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"We've Never Talked About It": Muslim American Attitudes Towards Homosexuality

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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This study seeks to fill the gap in the literature on attitudes towards homosexuality, and more specifically, to do this from the perspective of Muslim Americans rather than the usual Christian viewpoint. While analyzing the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals is important, to have a comprehensive understanding of different forms of homophobia, one must explore the attitude formation of non-LGBTQ individuals. Studies on attitudes towards LGBTQ issues tend to be scarce, but in the literature that does exist, it is common for religion to play a role in predicting whether attitudes are negative or positive. Using 21 in-depth interviews with self-identified Muslim Americans, this study seeks to understand how college-aged Muslim Americans navigate and express their attitudes towards same-sex relationships. I found that Muslim Americans fall in line with the literature on Christian attitudes towards homosexuality in the following ways: 1) adhering to traditional gender beliefs tends to predict negative attitudes and 2) heightened exposure to LGBTQ individuals results in more positive attitudes. However, I found that Muslim Americans are more unique in ways than they are similar: 1) higher levels of religious practice among Muslim Americans do not have a positive relationship with negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships, 2) they do not fall neatly into attribution theory's notion that one's belief in the cause of homosexuality would predict their attitudes towards it, and 3) despite little to no discussion of homosexuality within Muslim communities in comparison to Christian communities, my participants were similar to one another in their negotiation practices and ideologies regarding homosexuality.

Introduction

On June 12, 2016, a Muslim shooter opened fire on a gay night club in Orlando, Florida. This event sparked an important conversation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Muslims – the unspoken victims caught in the symbolic crossfire of this event. LGBTQ Muslims felt afraid as discussions laced with both Islamophobia and homophobia were rampant in the media. While they face both Islamophobia and homophobia in the current US political climate, they also come across tension within their own Muslim community because of their sexuality. To understand the experiences of LGBTQ Muslims, it is necessary to first understand the views of their non-LGBTQ Muslim peers on the topic of same-sex relationships. In this study, I ask: How do college-aged Muslim Americans navigate and express their attitudes towards homosexuality?

Studies on attitudes towards homosexuality are scarce; even more so when it comes to those on attitudes among specific groups. Studies on Christian denominations have found that religion has an impact on people's attitudes towards homosexuality, with higher levels of religious practice being related to negative attitudes (Herek 1988; McQueeney 2009; Rincon and Lam 2011; Espin 2012; and Whitehead 2014). Thus, it is important to understand whether these attitudes vary from one religious group to the next.

Muslim Americans are unique when compared to Christian groups in many ways. First and foremost, there are a variety of racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds that would vary their experiences and thus how they formulate their social attitudes. Second, in a post-9/11 world, young Muslim Americans are required to enact navigation practices that refute negative stereotypes about Muslims while also maintaining their religious practices and beliefs. Thus, this study emphasizes the necessity of studying individual religious groups, rather than studying the dominant group and assuming that findings would apply universally. Muslim Americans, in particular, are a growing population in the United States facing a continually contentious political climate and so providing them a voice within academic research is necessary now more than ever.

Young Muslim Americans must navigate between their religious identity and the rest of American society, which has grown especially hostile towards Islam post-9/11. Their shared experiences of being Muslim in a post-9/11 world transcend the differences that would otherwise become apparent because of their varied racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds. While my findings fall in line with some of the literature on religion and attitudes towards homosexuality, in many ways, they do not; this highlights the importance of studying individual religious groups rather than using dominant Christian denominations as a representative of all religious groups.

Speaking to the growth of the Muslim American population, a 2007 PEW survey revealed that 73% of all US Muslims discourage homosexuality. Since then, marginal shifts have taken place. In 2011, the percentage of Muslim Americans who discourage homosexuality decreased to 61%, and even further to 48% in 2017. Both religious and cultural factors may be behind this shift. Because this research is quantitative, however, the reasoning behind these numbers cannot be identified.

I begin this paper with a brief introduction to the demographic information of the Muslim population in the United States and an overview of the existing literature on Muslim Americans and their attitudes towards homosexuality. Since these types of studies are scarce, my literature review utilizes studies on other religious groups to predict potential patterns. My literature review sections are as follows: 1) the role of traditional beliefs about gender in producing negative attitudes towards homosexuality, 2) the relationship between levels of religious practice and negative attitudes towards homosexuality, 3) the important role that exposure to LGBTQ individuals plays in developing positive views of homosexuality, and 4) an explanation of attribution theory and the politics of belonging and how these two theories framed my findings. In my research design, I provide the demographic information of my sample, my data collection methods, and my positionality within this study. I organize my findings according to the categories presented in my literature review. I conclude with a discussion of my findings, the limitations of this specific study, and suggestions for further research.

Background: Muslim Americans

Demographic Information

The three largest racial/ethnic groups of Muslims in America are Arab, African American, and South Asian (Rayside 2011; Garner and Selod 2015). African American Muslims are more likely to be concerned with racial rather than religious discrimination, since they are first and foremost identified as African American by the general society (Rayside 2011). Arabs have a long history of migrating to the US for different reasons and at different times, so their levels of religiosity and cultural conservatism vary greatly depending on what Arab country they come from and at what time they migrated (Rayside 2011). South Asian Muslims deal with the same type of religious discrimination that Arab Muslims do; however, they have higher rates of education and so it is possible that this leads them to be more accepting of same-sex relationships (Rayside 2011). This hypothesis about education, however, has not yet been tested because there have not been in-depth studies on Muslim American attitudes and the reasoning behind them. It is important to also note that although these are the three majority groups in the US, they are not the only groups. Since Islam is open to people of all backgrounds, anyone can be a Muslim and so studying these groups alone is not representative of Muslims as a whole.

Heterosexual Muslims on Homosexuality

A qualitative study conducted in South Africa explored the attitudes of a Muslim community towards homosexuality (Bonthuys and Erlank 2011). All the participants in this study, even those who were gay and lesbian, stated that Islam condemned homosexuality (Bonthuys and Erlank 2011). Several of the participants attributed the "cause" of homosexuality to internal forces, such as boys being raised in predominantly female households, attending same-sex schools, or developing same-sex desires after experimenting in their youth (Bonthuys and Erlank 2011). They also employed this idea that one was not considered homosexual, and thus was not sinning, unless he or she engaged in same-sex behavior (Bonthuys and Erlank 2011).

Literature Review

Traditional Gender Beliefs Predict Negative Attitudes

Studies have found that negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians are much higher among those with traditional views of gender (Lance 1987; Herek 1988; Herek 2000; Rincon and Lam 2011; and Edwards 2013). Those who are part of more conservative religious denominations tend to have negative opinions about same-sex relationships since those religions preach traditional gender roles and heteronormativity (Herek 1988; Herek 2000; McQueeney 2009; Rincon and Lam 2011; and Edwards 2013). Religious individuals who adhere to these traditional gender roles fear that anything outside of heterosexuality is an attack on the "traditional" family framework (Herek 1986; Kite and Whitley 1996; Wald, Button and Rienzo 1996; Hill, Moulton and Burdette 2004; Burdette, Ellison and Hill 2005; Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Brumbaugh, et al. 2008; and Rincon and Lam 2011). In accordance, Herek (1988) finds that heterosexuals who belong to more liberal groups or who are not religious at all are more likely to be accepting of same-sex relationships.

