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PRIVACY CONCERNS DURING REMOTE EMERGENCY LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN QATAR

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ABSTRACT

The cultural norms involving privacy and online privacy in Qatar and the Persian (Arabian) Gulf are complex, based on both Sharia law and local Bedouin customs. Adding to the complexity of the topic is the demographic structure of Qatar: over 90% of Qatar's population consists of non-citizen expatriate workers and their families primarily from Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East comprising both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries. The following chapter presents results, with a specific focus on privacy, of a mixed-methods longitudinal study on virtual learning environments in higher education in Qatar conducted from December 2020 to the time of writing. The goal of this research was to develop hypotheses and models about online privacy behaviors and attitudes in Qatar to assist instructors in understanding and respecting local privacy norms (the majority of higher education instructors in Qatar are non-Qatari), and to improve online student engagement and learning outcomes. Qualitative analysis of student focus group transcripts (n=95; 22 groups), expert faculty and student opinion, and a review of the current research literature revealed that: 1) privacy is a significant and pervasive concern in Gulf online educational contexts, especially for Muslim women, with an unexpected 'privacy paradox' 2) studying at home during government-enforced lockdown created novel privacy concerns (outsiders viewing the home and seeing and hearing other family members; and negotiation of private study / communal spaces within the home); 3) camera on/off policies and behaviors for synchronous learning precipitated complex and novel student behaviors; 4) dressing properly (modesty, hijab) for online classes was a concern specifically for Muslim women students; and 5) recording of lectures was a privacy concern for both faculty and students due to photography taboos in the Gulf related to tribal/family honor.

KEYWORDS

Online Learning, Education–COVID-19 Pandemic, Online Privacy, Gender, Persian (Arabian) Gulf, Qatar

1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural norms involving privacy and online privacy in Qatar and the Persian (Arabian) Gulf are complex, based on both Sharia law and local Bedouin customs. Adding to the complexity of the topic is the demographic structure of Qatar: over 90% of Qatar's population consists of non-citizen expatriate workers and their families primarily from Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East comprising both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries. The following chapter presents results, with a specific focus on privacy, of a mixed-methods longitudinal study on virtual learning environments in higher education in Qatar conducted from December 2020 to the time of writing. The goal of the research was to develop hypotheses and models about online privacy behaviors and attitudes in Qatar to assist instructors in understanding and respecting local privacy norms (the majority of higher education instructors in Qatar are non-Qatari), and to improve student engagement and learning outcomes. Qualitative analysis of student focus group transcripts (n=95), expert opinion, and a review of the current research literature revealed that: 1) privacy is a significant and pervasive concern in Gulf online educational contexts, especially for Muslim women; 2) studying at home created novel privacy concerns (outsiders viewing the home and family members; and negotiation of private

study / communal spaces within the home); 3) camera on/off policies for synchronous learning affected student behaviors; 4) dressing properly (modesty, hijab) for online classes was a concern for Muslim women; and 5) recording of lectures was a privacy concern for both faculty and students. A 2022 study surveying the opinions of five expert online instructors in higher education in Qatar confirmed some of the results of this study; for example, "organizing personal learning spaces at home was challenging due to strong privacy customs among Gulf Arabs and large family units sharing space" (Kittaneh et al., 2022, p. 8195).

Qatar is a small water-scarce desert peninsula in the Persian Gulf with a single land border with Saudi Arabia. Islam (predominantly Sunni, with small populations of Shia, Ibadis, and Ismailis) is the state religion and the country is ruled by a hereditary monarch from the Al Thani royal family along with an appointed / elected *majlis al-shura* (advisory council). The Human Development Index of Qatar was .855 in 2021, ranked 42nd in the world and 3rd in the Arab-speaking world (UNDP, 2023). According to the World Bank, Qatar is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, with a GDP per capita (PPP) of 102,018 USD in 2021 (World Bank, 2023). The enormous wealth of Qatar derives almost solely from its vast oil and natural gas reserves (3rd largest gas reserves after Russia and Iran). Up until 2000, Internet usage in Qatar was virtually non-existent. However in 2004, IctQatar was established as the internet regulation and development arm of the State of Qatar. This ministry along with the state-owned telecom and Internet Service Provider Ooredoo.com (formerly Q-Tel) began investing billions of dollars in fiber optic cable, broadband and mobile networks, and cloud computing, as well as e-learning software and Learning Management Systems and e-curricula such as the custom-built K-Net platform and E-Schoolbag (Weber and Hamlaoui, 2018, pp. 239-40). Even before the remote emergency learning transition necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, hybrid learning became a common learning modality in Qatar during the past decade.

