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## Surveillance & Modesty on Social Media: How Qataris Navigate Modernity and Maintain Tradition

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# Surveillance & Modesty on Social Media: How Qataris Navigate Modernity and Maintain Tradition

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## ABSTRACT

Recent research on social media use in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has focused on their role in the Arab Spring uprisings, but less work has examined the more mundane uses of these technologies. Yet exploring the way populations in the MENA region use social media in everyday life provides insight into how they are adapted to cultural contexts beyond those from which they originated. To better understand this process, we interviewed eleven Qatari nationals currently living in Doha, Qatar. Our analysis identifies ways users, particularly females, practice modesty, manage their own (and by extension) their family's reputation, and use social media to monitor and protect others. These findings are placed within a framework of social, or participatory surveillance, which challenges conventional notions of surveillance as a form of control and instead shows how surveillance has the potential to be empowering.

## Author Keywords

Arab Studies; Middle East; Modernization; Modesty; Qatar; Social media; Surveillance; Tradition

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## INTRODUCTION

Previous studies of the use of social media among residents of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have examined contexts of war and civil unrest [2,19,29], with a large focus placed on the Arab Spring uprisings [1,9,17,31,37]. Less work has been done on everyday use of social media. Yet these everyday uses raise interesting questions about how people who live in societies that value family, adherence to religious authority, and proper public comportment use social media that are conceived of and designed around Western ideologies and social practices.

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Although social media have global reach, they are not universal in the sense that they are understood and related to in the same way around the world. In other words, even as social media are globally used, they are not used in the same way in all countries and cultural contexts [22].

Our aim, therefore, is to contribute to the CSCW literature by better understanding how social media, which are used to connect, see, be seen, and communicate (among a host of other tasks), are perceived and oriented to within Qatari society, especially among educated females. In addition, we aim to further theorize the concept of surveillance as it relates to social media use in an effort to complicate and expand the way this concept is applied in social media research.

As a nation undergoing fast development in an effort to modernize and transition to a knowledge-based economy, Qatar's vision for the future, as laid out in the Qatar National Vision 2030 [24], is to modernize while preserving its traditions. That the preservation of traditional types of social order are by definition at odds with what Giddens [11] refers to as "the discontinuities of modernity" speaks to the dilemma that many Qataris find themselves in as they attempt to embrace modernity while maintaining strong adherence to the Islamic religious values that undergird traditional Qatari social structure. Social media hold an interesting position within this dual push to modernize and preserve tradition. On the one hand, social media epitomize the type of technological innovation responsible for the globalization of modernity. On the other hand, the diffusion of social media (as with any form of technology) into new milieux necessarily entails a certain amount of recontextualization that adapts the technology to local circumstances. In this way, global technologies are "glocalized" or "indigenized" [7] as they are appropriated within local cultural contexts.

It is against this backdrop that we look at how a group of Qataris appropriate social media sites, such as Instagram or Twitter, and repurpose them in ways that fit within their lifestyle and ethos. The tactics used by our Qatari participants to mold social media within the framework of Qatari society are an example of how they negotiate their own path toward modernity while working to preserve and uphold traditional values and expectations.

In the sections that follow, we provide a brief description of Qatar and Qatari cultural practices, related work, and our

methods. We then analyze our interview data. Our analysis illuminates the ways in which our participants negotiate identities as they participate on and interact through social media. In particular, we consider how culturally-specific facets of both individual and collective identity are enacted and maintained in ways that meet the expectations of users' audiences, while allowing for self-expression and enjoyment.

## BACKGROUND

Qatar is a small country to the east of Saudi Arabia that reaches into the Arabian Gulf. Along with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman, it is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an intergovernmental political and economic union.

### A Growing Population, Economy

In early 2015, Qatar's population was approximately 2.3 million compared to its 1991 population of 350,000. Much of that population is comprised of expatriates; only about 10% of the population living in Qatar are Qatari citizens, who are the focus of this study. Due to reliance on a foreign workforce, particularly manual laborers, the gender distribution in Qatar as a whole is 75% male, 25% female [23]. These numbers underscore the rapid growth and changes the country has faced and continues to undergo.

Qatar's massive natural gas and oil reserves make it one of the wealthiest countries in the world; it is this wealth that funds the drive to modernize. According to the World Bank, the per capita GDP of Qatar is \$97,519. As a comparison, the per capita GDP of the United States is \$54,630; in India, it is \$1,596 [32].<sup>1</sup> However, despite the wealth of Qatar as a nation, it is important to understand that the indigenous population is—like any other population—a complex and varied community; not all Qataris enjoy extreme wealth, and there is a sizable middle and lower class [16].

With its growing economy and affluence, Qatar has been positioning itself as a player on the world stage [15]. The 2022 World Cup will take place in Qatar, which has played host to several other high-profile sporting events in recent years. In addition to the national interest in bringing renowned athletic competitions to the country, Qatar is attempting to establish a "knowledge-based" economy as part of the government's National Vision 2030 [24]. Within the GCC, Qatar is seen as comparatively progressive regarding post-secondary education, and has established a 2500-acre campus called Education City that is home to branches of several universities—six American, one British, and one French. The aim is to provide prestigious, Western educational opportunities to male and female students living in the region [13].

<sup>1</sup> These figures represent averages from 2010 to 2014 in current US dollars.

