

# A First Look into the Profile Lock Feature on Facebook

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## 1 Introduction

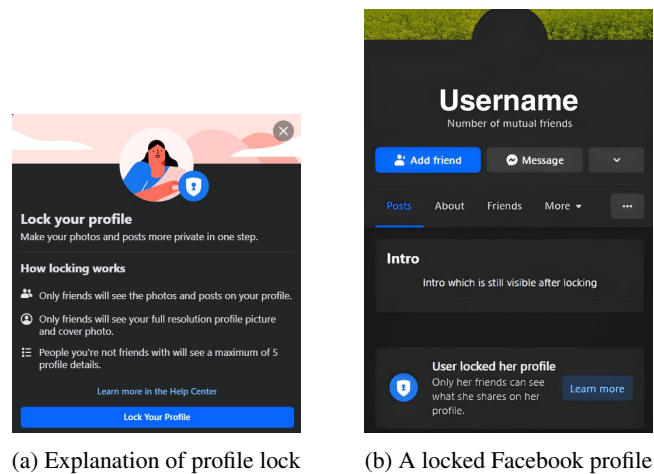
In response to the usability and privacy needs of the users, Facebook has been frequently experimenting with its design and features since its inception [3, 4, 9, 16, 17]. More recently, this social media platform has implemented a feature that allows the users to lock their profile by making their photos and posts more private in one step [11]. Although Facebook has not released any official statement or blog regarding profile lock, this feature has been made available in the last couple of years only in a few countries, mostly in the Global South [2, 7].

Previous research has focused on Instagram and Twitter users, examining their motivations for locking their accounts or making them private [8, 15]. Studies have also explored the disclosure of user data on Facebook, the gap between privacy settings expectations and reality, and users' privacy protection strategies [10, 12, 18]. However, the Facebook profile lock feature has not yet been investigated in the existing literature. Additionally, since this feature is region-specific and primarily available in Middle Eastern and South Asian countries [2], understanding the user motivations for adopting this feature is crucial for identifying the privacy protection mechanisms of the relatively understudied populations in the Global South.

We conducted interviews with Bangladeshi Facebook users about their motivations and opinions, to understand what makes them to adopt the profile lock feature. We found that our participants lock their profile both in proactive and reactive ways in response to the negative experiences encountered on the platform. By locking their profile, they get an inflated sense of security and protection as they tend to harbor misconceptions about the scope of this feature. Furthermore, local religious and cultural considerations play an important role in their decision to lock the profile.

## 2 The Facebook Lock Feature

The Facebook profile lock feature is a specialized, optional feature that allows a user to present a limited view of their



(a) Explanation of profile lock

(b) A locked Facebook profile

Figure 1: Facebook Profile Lock

profile to people who are outside their friend list. It is a region-specific feature that is available only in a few countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), India, Bangladesh, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Morocco, Egypt, and Sudan [2, 7]. Figure 1 shows the screenshots of a locked profile and the explanation given to the user when presenting this feature. As can be seen from the explanation, once a profile is locked, only friends are able to see the contents and the full resolution profile picture and cover photo, while other people are restricted to a maximum of five profile details. However, people can still search for the user, send messages and friend requests even if the profile is locked [11].

## 3 Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 Facebook users (13 female, 8 male) from Bangladesh who lock their profile to understand their motivations behind adopting the feature. The participants ranged from 20 to 33 years old with

25 being the median age. We asked these participants about their motivations, opinions, and perceptions regarding the profile lock feature. Most of the interviews were in person but based on the preference of some participants, we conducted their interview through Google Meet. The interviews were conducted in Bengali and the whole research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of BRAC University.

All the data collected from our interviews was anonymized, translated into English, and analyzed manually by three members of our research team as no software was used in the whole process. We used open coding to analyze our data. It should be noted here that all the members of the team are born and raised in Bangladesh and they are well-familiar with the local social media culture.

## 4 Findings

Our analysis revealed four overall themes for reasons our participants locked their Facebook profile: negative experiences, religious and cultural considerations, misconceptions regarding the feature, and strategy for managing multiple platforms.

**Negative experiences.** Most of the participants adopted the lock feature due to negative experiences encountered on Facebook. As one participant said,

*“I was harassed by the gaming community. I used to do cosplays, perhaps they didn’t appreciate my cosplay. They also body-shamed me. Hence I locked my profile for protection.”* [P11]

While prior negative experience prompted some of them to use the feature as soon as they found it, others locked their profile only after they had encountered unintended consequences.

**Local religious and cultural considerations.** Religious and cultural considerations were prevalent among our participants. One participant said,

*“Those who wear a niqab<sup>1</sup> usually lock their Facebook profile. This is what I have seen among my friends and family members, 100% of the people who maintain a niqab also lock their profile. They do it from religious obligations.”* [P4]

Similar sentiments were echoed among other participants, including the male participants who discussed the practices of their religious female relatives. In a conservative society like Bangladesh, female participants cited gender-specific reasons for locking their profile. A few participants adopted the feature due to lack of legal recourse mechanisms in Bangladesh in case of social media harassment.

<sup>1</sup>A niqab is a veil worn by religious Muslim women in public, which covers all of the face apart from the eyes.

**Misconceptions about the Feature.** Many of our participants erroneously believed that using the profile lock feature would make them invisible in Facebook search results. For instance, P14 stated, *“Now that I have locked my Facebook profile, no one can find me through Facebook search anymore.”* They also attributed unrelated positive experiences on social media, like their accounts no longer getting hacked, to the use of the profile lock. These responses suggest that the Facebook lock feature gives users an exaggerated sense of security and protection.

**Strategy for managing multiple platforms.** We found that some of our participants use the profile lock option as part of their strategy for managing multiple social media platforms. Some participants viewed Facebook as a more public platform than Instagram, leading them to lock their Facebook profile to safeguard their privacy. As one participant said,

*“I never faced any negativity on Instagram ... Facebook is used by people of all classes, and as such, insensitivity and intolerance are much prevalent there. Hence I lock my Facebook profile but keep my Instagram open.”* [P8]

This and a few other responses indicate that some participants use the Facebook profile lock feature to devise a strategy regarding navigating multiple social media platforms.

## 5 Discussion and Future Work

Our findings generate a few important insights. First, from a design viewpoint, the instructions provided when inviting the users to lock their profile are not sufficient to understand the full scope of the feature. The interface summarizes the feature through three key points and provides the link to the Help Center to learn more (Figure 1). However, these key points vary between the desktop and the mobile versions and omit important details such as who can message or search them after profile lock. The relevant usable privacy and security research on designing an optimum size notice can be applied in this regard to help users quickly understand the most important information [5]. Second, our findings can be connected with the prior studies conducted in Bangladesh at the intersection of religion and privacy [6, 13]. In this and many other regions of the Global South, Islamic rituals such as purdah play an important role in configuring the privacy settings of the social media accounts [1]. Third, our study demonstrates that users have a nuanced strategy to navigate multiple social media accounts such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram [14]. We plan to recruit more participants in the future who use multiple platforms to better understand the issue. Another important research direction could be to recruit users from a different geographic location such as the Middle East to compare and contrast the findings from our study.

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