birlikte yarattığını, eylemliliklerinin koşullarını yeniden şekillendirdiğini, direnç geliştirdiğini, yeni bir yuva duygusu yarattığını ve hem ev sahibi toplumda hem de diasporik hayal dünyalarında görünürlük bulduğunu savunuyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Arap Kadınları, Asabiyye, Gayriresmi Öğrenme, Göç, Sosyal Sermaye, Topluluk Oluşturma.

ABSTRACT

GATHERING KNOWLEDGE, SHAPING SELVES: ETHNOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS INTO YOUNG ARAB WOMEN'S INFORMAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN ISTANBUL

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This ethnographic study examines the informal learning and knowledge-sharing practices among young Arab women in Istanbul and how these practices contribute to their community building, with their shared identity of being Muslim and being Arab. It examines how these gatherings (ranging from religious study circles to book clubs or lectures on politics, history and social issues) serve as critical spaces for education, meaning-making, identity formation, and collective healing in the context of migration and displacement.

This ethnographic research is grounded in participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 15 young women who regularly attend these gatherings on a weekly basis. I also drew on digital ethnography to understand how participants extend their engagement and community-making through WhatsApp, Telegram groups and social media platforms.

The gatherings, often held in cultural centres, coffee shops, waqf organizations, homes, mosques, or parks allow participants to navigate the complexities of migration, religiosity, and gather empirical knowledge from great scholars in the fields of religion, politics, history, social issues and life skills, while articulating new forms of

belonging and self-understanding. They are building a community that helps them on both an external and internal level.

Theoretically, the study is informed by Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyyah* (social solidarity), Bourdieu's theory of social capital, and Wenger's concept of Communities of Practice to analyse how these young women form new friendships, build a community, and find new opportunities.

I argue that these learning circles function as both epistemic communities and affective sanctuaries, where participants come together and articulate new forms of belonging, co-create meaning, reshape the terms of their agency, cultivate resilience, create a new sense of home and find visibility within both the host society and their diasporic imaginaries.

Keywords: Arab Women, *Asabiyyah*, Community Building, Informal Learning, Migration, Social Capital.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to:

My mother, Huda, for her love and unwavering belief in me.

My father, Yousef, for his love, care, strength, and support.

My sister, Tuqa, for being Allah's biggest blessing in my life.



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First and foremost, all praise belongs to Allah for the countless blessings He has bestowed upon me.

I want to thank me, I want to thank me for believing in me, I want to thank me for my perseverance throughout this journey. Despite numerous challenges encountered while working on this research project, I did not give up; instead, I continued to move forward and remained committed to completing this work. This thesis stands as a reflection of that resilience and determination.

I am deeply grateful to my family for their unwavering love, care, and support. I extend my endless love and respect to them for standing by my side throughout every stage of my MA journey.

I would like to thank my dear friends, Thuraya, Noor, Sadia and Duaa, for their love, support, and great friendship.

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Ghena RAHMAN
İSTANBUL, 2025

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Migration is never just about movement from one place to another; it is about the shifting of entire lives, relationships, and ways of knowing into a new world full of uncertainties. For young Arab women like me and those at the centre of this research, arriving in Istanbul is not simply a story of relocation. It is a process of renegotiating identity, reconstructing community, and rethinking what it means to belong while building a new life. Istanbul, with its rich history of empires, faith, and migration, that presents both opportunities and challenges. Istanbul welcomes Arabs through its geographic, religious, and cultural proximities, yet it also confronts them with hierarchies, discrimination, and the struggles of navigating life as migrants in a metropolis. In this big and complex city, young Arab women have been creating their own spaces of resilience and informal gatherings where they share knowledge, exchange experiences, and build forms of solidarity that sustain them.

This thesis is about those gatherings. It is about how circles of women meeting in mosques, cultural centres, cafés, and even WhatsApp groups become classrooms, sanctuaries, and miniature homelands. It is about how women come together not only to study religion, politics, or literature, but also to reaffirm their identities, nurture one another, and imagine futures in contexts of displacement. At the heart of this study lies the question: *How do informal learning gatherings among young Arab women in Istanbul shape their identities, foster community, and provide forms of social and epistemic support in the context of migration?*

My own journey into this research began long before I decided to pursue a master's degree in sociology. Growing up in Amman, Jordan, I was accustomed to a culture where religious and intellectual circles were part of everyday life. As a child, I attended Qur'an study groups in the mosque. As I grew older, I joined book clubs and informal discussions where we debated social and political issues. These gatherings, though not

officially labelled as “education,” were profoundly formative. They shaped my faith, my intellectual curiosity, and my sense of belonging.

When I moved to Istanbul in late 2021, my neighbourhoods in Büyükçekmece felt distant from the communal spirit I had hoped to find in Turkey. The streets and cafés reminded me more of Europe than of the Arab world, and the presence of a visible Muslim community felt muted. Later, when I began my studies at Ibn Haldun University and moved to Başakşehir, I entered a different landscape. Here, practising Muslims were more visible, and I felt that I was living in a Muslim city. Through friends, I learned of numerous gatherings organised by and for Arab women.

At first, I attended them simply for personal enrichment; I wanted to meet people, make friends, stay connected to my faith and a familiar cultural world. I sat in Qur’an circles, joined political discussions, and attended book clubs. Over time, however, I began to notice patterns: the way women talk to each other and build trust, the way conversations flowed from religion to politics to personal struggles, and the way sisterhood emerged through small acts of care, such as helping someone find an apartment or simply asking after someone who was absent. I realised that these gatherings were doing more than sharing knowledge; they were building a community, a support family, or even, as they put it themselves, a family, and they were shaping identities, creating solidarities, and offering women a sense of home in exile.

This personal realisation became the seed for my thesis: what I had thought of as ordinary social spaces were, in fact, profound sites of learning, identity negotiation, and resilience. As both a participant and a researcher, I wanted to document and analyse these experiences not only because they mattered to me, but because they mattered to so many women around me whose voices are often missing from scholarly accounts of migration.

Istanbul today is home to a vast and diverse Arab population because of the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011 and the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The city has attracted Syrians, Iraqis, Yemenis, Libyans, Palestinians, Egyptians, and Lebanese families seeking safety, education, and opportunity. For them, Istanbul offers affordability

compared to the Gulf, cultural familiarity compared to Europe, and the opportunity to raise children in a predominantly Muslim environment.

Arab migrants, especially Syrians, have also faced significant challenges: discrimination, economic marginalisation, and shifting public attitudes that frame them alternately as guests, burdens on the Turkish economy, or threats. Women in particular experience layered vulnerabilities as they must navigate not only the legal and economic challenges of being migrants, but also a dominant secular environment in universities and workplaces where, just because you are a Hijabi and Arab woman, you are discriminated against.

Within this context, informal learning gatherings have flourished in Istanbul, particularly in the areas of residence of migrants from the Arab world. These gatherings take many forms: structured Qur'an classes led by female teachers, semi-formal study circles in cultural centres, book clubs discussing politics and history, and casual meetings in cafés where young women talk about identity, modest fashion, or emotional struggles. All the gatherings extend into digital spaces as well, WhatsApp and Telegram groups, where women share resources, advice, and reflections

These spaces matter because they offer more than education; they provide community, they create a sense of safety where women can speak Arabic, wear hijab without scrutiny, and discuss issues that are often misunderstood or marginalised in the wider society. They are places where young woman articulates who they are as Arabs, as Muslims, as migrants, and as women negotiating the complexities of Istanbul.

Why Informal Learning? Most studies on migration and integration focus on formal structures, such as state policies, schools, and NGOs. While important, these frameworks often overlook the everyday ways migrants learn and adapt, and most importantly, build their own spaces where they can exist freely. As scholars like Livingstone (1999) and Alenius (2018) have shown, informal learning, the kind that can happen in parks, mosques, living rooms and online chats, can be just as significant, if not more, in shaping migrants' experiences.

Informal learning is relational. It is embedded in stories, advice, and shared practices. It is flexible, responsive, and rooted in lived experience. For young Arab women in

Istanbul, informal gatherings are where they learn not only about bureaucratic processes and job opportunities, but also about themselves: how to carry their faith with confidence, how to form friendships, and how to belong in a city that sometimes excludes them. By focusing on informal learning, this study highlights a dimension of migration that is both deeply personal and profoundly social. It shifts the lens from institutions to communities, from policies to practices, from statistics to lived experiences.

While there is an expanding body of literature on Arab migration to Turkey, much of it focuses on Syrians. Women's everyday experiences, particularly their informal learning and community-building practices, remain understudied. There is little research that captures how women themselves create spaces of knowledge and solidarity, how these spaces function, and how they impact identity formation and resilience.

This study addresses that gap. By centring the voices of 15 young Arab women and observing the gatherings they attend, I aim to show how informal learning functions not only as a coping mechanism but as a site of transformation.

This thesis is guided by the central question: *How do informal learning gatherings among young Arab women in Istanbul shape their identities, foster community, and provide forms of social and epistemic support in the context of migration?* Building on this inquiry, the research explores the types of knowledge that circulate within these gatherings and the ways in which they are shared, examining how such spaces foster a sense of belonging and community among participants, bringing them together and making them feel less isolated within the host society. It also considers how these circles influence the formation and negotiation of religious, cultural, and gendered identities, highlighting the role of collective learning in processes of self-understanding and social positioning. Ultimately, the study examines how digital platforms expand and transform these communities, facilitating new forms of connection, exchange, and continuity that extend beyond the physical gatherings themselves.

As a young Arab Muslim woman living in Istanbul, I am not a distant observer of these dynamics; I am part of them as I attend the same gatherings, share many of the same challenges, and navigate similar questions of identity and belonging. This insider perspective gave me access and trust. Participants did not see me as an outsider because I had been attending these gatherings for over two years before starting my ethnographic fieldwork, and like them, I was someone who also carried questions and struggles.

To capture the richness of these gatherings, I used three complementary methods. First, participant observation enabled me to attend weekly circles, observe interactions, and participate in discussions, which provided insight into both the formal and subtle dynamics of learning. Second, through semi-structured interviews with 15 young women from diverse Arab backgrounds, I invited participants to reflect on their experiences in their own words, enabling me to access personal narratives and subjective meanings. Third, digital ethnography traced how learning and support extended into WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram, platforms where knowledge circulates constantly and where communities sustain themselves beyond physical encounters. Bringing these methods together enabled me to see how informal learning unfolds across physical and digital spaces, how it feels in lived experience, and how it shapes both individual and collective identities.

Throughout this process, I drew on grounded theory as an analytic orientation, which allowed themes and insights to emerge from the data itself. This approach ensured that my interpretations were grounded in the participants' voices, while also providing a framework for developing broader sociological understandings of community, identity, and belonging in the context of migration. Taken together, these methods and this analytic approach positioned me to address my central research question: *How do informal learning gatherings among young Arab women in Istanbul shape their identities, foster community, and provide forms of social and epistemic support in the context of migration?*

This thesis contributes to the existing sociological knowledge on both academic and social levels. It attempts to contribute to migration and sociology studies by highlighting informal learning as a crucial but often overlooked dimension of migrant

life. It engages with theories of social capital (Bourdieu), asabiyyah (Ibn Khaldun), communities of practice (Wenger), pious subject formation (Mahmood), situated learning (Lave & Wenger), and cultural identity (Hall). By applying a framework informed by these theories, it enriches our understanding of how identity, knowledge, and belonging are co-produced in diasporic contexts.

Social: It also documents and validates the voices of young Arab women, a group often sidelined in both host society narratives and scholarly research. It demonstrates how they are not passive recipients of integration policies, but rather active agents who create their own spaces of resilience, learning, and solidarity.

Personal and Community-Based: For the women themselves and for communities like ours, this study affirms that what happens in these ordinary gatherings is extraordinary. It is knowledge-making, world-building, and life-shaping. By writing about them, I hope to honour their significance and ensure they are not rendered invisible.

This thesis unfolds across six chapters, building gradually from context and theory to lived experience and interpretation. Following this introduction, the second chapter reviews the literature on informal learning and community-based knowledge sharing, situating the study within the broader context of migration and diaspora scholarship while highlighting the gaps that this research addresses. The third chapter outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of social capital, Ibn Khaldun's Asabiyyah, Wenger's communities of practice, Saba Mahmood's theory of pious subject formation, situated learning, and Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory in order to understand the ways knowledge, identity, and solidarity are produced in these gatherings. Chapter 4 then turns to methodology, describing the ethnographic approach, fieldwork design, digital ethnography, and ethical considerations that shaped this study while also situating the research within Istanbul's unique social and cultural landscape.

The fifth chapter presents the empirical findings, weaving together participant observation, interviews, and digital ethnography to illustrate how young Arab women build resilience, create a sense of belonging, and negotiate their identity through informal gatherings. This analysis demonstrates how these spaces function

simultaneously as epistemic communities and affective sanctuaries, and how everyday practices of learning are deeply tied to care, solidarity, and self-shaping. Chapter Six presents a theoretical reframing that engages the findings in dialogue with the chosen frameworks, illustrating how informal learning extends beyond the transmission of knowledge to the reshaping of values, aspirations, and identities in diaspora. The final chapter concludes by synthesising the study's main contributions, reflecting on its limitations, and suggesting directions for future research, while also offering sociological as well as personal reflections on what it means to document and participate in these circles as a young Arab woman in Istanbul.

This introduction has set the stage for a study that is both individual and collective, as well as academic and affective. It is individual because it emerges from my own journey as a migrant Arab woman navigating Istanbul. It is collective because it centres the voices and experiences of 15 young women who, like me, are creating lives, identities, and communities in this city.

The chapters that follow will demonstrate that informal learning is not marginal; it is, rather, central. It is in these gatherings, these circles of women, that knowledge is made, selves are shaped, and communities are born. By attending to them, we can gain a deeper understanding not only of the lives of young Arab women in Istanbul, but also of the broader processes through which migrants everywhere craft belonging, resilience, and meaning in uncertain times.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INFORMAL LEARNING AND COMMUNITY-BASED KNOWLEDGE SHARING AMONG YOUNG MIGRANT WOMEN

Migration is never simply about crossing borders; it is a process of renegotiating one's place in the world. For many young women who migrate, particularly from the Arab world to Istanbul, this process unfolds not only in relation to the host society but also within the intimate spaces of migrant communities that have a shared identity and culture. While formal education and institutional programs often dominate policy discussions about integration, they account for only a fraction of how migrant women actually acquire the knowledge, skills, strength, and confidence needed to navigate their new lives. The everyday, uncredentialed exchanges that take place in living rooms, religious gatherings, online groups, and neighbours' meetings form an equally powerful, if less visible, curriculum.

Informal learning as it emerges in migrant contexts is deeply embedded in relationships; It is carried in the stories women share about navigating bureaucratic hurdles, in the advice passed between young women about universities and work opportunities, in the quiet encouragement exchanged during a shared iftar in Ramadan or celebrating Eid together, or in the collective recitation of the Quran and religious texts. Such practices not only transfer practical info about navigating the host society but also preserve faith, language, cultural traditions, and values that anchor identity in the midst of displacement. They create spaces where women can reaffirm their identities, even as they adapt to a city that is at once familiar in its cultural proximity and challenging in its social hierarchies.

This literature review begins by situating these dynamics within the broader scholarship on informal learning and community-based knowledge sharing among migrant women. Drawing on studies from diverse geographic contexts, this research highlights how peer networks function as informal learning environments, where women gain both practical tools for survival and intangible resources, such as confidence, agency, and a sense of belonging. The review examines how these networks serve as substitutes for absent extended family structures and support systems back home, sustain cultural identity, and empower women to reimagine their lives in new social contexts.

The second part of the chapter turns to the specific context of the Arab diaspora in Istanbul. The city's position as both a regional hub and a diverse social space makes it a particularly interesting site for exploring the intersections of migration, identity, and learning. Since the early 2010s, Istanbul has become home to a diverse Arab community, Syrians displaced by war, families from countries affected by the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and return migrants from Western and Gulf countries.

While Istanbul offers opportunities in terms of education, religious life, and cultural familiarity, Arab migrants, especially Syrians, have also encountered persistent discrimination and economic marginalization. The discrimination culminated in violent incidents, including the Kayseri riots in mid-2024, where protests escalated into attacks against Syrian neighbourhoods, and approximately 475 people were detained by authorities¹). The literature on this subject reveals how ethnic hierarchies, nationalist discourse, and fluctuating public sentiment shape migrants' everyday experiences, producing a fragile sense of belonging that is constantly renegotiated. As Tuncer (2024) discusses, ethnic hierarchies in Istanbul are evident, where migrants from Europe are perceived and welcomed as “expats,” while Arab migrants are perceived as less welcome (Tuncer, 2024).

By weaving together insights from research on informal learning and studies on the Arab presence in Istanbul, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the role of women's community gatherings and learning circles in my own fieldwork. These

¹ Financial Times, 2024. 475 detained after Kayseri anti-Syrian riots.

spaces cannot be reduced to educational programs; they are living ecosystems where cultural transmission, mutual support, and practical skill-building intersect. In mapping this scholarly groundwork, I aim to demonstrate how these informal networks serve as both a response to exclusion and a strategy for self-empowerment, providing Arab women in Istanbul with the support and tools necessary to navigate the city, preserve their heritage, and envision a future that bridges their home and host societies.

2.1. Arab Diaspora in Istanbul

The early 2010s marked a significant demographic and cultural shift in Istanbul as large waves of Arab migrants settled in the city, most notably Syrians fleeing the war in Syria. As well as Arabs from other Arab countries like Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, who were part of the Arab Spring and the aftermath of that, also found themselves as migrants in Istanbul. The influx of all these Arabs attracted more Arabs who are from countries that have suffered wars in the past or continue to do so today, like Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon. Some of whom were living in the United States, Europe, Canada and even the Gulf countries.

A combination of economic factors, the religious aspect, and geography drew Arabs to Istanbul. Living costs are significantly cheaper than in places like the Gulf countries, which have become increasingly expensive over the past decade. With education for migrants being particularly expensive, especially at universities, Istanbul offered a viable solution. The majority of Arab families in Istanbul are supported by their fathers or both parents who work in Gulf countries; their children are able to access education that is far less expensive than in the Gulf countries.

Then, for the religious aspect for many Arab Muslim families coming from the United States, Europe, and Canada Istanbul combined the aspect of being able to raise their children in a religious, conservative city, and also close to the west, where their livelihoods depended on them being there and close to the east, where they were able to visit their homeland.

Although Turkey initially adopted a policy of welcoming Syrian refugees through its “guests” framework, Arab migrants have frequently encountered discrimination and

marginalisation in Turkish society. This has manifested in multiple ways, including racialised media portrayals, limited access to stable employment, and xenophobic attitudes in daily life. Syrians in particular have often been depicted as a burden on the Turkish economy or as culturally incompatible with Turkish secularism, despite their visible integration into local economies and neighbourhoods. These dynamics have contributed to a fragile sense of belonging, where Arab migrants remain socially peripheral even when they are physically embedded in Turkish urban life (Yıldız and Sert 2017).

At the interpersonal level, Arab migrants report facing everyday forms of exclusion, such as being treated with suspicion in public spaces or being subjected to derogatory comments, often linked to rising nationalist discourse and economic anxieties within Turkey. These tensions are especially pronounced in major cities, such as Istanbul, where large Arab communities have settled and become increasingly visible. While Arab-led businesses, cultural spaces, and media outlets have flourished in some areas, they coexist with underlying resentment from segments of the host population.

“One of the most unique findings of this study relates to the “conscious distance” that the Turkish society has established between themselves and Syrians in Turkey. While the Turkish society do not avoid helping and supporting the Syrians who had to escape war and persecution, Turks quite clearly demonstrated that they are unprepared to share their future with Syrians.” (Erdoğan 2018, 27)

This study goes over who views this presence of Syrians as a threat to their future, both culturally and economically (Erdoğan 2020). This whiplash between hospitality and hostility is crucial to understanding the informal learning, identity-making, and community-building practices of Arab migrants in Turkey, both generally and more specifically in Istanbul. Depending on the news and political agenda of the day, Syrians are welcome today and not so much tomorrow.