### Religious Values, National Dress

Most Qataris identify as Arab, and virtually all are Sunni Muslim who practice Wahhabism, a branch of Sunni Islam that involves strict interpretations of religious texts [16]. As a traditional Islamic society, daily life in Qatar revolves around religious practice. Patriarchal norms dictate behavior and etiquette, and gender segregation is common and often expected. In addition, the honor and reputation of one's family is of the utmost importance; individuals' behavior is a direct reflection upon their extended family, and upholding cultural standards is essential. [13].

Qatari females and males<sup>2</sup> are expected to wear national dress when in public. Females wear a loose black robe over their clothing, and a scarf to cover their hair, known as an *abaya* and a *shayla*, respectively. In addition, some opt to cover their faces in public, though it is not required. Females may choose to wear a *niqab*, a cloth that covers the entire face except the eyes, a *gheshwa*, a semi-opaque veil that covers the entire face, or a *batoola*, a mask that is often gold in color that covers most of the face. Males wear a long white robe called a *thobe*, and a headpiece comprised of a circular black band called an *agal*, which sits atop a long scarf, the *ghutra*. In a country where expatriates outnumber Qatari nationals, the national dress acts as a marker of Qatari identity. Of equal importance, the national dress preserves a sense of modesty for both males and females where cultural norms and expectations are to cover in public to at least below the knees and past the shoulders.

### Social Media Use in the MENA Region

Social media of various sorts are popular in Qatar, and many Qataris use them daily. A report sponsored by the Qatar Ministry of Information and Communication Technology that focused on social media use in Qatar was published in 2014; it details basic information regarding social media and social messaging use among Qataris and other citizens of the GCC who live in Qatar. Among Qataris, Instagram is the most popular social media application; 65% of Qataris use it. The next most commonly used app trails behind by almost twenty points – 46% of Qataris use Twitter, 44% use Facebook, and 39% use Snapchat [25].

In pursuing the current research, our participants were clear about their fondness for social media; they enjoy posting photos, commenting, receiving and giving "likes" to others, and gathering information. Social media are a welcome and

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article we use the terms "female" and "male" to refer to the conventional gender identities of "woman" and "man." In Gulf Arab culture, females are commonly referred to as "girls" until they are married, as the descriptor "woman" connotes that a female that has experienced sexual relations [18]. In wishing to avoid any possible offense, we are careful not to place either identity on our female participants. However, the reader will see the terms "girl" and "woman" arise in direct quotes when they are used by participants, and in references to sources that specifically choose one term or the other.

fun addition to many Qataris' lives; some spoke of how it has changed their lives for the better by giving them access to information they would not have otherwise.

The positive reception of social media in Qatar echoes the survey and focus group data examined by Al Jenaibi in the United Arab Emirates [3]. The author found that users consider social media an effective means for gathering news, for developing business, and for entertainment, among other uses.

However, as previous research has shown, social media use in Qatar—and in the Arabian Gulf region more generally—is shaped by regionally specific cultural values. In her research on Qataris' uses of social media, Rajakumar [26] surveyed 100 Qatari females on their uses of Twitter, Blackberry Messenger, and Facebook. She highlights participants' "creative approaches" to using Facebook, and demonstrates the agency they display to avoid particular activities on Facebook as they manage their public images. Similarly, League and Chalmers [18] interviewed 42 Arab female university students, most of whom were raised in Qatar, 19 of whom are Qatari. They were interested in understanding self-expression in social networking sites, and found that reputation was important to how participants managed their identities, particularly as it relates to cultural values.

Outside of Qatar, Al Omoush and colleagues studied the impact of Arab cultural values on Facebook use, and found that the majority of users in the Arab world are young students (aged 13-24), who are influenced by what the authors term "Arab cultural values" as they go about online social networking activity [4]. However, the authors do not define what they precisely mean by "Arab cultural values," so we are left uncertain as to which populations they researched and what exactly they were hoping to show regarding their outcomes vis-à-vis "Arab cultural values." Adopting a cross-cultural framework, Ur and Wang examined privacy as it relates to SNS, but minimal attention is paid to Arab users [34].

Examining technology use vis-à-vis Arab cultural norms and expectations, Alsheikh and colleagues performed an ethnographic study of Arab couples, and looked at how individuals who are in relationships use technology to stay in touch with their long-distance partners. The authors argue for culturally sensitive design that considers their participants' values. They go on to recommend ways to support agency, allowing users to "enact particular cultural roles in the context of their relationships" [6].

Similarly, Mark et al. [19] point out that Western ideologies do not translate well to non-Western settings vis-à-vis technology adoption and use. The authors looked at how Iraqi citizens adopt and use various technologies to stay in touch, gather information, and self-organize during the Iraq war that began in 2003. They find that their participants exhibit resilience through their uses of technology in their

disrupted environments. The same authors [2] also look more closely at Iraqi blogs published during the war, and find that bloggers and their followers were able to participate in conversations that would not have been possible otherwise. The dialogs between bloggers and their followers led to greater understandings of the situation by both populations within and outside Iraq. Likewise, Semaan and Mark performed an in-depth analysis that looks at how Facebook is used by Iraqis affected by the ongoing conflict in their country. They find ways in which features of Facebook are employed to help those in need, locate information about loved ones, and maintain a sense of normalcy in the midst of upheaval [29].

As these various lines of research demonstrate, social media use is profoundly shaped by community specific values and needs. With this background in mind, we examine the way values and traditions shape the way Qataris use social media.

## METHOD

Both authors live and work in Qatar, and have established relationships with Qataris. However, we are acutely aware of our roles as outsiders, asking questions about a population with which we are familiar but of which we are not a part. As the first author recruited participants for this study, she was careful to explain the questions she was asking, and why she was inquiring about social media use among Qataris. The interviewees were enthusiastic about participating, and some have expressed interest in the outcomes of the study, which have been provided to them.