2. BACKGROUND

In an early criticism and warning about the impact of the Internet, Roger Clark argued that, "Cyberspace is invading private space" (p. 60) and he recommended governmental oversight on the basis that, "the threats it embodies for individuals' interest in sustaining private space are severe" (p. 67). Oversight from the state became a reality in Qatar in 2016 when the Personal Data Privacy Law was introduced (Law No. 13, 2016). This law focuses on privacy of data but extends to include parental rights to delete information posted by their children if the parents deem this information is appropriate or that the youth have been sharing too freely. That same year, Abokhodair and colleagues published an analysis of privacy on Twitter in Qatar. They noted that within Qatar and across the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), "privacy is highly gendered, such that the specific requirements for privacy differ greatly between males and females" (p. 75). Second, personal privacy includes both what people share of themselves and what is shared by others. Third, one's personal privacy should be protected even after death, and fourth, that all of this has emerged from the cultural values of Islam. The Quran specifically recognizes personal privacy as a core human right and recommendations include, "Do not spy on one another" (49:12) and, "Do not enter any houses except your own homes unless you are sure of their occupants' consent" (24:27). The Qur'an and *Hadith* (the words of the Prophet Mohammed) form the basis for Sharia law, which is "the legal framework of most Middle Eastern countries" (El-Taweel, 2019, p. 26), including Qatar where Sharia law governs personal, family, and social relations with other areas such as business and banking governed by a civil code. Gulf culture and social structures themselves, not always precisely synonymous with Islamic ethical values or Islamic culture, add another layer of complexity to privacy in Qatar.

Abokhodair and colleagues (2016) noted that within this cultural milieu, privacy is essential in regard to the home, gendered spaces, and the individual. As seen in other areas of the world, privacy of one's property is considered crucial, as is privacy for the individuals housed within that property. In examining architecture of the traditional Qatari home, Mohannadi and Furlan (2022) found that, "in domestic architecture, privacy is one of the most predominant factors in determining the internal configuration of houses" (p. 264). For example, in alignment with Islamic and Arab principles, traditional home design in Qatar ensures privacy from external view. Home privacy is further enforced externally through gates and walls, and internally through differentiation of specific areas for specific activities and people. "The purpose is to protect the sanctity – or *hurma* – of the house and the body" (Abokhodair and Vieweg, 2016, p. 674).

This brings us to the second feature of privacy within Islam and Qatar, gendered areas within the home. The home provides a physical manifestation of Qatari culture through provision of much greater privacy for women than is afforded to men. The degree of gender separation within the home varies across Muslim cities around the world, but the authors determined that "Qatar is a traditional Muslim country and is a gender-divided society" (p. 266), and thus, gender division is built into the very framework of the Qatari home. Some spaces within the home are designated female-only or male-only, providing deeper levels of privacy within the home. As seen through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, there are distinct and explicit separations between front and back stages within the Qatari home, and these separations are multilayered, as in separation from outside viewers and even from family members of another gender within the home.

