Aunties, Strangers, and the FBI: Online Privacy Concerns and Experiences of Muslim-American Women

Tanisha Afnan, Yixin Zou, Maryam Mustafa, Mustafa Naseem, and Florian Schaub
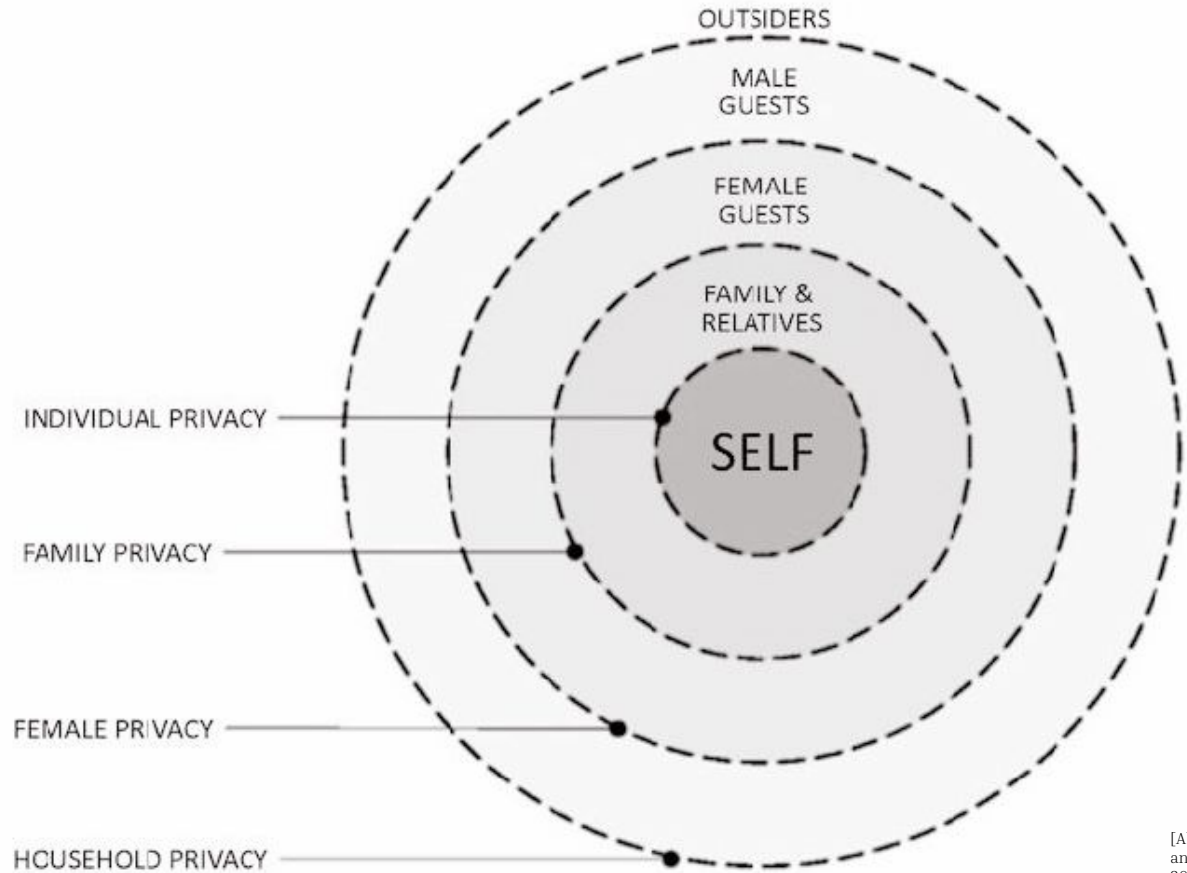
M | SCHOOL OF INFORMATION
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

LUMS

Muslims in America

Islam, women and privacy

OUTSIDERS

MALE GUESTS

FEMALE GUESTS

FAMILY & RELATIVES

SELF

INDIVIDUAL PRIVACY

FAMILY PRIVACY

FEMALE PRIVACY

HOUSEHOLD PRIVACY

[Abokhodair and Vieweg, 2016.]

3

- Prior research suggests diverging outcomes...higher levels of religious involvement:
  - Can mute some behaviors
  - And encourage others

But generally positively associated with higher psychological well-being (life satisfaction, happiness, morale)

- Different scales showcase correlation between higher levels of religious involvement and women (vs. men) + ethnic minorities (vs. majorities)
  - What might this mean for Muslim-American women?

