

CHAPTER 6

Revisiting Digital Islamic Feminism:

Multiple Resistances, Identities, and Online Communities

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Introduction

With its transnational, borderless, and inclusive nature, the internet ushered in a new dawn for many religious communities around the world. The global Muslim community, or *ummah*, is no exception.¹ The availability of new digital media, with all their unique potentials, opened alternative pathways in the realms of political participation, civic engagement, religious education, and self-expression.² This is especially true in the case of marginalized groups, which have traditionally enjoyed less power and, therefore, had less access to the tools needed to amplify their voices and to make their needs, demands, and grievances heard.³ Muslim women are no exception. This chapter investigates the dynamics of transnational gendered Muslim communities in cyberspace, shedding light on how these faith-based, digitalized groups of Muslim women, both at home and in the diaspora, are creating, negotiating, affirming, and challenging hybrid feminist identities via new media technologies—in particular internationally accessible and technologically enabled social media platforms such as Facebook groups and Twitter campaigns.⁴

This qualitative, feminist study provides an overview of the plethora of online activities which different generations of Muslim women from around the world—representing varying interests, ideologies, religious orientations, and backgrounds—engage in. They do so through participation in a wide array of gendered online communities, activities, and initiatives. My approach relies on a critical analysis of a number of Muslim women's online groups and campaigns. I examine their goals and objectives by spotlighting examples from the posts of some of these groups and contextualizing the depicted discourses within broader transnational, social, political, and religious frameworks.⁵ By engaging in a deep analysis of the various push-and-pull mechanisms (and the competing influences) impacting these groups, as well as the dynamics they engage in, this study unpacks the complexities, hybridity, and ambivalences of the multifaceted Muslim gendered identities manifested in cyberspace. My analysis reveals three main functions under which these various activities can be classified, namely: exercising resistance, expressing identities, and extending solidarity and support. To illustrate these discrete functions, I spotlight case studies from various groups and campaigns which have been launched by Muslim women online.

In investigating the dynamics of these interrelated and intersecting processes, this study pays close attention to the complex phenomenon of “Islamic feminism.”⁶ My analysis explores how different groups of Muslim women define the concept of feminism according to their own realities, identities, and experiences—and how they use social media platforms to express their shifting gendered subjectivities and activisms, and to meet their various religious, social, cultural, and professional needs. In doing so, I argue that these groups are creating and reflecting, as well as redefining, the growing phenomenon of multifaceted digital Islamic feminism, with all its complexities and intricacies. This chapter also demonstrates how this online engagement simultaneously contributes to the equally complex process of producing “third spaces of digital religion,”⁷ exemplified in the immense diversity of digital, feminist “third spaces on social media.”⁸

Exercising Resistance Online: Raising Voices and Pushing Boundaries

Muslim women globally use the internet not just as a window to see the rest of the world, while being seen by the rest of the world, but also as a tool, or even a *weapon*, to fight back against the many attempts to sideline them, profile them, stigmatize them, and silence them. Their efforts to deploy digital media as a platform that gives “voice to the voiceless,”⁹ helping them to amplify and spread their messages, became particularly important in the midst of the surging tide of Islamophobia worldwide, including in the United States.

Islamophobia can be defined as “an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life.”¹⁰ Its spread has prompted “an increasingly visible ‘backlash’ against Muslims across Europe and the United States.”¹¹ Islamophobia has been steadily on the rise in the United States after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, but it became exponentially worse after President Trump came to office in 2016. During his presidency, some of the most prominent Islamophobes launched their campaigns online, using the internet to spout hatred and fuel anger and discrimination against immigrants and minorities in general, and Muslims in particular.¹²

In 2016, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump insinuated that Ms. Ghazala Khan’s religion might have stopped her from speaking at the Democratic National Convention, when she stood beside her husband, Mr. Khizr Khan, on stage. Soon after, Ms. Khan stood up for herself and spoke out in a televised interview, explaining that she remained silent only after seeing a displayed photo of her martyred son, a Muslim American fallen soldier, which made her very emotional.¹³ In response to this incident, other Muslim women started a far-reaching Twitter campaign using the hashtag #CanYouHearUsNow to show just how powerful, strong, vocal, and outspoken they are, exhibiting clear examples of their successes and achievements in various professional fields. In other words, they effectively, and powerfully, countered and *resisted* the distorted stereotype of the silenced, oppressed, and marginalized Muslim woman by making their *voices* heard, loudly and clearly, through this Twitter campaign.¹⁴