The first author conducted in-depth interviews with eleven participants between January and March 2015. Participants were recruited through personal and professional connections. Some of the interviewees were direct connections of the first author, and others were recommended as potential participants by direct connections of the first author. In Qatari society, one's personal connections, or *wasta*, plays an important role in conducting business. Recruitment for the study therefore proceeded through such connections resulting in a modified snowball method.

As the first author approached Qatari adults with whom she has relationships, she asked them to speak about their experiences with social media. The only eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study was being a Qatari citizen. All participants have at least some undergraduate education; most have a bachelor's degree, and one holds a master's degree. All are bilingual in Arabic and English. In total, three males and eight females were interviewed, with ages ranging from 21 to 38. Due to the practice of gender segregation in Qatari society, and the preference of some Qataris not to socialize with non-family members who do not identify with their own gender, the first author—who is female—had greater access to females.

Ten interviews were in person and one took place via video chat; interviews lasted from 21 minutes to 1 hour 10 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English, a language in which all participants use daily in work and educational settings. The interviews were framed as an informal conversation about social media use. The first author began with three basic questions to start the conversation. What social media sites are you aware of? Which do you use? How do you use them? From there, the discussion was allowed to progress naturally to cover various aspects of social media use as dictated by the responses and interests of the interviewees, including discussion of why certain sites and services were used for particular reasons, what participants liked and disliked, and what they thought about the role of social media in their lives. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the first author.

We used ethnographically informed discourse analysis to analyze the data. We looked closely at not only what was said by our participants, but at how their discourse is situated within a broader cultural context. In replaying the interviews and reading the transcripts, we pinpointed common themes that arose across the interview data. This inductively draws out recurring points of interest highlighted by the participants. At the same time, we drew upon theoretical ideas from existing literature and personal ethnographic insights to relate these recurring themes to the specific ethnographic context and wider theoretical framework. This approach to the data therefore involves a form of “theoretically informed induction.” As Tracy [33] explains of this approach, the “tapes and transcripts are repeatedly studied to identify interesting practices, where notions of what is interesting are shaped by knowing what observed practices would challenge or extend theorizing.” Given the importance of repeated listening to the data to extract meaning, we consider the transcription of the interviews the first step in the analytic process. Rather than using a transcription service, the first author performed a close transcription of the data while paying attention to paralinguistic detail such as prosody and laughter. This allowed us to cue into subtle aspects of meaning in the interaction between the first author and participants as we extracted its ethnographic significance for the analysis.

As we went through our analysis, we noted themes that emerged through participants’ discourse. Our participants spoke about social media use vis-à-vis marriage practices, how families employ social media to update each other and maintain contact, and how they can negatively impact relationships and minimize face-to-face communication. In the current study, we focus on two of the themes: empowerment through surveillance and modesty.

### **SURVEILLANCE, MODESTY**

In Qatari culture, the onus is on the individual to constantly manage the reputation of their family. When in public, individuals must behave in a manner that complies with

established cultural expectations [13]. Females in particular have a singular role in maintaining the good name of their families as the “cultural and symbolic bearers of community identity” that is placed upon them within Islamic culture [30]. One aspect of this reputation management involves being observed by others. Participants spoke about the need to continually monitor public behavior in a variety of contexts, such as while driving in one’s car, walking in a shopping mall, or participating in social media conversations, among other activities. If an individual makes a misstep that is observed by other Qataris, the damaging news will likely make its way back to their family. Again, women in particular are in a position of great responsibility when it comes to upholding the family’s reputation; their comportment in public is bound by strict religious and cultural standards.

This led us to ask, how do Qatari females uphold the modesty that is expected of them as they participate in social media sites? What tactics do they employ? More broadly, how do Qataris (both females and males) adapt social media to the unique circumstances of their culture? How do they use social media to balance the dual goals of modernizing while preserving tradition?

### **Conventional Views of Surveillance**

Conventional conceptions of surveillance are well represented by Bentham’s “panopticon,” which evokes an image of surveillance that is hierarchical. The implementation of a panoptic system is one in which power is firmly in the hands of the one performing the surveillance, while the one being surveilled is left vulnerable and without control. Those under surveillance, whether they are being actively watched or not, internalize the idea that they are constantly under scrutiny, and therefore avoid missteps, avoid anti-social acts, and behave in a way that is deemed acceptable and normal by those in their surrounding environment [5,10].

The conventional notion of “surveillance” is one in which there is a clear power relation; the powerful watches, assesses, and in some cases controls the less powerful. This type of surveillance is linked to the notion of “gaze.” For example, Siraj writes about women being under a “communal gaze,” or a “gaze of surveillance” in a Muslim community in urban Scotland [30]. The author stresses the importance some women place on appropriate dress in public spaces as a reflection of their modesty, but also because they are frequently watched by members of the community who will report inappropriate behavior to their families.