Religion as an influence on behavior

Research Questions

1. Are there any identity-specific privacy concerns that affect Muslim-American women?
2. What relevant resources, strategies, or platforms are Muslim-American women using to protect their privacy? **Why?**
3. What role does religiosity play in participant's privacy behaviors or attitudes?
4. How can we better support the needs of this community?
   a. **What needs are going unmet?**

Method

Recruitment	Data Collection	Data Analysis

Multi-channel recruitment strategy:
- Social media adverts in **targeted spaces** (e.g., FB groups for Muslim women)
- Snowball sampling
- Partnering with local community organizations (e.g., Ann Arbor Islamic Center)

21 semi-structured interviews between May - August 2021
- Companion pre-study survey and post-study survey administered via Qualtrics

Thematic analysis
- Following the Braun & Clarke 6-step process
- Qualitative coding on Dedoose

Participant Demographics

Table 1: Participant demographics

ID	Age	CRS	Education	Ethnicity
P01	39	3.8	Master's Degree	South Asian
P02	27	4.8	Master's Degree	MENA
P03	26	3.6	Master's Degree	South Asian
P04	22	2.8	Bachelor's Degree	South Asian
P05	34	4.8	Professional Degree	South Asian
P06	29	4.4	Master's Degree	South Asian
P07	25	4.4	Bachelor's Degree	MENA
P08	25	4.2	Master's Degree	South Asian
P09	25	4.8	Master's Degree	MENA
P10	35	3.8	Master's Degree	MENA
P11	26	4.6	Bachelor's Degree	Black or African
P12	29	4	Master's Degree	Central Asian
P13	29	4	Master's Degree	South Asian
P14	37	4.6	Master's Degree	South Asian
P15	25	4.8	Master's Degree	South Asian
P16	24	3.8	Bachelor's Degree	South Asian
P17	30	4	Bachelor's Degree	South Asian
P18	N/A	2.4	Doctorate Degree	South Asian
P19	23	4.8	Professional Degree	South Asian
P20	27	5	Master's Degree	Central Asian
P21	28	4.2	Bachelor's Degree	Black or African

MENA = Middle East and North Africa.

Key Findings

Concerns as a result of being Muslim-American

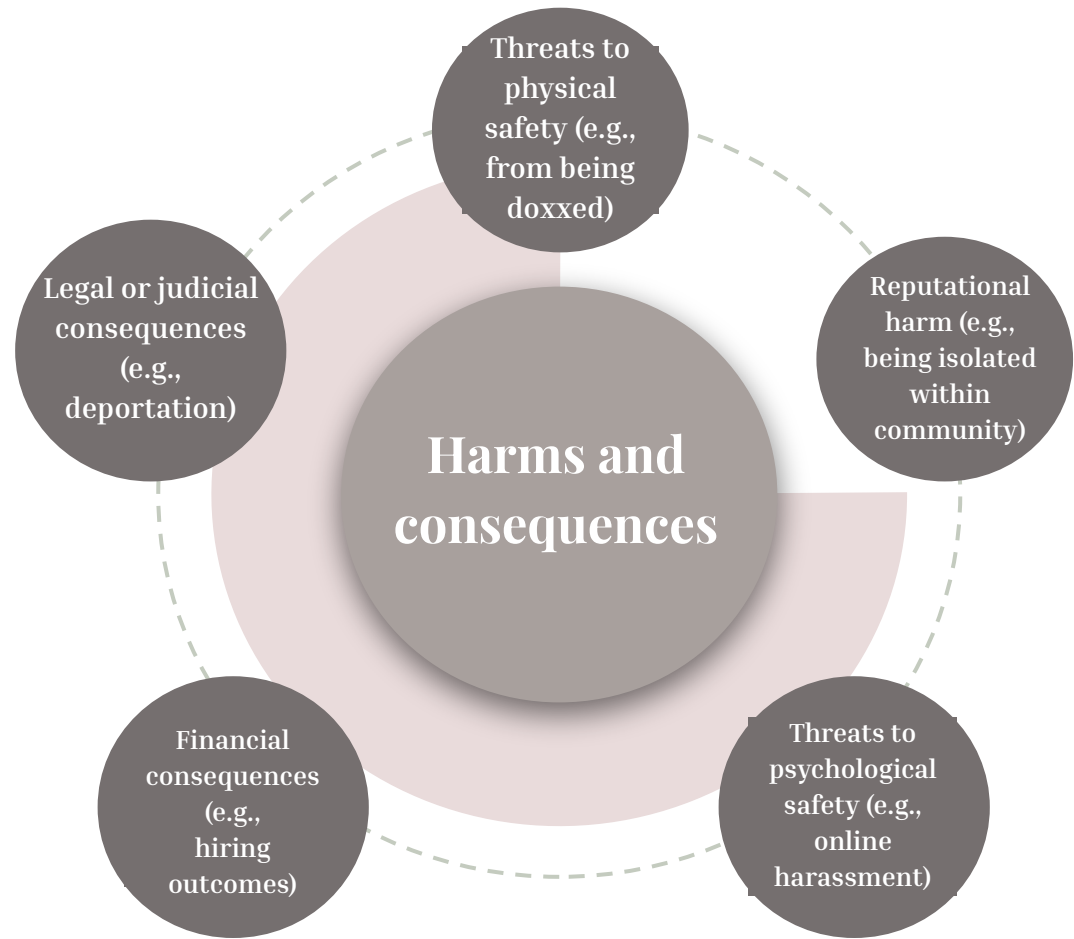Risks that affect any individual within the Muslim-American community regardless characteristics