Many of the tweets in this massive campaign went viral on Twitter, spilling over into mainstream media. Here are a few examples, among many.¹⁵ A tweet from the Washington DC-based group *Karamah* (Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights) proclaimed: “Today we raise our voices for Muslim women around the world who empower their community #CanYouHearUsNow.”¹⁶ American Muslim activist Hind Makki, commenting on a photo of eighty American Muslim women speakers at the ISNA (Islamic Society of North America), declared, “Check out all these Muslim women speakers NOT silent at a major American Muslim conference #CanYouHearUsNow.” In a post displaying an image of Wonder Woman, Faiza N. Ali tweeted: “I’m an organizer, activist, public servant fighting 4 dignity & respect. Pretty much Wonder Woman #CanYouHearUsNow.” Rim-Sarah Alouane provocatively asked, “@realDonaldTrump I’m a #humanrights scholar, trying to make sure rights and freedoms are protected. What do you do? #CanYouHearUsNow.” And Dalia Mogahed, the coauthor of the book *Who Speaks for Islam?*, asserted: “Muslim women ‘not allowed to speak?’ I gave a @TEDTalks and got a standing ovation #CanYouHearUsNow.”

In commenting on this influential online campaign, some mainstream media outlets described it as a powerful and effective effort to showcase the diverse voices, talents, and successes of Muslim women who—as journalists, activists, academics, and more—demonstrated how they regularly speak

out to make the world a better place.¹⁷ The campaign was also praised for helping Muslim women take back their own *narratives*—especially at a time when their perceived “oppression” under Islam is weaponized as a means to implement discriminatory policies and when they are the most frequent targets of hate crimes and bias incidents. The public impact of this campaign also revealed how social media democratize voice share if used properly: amplifying voices often ignored by mainstream media while, at the same time, encouraging reporters and journalists to pay attention and communicate accurate stories.¹⁸ Other media outlets commended Muslim women for amplifying their voices, broadcasting their strength, and, most importantly, reclaiming the narrative from Trump while exposing his Islamophobic, sexist, and misogynistic rhetoric in a simple, agile, effective, and powerful manner.¹⁹ This dynamic illuminates the double-edged sword of social media when it comes to the complex phenomenon of Islamophobia: it provides platforms to spread it and the tools to counter it at the same time.²⁰ Muslim women exercise *agency* online when they effectively utilize the opportunities made possible in cyberspace to *resist* misrepresentation, stereotyping, profiling, and marginalization.²¹

Another salient example of Muslim women’s strategic use of digital media platforms for resistance emerged with France’s 2021 decision to ban girls under eighteen years of age from wearing the *hijāb* (the Islamic headscarf) in public and prohibiting mothers wearing the *hijāb* from accompanying their children on school fieldtrips.²² These decisions are just the most recent actions by the French government, among a long series of past legal maneuvers aimed at restricting the *hijāb* in France.²³ This previously included banning the wearing of the *hijāb* in public schools in France; banning the *burkini* (the modest, religiously compliant swimwear worn by some Muslim women); and the banning of the *niqāb* (the full-face covering) by law in 2010—an action which was subsequently critiqued by the UN Human Rights Commission as an unjustified decision that disproportionately targets the minority of Muslim women who wear it, thereby violating their rights of religious freedom.²⁴

Commenting on this latest decision by the French government, New York American Muslim activist and organizer Linda Sarsour tweeted, “I need all the folks that express outrage at Iran for forcing Muslim women to wear *hijab* to express the same outrage at France for banning girls under age 18 from wearing *hijab* & their moms who want to go on school trips.” Other Muslim women supported Sarsour’s position with additional tweets such as “I know this ban hasn’t been passed into law yet, but the fact that a majority of the French Senate voted in favor of the ban preventing women under the age of 18 from wearing *hijab* is telling. Praying for my *hijabi* sisters in France.” Similar comments from American Muslim women criticized what they described as French “hypocrisy” and “double-standards,” highlighting the sharp contrast between the principles of “equality, liberty, and justice,” upon which modern French society is allegedly built and which it prides itself on, and the harsh and unequal treatment of religious minorities in France, especially Muslim women. These critiques pointed to the constant

efforts and singular obsession on the part of the French government to “regulate and police their bodies,” including suppressing their right to dress in a way which matches their religious values and beliefs.²⁵

Interestingly, in response to these new discussions and debates, related posts about past issues—such as the previous *burkini* ban in France—surfaced once again in some online groups. This included, for example, the closed Facebook group, “Sisters Uncut-South East London.” A post from August 26, 2016—originally composed in response to the *burkini* ban in France—was reposted on this group’s page under the heading, “As Muslim Sisters with Sisters Uncut, we send love and rage to our sisters in France.” The post expressed a strong message of resistance to multiple forms of repression:

The #burkini ban isn’t an isolated incident. It follows in a long tradition of policing, controlling and politicizing the bodies of women, and, in particular, the bodies of black, brown, and Muslim women. As Muslim Sisters within Sisters Uncut, we send love and rage to our Sisters in France. In the face of continued Islamophobic, racist, and misogynistic actions everywhere, we would like to offer a reminder that true solidarity with our Muslim sisters everywhere starts with listening. It starts with recognizing that Islamophobia is not just something that happens when four armed men force a woman to remove her clothes on a beach in Nice. It starts with understanding that in the UK there has been a 326% rise in hate crimes against Muslims since 2015 (and that this, as ever, is targeted at black, brown, and visibly Muslim sisters).²⁶

This powerful statement highlights the necessity of gendered resistances to multilayered (and multiple) forms of oppression inflicted upon Muslim women globally along the intersectional (and intersecting) identity markers of gender, color, race, class, and religion. This is especially apparent in the case of the visibility of Muslim identity among women who decide to wear the *hijāb*, the *niqāb*, or the *burkini* in public. What is evident here is the existence of intersectional layers of identity—such as being Muslim, female, and Black—that oftentimes create equally intersectional, multiple layers of oppression which, in turn, triggers a plethora of resistance tactics and strategies.²⁷ The “third space” created via various social media platforms provides an ideal arena of contestation where these tug-of-war, push-and-pull mechanisms can be exercised, amplified, and proliferated to a diverse, transnational audience—inviting new players and facilitating innovative dynamics within an interconnected, ongoing cycle in cyberspace.²⁸

Expressing Diverse Identities: Blending Tradition and Modernity

One of the many ways that modern Muslim women strive to express their diverse identities in cyberspace is through blending tradition and modernity.

The booming world of internet fashion offers a good example of the crossover between these categories. Since the way we dress always speaks volumes about who we are, providing a mirror that reflects our identity, a young generation of Muslim women around the globe now utilize the borderless, transnational, internet-based modes of modern communication to prove to themselves, and to the world, that modesty and elegance are not mutually exclusive—and that faith and fashion can, indeed, go hand in hand.

Echoing the concept of “fashionista,” a fashion icon and role model, especially in the digital sphere, the term “*hijabista*”—which, as Waninger explains, combines the terms “*hijābi*” and “fashionista”—refers to “a Muslim woman who dresses ‘stylishly’ while still adhering to an array of ‘modest’ apparel that coincides with Islamic dress code.”²⁹ Combining modesty with fashion in the online sphere, Muslim women *hijabistas* have become very popular among young Muslim women in recent years, setting a new global trend. In effect, these “influencers” play a significant role as “fashion public opinion leaders” and “fashion agenda-setters.” As role models, they set the agenda for other young Muslim women who are keen to dress both modestly and stylishly. Some Muslim women social media influencers today have hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of followers online—a vast audience of mostly young Muslim women who interact on digital platforms such as Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, and Instagram.³⁰ Prominent online *hijabistas* effectively serve as the go-to sources for *hijāb* fashion, demonstrating various styles of the *hijāb*, giving useful fashion tips, and, most importantly, providing modest fashion inspiration for other young Muslim women.³¹

One of these young *hijabistas*, twenty-five-year-old Abrar Al-Heeti, explains in a 2019 article how the internet has helped her feel comfortable in modest clothing by connecting her to a large global community of like-minded young Muslim women who have also decided to combine modesty and elegance, celebrating both faith and fashion. She describes how she was initially on her own when figuring out how to wear her *hijāb* in a stylish way that reflected and expressed her identity. It was not until the rise of modest fashion social media sites, she notes, that she felt she was starting to receive some support and inspiration. According to Al-Heeti, social media accounts and blogs opened up a whole new world of *hijāb* fashion and, in the process, made wearing the *hijāb* a personal expression for Muslim women. Commenting on this point, she asserts, “Muslim fashionistas like me once felt isolated. But influencers have given us a safe haven.”³²

Despite its glamor, wide appeal, and lucrative economic rewards, this new trend of digital *hijabistas* is not a “one size fits all” phenomenon, nor is it free of tensions and controversies. As Kavakci and Kraeplin found in their research on *hijābi* social media personalities, “the digital realm allows for opportunities for multiple constructions of self.”³³ This was reflected in the hybridity of the three famous *hijabistas* they studied who “revealed both an Islamic religio-cultural identity and a fashionable Western identity, at times emphasizing one more than the other, at times combining the two in unorthodox ways.”³⁴

This, in turn, triggered equally hybrid and mixed reactions from diverse Muslim communities online, depending on gender, generation, religious orientation, and geographic location, among other factors. The younger, more cosmopolitan, female internet users in the diaspora mostly expressed admiration and fascination; by contrast, older, more conservative, religiously orthodox internet users, especially those outside of the Western world, mostly criticized these new stylish fashion icons and their Western-influenced styles as the antithesis of modesty and religiosity. As Kavakci and Kraeplin aptly conclude, however, in every case these new negotiated identities are reflective of “the experience of duality or multiplicity that confronts *hijabis* with an active online presence.”³⁵ Despite all the controversies, tensions, and push-and-pull dynamics, there is no question that these new digitally savvy *hijabista* influencers are setting the pace and establishing the pattern for a new phase in the representation of multiple, hybrid Muslim feminist identities. In doing so, they are simultaneously triggering wider debates, both online and offline.