### **Participatory, Social Surveillance**

Recently, however, scholars have begun to challenge the conventional conception of surveillance as the only way surveillance unfolds, pointing out that surveillance need not always be hierarchical, nor viewed negatively. They show how the customary dynamic between the surveillor and the surveilled can be disrupted. The restrictions and/or

expectations of those under surveillance are one aspect of the relationship. However, when we interrogate the notion of surveillance and begin to dissect how it works and what it can accomplish, it can be expanded to include “technological mediation” that can empower without necessarily violating [5]. Surveillance can become a means for social media users to gain advantage by exhibiting their own agency and power to control what others see and under which circumstances. Surveillance can involve equal footing among all parties, and when we consider the use of social networking sites vis-à-vis surveillance, we see how it can be empowering for users as it “facilitates new ways of constructing identity.” Surveillance provides a new and different context in which to socialize, both with close friends and family, and potentially with strangers if users choose to open their profiles to the public. Albrecht [ibid] calls this “participatory surveillance.”

Similarly, Marwick [21] frames this type of surveillance as “social surveillance,” and points out that it can be used as a tool of empowerment. The author defines social surveillance as the use of Web 2.0 sites to see what friends, family and acquaintances are “up to” through “technologies that are designed for users to continually investigate digital traces left by the people they are connected to.” Marwick emphasizes that social surveillance results in social media users self-managing their behavior. As both the surveillor and the surveilled are conceptualized as social agents (as opposed to, for example, a powerful government entity on the one hand, and a powerless individual on the other), a view of what is expected, accepted, and not accepted is co-created among users [21]. In other words, social surveillance can be viewed as empowering in that it affords individuals agency over self-presentation, and co-construction of collective values and identities.

### **Social Surveillance in a Relationship-Based Culture**

Social surveillance is apparent in our data when one of our participants discusses why she appreciates social media use in Qatar, particularly the engagement of various government ministries with members of the public via Twitter and Instagram. P3 recounted an example of how social media are used as tools of surveillance to garner positive reactions and appease public distress regarding behaviors that do not contribute to the common good as it is understood and enacted by Qataris:

*“Some guy, he was at a fun city for children<sup>3</sup>, he found an inappropriate picture on one of the toys. So he [took a photo] and mentioned it to the ministry, and they [responded] to him, and they covered it temporarily and told him [they] will fix it....the Ministry of Interior, if something [illegal is happening], people mention it, and they respond.”*

<sup>3</sup> Due to the hot temperatures that endure for much of the year, indoor play areas for children are common in shopping malls in Qatar. They include rides, games, and small open spaces for physical activity.

P3 explained that the photo was posted to a social media site with a message directed at the Ministry of Interior. The conventional approach to surveillance might view this type of communication and regulation of behavior in an Orwellian light, emphasizing the hierarchical position of the government ministry over the less powerful citizens. The government might be said to surveil “through the eyes” of ordinary citizens to regulate behavior in a top-down manner.

Yet this is not how Qataris generally view this type of act. In Qatar, being corrected for anti-social behavior is a typical means by which behavior is regulated. In the above excerpt, P3 is not complaining about the management of the children’s play area, she is lauding the use of social media communication as a way to maintain environments that are safe and acceptable. Here, social media enables a type of surveillance that empowers P3 and others to work together to communicate what is collectively deemed appropriate.

In broader terms, social or participatory surveillance integrates well with the types of interactions typical of a high-context, relationship-based culture. As Hall [12] points out in making his distinction between low-context and high-context cultures, a high-context culture values relationships and often holds a collectivist orientation. Drawing on Hall, Hooker [14] explains how the interpersonal connections of a relationship-based culture are important for communicating behavioral expectations. Whereas rules are often written down, posted on signs, and thereby expected to be followed in low-context, rules-based cultures such as those of the United States and Western Europe, in a high-context, relationship-based culture like Qatar it is common for the norms to be personally communicated. Simply writing them down without adding the relational element to their transmittal may convey the attitude that they are unimportant or non-binding. The connections developed through online participatory surveillance in Qatar therefore act as important links in the relational chain that allows citizens to communicate shared cultural norms and behavioral expectations.

As evidenced in P3’s comments, social media communications have provided Qataris another avenue to engage in relationship-based cultural practices. Social media afford users a way to personally communicate behavioral expectations—communications that are generally welcomed and positively received among Qataris.

To further illustrate this point, when asked about what he posts on Instagram, P8 elaborates on activities regarding the encouragement of socially acceptable behavior:

*“[I] usually post pictures of me, um, like the experience I face for example, when I don’t like something on the street, when I watch something weird, when I am proud of something. I, like, share the picture along with a description...for example, someone throwing rubbish out of the window.”*

P8's story is an additional example of how social media are used as a way to collectively regulate behavior. When he sees people throwing litter out of car windows, he takes a photo of the offense and posts it on Instagram and/or Twitter. His hope is that others will do the same, and motivate people to keep Qatar clean and litter-free. The popularity of social media in Qatar empowers P8 to communicate behavioral expectations to others not adhering to social norms.

In contrast, many Western expats living in Qatar are often uncomfortable by the use of social media to keep a watchful eye on residents. For example, in March 2014, the Ministry of Municipality and Urban Planning launched a cleanliness campaign to remind residents not to litter [28]. The campaign posted signage around the city that included slogans such as "Don't spit on public property" and "Don't throw garbage over public beaches." But in addition to these simple statements of "rules" (very familiar to Western expats accustomed to rules-based cultural practices), the signs also included the following slogan: "We see you, you are not alone." From a Western perspective, such a statement seems to provide an implicit message that Big Brother is watching. Yet for many Qataris, the slogan acts as a reminder of the collective dimension required to enforce shared expectations. Indeed, social media have also been harnessed to these ends in other government campaigns, such as efforts to curb irresponsible driving where residents can take photos of offenders and send them to the Ministry of the Interior. In essence, these examples are ways in which Qataris apply social media to situations that allow them to encourage and maintain traditional, socially acceptable behavior.