“Thus, migration to Turkey mostly results in ‘upward mobility’ (Arnaut et al., 2020) for North Americans and Europeans due to their white cultural capital, which increases the relative value of their qualifications and allows them to take advantage of the opportunity of ‘geographical arbitrage’ (Hayes, 2014; Hayes & Pérez-Gañán, 2017; Ong, 2006). On the other hand, North Africans, Middle Easterners and South Asians, albeit slightly, set an example for the pattern of downward mobilities. Although the former are appreciated and accepted by Turkish society as ‘expats’, the latter are labelled ‘Arabs’ as a way of belittling them and are sometimes exposed to exclusionary behaviours.” (Tuncer 2024, 6)

Tuncer (2024) documents the emergence of ethnic hierarchies in Istanbul, where Western migrants are often labelled as desirable "expats" while Arab migrants are perceived as less welcome (Tuncer 2024). These hierarchies shape not only policy and social interaction but also urban access and feelings of safety. Arab migrant women in particular face layered vulnerabilities, because they are the most visible, and because they dress in a certain style that is known to the Turkish society as associated with Arabs. In response, many turn to Arab or women-only Arab communities, gatherings, and learning circles, where they feel seen, understood, and protected by *Asabiyyah* (group solidarity).

2.2. Peer Networks as Informal Learning Environments

Informal learning has increasingly been recognised as a critical mode of knowledge transmission in migrant and refugee contexts. Migrants acquire crucial life skills not only through institutions but also through local, community-based, and peer-led engagements that help them navigate daily life in unfamiliar environments, while also connecting them to their mother language, their religion and culture. Alenius (2018) demonstrates how Estonian-Finnish transmigrants engage in the transmission of cultural and practical knowledge within family networks, highlighting how such informal practices are key to identity formation, cultural continuity, and survival in the diaspora (Alenius 2018). These insights are echoed in similar studies that document how migrant women share personal narratives and practical knowledge with others to facilitate smoother integration, often in spaces beyond the reach of formal education systems (WIDHT Project, 2021).

For many newcomers, informal exchanges with people that share the same background become lifelines that enable quick familiarisation with legal systems, bureaucratic requirements, healthcare access, social customs and navigating the new city. These processes align with the notion of situated learning, where knowledge emerges through participation in everyday social practices and interactions (Alenius 2018). In the context of young Arab migrant women in Istanbul, learning circles often serve as vital hubs for information sharing, offering both educational and social capital. These gatherings not only help attendees access housing, employment, and documentation

services but also play a crucial role in shaping their sense of identity, confidence, and sense of belonging within the host society.

“Engaging with the community also had positive practical impact on women's lives. A lot of them stated that they gained different important skills that later on helped them with their job, e.g. language skills, public speaking skills, being a team-player, etc. For one of the women the outcomes were also connected to financial stability and earning more money. Participation in the community also helped those women increase their motivation to engage in learning.” (WIDHT Project 2021, 17)

This demonstrates the positive effect of informal knowledge sharing among migrant women, and how it has a positive impact on their livelihoods, as well as their economic growth in the host society, empowering them to engage with it, practice its new language, and improve their living circumstances.

Moreover, knowledge-sharing is not limited to information transfer. It includes the subtle ways through which participants learn through active engagement with people who share the same background. They preserve their mother language, social norms, religious identity, cultural heritage, and build new relationships or friendships on a deeper level.

Alenius (2018) highlights the importance of language in the formation of a person's identity, culture and social life, especially for those who migrate when they are children or are born in the host society.

“In another interview account, Toomas underlines the importance of language for ethnic/national identity and highlights how grandparents can support informal language learning and foster grandchild's ethnic identity construction through everyday usage of the Estonian language.” (Alenius 2018, 50)

Similarities can be drawn here on how the majority of young Arab women living in Istanbul, who don't have access to their extended family, and in these knowledge circles, the lecturers, experts and scholars are usually older and wiser, and have lived most of their lives in their homeland, so by spending time with them and learning from them, they are not only gaining empirical knowledge, but also having access to their culture of origin. In a sense, a parallel can be drawn with these children learning from their grandparents, their mother language, and how that helps them connect to their ethnicity and culture “The grandparents had also supported the language and

sociocultural learning of their grandchildren through caring for them in both Estonia and Finland.” (Alenius 2018, 50)

Through study circles, books, stories, narratives, engaging with expert lecturers and mentoring others, participants continuously learn how to embody and adapt their roles as migrants, young women, and learners in a diasporic context. These modes of knowledge sharing, cultural transmission, and cultivating a religious identity may go undocumented, but have a profound impact on how young migrant women develop resilience, agency, a sense of home, and belonging.

2.3. The Role of Social Networks and Cultural Transmission

Research on migrant women’s learning trajectories confirms that peer networks act as crucial knowledge hubs; a study of young rural women who migrated to cities in China, with social networks as their main source of learning how to navigate the host society in which they found themselves (Luo and Seeberg 2022)

Luo and Seeberg (2022, 2) highlight studies showing that social interaction plays a crucial role in migrant learning. Kim (2010) found that for migrant workers and local residents in South Korea, ongoing participation in social activities helped build self-efficacy, self-esteem, and intercultural skills. Similarly, Wen and Hanley (2015), Li (2006), and Seeberg and Luo (2012) demonstrated that Chinese rural migrants heavily relied on kinship and hometown networks as key informal learning spaces to adjust to urban life.

In the same vein, much of what migrant women come to know about surviving and thriving in the host society is acquired through everyday interactions with relatives, friends, and community contacts rather than formal institutions or instruction.

This resonates with Alenius’s (2018) observation that transnational family networks serve as informal learning environments, similar to what the learning circles in Istanbul provide for young Arab women. Learning circles in Istanbul provide access to a network of people, including Arab Muslim migrants who have been in Istanbul for

over a decade and have thus accumulated a significant amount of experience and information.

A great number of young Arab woman in Istanbul don't have access to their extended family and are only here with their parents and siblings (for the most part. It's the mother and the younger siblings, while the father and probably also the older siblings work abroad and they come and visit them a few times a year) and so the networks that they are integrated with through these learning circles serve as a replacement of family networks. These networks help them navigate life in Istanbul and serve as references that they can consult to learn how to overcome the challenges they face. Crucially, these exchanges help newcomers gain practical knowledge while more established or older migrants reinforce their own competencies and sense of purpose by guiding others.

These networks are not only available face-to-face when they meet on a weekly basis, but also are accessible 24/7 through online social networks, including WhatsApp, Telegram groups, and Instagram. Social media and messaging apps often amplify this process today, as each of these communities creates online groups to organise meetings and answer each other's questions about all things related to life in the host society. Such learning is invaluable because it disseminates not only information but also emotional support and confidence.

2.4. Informal Learning: A Foundation for Social Cohesion

Informal learning in migrant communities is deeply intertwined with cultural transmission and the formation of identity. Community-based knowledge-sharing often centres on preserving heritage as well as adapting to new realities. For women in particular, everyday practices – such as cooking traditional recipes, telling stories, teaching the native language to children, and celebrating religious festivals – become modes of informal education that reinforce ethnic identity. Alenius (2018) documented how migrant families use shared routines to construct ethno-cultural identities and pass on social and cultural traditions across generations (Alenius 2018, 50).

These informal teaching moments help young migrants, such as Arab women in Istanbul, stay connected to the values and customs of their heritage. Almost all of the gatherings and learning circles I participated in during my time in Istanbul hosted Ramadan Iftar during the holy month of Ramadan and also held gatherings to celebrate Eid holidays. Especially women-only gatherings like Diwaniyah, as well as the Quran gatherings, make sure to host social events at least once a month, where women and their families can come together, share food and sweets they have made, spend time together, and socialise freely.

Informal learning exists in all kinds of societies, and it's not bound to migrant societies in diaspora. An example of this is Livingstone's survey of informal adult learning in Canada, which reveals the extensive yet often invisible scope of self-directed and socially embedded learning practices that take place outside formal education systems. Through empirical research involving over 1,500 participants, Livingstone finds that Canadian adults voluntarily spend, on average, fifteen hours per week on informal learning, ranging from workplace skills to household management, community engagement, life skills and personal growth/development. This learning is not evenly recognised or supported by educational institutions, despite its critical role in shaping knowledge accumulation across people's lives. The study challenges the traditional focus on credentialed learning and emphasises the value of informal learning, defined as learning that individuals themselves identify as purposeful and significant (Livingstone 1999).

This research on informal learning draws upon Knowles' (1970) ideas of andragogy. Knowles argued that every individual is involved in continual learning activities and that these activities or projects, which are beyond the realm of institutional control, are integral to the constituting of society. (Livingstone 1999, 3).

This demonstrates how informal learning is integral to the building of a society. The study is based in Canada, and the knowledge gained from informal learning activities is more beneficial in their lives and day-to-day experiences than what they learned in formal education, because it addresses the life skills they personally need to grow and evolve.

This resonates strongly with my own research, where Arab migrant women in Istanbul engage in rich, self-organised learning spaces; from study circles to book clubs about religion, politics, history, and identity. Livingstone's work not only legitimises such practices as meaningful learning experiences but also critiques the dominant educational paradigms that marginalise these forms of knowledge. His emphasis on collective learning and life transitions as sites of profound informal learning (Livingstone 1999) aligns with how my participants navigate migration, belonging, growth, agency, and self-development. Moreover, his call to recognise the knowledge of excluded groups in society offers a critical framework for understanding how these women's informal learning is both epistemically and socially productive, even if it remains undervalued by formal institutions and social structures.

2.5. Community and Resilience: Informal Networks as a Response to Exclusion

These responses sometimes take the form of small-scale initiatives, such as discussion groups, religious gatherings, and Quran study with friends or, more likely, neighbours in the same area. Or larger-scale knowledge circles, such as those organised by schoolers, book clubs, and cultural workshops. Such initiatives are not only spaces for learning but also for networking, collective healing and resilience-building. Participants utilise the social capital they form in these gatherings to exchange information on how to obtain residency, learn Turkish, navigate public services, or access jobs, all while fostering friendships based on trust and emotional solidarity. These community spaces foster a strong sense of shared identity rooted in Arab culture, Islam, and women's experiences.

Empowerment programs in similar settings have shown that peer mentorship and social support significantly enhance mental health, autonomy, and integration outcomes for migrant women (Gower 2022). Thus, the informal learning gatherings in Istanbul are central pillars of social resilience, providing support. "Peer mentoring is a reciprocal process through which a more experienced individual encourages and assists a less experienced individual in developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be more successful." (Gower 2022, 2) This aligns with how participants learn through attending community gatherings or study circles from more knowledgeable women,

elders, or even peers who are around the same age but have been in the host society for longer and have more experience navigating it Gower (2022).

This research designed and implemented a peer mentoring program that connected newly arrived migrant and refugee women in Australia with more experienced migrants who had already navigated the host society. The mentoring relationships were flexible and tailored to individual needs: some focused on employability (including job applications, CV preparation, and understanding workplace rights) while others centred on emotional support, confidence-building, and overcoming isolation. The program was co-developed using a community-based participatory approach, ensuring cultural sensitivity and responsiveness to real needs. A key aim of the intervention was to foster social capital by helping participants expand their social networks and develop trusting, supportive relationships. These peer-based networks functioned not only as informal channels for practical knowledge-sharing but also as safe spaces for women to articulate their identities, build resilience, and foster a deeper sense of belonging in their new society.

The literature reviewed in this chapter makes clear that the everyday practices of informal learning are not marginal to the migrant experience; they are central. Migrant woman, particularly those who arrive in contexts of instability and limited support systems, rely on community-based networks as their primary channels of knowledge acquisition, adaptation, and identity building. What emerges from these studies is a consistent pattern: the most vital skills and resources for navigating new societies are exchanged not in classrooms or training centres, but in informal gatherings, mosques, WhatsApp groups, living rooms, parks and neighbours' gatherings. These informal sites of learning highlight the agency of migrant woman who draw on one another as resources while also creating environments that enable collective resilience.

At the same time, the literature demonstrates that informal learning is never just about survival. It extends beyond practical adaptation, such as acquiring language skills, understanding bureaucratic systems, or accessing employment opportunities, to encompass deeper forms of cultural transmission, identity negotiation, and social integration within the host society. Alenius (2018) emphasises the role of language in shaping identity and continuity across generations, while studies like the WIDHT

Project (2021) and Luo and Seeberg (2022) show how social networks operate as critical infrastructures of knowledge and support. Livingstone's (1999) work on informal learning more broadly validates these practices as legitimate and socially productive, challenging the hierarchy that privileges formal over informal education. Together, these perspectives help us see migrant women not as passive recipients of aid but as active learners, educators, and cultural transmitters.

In the specific case of Istanbul, the literature also foregrounds the complex social situation in which Arab migrant women are situated. On one hand, Istanbul offers affordability, religious familiarity, and a sense of proximity to both East and West that attracts Arab families from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, Arab migrants, especially Syrians, face entrenched hierarchies of belonging and frequent experiences of marginalisation. Studies by Yıldız and Sert (2017), Erdoğan (2018, 2020), and Tuncer (2024) highlight how ethnic labels, nationalist discourse, and shifting political climates shape the lived realities of Arab communities. These conditions underscore the importance of Arab-led spaces where women can both preserve their cultural identity and gain the support and tools to navigate daily life in Turkey.

The intersection of the literature on informal learning and the Arab diaspora in Istanbul highlights the significance of women's study circles, gatherings, and community networks as spaces of both knowledge and solidarity. They are not only compensating for the absence of extended family structures and support but also actively generating new forms of social capital and *asabiyyah* (group solidarity). These networks allow women to both anchor themselves in heritage and adapt to the demands of the host society. They are sites where the personal meets the political, where every day acts of teaching and learning become strategies of survival, resilience, and empowerment.

This chapter, therefore, provides the foundation for my own research, which investigates how young Arab migrant women in Istanbul engage in and transform these informal learning environments. By situating my fieldwork within this body of scholarship, I emphasise the need to sociologically consider the importance of the communities that are built and the knowledge produced in these community-based spaces, not as supplementary to formal systems but as vital in their own right. These gatherings reveal that learning in migration is not confined to institutional boundaries

but rather is lived, embodied, and shared. Recognising this not only expands our understanding of how migrants adapt but also affirms the creative and collective ways young women reimagine belonging in a city as vast and complex as Istanbul and carve out a place in the host society.

2.6. Theoretical Framework in Networks of Care: Mapping Social Capital and Asabiyyah in Women's Learning Circles

This study explores informal learning experiences among Young Arab women migrants in Istanbul and the social networks they build through these experiences. It does so through a multi-layered lens that attends not only to the sharing of knowledge but also to the formation of community, belonging, and selfhood. Because this phenomenon that I observed is socially, emotionally, culturally, and politically complex, this study draws on two complementary theoretical traditions Pierre Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory and Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Asabiyyah; to better understand how young Arab women come together, gather, share knowledge, build solidarity, and sustain cultural identity and agency in the context of migration and marginality.

In this research, Bourdieu's work enables us to explore how social networks provide access to resources, work opportunities, and, in some cases, even facilitate the finding of life partners. Ibn Khaldun provides a moral and affective vocabulary to discuss solidarity, mutual uplift, and the collective ethic that binds the young women together.

These two theories were chosen not only for their conceptual richness but also because they speak to different but overlapping ideas: Bourdieu's theory explains how individuals navigate social hierarchies and accumulate forms of capital through participation in community life and engaging in society in this a diasporic society, while Ibn Khaldun emphasizes the emotional, moral, and even spiritual energy that brings and keeps communities together, which is applied here to a diasporic society. By placing them in dialogue, we can gain a better understanding of the social and affective infrastructure that sustains informal learning and mutual support among these women. As this thesis maintains, young women join these gatherings for both reasons.

Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986, 248). In Bourdieu’s view, these networks are never neutral; they operate within broader “fields” where individuals compete for power and legitimacy through various forms of capital, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1990, 128).

In the context of this research, the knowledge circles and gatherings I observed and participated in can be understood as spaces where social capital is actively built and exchanged. *Bonding capital* was clearly present in the deep emotional ties among young women participants. Many of the young women I interviewed described feeling “seen,” “understood,” or “at home” in these circles; experiences that reflect a kind of emotional social capital anchored in shared language, religion, and culture.

At the same time, these spaces also generate *bridging capital*. Beyond emotional support, the gatherings served as hubs for disseminating crucial information about scholarships, job opportunities, housing options, and navigating the Turkish bureaucracy for a residence permit. For many women, someone they met at a gathering later connected them to a work opportunity or helped them find a lawyer; some formed strong friendships, and for others, they found their life partners. These moments reflect what Bourdieu would call access to resources through social proximity and shared recognition within a field (Bourdieu 1986, 251).

Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is also useful in understanding how participation in these gatherings transforms the women over time. Habitus, described as the “embodied history” of social positions and learned dispositions (Bourdieu 1990), was visible in how women adapted their speech, dress, and social interactions. Some participants noted how their involvement changed their approach to carrying themselves, expressing their religious identity, and making more modest fashion choices, as well as how they engaged with others across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The gatherings, in this sense, serve as informal institutions for cultivating a habitus that blends religiosity, social confidence, and resilience in the migratory field.

Moreover, symbolic capital accumulates within these gatherings. Women who regularly organise sessions, contribute insights, or offer emotional and material support often become informally recognised as leaders. This status is not officially assigned, but it is signalled through how others look up to them, seek their advice, or express appreciation. Symbolic capital, as Bourdieu explains, operates through recognition and can eventually be converted into other forms of capital outside the gathering itself, such as status in religious, academic, or activist circles (Bourdieu 1986, 255). Bourdieu's framework helps map the subtle hierarchies, social resources, and mechanisms of belonging that animate these seemingly informal and voluntary gatherings.

This research examines economic inequality as a relational condition shaped by access to networks, recognition, and collective resources rather than just income, building on Bourdieu's theory of social capital. The lived experiences of economic inequality among Arab women migrants in Istanbul are mediated by social capital, which is defined as the actual and potential resources contained in long-lasting social ties. Even though many participants face structural obstacles to formal employment and institutional mobility, their participation in community networks and informal learning circles allows information, emotional support, and practical aid to be shared. These types of social capital serve as tools for people to negotiate exclusionary systems and lessen the immediate consequences of marginalisation, but they do not completely eradicate economic inequality. According to Bourdieu's framework, these networks show how inequality is sustained by unequal access to meaningful and convertible relationships, making it both material and profoundly social.

This was clearly mirrored by the data that I collected in my ethnographic fieldwork; young women who could afford housing within the areas of Başakşehir and Kayaşehir had more access to these gatherings because they are closer geographically. Whilst the ones who lived in areas like Esenler had more trouble commuting to these gatherings. Public transportation is another indication of economic inequality; some of the young women expressed frustration with having to take public transportation for one hour or two to get to these gatherings. On the other hand, a number of the young woman who attend the gatherings live in the area of Bahçeşehir and commute in their personal cars, which allows them easier access to these gatherings.

Another very evident indication of economic inequality was that some of these young women had to work full-time jobs for six days a week and that took up most of their time and thus they were unable to join these gathering as much as they hoped for while on the other hand, young women who had the privilege of being financially comfortable, focused more on their studies and pursuing types of work that were meaningful and personally fulfilling for them without the burden of worrying about the financial rewards.

At the same time, Bourdieu's work highlights the limits of social capital as an equalizing force, a tension that is evident within the empirical findings of this study. The ability of collective learning spaces to convert into long-term economic mobility is nevertheless uneven and limited by broader power dynamics, despite the fact that they promote solidarity, belonging, and common survival tactics. Not all forms of social capital are equally valuable since the value of social ties is defined by their acknowledgement within prevailing social and institutional contexts. Because of this, the very networks that promote resilience may also mirror and replicate current inequalities, especially those based on class, immigration status, and legitimacy. This emphasises a crucial finding of Bourdieu's theory: social capital functions within organised inequality, providing both opportunities for action and distinct bounds for change. In this situation, the persistence of economic inequality is not caused by a lack of effort or competence, but rather by unequal circumstances that determine whose connections, knowledge, and forms of belonging are economically important.