Concerns as a result of being a Muslim-American *woman*

Risks that only affect Muslim women as a result of gendered cultural and religious norms

Concerns as a result of individual religiosity

Risks that affect specific individuals based on their own practice of Islam

Harms and consequences

- Threats to physical safety (e.g., from being doxxed)
- Reputational harm (e.g., being isolated within community)
- Threats to psychological safety (e.g., online harassment)
- Financial consequences (e.g., hiring outcomes)
- Legal or judicial consequences (e.g., deportation)

Intentional concealment of present-day counterterrorism efforts + history of profiling within participant communities = perception that the government is still constantly monitoring them...

- **19 of 21** participants felt that Muslim-Americans were subject to targeted surveillance by U.S. government or military entity.
- **12 of 21** participants felt they had no control over their information.
- Impact on behavior?
  - Avoiding certain words and terms (both online and offline)
  - Reexamining privacy settings on apps due to fear of data sharing between private companies and government
    - Deeply influenced by scandal surrounding Muslim Pro app (mentioned by **5 participants**)
  - Not publicly sharing opinions critical of U.S. government

100% of participants had witnessed an instance of Islamophobia online

"I experienced very Islamophobic rhetoric. First it was like the replies back and then I learned to just block [them], and then I learned

after that to just not interact. Because there's no point essentially." **(P02)**

- Impact on behavior?
  - **19 of 21** participants keep all their social media accounts private
  - Opting in as content viewers rather than content creators
  - Audience settings to share more 'Muslim' content with only Muslim connections in their circles
  - Mix of 'some control' or 'total control' over their information.
  - Avoiding engaging in public comment threads/conversations

Online Islamophobia

Strategies kept participants from becoming targets themselves, but continued to see Islamophobic sentiments regulary online...

CONTENT WITH NON-MAHRAM MEN (E.G., PHOTO AT A SCHOOL EVENT)

SHARING CONTROVERSIAL OPINIONS TOO OPENLY (E.G., CRITIQUING ISLAMIC SCHOLARS)

CONTENT WEARING INAPPROPRIATE CLOTHING (E.G., SHORTS)

Taboo content?

"A lot of times you lead the double life. Not in a bad way, but [...] I don't feel like I'm very different from most other American women because I pretty much do the same thing a lot of American women do. I dress the same as them, I eat the same kinds of foods. I'm single, so I date as well. But I have to hide certain parts of that when I'm around my family because it's inappropriate, and I always have to be aware of what's acceptable culturally, so I can never really share who I am." **(P01)**

CONTENT PLACING PARTICIPANT IN INAPPROPRIATE VENUE (E.G., BARS)

SHARING MENTAL HEALTH OR FAMILY DYSFUNCTION ISSUES

CONTENT ABOUT ROMANTIC OR SEXUAL INTIMACY

Scoring for the 5-question Centrality of Religiosity Scale:

"For the categorization of the groups we propose the following thresholds: 1.0 to 2.0: not-religious, 2.1 to 3.9: religious, 4.0 to 5.0: highly-religious."