Abokhodair and Vieweg (2016) explain this gender separation through the Muslim emphasis on modesty. "Presenting oneself as modest, in both dress and behavior, is of great importance to being a respectable member of Gulf society, and privacy plays an important role in how modesty and respect are maintained" (p. 674). To enter a room without permission risks exposure of the inhabitant's *awrah*, the intimate parts of the body. In relation to women, the concept of awrah extends beyond the sexual organs to include the body from hair to legs, sometimes the face, and has been associated with the traditional view of women as weak and vulnerable (Weber, 2010). Awrah also applies to men, the region between the navel and knee, which should be covered. Another concept – *ird* - translates as 'honor' and is a foundational value across the GCC. Protecting familial honor is paramount to Muslims and is manifested in almost every facet of life across the GCC. One can readily see how awrah and ird speak to powerful and deeply rooted norms regarding the sanctity of personal privacy, especially for women, and corresponding gendered restrictions on dress, behavior and visibility, whether in-person or online.

Foreigners from outside the GCC might have difficulty understanding such beliefs. It is important to understand that Arab Gulf culture is far more collectivist in nature than Western cultures (Weber, 2014). As noted by Abokhodair and Vieweg (2016), "Membership in a family and tribe are of the utmost importance; there is no individual separate from a family" (p. 673). Thus, protecting one's personal modesty and the modesty of others in the family is crucial to collective family honor within the community. To bring shame to the family or tribe is a significant transgression.

> Islam places great importance on blood ties and family relations (*silat ur-rahm* in Arabic). This value includes maintaining a good relationship with one's relatives, to love, respect and help them. The importance of this value has generated a society that is highly collectivist in nature (Abokhodair, et al., 2017, p. 699).

GCC culture in general, and Qatari society specifically, are similar to other Eastern cultures in this regard. Intercultural ethicist Ralph Capurro notes that whereas Western cultures define privacy in terms of individuality and something substantive to be protected regardless of situational context, these ideas are more fluid and relational in the East (as seen in Capurro's analysis of Japanese culture) where subjectivity "is not permanent, but dependent on situations and networks of relationships" (2015, p. 38).

In Qatar, as in Saudi Arabia, taking photographs of women in public is considered taboo. One must first seek permission from the woman and others who might appear in the picture because of concerns that photos of women could end up online and in so doing bring shame to their family and tribe. There are cases where women have been blackmailed over photos that were not sexual in nature but might show them in ways that are not in alignment with strict religious or social norms (Abokhodair, et al., 2017). Islamic culture places the same level of importance on protecting the honor and reputation of family members as it does on protecting them from physical harm.

This can also be traced to Qatar's cultural history of tribal allegiances. Abokhodair, et al. (2017) argue that within this highly relational culture, social media users bifurcate their online identities into an autonomous self who acts independently and a collective self that functions within familial and cultural norms and values. Congruent with cultural norms of modesty and honor, it is the latter that is more likely to be shared with a larger social audience because for users of social media: "In a collectivist-oriented society, not only is seeking parental approval expected, but approval from the larger extended family is also common" (Abokhodair et al., 2017, p. 704). In light of the preceding discussion, it is apparent that collective approval is even more paramount for young adult women.

In the context of such deeply rooted and wide-spread cultural restrictions on online behavior, it is significant that a 2019 Masters thesis study in Qatar found evidence of "the privacy paradox" (El-Taweel, 2019, p. 31), in which Internet users express fears and concerns about lack of online privacy but they do virtually nothing to protect themselves. This study found that a

> majority of respondents indicated that privacy is "very important" to them in the digital world and that it is of great concern to them. However, the majority of respondents also indicated that they have not followed the news of any of the recent scandals, involving major technology companies that they use daily. An even lesser number of respondents indicated that they were worried enough about the situation that they have taken any action to further protect their privacy (El-Taweel, 2019, p. 65).

One wonders, then, where female university students situate themselves on the continuum between powerful cultural and religious norms and the privacy paradox.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a triangulated mixed-method strategy with five sources of data: thematically coded student focus group interviews, a questionnaire with Likert-scale and open-ended questions, direct query of an expert faculty group (combined years of online teaching experience = 36) and student researchers to refine coded themes, a background anthropological / sociological review of the literature on privacy in the Gulf, and the experiences of the Co-PIs as higher education instructors in Qatar (combined years of experience = 111). From December 2020 to October 2022, 95 higher education students (78 female, 15 male, 2 gender not reported) from 8 HEIs in Qatar participated in 60-minute student-moderated focus groups. Faculty researchers were not present in the focus groups to increase the candidness of the responses.