There are a number of potential explanations for why this is the case. More often than not, conservative denominations encourage heterosexuality through gender roles and women's subordination in these heterosexual relationships (McQueeney 2009). Traditional and conservative teachings of religious texts operate around the notion of gender complementarity (O'Neill 2007; Eidhamar 2011). Under this assumption of gender complementarity, men and women – when they adhere to their traditional gender roles – complete one another, which then pushes forth the idea that marriage can only truly be successful between a man and a woman. Gender complementarity not only relies on a heterosexual frame, but also on men and women adhering to traditional practices of masculinity and femininity. Christian evangelical parents, for example, believe it is their responsibility to teach their children these "family values" and to protect them from the corruption of the secular world (Fetner 2008). Those who adhere to these traditional values about gender roles were more likely to have negative views and be the least tolerant towards same-sex relationships because there is no place for same-sex relationships within these frameworks (Herek 1986; Kite and Whitley 1996; Wald, Button and Rienzo 1996; Hill, Moulton and Burdette 2004; Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Brumbaugh, et al. 2008; Rincon and Lam 2011; Edwards 2013). Herek (1998 and 2000) also found that heterosexual men specifically are more negative towards gay men than they are of lesbians because they perceive a direct threat to their own masculinity and heterosexuality.

Muslim Americans generally share the same conservative views towards gender as conservative Christians (Rayside 2011). Research finds that older Muslims in Western countries fear that young Muslims will be "corrupted" by Western ideals about sexual diversity and risk losing touch with their faith (Bonthuys and Erlank 2011; Rayside 2011). Muslims who adhere to traditional and more conservative views also adhere to notions of gender complementarity (O'Neill 2007; Eidhamar 2011). Thus, because of this commonly held heteronormative framework, Muslim Americans may share similar views with Christians towards homosexuality.

High Levels of Religious Practice Lead to More Negative Attitudes

Levels of religious practice have also shown to be a predictor of whether an individual will have negative or positive attitudes towards homosexuality. Studies find that those who are more highly involved in religious practice are more likely to hold negative attitudes (Hill, Moulton and Burdette 2004; Burdette, Ellison and Hill 2005; Olson, Cadge and Harrison 2006; Andersen and Fetner 2008; Whitley 2009; Whitehead 2010; Sherkat, et al. 2011; and Whitehead 2014). Each study, however, comes with its own caveats or clarifications. Andersen and Fetner (2008) find that although higher levels of religious practice are related to having negative attitudes towards homosexuality, individuals who attend more liberal churches do not have the same negative attitudes; thus, they attribute this relationship of negative attitudes to be with fundamentalist religious traditions rather than levels of religious practice. Olson et al. (2006) points out that, "Jews, liberal Protestants, and people who are religiously unaffiliated have the most liberal attitudes, in part because many of their religious traditions have not systematically condemned homosexual behaviors in recent years" (342). Thus, research that addresses the relationship between levels of practice and attitudes towards homosexuality focuses on Protestant Christians since they are more likely to have higher church attendance, which is typically one of the measures of levels of religious practice or religiosity (Hill et al. 2004; Burdette et al. 2005; and Olson et al. 2006). They also propose that it is *because* Protestants have higher levels of attendance that they are more likely to have negative attitudes as a result of having constant exposure to this negative rhetoric compared to other groups (Hill et al. 2004; Burdette et al. 2005; Olson et al. 2006; Whitley 2009; Whitehead 2010; Sherkat, et al. 2011; and Whitehead 2014).

Because the literature indicates that it is not simply higher levels of religious practice that lead to negative views, the levels of religious practice among Muslim Americans may play less of a role than their exposure to rhetoric regarding homosexuality. If mosques present religious lectures that are laced with homophobic rhetoric, then Muslim Americans will be more likely to have negative views on the matter. Their specific levels of practice, thus, will not matter as much as the types of religious discussions they are exposed to.

Exposure to LGBTQ Individuals Results in More Positive Attitudes

Studies have proven that increased contact with gay and lesbian individuals increases the likelihood of acceptance (Lance 1987; Herek 2000; Loftus 2001; Rincon and Lam 2011; and Baunach 2012). Lance (1987) theorizes that interacting with gay and lesbian individuals demonstrates to heterosexuals that any perceived negative stereotypes they have about the LGBTQ community are not true. It leads to the humanization of gay and lesbian individuals and the issues they face outside of the negative rhetoric religious individuals would typically be exposed to in their churches.

For young Muslim Americans who have spent a majority of their life in the US, one can assume that they have had heightened exposure to LGBTQ individuals in comparison to older generations of Muslims in the US. Since the literature demonstrates that exposure plays such a key role in developing positive attitudes, this could be on possible explanation for the shift in Muslim American attitudes towards homosexuality since 2007, going from 73% who discouragrd homosexuality to only 48%.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory asserts that individuals attempt to explain the behaviors and attitudes of other people that they do not understand via causality (Heider 1944). Weiner (1979) adds attention to the locus of control to the theory, stating that when individuals label certain behaviors controllable, they place accountability for those behaviors on the individuals who "choose" to engage in them. Whitehead (2014) applies this theory to attitudes towards homosexuality, suggesting that if people attribute homosexuality to an external force – following the rhetoric that sexuality is something one is born with – they are more likely to have positive attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships. However, if individuals believe that homosexuality is due to an internal force, and thus somehow a choice that can be reversed or changed, they are less likely to have favorable attitudes. Studies on attitudes towards homosexuality have found support for the role of attribution theory on individual's views towards homosexuality (Herek and Capitanio; 1995; Loftus 2001; Herek 2002; Sakalli 2002; Wood and Bartkowski 2004; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Whitehead 2010; and Rincon and Lam 2011). Rincon and Lam (2011), for example, found that Latina mothers disapproved of lesbian parents specifically because they worried that lacking male role models and having same-sex parents would confuse a child about their own sexuality. This demonstrates that they view homosexuality as something that is a result of an internal force, and thus their attitudes are more negative.

Eidhamar (2014) states that most Muslims perceive homosexuality as a learned behavior. Historically, the Muslim world has not had a concept of homosexuality as a lifestyle or "inclination"; thus, the sin is often regarded as being within the act and not the desire (Halstead and Lewicka 1998; Kugle 2010). A more moderately traditional or centrist stance within Islam sympathizes with non-heterosexual Muslims and their struggles, but still encourages the idea that one must fight this ongoing battle to be rewarded by God; it perpetuates the idea that one's sexuality is a religious test (Eidhamar 2014). For Muslims, then, their attitudes towards homosexuality and their attributed causes of it may be complicated by what constitutes a sin when it comes to same-sex desires and relationships.