While Bourdieu's theory brings clarity to questions of access, status, and transformation, it does not fully explain why women return week after week, often without external reward. To explore this dimension, I turn to Ibn Khaldun's concept of *Asabiyyah*, or group solidarity.

In *The Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun describes *Asabiyyah* as the "bond of cohesion among people of the same group" rooted in shared lineage, values, and commitment to mutual defence and continuity (Ibn Khaldun 2005, 100–101). Though his original formulation was applied to tribal societies and political dynasties, *Asabiyyah* can be reinterpreted to analyse the moral and affective cohesion found in diasporic and migrant communities.

In this study, *Asabiyyah* is not founded on blood ties, but rather on shared experiences of exile, religiosity, language and marginalisation. Women described these gatherings as more than educational; they are spiritual and emotional lifelines. Participants shared how they help each other and show up for one another; one interview mentioned how in one of the gatherings that she took part in; a girl couldn't pay her tuition fees and they all came together and collected the money for her, and she said: "we are all university students without personal income and supported by our parents but still we managed to collect the money and help her"

These acts of care are not merely social obligations; they are expressions of a moral ethic to uphold the group's collective wellbeing; a lived form of *Asabiyyah* in action. The gatherings also cultivate what could be called *spiritual Asabiyyah*. Many young women spoke of how the gatherings helped them "return to Allah," "stay grounded," or "remember who they are." The emphasis on shared religious growth fosters a deeper sense of unity that transcends national differences or class divisions, which can exist in any setting and certainly do in these gatherings. This collective striving forms the backbone of the group's emotional and ethical coherence.

Unlike Bourdieu, whose framework centres on competition, capital, and social fields, Ibn Khaldun allows for the fostering of emotional and tangible support, community, loyalty, and collective resilience. His theory helps us see the invisible works: the spiritual and affective investments that sustain these communities through instability and change. In the absence of formal institutions or external recognition, *Asabiyyah* is what holds the group together.

To complement the frameworks of social capital and '*asabiyyah*', I also draw on Etienne Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice to better understand how identity and learning are shaped through shared participation in informal gatherings. This theory views learning as a deeply social process that happens not only through content or instruction, but through consistent engagement, shared practices, and mutual meaning-making among a group. In the context of my research, the women's gatherings I observed, whether religious study circles or gatherings, can be understood as communities of practice, where participants are not simply passive recipients of knowledge but actively shape their understanding of the world and themselves through

regular interaction. Over time, these spaces allow them to build trust, develop a shared language, and cultivate ways of thinking and being that are rooted in their experiences as Arab and Muslim women living in Istanbul. By applying this framework, I'm able to explore how these informal circles contribute not only to knowledge acquisition but also to the formation of identity, belonging, and agency through collective engagement and reflection.

Together, Bourdieu's and Ibn Khaldun's theories enable us to understand these informal gatherings as more than casual or spontaneous meetups, but rather with depth and complexity. Bourdieu helps us map the networks, hierarchies, and access points that women navigate and construct through consistent participation. Ibn Khaldun, on the other hand, draws attention to the emotional, spiritual, and ethical bonds that infuse these gatherings with meaning and momentum.

By applying both frameworks, we can interpret these spaces as simultaneously arenas of capital exchange and fields of moral solidarity. They are sites where young Arab women not only learn and grow, but also remake themselves and their communities in the face of displacement and uncertainty. These theories help make visible the quiet everyday choices; attending, listening, supporting, helping, caring that constitute powerful acts of community making and social transformation.

2.7. Conclusion for Chapter II

This chapter has argued that what appears "informal" in the lives of young Arab migrant women in Istanbul is, in fact, the beating heart of how they learn, endure and remake belonging under conditions of displacement. By tracing the literature on informal learning and community-based knowledge sharing and by situating those insights within the particular dynamics of the Arab presence in Istanbul, I have shown that living rooms, parks, mosque courtyards, book clubs, women-only circles and group chats are not peripheral to adaptation; they are the curriculum of everyday life. These spaces transmit practical know-how: how to find housing, secure documentation, enrol in university, or access healthcare, but they also stage a quieter pedagogy of self: how to carry faith, language, modesty, confidence, and dignity into a new urban field marked by shifting hierarchies and uneven welcomes.

The theoretical dialogue between Bourdieu's social capital and Ibn Khaldun's *Asabiyyah* clarified why these circles matter; they are both social infrastructures that connect young women to resources and moral communities that bind them through care, obligation, and shared striving. Wenger's notion of communities of practice further sharpened the picture by showing how learning here is not only about content but about becoming with others and together over time.

First, the literature review demonstrated that informal learning is a recognised, consequential mode of knowledge transmission across migratory contexts in different parts of the world. Studies from Europe and Asia consistently document how migrants rely on peer networks to interpret institutions and navigate everyday life when formal systems are slow, expensive, exclusionary or simply inattentive to lived realities. In Istanbul, this pattern is intensified by the city's scale, diversity and political temperature. The women in focus are not abstract "beneficiaries" but active producers, carriers, and editors of knowledge. They circulate tips, translate bureaucratic language, recommend lawyers and employers, and teach one another the tacit social codes of neighbourhoods and universities. Yet the literature also makes clear that these exchanges do more than solve immediate problems. They replenish confidence, reduce isolation, and affirm identities that mainstream narratives often misrecognize. The effect is cumulative; repeated participation builds habits, dispositions and aspirations that are as educational as any classroom.

Second, placing that body of work alongside scholarship on Istanbul's Arab communities clarified the structural backdrop against which these networks arise. Arab migrants, especially the Syrians, are visible, debated, and frequently politicised. Economic volatility and nationalist rhetoric, fluctuating media portrayals, and even tensions on the neighbourhood level produce a precarious sense of acceptance. This context makes the woman's networks not merely convenient but necessary. They become safe spaces against stigma and uncertainty, as well as launchpads for mobility, linguistic, educational, social, and sometimes economic opportunities. The chapter, therefore, insists that to understand what and how these women learn, one must also understand what they are up against: a stratified urban field in which Western "expats" are celebrated while "Arabs" are often othered. a policy landscape that oscillates between hospitality and hostility, and a public sphere that can be generous on one day

and suspicious the next. Informal learning does not float above these conditions; it is forged within them.

Third, the theoretical framework offered a double lens through which to make sense of the women's practices. Bourdieu provided a vocabulary for mapping how different forms of capital are accumulated, exchanged and converted in and through these gatherings. Bonding ties (shared religiosity, language, homeland references) generate thick trust and emotional safety, bridging ties (introductions across age, city districts, or institutional boundaries) open doors to universities, workplaces and services. Symbolic capital clarifies the informal leadership structures that emerge when some women become leaders in the network because they reliably show up, share, and guide. Ibn Khaldun for his part added what Bourdieu can eclipse: the moral and spiritual force that keeps people devoted to one another without external reward. *Asabiyyah* social solidarity illuminates the felt texture of these circles: the sense of duty, the quick mobilizations to cover a tuition for their friend, the shared fasts in Ramadan and celebrating Eid, the disciplined study that binds strangers into kin. Rather than treating solidarity as a side effect of networking, Ibn Khaldun centres it as a generative cause; a binding that enables persistence and generosity under pressure. Wenger then shows how these ties not only transmit "information" but also organise a shared practice in which identities are negotiated through apprenticeship into being a certain kind of Muslim, Arab, student, worker, or friend in Istanbul's specific social landscape.

From these strands, several implications follow for the analysis I will undertake in later chapters, such as how Informal spaces are primary sites of learning, not additional ones. The circles I study function as living pedagogies, in which curriculum, assessment, and mentorship are distributed across people, moments, and media, such as the WhatsApp thread, which is as much a classroom as the weekly halaqa and the gatherings in the park, and as instructive as the university classroom. Recognising this shifts research attention away from measuring "integration" through institutional metrics alone and toward tracing the dense ecosystems of peer instruction that make formal achievements possible.

In this ecosystem, the role of digital infrastructures is integral, not an add-on. Group chats and social platforms knit the scattered city into an always-available and

accessible support system, as well as a classroom. They accelerate the circulation of documents, warnings, opportunities, and reminders; they also preserve traces of debate and decision-making that later become reference points. The digital layer magnifies both bonding and bridging effects, expanding reach while consolidating trust through repeated help.

This chapter also clarifies the study's contribution. Empirically, it centres a population of young Arab women in Istanbul whose knowledge practices are often minimised or folded into generic "refugee integration" debates. Conceptually, it brings Bourdieu and Ibn Khaldun into conversation to capture both the instrumental and affective dimensions of women's networks, while using communities of practice to track learning as identity work over time. Methodologically, it justifies an ethnographic approach that follows study circles across rooms and screens, capturing how small, repeated acts accumulate into durable capacities. The conclusion is not that informal learning "compensates" for formal gaps, it is that informal learning is the social technology through which formal pathways become thinkable, reachable, and survivable

Looking ahead, the fieldwork will reveal how these arguments unfold in the textures of particular lives and circles, including what is shared, who speaks, what is learned, what is contested, and how women support one another through the city's changing weather. I will examine the micro-practices that scale into capacity: the way so much is shared in a WhatsApp group, asking for help, planning iftar gatherings during Ramadan, the feedback on a study session, and the ritual of welcoming a newcomer. These details are important.

This chapter has argued for a reframing that allows us to see informal women's networks in Istanbul not as stopgaps but as engines of knowledge, solidarity, and becoming. They help women make a place in a city that is simultaneously intimate and indifferent, familiar and demanding. They are where young migrants learn to be at once daughters of their homelands and authors of new lives. The pages that follow build on this foundation, showing how, in these circles, the ordinary acts of attending, listening, advising, fundraising, cooking, memorising, and messaging add up to something transformative, a collective capacity to navigate, preserve, and imagine a

way of living and learning that threads home into the present while stitching the present toward a future.



CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY ISTANBUL: A UNIVERSE WITHIN A CITY

This chapter outlines how I designed, entered, and navigated the field that animates this study: the informal learning worlds of young Arab women in Istanbul. I approached these worlds ethnographically, not only to document what is said in a lecture or what book a circle reads, but to stay with the textures through which learning actually happens. For women who are migrants and students, daughters and friends, believers and seekers, knowledge does not arrive in a vacuum. It is entangled with belonging, with homesickness, with the practicalities of transport lines and residency offices, with poetry and prayer and politics, and with the everyday acts of care. An ethnographic methodology enables me to hold these strands together without flattening them into a single story, and to appreciate the beauty of their diversity.

I began from proximity rather than distance. Before I decided to make these gatherings the focus of research, I was already a participant first in Amman, where I grew up attending Quran circles and informal discussion groups, and later in Istanbul, where I sought similar spaces for my own growth and journey. This pre-research involvement matters as it shaped how I entered, who trusted me, what I could see without interrupting the rhythm of a meeting, and where my presence might have amplified rather than obscured the learning underway. It also demanded a careful and explicit reflexivity to acknowledge how my own commitments and experiences sharpened my attention, while also influencing my interpretation.

The methodological framework of this chapter is based on three pillars. The first is participant observation, showing up, staying long enough to notice patterns, and writing fieldnotes that capture not only “what happened” but how it felt to be the speaker as well as the learner in the gathering, without forgetting the side conversations at the back, the shift in attention when topics changed, etc. The second pillar in this

methodology is semi-structured interviewing with fifteen young Arab women who regularly attend these circles. The Interviews offered a slower, more intimate register in which participants could narrate how gatherings intersect with study and work, with family expectations, with spiritual striving, as well as with other emotions such as loneliness, with courage. The third pillar is digital ethnography: paying attention to the WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and Instagram pages where these communities organise, reflect, and extend their learning, shaping the way lessons and life remain in conversation between meetings.

Across these modes, I attend to the small but telling movements of a circle-like how leadership emerges informally, how a joke loosens a tense discussion, how a newcomer is welcomed, and how a difficult concept is taught twice, then three times, until it lands in language that feels owned rather than borrowed. I also tried to follow the movements and circulation of ideas in the groups: how an idea first heard in the gathering reappears, reframed, on Instagram or a reading list born in a book club that circulates through group chats or an iftar conversation that becomes a pointed question in the next lecture and a lecturer is invited to speak on it. This movement across settings is not incidental; it is one of the ways knowledge becomes durable and shared.

Making these movements visible requires clear ethical principles and a strong commitment. I obtained informed consent before recording the interviews and made it clear that participation was voluntary, that withdrawal was possible at any time, and that anonymity would be protected by using different names and carefully masking identifiable details. As I was already known to many participants, I am explicit about my positionality as a young Arab Muslim woman who finds both familiarity and aspiration in these spaces. That proximity is not a methodological flaw to be corrected but a condition to be worked with, reflexively, so that empathy sharpens rather than blurs analysis.

The chapter that follows is organised to carry the reader from origin to practice, from setting to stance. Section 3.1 recounts how this topic emerged from my own trajectory, from Amman's masjid circles to the varied geographies of Istanbul, and how early participation seeded the questions I later pursued systematically. It explains how a move from Büyükçekmece to Başakşehir altered my access to Arab-majority spaces

and how friendship networks became the doorway to a wider field. Section 3.2 details the fieldwork design and data collection: how I balanced regular attendance at diverse gatherings with a program of semi-structured interviews; how I scaffolded interviews to move from background to experience to reflection; how I handled recording, transcription and how I tracked practical matters, time, distance, and transport that reveal the cost and commitment behind attendance.

Section 3.3 turns to digital ethnography and articulates why chat threads, links, and voice notes count as sites of learning in their own right. I demonstrate how the digital sustains attention between meetings, enables layered participation, and becomes a space for the collective processing of politics abroad, paperwork at home, spiritual insight, fashion, and friendship. Section 3.4 lays out ethical considerations, positionality, and reflexivity in detail the forms of closeness that made research possible. Finally Section 3.5 sets the scene, offering portraits of the places where learning unfolds Sunday morning cafés, waqf centres perfumed with oud, the mosque majlis with its particular gravity, the outdoor Eid picnics and sketches the main types of gatherings I encountered like religious study and spiritual growth circles; political and intellectual book clubs and peer-led sessions on self-development and emotional intelligence.

In summary, this methodology involves intentionally observing, interviewing, and tracing the digital data carefully. It is built for a city of many worlds and for a community that stretches across rooms and timelines. It begins from the premise that to understand how young Arab women in Istanbul learn together is to understand how they make the city habitable, how they turn distance into connection and how they shape selves that are steady enough to move. The sections that follow make this premise concrete, guiding the reader from the origins of the project through the practices of fieldwork, from ethical stance to situated scenes and into the empirical heart of the study

3.1. Initiating the Research Topic

This research is grounded in an ethnographic approach because my aim is not only to study what young Arab women are learning in their informal gatherings, but also how

learning occurs through conversation, shared space, emotion, and lived experience. Ethnography allowed me to step into the everyday world of my participants, to witness their rhythms, expressions, and the subtle ways knowledge is shared, formed, and felt within the community.

Rather than applying a fixed framework, I wanted to remain close to what was happening on the ground. The lives of these women, as Arab migrants navigating Istanbul, are layered and complex. Their learning spaces, book clubs, Halaqas and community lectures are not formal classrooms, yet they are full of meaning, reflection, and transformation. An ethnographic lens gave me the space to be present, to listen deeply, and to understand these spaces as more than just educational; they are spaces of belonging, resilience, and self-formation.

Because this research focuses on the epistemic and effective dimensions of learning, it required a methodology that could encompass both the transmission of knowledge and the emotional, relational experiences that shape how knowledge is received and embodied. Ethnography made that possible.

Growing up in Amman, Jordan, I attended Quran circles in the mosque as a child. As I grew older, I began attending informal knowledge circles and book clubs, where we explored various topics, including social issues, political issues, religion, and the works of different scholars.

When I first moved to Istanbul, I lived in the Büyükdere district of Istanbul back in October 2021, a place where very few Arab immigrants lived; besides my family and me, we only knew two other families: a Palestinian family and an Egyptian family. For those 12 months living there felt very similar to living in Europe, where I had been prior to moving to Istanbul, the area had no visible cultural signs of being in a Muslim society, for example, women wearing Hijab or abstaining from public eating during Ramadan hardly existed. By all standards, it was just another European neighbourhood. By February 2022, I started my Master's program at Ibn Haldun University at the Basaksehir campus; there, I met and became friends with Arab girls from my university, and I was interested in finding gatherings for Arabs. I learned from them about various gatherings for Arabs that were happening on the university campus, in

the Basaksehir district, Kayasehir, in Quran centres, waqif Centres, cultural centres, and book clubs that were taking place in the downtown area of Istanbul.

Later, I moved to the Başakşehir district of Istanbul, where I was closer to connections and friendships with young Arab women from across the Arab world whom I had met at my university. These connections themselves were the foundation for this study; these women would immediately start inviting me and letting me know about all the different gatherings, meetups, and events happening around the area. For several months, I regularly attended gatherings that ranged from Islamic study circles and political discussion groups to book readings and personal development workshops. These took place in a variety of spaces, cultural centres, mosques, homes, coffee shops, parks, and sometimes even online. I joined as a participant at the time for my own personal growth, and soon I found myself falling into a rhythm, attending two to three different sessions with different groups each week.

As time went by, I started to notice the small, recurring patterns that can only be seen over time: how trust is built, how leadership emerges informally, how themes repeat across gatherings, and how even the most personal knowledge, about personal struggles, pain, migration, or spiritual struggle, family, and marriage could become a form of collective learning.

This form of observation provided me with insight into what couldn't be fully captured through interviews alone. Things like how people greeted each other, how they used language and body language, how trust was built, how ideas were conveyed, and how smaller circles were formed. It gave me a sense of what knowledge feels like when it is shared through care, repetition, and presence. All of this was amplified once I decided to conduct research on these gatherings, drawing heavily on my previous observations, as well as new ones I noticed after starting the research, while continuing to attend these gatherings.

3.2. Fieldwork and Data Collection

I used three key methods in this research: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography. Together, they helped me capture the richness of how knowledge is shared across both physical and digital spaces.

Semi-structured Interviews: To complement participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 young Arab women who regularly attend the gatherings I was observing. These interviews served as a space for the participants to reflect more intimately on their experiences, what these gatherings meant to them, how they shaped their thinking, and how they fit into their broader journey as migrant young women in Istanbul. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility: while I prepared a guiding set of questions, I also followed the natural flow of conversation, allowing participants to expand on what felt important to them.

We spoke in Arabic, using some English terms as needed, depending on what felt most natural for each participant. I recorded the interviews (with consent) and later transcribed them for analysis. These conversations opened up deeply personal and reflective insights that added richness to the observations.

The interviews began with background and context-setting questions. I asked participants to introduce themselves, including their name, age, whether they were studying or working, what they studied, the name of the university they attended (and whether it was public or private), their hometown, and how long they had been in Istanbul. These opening questions helped me understand each participant's migration timeline and educational or professional background. They also provided a lens into class dynamics and access to resources.

I also asked about their living situation: whether they lived with their families, alone, or with siblings, and in which part of the city. Many young women came from distant neighbourhoods like Esenyurt or Pendik, spending over an hour on public transport to attend a two-hour gathering. I asked about the time and effort it took to get to the gatherings, not only to understand commitment levels but also to reveal what motivates these women to show up regularly despite the distance and difficulty.

Next, I examined how participants learned about the gatherings and what drew them in. I asked, 'How did you first hear about this circle?' *What made you come? What keeps you coming back?* These questions opened up narratives about friendship networks, word-of-mouth invitations, and the informal, trust-based ways that knowledge and opportunities travel within migrant communities. Through these answers, I began to understand how social capital is formed and how gatherings function as both learning and networking spaces.

A large portion of the interview focused on how the participants felt during and after the gatherings. I asked what they loved most about them, whether they left feeling inspired or renewed, and if they had ever experienced a moment or topic that stayed with them long afterwards. Many women shared examples of lectures that helped them make sense of their personal struggles or ideas that shifted their understanding of themselves and their relationship with God. These reflections were essential in capturing the *affective* and *transformative* dimensions of informal learning, as well as how knowledge can become healing, empowering, or grounding.