Participants were recruited through convenience (snowball) sampling, and the final sample roughly matched the demographics of Qatar (CIA World Factbook, 2023). However, females were over-represented in the sample, and participants from the national university Qatar University were under-represented. The average focus group size was 5.5 participants, and 21 groups were conducted in English, and 1 in Arabic (total 22 groups). The semi-structured interview guide contained one open-ended question on privacy. Text transcripts of the audio-recorded focus groups were analyzed in NVivo 12 release 1.7 (4839) qualitative analysis software using word frequency charts, key word searching, hand-written notes, and single-coder iterative thematic coding in NVivo based on Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz et al., 2020). This standard inductive process starts from cleaning and transcribing the interviews, where patterns begin to emerge to the researcher (hand notes), and is then followed by word frequency analysis to identify further potential themes; next, the analysis proceeds to formal coding in the qualitative analysis software. Representative participant statements from the themes are then correlated with the other data sources to build hypotheses about the operational principles of online privacy behaviors and attitudes in higher education settings in Qatar. These hypotheses are subsequently tested by re-reading the transcripts and searching for the operational principles in specific statements of the respondents, or correlating them with other online privacy research findings from the published literature, or from the pedagogical expertise of the researchers. As the data was collected primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic period, in which all schools in universities were closed except for limited circumstances from March, 2020 until spring semester 2021, findings related to mental health, isolation, and socialization cannot be easily disentangled from the other variables.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The major themes and subthemes identified by the qualitative analysis along with their descriptions appear in Table 1 below. In this section, each theme is discussed by contextualizing it within the other data sources.

Table 1. Themes and descriptions from qualitative analysis of student focus groups, 2020-2022 (n=95; 22 groups)

THEME	Description	Subtheme	Description
Studying at Home	During enforced quarantine, all students in Qatar from 2020-21 attended class online from their homes, dormitories, or hotel rooms	**Outsiders' access to home**	Via camera or audio in synchronous classes, others can possibly view the home environment / see and hear other family members
		Family relations in home	Negotiation of communal and private study spaces within family homes
Camera On/Off	Video camera policies, behaviors relating to camera use		
Attending Class in Bed	Self-explanatory		
Dressing Properly	Appearing on camera in professional dress and modest Muslim dress (females only)		
Recording Lectures	Issues related to video/audio recording, screen shots, Gulf photography taboos	**Students record professor**	Self-explanatory
		Professor records students	Self-explanatory

4.1 Studying at Home

'Studying at Home' was the most discussed and nuanced theme in the transcripts (89.5% of the student respondents commented on this theme, with responses typically reaching 1-2 full length paragraphs). This theme was often associated with pandemic-related concerns such as disruption of normal patterns of life, developing new and unhealthy schoolwork/eating/sleeping/recreation routines, lack of socialization, demotivation towards schoolwork, and mental health problems such as anxiety, stress and depression.

One student expert (Research Assistant studying online learning) commented,

> Within Qatar's context, privacy concerns that arose during remote online learning fell under universally shared experiences, concerning primarily the lack of self-motivation and environmental hindrances. One of the main concerns expressed by students is related to physical issues, specifically communal home environments shared with family, which made it difficult to find a private space to study in.…Additionally, students' lack of motivation to clean up their surrounding environment, find a suitable location/ backdrop, make themselves presentable (dress up and wash their face), and stay interested to learn and focus (away from distractions) were all leading factors.

