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

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Muslims in America
Islam, women and privacy

[Abokhodair and Vieweg, 2016]
Religion as an influence on behavior

- 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?
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

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)

Data Collection

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

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis
- Following the Braun & Clarke 6-step process
- Qualitative coding on Dedoose
### Table 1: Participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>CRS</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>P01</td>
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<td>P04</td>
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<tr>
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<td>P11</td>
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<td>Black or African</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Black or African</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MENA = Middle East and North Africa.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Findings</th>
<th>Concerns as a result of being Muslim-American</th>
<th>Concerns as a result of being a Muslim-American woman</th>
<th>Concerns as a result of individual religiosity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risks that affect any individual within the Muslim-American community regardless characteristics</td>
<td>Risks that only affect Muslim women as a result of gendered cultural and religious norms</td>
<td>Risks that affect specific individuals based on their own practice of Islam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Harms and consequences

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

Strategies kept participants from becoming targets themselves, but continued to see Islamophobic sentiments regularly online...
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)
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.
● **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)
- 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.
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?
“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

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