I also asked about identity and change: *Do you feel like you've grown or matured through these gatherings? Do the topics help you understand yourself better or strengthen your spirituality?* These questions allowed participants to articulate subtle shifts in their self-perception, values, and emotional growth. For some, the gatherings offered new language for experiences they hadn't previously named. For others, they provided a sense of direction, calm, or religious grounding that was otherwise hard to find in the chaos of being a migrant in a city like Istanbul.

Community was another core theme. I asked, 'Have you made friends here?' *How would you describe your relationship with the other young women? Is there support? Encouragement? Do you feel like you're part of a community, or even a kind of family?* These questions often prompted heartfelt answers about sisterhood, emotional safety, and the comfort of being in a space where everyone shared something, be it language, faith, or lived experience. Women spoke of the ease they felt in these spaces compared to other parts of Istanbul, where they often felt isolated or misunderstood.

Toward the end of the interview, I encouraged participants to reflect more broadly. I asked, 'How do you think these gatherings affect your overall experience as a young Arab woman in Istanbul?' *How do they compare to what you had back home? What role do they play in helping you feel like you belong here?* I also inquired about language, fashion, Ramadan iftars, and how women expressed their identities in these gatherings, sometimes subtly through style and speech, and at other times through more overt forms of shared religious practice or intellectual engagement.

Finally, I ended the interviews with a few open questions: *Is there something you wish more people understood about these spaces? If you had to describe the gatherings in one word, what would it be and why? Do you think these gatherings contribute to a sense of collective consciousness or a new culture among young Arab women in this region?* These closing questions provided participants with the opportunity to step back and reflect on the broader impact of these circles, not just on their individual growth, but on their community as a whole.

Across all interviews, I noticed how the same themes kept reemerging: growth, belonging, transformation, trust, and faith. The conversations were often emotional, and at times, participants told me that the interview gave them space where they could pause and reflect on how far they had come. These interviews were not just moments for data collection; they were spaces of connection, witnessing, and mutual respect.

3.3. Digital Ethnography

Virtual spaces are a big part of these gatherings and understanding them helps us understand the mechanisms of how different pieces come together to create these spaces. That is why I decided to include digital geography into this study with Istanbul's fast paced, big, busy and loud nature; the virtual spaces that consist of social media such as Instagram, WhatsApp and telegram help people stay connected.

Because much of these women's engagement with learning extends into the digital world, I also paid close attention to how knowledge is shared through WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and Instagram pages. These platforms were not secondary; they were extensions of the gatherings themselves. They kept the conversations going

between sessions, allowed people who couldn't attend in person to stay connected, and in many ways, made the community more fluid, accessible, and responsive to daily life.

In a time when digital media affects daily social life, the book *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* offers a thorough rethinking of ethnography. Pink et al. contend that ethnography should focus on how people's activities, connections, and forms of knowledge migrate across online and offline contexts rather than viewing the digital as a distinct or confined field site. The book presents digital ethnography as an adaptable and practice-focused method that tracks people's actions, sharing, emotions, and knowledge via digital media while paying attention to the material, social, and cultural factors influencing these practices. In this way, the digital is viewed as a component of the larger contexts that form meaning and sociality rather than as an object of study in and of itself.

“Digital Ethnography outlines an approach to doing ethnography in a contemporary world. It invites researchers to consider how we live and research in a digital, material and sensory environment. This is not a static world or environment. Rather, it is one in which we need to know how to research in it as it develops and changes. Digital Ethnography also explores the consequences of the presence of digital media in shaping the techniques and processes through which we practice ethnography, and accounts for how the digital, methodological, practical and theoretical dimensions of ethnographic research are increasingly intertwined.” (Pink et al. 2016, 20)

This viewpoint is very relevant to my project, which looks at community development and informal learning among young Arab women in Istanbul in both real-world and virtual settings. Platforms like social media and messaging apps should be viewed as essential to how communities maintain closeness, continuity, and common understanding throughout time, as Pink et al. stress. According to my research, digital platforms serve as continuations of in-person study circles, where practical knowledge, theological interpretations, emotional support, and thoughts are shared beyond the actual meeting. This study is able to conceptualise digital contacts as ethnographically significant practices that show how learning, belonging, and caring are collaboratively negotiated in daily life rather than as secondary data.

At first glance, these digital spaces might seem like logistical hubs, used to share event invitations, links to recorded lectures, PDF books, or summarised notes. But they were

far more than that. I witnessed how these platforms operated as living ecosystems of informal learning and emotional support. Within WhatsApp groups, for example, conversations rarely come to a stop. The pace was dynamic and organic, shifting effortlessly between serious reflection and everyday concerns of navigating life in Istanbul across all aspects, including residence, education, transportation, and everything in between.

One moment, a participant might be sharing a reflection from the last lecture about spiritual growth or relationships, and the next, someone else would be asking for help navigating a residency renewal process or recommending a new modest fashion store. In this way, the digital spaces were flexible; they blurred lines between the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and practical dimensions of life. The discussions reflected the full spectrum of migrant life as lived by young Arab women in Istanbul.

Over time, I noticed that these channels had their own informal rhythms and norms. Some groups were more focused on specific topics, such as tafsir or contemporary politics, while others were more diverse and social. The political updates were especially striking: women shared news and commentary on events unfolding in Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and elsewhere, offering both information and emotional processing. The digital threads often became spaces of collective mourning, outrage, prayer, or solidarity, especially in moments of crisis.

Other times, the conversation was lighter, and women shared tips for navigating life in Istanbul. How to change apartments, which university to choose, where to buy skincare products, how to get documents translated quickly, or even hair salon recommendations. These exchanges were not trivial. They were part of how women made Istanbul liveable, how they crafted a life that felt a little less alien and a little more like home.

What emerged in these digital spaces was a powerful sense of mutual care and shared knowledge. The participants answered each other's questions quickly and generously, recommended job opportunities, or simply checked in if someone had been quiet for a few days. In that way, the groups weren't just informational; they were relational. The

sense of community was real and present, even if the women hadn't met face-to-face every week or so.

These platforms also allowed for layered forms of participation. Some women were very active, regularly sharing reflections or resources, while others read quietly but consistently. Digital presence became another form of attendance, and the boundaries between online and offline engagement were often blurred. It wasn't unusual to hear someone reference a digital discussion during an in-person gathering, or to see the continuation of a live debate spill into WhatsApp hours later.

In order to comprehend how social practices and meaning making develop in the gatherings we must look into the digitally spaces; this study employs digital ethnography. This research examines digital platforms as active social contexts where interactions, norms, and behaviours are mirroring the ones happening in real life during the gatherings; as opposed to seeing online spaces as distinct from real life. By closely interacting with various platforms over time, the study is able to see how digital tools, interfaces, and communication formats help care out the spirit of the gatherings between meetings. The virtual world, especially nowadays is inseparable from the real world; as Hine Describes virtual ethnography as vital to the ethnographer's fieldwork and how it helps add more dimensions to our research studies:

“Virtual ethnography involves intensive engagement with mediated interaction. This kind of engagement adds a new dimension to the exploration of the use of the medium in context. The ethnographer's engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight. Virtual ethnography can usefully draw on ethnographer as informant and embrace the reexive dimension. The shaping of interactions with informants by the technology is part of the ethnography, as are the ethnographer's interactions with the technology” (Hine 2000, 65)

By incorporating digital ethnography into my methodology, I was able to trace how knowledge is not only shared but also sustained and reinforced within the community. These digital channels mirrored the values of the gatherings, connection, trust, curiosity, but also extended their reach. They allowed different voices to emerge, enabling those who might be shy in person to speak up, and facilitating learning across time zones and schedules. Ultimately, these digital spaces proved essential to understanding the full landscape of informal learning among Arab migrant women in Istanbul.

3.4. Ethical Considerations, Positionality, and Reflexivity

From the very beginning of this research, I was committed to approaching the field with care, humility, and respect. The women I spent time with shared personal stories, dreams, fears, and reflections. Many of them are navigating difficult realities as migrants, and it was essential for me to ensure their voices were represented with honesty and dignity.

Before any interview or recording, I clearly explained the purpose of the research and obtained consent. Participants knew they could withdraw at any time or skip any questions they didn't want to answer.

As a young Arab Muslim woman myself, my entry into the spaces I studied was shaped by a deep sense of shared experience. I wasn't coming in as a complete outsider. The women I interviewed and observed were navigating many of the same things I was: living away from home, facing prejudice, and holding onto faith and identity in an unfamiliar place. That common ground, particularly around spirituality, emotional resilience, and the desire to stay close to our roots, made access feel natural. There was a quiet, unspoken understanding between us.

That emotional closeness sometimes made it difficult for me to separate myself as a researcher. I didn't just observe; I felt. I recognised parts of myself in their journeys, in their fears, in their sense of longing for stability and home. And while that made me more attentive and compassionate, it also made me more reflective about my role, considering how I was interpreting, writing, and how to remain honest while still being respectful and careful.

Because I had already been attending these gatherings for over two years, many of the young women already knew me. I wasn't entering the space as "the researcher." I was simply Ghena, someone they'd seen week after week, who joined the discussions, helped set up, and shared meals. That familiarity made interviews more fluid, and people were often willing to share openly with me. In some cases, I had already formed friendships with them, and in others, we had spent many hours in the same learning circles, so there was a natural ease in our conversations.

My presence as a researcher didn't shift the energy of the gatherings because I was already part of the environment. Sometimes, I even discussed my research with participants during break time or after the lectures ended, and these conversations added new layers to my understanding. They reflect and offer insights I hadn't noticed, pointing me toward new patterns or meanings I might have missed.

Holding the dual role of participant and researcher was delicate but brought a rewarding balance. It allowed me to observe organically while also engaging with intention. For example, I often noticed small things, such as how some couples would bring their children to mixed gatherings, or how women-only events would sometimes become spaces of deep emotional support and exchange. These details may have gone unnoticed by an outsider, but my closeness to the space allowed me to see them clearly.

I was also mindful of the ethical responsibility that came with this proximity. I never pushed for personal stories beyond what participants were willing to offer. If someone mentioned family tensions or unsupportive parents or spouses, I accepted what they shared without pressing for further details. It was important to me that the interview space felt safe, not intrusive. I always tried to be sensitive to the emotional and cultural boundaries that guided our interactions.

3.5. Setting the Scene

The spaces where these gatherings took place vary widely. One common location is cafés that are rented or reserved early on Sunday mornings, specifically for the gathering. Since they are booked in quiet hours, they're usually empty except for the women attending, which creates a cosy, uninterrupted atmosphere. The smell of freshly brewed coffee often mingles with warm conversation, and the layout is informal; women sitting around low tables, sharing thoughts over tea and pastries, in a space that feels more like a gathering with friends than a public event.

Another frequently used setting is *waqf* centres. These spaces are designed to serve the local Arab or Muslim communities and are often used for charity work, Islamic classes, and cultural events. They're structured like Arab homes, with carpets, benches, and soft lighting. Upon entering, shoes are removed, and the smell of oud greets you

at the door. Tea, dates, and sweets are almost always offered, adding a feeling of comfort and welcome. Women sit on traditional seating, either on majlis-style cushions or directly on the floor if the space is full. The atmosphere is intimate, soft, and familiar.

These gatherings are typically hosted by community groups started by Arab Muslim women themselves; women who felt a deep need for these spaces and created them out of shared longing. Modesty is a shared value, and it shows: women dress beautifully in modern, modest fashion, often stylish yet reserved, expressing both their personality and principles. Children are often present—usually just a few—tagging along quietly with their mothers. While there aren't specific accommodations for them, they're gently included, and their presence is never seen as disruptive. Some gatherings take place in more formal Islamic settings, like the *majlis* held at the Sulaymaniyah Mosque. This historic site, located in the heart of Istanbul, already carries centuries of spiritual significance. The room used for these gatherings is equipped with proper seating and Islamic architectural elements that make the space feel sacred and spiritual. The mood in these gatherings is focused, spiritual, and reflective.

The lecturers in these gatherings come from within the community and share similar migration experiences, which makes them more relatable to the young women. Their familiarity with the community's needs makes the discussions feel grounded and deeply relevant.

Outdoor spaces, such as parks and gardens, are also occasionally used, especially for celebratory occasions like Eid or during Ramadan. These events are more relaxed, centred on social connection and joy. Women sit on picnic blankets, share home-cooked food, and enjoy each other's company under the open sky. The environment is light and free-spirited, allowing for casual conversations and the formation of new friendships to occur naturally. The presence of nature adds to the sense of ease and grounding.

The gatherings I observed and participated in during the course of this research took various forms, each with its own tone, rhythm, and focus. While all were grounded in

a shared desire for connection and growth, the themes and structures varied, reflecting the different needs and interests of the women involved.

Religious Circles were among the most central. These came in two distinct types. The first were more formal study circles focused on Qur'an, Hadith, or Fiqh, usually led by a dedicated teacher who remained consistent across sessions. These gatherings followed a structured format: the teacher would present the lesson, and participants could ask questions or discuss at the end. The second type was less formal, centred on personal spiritual growth, emotional well-being. These often featured guest speakers and covered topics such as faith, hijab, and women's roles in Muslim communities. This second type was especially popular among the women, as the topics felt more immediate and flexible. They often sparked spontaneous conversation, and women would stay after the session ended, continuing the discussion.

Political and intellectual circles, including book clubs, were more common among university students. These sessions usually revolved around a book or theme: Palestinian resistance, Arab revolutions, and post-colonial Arab society and were often led by an academic, journalist, or community intellectual. They offered space not just for knowledge but for critical dialogue. Here, young Arabs voiced political frustration, unpacked inherited narratives, and debated strategies for cultural or social change. These gatherings carried a different energy; sometimes intense, often empowering. They made space for political literacy in a way that felt accessible and relevant.

Self-development and emotional intelligence gatherings were also increasingly popular, especially among individuals in transitional stages of life, such as those navigating marriage, career, or personal uncertainty. These sessions were conversational and often peer-led, sometimes including a lecturer with a background in psychology, coaching, or counselling. Topics included boundaries, emotional regulation, friendship, time management, and self-awareness; all rooted in Islamic ethics. Young women often shared personal experiences and asked for advice on how to better navigate them.

Each of these gatherings served a unique purpose, but what united them was their ability to hold space for knowledge, healing, empowerment, change, and

improvement. They were places where young women came not only to learn but to be seen, heard, accepted and understood.

3.6. Conclusion for Chapter III

This chapter has argued for a methodology that can capture the full experience of learning as it unfolds among young Arab migrant women in Istanbul, encompassing its ideas, atmospheres, words, silences, spaces, and chat threads. Ethnography made this possible. By combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography, I stayed close to how knowledge is created, circulated, and experienced in spaces that are at once educational, social, spiritual, and political.

Participant observation taught me to slow down and notice the choreography of a gathering: how they welcome newcomers, how difficult topics are discussed, the questions that arise, and so on. Of course, the Interviews opened a private, reflective tempo where participants could link these moments to their wider journeys of migration, study, faith, friendship and responsibility. Digital ethnography maintained the pulse between meetings, revealing how WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram sustain these relationships, extend access, and weave practical advice with spiritual reminders and political awareness. Rather than three separate data streams, these modes interlocked in a way that allowed me to test recurring patterns of belonging, growth, trust, courage, and faith over weeks and months, as well as dissonances.

I entered this field from proximity, not distance, as a young Arab Muslim woman already attending similar circles, I had access that felt natural and relationships that preceded the research. That closeness required clear ethical guardrails: informed consent for recordings, the right to withdraw, careful anonymisation and ongoing attention to boundaries. Reflexive journaling kept me honest about how my own experiences sharpened or risked blurring interpretation. Proximity treated carefully became a strength; empathy clarified meanings rather than replacing them.

The experiences covered included a variety of gatherings such as religious study circles, personal growth talks, political and intellectual forums and sessions on emotional intelligence, each bearing distinct rhythms. Yet they share a common ethic,

to make space for learning as self-formation and community building at once. A discussion of visa paperwork can sit beside a reflection on sincerity, or a debate over media narratives can end with a reading list and a prayer. My methodological choices were deliberately flexible to accommodate this range and to follow how ideas evolve from a lecture to a group chat to the next week's question.

The payoffs of the research design are clear. It highlights the ordinary infrastructures that make learning possible, such as shared rides, posted reminders, rotating note-taking, and small acts of encouragement that accumulate. It demonstrates how digital and physical spaces intersect and reinforce one another. It clarifies how informal leadership emerges and how complex ideas are translated into a language that is owned through repetition, examples, and dialogue. It reveals how these circles do double work, equipping young Arab women to navigate a sprawling city and a shifting world while also shaping selves grounded in faith, ethics, and collective responsibility.

This Chapter provides the scaffolding for the rest of the thesis, explaining how voices were protected, how scenes were recorded, and how meanings were assembled with care. The next chapter moves from method to meaning; it gathers the threads traced here into analytic themes such as how belonging is cultivated, how knowledge travels and solidifies, how confidence and courage are learned in community, as well as how political and spiritual vocabularies are refined. If this chapter has been about how I learned to listen well, the chapters ahead are about what that listening makes visible in a universe within a city.

CHAPTER IV

EVERYDAY GATHERINGS: INFORMAL LEARNING AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN ISTANBUL EMERGING THROUGH EMPIRICAL DATA

This chapter delves into the empirical findings of this ethnographic study, analysing the rich data gathered through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with 15 young Arab women, and digital ethnography of their online communities. The primary aim is to answer the central research question: “How do informal learning gatherings among young Arab women in Istanbul shape their identities, foster community, and provide forms of social and epistemic support in the context of migration?”

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of social capital, Ibn Khaldun’s concept of *asabiyyah* (group solidarity), Etienne Wenger’s theory of communities of practice, Saba Mahmood’s theory of pious subject formation, Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger), and Stuart Hall’s Cultural Identity Theory, this discussion will demonstrate how these seemingly informal gatherings function as critical sites for knowledge acquisition, identity negotiation, and the cultivation of resilience and belonging amidst the complexities of migration and marginalization in Istanbul. The analysis will weave together direct insights from the participants’ voices, highlighting the profound impact of these spaces on the young women’s lives.

4.1. Voices from the Field

This chapter has argued in what follows, I will introduce the participants whose narratives form the core of this ethnographic study. Drawing on the fieldwork I conducted over several months, these brief portraits offer insight into the diverse backgrounds, migration journeys, and everyday realities of the young Arab women I

spoke with. Including this information here provides important context for the discussions that follow, allowing their voices, experiences, and situated knowledge to remain central throughout the analysis.

Alaa is a 26-year-old woman originally born in Canada to Libyan parents. She lived in both Canada and Libya before moving to Istanbul, Turkey, in 2017, where she currently resides with her family. Alaa previously studied Islamic studies with a specialisation in Quranic sciences and is now continuing her education in the Arabic language through an online academy. She does not currently work in Istanbul; she lives with her family. While Alaa is a regular attendee of the Diwaniya gatherings, she has also participated and is involved in other women's gatherings, such as Quranic learning circles (notably Diyar Al-Quran) and informal women's study groups with neighbours and family friends. These gatherings focus on Quranic studies, Arabic, and social issues, often occurring twice or three times a month.

Malak is a 28-year-old engineering graduate from Lebanon. She is originally from Beirut, Lebanon, but moved to Istanbul after the city's explosion. In Istanbul, she first lived with her family for seven months before moving into her own rented accommodations with her sister in the Kayasehir area. She is not currently a student, having graduated from the American University of Beirut. She is currently working to gain professional experience. Malak is a committed attendee of several women's gatherings, including the "Diwaniya" and "Misk session."

Rama is a twenty-one-year-old Syrian who formerly lived in Saudi Arabia. She has never lived in Syria and moved directly to Istanbul from Saudi Arabia when she was fourteen years old. She currently lives in Istanbul with her family and is a third-year university student majoring in English and Turkish Translation at Gulf University. Having graduated from a public Imam Hatip high school in Turkey, she is fluent in the language and often acts as a translator for her family. She has been attending the "Diwaniya" women's gathering for almost a year, which she considers her primary and most committed circle of friends. While she attended Quran circles in a mosque and summer courses during her time in Saudi Arabia, the Diwaniya is the main gathering she attends in Istanbul.