To the question "in my WORST online course, I felt motivated to participate in the class" with the five-point Likert scale '*strongly disagree–strongly agree*,' 39.1% of focus group respondents *disagreed* and 26.3% *strongly disagreed* with this statement. Similar responses were obtained from a related question about student motivation in their BEST online class, indicating a generalized strong lack of motivation to engage in online classroom activities during the pandemic. Corresponding online difficulties experienced by faculty in Qatar have been reported in Bianchi et al. (2023). Two important subthemes regarding online privacy and the home environment only incidentally linked to the pandemic, discussed below, emerged from the data.

4.1.1. Outsiders' Access to the Home Environment

Although most videoconferencing software used in education now allows blurring of backgrounds or the use of virtual backgrounds, this was not the case for some of the learning platforms required by Qatar's HEIs in the early stages of pandemic remote emergency learning. For example, Cisco Webex only introduced privacy features such as virtual backgrounds and background blurring in mid-2020, *after* the first semester of emergency remote learning in Qatar had concluded (Techradar, 14 July, 2020). And up until 2021, virtual backgrounds were only available in the Microsoft Teams desktop app, not the mobile version. The virtual

background feature was not available in the MS Teams mobile app for Apple devices (iPad/iOS) (Microsoft Corp., 25 January, 2021).

In addition, faculty and students may not have been aware of these privacy features when they became available, or how to use them, potentially exposing the students' home environments to faculty and other students in the cases of required camera-on policies, or when students felt pressure to keep their cameras on to gain participation points for the class. Also, even with cameras off, when turning on microphones to speak in class, students could potentially expose the private conversations within the household.

One of the authors reported the recurrent and representative anecdote below related to privacy of the home environment.

> One time I had a male student attending class online and the place where he had the strongest internet at home was al-majlis (this is a detached room from the rest of the house where the male guests are usually received in Qatari homes). He was in general a very active student but one time he just disappeared in the middle of our 3-hour class. He later on messages me saying that he had to exit the class Zoom because his father and uncle came into the majlis. He said that not only was he unable to participate, but he also wanted to respect the privacy of his female classmates who were participating and had their cameras on. This happened with several students, especially at the beginning of the lockdown, when I had students unable to turn on their cameras or even their mics to participate because they were in quarantine and had to share hotel rooms with family members. Many of them had to participate via chat only, because they had people chatting around them.

Experiences like this highlight the significant impact of cultural norms about privacy, modesty and respect.

4.1.2 Family Relations in the Home

As noted in the background section regarding Qatari home interior architecture and living spaces, although living spaces are often segregated as male/female, paradoxically *within* those gendered sections there is often a reduced need for personal privacy. For example, in the female section of the household, it is common for women to uncover among themselves, even with unrelated female guests; doors are often open and unlocked and family members of the same gender move freely throughout the spaces, including bedrooms and the majlis. In fact, the complaint that other family members were constantly "barging into my room" while a student was attending class online was frequently voiced in the focus groups.

As a communal culture with deep-rooted *beddu* customs of desert hospitality and mutualism, Qatari Arab families value family time together and the concept of being alone has been traditionally associated with shunning, or the fear of accidental abandonment or separation (an individual separated from the tribe in the harsh desert environment of the Gulf would have a very low probability of survival). Regarding the negotiation of communal and private study spaces in the home, one representative observation by a female student revealed a typical balancing act between studying at home and finding time to meet expected family responsibilities to be part of the family unit:

> So balancing time to sit with my family or my friends, aside from focusing on my studies and stuff, that was a bit of a challenge, because even if the learning experience took the entire day, you'd still have to find the time to sit with your family. And I think it was a bit difficult to convey that message to them…. it was a bit difficult for me to tell my parents, like, if I don't sit with you, it's not because I want to stay alone, it's because I'm occupied. That was the challenge for me.

Another respondent added,

> when you're at home, obviously you're living with your parents and then it becomes like one of those things where you're obviously not on your own personal schedule. You have to, you know, align to everybody else's needs as well, which is perfectly fine and reasonable from their side. But at the same time, it can cause, like, you know, difficulties with your own schedule academically.