Beyond the world of Muslim women’s fashion, another interesting example of an effort to express and assert Muslim women’s diverse and hybrid gendered identities in cyberspace was the launch of the annual global campaign #MuslimWomensDay on March 27, 2017.³⁶ This idea was introduced by a young American Muslim feminist and activist, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, in response to the Muslim Travel Ban as a way to amplify Muslim women’s voices and to boost the visibility of their obscured, or misrepresented, identities. It is worth noting that Amani is the founder of a group blog called “Muslim Girl,” which subsequently became an online magazine and a foundation dedicated to increase Muslim women’s media representation and visibility, providing them with a safe space to reclaim their narratives and to amplify their voices.³⁷ A number of Muslim women, representing different backgrounds and identities, used the #MuslimWomensDay on Twitter in 2017, to propagate their narratives of diversity, often coupled with visuals such as attractive selfies. For example, a group of Black Muslim women tweeted a photo of themselves with the caption, “We are different shades of melanin. We are veiled and un-veiled. We are BLACK. Please don’t erase us. Happy #MuslimWomensDay.”³⁸ Another woman tweeted a selfie alongside the caption, “About time we got a #MuslimWomensDay. Perhaps it’s a step towards being heard inshallah. #TraditionallyUnsubmissive #Muslimah.”³⁹ In both of these tweets, women were pictured wearing *hijābs* as a way to assert their Muslim identities and to fight the pervasive idea that Muslim women lack agency.

On its fifth anniversary in 2021, #MuslimWomensDay provided another excellent opportunity for many Muslim women from different walks of life to represent their diverse identities through a number of tweets and posts on a number of social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. Many of these posts also combined text with visual imagery—photographs, selfies, videos—marking another example

of how Muslim women utilize the digital sphere to amplify their messages and share them with a widely diverse global audience—expressing and negotiating their individual identities while challenging the commonly held misconceptions and stereotypes clouding their lived realities and varied experiences. A typical example of the kinds of sentiments expressed during this 2021 global campaign is an article titled “Muslim Women Should Look to the Past to Find the Empowerment We Need Today,” written by Mariam Khan, the editor of *It’s Not About the Burqa*. The article urges contemporary Muslim women to follow the examples of strong, resilient Muslim women leaders from the past who can serve as role models for all women today. Khan remarks, “Muslim women are constantly being told that we don’t and have never had any agency. To counter this, we need to hear and tell the stories of our forbearers.”⁴⁰ She goes on to assert, “These Muslim women existed before feminism even began in the West. They’ve taught me I can be a feminist and a Muslim woman and empowered and so many other things, because so many Muslim women before me have been.”⁴¹

This is certainly a forceful response to the false claim that Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive and, therefore, incompatible. That theme was also emphasized by Amani Al-Khatahtbeh in a number of tweets marking this day, along with a video in which she exclaimed, “It really pisses me off that people think the words ‘Muslim’ and ‘feminist’ don’t go with each other.”⁴² Other postings from this 2021 global campaign included a tweet from a young Muslim woman, Shahed Ezaydi: “A happy #MuslimWomensDay to all Muslim women everywhere! We are constantly sidelined, silenced, and excluded, so today is a day to listen and pass the mic to Muslim women.” Similarly, another Muslim woman, tweeting as “King Marwa,” declared, “Happy #MuslimWomensDay. Being a Muslim woman means everyone around you has ideas about who you are and what you believe in. I encourage you to speak to a Muslim woman and understand where we come from and OUR beliefs. Not the lies the media and false sources like to give. It is OUR narrative.” This tweet was coupled with a drawing of a *hijābi* Muslim woman carrying a sign that stated “Muslim Women Do Not Need Saving.”