### Doing Hijab and Individual Identity

The importance of expressing modesty in public spaces is symbolized by females' practice of "doing hijab" [27]. The hijab is the traditional head covering worn by many Muslim females. Likewise, wearing the abaya and shayla are forms of doing hijab in that they index proper modesty. Siraj [30] argues that the hijab (or the abaya and shayla) is more than merely a piece of fabric worn to cover a female's hair; it is an "embodiment of modesty...it offers women the opportunity to assert themselves in religious practice and allows them to integrate within society." In other words, these displays of modesty allow females to assert themselves as "respectable" while going about their daily lives in public places. Surveillance by members of a female's community contributes to the careful attention paid to presenting a modest image when in public. This holds for females in Qatar, and in many communities and countries in which Islamic law is observed [27,30,36].

Beyond forms of dress, the practice of doing hijab can be extended to actions and behaviors performed by Qataris as they interact in social media contexts. Qatari females employ methods to protect themselves from unwanted attention while still actively participating on Instagram,

Facebook, and other social media sites. Like the wearing of the abaya and shayla in public, the tactics adopted by Qatari females on social media sites allow them to display modesty while still expressing their individual identities.

The most obvious indicator of doing hijab online is the lack of photos of one's entire face. None of our female participants posted pictures of their faces on any social media sites, which is similar to what Rajakumar found in her study of Qatari girls [26]. In addition, Semaan and Mark discuss the lack of profile photos among Iraqi female Facebook users who wish to adhere to societal norms [29]. It is a violation of Qatari cultural norms for females to publically show photos of their entire faces that are not for professional purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Publically posting photographs of oneself, or one's family and friends, is a highly regulated practice among Qataris. In addition to Qatari females not posting photos of their faces, some Qatari males also avoid this practice. Public posting of photos of children's faces is more common, though some families choose to refrain from doing this as well. However, there are differing views among Qataris of what exactly is appropriate regarding photos of faces, particularly female faces. Some females will not post any part of their faces, while others will post photos that show only part of their face so as to remain unidentifiable.

For females, avoiding the posting of photos of one's entire face is a way to protect themselves from potentially negative attention—publically displayed photos, they point out, may end up in the wrong hands, and the spreading of one's photos to non-relative males would bring shame to a female and her family. Generally speaking, there is a sense that photos of one's face are not meant to be seen or shared among strangers [26].

During a conversation about Instagram use, when discussing the photos she posts, P11 explains that she will:

*"post half my face, cuz you know we cannot post our pictures...so maybe part of my dress, part of my face."*

In avoiding photos of the entire face, P4 talks about how females will post other types of images on social media:

*"Most of the girls [who] are on Facebook will put like a flower, or some pictures of trips...or even if they put their body, it will be like from a far distance so nobody can recognize them."*

Just as League and Chalmers [18] point out in their survey of Facebook usage among Arab girls living in Qatar, the tactics discussed by both P11 and P4 afford Qatari females creative ways to express their individual identities while adhering to cultural norms of modesty. They use a communicatory medium that opens them up to surveillance,

<sup>4</sup> It is permissible for a female to show her face in a photo for professional reasons, i.e. a workplace website, or press release.

and are careful to express appropriate levels of modesty. However, rather than being agentless actors that simply reproduce cultural expectations, the Qatari females in our interviews exercise agency as they carve out their own forms of self-expression through the posting of photos. Qatari females know they are being surveilled, but the state of surveillance does not equate to a lack of agency.

Whereas “selfies” may dominate the feeds of social media users in Western societies, there is no reason why technologies that are common sites for the posting of photos (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) should necessarily involve a focus on photos of the self. In contrast to the Western tendency towards selfies, or photos of friends and family that show faces, these Qatari females demonstrate a different way to use social media. In other words, as social media are appropriated by Qataris, they are repurposed to fit the needs and expectations of the local Qatari context.

In addition to creative uses of photos, another practice adopted by some Qatari females is to maintain two accounts within the same social media site. For example, P5 says:

*“like my friends, they have two accounts, accounts they can show their parents, and accounts for themselves...like accounts where they post their photos, like from the lips down, they post it.”*

P5 explains that some of her friends have an Instagram or Facebook account in which they do not post any photos of themselves. Then, in a separate account, these same friends will post photos that show parts of their faces, and other photos which may not be condoned by family members, but which they would still like to share.

Separately, P7 discusses how she manages her Facebook account. She attended college abroad, and while there, was permitted to interact with non-family males via social media. Her parents are aware of this, and accept her Facebook relationships as they began in an educational setting, and they trust that P7 does not communicate inappropriately with any of her Facebook contacts. However, not all family members approve of this practice. Below, P7 talks about her extended family, many of whom are opposed to her social media associations:

*“[H]ere in Qatar, most families they don’t accept friendship between a boy and a girl. When I studied in <country> I had many friends, and colleagues which are boys...and when I used to come in Qatar for my vacations, [my extended family said] ‘oh yeah, you have this guy on Facebook, why do you have him? Why do you find him? What does he tell you?’ It’s none of your business! So then, it’s like, ok, for you guys, for your mentality, I’m gonna give you whatever you want....So like these people, like, Type A, they can see whatever I want them to see, and Type B, they know my personality, they know me, and they know that this is accepted...I can show them whatever I want...[M]y cousins, my uncles, like they’re, they’re a bit like closed, and like they don’t like this...they followed me*