4.2 Camera On/Off

Camera usage in online classes was the second most popular topic related to online privacy discussed by the participants, with 71 references to cameras. This subject merits its own focused research study within the Gulf

context due to, among other contextual variables, the complex relationship of Gulf Muslims with images of the human form, believed to be *haram* (forbidden) by some conservative muftis of the Hanbali and Salafi *madhhabs* (schools of thought) of Sharia law popular on the Arabian peninsula. In addition, there are many possible explanations for not turning on cameras which do not involve privacy concerns, including lack of engagement and interest in a course, opportunity to engage in other activities such as games or social media, necessity to sleep, lack of motivation to wash and put on appropriate clothing, and competing family responsibilities. Also, one researcher was informed by a student that there were cases of students who began the course with their cameras on, but who were bullied by the others to turn them off.

A student researcher who coordinated and moderated many of the focus groups for this study reported that, based on her work with the respondents and cleaning the subsequent transcripts,

> one key concern [during remote emergency learning] was camera usage in online classes. Students did express a clear disinterest in turning their cameras on and sharing their home space with their peers and instructors. For many, it not only felt like an invasion of privacy, but was very confusing. During the period, the home, and for a majority, the bedroom, became the office, classroom or work area. What was once an intimate space to unwind and let go became an environment that required constant grinding and a lot of (digital) socializing. Turning on the camera was essentially an invitation for strangers to enter that sacred place. Therefore, a lot of students felt more comfortable with their cameras off because it gave them the chance to behave naturally in their personal space, without worrying about their background, work area or way of dress.

The widespread practice of turning off cameras during live online classes reported in the data may also have been related to bandwidth issues (lagging, frozen images) and not always to privacy concerns. Theoretically, Qatar is well equipped infrastructurally for virtual learning, with impressive ICT and broadband Internet indicators: in 2020, 99.7% of the population had access to the Internet (ITU, "Percentage," 2022) and 95.0% of the residents of Qatar had Internet service in their homes in 2020 (ITU, "Core indicators," 2022). However, 46.3% of focus group participants surprisingly reported technical issues in their online classes, typically lack of bandwidth; thus cameras were frequently deactivated to improve audio transmission rates. Camera policies generated lengthy and vigorous debates among administrators and faculty in all HEIs in Qatar, and privacy protections of students, particularly women, were key factors in these debates.

One student researcher (online education expert) indicated that keeping the camera off could in some instances not only protect privacy, but also afforded the positive benefits of reducing anxiety and facilitating better self-care for women,

> Since many students struggled to establish a daily routine to prepare for online classes, having the option and freedom to attend and participate without turning their cameras on helped them save time and effort. They did not feel the need to spend an extra 15 minutes in the morning to change their clothes, brush their hair, cover their head, or organize their desk. The flexible nature of this situation actually seemed to motivate students to attend online classes, for it allowed them to prioritize their wellbeing and comfort, away from gazing, judging eyes.

On the other hand, some students believed that keeping their cameras on would improve their learning: "I always felt I needed to [hold] myself accountable by opening my camera, by doing something to be engaged in a way so I didn't want [my] education just to go poof. Just because we were in an online situation." A frequent realization of students when they returned to face-to-face learning in 2021 was the unforeseen phenomenon that leaving their cameras off had prevented them from bonding with, or even recognizing, their peers and instructors,

> the majority of us don't even have our cameras on, right?....I wouldn't be able to form any strong connection with any of my classmates. Yes, we had a class group, and we used to talk and share ideas and help each other, but it was just, limited to that, there was nothing more than that, and especially also with the professors, I realize one thing when we now went back face-to-face, the majority of them, even though we were in their classes, they didn't recognize us. Because we didn't have our cameras on.

4.3 Attending Class in Bed

Since the bed and bedroom are typically some of the most private and intimate areas of the home, 'Attending class in bed' emerged as another privacy theme in the student responses. Demotivation to attend class due to COVID-19 challenges may have led students to utilize normally private spaces such as beds (with video cameras turned off) for academic work. The 'Attending class in bed' theme was commonly associated by students with laziness, lack of motivation, inability to separate work and study spaces, frustration, and resignation to the deficiencies in their online learning courses. Fatigue from increased workloads was frequently cited as the reason to remain in bed during the day.

