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Expressions of Cosmopolitanism in the Virtual Sphere

In the last decade, there has been much activity, discussions and debates within online virtual communities about a wide range of topics pertaining to everyday Islamic practices, Islam and citizenship, Islam and identity and the current state of Islamaphobia. There are over 100 Islamic groups online, which serve as sites for both men and women to articulate their positions on many of these ongoing debates. Many of these online communities are geographically based, while others cross national boundaries. This chapter examines the discursive interactions within two British-based virtual sites called The Revival: Voice of the Muslim Youth and Spirit 21. In doing so, the chapter demonstrates how British Muslim women exhibit cosmopolitan and feminist attitudes and views within the virtual sphere while they debate and discuss differing ideas online.

Firstly, the chapter describes the profiles and characteristics of the virtual space. Secondly, the chapter shows that many of the female participants willingly engage with differing ideas and positions that are invoked within the forums and discussion threads. I achieve this by examining in detail the participation patterns and discourse style found among these British Muslim online participants. Some of the discourse styles used by some of the Muslim female participants show opposed orientations, use of assertive language, posting of long messages, use of rhetorical language and, thus, engagement in lively debates on a wide range of differing topics. Thirdly, the chapter illustrates the participants’ concern with rights of Muslim women in nations outside Britain such as France and in the Middle East. Finally, this chapter analyses an advice column about meeting a partner.
The virtual community as a cosmopolitan space

In many ways, the virtual space can be conceptualized as a cosmopolitan space. Interactions that occur online are not situated within physical geographical sites. Conversations that occur online can cross national boundaries within seconds, but, more significantly, the Internet allows for debates and discussions, since the author can keep her identity fairly anonymous. It is a space that allows for differences to occur, a site where differences can be challenged or agreed upon, where creative expressions can flourish and where participants may decide to pursue long-lasting relationships or decide to leave the virtual community after a brief appearance. It is on the Internet that participants assert their positions and display their cultural competence as they engage with participants of diverse backgrounds and differing opinions. In the quote below, Anthony Appiah (2006) offers his point of view on cosmopolitanism:

You don’t need to leave home to have disagreements about questions of value…. In a classroom discussion of abortion, one student says that first-trimester abortions are bad for the mother and the fetus, but that they ought to be legal, if the mother chooses. Another thinks that killing a fetus isn't even as bad as killing a grown-up cat. A third claims all abortion is murder. If we are to encourage cosmopolitan engagement, moral conversation between people across societies, we must expect such disagreements: after all they occur within societies.

(p. 46)

On The Revival forum, disputes, disagreements and debates about moral, religious and political issues occur on a regular basis. Several of the British Muslim women who participate in the discussion threads on different topics express their disagreements on various issues in varying ways.

Howard Rheingold offers the following description of an online community:

In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual intercourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and metagames, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when they get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind. Millions of us have already built communities where our identities