Significantly, the 2021 #MuslimWomensDay global campaign was launched under the theme of “healing, resilience and renewal.” This special focus highlighted the importance of empowering Muslim women’s voices and listening to their stories as they reflected on their experiences navigating the Trump era and the Covid-19 pandemic, both collectively and individually.⁴³ The campaign also included the first-ever “digital summit,” hosted and organized by the “Muslim Girl Foundation.” This event was designed to bring together prominent allies from the media and entertainment industry, along with public figures, influencers, and activists on the frontlines of creating Muslim youth culture in the digital era, to engage in online conversations on diverse representations, social impact, and alliance-building.⁴⁴ What is clearly evident from all these

examples is the emergence of a heterogeneous, virtual *ummah* that mirrors the transformation, hybridization, and negotiation of Muslim gendered identities as they constantly oscillate between tradition and modernity.⁴⁵

Extending Solidarity and Support: Gated Online Communities

In our book *Islam Dot Com*, Mohammed El-Nawawy and I conducted an in-depth textual analysis of the threads in the discussion forums of three of the most popular, mainstream Islamic websites (www.Islamonline.net, www.Islamway.com, and www.amrkahled.net) to examine the multiple Muslim identities displayed in these online platforms and the complex factors behind their construction. Our research also compared the degrees of uniformity and divergence manifested in some of these online forums, as well as the reasons behind these differences.⁴⁶

One of the websites we examined, www.Islamway.com, included a discussion forum in English and another one in Arabic, both under the name “Islam Way Sisters Discussion Forum.” Access to both of these forums was restricted to Muslim women only. In effect, this exclusively female online space allowed for the creation of a type of “Islamic feminism” or “Islamic sisterhood” that enabled the discussion of women’s issues, family issues, and domestic issues within a gated, gendered online community.⁴⁷ It provided a *safe space* for Muslim women to vent, open up, and share their private experiences, not just as members of the same faith community but also as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, among other gender-based identities.⁴⁸ Our analysis of this particular website revealed how the discussions and deliberations in both the English and Arabic discussion forums increased the degree of uniformity, solidarity, and cohesion between the female Muslim participants who shared a “collective identity,” united by both gender and faith identity markers as members of the same Muslim *ummah*.⁴⁹

The online deliberations in some of the other discussion forums we explored in the book widened the gap and demarcated the boundaries between “divergent identities,” as in the case of some online discourses between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as between different categories of Muslims, such as Sunnis and Shi’a. By contrast, the interpersonal exchanges on “Islam Way Sisters” discussion forums were characterized by a high degree of consensus.⁵⁰ Even so, it was oftentimes an emotionally triggered consensus, which lacks the principles of rational-critical deliberation that Habermas identified as part of his ideal conception of the public sphere.⁵¹ The exchanged discussions in this gated, gendered online community ranged from seeking advice on spiritual and religious matters (such as questions by recent converts to Islam about the specific details of daily religious rituals); to intimate questions about family affairs (such as adapting to an intercultural

marriage situation); to requests for help, guidance, and emotional support in the face of a difficult and challenging situation (such as falling in love with a non-Muslim man). In every case, the Muslim sisters in the Arabic and English discussion forums of “Islam Way Sisters” provided unwavering emotional, spiritual, religious, and social support, while avoiding judgment, criticism, profiling, and stigmatization.⁵²

Another group that works to build solidarity and community-based support online along gendered and religious identity lines is “Surviving *Hijab*.” The founder of this closed Facebook group defines its mission as follows:

Ladies—this is just for all the beautiful ladies out there who have taken the (very difficult) decision to wear the *hijab* for days, months, or years now, and are still battling with the decision, or have given in and given it up. There is a crazy trend going around, but we don’t seem to be affected, right? I’m guilty, and I can’t deny it. I’m finding it hard and harder every day, especially when I see, and observe, the most faithful of girls take it off, and it could happen to anyone of us any minute, any day. So, since nobody likes to go through it alone, I have decided to create this group to urge those who are veiled (and those who are considering it in these hard times) to continue holding on to this hard *ibada* [religious ritual], despite the hardships, in order for us to motivate each other, push ourselves to hold on, and, perhaps, even become better veiled Muslim women. I sincerely need your help, and feel free to invite your friends, even those who might have taken it off, regret doing so, and wish to come back.

This description of this group’s goal and the purpose behind its creation is an optimal example of the function of “community building” and “solidarity strengthening” among Muslim women transnationally. In this case, “Surviving *Hijab*” embraces the wearing of the Islamic headscarf as an important Muslim practice. Unlike many of the other groups where the posts are predominantly in English—except when quoting from *āyāt* (verses from the holy Qur’ān) or *ḥādīth* (sayings of Prophet Muhammad)—the posts in this group were in both English and Arabic. This bilingual format is an interesting feature which allows more women to join in and encourages them to take part in discussions and conversations online. This group also integrates visual materials in posts, mostly photos that women share of themselves after deciding to wear the *hijāb* or images of some of their close relatives and friends who have embarked on this journey. Some good examples of such posts in Arabic included the following: “This is a photo of my 14-year-old daughter on her first day wearing the *hijab*. Please show her some love and support” and “This is my first day wearing the *hijab* and going to work. Please let me know what you think of my new look! Wish me luck, power, and strength!” The combination of both the visual and the textual and the group’s transnational outreach and bilingual features are

powerful strategies that help increase this group's effectiveness in performing solidarity and promoting community-building on a broad, global scale.