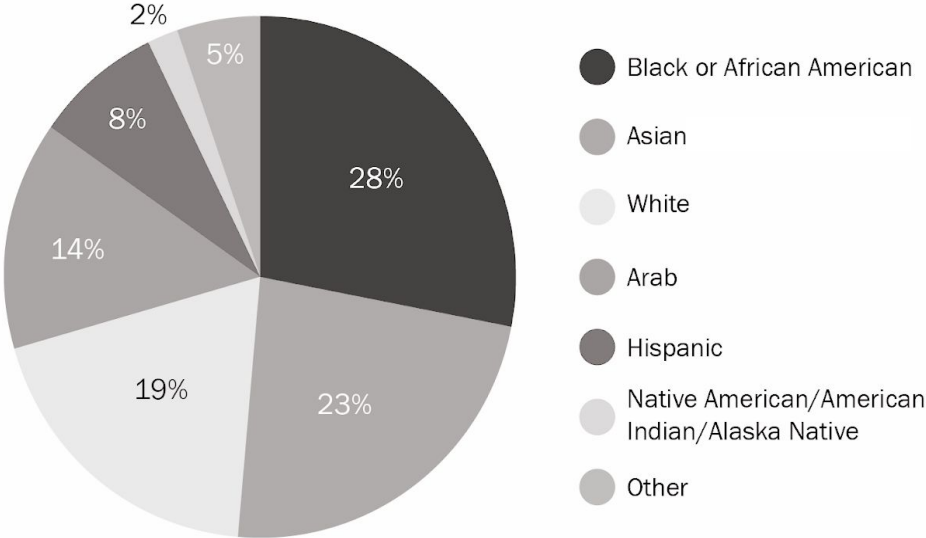**14 out of 21 of participants had a score ≥ 4 despite extremely different beliefs.**

13

- **Frequency** (how often did participants engage in intentional religious practices in their regular life)
- **Public Muslim activism** (has this participant publicly advocated for specific social causes, are they in a leadership role at an Islamic organization?)
- **Veiling Practices** (if participants choose to wear the hijab, niqab, other physical signifier of Islam)

Alternate Categorization

CANARY MISSION

- Creating female-only spaces, (especially ephemeral) for non-hijab photos
- Self-censorship or limiting public activism
- Taking measures to maintain data privacy against all entities equally (e.g., restricting app permissions)

Participants that exhibited higher levels of religious involvement → cared more deeply about privacy as a holistic value.

Muslims Most Ethnically Diverse Faith Community

- Black or African American — 28%
- Asian — 23%
- White — 19%
- Arab — 14%
- Hispanic — 8%
- Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native — 2%
- Other — 5%

[7]

Limitations

13 of 21 of participants were South Asian, 100% of participants were college-educated

Maintaining boundaries on social media

"Somehow my settings were configured so that my friends can see the photos that I'm tagged in from other people. So, my family members had seen it because it was posted by someone else before I could notice and untag myself or delete it. [...] I didn't know it was there until I logged in and I saw it was there. I would've preferred it's like, "Hey, you're tagged in this photo. Do you want it to be on your timeline?" And it's up to me to say yes or no. And only then will it appear or not appear." **(P04)**

Can we design for stricter privacy defaults?

18
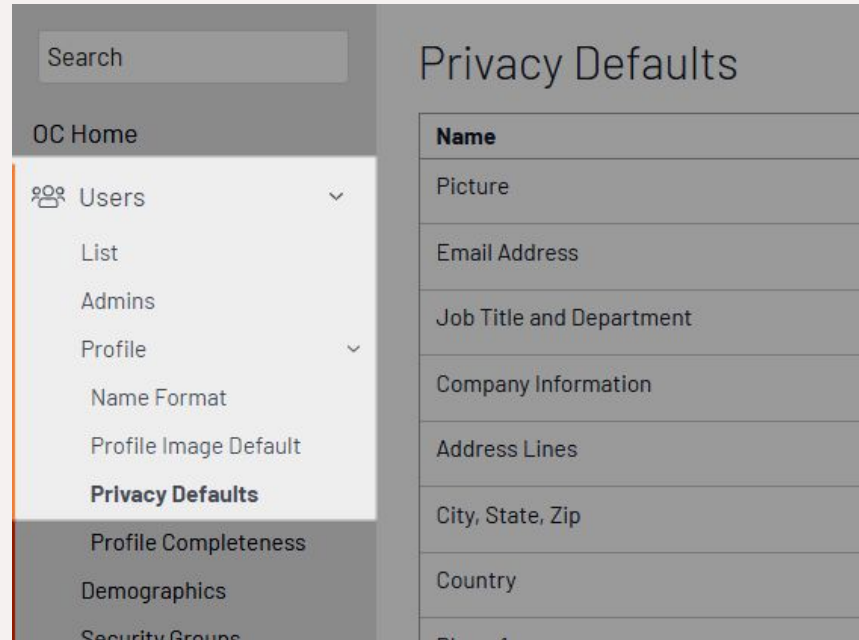
" **Several groups that offer their cybersecurity and digital hygiene training say they are seeing heightened interest from Muslim activists and Islamic institutions.**