Politics of Belonging

In thinking about Muslim Americans specifically, and considering the racial, ethnic, and national diversity of this group, Yural-Davis's (2006) concept of identifications and their social attachments are necessary to understanding the shared values of this group. Yural-Davis (2006) presents this idea of identities as "narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)" (202). This influences how individuals not only perceive themselves, but how they perceive other people. These identities can become more central and salient when they are threatened (Okamoto 2003 and Yural-Davis 2006). While this rhetoric is typically used within examples of terrorism, stating that the American identity became more salient after the threat posed by 9/11, I apply this notion to Muslim Americans within this same context. Post-9/11, the Muslim identity became central for many Muslim American individuals because their core values were being attacked by the general public with negative stereotypes.

This results in "imagined communities," which are imagined because individuals will never meet every single person from this community, and yet they are all tied together by this mental communion (Anderson 1991; Yural-Davis 2006). This is important to understanding Muslim Americans, because despite having various racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds and living in various regions in the US, they still share this idea of a community and reiterate the same core values.

Research Design

Data:

In order to explore Muslim American attitudes towards homosexuality, I employ data from 21 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The participants are self-identified Muslim American adults, including 13 participants who identify as women, 7 who identify as men, and 1 who identifies as female/non-binary. As for the racial, ethnic, and national breakdown, a majority of my participants were Pakistani (n=6). The national origin or ethnic identity of the others includes Egyptian, Lebanese, Yemeni, Turkish, Iraqi, Burmese, Mexican, and a few of mixed backgrounds, including Arab and Mexican, Indian and Somalian, and West African, Irish, and German. My participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29 and they were either in college at the time of our interview or had at least completed a Bachelor's degree. Most were born in the US (n=14), with the rest immigrating to the US at various points in their lives. Because my sample of each racial, ethnic, or national background was so small and I used snowball sampling to gather participants, I do not identify their racial, ethnic, or national identification to ensure confidentiality.

***Data Collection*:**

I established initial contact with the population through Muslim student-run organizations and clubs using non-random purposive sampling. Using either email or Facebook messaging, I contacted Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) and various Middle Eastern clubs and cultural centers at college campuses throughout California. The campuses were chosen both because of their location and because their MSAs or Middle Eastern clubs are presently active. California serves as a good location because its political climate varies based on region, so I wanted to potentially analyze differences across regions. Following these first few contacts, I used snowball sampling to collect contact information of other Muslim Americans who might be willing to participate in my study. I also provided flyers with information on this study to all participants to distribute to others in the Muslim community.

I conducted individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews at a time and location of the interviewee's choice to ensure that they were in an environment they found most comfortable. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 90 minutes. I recorded the interviews with a digital audio recorder to ensure accuracy in recalling the given information. The questions that I asked the participants were of four categories: 1) demographic information, 2) levels of religiosity 3) attitudes towards same-sex relationships both within and outside of the Muslim world, and 4) their expected behavior in hypothetical questions about interacting with gay or lesbian individuals. Lastly, I asked participants to offer any concluding or additional thoughts on the questions or their given

answers. As soon as I or the participant left the location of the interview, I wrote down a summary of the interview and my immediate thoughts and reactions. I later transcribed each of the recorded interviews.

Since there were not many studies on this topic, I did not have a direct reference to use as a guide for my study. Instead, I pulled from various works in formulating my questions. When I began analyzing the data, I thoroughly read each transcript using open coding, which identified broad potential themes found in the transcript. I followed this with focused coding, which required me to reread the transcripts and themes from the initial coding process to group the much broader findings into more concise themes and categories (Marvasti 2004). I then revisited the literature to bring together existing themes along with emergent themes I had found in my data.

Positionality

As a researcher, my positionality among participants and this research was important to acknowledge. I was raised in a Muslim family, but do not strictly practice the religion. I also identify as a queer woman. My background as Muslim made me relatable to participants, demonstrating that I understood various religious and cultural concepts or struggles that come with being Muslim in America that they would bring up without feeling like they had to educate an outsider on these subjects; thus, they could focus on the topics we were discussing. This created much better rapport during the interviews. However, the fact that I have tattoos and do not wear the hijab[1] would indicate my very low levels of practice and may have given the impression that I was somewhat of an outsider. To make my participants feel like they could relate to me, I covered my tattoos during our interviews and made an effort to dress modestly even if I did not wear the hijab. I did not disclose my sexuality with any participants unless they asked me after the interview was over, which only one of them did. I did not want to create an environment where participants altered their responses based on my own sexuality or religious practices.

Findings

Traditional Gender Beliefs and Perceived Threats

Gender Complementarity

A majority of my participants, when asked specifically about Islam's stance on homosexuality stated that they did not have a lot of knowledge on the matter and that they could not reference specific quotes or Quranic[2] verses regarding homosexuality. Instead, when justifying either their own stance or in an attempt to explain what Islam says, they referred to traditional gender rhetoric, consistent with the concept of gender complementarity. For example, Bilqees[3] (18 years old), states the following:

> I think, I don't know if this is true or not, but I've heard that in Islam, it's not supposed to be acceptable just because whatever Allah (God) says is

[1] The hijab is the traditional Islamic headscarf that some Muslim women wear.
[2] The Quran is the holy book for Muslims.
[3] Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

> what's supposed to go, like girls are supposed to get married to guys, guys are supposed to get married to girls, so that's kind of what I know.

Despite the fact that she recognizes that she does not have a lot of knowledge on the subject matter, she claims that Allah intended for girls to marry guys and vice versa. When asked, she could not provide an exact reference for this, but claimed that this is the expectation set in her family and in the Muslim community and so Muslims must adhere to it.

Other participants were able to provide more information from the Quran. Khadija (29 years old) says that "the Quran says that we are made man and woman for each other." Nora (24) elaborates further:

> But it [the Quran] did mention how you know with the prophet Lot, how Allah created us to be men and women, and it talked about how telling the people of Lot, why would you [men] have intercourse with a guy when you know we created you man and women or something like that.

The closest that Nora and some other participants could get to providing exact text on Islam's stance on same-sex relationships was referencing the story of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah[4], which is commonly used as an analogy of why homosexuality is forbidden. However, most participants did not use this story to state that homosexuality is directly condemned; instead, they used the notion of gender complementarity as a tool within this Quranic story to explain why heterosexuality is what God intended for humanity. Their focus was not the actions of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, but the statement that men and women were created for one another.

Assumed Heterosexuality

Not all of my participants used the story of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah. When their knowledge of Islam had its limit, they used the assumptions of their family and their community to explain their own or their community's attitudes. When asked how she would feel about her children coming out as queer, Sameera (25 years old) responded with the following:

> Well I mean 'cause I have two girls, so I always feel like ever since they were born, I think about the day they get married, you know, with the white dress, and the guy is wearing the tux and everything. So I think that's my whole point of it, you know, to be able to see my girls married.