Leila is a 29-year-old Libyan student who currently lives in Istanbul with her parents and younger siblings. Although her family is from Libya, she was born in Jordan and lived there for a year before moving to Britain, where she spent the next seventeen years. She moved to Turkey with her family in late 2017. Leila is not currently working, but she has previously worked with the intellectual centre Manar Al Fikr. She is an active university student. Leila has extensive experience with women's gatherings, having attended them in Britain and continuing in Turkey. Her participation is diverse, including educational camps like "Takwin" a Quran circle at a local mosque, a weekly hadith session at her university, and scholarly lectures, such as those at the Sulaymaniyah Council.

Arwa was born in 1993, is originally from Gaza, Palestine. She currently resides in Istanbul, where she has been living for three years. Prior to Istanbul, she lived in Gaza. Arwa is a student pursuing a master's degree in the Department of Institute of Civilisation Studies, having completed her bachelor's degree in English Language Teaching. She lives alone in Istanbul in the student dorms, as her family is in Gaza. She attends some women-only gatherings as well as the Sulaymaniyah Council.

Tala is 30 years old and is originally from Egypt, where she completed her law degree and master's in international relations at Ain Shams University. She has been living in Istanbul, Turkey, for almost five years. Tala lives with her family in Istanbul. She regularly attends a women's gathering, as well as the Sulaymaniyah Council. She is motivated to attend these gatherings because they allow her to hear her native language, engage with religious content, and connect with people, which helps reduce feelings of alienation and provides a sense of belonging within the community.

Dina is 21 years old and originally from Lebanon. She has been living in Istanbul, Turkey, for three years, having moved there when she was 18. Dina lives with her family in Mahmoud Bey, Istanbul. She is a student at the university. Dina attends women's gatherings, specifically the "Diwaniya" and girls-only discussion sessions at her university, which she learned about from a friend. She values these gatherings as they provide an opportunity to connect with other Arabs who speak her native language and discuss religious topics that interest her. She feels these gatherings help

alleviate feelings of alienation in a foreign country, offer a sense of belonging, and contribute to her personal growth and learning.

Noor is 34 years old and is originally from Iraq, where she previously studied literature and history. She currently resides in Istanbul, Turkey. Her presence in Istanbul dates back to 2016, with periods of being almost settled between 2016 and 2021, and she specifically returned for studies at the end of 2023. She moved to Istanbul with her brother for her studies. Noor actively attends various women's gatherings in Istanbul, the Sulaymaniyah Council, which she has been attending since 2019. She also participated in various cultural and religious conferences and courses, including Quran memorisation classes and courses on Islamic knowledge. These gatherings are significant to her as they serve as a pathway to gaining knowledge beyond traditional university settings and foster a sense of community and support, especially for those living abroad without extended family. She also attended similar gatherings in Iraq to some extent.

Rahaf is 29 years old and originally from Syria, where she completed her bachelor's degree in English Literature at the University of Damascus. She has been living in Istanbul, Turkey, for eight years. Rahaf is currently a Master's student in English Literature and is in the thesis preparation phase. She also began studying Media at an online university in Syria, but did not complete the program yet. She lives with her family in Istanbul and is single. Rahaf actively participates in women's gatherings in Istanbul. She finds that these gatherings provide psychological comfort and a strong sense of belonging. She describes Istanbul as a nurturing environment for such communities, where participants can truly be themselves, and the gatherings create a familial atmosphere.

Yara is a 27 years old from Palestine, She recently graduated civil engineering, she's been living in Istanbul for the past six years, she moved here from UAE with her family, she attends different gatherings around Istanbul, such as women gatherings, book clubs, and professional gatherings for engineers. She's very active and enjoys the diversity that Istanbul has to offer and finds it very nurturing for young people and she values young Arab women gatherings, especially because she has made friendships within these gatherings.

Iman is 29 years old and originally from Yemen. She has been living in Istanbul, Turkey, for eight years, having moved there from Saudi Arabia. Iman is currently a Master's student. She lives with her family in Istanbul. Iman actively attends women's gatherings, which she describes as a vital space that redefines her fundamental life and provides a sense of emotional and sentimental belonging. She also believes these gatherings contribute significantly to building collective awareness and culture.

Samira is 25 years old and originally from Syria. She moved to Turkey when she was 15, around 2015, and has been living there for approximately 11 years. Initially, she lived in Ankara for two years before moving to Istanbul. Samira studied pharmacy at the University of Medical Sciences, a governmental institution, and also learned Turkish in high school and university in Turkey. She is currently employed and works in a pharmacy, often for long hours, every day except on a day of the week. Samira lives with her family in Istanbul. She attends women's gatherings, specifically the “Diwaniya”, which she discovered through Instagram. While she attempts to attend regularly, her demanding work schedule and the distance from her home sometimes prevent her from maintaining consistent attendance. Samira highly values these gatherings, as they connect her with people from her home country, fostering a sense of shared goals, ideas, culture, and traditions, and providing a sense of belonging in the diverse Arab community in Istanbul. She fondly recalls these gatherings.

Nadia is a 29-year-old student. She moved to Istanbul in 2015 when she was 20 years old. She currently lives in Istanbul with her family. She isn't currently employed. She attends women's gatherings, the Arabic Summer Book Club and the Sulaymaniyah Council.

Mariam is 51 years old and originally from Yemen. She has been living in Istanbul, Turkey, for nine years, having moved there in 2015. Mariam lives with her family in Istanbul. She is a graduate of Al-Iman University in Yemen with a degree in Sharia Sciences. Mariam is actively involved in teaching and religious instruction. In Yemen, she managed a memorisation centre and led Quranic and Sharia lessons from 2001. In Istanbul, she continued this work, studying the Quran with sisters for two years and has been teaching at Insan Academy since 2018. She also gives lessons at women's gatherings, such as the “Diwaniya”. Mariam finds these gatherings offer a strong sense

of belonging and community, especially for those living abroad. She focuses her lessons on topics prevalent among young women where they might need more awareness, aiming to convey the full meaning and dimensions of these subjects, driven by a desire to share her knowledge.

Sama is 29 years old and is a Palestinian from Gaza, where she completed her studies. She has been residing in Istanbul, Turkey, for about eight years. Sama lives with her parents in Istanbul. She studied educational guidance with a focus on psychology and is currently pursuing an online Diploma in Education related to parenting. Although she previously worked in the clothing industry (not her primary field), she is currently not employed. Sama attends women's gatherings, having discovered them through a relative, and has become quite attached to them. She describes these gatherings as a "gathering of friends, a gathering of sisters" that provides a sense of closeness, intimacy, and a feeling akin to a "big family gathering". She highlights the importance of these gatherings, especially for Arab girls, and particularly hijabi girls, living in a foreign and "open-minded" country like Turkey, as they offer a space for education and guidance. Sama values the lessons learned at these meetings, finding them beneficial for acquiring new ideas and correcting misconceptions. She believes these gatherings have contributed to her personal growth and maturity, strengthening her relationship with God and enhancing her understanding of reality and herself. Sama considers these gatherings to be very useful and desires to share this experience with her friends and family, always trying to bring her friends and mother along.

The ethnographic fieldwork revealed several overarching themes that consistently emerged across the diverse informal learning gatherings and individual interviews: Multifaceted Learning: These spaces are not solely for academic or religious instruction but serve as comprehensive hubs for practical life skills, emotional intelligence, cultural preservation, personal growth and development. Iman, a 29-year-old university student from Yemen who is married, emphasised this holistic learning, describing a significant "shift" in her perceptions and beliefs since arriving in Istanbul and engaging with these circles. She noted that the gatherings exposed her to new ideas and scholars, a stark contrast to her previous environment, leading her to "redefine basic areas in my life" (Iman, Yemen, 29). This included reevaluating concepts such as what it means to be a woman, the true meaning of beauty, and the purpose of

existence, which she felt was crucial for her personal growth. As she articulated, she began to “beautify my mind instead of beautifying my face and my house all day long” (Iman, Yemen, 29). “We make friends, we meet, we learn. We share knowledge and help each other.” (Rama, Syria, 21)

“It's diversity. There is no specific theme. There is nothing like that. An element that we continue to have. Even if it is, for example, the religious element is present in all its aspects. But this is our nature as Muslims. But they like to diversify the topics. In activities. For example, lectures such as Eid and Ramadan meetings. And breakfast and stuff like that. For example, these don't have lectures. Or it could be a short lecture, so you feel it is a special Eid topic or Ramadan topic. However, the diversity, for example, and the renewal of faces who give the lectures, provide me with benefits in many ways.” (Rama, Syria, 21) “We are learning new things because we discuss different topics, and at the same time, I love it. It means there is no fixed structure. Meaning there is spontaneity in the subject. It is sometimes in lectures, sometimes in girls' gatherings.” (Rama, Syria, 21)

Rama's reflections underline the dynamic and evolving nature of these informal learning spaces, highlighting how their diversity and spontaneity foster a richer and more engaging learning experience. Rather than a fixed curriculum or thematic structure, these gatherings accommodate a wide array of topics and formats, ranging from religious lectures to casual discussions over coffee and tea, allowing for both depth and flexibility. This openness creates an environment where participants can explore various aspects of their identities, beliefs, and interests without feeling confined. The continual renewal of speakers and themes that Rama appreciates reflects a broader culture of curiosity and inclusivity within these circles. Her emphasis on learning “new things” through both structured and unstructured encounters illustrates how knowledge in these spaces is co-created and relational, shaped by dialogue, shared experiences, and mutual support. Rama's account ultimately highlights the power of these gatherings not only as educational forums but also as communal, living spaces of growth and transformation.

Participants consistently articulated a deep sense of belonging, sisterhood, being seen, and mutual support, often describing these groups as a “second family” (Iman, Yemen, 29) in Istanbul. Iman described these relationships as profound, forged on shared principles and values. Despite not having sisters of her own, she considers the women in these groups as such, valuing their deep connections and intimate conversations that she believes “will be a long time in my life. It will not just be a phase” (Iman, Yemen,

29). This sense of kinship provides a vital support system distinct from what they might find elsewhere.

“Oh yeah, a lot. I mean, the girls are very nice. They are cooperative, and when we ask, they give us answers, even here. And many of them provide services if you need them, so many of them do. It is easy to feel that these people help each other and everything.” (Rama, Syria, 21)

Rama’s words illuminate the deeply embedded ethic of care and reciprocity that shapes these gatherings, reinforcing their role as intimate social ecosystems rather than merely educational spaces. Her observation that “many of them provide services” and are quick to help when asked reflects a culture where support is not transactional but instinctive, rooted in shared experience and a collective understanding of what it means to navigate life as a migrant young woman in Istanbul. This communal orientation, where generosity and cooperation are the norm, nurtures a strong sense of safety and emotional security. It reinforces the idea that belonging in these circles is built not just on shared beliefs, but on active participation in each other’s lives through listening, service, and solidarity.

“It means psychological support to them. Especially if they are strangers in this society? I mean, of course, it will have an impact on their souls. First of all, many girls... says, ‘By God, I felt like we were in Exile. But when we entered the centre and memorised the Quran. When I met the girls, I felt like I had sisters. I felt like I had a big family. ’ Teacher Muna

Another emerging theme is related to identity affirmation and negotiation: The gatherings provide a crucial environment for young Arab women to affirm their Arab and Muslim identities, while also navigating the complexities of their migrant status within the host society here in Istanbul. Iman’s journey exemplifies this, as she confronted ingrained ideas about her identity, particularly as a woman, that were shaped by her upbringing in the Gulf. She revealed how the open environment of Istanbul and the discussions within these circles prompted her to question and ultimately redefine her understanding of herself and her faith, moving beyond “material standards” (Iman, Yemen, 29) to a deeper, more critical awareness. She noted, for example, her exploration of the topic of hijab, which was previously a given but became a subject of critical inquiry and personal re-interpretation in Istanbul.

“Honestly, for someone living abroad, especially for us girls in such an open-minded environment, we really need a space that educates us and brings us back to the right path. Some girls, despite attending lessons, had already taken a different direction in life. But when they

came here, they said things like, ‘I came in this gathering, and I felt I needed someone to guide me back to my faith’ For them, thank God, the Diwaniya became that space.” (Sama, Palestine, 29)

This reflection highlights how identity, especially for young women navigating life abroad, is not fixed but continually shaped by context, influence, and choice. The participant's words reveal a tension many expressed in my fieldwork: the push and pull between external openness and internal grounding. She speaks to the need for spaces that do more than just inform; they realign and re-anchor. In a setting where values can feel fluid and boundaries are easily blurred, gatherings like the Diwaniya become spaces for intentional recalibration. They offer moral clarity, peer reflection, and a collective sense of direction. Her mention of girls who “*had already taken a different path*” but found themselves redirected through these sessions speaks to the Diwaniya’s role not just as a cultural or religious gathering, but as a space of identity negotiation where participants actively affirm who they are, whom they want to be, and how to navigate that process with support and dignity. It’s in these subtle returns and reorientations that identity is not only preserved but reimaged.

“In exile, meaning they have their own circles. They learn from each other and speak freely. And they share experiences, like the Diwaniya... I mean, because when a person is abroad, the first thing he needs is... Something for familiarity... Holi gatherings mean, it provides space because you are with people, they speak your language,” (Dina Lebanon, 21).

The data also helped highlight the theme of enhanced agency and resilience. Through shared knowledge and collective support, young Arab women gain confidence, strength, practical tools, and emotional resilience to navigate challenges (both social and institutional), pursue opportunities, and shape their futures in the host society. Iman highlighted how the exposure to role models and scholars deeply inspired her and fostered a “love for change and learning”. She felt these spaces helped her move from a “deep ignorance” to a profound “awareness,” (Iman, Yemen, 29) enabling her to critically sift through ideas and build her knowledge anew. This newfound clarity, though sometimes challenging for her immediate family, has empowered her to navigate her personal life, including her marriage, with greater intentionality and self-awareness.

Another emerging theme from the data is the bridging of online and offline engagement. Digital platforms (WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram) are integral

extensions of these communities, facilitating continuous support, knowledge sharing, emotional support, casual socialising, forming new friendships, and serving as a platform for discussion after physical meetups.

“They help a lot. However, that was after I joined the WhatsApp group, as it helps me stay connected. In the group, if you had not joined, you would not have been included. I would not have felt that way.” (Rama, Syria, 21)

Rama’s reflection highlights the critical role digital platforms play in sustaining the continuity and depth of these informal learning communities beyond physical gatherings. Her emphasis on the WhatsApp group as a turning point in her sense of connection reveals how online spaces function as vital threads that weave the community together throughout the week. These platforms do more than simply relay information; they foster emotional closeness, facilitate ongoing conversations, and allow for spontaneous interactions that strengthen bonds. Without access to these digital networks, Rama suggests, the feeling of inclusion and belonging would be significantly diminished. This insight highlights the hybrid nature of these communities, where online engagement is not merely secondary but central to the formation and maintenance of relationships. It also reflects a broader reality for migrant women in urban contexts: digital tools are not just conveniences, but lifelines for building and sustaining meaningful social worlds.

4.2. Social Capital in Action: Networks of Opportunity and Support

In what follows, I will introduce the participants whose Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social capital provides a powerful lens through which we can understand the tangible and intangible resources that young Arab women accumulate through their participation in these informal gatherings. The findings clearly illustrate the formation and exchange of both bonding capital and bridging capital, as well as the emergence of symbolic capital.

The interviews consistently highlighted the deep emotional ties and sense of solidarity among participants. Many young women expressed feeling “seen,” “understood,” and “at home” within these circles, in stark contrast to the feelings of isolation or misunderstanding they sometimes experienced outside in the host society, whether in

university or the workplace. As one participant shared, “It’s a place where everyone speaks your language, understands your struggles, and shares your faith. It feels like a family.” (Dina Lebanon, 21). This emotional social capital, rooted in shared language, religion, cultural background, and migration experiences, is the foundation of these communities. The gatherings provide a safe space where vulnerabilities can be shared and understood, allowing for collective healing and fostering a profound sense of sisterhood. There is also social capital beyond just emotional support; These gatherings function as vital hubs for the circulation of crucial practical information and opportunities. Participants frequently recounted instances where connections made within the circles led to concrete, real-life benefits. For example, the young women also exchanged information about: scholarships and educational opportunities, Access to information about universities, courses, public and private dormitories, financial aid, scholarships, information on the real experience of a university, one of the interviewees:

Another theme is job opportunities and professional networking: Several participants mentioned being connected to work opportunities or receiving advice on career paths from fellow members. One interviewee specifically noted;

“I would be doing small talk after the gathering with people and i would mention how I have my own business and I got new offered calibration opportunities through these gatherings and some university students coming to join my platform once I explained it to them, so yes it was a very interesting dynamic because I was there to attend a lecture and you know socialize and have a coffee, but yes it defiantly has a professional aspect or I guess because I am a professional person so wherever I go I take that with me.” (Malak, Lebanon, 28)

The theme of housing options and navigating bureaucracy also emerged from the data, including information on finding apartments, understanding rental agreements, and navigating the often-complex Turkish bureaucracy for residence permits. This is one of the major topics that questions are frequently asked about in group chats on WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram. Because it is an important and usually urgent matter, the response to these kinds of questions is almost immediate, as everyone understands the struggle of obtaining a residence permit in Istanbul.

“For example, they had a group called, and most of them were young Egyptian men and women. By the way, whenever I asked a question, any question, they would answer, meaning they would translate for me at that time. Once I needed it while I was looking for housing, and they would respond to me directly, so there was help even if it was just a meeting between us

or a job opportunity, for example, they would write about a job opportunity in such and such a place, or they would come to you personally or they would write on the group.” (Noor Iraq, 34)

Personal and business connections were another theme that was observed: some women found opportunities to promote their small businesses, or, as some interviewees shared, met their life partners through connections made at these gatherings. Iman’s discussion of meeting people from “all nationalities” (Iman, Yemen, 29) in Istanbul through these gatherings, including those from Turkestan, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, India, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Palestine, and Jordan, highlights the extensive networking and potential for diverse connections that these informal spaces offer. While she didn’t explicitly detail specific job or housing leads, her emphasis on forming strong, principled friendships suggests that these communities provide fertile ground for building essential bridging capital.

“Oh, through my friend. She invites me. She used to be our neighbour. Now she's moved out. Ah. She invited me. She said to me, 'So, there is something like this if you like?' You go and so on. And this was the first time I joined” (Rama, Syria, 21)

This illustrates how social capital, in Bourdieu’s sense, functions as a mechanism for resource mobilisation within trusted networks. As Bourdieu explains

“The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected.¹³” (Bourdieu 1986, 21)

The informal nature of these exchanges helps and has a significant impact on the women's ability to navigate and thrive in Istanbul.

The gatherings also contribute to the accumulation of symbolic capital. The Women who give the lectures and consistently contribute to these gatherings share insights or offer support, often gaining informal recognition and respect within the community. This status, though not formally assigned, is evident in how others seek their advice or express appreciation. This symbolic capital can also be converted into other forms of capital, should they choose to, such as enhancing their status within religious, academic, or activist circles outside the immediate group. And so has one of the lecturers, who, two years ago, was invited to various gatherings to give lectures to

young women. She has now started her own group, and young women are invited to attend every week.