Muslim women converts, who often refer to themselves as "reverts," also participated in this closed Facebook group—albeit in smaller numbers—to seek support from life-long, *hijāb*-wearing Muslim women. "Salaam Sisters. I'm a new convert to Islam from Australia, and I'm still hesitant about taking the step of wearing the *hijab*, although I really want to do it. I would highly value your support please," announced one woman in a post. In a similar fashion, another said, "I'm a new Muslim revert from Germany. I just took my *shahadah* [proclamation of faith] last month. Despite the racism and discrimination against Muslims here in Europe, especially Muslim women who wear the *hijab* in public, I decided to take this life-changing step today. Alhamdulillah [thank God]. Here is my photo! Please keep me in your *du'aa* [prayers]!" The responses from the group's members to these posts, and others like them, included a mix of prayers, encouraging statements, and comments of admiration and moral support, such as "May Allah bless you, dear sister!"; "*Mabrouk!* [Congratulations!];" "Insha'Allah [God willing] God will make it easy for you. Hang in there!"; and "We are here for you, we are all your sisters, and we support you every step of the way." As in the case of "Islam Way Sisters," the "Surviving *Hijab*" Facebook group demonstrates a high degree of emotional support along religious, spiritual, and gendered lines. This group's solidarity also crosscuts the social domain, leaning more toward uniform consensus but lacking any form of critical, rational deliberation.⁵³

An array of additional online groups created along gender and faith lines illuminate additional dimensions of community-building and identity-construction in digital spaces. Another closed Facebook group, "Monthly Sisters' *Halaqa* (religious study circle)," focuses on enhancing Muslim women's spirituality and educating them about their religion and its principles using varied tools and techniques. This includes Qur'ān study and recitation groups, watching and sharing religious lessons, and engaging in fun religious learning activities, such as taking online quizzes.

The closed Facebook group "Muslim American Women in Media" was explicitly created for the purpose of providing professional help and support to young Muslim women who have decided to pursue a career in the field of media and journalism. This online community provides professional advice, guidance, resources, and networking to help beginners fulfil their career goals and find their dream job. Often, this is achieved by putting them in touch with more experienced and established professionals in the field of media and communication. One of the main goals of the group is to ensure that Muslim women have better media representation, increased visibility, and more prominent representation. This reminds us of the importance of amplifying women's *voices*, using a variety of digitally mediated tools.⁵⁴

Other gendered, gated groups were created based on other criteria, such as geographic location. This includes "East London Muslim Sisters,"

“Sisters Uncut-South East London,” “Muslim Sistas, Farmington, Michigan,” “East Michigan Muslim Sisters,” “Muslim Sisters Association-London,” and many others. The purpose of these types of gated Facebook groups is to provide “local” community networking—supporting Muslim women by helping them to identify and utilize local resources, especially faith-based, or faith-specific, resources. Requests for “a female Muslim doctor in this area,” “the closest Islamic school to this community,” or “the best, and nearest, *halal* food market” are just a few examples. Interestingly, in certain online groups more specific identity markers were sometimes added to the geographic location. The closed Facebook group “Muslim Moms of Maryland,” for example, adds the criteria of “motherhood” to geographic location, creating a more channeled and focused mission for this group. This online community frames its mission as raising Muslim children in a non-Muslim society and tackling its particular challenges, such as bullying in schools which impacts Muslim children to an alarming degree, finding good Muslim studies’ home tutors, locating the best Qur’ān teachers in the area, and many other locally based, motherly focused requests.

Other groups narrow the topical focus even further. “Young Muslim Moms of Montgomery County, Maryland” determines the age and generation of the mothers and their children in addition to specifying the group members’ geographic location more narrowly to produce more targeted results. Typical posts in this group focus on “finding a good Muslim nanny,” “finding a reliable part-time Muslim babysitter,” or “locating the nearest store to buy *halal* food and baby food.” “Muslim Sisters United” is yet another closed Facebook group, which is generationally and locally based. It describes itself as “An organization for young Muslim sisters, youth who are 12 years and up, who would like to engage in community and charity work in Montgomery county, Maryland.” Here again, the granular focus on a specific age group and geographic location helps to maximize the benefit of this group and to enhance the collaboration and coordination between its members.