Sameera uses this heterosexual framework to explain how she has a future envisioned for her daughters. Nowhere in this imagined scenario can there be a wedding for her daughters with a partner who is not male. This happy image of a wedding can only be happy if it adheres to the assumption of heterosexuality. Sameera does not explain where this image comes from, or why it is the ideal image for her daughters, simply stating that it is what "every mother dreams of."

Mona (19 years old) reflects a similar mindset. She also uses the idea of marriage and the "traditional" family as an ideal:

[4] This specific story can be found in the Quran in chapter 26, verses 161-173.

> Like I've always been taught that it obviously has to be the opposite gender, and then like you have to have kids together, or whatever, like that's just the way I grew up learning, but like nobody has told me about homosexuality.

Mona makes an important distinction that other participants also noted, which is that homosexuality was never brought up as an option. When I asked her how and in what settings she was taught that it had to be the opposite gender, she then explains that she was not directly taught these things and instead focuses solely on the fact that homosexuality was never discussed. The Muslim community seemingly regards heterosexuality not only as natural, but as the only option. Homosexuality is not even discussed as a potentially harmful alternative; instead, it is left out of the discourse completely because heterosexuality is always assumed. Malik (19 years old) further demonstrates this: "It's like I said, it's unspoken, like they [my parents] they already know, obviously, they know me and my brother, we're not gay." Malik, like other participants, uses words such as "obviously" to show that homosexuality is not even present as an option in his parents' minds. He did not "come out" to his parents as heterosexual, neither he nor his brother had ever introduced them to girls they were dating, and yet he knows for a fact that his parents still "obviously" know that he and his brother are not gay, because anything other than heterosexual is not a consideration.

"As Long as They Don't Flirt with Me"

When speaking specifically of their friendships or acquaintances with queer individuals, a large majority of my participants – both male and female – exercised this defensive strategy in which they assumed that a gay or lesbian friend would automatically have sexual or romantic feelings for them. For some, like Amina (20 years old), whether or not a friend flirted with her was a strict condition of the friendship. She says, "It'd be awkward, like if they start liking girls or something. I mean if they're a close friend, I would hope they'd respect me I mean not to do anything like flirt with me." Amina employs a number of strategies here to create this distance between herself and this hypothetical friend's sexual orientation. First and foremost, although she claimed earlier in the interview that homosexuality can sometimes be a choice and sometimes be a genetic predisposition, she still uses language that implies homosexuality is a deviation from one's default stage of heterosexuality. Further than that, she associates someone of the same-sex being attracted to her as a form of disrespect. Finally, as with all other participants who used this type of rhetoric, she assumes that someone who is gay or lesbian would automatically be attracted to any friend they had of the same sex.

Ameen (22 years old) uses it as a condition of acceptance, similar to Amina. When asked how he would react to a close friend coming out to him, his very quick response was, "Hopefully they don't immediately hit on me." After a brief pause, he goes on to say, "But I would just try to be there for them, just say, 'Hey, whatever makes you happy,' you know?" Although Ameen's concluding remark is that he wants his friend to be happy, his more immediate reaction is to be concerned that his gay friend would be attracted to him.

Kamal (24 years old) explains how he had this same mindset when he first started interacting with more gay men in college:

> But when I came to the theater program here, there were actually a few [gay men] that would start like, what I felt like were hitting on me, kind of asking to go hang out on what I thought were dates and whatnot.

Unlike a majority of my participants, Kamal acknowledges a change in his mindset that came with exposure to more gay individuals. He realizes that while these individuals were simply trying to be friendly in a way that any fellow classmate would, he was defaulting to a defensive attitude simply because of their sexuality and his own. Kamal tells me that these same individuals are now his closest friends, and that he no longer assumes that every gay man who interacts with him is attracted to him.

Reem (18 years old) provides the unique perspective of what her parents' concerns would be. While she herself did not have any concern about lesbian friends flirting or hitting on her, she explains why she would not want to tell her parents if she had a lesbian friend:

> I think if it was a female, my parents would be a little more concerned because they would think that she, you know, like loves me or something in that type of way. But if it was a male, they wouldn't have to worry about that boy in general, so they'd be a little bit less worried even though they would still kind of be worried just because like, 'What if he's not [gay]?' and you know, we don't typically hang out with guys a lot anyways.

While most of my participants asserted that their parents could not have any conceptual understanding of homosexuality, and that they would have trouble understanding it, Reem believes her parents would be defensive if she had a lesbian friend and more comfortable with a gay friend. Her parents would not be unconditionally accepting of a gay friend, with the possibility of heterosexuality still being an option. This option, however, does not diminish their concern with a lesbian friend.

Whereas Christians perceived homosexuality as a threat to their overall values of a traditional heteronormative family, the Muslims in my study held a more individualistic fear. They feared that homosexuality would threaten their own identity and sexuality, rather than their community's values.

Levels of Religious Practice

When asked about their levels of religiosity, all but three of my participants demonstrated relatively high levels of religious practice. I gave them the opportunity to explain this to me in two ways: their level of mosque attendance and their own subjective definition of how religious they considered themselves. Nearly all of my participants explained that they attended the mosque at least once a week during the traditional Friday prayer, with a few others attending even more than that based on how much time they had during the week. Two of my participants stated that they attended once a month or on special occasions, while only one of my participants could not recall the last time he attended a mosque.

When asked to subjectively explain to me how religious they considered themselves, nearly all of my participants reverted to rating themselves on a scale of 1 to 10. No one who used this scale gave themselves lower than a 6, with most of them being

at an 8. When asked to elaborate, participants explained that they had a strong faith in God and the core values of Islam, and that although they did not adhere to all the religious practices, they put some effort into basic requirements, such as fasting during Ramadan, praying five times a day, and for most of my female participants, wearing the hijab[5].

In contrast to findings on Christians, these varied levels of religiosity among my participants did not have an immediately noticeable relationship with how they felt about homosexuality. For example, Sayid (23 years old) who was the only participant to say that he could not remember the last time he attended a mosque and to state that he was not very religious, still utilized traditional rhetoric regarding homosexuality. While he claimed to be "liberal" and to be a proponent for civil rights, he expressed notions of heteronormativity in stating that homosexuality can be a "confused phase" and that while he believes individuals do not choose to be homosexual, there could be some environmental factors or "childhood trauma" that cause it.

For the rest of my participants, there was not a single individual who outright condemned homosexuality or spoke fully against it, instead utilizing various negotiation tactics to balance their personal views with what they believed their religion states. I will elaborate on these negotiations later. Two participants, who did still consider themselves highly religious were unconditionally accepting of homosexuality, both within and outside of the Muslim world.