Furthermore, participation subtly shapes their habitus, or embodied dispositions. Participants noted changes in their speech, dress, and embracing modern modest fashion, as well as social interactions, religiosity, social confidence, and resilience cultivated within these spaces. As one young woman observed, “I learned how to carry myself differently, with more confidence, especially about my identity as a Muslim woman.” (Sama, Palestine, 29)

“Yes, we actually became friends and exchanged numbers. We got to know the girls, and now every Sunday we sit together, greet each other, and after the lesson, we go out as a group to a coffee shop. Sometimes we talk about the lesson, and other times we just chat. It’s so refreshing and uplifting to have these friendships; we genuinely miss each other when we don’t attend.” (Sama, Palestine, 29)

This quote captures how informal learning spaces can evolve into meaningful social bonds that extend beyond formal gatherings. What starts as a shared interest in attending lessons becomes a foundation for friendships built on routine, trust, and presence. The fact that they “*miss each other*” speaks to a deeper emotional connection formed not just through shared values, but through consistent, low-pressure interactions, such as meeting at a coffee shop after. These relationships offer more than companionship; they create networks of emotional support and even potential collaborations. In contexts of migration where familiar social structures are often absent, these connections become vital. They offer a sense of continuity, mutual encouragement. This reflects how spaces like the Diwaniya foster not only spiritual or intellectual growth, but also personal relationships that grow organically through trust and shared rhythm.

4.3. Asabiyyah: The Moral and Affective Cohesion

While Bourdieu illuminates the instrumental aspects of social networks, Ibn Khaldun's concept of asabiyyah (group solidarity) provides insight into the profound emotional, moral, and spiritual bonds that compel these women to return to the gathering week after week, often without direct external reward. Ibn Khaldun states that Asabiyyah is not limited to nomadic societies and can also exist in cities, where people don’t necessarily share the same bloodline, but rather come together based on commonalities

they share. (Ibn Khaldun 1967) Though originally applied to tribal societies, asabiyyah can be reinterpreted to understand the powerful cohesion within these diasporic communities, in the sense that young Arab women, coming together, based on the shared similarities that being Arab and Muslim, and they also share the common struggle of existing as migrants in the host society here in Istanbul.

“Asabiyah, in its earliest stage, is conceived as a result of the natural human desire for cooperative collective life, which distinguishes human beings from animals. Out of this tendency, the nucleus of a social group is formed. A number of individuals identifying themselves as a single group (in a certain geographical unit) bind together (in its earliest formative phase) by common familial ties. This natural cooperative urge finds concrete expression in the formation of asabiyah.” (Muhammad 1998, 37)

In this study, asabiyyah is not founded on blood ties but on shared experiences of migration, religiosity, language, and often, marginalisation.

“Asabiyyah is a 'we-feeling' among people, without which no social or political organisation can survive. For Ibn Khaldun asabiyyah is a very important and complex theoretical tool. It could be generated by common beliefs, common goals, common economic interests, common culture, common language, common sufferings, or a common enemy.” (Muhammad 1998, 37)

Participants consistently described the gatherings as more than just educational; they were “spiritual and emotional lifelines.” The most striking example of this collective ethic was recounted by an interviewee: “In one of the gatherings, a girl couldn't pay her tuition fees for her university; we are all university students without personal income and supported by our parents, but still, we managed to collect the money and help her.” (Leila, Libya 29). This act of support, love and collective care for one another, driven by a deep commitment to mutual upliftment, is a powerful manifestation of asabiyyah in action, demonstrating a shared moral responsibility for the group's well-being, even when the resources are limited because they are all students, they still found a way to help one of the group members who is in need, thus their shared Asabiyyah is the reason for that,

Asabiyyah in the gatherings also fosters spiritual support; many young women spoke of how the sessions helped them “return to Allah,” “stay grounded,” or “remember who they are.” (Sama, Palestine, 29). The emphasis on shared religious growth transcends national differences or class divisions that might otherwise exist, forming a deeper sense of unity. This collective striving for spiritual and personal betterment

forms the emotional and ethical backbone of the group, sustaining the community through instability and change, particularly in the absence of formal institutional support or external recognition.

4.4. Communities of Practice: Shaping Identity Through Shared Engagement

Etienne Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice further illuminates how identity and learning are inextricably linked through consistent engagement and mutual meaning-making within these informal gatherings. These circles, whether religious study groups, book clubs, or self-development workshops, function as dynamic communities where participants are not passive recipients but active co-creators of knowledge and understanding.

“Participation here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. Participating in a playground clique or in a work team, for instance, is both a kind of action and a form of belonging. Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do.” (Wenger 1998, 4)

Through regular interaction, the women build trust, develop a shared language, and cultivate common ways of thinking and being that are deeply rooted in their experiences as Arab and Muslim women in Istanbul. The discussions, reflections, and shared experiences within these spaces allow them to collectively interpret their world, articulate their challenges, and find collective solutions. This process of shared participation contributes significantly to the formation of their individual and collective identities, fostering a sense of belonging and agency that extends beyond the formal content of the learning. For instance, the way women discuss current events related to their homelands, or share tips on navigating daily life in Istanbul, reflects a shared practice of making sense of their complex realities together.

Iman's narrative strongly reinforces the idea of these gatherings as transformative “spaces for awareness, for awareness and change” (Iman, Yemen, 29). She actively sought out these environments for what she termed a “qualitative shift” in her life, a radical re-evaluation of fundamental concepts and deeply ingrained ideas about herself and the world. Her sociology background fuelled this critical engagement, leading her

to “sift” through previous knowledge and reconstruct her understanding, even if it meant challenging long-held beliefs. She emphasised that the value of these gatherings lies in the expertise of the “real people who have lived and researched for 20 or 25 years” (Iman, Yemen, 29) indicating a dynamic co-creation of knowledge driven by experienced individuals and collective inquiry. This continuous process of questioning and redefining, as Iman expressed, is not always easy but is essential for personal evolution and greater awareness.

An interesting reflection by Alaa, in which she compares these gatherings with the social norms that exist in our society. She attends the Diwaniya gathering, as well as other women-only gatherings, which are typically held by women from the same building in the Kayashahir area. These gatherings focus on lessons revolving around the Quran or Sunnah, and participants come together once a week to discuss these topics. And this was her reflection on these gatherings:

“I feel comfortable because, usually in our culture, women's gatherings tend to revolve around talking about others' gossip, backbiting. That's the norm in many circles. Women may be housewives or not work outside the home, and this often becomes the primary mode of interaction. However, what I've found different here is that these meetings and gatherings become more like knowledge circles, where advice is shared, and awareness is built. Young girls who come with their mothers, for example, get to see that not every woman's gathering has to be about gossip or hypocrisy. These spaces show that we can create something better. They give hope. They show that we can grow and improve ourselves as a community.” (Alaa, Libya, 26)

This reflection captures a powerful shift in how women's gatherings are experienced and reimaged. Drawing on *Communities of Practice* theory, what stands out here is how participation in shared spaces, like study circles or gatherings, can offer more than just social connection; they become sites of informal learning and identity formation. What she's articulating is not just a personal preference but an emerging sense of belonging to a different kind of practice, one where presence, reflection, and self-improvement replace the more passive or even harmful norms she's grown used to. Through repeated engagement in these meaningful gatherings, even younger girls begin to learn that not every woman's space has to fall into familiar, unproductive patterns. This shift reflects how communal practices, when anchored in shared purpose and values, can shape both perception and participation over time.

“not just cultures, but also diversity of ideas. For example, before, I always felt like I was listening to the same thing. But here in gatherings, because they are gatherings. Different. Even in gatherings, they bring different people to talk. And basically, different people are discussing. So I feel I have a difference. I mean, with knowledge. Mine has become diverse.” (Dina Lebanon, 21).

4.5. Identity Formation and Self-Shaping: Pious Subjects and Situated Learning

The informal learning gatherings in Istanbul serve as crucial sites for the ongoing formation and negotiation of identity among young Arab women, particularly in shaping what Saba Mahmood refers to as the “pious subject.” Mahmood's work on the Egyptian mosque movement underscores that piety is not merely an internal state, but an embodied practice cultivated through disciplined engagement with religious texts, rituals, and communities (Mahmood 2005, 117). This ethnographic study reveals a similar dynamic, where participation in these circles actively shapes the women's religious and cultural identities through a process of situated learning.

“It takes me through the previous education system. Scholars used to sit in mosques and teach students. Yes. The students used to graduate from the mosque, and thus, there is a connection between religion and life. There is no separation. Yes. I mean, this physical separation that you feel exists in the university. Maybe it is the construction of a chair. Here, you sit in a kind of humility. There is a sense that the angels are participating with you in this council. Yes, it is a religious aspect in addition to the other aspect that you hear in” (Noor Iraq, 34)

Noor's reflection beautifully illustrates how these gatherings function as lived expressions of embodied piety, aligning closely with Mahmood's notion of the “pious subject.” Her comparison to historical models of mosque-based education reveals a desire for continuity between religious knowledge and everyday life, a continuity she feels is disrupted in more institutionalised settings, such as the university. By highlighting the posture of sitting with humility and the spiritual presence of the angels she senses in these gatherings, Noor draws attention to how the physical and emotional atmosphere of the space contributes to her moral and spiritual formation. The act of learning here is not just cognitive but deeply affective and ethical, rooted in presence, and shared spiritual aspiration. Through her words, we see how these informal circles become powerful contexts of situated learning, where religious identity is not only reaffirmed but reshaped through embodied practice, collective memory, and the affective sensibility of being in a space imbued with sacred meaning.

“Yes, I think so. I mean, it's part of preserving your Arab and Islamic identity. Yes. If you don't want to preserve your Arab identity, at least your Islamic identity is a very important point because Istanbul is ultimately open and has many options. Yes, the existence of such a council ultimately helps you or connects you to what you're working on.” (Noor Iraq, 34)

4.6. Situated Learning Theory, as Articulated by Lave and Wenger

Lave and Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation provides a powerful lens for understanding how learning unfolds in these informal gatherings. Rather than viewing learning as the simple acquisition of knowledge, they emphasise its deeply social and identity-shaping nature:

“Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call legitimate peripheral participation. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills.” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 29)

This process, which they call legitimate peripheral participation, emphasises that learning is not simply the acquisition of skills, but a transformation of identity through gradual inclusion in a community's shared practices. In these gatherings, young Arab women are not simply receiving information; they are actively participating in a process of becoming. For many, these spaces offer a context where their religious and cultural heritage is not only affirmed but actively explored and deepened. As one participant noted:

“It is a gateway to seeking knowledge. In my opinion, seeking knowledge is not limited to universities. Yes, on the contrary, the councils are open without an academic system, which is a system that you feel is necessary year after year. These gatherings teach me more than the university does, for me. It opens up new things for me that I didn't know.” (Noor Iraq, 34). This highlights how the informal setting allows for a more organic and personally resonant form of learning, distinct from the formal academic environment.

“With different viewpoints from different countries. This was a crucial point for me when I began my tenure on the council. It was young people who came to this council. And each one had a different point of view to present. This makes you think. This added value to me and was important to me to see people from different backgrounds who also think differently.” (Noor Iraq, 34)

What stands out in these learning circles is how much the act of engaging with others becomes a way of learning in itself. The presence of people from diverse parts of the world brings a wide range of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. As they speak, listen, and interact, they don’t just exchange information; they open up new ways of seeing things. This diversity creates a richer space for learning, offering perspectives that many of them might not have encountered otherwise.

The cultivation of the pious subject is evident in how women describe their internal and external transformations. Sama, for instance, articulated a profound shift in her relationship with her faith:

“Yes, yes, I mean, one gets attached to God more, I mean. It means our awareness of the world is not just our awareness of the reality we live in, but also encompasses our beliefs about religion and God. I mean, we understood it more than anything. One person says, 'Why is it like this?' and asks questions, which helps us better understand. So, we have become better at understanding our religion and our prayers and so on, God willing.” (Sama, Palestine, 29).

This quote demonstrates a deepening of religious understanding and a more mature, accepting worldview, which Sama attributes to her participation in the gatherings. The collective environment provides a supportive space for this spiritual growth, reinforcing practices and interpretations of Islam that resonate with their lived experiences as young migrant women.

Furthermore, the discussions within these circles often address practical aspects of living as a Muslim woman in a diverse, sometimes challenging, urban environment. Participants learn from each other how to navigate social expectations, reconcile cultural norms with religious principles, and express their identity authentically. This is a key aspect of situated learning, where knowledge is acquired and applied within the specific social and cultural context of their lives. The shared experiences of being veiled in Istanbul, for example, become a topic of collective reflection and mutual support. As Sama shared:

“Yes, of course, yes, because a person gets jealous with love, he likes to see himself as the same as those around him. In the best condition and in the best image. When he sees girls This is how he looks: She is beautiful even with a hijab and nice, modest clothes, so that's it, he said to himself I also want that, because in Istanbul being a hijab and modest is not always the easiest thing, “ (Sama, Palestine, 29)

This illustrates how the visual presence of other pious women in the gatherings serves as a powerful affirmation and inspiration, reinforcing their commitment to their chosen identity.

“It doesn't mean new cultures. It means new ideas. People who are similar to me and different from me at the same time...It means an opportunity for me. Every week, to learn new things as well.” (Dina Lebanon, 21).

Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory provides another crucial lens for understanding the dynamic and fluid nature of identity formation within these spaces. Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a process of “becoming” as well as “being,” constantly negotiated through representation and interaction within specific cultural contexts (Hall 1990, 225).

“Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power.” (Hall 1990, 225).

For young Arab women in Istanbul, their cultural identity is a complex interplay of their national origins (Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, Egypt), their shared Arab and Muslim heritage, and their experiences as migrants in Turkey. The gatherings become a place where these multiple layers of identity are explored, affirmed, and sometimes re-shaped.

The diversity of nationalities within the gatherings, as highlighted by Rahaf, enriches this process:

“The idea of having a council, especially here in Istanbul, and what distinguishes it is the diversity of nationalities and social and cultural backgrounds. So, there would be more room for presenting ideas and the discussion that would take place, not the same as if it were a Syrian community. I feel it would be all the same; there is in these gatherings, especially here, a

difference in ideas, in perspective, let's say, perspective. the perspective from which we present and discuss ideas" (Rahaf, Syria, 29).

This "diversity of nationalities and social and cultural backgrounds" enables a broader negotiation of what it means to be "Arab" or "Muslim" in a transnational context, moving beyond narrow, nationalistic definitions. It fosters a more inclusive and adaptable cultural identity that can thrive in a diasporic setting.

Moreover, the discussions frequently address issues of cultural preservation and adaptation. While affirming their Arab roots, women also engage with aspects of Turkish culture, selectively integrating elements that align with their values. This active negotiation of cultural boundaries is central to Hall's understanding of identity as a continuous process of identification and disidentification. The gatherings provide a space for these women to collectively define and redefine their cultural identities, ensuring that their sense of self is not simply imposed by their surroundings but is actively constructed and sustained through shared meaning-making.

4.7. Community Building and Belonging: A Miniature Homeland

The sense of community and belonging fostered within these informal gatherings is profound, often described by participants as a vital anchor in their lives as migrants in Istanbul. This echoes the concept of *asabiyyah* in its emphasis on collective cohesion, but also extends into the emotional and psychological dimensions of finding a "home away from home." For many young Arab women, Istanbul, despite its vibrant Arab presence, can still feel alienating. The gatherings directly address this by creating what one participant aptly termed a "miniature homeland" (Sama, Palestine, 29)

This sense of a "miniature homeland" is built on shared language, cultural understanding, and mutual support. Tala articulated the importance of this linguistic and cultural familiarity: "The first thing is that I hear my language. So the subject is for me. It's easy for me. I feel that I'm not too far away or not Alone here" (Tala, Egypt, 30). This highlights the fundamental comfort derived from being able to express oneself fully and be understood without the constant effort of navigating a foreign language or cultural nuances. The shared Arabic language acts as a powerful unifying force, creating an immediate bond among participants from diverse Arab countries.

Beyond language, the gatherings cultivate a deep sense of sisterhood and emotional safety. Sama described the relationships as a “gathering of friends, a gathering of sisters.” Sometimes, he misses you, especially when we are in faraway places.” (Sama, Palestine, 29). This “gathering of sisters” provides a crucial emotional buffer against the challenges of migration. In a context where extended family networks may be present and are back home, these informal communities step in to fill that void, offering a sense of familial warmth and unconditional support. The practice of checking in on absent members, as noted by Sama, “For example, if you're absent, they ask about you” (Sama, Palestine, 29), further reinforces this sense of care and interconnectedness, transforming casual acquaintances into a supportive social fabric. The feeling of belonging is also deeply intertwined with the ability to “speak freely” and “share ideas and experiences.” As Dina expressed, “Frankly, I love meetings. First of all, I like how you gather one person. Differences between countries, and so on. But at the same time. Despite all these differences, we are together, which means we are not different, I know. I love that” (Dina, Lebanon, 21). This freedom of expression within a trusted circle allows women to process their experiences, voice their concerns, and collectively make sense of their lives in Istanbul. It's a space where their unique perspectives as Arab migrant women are validated and valued, contributing to a stronger sense of self and collective identity.

The gatherings actively combat the isolation often experienced by migrants. Tala explicitly stated, “I meet people or get to know people, but it doesn't make me feel a little lighter. The feeling of alienation means. Yes. Or feeling that one is in it alone, these gatherings, being together, having each other's back encourages someone to take the plunge. In this community, he feels that he has friends. He will be able to talk to them at any time, and they will understand him. He will be able to. He tells them to understand and support each other” (Tala, Egypt, 30).

Tala here without realizing it has addressed the heart of this thesis; how coming together sharing knowledge and stories and experiences helps young Arab women shape themselves and their lives here in Istanbul, this is the impact that these gatherings have on their lives. They are feeling stronger and empowered to integrate with the host society, and they have resilience; to keep trying again and again to engage and carve out a life for themselves in diaspora. Which aligns with my main argument

of how these learning circles function as both epistemic communities and affective sanctuaries; where participants come together and articulate new forms of belonging, co-create meaning, reshape the terms of their agency, cultivate resilience, create a new sense of home and find visibility within both the host society and their diasporic imaginaries.

“When I attend these gatherings, and with these people, I feel my soul feels as if I am in my home country, I mean, thank God in particular in our area, thank God, it was very nice.” (Alaa, Libya, 26)

Alaa’s words speak to the deeply affective dimension of community that often goes unnoticed in formal analyses. When she says, “*my soul feels as if I am in my home country,*” (Alaa, Libya, 26) she isn’t just describing comfort; she’s describing a kind of emotional re-grounding. In a context of displacement and migration, these gatherings become more than just social; they offer a sense of rootedness, a *miniature homeland* where familiar language, gestures, and shared understandings recreate the emotional texture of home. What makes this even more meaningful is her emphasis on “*our area*” being especially warm and welcoming, which highlights how local dynamics within the diaspora can create differentiated experiences of belonging and how these young women find their place or home in the host society. These pockets of community are not incidental; they’re actively produced through shared rituals, repeated presence, and mutual care. In that sense, belonging here isn’t about geography; it’s about atmosphere, recognition, and the collective shaping of safe, emotionally resonant spaces. This highlights the critical role these communities play in mitigating feelings of loneliness and fostering a sense of rootedness in a new environment. The shared understanding and mutual support gained from these interactions empower individuals to engage more confidently with the host society.

“It means you feel like you have a community to turn to, a place you belong. You care about the people in it, and they care about you. For example, if you’re absent, they ask about you. That’s what gives you a real sense of community.” (Sama, Palestine, 29)

This quote beautifully captures the emotional infrastructure that holds a community together. It’s not grand gestures or formal roles that make people feel they belong; it’s the small, consistent acts of care, like someone noticing your absence and reaching

out. For many of the young women I spoke with, this kind of everyday attentiveness replaces what was lost when they left their home countries, and the fact that they don't have extended family here in Istanbul. A sense of community is not just about physical gatherings, but about emotional availability and mutual recognition. The Diwaniya becomes a *miniature homeland* not only because it reflects cultural familiarity, but because it sustains relationships that are emotionally invested. Through these ties, participants rebuild a version of "home" rooted in presence, remembrance, and shared responsibility.

