

## **Personal History Statement**

PhD in Information Science

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As a first-generation Arab American woman, I grew up hearing stories from my father saying, “I came to the US alone and was able to get to where I am now. It’s your job to move even further.” Throughout my life, I’ve felt a pressure to succeed, one often felt by children of immigrants, but turned this pressure into a personal promise I have made to invest my time and energy in helping craft a world that is compassionate and filled with care, whether that be through my research, my teaching, or my day-to-day interactions with others.

Four years ago, I sat in the back of the Espresso Royale on State Street with a cup of hot ginger dragon tea and my laptop open, ready to draft a personal statement for UMSI’s master’s program. In it, I sewed an invisible thread from my childhood to the present, weaving through my 10-year-old self’s decision to legally change my first name to better reflect my mixed-heritage to my undergraduate experiences of choosing to take an academic path in stark contrast with my immigrant parents’ wishes of ‘doctor, lawyer, or engineer’ to my sophomore-year battles fighting poor mental health and burnout. I wish I could tell my past self, the girl who definitely scalded her tongue on hot tea one too many times, that her determination to follow her own path would not be in vain—that the next three years would show her she was right to listen to the voice in her head that believed she could craft a life for herself where she felt internal peace in the ways she chose to spend her time and energy, that she would discover a love for research and teaching through her encounters with so many others (her students, peers, advisors, etc.) who also cared about making the world a kinder, more compassionate place.

In graduate school, I was fortunate enough to teach undergraduate students for 2.5 years in courses that all involved critical conversations around power structures and race and ethnicity, such as Introduction to Arab American Studies and a course on Race & Broadway Musicals. A request I always made of my students was to always ask questions, to ask *why* and *how* circumstances came to be, to take the time to then honor these questions and engage with and share this information in discussion with peers to try and craft understanding and inform our actions beyond the classroom. However, it was in the classroom and through listening to their discussions, their questions, their reflections, that I witnessed tangible evidence of the possibility for a better world—young adults who wanted to learn from the past, do their best to repair the impacts of past and ongoing harm, and to try and find ways to prevent these harms from carrying into the future. I often ask myself what contribution I can make to efforts trying to craft a world that is kinder and designed with structures and systems that have care and empathy embedded within them.

A few years ago, I came across some old videos I had made as a child on an old webcam; pretending to be a news reporter, singing a cover of *Jar of Hearts* by Christina Perri, playing with the filters that distorted my face. I wish that little girl in those videos knew she was hilarious and beautiful, that she wasn’t a little girl filled with so much self-loathing she hid behind jokes. I spent so much of my life caring about the numbers on the scale—able to remember my weight for every single year since I was 7 years old—that I forgot to make sure my younger self didn’t waste so many precious hours daydreaming about what she’d do once she’s “thin and happy.” My own direct experiences with weight stigma and disordered eating, and my understandings of how social media and technology impacted my own personal relationship with my body has helped to shape my research interests around compassionate technology. The same request I made of my students, to ask questions of the *why* and *how* of our world and honor them with inquiry, is related to what I believe research and pursuing a doctoral degree will allow me to do—to honor questions I’ve come to wonder around understanding how we can engage with and design technology and online social spaces to facilitate a positive relationship between the body and the self, specifically when a person has endured stigmatized experiences.

While I have my own personal encounters with several stigmatized experiences that motivate this specific question, I want the process of my research to be collaborative in efforts to understand answers, the same way my discussion sections as a GSI were. While I want to collaborate with other researchers at UMSI and other institutions, I also think of participants as collaborators who actively contribute their time and energy when sharing their experiences, and thoughts. I aim to center and honor them *and* their experience as well as to honor my younger self and the younger selves of all of us who have and have had complicated relationships with our bodies with the care I will give my doctoral

and research pursuits. I want to find answers that lead to changes challenging stigma and to help empower one's sense of well-being and autonomy for defining what health and well-being means to them in light of whatever stigmatized experiences one might encounter in life.

My efforts to invest my time and energy in things that may make the world a kinder, more compassionate place expands beyond research to include avenues of community care and action, specifically care and action that works to challenge stigma impacting the sharing and receipt of mental and sexual health information. While completing my undergraduate degree, I was actively involved in an organization called the Middle East and Arab Network (MEdAN), where I first served as public relations manager and later, President. Our organization hosted events each year to raise awareness, create safe spaces, provide cultural information on the Middle East and North Africa and sustain a sense of community among members. My interests in health informatics research, specifically as it pertains to the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) diasporic communities in the U.S., stem from my own personal experiences as well as those fostered during my time in undergrad. As an Arab-American woman, I grew up extremely cognizant of the lack of education and resources available to members of my community, with the lack of support and understanding for mental and sexual health being very pertinent to me.

As president of the MEdAN, I worked to create spaces for members of my community to discuss topics deemed 'taboo'; one of these was part of our 'Chai Circles' series (an hour long dialogue over tea) that we cheekily called *Let's (not) Talk About Sex Habibi*. In this event, several MENA women showed up to talk all things related to relationships and dating, sex and sexual health education (e.g. the kinds of information being shared and consequences of it), the reality and consequence of the lack of intra-community conversations happening related to sex/sexual health, double standards around gender and sex in the diaspora, and the stigma associated with sex and relationships. It was the first time in my life, at 22 years old, I openly talked about these topics without an ounce of shame or worry. As we commiserated over our shared experiences, the conversation turned to how we might've done things different in our lives if only we had known and the challenges we believed might exist in normalizing these sorts of conversations within our community so that important information related to sexual health was more accessible. I believe there is a major opportunity here to continue to create space for these conversations through community-based research projects intended to turn these conversations into information that directs and informs sexual health education and information for a community historically excluded in health-related research.

Related to my wishes for my research to support and empower individuals facing stigmatized experiences, I want to be a part of research that supports and empowers individuals to have access to and benefit from health information, regardless of potential stigma associated with it while also accounting for community members' values in this process. A doctoral degree from UMSI will help me work towards this goal and allow me to better establish a career where my time and energy is invested in producing and sharing knowledge in information studies that can help push the needle towards the world becoming a kinder, more compassionate place.