Little to No Discussion of Homosexuality among Muslims

One trend that I noted in every single participant was their assertion that homosexuality was not a matter that was commonly discussed among their Muslim peers, in their Muslim households, or at the mosque. In comparison to conservative Christian churches, where the topic of homosexuality is a more common theme in sermons, only one participant recalled a time that he heard homosexuality being discussed at the mosque during Friday lectures. Even this one participant said he was shocked when this happened and that it happened so long ago, he could not remember what was said or the context in which it was mentioned. Despite this and despite many of them expressing that they did not have a lot of knowledge on Islam's stance on the matter, a majority of them still echoed one another in similar navigation practices, justifications for their own views, and what they *assumed* Islam stated about the topic. Sameera (25 years old) expresses these assumptions:

> Well, before taking the Islam class [referring to a Religious Studies class on Islam at a CSU] I never talked about it, but it was just always known in that family that it's against the religion. We're not supposed to talk to

[5] It is important to note that there are varied interpretations regarding the hijab and whether or not it is a requirement of Islam. I did not personally employ the hijab as a measurement of one's level of religiosity; instead, it was participants themselves who referenced their decision to wear the hijab as a sign of their dedication to their religion. For my participants who did not wear the hijab, they did not associate their decision with how religious they considered themselves. This measurement was entirely subjective.

> them. We're not supposed to *be* gay or lesbian. You know, we're not supposed to have any kind of affiliation with them at all.

When I asked Sameera how she always knew this or if she could recall an instance in which these values were taught to her, she repeatedly used language like, "You just know, we just knew," using "we" to refer not only to herself and her family, but to the Muslim community in general. It was this notion that even if they had never discussed this topic, there was an unspoken and common consensus among Muslims that came from this strong presumption of heterosexuality.

Nora (24 years old) expressed this same sentiment, but with surprise, pausing for multiple moments to recall if there ever was a time where it did come up:

> No, wow, I'm trying to remember but *(participant pauses)* You know what, we've never talked about it no. We do talk Islam and certain things and what's okay and what isn't, but we don't *(participant pauses)* We don't really talk about homosexuality, yeah, it's just never come up. We've never talked about it.

Nora states that her family and her friends have had other Islamic discussions about what is forbidden and what is not, but this same heterosexual assumption that Sameera demonstrated is present in Nora's statement as well. There was never any discussion of whether homosexuality was forbidden or not, because the assumption of heterosexuality ran deep in every Muslim in her life – both relatives and friends.

Thuraya (27 years old) provides a possible explanation, stating, "It just didn't come up because there is no case like that as far as we know that's related to us, so it just never came up." For Thuraya, she explains that her family has never had a reason to discuss homosexuality because no one in their family has ever come out as gay or lesbian or showed any indication of possibly coming out, so because they assume that it does not directly affect them, they do not feel the need to discuss it. Unlike Protestant Christians, who are constantly exposed to negative rhetoric on homosexuality, Muslim Americans do not hear discussions of homosexuality in their place of worship, and so their level of practice is not directly linked with negative or positive attitudes towards homosexuality.

The Positive Role of Exposure

The role of exposure for the Muslims in my study is consistent with research on attitudes among the general population. For participants who were most open and accepting of homosexuality, it was immediately clear that having positive exposure to queer individuals was key in shaping their opinions. Kamal (24 years old) was the same individual who explained how upon first meeting gay individuals, he immediately assumed they were flirting with him. He explains how his opinion changed:

> And then eventually, just doing more shows with them, being in classes with them, partnering up with them and just *talking* to them, and then… You know for me, before, I thought that all these gay people could think about was jumping on another dude, but then I realized they were just like other people.

Not only does Kamal acknowledge how exposure to gay individuals caused such a major change in his mindset, he explains how knowing them on such a personal level humanized them. This is similar to what Rana (19 years old) observed in herself:

> Yeah it's kind of just exposure. When you're around this community right, you really learn what it is, what it's about and like you learn not to use words like 'fag' and stuff like that – not that I ever used it. But you really get the insider perspective on what's going on. And it's just really difficult to still have a negative stereotype, or a negative connotation, after having so many gay friends.

For Rana, specifically, this exposure came early on. She grew up in San Francisco, which she refers to as "gay central," and attributes much of her acceptance to this. Like Kamal, she explains how this exposure not only humanized these individuals, but also consistently disproved any existing stereotypes she may have been exposed to otherwise. In addition to that, she also stresses repeatedly during the interview how her close gay friends are individuals she cares about, and so she could not imagine having a negative opinion about something that is so central to who they are as people.

Nora (24 years old) expresses these same sentiments, but for her, she had the unique experience of spending some of her formative years both in Yemen and here in the United States:

> Here, I see a lot of homosexuals in front of me like I always see a lot, so that's how I'm starting to get used to it quicker because I'm seeing it everywhere, whereas in Yemen you don't really see it as much. It's like really rare to see it, if you ever see it actually. So I feel like it would take me longer to accept it—not to accept it, but like to just get the fact that it's, you know, it's there, so accept it and get used to it.

Unlike Kamal and Rana, Nora does not have close gay or lesbian friends who served as that positive exposure. Instead, she references the increased exposure in the United States in comparison to Yemen. She constantly uses terms like, "get used to it," especially when referencing Yemeni relatives who have never been to the United States, or who came at a much later age. She explains that she does not believe they are opposed to homosexuality, but that because of their lack of exposure, it is too shocking of a concept for them to immediately comprehend.

In contrast, there were a few participants who did not have close ties with LGBTQ friends, identifying LGBTQ individuals in their lives as nothing more than acquaintances. The rhetoric that these individuals engaged in was much less informed and there were more instances of negativity. For example, Yasmeen (18 years old) uses words like "disgusting" when describing same-sex couples. She emphasizes that she would never express these attitudes to a same-sex couple, but that she either tells her peers or thinks to herself, "Oh my god that's disgusting."

Ameen (22 years old) recognizes that if he had a close relationship with someone who identified as LGBTQ, his stance may change:

> I'm sure that if somebody in my personal life was [gay], it might sway me just because I can identify with them, I care about them, I love them, you

> know, I want them to be happy, so they'll have to have that [a same-sex relationship] to be happy. But, yeah, I'm sure it would affect me if I did.

Apart from this, Ameen strongly affirms that Islam opposes homosexuality, but that he does not have an opinion on the topic because it does not affect him. Throughout the interview, he expresses his indifference.

Attribution Theory: A Test from God

In applying attribution theory to attitudes towards homosexuality, studies have found that if individuals believe homosexuality is a choice, they are more likely to have negative attitudes than if they believe homosexuality is something one is born with. For my participants, however, this was not at all a clear relationship. First and foremost, participants ranged from believing it is a choice or something that is a result of one's environment, to being neutral and stating that there could be instances of both, to believing entirely that it was something individuals are born with. However, their attributions were unrelated to their attitudes.

There were some cases where individuals did believe it was a choice and despite this, they were still very accepting and shared positive examples. Kamal states:

> I honestly, um, I think it's [homosexuality] a choice that happens later on in life. I don't think anyone is born a certain way. You know, it's what you're taught, experiences, things you see and witness. That's my personal opinion.