"The other aspect, as Arabs, I feel the joy of discovery. I mean, whenever I see an Arab with a new story, he will tell me about it. Or maybe we can go out from here and try a new dish, and at the same time, I feel that I am more connected to Arab history. Because this story always carries this. It is worthy of it. This is a part of history. So I feel that I can. I am able. To understand. To understand. To understand me. And to understand. To understand us. I mean as societies. And I truly feel that I have a new home in a new country." (Rahaf, Syria, 29)

4.8. Navigating Migration and Host Society: Resilience and Adaptation

The experience of migration is inherently complex, marked by both opportunities and challenges. For young Arab women in Istanbul, navigating the host society often involves confronting cultural differences, language barriers, and sometimes, subtle or overt forms of discrimination. The informal learning gatherings emerge as vital spaces where women collectively develop strategies for resilience and adaptation, moving beyond what one participant described as a "utopia" to engage more realistically with their new environment.

The discussions within these circles often serve as a platform for sharing practical advice on navigating Turkish society. From understanding bureaucratic processes to deciphering social cues, women exchange knowledge that is crucial for daily life. Rama, who has lived in Istanbul since she was 14 and is fluent in Turkish, plays a significant role in her family and community in this regard: "I don't just walk myself; I walk with others. I go with Mom; I'm going to the hospital to help others, and I'll also be working with the government. When we go to the residencies, I am the one who

translates for mom and dad and when we go to the notary together. I am the one who talks to the notary, “(Rama, Syria, 21). While Rama's experience highlights the instrumental role of language proficiency, the gatherings provide a space for others to learn from such experiences and gain confidence in their own interactions with Turkish institutions and society.

Beyond practicalities, the gatherings offer a psychological and emotional buffer against the challenges of living in a foreign land. The sense of isolation and marginalisation, particularly for those who feel they “live on the margins of Turkish society” (Tala, Egypt, 30), is directly addressed by the supportive environment of the circles. As Tala articulated, “Girls' gatherings mean that they help them to be themselves. They have more social awareness.” (Tala, Egypt, 30). This “social awareness” includes understanding the realities of their migrant status and developing collective responses to it.

The concept of “utopia” versus “reality” in the context of migration was a recurring theme. Leila, who lived in Britain for 17 years before coming to Turkey, reflected on her initial idealised view of Islam in the West compared to the complexities she encountered in Turkey: “So, as you say, we lived these meanings in Britain, and we lived in a strange idealism. We see Islam. Expression. means Islam exists in the West. When I came to Turkey, I saw the Turks, for example. For example, I saw a Turkish friend of mine whose brother is an imam and her father. Her brother is an imam, and her mother wears black. And her father has tattoos. I mean, it's a party, but they live, of course, to an excess. But even the Arabs, I saw, I saw Arab Muslims, so the Arabs were more than the Muslims. So, I started to see things, and I was forced to understand things about religion that I hadn't been forced to understand before.” (Leila, Libya 29). This quote vividly illustrates the process of confronting idealised notions with lived realities, and how these encounters, particularly with Turkish society and diverse Arab Muslims in Istanbul, “forced” her to a deeper understanding of her religion. The gatherings provide a space to process these observations and integrate them into a more nuanced understanding of the world.

The gatherings also facilitate a process of cultural adaptation that goes beyond mere assimilation. Instead, women engage in a selective integration, drawing on the

strengths of both their heritage and their new environment. The example mother making jam and building friendships despite language barriers, and the Egyptian lawyer teaching Turks about Islam and Arab culture, are powerful illustrations of this active engagement. excellent additions to demonstrate how individual efforts, supported by the collective, contribute to bridging cultural divides and fostering mutual understanding.

The challenges of discrimination and marginalisation are acknowledged and discussed within the safe confines of the gatherings. One interviewee highlighted the societal issues, stating, “Because the society around you does not help. (Tala, Egypt, 30) and further, “Society. I mean, society in general is not originally committed to God. They live their lives. It's as if they are not Muslims at all. I mean, that's true. Certainly, naturally. On the contrary, in the school, the teacher tells them that love between boys and Girls is haram. Who said that? Bring me proof! my little brother tells me. They are from the same environment. The Turkish teachers and students are from the same environment. This is amazing, A disaster in itself. I mean, when you doubt your religion. This is one of the most severe. The difficulties we face. You come from a school where your religious understanding is 100% wrong” (Tala, Egypt, 30). These candid observations highlight the crucial need for spaces where women can collectively process such experiences and reaffirm their values in the face of external pressures. The gatherings thus become a site of collective resilience, where shared narratives of overcoming adversity strengthen individual resolve.

“Yes, of course, yes, because a person gets jealous with love. He likes to see himself as the same as those around him. In the best condition and in the best image. When he sees girls, this is how he looks: She is beautiful even with a hijab and nice, modest clothes, so that's it, he said to himself I also want that, because in Istanbul being a hijab and modest is not always the easiest thing” (Sama, Palestine, 29)

This reflection speaks to the quiet yet powerful forms of influence that circulate in diasporic settings. Migration often pushes individuals into spaces where their values and appearance are challenged or marginalised. But what this participant reveals is that transformation doesn't always require confrontation; sometimes, it's inspired by subtle modelling. The admiration she describes isn't rooted in pressure or judgment, but in seeing someone who embodies both beauty and modesty confidently in the host society. That image becomes a source of aspiration and is desired. In this way,

resilience manifests as adaptation without assimilation: finding ways to remain rooted while evolving. It's a reminder that in these in-between spaces, identity is often renegotiated through gentle mirrors, people who reflect back what's possible.

"The idea is that we are in an environment that is somewhat foreign to us, we are not learning a new language, it is difficult for us, so maybe you can understand and learn things about this society from your perspective. The network of relationships that you are building, and here at the same time, the person needs this network of relationships to feel that he is able to adapt. Look at other experiences." (Rahaf, Syria, 29)

4.9. The Role of Digital Ethnography: Extending Community and Learning

The ethnographic fieldwork extended beyond physical gatherings to include an examination of digital platforms, revealing that online spaces (WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram groups) are not merely supplementary but are integral extensions of the informal learning and community-building processes among young Arab women in Istanbul. These digital platforms facilitate continuous engagement, knowledge sharing, and emotional support, effectively transcending geographical limitations and temporal constraints associated with physical meetings.

The immediate and pervasive use of WhatsApp groups for communication among participants underscores their importance. As Iman noted, "Yes, I mean, according to what we can say, according to your circumstances, according to the circumstances and according to the place. If it's summer, we sit in the garden. If it's cold, we sit in cafes or sometimes at home. I mean, it's a very flexible topic, there are WhatsApp groups that bring us together so we can communicate of course" (Iman, Yemen, 29). This highlights the practical utility of these groups for organizing meetings, sharing logistics, and maintaining a constant line of communication. Beyond logistical coordination, these groups serve as dynamic forums for ongoing discussions, where ideas from the gatherings can be further explored, questions can be posed, and additional resources (articles, videos, lectures) can be shared.

The digital spaces also function as a continuous source of social and epistemic support. When a participant needs information, advice, or emotional encouragement, the online group provides an immediate and accessible network. Sama articulated this clearly: "Yes, one sometimes needs to ask, but doesn't know where to ask. As a group, as a

diwaniya or other means other Arab and other groups that it one can ask and inquire at any time. It means support.” (Sama, Palestine, 29). This demonstrates how the digital extension of the community provides a safety net, ensuring that support is available even outside scheduled physical meetings. The rapid responses and willingness of members to help each other, as observed in the groups, reinforce the strong bonds of *asabiyyah* and social capital cultivated offline.

Furthermore, digital platforms contribute to the situated learning process by allowing for engagement and a broader reach. Women who might not be able to attend every physical gathering due to distance, family commitments, or work schedules can still participate in the learning process and remain connected to the community through these online channels, almost all of the times the lessons are also available live on zoom. This flexibility is crucial for maintaining participation and ensuring that the benefits of the community are accessible to a wider range of individuals. The sharing of summaries, notes, and supplementary materials within these groups ensures that the knowledge exchange is continuous and cumulative. Rahaf, for example, mentioned that for one of her groups, she “just read the books they send me, summarize them with them, and discuss them in online sessions” (Rahaf, Syria, 29). This illustrates how the digital space facilitates continued engagement with the learning content, even if physical attendance is not always possible.

Instagram, while perhaps less focused on direct learning content, plays a role in showcasing the community's activities and fostering a broader sense of shared identity and belonging. For some, it might be the initial point of contact, as Malak mentioned “Oh, I found out about it through Instagram. Maybe it was... Someone from Someone I know had posted she was going before, so I got excited. I must have felt that was a nice community, coffee shop and place. It's open and free, so you can go and take Coffee in the morning and make a nice community Because it was sweet” (Malak, Lebanon, 28). This points to the role of digital platforms in recruitment and in presenting an inviting image of the community to potential new members, thereby extending its reach and impact.

In essence, digital ethnography reveals that these online spaces are not merely virtual replicas of the physical gatherings but dynamic environments that enhance and extend

the community's functions. They reinforce social ties, facilitate continuous learning, and provide a flexible infrastructure for mutual support, demonstrating how informal learning is increasingly intertwined with digital forms of engagement in diasporic contexts. Specific insights and anecdotes, as well as lived experiences and Identity negotiation, offer valuable perspectives beyond the broader theoretical applications. The individual narratives and specific anecdotes shared by the participants provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of young Arab women in Istanbul and how these informal gatherings directly impact their identity negotiation. These micro-level interactions and personal reflections bring the theoretical concepts to life, grounding them in the realities of everyday life.

One particularly striking encounter that I encountered while in the park enjoying some food and drinks in gathering that one of the groups I attend was coming together for Eid. is that of a young Egyptian girl in her early twenties, we were discussing the art scene here in Istanbul and I was saying how secular it is and quite polarized, and she expressed that when she first started studying in university she used to seriously think that maybe she should take off her hijab to fit in with the art community, and how attending gatherings like this one and seeing all young Arab woman dressing modestly and living their lives in various fields in Istanbul made her feel empowered to be true to herself and religion, be confident and understanding that changing yourself is not how you fit in.

This encounter vividly illustrates the internal and external pressures faced by young Muslim women in a diverse urban environment, such as Istanbul. It highlights the tension between maintaining a pious identity, as explored by Saba Mahmood, and the desire for social integration and professional advancement in a secular-leaning society. In this context, the informal gathering becomes a crucial space for processing such dilemmas. While the specific outcome of this individual's struggle is not the focus, the fact that such a sensitive topic could be openly discussed within the group speaks volumes about the trust and psychological safety fostered within these communities. It suggests that these spaces provide a non-judgmental forum where women can explore their identities, challenge societal expectations, and seek collective wisdom on navigating complex personal decisions.

Teacher Muna in the mosque teaching Tajwid to an older Syrian woman exemplifies the power of intergenerational knowledge transfer and situated learning, as she told me that this is not her only elderly student, but rather she has a whole group of them. This informal mentorship, occurring within a religious setting, is a classic example of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger). The woman gradually becomes more central to the practice of Tajwid through her engagement with an experienced practitioner. This not only facilitates the acquisition of a specific skill but also reinforces cultural and religious heritage, fostering a sense of continuity and belonging across generations in a new land. This anecdote beautifully illustrates how practical learning is intertwined with the cultivation of a pious subject, as the mastery of Tajwid deepens one's connection to the Quran and, by extension, to their faith.

These specific insights demonstrate the nuanced ways in which identity is formed and negotiated within these informal learning environments. They highlight the interplay between individual agency and communal support, revealing how young Arab women actively construct their selves in response to both internal aspirations and external pressures, ultimately fostering resilience and a stronger sense of cultural and religious belonging.

Inequality and access, as well as barriers to participation: while the informal learning gatherings offer significant benefits to young Arab women in Istanbul, it is crucial to acknowledge that access to these spaces is not universally equitable. The ethnographic fieldwork revealed that geographical location and socio-economic factors, particularly the ability to afford housing in areas with a higher concentration of Arab communities, can create significant barriers to participation. This highlights a critical dimension of social inequality that can limit the reach and impact of these otherwise empowering communities.

The issue of distance and transportation emerged as a practical challenge for several interviewees. Rahaf, for instance, mentioned travelling “About 40 minutes to an hour and a half depending on traffic and transportation” (Rahaf, Syria, 29) to attend her preferred gatherings. While her motivation to attend was strong, as evidenced by her commitment despite the commute, this implicitly points to the time and financial resources required. Similarly, Noor noted that her journey to the Sulaymaniyah

Council could take “about an hour and a half by metro” (Noor Iraq, 34). These travel times, coupled with the cost of public transportation, can be prohibitive for individuals with limited financial means or demanding schedules.

The concentration of Arab communities in specific neighbourhoods, while fostering a sense of familiarity and belonging, inadvertently creates a geographical divide. Women who cannot afford to live in these areas, or whose circumstances necessitate residence elsewhere, may find themselves excluded from the vibrant informal networks that flourish within these communities. This spatial inequality directly impacts their access to the social capital and learning opportunities that these gatherings provide. The casual nature of many of these circles, often organised through personal networks and word of mouth, further exacerbates this issue, as those outside the immediate geographical and social proximity may simply not be aware of their existence or how to join.

The implicit assumption that participants can afford the time and cost associated with regular attendance means that the benefits of these communities may disproportionately accrue to those with a certain level of economic stability. This creates a potential reinforcement of existing social hierarchies, where those with more resources are better positioned to access and leverage social capital. While the act of collecting tuition fees for a fellow student (as discussed under *Asabiyyah*) demonstrates a powerful internal solidarity, it also implicitly acknowledges the financial precarity faced by some members.

Therefore, while celebrating the positive impact of these informal learning gatherings, it is imperative to recognise that their benefits are not equally distributed. Future initiatives aimed at supporting migrant women in Istanbul might consider strategies to overcome these access barriers, perhaps through decentralised meeting points, subsidised transportation, or more widely publicised and inclusive outreach efforts, to ensure that the transformative power of these communities can reach a broader spectrum of the young Arab female population.

4.10. Conclusion For Chapter IV

The demonstration of how informal learning gatherings among young Arab women in Istanbul serve as dynamic and multifaceted spaces for identity formation, community building, and the provision of crucial social and epistemic support. By applying Bourdieu's concept of social capital, Ibn Khaldun's theory of *asabiyyah*, Wenger's communities of practice, Saba Mahmood's pious subject formation, Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger), and Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory, this research has illuminated the profound impact of these seemingly informal gatherings on the lives of migrant women.

The findings reveal that these circles are not merely recreational but are essential for navigating the complexities of migration. They foster robust social networks that provide both emotional solidarity (bonding capital and *asabiyyah*) and practical resources (bridging capital), enabling women to access opportunities and overcome challenges in a new society. Furthermore, through legitimate peripheral participation within these communities of practice, women actively shape their religious and cultural identities, becoming “pious subjects” who can confidently express their faith and heritage while adapting to their transnational context. The integration of digital ethnography highlights how online platforms extend these communities, ensuring continuous engagement and support beyond physical boundaries.

Despite their significant benefits, the study also identified critical issues of inequality and access, particularly related to geographical proximity and socio-economic status, which limit participation for some women. This suggests that while self-organised communities are powerful, external support or strategic planning might be necessary to ensure their reach is as broad and inclusive as possible.

In conclusion, these informal learning gatherings are vital for the holistic well-being and empowerment of young Arab women in Istanbul. They represent resilient and adaptive forms of community-making and knowledge-sharing, offering a “miniature homeland” where identities are affirmed, support is abundant, and individuals are equipped to thrive amidst the challenges of migration. This research contributes to a

deeper understanding of diasporic communities, informal learning, and the dynamic processes of identity construction in transnational urban settings.



CHAPTER V

WEAVING KNOWLEDGE, BELONGING, AND BECOMING: A THEORETICAL REFRAMING OF INFORMAL LEARNING

To gain a deeper understanding of the informal learning gatherings among young Arab women in Istanbul, this chapter synthesises theoretical concepts and revisits the main research question in light of the data presented in the previous chapter. These gatherings are dynamic processes which transcend time and geography, weaving together experiences of resilience, longing, and displacement. They create a lively social network of education and mutual support, taking place in coffee shops, homes, waqf centres, university prayer rooms, digital spaces, and parks. The purpose of this chapter is to provide participants with a voice while establishing connections between their lived experiences and the theoretical frameworks that inform their interpretation.

By engaging more directly with the literature review and applying the theories outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter aims to clarify how this research contributes to sociological discussions on migration, informal education, identity, and community formation. It is an invitation to consider how knowledge is co-produced in everyday encounters, how identity is actively negotiated in dialogue with peers, and how belonging can be cultivated through repetition, ritual, and care. Moreover, this chapter aims to illuminate the subtle but significant power of ordinary spaces; those often deemed marginal or mundane, in shaping epistemic and emotional infrastructures that help young Arab women navigate the host society.

This chapter does more than merely summarise the results; it explains their theoretical relevance and situates them within larger debates in Islamic sociology, feminist migration studies, and cultural theory. It seeks to articulate how the micro-level interactions observed in parks, cafés, waqf centres, and WhatsApp groups in Istanbul speak back to and at times challenge dominant paradigms of learning, integration, and

identity construction in the diasporic experience. It also explores how these women's gatherings constitute forms of quiet resistance to exclusionary norms, and how they enable new modes of being and knowing that may not be legible within mainstream narratives of education or social cohesion. The chapter ultimately prompts us to reconsider where learning occurs, who constitutes a teacher, and what constitutes legitimate knowledge.

The primary research question guiding this study is: "How do informal learning gatherings among young Arab women in Istanbul shape their identities, foster community, and provide forms of social and epistemic support in the context of migration?"

The discussion here aims to bridge the gap between empirical insights and theoretical framing, demonstrating how the everyday practices of young Arab women in Istanbul simultaneously challenge, extend, and reaffirm existing scholarly understandings of informal learning, diasporic solidarity, and gendered subjectivity in migration contexts. This chapter brings forward the voices of participants not just as sources of data but as co-theorists of their own lives whose reflections illuminate the entanglements of faith, displacement, sisterhood, and self-actualisation.

5.1. Knowledge as Care: Extending the Informal Learning Paradigm

As the literature review established, informal learning is increasingly recognised as a key component in how migrants acquire not only language and vocational skills, but also cultural orientation, identity frameworks and emotional support systems (Livingstone 1999; Alenius 2018; WIDHT 2021). However, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of how learning is deeply intertwined with care to the existing body of work. The circles in which my participants engage are not simply knowledge transfer spaces; they are intimate and ethically charged environments where learning is nurtured through listening, affection, trust, repetition, and a sense of spiritual accountability to one another.

This reframes informal learning away from its often utilitarian framing in policy and development literature; focused on employability or language acquisition, toward

where knowledge emerges through mutual witnessing, storytelling, embodied practice, and shared values. In these circles, the act of sitting together, sharing meals, quoting Quranic verses, reflecting on personal setbacks, sharing vulnerabilities, and exchanging advice collectively evolve into an informal way of learning closely tied to the emotional effort and trust, and care that uphold and nourish these spaces.

This study therefore echoes and extends Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice, while also pushing its boundaries by emphasising emotional investment and religiosity as essential aspects of participation; learning is not an individual act but a communal unfolding, shaped by everyday rituals of support and co-presence; Participants are learners, mentors, sisters, and friends all at once.

Revisiting Bourdieu, from capital to reconfiguration: Bourdieu's theory of social capital was foundational to this analysis in understanding how informal networks circulate not just emotional support but also economic and cultural resources; These gatherings serve as social arenas where women access information about scholarships, housing, job openings, and legal documentation; resources that are critical for navigating life in the host society. However, what became increasingly evident in the field work was that these gatherings do more than provide access to existing forms of capital; they often reconfigure what counts as valuable knowledge and desirable outcomes in the first place.

For example, while some women gained practical knowledge about navigating residency permits or Turkish Universities, others spoke at length about how the most transformative aspects of the gatherings involved shifts in their perception of themselves, their purpose, and their relationship with God. Empowerment was often framed not in economic or careerist terms, but in the ability to reevaluate one's internal landscape and to overcome social pressure, and to reconnect with one's moral compass.

This signals a shift beyond capital accumulation into a form of symbolic disruption, where participants collectively generate and validate new hierarchies of value. For example, rejecting the idea that femininity must be performative or tied to appearance, some participants redefined beauty in terms of intellectual growth and spiritual

integrity; Such redefinitions constitute a quiet resistance to the hegemonic scripts of femininity that often dominate both mainstream Arab and host society norms.