Three interesting points are worth highlighting here. First, many online groups like “Muslim Sisters United” are indicative of a pervasive emphasis on charity and philanthropy in Muslim communities, especially the American Muslim community, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Muslim women, and particularly American Muslim women, play a vital role in this domain of charitable work, a great example of “putting faith in action.” The internet certainly helped to coordinate, organize, and expand such efforts—a reminder of its critical role in aiding women’s activism.⁵⁵ Second, while cyberspace has certainly played an important role in terms of enhancing and expanding globalization, all these cases illustrate how it also enhances and aides “localization”—an equally important, yet mostly overlooked and understudied, aspect in internet-related research. Third, a micro-level analysis of these various layers of identity markers and their

segmentations and divisions into categories and sub-categories—based on geographic location, coupled with other factors such as motherhood, marital status, and age—reveals how this growing phenomenon of creating “mini virtual *ummahs*” in cyberspace plays different roles and serves multiple functions within the complex social fabric of everyday Muslim life.

Conclusion

This chapter has documented some of the innovative and creative strategies that Muslim women are using to engage in three interrelated and ongoing functions: creating resistances, constructing identities, and building communities in new digital spaces. The findings of this study clearly illustrate a unique amalgamation of multidimensional activities in cyberspace, signaling both the complexity and hybridity of these new digitalized mediated spaces, on one hand, as well as the identities and agencies competing within them, on the other.⁵⁶ My analysis also clearly reveals the crossovers, intersections, overlaps, and divergences between these multiple identities and voices, both online and offline, while reminding us of the participatory possibilities which are available for Muslim women in the domain of online culture.⁵⁷ All the activities and initiatives that these Muslim women have been engaging in are reflective of their own dynamically shifting realities as gendered and mediated beings who are capable of utilizing new media technologies to exercise their resistances, express their identities, and extend their solidarity and support to each other.

This research highlights the new potentials and possibilities opened up to these diverse groups of Muslim women with their adoption of new digital platforms for communication in cyberspace—alternative spaces that were simply not available in the past. In her study of the power of social media activism, Goehring reminds us that hashtags “are not merely tools for slacking activists.”⁵⁸ Rather,

Combined with their use on the Twitter platform, in which one is encouraged to make and foster connections with other Twitter users globally, hashtags emerge as powerful tools utilized to educate, critique, and express solidarity. With regard to Muslim women, they have been used to question, critique, react against, and affirm the multiplicity of identities expressed through any number of identifiers.⁵⁹

The case studies in this chapter confirm these insights, illustrating how the numerous gendered activities and activisms of different Muslim women, both individually and collectively, skillfully utilize hashtags and other

digitally enabled tools and techniques to strategically execute multiple functions.

In addition, Goehring highlights the fact that in participating in social media networks, “a user is connected to a global community of other users through a platform that encourages connection between its users. By creating open spaces in which one has the capacity to engage in sharing information with other users, social media offers a fruitful space for conversation regarding certain topics such as identity.”⁶⁰ The results of my own research confirm the need to acknowledge the crossovers and overlaps between the different categories of digital feminist Muslim agency and activism in cyberspace and the three main functions under which they were classified in this study: exercising resistance, expressing identities, and extending solidarity and support.

For example, we can argue that the wide array of online activities included under the banner of #MuslimWomensDay online campaign do not just offer significant platforms for Muslim women’s self-expression that increase the visibility of their gendered, feminist, Muslim identities. They also provide salient examples as to how modern Muslim women are deploying new social media tools as effective weapons to push back against their misrepresentation and to resist their silencing, profiling, stigmatization, and marginalization. Likewise, I argue that groups like “Islam Way Sisters,” “Surviving *Hijab*,” and “Muslim Moms of Maryland” provide ideal examples of how Muslim women are using social media to build gendered online support communities while simultaneously expressing their rich identities and sharing their varied experiences. In doing so, these virtual communities are creating and reflecting different shades, styles, and degrees of “Islamic feminism”⁶¹ in the digital age through constantly engaging in the complex, interconnected dual processes of the “Islamization of feminism and the feminization of Islam.”⁶²

In unpacking these interrelated and intersecting phenomena, this chapter has illuminated Muslim women’s engagement in the creation of new mediated, hybridized, gendered identities. These feminist positions of “in-betweenness” in cyberspace crosscut the boundaries between localization and globalization, tradition and modernity, the online and the offline, the private and the public, the national and the international, the social and the political, and the secular and the religious. Moving forward, it is only logical to predict that as the number of young, educated, technologically savvy, and digitally empowered Muslim women continues to grow, both at home and in the diaspora, so too will their multiple usages of internet-enabled platforms. The expanding opportunities enabled by digital media, in turn, will allow Muslim women to raise their voices, amplify their messages, exercise their resistances, and build their support communities. By doing so, they will continue to shape their changing identities and hybrid narratives within the equally dynamic and hybrid world of cyberspace.