*on Facebook just to know what I’m doing, and I got trouble from this...they keep calling me, like ‘why are you doing this’? Like the name of the family, and, I was like, I’m not doing anything wrong! [Y]ou say it’s wrong. It’s not wrong.”*

P7 is aware of what she can control, and not control, when it comes to social media. Her tone and explanation in this passage indicates exasperation with her extended family, and signifies that she is being needlessly constrained. In the hopes of avoiding further familial strife, and seeking to appease those family members who do not agree with her choices and behavior (despite those choices and behaviors being sanctified by her parents), P7 manages her Facebook account in a way that is presentable to her uncles and cousins. P7 is aware that she is being surveilled, so she leverages the privacy settings of Facebook in a way that empowers her to present herself as mindful of the family reputation, and which her uncles and cousins consider acceptable. Thus, what we see here is, first, an acknowledgement of conventional surveillance by P7. But the story about surveillance does not end there. P7 then engages in a form of participatory surveillance that allows her to enact a form of collective identity management for her extended family while expressing herself to different audiences online.

As described by P5 and P7, these tactics avoid the “context collapse” [20] typically associated with social media platforms where multiple audiences are brought together within a single context. As Marwick and boyd point out in their study of Twitter, users adopt a variety of tactics to navigate the multiple audiences they address through tweets. But another way to avoid the issues that accompany context collapse is to set up different accounts aimed at discrete audiences, as P5 describes, or to manage privacy settings, as in the case of P7. The viability of these tactics is made possible by the way many Qataris maintain exclusive access to their feeds for different audiences. P5 mentions one account where parents (and family) would have access, and another where only close friends would have access. P7 invokes this same principle by tightly managing privacy settings on her Facebook account. P5 and P7’s tactics are not unlike those used by the participants in Woltrap’s [36] study of young Muslim women in urban Denmark who use Facebook in both visible and “invisible” ways to communicate with friends, and with non-family males.

Other interviewees also talked about how they set up tightly regulated and closely monitored friend lists for Instagram and Twitter. For example, several participants said that Instagram and SnapChat are only for family and close friends. The idea of inviting strangers or even acquaintances to see their photos or have access to commenting is not acceptable. Discussing concerns about privacy, P2 said that she gives access to only 34 family members and close friends to see her Instagram account:



*“I don’t allow anyone. I have a lot like, I have like two or three invitations, but I actually decline them. Yeah, because you know I have a lot of private things.”*

P2 spoke about the images she posts to Instagram, and showed the first author her account. Her photos consisted of food, landscapes, flowers, and accessories. P2 had a story behind each of her photos, and explained why she took it, and why she chose to share it on Instagram. She spoke of Instagram as a diary of sorts, something to be shared with only a select few, and not for public consumption.

In another interview, P6 said that she allows only about 20 people to follow her Instagram account—again, only family and close friends. P6 allows cousins to follow her, but only females. She later discusses receiving a request from a male cousin who wanted to follow her on Instagram:

*“Cousins can follow me, but the female, not the male...I have one cousin, he’s a male, but I didn’t accept him because...all the subjects, or the pictures that I’m posting, are for ladies, and he understands that.”*

It is customary in Gulf Arab culture for male and female cousins to be separated around the age of puberty. So while P6 knows her male cousin, allowing him to see her Instagram photos or to interact with him through the site would be inappropriate. By denying her cousin’s request, P6 is maintaining the collective identity of the extended family by choosing not to interact inappropriately with a male, even though he is part of that same family. In effect, her cousin’s request placed P6 in a position to assert her authority as someone who is attentive to the family reputation, and which empowers her to maintain her identity as a modest female.

In sum, as females “do hijab” on social media, they do so with an eye toward how the persona they put forth will be received by actual or potential audiences. The state of surveillance can be empowering as it allows them the opportunity to voluntarily engage with others as they construct their individual identities. In this way, as Albrechtslund [5] points out, participatory (i.e. social) surveillance is “about the act of sharing yourself—or your constructed identity—with others.” As seen in the interview excerpts above, Qatari females find creative ways to express their individual identities and manage their audiences as they work within the expectations of their cultural tradition.

### **Modesty and Collective Identity**

Perhaps more important than the expressions of individual identities seen in the previous section is the co-construction of familial identity. After all, much of the interactive work done on social media, especially as it revolves around communicating expectations of modesty, occurs against the backdrop of a collectivist cultural orientation. How a female presents herself is just as important for her family’s collective position in society as it is for her individual status.

P7 spoke at length about her male relatives’ expectations of her behavior on social media and the tactics they implement to regulate her behavior and preserve the family’s reputation. Her brothers do not allow her to access or view their Instagram profiles; she cannot see what they post, and vice-versa. She explains:

*“They don’t want their friends to see my posts or anything, so they don’t add me.”*

Later, P7 says:

*“I don’t follow them and they don’t follow me...because once I followed my brother, and whenever he posted something, I would like it, and make a comment, and then his friends started to ask ‘who is this?’ so he unfollowed me and blocked me.”*

P7 explains that it is unacceptable for her to be in any kind of communication with the friends or acquaintances of her brother. This would violate the practice of properly “doing hijab” online. It would be seen as an act of immodest behavior observable by others. But here, P7’s brother helps her do hijab by taking the step to unfollow her on Instagram and block access to his posts. This ensures the gendered separation that is expected between P7 and her brother’s male friends.