In this sense, Bourdieu's framework remains helpful but ultimately requires supplementation. While social capital explains the infrastructure of opportunity, it does not fully account for the transformational reorientation of desires and dispositions observed in the field. These young women are not only creating networks and community, but they are also reshaping the symbolic space or environment where value is assigned.

5.2. Asabiyyah Group Solidarity in Diaspora: Rethinking Ibn Khaldun

Ibn Khaldun's concept of asabiyyah, group solidarity, has proven powerful in capturing the moral and affective glue that binds these gatherings. Originally conceptualised as the collective solidarity that binds kin or tribal groups and blood relations, asabiyyah in this study takes on a new life in the diasporic, urban context of Istanbul. In Istanbul, shared migration status, religiosity, language, gendered experiences, and vulnerability form the new basis of belonging and collective responsibility.

Importantly, this asabiyyah is not defensive or exclusive; rather, it is generative, expansive, and intergenerational. Through its young Arab women, it creates spaces of healing, spiritual growth, ethical formation, and forward-looking imagination. The group's cohesion enables tangible acts of support, such as financial assistance and translation help, as well as babysitting, counselling, and peer mentoring. It also undergirds intangible yet equally crucial acts, such as emotional validation, spiritual witnessing, and the celebration of one another's transformations and growth.

This reinterpretation of asabiyyah offers a meaningful contribution to contemporary applications of classical Islamic sociology, showing how ancient concepts can be revitalised to describe the emotional economies and solidarities that sustain life for migrants in the host society. The gatherings not only keep cultural memory alive; they also cultivate a new diasporic ethic rooted in religion, cultural care, and resilience.

5.3. Situated Learning and Embodied Growth

As Lave and Wenger suggest, situated learning is not a linear accumulation of knowledge but a trajectory of becoming through social practice. This framework captures the layered and iterative way in which young Arab women in this study learn not only information but also ways of being. These include how to carry oneself in the host society, how to assert boundaries, how to express religiosity confidently, and how to engage in spiritual reflection with sincerity.

This also applies to their interaction with the host society. Learning how to navigate the Turkish bureaucracy and understand local customs, as well as how to respond to discrimination, requires repeated social rehearsal. These gatherings often serve as a source of help for adaptation, where participants share their experiences and learn from one another how to better navigate the host society.

Furthermore, the gatherings provide a rare space where women's embodied knowledge is respected and shared. This includes fashion tips that honour modesty and self-expression, as well as discussions about hijab and what it's like to be a young Muslim woman in Istanbul; all of these reflect a holistic pedagogy in which learning is not disembodied but deeply embedded in gesture, posture, and interaction.

5.4. The Pious Subject and the Politics of Return

Saba Mahmood's theory of pious subject formation helps capture the transformative potential of these circles for many participants. She reminds us that piety is not simply a matter of internal belief, but a discipline of the self cultivated through bodily practice, ethical striving, and collective reflection.

In the gatherings observed, young women repeatedly described how their participation led them to reassess their values, ambitions, and aesthetics, not out of coercion but from a place of intentional return to principles of Islam. This return was often framed as a recentering, a way to reconnect with God in a secularising and fragmenting world.

It's a process. Participants actively negotiate how to practice piety in a city like Istanbul, such as whether to wear a hijab or not, how to balance being a migrant and engaging with the host society, and how to coexist in a secular university while making friends. These spaces offer room to understand all of this, for disagreement, trial, and error. In this sense, they are not just sites of religious socialisation but also where young women test out what kind of pious subject they want to become.

This expands Mahmood's framework by showing that pious subject formation in diaspora is not about retreat, but about creative reclamation, a process of reinterpreting and reviving tradition in dialogue with modern complexity and urban life in the host society.

Cultural Identity as Becoming; Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity as both "being" and "becoming" is particularly apt in this study. The young Arab women in Istanbul are not passively preserving a static heritage; they are actively crafting a transnational identity that honours their roots while embracing multiplicity and difference. In gatherings where Syrian, Libyan, Iraqi, Egyptian, Palestinian, and Yemeni women sit side by side, a pluralistic Arabness is enacted, one that is generous, fluid and curious.

Language plays a key role here; Arabic is not just a tool for communication, but also a symbolic home, a means to stay connected to ancestral memory, poetic resonance, and the Quran. Simultaneously, young Arab women navigate Turkish in university settings and English in academic texts, as well as online slang in group chats. Identity, in this context, is not fixed but polyphonic. It is sustained through continual negotiation and expression.

The young women's reflections on modest fashion, ethical consumption, motherhood, and education reveal a hybrid identity practice, one that defies binaries between East and West, secular and religious, traditional and modern. They are neither assimilating nor isolating. They are synthesising, selectively drawing from multiple sources to build a way of life that feels coherent, ethical, and empowering. Returning to the Research Question: What Has Been Learned? the central question: how do informal learning gatherings shape identity, foster community, and offer social and epistemic support? this research has shown that: These gatherings function as affective communities that

offer not just knowledge but deep emotional and spiritual anchoring. They also produce multiple forms of capital: emotional, cultural, and symbolic, which are critical for surviving and thriving in the host society. They enable ethical subject formation, blending tradition and reinterpretation. They foster intergenerational and intercultural bridges, building a sense of continuity amidst displacement. They create a sense of belonging without borders, a community rooted not in a nation but in shared values, practices, and dreams. They act as laboratories of adaptation, helping women with their social engagement with both their diaspora and the host society.

5.5. Conclusion for Chapter V

By weaving empirical observations with classical and contemporary theories, this chapter aims to contribute to a richer understanding of what it means to learn, to belong, and to become in the contexts of migration. The young Arab women of Istanbul are not merely recipients of support; they are authors of knowledge, community, and selfhood, as well as sisterhood. Their gatherings are not just spaces of survival; they are sites of social innovation, offering alternative modes of being and knowing that deserve recognition, support, and scholarly attention.

In doing so, this study calls for a new sociology of migrant learning, one that centres affect, ethics, gender, and faith as core to the learning process rather than peripheral concerns. One that listens carefully to the quiet revolutions taking place in cafes, mosques, homes, parks, and WhatsApp groups. One that takes seriously the voices of those who gather knowledge and shape themselves not in classrooms, but in circles. One that insists that learning is not just about what we know, but about who we become together.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

For the young Arab women whose lives have animated this study, migration to Istanbul is not a temporary disruption but an enduring condition in which they must constantly negotiate who they are, how they learn, and where they belong. The purpose of this thesis has been to explore how informal learning gatherings, such as Qur'an circles, book clubs, intellectual lectures, and self-development sessions, as well as their digital extensions, provide spaces for community, identity formation, and epistemic support for these women. By taking these ordinary gatherings seriously, I have argued that they are neither marginal nor peripheral to migrant life; they are central sites where resilience, solidarity, and transformation are cultivated.

At the heart of this work has been the guiding question of how informal learning gatherings among young Arab women in Istanbul shape their identities, foster community, and provide forms of social and epistemic support in the context of migration. What has become clear through this research is that these gatherings are not merely social outlets or casual meetings but dynamic environments where participants acquire practical knowledge to navigate bureaucratic challenges, preserve and reinterpret cultural and religious identities and construct networks of belonging. The young Woman enters these circles seeking knowledge and companionship, but often leaves with far more: friendships that feel like kinship, confidence to face discrimination, resilience to keep trying to build a life and a home in Istanbul, clarity about their sense of self, and inspiration for reimagined futures. The gatherings function simultaneously as epistemic communities and affective sanctuaries, transmitting knowledge in the form of life skills, academic guidance, religious teachings, and political literacy while also offering emotional safety, solidarity, and mutual care.

The study makes several contributions to our understanding of migration and learning. First, it demonstrates that informal learning is central, not peripheral, to the lives of migrants. While policies and academic studies often focus on schools, NGOs, or government programs, what emerged here is that the most significant learning happens outside institutions, in waqf, parks, living rooms, cafés, mosque courtyards, and WhatsApp groups. These are the spaces that teach women how to navigate bureaucracy, strengthen their faith, process exile, and imagine new futures. Second, the application of Bourdieu's theory of social capital revealed how these circles provide both bonding capital, in the form of solidarity and trust among Arab Muslim women, and bridging capital, in the form of access to jobs, scholarships, housing, and bureaucratic guidance. Symbolic capital was evident in the respect and recognition accorded to women who consistently contributed knowledge or support. Yet the gatherings often went beyond the accumulation of capital, reconfiguring what counts as valuable in the first place. Beauty, for example, was redefined by some participants as intellectual depth and spiritual integrity rather than material display. Informal learning became a process not just of acquiring resources but of reshaping value systems.

Equally important was Ibn Khaldun's concept of *Asabiyyah*, which offered a vocabulary for understanding the moral and emotional glue that holds these communities together. Here in Istanbul, *asabiyyah* is not rooted in bloodline but in shared faith, language, and vulnerability as migrants. The small but powerful acts of solidarity that emerged, such as collecting tuition fees for a struggling student or gathering to celebrate Ramadan and Eid, demonstrated that these women are bound together not by obligation but by an ethic of care. This diasporic *asabiyyah* is generative, enabling survival and resilience in a city that can feel both hospitable and hostile.

Wenger's concept of communities of practice and Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning further sharpened the picture of how these gatherings function. Women are not passive receivers of information but active participants in shared practices, co-creating meaning, experimenting with new ideas, and embodying new ways of being. Newcomers gradually participate more fully until they become central to the community, whether in Qur'an study, political discussion, book clubs or self-

development sessions. Over time, these engagements transform identities, embedding confidence, resilience, and ethical orientation. Saba Mahmood's insights on pious subject formation help explain how participation often deepened women's commitment to modesty, prayer, and Islamic ethics. These were intentional acts of self-shaping in a secular and sometimes challenging environment, a part of a larger negotiation of identity in exile. Stuart Hall's idea of cultural identity as both being and becoming resonates strongly with this process. Identity in these gatherings was never static. Arabness and Muslimness were affirmed but also reshaped, producing a hybrid, plural Arabness that thrived in diaspora, inclusive of Syrians, Iraqis, Libyans, Palestinians, Yemenis, Egyptians and Lebanese; all of whom found common ground while retaining their differences.

Methodologically, the ethnographic approach, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography, proved indispensable. My insider position as a young Arab Muslim woman granted me access and trust, but also required reflexivity to navigate empathy and analysis. Grounded theory allowed patterns to emerge from the women's voices rather than imposing predetermined categories, ensuring the findings were rooted in lived realities. Digital ethnography revealed that WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram groups were not mere logistical tools but living classrooms and support networks that extended and deepened community life across time and geography in Istanbul.

Several consistent themes emerged across the research. The gatherings created belonging and sisterhood, often described by participants as a (second family) or a (miniature homeland). They enacted knowledge as care, where learning was inseparable from acts of generosity, such as sharing notes, raising money, or bringing tea and coffee. They facilitated identity negotiation, helping women redefine what it means to be Arab, Muslim, female, and migrant in Istanbul. They enhanced resilience and agency, equipping women with confidence, networks, and strategies to face discrimination and uncertainty. Digital platforms played a crucial role in sustaining these communities by bridging the distance between meetings and making support accessible at all times. Yet inequalities of access remained: geography, socioeconomic status, and time constraints limited participation for some women, reminding us that

while informal networks are powerful, they cannot by themselves overcome structural barriers.

These conclusions are relevant to practice and policy. If municipal services, NGOs, universities, and organisations acknowledge informal women's networks as serious learning environments, they can design with them, rather than just for them. That might mean; resourcing women led circles with space, childcare and grants; partnering with trusted community organizers to co deliver workshops on rights, employment, and health; It also means ensuring that anti-harassment and anti-discrimination measures in schools, hospitals, and public services are not symbolic but enforceable, so that women do not have to rely solely on private networks to secure basic needs. Finally, it requires making room in public narratives for young Arab women as thinkers and organisers who keep the city liveable, not as burdens to be managed.

There are, of course, limits. Informal networks cannot address residency regimes and labour market exclusions. They can mitigate harm, open doors, and keep hope alive, but they cannot substitute for systematic protections or equitable opportunity structures. Recognising their power should not let institutions off the hook. On the contrary, it should direct policy attention to the interfaces where institutional systems can respectfully meet and bolster the peer ecologies women already trust.

Other limits include the fact that: the sample of fifteen women cannot capture the full diversity of Arab migrant women in Istanbul. Most participants were students or educated young professionals, leaving out more marginalised or less visible voices. My insider status, while offering trust, may also have influenced what women chose to share, seeing as I am part of that community. The focus on young women overlooked the gatherings of migrant mothers, a vibrant community here in Istanbul, where they gather with their neighbours to learn from one another and support each other. Additionally, the focus on women necessarily excluded the perspectives of men and the complexities of mixed-gender dynamics. These limits suggest directions for future research, which could include broader and more diverse samples, comparative studies across different diasporic hubs, such as investigations into the intergenerational dynamics of knowledge transfer and examinations of how these practices evolve over time as communities settle, disperse, or change.

For me, however, beyond its academic contributions, this research has also been deeply personal. As a young Arab woman in Istanbul, I did not approach the field as an outsider. Coming together in these gatherings is the closest thing to home that you can get, in my opinion. For two to three hours, you are transported to the warm and comforting familiarity of your homeland. The shared background, religion, culture, language, experiences, and challenges make it a safe space where you belong.

What made me embark on this journey to do this Research project is the paradox of how being a part of these gatherings is belonging, at the same time its helping you grow and evolve, which makes you better engage with your life in diaspora and the host society; it makes you feel like you belong, you are home, safe, you are understood; which makes you resilient and empowers you to go out and try again and again to adapt and create the best possible life for yourself within the host society, as part of it and building a whole life rather than living on the margins of the host society.

The women I encountered reminded me that resilience is not abstract but tangible. It is in the way someone answers when help is asked for on the WhatsApp group, the way they come together to raise money for a friend's tuition or the way sisters gather to celebrate Eid in exile. It is in the courage to wear hijab confidently in a secular classroom or to debate politics despite fear of misunderstanding. It is in the way they carve out a life for themselves in the grand city of Istanbul; by engaging and integrating with the host society, refusing to live in the shadows and margins of society.

This thesis, then, is not just an academic exercise; it is an attempt to honour the everyday practices through which young Arab women in Istanbul gather knowledge and shape themselves. It insists that their circles are not marginal but transformative, not supplementary but central. They remind us that learning is not confined to classrooms, that identity is never fixed, and that community can be created wherever people sit together, share stories, and care for one another. In the end, it is in these ordinary yet extraordinary gatherings that exile is transformed into a home and displacement becomes a part of becoming.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS

Table A.1. List of Interlocutors 1

Name	Country	Gender	Age	Language of Interview	Occupation/Field of Study
Alaa	Libya	Female	26	Arabic	Student, Arabic Language
Malak	Lebanon	Female	28	Arabic	Engineering graduate, professional business owner
Rama	Syria	Female	21	Arabic	Student, English and Turkish Translation
Leila	Libya	Female	29	Arabic	University Student
Tala	Egypt	Female	30	Arabic	Law degree & MA in International Relations, not employed currently
Dina	Lebanon	Female	21	Arabic	University student

Table A.1. (cont.)

Noor	Iraq	Female	34	Arabic	University Student
Rahaf	Syria	Female	29	Arabic	Master's student in English Literature
Iman	Yemen	Female	29	Arabic	University student
Samira	Syria	Female	25	Arabic	Pharmacy graduate, working in pharmacy
Mariam	Yemen	Female	51	Arabic	teacher at Insan Academy
Sama	Palestine	Female	29	Arabic	Educational Guidance (psychology), not currently employed
Arwa	Palestine	Female	32	Arabic	University Student, English Language Teaching
Nadia	Iraq	Female	29	Arabic	University Student, not employed
Yara	Palestine	Female	27	Arabic	just graduated from University

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

First, I will be recording this interview via audio. Do I have your consent to do that?

Personal Background

1. Can you please introduce yourself? (Your name, age, and whether you are currently studying or working.)
2. Are you currently attending university?
3. What is your field of study or major?
4. Which university do you attend? Is it a public or private university?
5. Where are you originally from?
6. How long have you been living in Istanbul?
7. How old were you when you first moved to Istanbul?
8. Do you live here with your family or siblings?
9. Which neighbourhood or area do you live in?
10. Is your home far from here? How much time does it take to get here?
11. What kind of transportation do you use to attend these gatherings?
12. Why do you make the effort to come from far away?
13. Do you speak Turkish?
14. Do you attend other group gatherings?

Experience in the Gathering

15. How did you hear about this gathering?
16. How would you describe this type of gathering in your own words?
17. What do you enjoy the most about attending these meetings?
18. Do you feel inspired or walk away with new ideas after attending? Can you share an example?
19. Have you noticed any personal growth or changes in yourself as a result of participating in these gatherings?
20. Do you feel that the topics discussed here help you understand yourself better or strengthen your connection with God?
21. Do you discuss the ideas you hear here with your friends or family members?

22. In your opinion, why is it important for girls to have their own safe learning and discussion spaces?
23. Have you made any friendships through these gatherings?
24. How would you describe the relationship among the girls here? Do you feel support and encouragement?
25. Do you help one another in practical or emotional ways?
26. Do you feel like you're part of a community?
27. Do you feel a sense of belonging, like this is a second home or a kind of family?
28. Do these gatherings support your religious practice or spiritual growth?
29. Did you attend similar gatherings back home, such as in a mosque?
30. How often do you attend, and when do you feel most drawn to come?

Broader Reflections

31. How would you describe your experience as a young Arab woman living in Istanbul?
32. How does your experience here compare to your life back home?
33. In what way has participating in these Sunday gatherings shaped how you view or feel about living in Istanbul?

Group Dynamics & Aesthetic Elements

34. Do you feel that being surrounded by girls in these gatherings helps you emotionally or spiritually?
35. What role does language play in these spaces? that they are in Arabic, your mother language
36. Most of the girls wear hijab? How does that affect the atmosphere?
37. How would you describe the general “female energy” in terms of emotional presence or even fashion?
38. How does the group nature of the gathering (rather than one-on-one meetings) affect your experience?
39. How was your experience attending the Ramadan iftar gathering?
40. Do you think there should be more gatherings like these for women?

Emotional and Psychological Impact

41. How do you usually feel after leaving one of these gatherings? Does the feeling stay with you?
42. Can you recall a moment or topic from a past gathering that stayed with you for a long time? What made it memorable?
43. How do you think participating in these circles has affected how you understand yourself or manage your relationships?
44. When you talk to your friends or family about these gatherings, what do you tell them? How do you explain what they mean to you?
45. What do you find in these circles that you don't easily find elsewhere?
46. Looking back from when you first started attending until now, how do you think you've changed mentally, emotionally, or spiritually?
47. If you had to describe this kind of circle in one word, what would it be? And why?
48. Do you think gatherings like this contribute to building a collective awareness or a new kind of culture among young women?
49. At the end, would you like to share anything else, perhaps a meaningful idea or experience that impacted you?

APPENDIX C

ETHICS COMMITTEE PERMISSION

Evrak Tarih ve Sayısı: 18.09.2025-61654



T.C.
İBN HALDUN ÜNİVERSİTESİ
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği
Kurulu Başkanlığı



Sayı : E-71395021-050.04-61654
Konu : Etik Kurul Kararı - Ghena RAHMAN

18.09.2025

İLGİLİ MAKAMA

Kurulumuza başvuran Ghena RAHMAN'ın, "Gathering Knowledge, Shaping Selves": Ethnographic Insights into Young Arab Women's Informal-learning Experiences" isimli projesi; amaç, araştırma türü, veri toplama araçları, süreç ve işlemler, veri analizleri dikkate alınmak suretiyle 15.08.2025 tarihinde değerlendirilerek 2025/08-11 karar numarası ile etik açıdan uygun bulunmaktadır.

Bilgilerini ve gereğini arz/rica ederim.

Prof. Dr. Alev ERKİLET
Başkan

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