Despite this, Kamal still expresses positive opinions. I reference him earlier when discussing the impact of positive exposure. He speaks highly of gay friends, even referencing that he has hired a number of gay and lesbian employees, and emphasizing that one's sexual identity no longer determined how he viewed them on an individual level.

Layal (21 years old) was one of my few participants who expressed an unconditional acceptance of homosexuality, both within and outside of the Muslim world. She, like, Kamal expresses views that do not adhere to the concept of attribution theory:

> I feel like it's [homosexuality] something that you choose. Sexuality is a spectrum so it's something you feel. You're-you're in the middle of the spectrum, I can't say that I'm 100% straight 'cause I don't know that myself, you know no one can know that. So it depends on where you fall on that spectrum. So I don't think they're born with it, I think they feel it and choose it as they're growing.

Layal uses language that suggests a very progressive view, calling sexuality a spectrum and even calling her own sexuality into question. However, she still frames sexuality as something that is a choice, that one eventually chooses their place on the spectrum. Despite her viewpoint that it is a choice, Layal was unconditionally accepting of gay and lesbian individuals, even if they were Muslim, which set her apart from other participants who were also accepting. She repeatedly emphasizes the fact that gay and lesbian individuals are still human and how every gay and lesbian individual she had ever

encountered had been very kind to her. Her exposure, in this case, had more of an impact on her opinions than her belief that it was a choice.

A number of other participants very clearly and adamantly stated that they believed homosexuality was something individuals were born with, but they did not have unconditionally positive views towards it in the same way that Layal did. Here, most participants exercised what I call the "test from God" rhetoric to find a balance between their own personal views and what they believed were the views of their religion. Khadija (29 years old) states:

> I think that some people are born with a natural inclination to the same sex or both sexes, like I said though, it is a choice to live that, a lifestyle and indulging in that. I don't wanna say indulging because it makes it sound like it's, um, something gluttonous. But if they choose to live according to their natural feelings, then in that case, the lifestyle is a choice. The feelings are not.

Here, Khadija does not expressly state her stance, but she repeatedly emphasizes that one's sexuality is not a choice, but how they act upon this sexual identity is. While removing the blame from an individual in one instance, she then puts it back on them with this idea that one's "lifestyle" can be separated from their sexual identity. Moreover, she uses language like "gluttonous" – even though she seemingly retracts it – which parallels the type of language that many other participants used. In many instances, participants who utilized rhetoric similar to Khadija's compared this idea of "indulging" in homosexual acts to indulging in other things that are forbidden in the religion, such as alcohol or eating pork. They compared homosexuality to temptations and often used certain forbidden foods as comparisons, that one must resist their desire to be with the same sex in the same way that they resist eating pork or drinking alcohol.

Sura (21 years old) further elaborates on this idea. When discussing this, Sura, who avidly stated her support for the LGBTQ community very early on in our interview, seemed very uncomfortable and hesitant when explaining this idea of homosexuality as a temptation:

> Um-I-so… this is where the knowledge that I do have about Islam comes in, so I definitely think that it [homosexuality] is something that is *(participant pauses)* true and something people are born with. Like it's definitely something that is uh that you know God has made people this way, so this is something that they're born with. It's not, um, in their brain or all that stuff. Um and then I think that those people are the biggest people—or like the strongest people. Just-just over everything because they have to live with something uh very very heavy *(participant pauses)* all their lives. It's not something they can act on, because that would make it a sin that just in general, that's the biggest hardship that they have to—that's in their life.

It is important to note that in other parts of our interview, Sura did not have nearly as many pauses, stutters, and filler words like "um" and "uh." I specifically noticed this speech pattern develop when she talked about queer Muslims and the navigations she

believed they had to engage in to avoid sinning. She, and other participants who employed this notion, also explained that homosexuality, if an individual was born with it, was that individual's specifically chosen test from God. They believed that no individual was born with a test that they could not handle, and although it was difficult, God granted it to them for some reason unknown to them because only they could handle it. Sura's hesitation, considering she repeatedly stated her support for the LGBTQ community, is a clear depiction of the type of balancing act that many of my participants took part in. There were moments during our interview where Sura even used her fingers to put visual quotation marks around certain words or terms (i.e. certain behaviors being "natural"), but still expressed them as though they were part of her own belief system. Similar to Layal, Sura and many other participants' attitudes were more predicted by their exposure than anything else. Thus, whether they believed homosexuality was a choice, something individuals were born with, or anywhere in between, it did not have an automatic reflection on their attitudes towards gay and lesbian individuals, and especially not gay or lesbian Muslims. This is in contrast to findings from research on non-Muslim populations.

Muslim Americans and their Imagined Communities

When a community faces some kind of threat, their ties to one another become stronger and more salient. For Muslim Americans in a post-9/11 world where their religious identity is under constant scrutiny, their bond to other Muslims becomes crucial. My participants came from a number of racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds, and yet they demonstrated very similar negotiation practices and attitudes towards homosexuality. When discussing the topic of homosexuality within the Muslim world, their concern was less with homosexuality itself, but more with the fear of division within the Muslim community.

Reactions to Progressive Muslim Communities

Islamic centers devoted to progressive Muslim communities are a more recent development in various parts of the world. These communities assert their progressivism in a number of ways, including not segregating their prayers by gender, having females lead prayer, welcoming LGBTQ individuals, and officiating both same-sex and interfaith marriages. These communities are small and when I asked my participants about them, all but one of my participants had never heard of progressive Muslims and what they stood for. That same participant who had heard of them was the only one to have an entirely positive reaction to them. Everyone else, including those who had expressed a certain level of acceptance towards more liberal values, had various reasons for disagreeing with the creation of these communities.

Amina (20 years old) took issue with this idea of Muslims separating themselves from one another through the creation of these specified communities:

> I mean no one's perfect, we're all gonna do things, you know? So I just think if they [progressive Muslims] divide themselves, like them having a homosexual mosque, that's them accepting the fact that they're homosexual which is fine, but then also saying we're homosexual and we're just gonna not try to change it.

Amina expresses two issues that a number of other participants expressed as well. First, as stated, she is opposed to the potential divide that this would create among Muslims. Second, going back to this idea that homosexuality as an identity is not a sin, but same-sex sexual acts are, Amina takes issue with the fact that a progressive Muslim community would not adhere to this ideology, and allow for queer Muslims to get married, rather than attempt to resist their same-sex desires. Rana (19 years old) takes this idea a step further:

> But having a mosque that's like in a way encouraging people to be gay Muslims, that I think is a bit too forward, and I think it kind of becomes the argument as a thing of 'Because we can do it, we're gonna do it,' and it's kind of a screw you to other Muslims. And that just kind of furthers the divide between Muslims and gay Muslims, it kind of creates a bigger, like – cause the Muslim people feel like their traditions are becoming a joke.

Even though Rana was one of my participants who believed homosexuality was something individuals are born with, she still states that an LGBTQ friendly mosque would "encourage" people to become gay as though this was an identity that could be a result of environmental influences. She also frames the idea of progressive Muslims as an outright attack against other Muslims, without acknowledging that there are other Muslim sects already in existence, such as Sunni, Shiite, and Nation of Islam to name only a small few. Despite divisions already being present in the Muslim world, she still paints progressive Muslims as the "other" with the rest of the Muslim world being what's acceptable.