However, the accidental activation of the camera button could have devastating consequences for a student taking classes in bed attending a mixed-gender class, particularly if a female student were inappropriately dressed. Mixed gender classes in fact are relatively new in Qatar, with Weill Cornell Medicine–Qatar holding the first non-segregated class in Qatar in 2001-2002. Qatar University still maintains its separate male/female campuses, and boys-only and girls-only schools are the norm in the government K-12 school system. In light of privacy issues and related online learning engagement concerns, the authors organized a one-day national online workshop on March 11, 2023 entitled "Effective Teaching Online for Faculty and Students" in which faculty participants brain-stormed a checklist for student success in virtual learning environments. The 16-item checklist entitled *Students: How to be an Effective Online Learner* was designed to be incorporated into syllabi and shared with students. Two items agreed upon by the workshop participants were: 1) "treat the online class as a formal class meeting (for example, not lying in bed, dressing in pajamas, etc.)"; and 2) "separate your work, leisure, sleep times and places – a dedicated desk only for classwork is a good idea."

4.4 Dressing Properly for Class

In Qatar almost all Qatari women, and most expatriate Muslim women, wear a full body covering (abaya, chador, or jilbab) as well as a head covering concealing the hair (shayla, khimar, or hijab). A small percentage of women wear a full-face veil (niqab or batoola). The rules and social norms for proper Muslim female dress in Qatar are taken very seriously and are universally understood by all residents, even non-Muslim expatriates.

Interestingly, dressing modestly for online classes using videoconferencing was not a major topic of discussion in the focus groups – with only 8 responses – and one might hypothesize this is due to the widespread and unquestioned adherence to modesty norms. Appearing modestly in all public contexts, including online classes, is expected and routine for Gulf women and therefore may not have been an area students felt necessary to mention. Although not represented prominently in the data (for the reasons hypothesized above), the researchers are confident from their knowledge of Gulf society that the following female student response represents a typical attitude of a university student who practices covering, "like I was[,] how did my hijab look, how with my hair showing, I was very scared …. if I had opened the camera and I wasn't wearing my hijab." An expert student researcher who assisted with this study and who worked closely with the focus group transcripts added (relating the camera usage issue to proper attire),

> Many students preferred not to open their cameras in order to not wear formal attire and go through the stress of being observed by their peers and professors. Many of them woke up five minutes before class, which gave them no time to prepare beforehand. Nevertheless, a lot of students started exploring camera filters, emoji reactions and zoom backgrounds to show their presence in the virtual classroom.

An unexpected response from one female Muslim student attending an online class with Muslim males raises the possibility that the unique and unprecedented circumstances of pandemic learning may have caused a temporary suspension of commonly accepted Gulf rules of modesty and privacy in some cases:

> our professors also required us to turn on our cameras, but my class majority is boys and so I'd wake up at 8am and I'd see them still in their sweatshirts and like, they obviously just woke up. So I was just like, 'O, look, and they're doing this. What's stopping me?' ….I'm like, it's mostly everyone's in their pajamas. I'm going to be in my pajamas. So I have my camera on.…everyone would be in their pajamas. And I was just like *Khalas* [ok! / enough!] and then I'm going to be in my pajamas too."

One expert faculty member who reviewed the a-typical behavior described above, hypothesized (since family members and parents normally monitor and enforce modesty behaviors, along with self-monitoring) that "parents of students in particular were likely too busy managing their own lives and households during the pandemic to be concerned about camera use among their children."

