
Spatial & Social Connectedness in the Arabian Gulf: How to connect when connection is forbidden

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Abstract

Islamic perspectives on space and design have great impact on how people who live in Islamic cultural contexts go about their professional lives. Privacy, modesty, and upholding family honor are of the utmost importance within Muslim communities, and these values are reflected in how workplaces are designed and subsequently, how people interact and thrive (or not) in professional environments. In this position paper, we explore how physical and virtual workplaces in Saudi Arabia and Qatar impact the professional lives and development of Arab-Gulf women, and posit questions regarding how modern technologies in particular are changing the landscape of what the “workplace” entails in the Arabian Gulf.

Author Keywords

Workplace design; Islam; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; Arab Women; Privacy; Social Media

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

Introduction

The construction of shared spaces in a work environment as a place to get to know others, build trust and carry out personal and professional tasks is a complicated phenomenon when we think about this process in the context of Arabian Gulf culture. Within conservative Muslim culture, gender segregation is often expected, and may be legally enforced. So, when we think about interactions in the context of the workplace under the umbrella of Islamic law and cultural norms rooted in tribal tradition, we see how women in particular navigate their professional lives in ways that allow them to adhere to cultural norms while constructing what it means to be a “professional women” in the Arab Gulf. Importantly, spatial design and technology use play a critical role in how this process takes place.

Cultural Norms in the GCC

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a group of six countries located in western Asia, on or around the Arabian Gulf. Comprised of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, these countries share economic and cultural commonalities based on oil and natural gas production, historical tribal linkages, and all have a majority Muslim population. Emerging from the adherence to cultural traditions and Islamic teachings that are paramount in everyday practice, the Arab Gulf cultures value particular modes of conduct and behavior that have great influence on workplace design.

The need for, and expectation of, privacy plays a prominent role in the daily lives and actions of GCC citizens [1,4]. To adequately grasp how privacy is viewed and enacted in the GCC, it is important to first

explain what privacy is from an Islamic perspective. Gulf Arab notions of privacy are bound up in the importance of modesty [4]. Sobh and Belk (2011) explain that “the notion of privacy in the Arab-Islamic paradigm is largely related to the requirement of modest self-presentation for Muslims in public, particularly women...the underlying meaning of privacy in the Arab-Islamic culture is respect and not seclusion.” 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.

The enactment of privacy is evident in various aspects of daily life. For example, residential architecture can be seen as a physical representation of the need for privacy. Sobh and Belk provide detail about traditional home design in the Gulf Arab countries, where houses are typically designed with an inward-facing center to protect the family from the public eye [3]. In particular, spaces for women are cordoned off and not accessible unless visitors are explicitly invited into the area. With the advent of greater numbers of women joining the workforce, these same principles carry over into the workplace, and affect how communication, collaboration and collocated interacting occur.

Gendered Spatial Segregation

A significant outcome of the need for privacy is gender segregation; as the authors are most familiar with the cultures of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, we discuss those particular countries here. The gender segregation that is actively enforced in Saudi Arabia, and which is commonly practiced in Qatar (though it is not legally enforced) entails the separation of boys and girls during

their formative years, so as to prevent any inappropriate interactions or relationships that may harm their families' honor. Interaction between unrelated men and women is forbidden; if such interaction occurs, it brings shame. Women in particular are in a position to uphold their families' good names by ensuring that they do not inappropriately interact with men. In her study on gendered spaces in Qatar [3] found that the need for segregation is not cause for the reduction of women's status like some might think—instead, it is empowering. She states, “gendered spaces are relational and complimentary in nature...their maintenance helps Qataris resolve conflicting cultural pressures that the current generation has increasingly experienced.”

While gender segregation in the workplace is not required in Qatar, vestiges of this practice are apparent. In office settings, Qatari women tend to either have an inward facing cubical or an office with a door. They wear traditional clothing comprised of an abaya (long, loose black robe) and shayla (veil or head scarf); these garments index modesty, and serve as an indication for the need for privacy. When entering a woman's office, it is common practice to seek permission to prevent walking in on her in an unprepared state (e.g. if she is not wearing her veil).

In Saudi Arabia, gender segregation is enforced by law. Adherence to segregation is strictly monitored by the *religious police* in all workplaces with the exception of hospitals and medical clinics. Therefore, companies are expected to follow the law by designing special workspaces for women that include a guarded door that prevents men from walking into the women's space. In addition, when meetings are required, they are often

conducted using digital means (e.g., Skype). Further complicating the matter, women in Saudi are still not allowed to drive. Accordingly, this affects their ability to secure employment outside of the home. As mentioned earlier, these strict laws are enforced and followed in the goal of protecting women from the unnecessary interaction with non-*mahram* males (any male outside of the circle of close male relatives—husband, son or grandson)

The virtual workplace in the GCC

With the goals of this workshop in mind, our experiences working in the GCC region offer an example of the “the fusion of spatial connectedness and social connectedness.” Various modern technologies and social media in particular offer a way for women to circumvent the social and religious constraints enforced/observed at the workplace in the GCC. The spread of mobile technology is revolutionizing the ways in which women are entering the business world and constructing their profession identities.

For example, the growth of “Instagram shops” is unprecedented [5]. These are businesses that are usually managed out of one's home, with very low overhead costs. Proprietors are mostly Arab women who do not have jobs outside the home. These women are taking advantage of the platform design to showcase photos of their products and services—which range from food to clothing to hairstyling—to reach a wide customer base. Sellers provide a phone number in their Instagram bio, and when customers contact them, they typically communicate via WhatsApp to arrange for delivery and payment.

This phenomenon is thriving in the region. It empowers women to run their own businesses without going through cumbersome government processes. Before the rise of social media, women were limited regarding the ability to have a professional identity. For example, if a woman wants to obtain permission to start a “conventional” business in the GCC, she must have the support of a male guardian. This guardian is tasked with leading the time-consuming, cumbersome bureaucratic process that involves visiting various offices, collecting signatures, and gaining necessary approvals. The advent of Instagram shops allows women to have ownership over their professional lives, without the need for any involvement from a male guardian. The inability to work in mixed gender environments is not an issue when one creates their own work environment through social media.

An additional effect Instagram is having on women-owned commercial ventures is apparent in women-only “pop up” shops. It is common to come across these venues (e.g. in hotels) where sellers rent booths. Instagram allows proprietors to bring a few items, in addition to a tablet or phone. Their Instagram accounts serve as the extension of the showroom. This allows sellers to: 1) save on space rental costs, 2) increase online traffic. Overall, these examples show how the merging of spaces, social interaction and shared activities takes place in virtual workspaces in the GCC.

Conclusion

As residents of the GCC, and participant observers in a mixed gender workplace in Qatar, as well as in a gender segregated workplace in Saudi Arabia, we are privy to the nuanced ways in which social and spatial connectedness are mediated vis-à-vis the need to

adhere to the Islamic interpretation of privacy. With the above examples and through our own experiences, we seek to enrich the conversation regarding culturally sensitive UX design in the workplace. We also come with questions specific to the region, but which have wider-reaching implications for the CSCW community, such as: how do processes of trust-building and establishment of common ground happen in both virtual and physical environments in which interaction is stymied or forbidden?

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