Nusayba (27 years old) had a more unique perspective on a lot of matters compared to my other participants, part of it being that she identified as female/non-binary and consistently referred to herself as queer during our interview. Although she was mostly an outlier on other subject matters, she still had a similar reaction to the idea of progressive Muslims in terms of creating a divide:

> You [progressive Muslims] have all these values but you don't even wanna talk to people who are different, and you just wanna like be angry at them but not have conversations with them—and how do you—'cause they [non-progressive Muslims] feel the same. And so, that's kind of… It's fine to have that view, but if there is an interest to really change things then I think that needs to be an open dialogue. That's where I would stand on it.

Unlike other participants, Nusayba does not frame progressive Muslims as the other, stating that the divide is an issue that stems from both sides of this argument. She does believe, however, that these communities should exist in order to eventually influence change and cause integration. Although she still adheres to this idea of division, she does not approach it defensively or use the process of "othering" like the rest of my participants.

"None of My Business" Until It Is

For most of my participants, even if they demonstrated negative attitudes towards homosexuality or employed homophobic rhetoric, they still resorted to this using language like, "It's none of my business," explaining that everyone is free to live their life as they please. They stated that another person's sexuality did not affect them, and so they would never actively oppose it. This shifted, however, when we discussed queer Muslims. This "none of my business" language was only present when discussing non-Muslim gay or lesbian individuals. Mona (19 years old) very openly stated, "Personally I'm okay with homosexuals in American culture, not necessarily Muslims." For her, being homosexual was too big of a sin and thus could not harmoniously exist with a Muslim identity. Bilqees (19 years old) echoed this: "It doesn't really bother me that there's people that way [homosexual], but obviously like if it's in Islam, if it's somebody close to me, then of course it would probably like trigger me." When I asked her who she would consider close, she clarified then that it would be anyone she knew who was Muslim. Sharing a Muslim identity alone would cause her to have trouble accepting another individual's homosexual identity.

For other participants, this negative reaction was further heightened by the idea that this person could be a relative. Dawood (19 years old) had trouble responding when I asked him how he would react to a family member coming out as gay or lesbian. He asked to come back to the question at a later time because he could not formulate his thoughts around something so shocking. When he did answer, he stated:

> I mean, like let's say if I knew one of my best friends was homosexual, I wouldn't feel bad for him. I would feel whatever works for him works for me personally. If I knew someone in my family, especially you know being in a Muslim family, that would be a tough decision to deal with. And I would still love them, of course, but it will still be a tough situation, especially what to do next, you know? But if someone I knew, like a best friend, was homosexual, I would be okay with it.

For Dawood, this unheard of situation would be difficult to navigate because it is something he had never encountered nor did he ever expect to encounter it. Although he would still love them, as he stated, he still calls this hypothetical individual's sexuality a "decision," and so when he says "what to do next," it implies that he feels there needs to be some sort of resolution to this person's sexuality. When I asked what he thought he or his family would do, he could not provide a response, stating that it was so foreign to him he could not even begin to hypothesize. Ameen (22 years old) had some idea for how he would "resolve" this situation if he came across it:

> If it was a family member, I guess I'd be a little more harsh. I mean, I'd probably talk about you know stories in the Quran, and be that guy that constantly lectures him and tries to get through every chance that I get. It'd be awkward, probably for no good reason, 'cause I'd be treating them differently than another person.

Ameen's resolution is to constantly use religion as a tool to potentially "get through" to this relative, assuming this means that this person would "change" their sexuality or at

the very least adhere to an abstinent or heterosexual lifestyle. Ameen, similar to Sura who would use quotation marks around ideas she seemed to disagree with but still express, recognizes that he would have "no good reason" for making things awkward, and yet still stands behind this statement as his reaction.

This policing of other Muslims, close friends, and relatives demonstrates the importance of one's Muslim identity and community ties. None of my participants avidly opposed homosexuality among non-Muslims, but many of them took issue with the idea of a homosexual Muslim, an LGBTQ-affirming mosque, or an LGBTQ Muslim leader. Non-Muslim homosexuals would not have potential to create a divide among Muslims, but many of my participants perceived that homosexuality could be a factor in diminishing one's Muslim identity or causing a separation among Muslim communities. It is important to understand the importance of identity and community ties for Muslim Americans, which further stresses the need to study individual religious groups and their unique dynamics and beliefs rather than simply studying Christian groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is important that studies on religion and its effects on social attitudes are inclusive of various faiths and identities, since one religious group cannot be representative of all other religions. In this study, I sought to fill this gap with the voice of Muslim Americans, a group that is continuously growing in the US, racially, ethnically, and nationally diverse, and simultaneously deals with living in a post-9/11 world and in a currently contentious political climate. My findings do two things: 1) they show that Muslims are not entirely unique and that despite the constant demonization of Islam as extremist and close-minded, they parallel the social views of Christian groups in some ways, and 2) despite sharing some values, they are still their own group with a separate identity and different beliefs.

My findings supported the literature that stated that traditional gender beliefs, which are typically taught in conservative religions, lead to more negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Although a majority of my participants did not express outright negative attitudes, they used traditional gendered language to explain why homosexuality was not allowed in Islam. Gender complementarity served as a key tool for their explanation, referencing notions that God created men and women for each other, and so there was no room for same-sex relationships within this framework. They also engaged in defensive strategies that reflected the notion of homosexuality being a threat to traditional gender values that previous studies had found (Hill, Moulton and Burdette 2004; Burdette, Ellison and Hill 2005; Olson, Cadge and Harrison 2006; Andersen and Fetner 2008; Whitley 2009; Whitehead 2010; Sherkat, et al. 2011; and Whitehead 2014). Their defense, however, was not specifically about their beliefs, but instead about their own sexual identity. Many of my participants provided that as long as a gay or lesbian individual did not flirt with them, then they had no problems with their homosexuality.

The one factor, however, that surpassed traditional gender beliefs and lead to more positive attitudes was exposure. This was in line with what the literature stated, but was especially important for my participants. For individuals who had close gay or lesbian friends and who had an immensely positive experience with these friends, much of their attitude formation centered around these experiences. It did not matter that they

had certain stipulations when later discussing Islam's stance on the matter, they still emphasized the humanization process that took place for them upon meeting and having a positive encounter with a gay or lesbian friend. For Muslim Americans, especially those who migrate to the United States from a predominantly Muslim country, this factor is key. Many of them referenced how in their family's home country, homosexuality was an entirely foreign concept and that if they had lived there, they may have never encountered someone who was openly gay or lesbian. This demonstrates that this component, especially for a group who is not often exposed to LGBTQ issues, holds the most power.