As noted earlier, violations of modesty expectations and other unacceptable behavior tend to make their way back to the family. But the disappointment felt by the family arises not simply out of what the violation means for the female as an individual, but also for the way the violation negatively constructs the family as a group. As a result, online social surveillance provides a means by which family members co-construct familial identity. The moment P7 posted a comment to her brother’s Instagram photo, she entered a public space in which she was exposed to non-relative males. That exposure violates the cultural norms of modesty. So, by blocking her, her brother protects not only P7, but the reputation of their family as well.

Given the relationship-based, collectivist orientation of Qatari society, social surveillance operates to communicate shared behavioral expectations. As discussed earlier, personally communicating these expectations is central to high-context, relationship-based cultural practices. Social media provide a new way to document what is deemed to be inappropriate behavior and to call out or shame group members for exercising improper judgment.

P7 goes on to describe the way using social media as a tool for surveillance enters into these practices of enforcing and communicating modesty violations:

*“...we’re not supposed to go out without our abayas, but some people do...,so when you post this on social media...then people are gonna say ‘wait, this is not your culture.’ So it affects them somehow.”*

When asked to explain, P7, elaborated:

*“[Y]ou don’t know the person, you just like saw her, you just ‘look guys, look what I found today...cuz once me and my cousin were at [popular, crowded area of Doha], and there was someone in his Bentley and he was like...he opened the roof, and he had a girl with him. My cousin...took a picture of them, and she [posted to Instagram] ‘look guys! Someone out with her boyfriend!’”*

P7 goes on to explain that the female in question may have been with her brother or her husband. But if she was in a compromising situation, it is entirely possible that such a photo will make the rounds on Instagram, someone would identify her, and the episode would cause the family of the female in question shame.

In each of these excerpts from P7, at issue is not simply the female’s identity as a socially recognized and “respectable” subject (although it certainly includes that) but also how the female’s family as a whole will be identified within wider society. It is not merely individuals who are under surveillance when they step out in public, but entire families. And through the use of social media, others within the Qatari community have the ability to enforce expectations, thereby helping to maintain tradition.

After talking about how other Qatari females have been negatively impacted by their photos being circulated on social media, P7 explains why she is very mindful of who she will share photos and videos with:

*“It’s like um, they can see me, like I don’t cover my face when I go out, but cuz like, as a Qatari society, pictures for especially girls...they make a lot of trouble. Especially if they went in the wrong hands...cuz you don’t want the reputation to come about you. For example, when you’re in a car and [there is] music you know, you’re singing a song whatever, ok, and you take a video. Ok, so my friend, I’m not sure if she’s gonna show it to someone. And this someone...says oh <P7> sings when she drives, or dances when she drives, or whatever, you know, and these things spread. So when I do these things, I just send it to people that I’m sure of.”*

Like many females her age, P7 enjoys driving in the city with her friends, listening to music, and having fun as they travel around Doha. Sometimes, they take photos and videos of their experiences, but P7 will only partake in the photographing or recording if she is absolutely certain that the person with the photos or video will not share them. Her concern is that the file will wind up in the wrong hands, and she and her family’s reputation will be negatively affected. She is intensely aware of the repercussions that will come to pass for both her—and more importantly—her family, if a photo or video spreads through the Qatari community without her consent.

In another interview, P11 discusses why she will not allow photos of herself to be made available publicly. Her careful management of her photos is due to the concern that they could be misconstrued or used against her or her family:

*“Because unfortunately a lot of Qatari men misuse these social media, and I’ve noticed that, I mean, if a guy, if a Qatari guy found a full picture of a girl, for example, in her room, or in her car, he can use that photo negatively...so that’s why women, Qatari women, they don’t post their pictures.”*

When asked about how males might use photos negatively, P11 went on:

*“[T]hey will just...they will spread the photo, and they will say ‘oh this girl, her name is this, her dad is this, blah blah blah,’ and people will start talking bad, and unfortunately, this is how it goes. Yeah, so we need to be careful on what we’re posting.”*

Not only do these excerpts illustrate the way social media are appropriated to communicate and enforce behavioral norms in a relationship-based culture, but it also underscores the way family identities are co-constructed through intersubjective interactions among Qataris. Although work on identity and interaction has focused on the intersubjective positioning of the individual self and others [8], here we see the co-construction of familial identities—that is, the social positioning of a collective family in relation to other families.

The collective enforcement of modesty is also well illustrated with the furor that erupted over images of young Qataris involved in a service learning trip to Brazil during the summer of 2014. As part of a charity effort, four young females and three young males journeyed to Brazil to help rebuild a school. The trip was originally sponsored by Vodafone Qatar and was filmed as part of a documentary. As part of the documentary film project, video clips were posted online after the students arrived in Brazil. But the clips were negatively received back in Qatar where many Qataris took to social media to denounce what they deemed to be modesty violations as the film clips showed the females with hair uncovered and wearing Western clothes. In the end, the public outcry effectively communicated and ultimately enforced cultural expectations insofar as Vodafone Qatar withdrew its support for the trip. The trip and the making of the documentary nevertheless continued through to fruition [35].

## DISCUSSION

The ways in which social media are used in practices of online surveillance must be closely examined from the cultural perspective of the users involved in those practices. Whereas a conventional perspective on surveillance—highly influenced by hierarchical assumptions about power and by Western ideologies of the individual—might impose a top-down, Big Brother type framework to explain the way social media are used to enforce and communicate behavioral norms, we argue that such a view of surveillance needs to be complicated and expanded to include other conceptions of surveillance. Throughout our data and analysis, we see how our participants utilize, respond to,

and maneuver around various types of surveillance in ways that empower them to exercise individual agency. This imbues them with the power to creatively express their individual identities and co-construct familial identities in line with the norms of their culture.