[Khan, 2021.]

In summary...

▫ Muslim-American women **do** have identity specific concerns

  ▪ These concerns vary across different levels (broadly as Muslims, more specifically as Muslim women, and individually)

▫ Individual religiosity seems to have an influence on privacy behaviors (higher priority)

▫ Participants have several adaptive strategies to counter these identity specific concerns → *but there are still unmet needs*
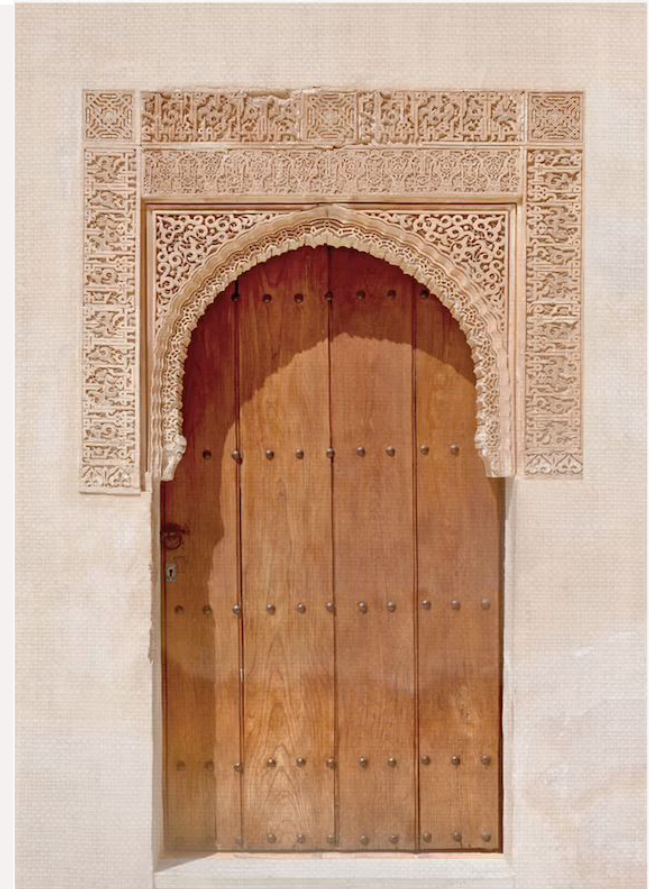
1. Norah Abokhodair and Sarah Vieweg. 2016. Privacy & social media in the context of the Arab Gulf. In Proceedings of the 2016 ACM conference on designing interactive systems. 672–683.

2. Sharon K Parsons, Peter L Cruise, Walisa M Davenport, and Vanessa Jones. 2006. Religious beliefs, practices and treatment adherence among individuals with HIV in the southern United States. AIDS Patient Care & STDs 20, 2 (2006), 97–111.

3. Michael E McCullough and Brian LB Willoughby. 2009. Religion, self-regulation, and self-control: Associations, explanations, and implications. Psychological bulletin 135, 1 (2009), 69

4. Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Francisco Lotufo Neto, and Harold G Koenig. 2006. Religiousness and mental health: a review. Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry 28 (2006), 242–250.

5. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative research in psychology 3, 2 (2006), 77–101

6. Aysha Khan. 2021, June 16. When data privacy becomes a subject of faith. Retrieved December 12, 2021, from https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2021/06/16/app-data-collection-muslims-in-tech.

7. Mohamed Younis. 2009. Muslim Americans Exemplify Diveristy, Potential. Gallup Research.