The first place that my findings did not line up with the literature was levels of religious practice leading to more negative attitudes. My participants' negotiation process was much too complex and varied, in the same way that their attitudes and opinions were complex and varied. Thus, despite a majority of my participants demonstrating regular mosque attendance and daily practice, there was no clear and consistent line between this and either more negative or positive attitudes. There are a number of potential explanations for this. First, it ties back to hypotheses that the reason Protestants had more negative views was not only because of their high level of church attendance, but that their attendance resulted in consistent exposure to homophobic ideas (Hill et al. 2004; Burdette et al. 2005; Olson et al. 2006; Whitley 2009; Whitehead 2010; Sherkat, et al. 2011; and Whitehead 2014). Since the Muslims in my study stated that they did not hear discussions of homosexuality in the mosque, this would not be a location or practice that would manifest in negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Secondly, for Muslim Americans in a post-9/11 world, their high attendance and involvement in their Muslim communities is used as a survival tactic, and may not necessarily reflect their level of religiosity. The presence of a Muslim community is crucial for them in a society that constantly perpetuates negative stereotypes about Islam and its followers. All of this proves that a pattern found in one religious group will not necessarily be reflected in another group.

When I use the term "negotiation," I refer specifically to the types of justifications I felt participants were providing for their views. Many of my participants were not directly opposed to same-sex relationships, but instead felt their religion was, and so they found ways to "negotiate" the two. One major way was through enacting this notion of the desire versus the act. Many of them believed that homosexuality is something created by God, and so the desire for members of the same-sex is natural and not a sin; however, this identity is granted to certain individuals as a test from God, and so it is their duty as Muslims to resist these desires. Since there is no direct statement about this in the Quran, participants used comparisons to demonstrate this, such as indulging in alcohol, drugs, or pork food products. This negotiation tactic turns this idea of attribution theory on its head. Believing that homosexuality was something an individual was born with did not at all result in participants having a more positive view towards it; instead, they found a way to justify this idea despite their belief that Islam condemned homosexuality. Their beliefs about what "causes" homosexuality thus become less of a determinant of their attitudes, but a tool they use to explain what they feel their religion states in comparison to how they may or may not feel personally.

Lastly, what set Muslim Americans apart from Christians was their lack of exposure to religious discussions on the topic. For most of my participants, the interview was the first time they had had an in-depth conversation about homosexuality, especially within the context of Islam. This was apparent in many interviews, where participants would go back and forth between ideas before settling on one answer. Upon hearing from one participant to the next that this was a topic they had never discussed at all, it became more and more surprising then when I noted patterns arising between participants. Although I relied on snowball sampling, each participant usually provided me with one other contact, so a majority of my participants did not know each other, nor did they live in the same region. All that being said, the complex negotiation practice – especially that of the desire versus act notion – was still present in similar ways among many participants. This brought up this idea of the politics of belonging and how "imagined communities" still create these salient identities that come with their own values and belief system without necessarily being discussed between members of those communities. It also relates to this notion that these identities become more central when there is a perceived threat against them. For Muslims in the US, this threat is living in a post-9/11 country and under a clearly anti-Muslim administration. The boundaries of the Muslim identity thus become clearer and clearer, even if they are not discussed. This was also demonstrated by the reaction to progressive Muslim communities being a defensive one. When these communities were discussed, the concern among nearly all of my participants was that this would create a divide in the Muslim world. In a society that is already seemingly against Muslims, the fear of division overpowered any one individual's view towards the topic of homosexuality.

Studying Muslim attitudes towards same-sex relationships is a crucial contribution to studies on sexuality; however, it does not come without limitations. First and foremost, this study focused on Muslim Americans in California. Although I gathered participants from northern, central, and southern California, which allowed me the opportunity to note whether regional differences played a role in attitude formation, it is still not generalizable to the overall Muslim American community. A small number of my participants who had grown up or spent some time in San Francisco recognize that they were more exposed to LGBTQ issues in comparison to other Muslims. However, many of my participants noted that because they live in California – even if they lived in a more politically conservative region – they are more likely to meet LGBTQ individuals. Thus, it would be beneficial to study Muslim Americans in more social conservative states since their experiences and exposure to certain ideas will vary. Furthermore, this study is focusing on Muslim Americans specifically, and is thus not applicable to Muslims worldwide. Geographical location, and thus political climate, may have an impact on how Muslims in other areas develop their ideas about same-sex relationships. Despite all of this, this study is still an important beginning to exploring this understudied topic, and making a case for future studies.

This study is one small step towards gaining a better understanding of how Muslims negotiate their religious views when forming their beliefs towards same-sex relationships. It would be valuable to conduct interviews with Muslims in various locations of the US, including areas like Dearborn, Michigan, where this a large and concentrated Muslim community as well as states or cities that do not have large Muslim

populations. It would also be helpful to do comparative studies of Muslims in more western countries and Muslims in majority Muslim countries. Since exposure played such a key role for my participants, it is important to understand how Muslims in predominantly Muslim countries view LGBTQ issues with exposure that is either nonexistent or exclusively negative.

There was one potential pattern that I would like to further explore, but would need more male participants to do so. A majority of my female participants repeatedly expressed concerns for how their faith was perceived by non-Muslims, and it became apparent throughout the interviews that this played a role in how they formulated and expressed their attitudes towards homosexuality. They were very aware of the stereotype that Muslims are intolerant and close-minded and so they repeatedly made statements about acceptance and how Islam does not discriminate in the way that the media portrays it to. These participants also wore the hijab, so their religious identity was constantly at the forefront of every interaction they had. For male participants, however, this did not appear to be a concern at all. Even when they expressed their opinions, they did not often refer back to religion unless I had explicitly asked about it. For women, however, they constantly reference their religion and their Muslim community when explaining their views. This brings into question the role of the hijab as an immediate identifier, which leads Muslim women who wear the hijab to do the emotional labor in defying stereotypes about Islam, as opposed to men who have the option to make their religious identity known. I would like to continue gathering male Muslim participants to see if this pattern is consistent.

Lastly, and most importantly, my primary goal during this study was to give Muslim Americans the voice they seem to lack in academic research. A latent effect that became more and more prevalent was also providing individuals with a chance to freely discuss what is considered taboo in their communities in a safe space. Growing up in a Muslim household, I knew that conversations around the topic of homosexuality were nearly nonexistent, but was not aware that this went beyond my own personal experience. Many of the individuals I interviewed expressed a sense of relief that they finally had the opportunity to have such an in-depth conversation about this topic. This is most accurately summed up by a quote from Rana, which has become a constant voice in my head throughout the rest of this process and encourages me to study the social views and experiences of Muslim Americans:

> It's difficult, because I love my religion and I wanna be extremely supportive of it, but I also live in a society where being Muslim is sometimes looked down upon. So finding a balance between the two is extremely hard. I do think that a lot of empathy and a lot of understanding and a lot of conversations are what changes that. So the fact that you're doing this study, that in itself is already such a big iconic step. That's one step forward, just getting people to talk about these things. It's incredible. So thank you for that.

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