We find the conception of surveillance in terms of participatory or social surveillance particularly fruitful for understanding the dynamics of social media use within Qatari society. Instead of reducing those under surveillance “to a powerless, passive subject under the control of the ‘gaze’” [5], the concept of participatory or social surveillance adopts the view of power put forth by Foucault [10]. In this view, power circulates throughout society so individuals comprise nodes of “capillary power.” In this way, instead of an all-powerful agent exerting top-down power on powerless individuals, social media users exercise power as they interact on social media sites. The image of capillary nodes corresponds well with the structure of social networking sites where each user effectively represents a node in a wider network. In this way, social media users are empowered as they participate in social surveillance to construct shared norms and communicate those norms.

It is not that these social media users simply internalize the external gaze of a dominant entity to enforce cultural expectations. That would be, as Albrechtschlund [5] points out, “the pseudo-participation we know from the Panopticon and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.” Rather, they actively construct those expectations in line with a collective vision of what it means to be Qatari in a modern world. In a relationship-based society where behavioral norms must be personally communicated if they are to be upheld, online social surveillance enables those communicative practices.

Conceptions of surveillance are often presented in the literature as an *either/or* proposition, as if surveillance can only be viewed from either one perspective or the other. Indeed, we have emphasized the participatory view of surveillance in this analysis in an effort to counter the traditional way of viewing surveillance that seems to us incongruent with the way social media is primarily understood and oriented to by the participants in the relationship-based society we studied. But we do not mean to suggest from this analytical emphasis that only one form of surveillance or the other exists in any given situation, nor do we intend to completely dismiss the traditional conception of surveillance and the role it plays in patriarchal societies. Rather, it is important to recognize that surveillance comprises myriad dimensions. In arguing that conceptions of surveillance need to be complicated and expanded, we therefore suggest that the CSCW community move toward an understanding of surveillance as comprising multiple dimensions to differing degrees. The analytical task therefore becomes one of first determining which dimension predominates in certain social practices and then unraveling the trace left behind by the other

dimension within those practices. The latter task is beyond the scope of the current paper, but is one we hope to take up in further research that continues to complicate and expand our understandings of surveillance and social media use. In particular, future work that builds on our current study needs to understand to what extent the practice of “doing hijab” may become limiting to participants even while it allows them to exercise agency.

Moreover, as our study shows, the use of social surveillance among these Qataris provides an important avenue by which they negotiate the challenge of modernizing while preserving traditional values. The difficulty of that challenge is made apparent in Giddens’ statement that “inherent to the idea of modernity is a contrast with tradition” [11]. Yet, as we have illustrated in our analysis, the adoption of modern technologies such as social media afford Qataris a modern means to engage in familiar, relationship-based cultural practices that empower them to uphold traditional religious values and social mores. In many ways, social media hold substantial potential for relationship-based societies given the relationship-based nature of social media sites, providing new technological means to network, connect, and communicate.

#### Limitations

The most salient limitation of the current study is that our analysis is limited to a small sub-set of Qataris. As such, the sample of Qataris we interviewed is not fully representative of the society as a whole. Notably, the participants in our interviews comprise younger, educated, mostly female English-speaking Qataris. Our claims are therefore limited in scope and are not meant to provide an all-encompassing description of social media behavior across all demographic groups in Qatari society. Moreover, the participants may represent a self-selection bias in that they all self-identify as adhering to Qatari norms and values; we did not talk with anyone who openly flouts or resists those norms.

Nevertheless, with this limited group, we gain insight into how social media are used in ways that reflect and/or reinforce Qatari cultural norms, particularly as experienced by females who have a greater responsibility in upholding tradition. The tactics our interviewees employ when using social media speak to the way they use the technologies in relation to Qatari-specific sensibilities. We suggest that similar tactics may be employed by other Qataris that use social media. But further research is required to probe the specific uses for which social media is employed by other Qatari citizens, especially those who are monolingual Arab speakers, of older generations, or without any tertiary education. Furthermore, given the focus on females in the current study, it would be interesting to gain greater insight into the social media practices of Qatari males. The results of this study can serve as the foundation for further research that focuses on larger and more diverse aspects of Qatari society, and asks farther-reaching questions. Ultimately, such research could speak to the design and production of

media aimed at users who share the values and norms we describe.

### CONCLUSION

The research we present describes the social media experiences of a group of educated, mostly female Qataris who currently navigate such sites with a constant need to reinterpret existing features to fit expectations, particularly as those expectations relate to a sense of preserving tradition. We point to ways in which users construe social media to fit their needs, and highlight how surveillance within a high-context society manifests via social media use. Future work will focus on how to bring together the “modern” and the “traditional” through technological means.

Overall, we provide an analysis of the practices that a sample of Qataris engage in as they navigate various social media, explaining how the transformation, the reinterpretation, the owning, of these sociotechnical objects are now becoming subject to “processes of localization that make their regional appropriation distinctive” [22]. Social media sites and services in the United States are not, in practice, the same social media sites and services in Qatar, even though they bear the same names of “Instagram,” “Facebook,” and so on. The way these social media are viewed, used, and appropriated is specific to the local contexts to which they migrate. People work within the confines and limitations of the technology, and within the expectations of their cultural norms to present and represent themselves through social media. Our aim has been to draw awareness to how Qatari cultural practices are enacted and performed via social media. This will lead to future research that continues to examine how non-Western users can be accommodated, and empowered, through social media use.

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