4.5 Recording Lectures

4.5.1. Professors Recording Students

As mentioned in the literature review, photographing or videotaping a person (and particularly a woman) without permission in Qatari society is socially unacceptable due to the fears of image misuse. Female university students commonly request that their images not be used on university websites, or in yearbooks or newsletters. It is therefore imperative that HEIs and individual instructors formulate culturally-sensitive online classroom policies regarding camera usage, audio and video recording, screenshots and sharing personal information outside of the classroom.

4.5.2 Students Recording Professors

One expert faculty member expressed concerns about privacy invasion with respect to himself and his students when his lectures were recorded without consent (potential manipulation of information, misinterpretation or misuse of his teaching style and content),

> I had concerns related to video recording, as online teaching sessions can be recorded, which raises concerns about my own privacy. For instance, I feel uncomfortable with the idea of being recorded without my consent which happened at least twice to me as students did not think it was wise to ask for my permission to record the session as well as their peers. They said recording the session will make it easier for them to take notes later on. Another time, I learned from a student that she was recording some session (audio only) using her phone without the class consent. Personally, I don't want my teaching style to be publicly available without being prepared for it.

A second expert faculty member at another institution reiterated this point: "I was very careful with the content and material that I shared on Zoom because I didn't know for sure that my students are the only audience that could hear me or watch the videos I shared."

5. CONCLUSION

This research features an extensive and comprehensive analysis of student online learning experiences with respect to privacy during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Gulf nation of Qatar. The goal of this study was to develop hypotheses and models about online privacy behaviors and attitudes in Qatar to assist instructors in understanding and respecting local privacy norms (the majority of higher education instructors in Qatar are non-Qatari), and to improve student engagement and learning outcomes. The authors used a qualitative mixed-methods research design which revealed five predominant themes emerging from student focus group discussions: 1) privacy is a significant and pervasive concern in Gulf online educational contexts, especially for Muslim women; 2) studying at home created novel privacy concerns (outsiders viewing the home and family members; and negotiation of private study / communal spaces within the home); 3) camera on/off policies for synchronous learning affected student behaviors; 4) dressing properly (modesty, hijab) for online classes was a concern for Muslim women; and 5) recording of lectures was a privacy concern for both faculty and students. The authors believe this information is both timely and important within the highly technologically-oriented world of contemporary higher education. As one faculty expert concluded,

> to address [privacy concerns], it is important for instructors to implement policies and practices that respect students' privacy and confidentiality. For instance, we can provide guidelines on camera usage and background settings to ensure that students feel comfortable during online teaching sessions. Universities can also provide students with the option to turn off their cameras or use virtual backgrounds if they prefer not to show their home environments. Within the Gulf region context, it is

important for instructors to be culturally sensitive and respectful of students' privacy, religion, and values.

The topic of online privacy in higher education settings in Qatar and the Gulf region merits further detailed research. The authors encourage future researchers to investigate/address the areas listed above and to seek additional avenues of investigation including, but not limited to, the nature and impact of social class, individual personality types, geopolitical factors, and ongoing changes in transnational higher educations. Due to the complexity of the subject, qualitative research methodologies common to the fields of ethnography, sociology, anthropology, and cognitive psychology would fit well with some analyses and sophisticated quantitative analyses might be more applicable than others, such as in illuminating larger trends for more global comparisons.

Limitations of the study include: 1) data collection occurred during and after nation-wide government-enforced quarantine, and further comparison of the pre- and post-pandemic datasets should be carried out; 2) women were slightly over-represented in the sample; 3) the HEI Qatar University was under-represented in the sample; 4) wide variations occur in both personal and cultural views of privacy, and Qatar is an extremely ethnically diverse nation undergoing profound cultural, social and economic changes due to rapid population increase from expatriates, and large scale increases in GDP. Thus, some of the thematic trends uncovered in the study might not be generalizable to other socio-economic and cultural groupings of higher education students in Qatar.

ETHICS APPROVAL

This study was approved for human subjects research by the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of Hamad bin Khalifa University (IRB #2020-11-037) and Weill Cornell University – Qatar (IRB #20000-40) pursuant to the laws of the State of Qatar and the United States Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects ('Common Rule').

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