- 11 Galvan (2012).
- 12 Galvan (2012).
- 13 Hernandez (2011).
- 14 Espinoza (2004).
- 15 Espinoza (2004).
- 16 Green and Giammona (2016).
- 17 Haleem (2008: 173).
- 18 Robinson (2014: 276).
- 19 Maffei (2016: XI).
- 20 Maffei (2016).
- 21 Anzaldúa (1987).
- 22 Martínez-Vazquez (2010: 37).
- 23 Maffei (2008, 2016).
- 24 Abeytia (2016).
- 25 Abeytia (2016).
- 26 Abeytia (2016).
- 27 Lofgren (2013).
- 28 Gallegos (2005: 99).
- 29 Abarca (2006: 118).
- 30 Abarca (2006).
- 31 Cognard-Black and Goldthwaite (2014: 2).
- 32 Latimer and Gamboa (2016).
- 33 Reddy and El-Ghobashy (2010).
- 34 United States and Donald J. Trump, Presidential Document (2017).
- 35 Tuathail (1996) and Brady (2002).
- 36 Sandoval (2000: 112).
- 37 Duran (2017).
- 38 Do (2017).
- 39 See Anderson (2003: 53).
- 40 Chan-Malik (2018: 186).
- 41 Tareen (2019).

Chapter 6

- 1 Bunt (2018).
- 2 Howard (2011).
- 3 El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009).
- 4 Khamis (2017).

- 5 A “self-reflexivity” note is worth highlighting in this context. As a bilingual, Muslim American, Arab American woman, who is a mother, an academic, a media commentator and analyst, and an interfaith activist, I was able to secure easy, and natural, access to many of these gender-based, faith-based, online communities, including women-only closed Facebook groups.
- 6 See McDonald (2008), Khamis (2010), Badran (2013).
- 7 Hoover and Echchaibi (2014).
- 8 Pennington (2018b).
- 9 Radsch and Khamis (2013).
- 10 Gallup (2018).
- 11 Tyrer (2013: 3).
- 12 Khamis (2018).
- 13 Khamis (2018).
- 14 Khamis (2018).
- 15 These tweets were posted at: <https://twitter.com/i/events/760197573839876097?lang=en>.
- 16 *Karamah* means “dignity” in Arabic.
- 17 <https://shortyawards.com/2nd-socialgood/canyouhearusnow>.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2016/08/muslim-women-broadcast-their-strength-with-canyouhearusnow/>.
- 20 Khamis (2018).
- 21 El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009); Khamis (2010).
- 22 <https://muslimskeptic.com/2021/04/01/france-bans-hijab-for-anyone-under-18-secular-tyranny-rises/>.
- 23 Croucher (2008).
- 24 <https://www.dw.com/en/french-burqa-ban-violates-human-rights-rules-un-committee/a-46007469>.
- 25 These tweets were all posted at: <https://mobile.twitter.com/lsarsour/status/1378173660058550272>.
- 26 Throughout this chapter, I quote from a number of “closed” women’s Facebook groups. Out of ethical considerations, and to respect the privacy of the participants in these gated online communities, no links are shared from these groups’ postings, and the names of individual participants who post in these groups are kept anonymous.
- 27 Karim (2006).
- 28 Hoover and Echchaibi (2014); Pennington (2018b).
- 29 Waninger (2015: 2).
- 30 Peterson (2020).
- 31 Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017).
- 32 Al-Heeti (2019).

- 33 Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017: 856).
- 34 Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017).
- 35 Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017: 866).
- 36 Pennington (2018a).
- 37 Al-Khatahtbeh (2016).
- 38 Pennington (2018a: 207).
- 39 Pennington (2018a: 206).
- 40 <https://metro.co.uk/2019/03/27/muslim-women-should-look-to-the-past-to-find-the-empowerment-we-need-today-9034825/>.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 The video and the tweets were all posted at: <https://muslimgirl.com/20-tweet-highlights-from-our-fifth-annual-muslimwomensday/>.
- 43 <https://muslimgirl.com/get-ready-for-the-first-muslimwomensday-digital-summit/>.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Bunt (2009, 2018).
- 46 El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009).
- 47 McDonald (2008), Khamis (2010), Badran (2013).
- 48 El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009).
- 49 El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009).
- 50 El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009).
- 51 Habermas (1992).
- 52 El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009).
- 53 Habermas (1992).
- 54 Radsch and Khamis (2013).
- 55 Hammer (2012).
- 56 Campbell and Evolvi (2019).
- 57 Harris (2008).
- 58 Goehring (2019: 34).
- 59 Goehring (2019).
- 60 Goehring (2019: 23).
- 61 McDonald (2008); Khamis (2010); Badran (2013).
- 62 Tzoreff (2014).

Chapter 7

- 1 Al-Khatahtbeh has expanded her work beyond *Muslim Girl* with other activism projects like partnering with *Teen Vogue* in 2016 to provide content on Muslim women's experiences, starting Muslim Women's Day in 2017 on social media,