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The applicability of symbolic annihilation in the Middle East

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As the field of communication research is further internationalized, communication scholars in non-Western locales have been challenged to apply theories central to our discipline that have grown primarily out of the Western experience. Western cultural tenets of individualism and democracy have been assumed as the norm within many communication theories, and initially, several of these theories were simply accepted and applied “as is” in foreign contexts. Increasingly, however, international scholars and Western scholars working abroad have questioned the presumptions of those theories and how best to apply them in nation-states and regions that don’t share the same basic assumptions or a similar cultural context, all to the benefit of more robust theoretical development within the discipline. In this vein, the authors here take a foundational feminist media theory, symbolic annihilation, and apply it to a non-Western nation-state—Qatar. In doing so, we draw much in our approach from Mohanty’s seminal “Under Western Eyes” (1984), not only avoiding the homogenization of a non-Western population through a Western lens, but also exploring the relationship between the discursive representation of the Qatari woman (in this case, in the news media), and the material reality, or lived experience, of the Qatari woman. Further, Mohanty’s point that feminist scholarship should focus on “the material and ideological specificities” (p. 338) that render women’s place in a particular set of power relations, rather than rack up a series of examples that make the ‘universal woman’ powerless, is well taken. Heeding these points, we take a bottom-up approach to our analysis, stressing these material and ideological specificities over sweeping statements and generalizations. Qatar is home to a female citizenry increasingly empowered to pursue higher education, employment outside the home, and wider freedom of movement. That said, many Qatari women face a unique cultural taboo that prevents them from appearing in public visual media, such as television news

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reports, online videos, or photographs printed in magazines or newspapers. This, we argue, limits Qatari women's equality in local media. However, our analysis carefully considers how this cultural practice must be understood within Qatari women's specific historic and cultural context. In doing so, we present a rich and nuanced analysis of the limitations this cultural practice presents to Qatari women, but also other methods by which Qatari women subvert it. Certainly, the cultural taboo against visual representations of women appearing in the media is contested among Qatari women, and as some have argued, is more rigorously defended by upper-class members of society (see Foley, 2010), though certainly not by all. Sheikha Moza, the former royal first lady of Qatar and still a very prominent figure in public life, as well as her daughters Sheikha Hind and Sheikha Mayassa, also prominent public figures, are depicted widely in the Qatari press. Yet some Qatari women don't mind the taboo at all and maintain that their photographs don't need to be included in the news, that name recognition is sufficient (Paschyn, 2013). Just because a society's cultural values deem it important for women to remain unseen in public life, however, doesn't mean that the state or society doesn't want them to be economically productive members of the workforce. We know in Qatar that the state itself is encouraging women's empowerment, education, and participation in the workforce as a significant piece of its National Vision 2030 (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008), including increasing "opportunities and vocational support for Qatari women" (p. 10) and enhancing women's capacities and empowering them "to participate fully in the political and economic spheres, especially in decision-making roles" (p. 12). The vision also asserts that "women will assume a significant role in all spheres of life, especially through participating in economic and political decision-making" (p. 11). So in that sense, a fundamental assumption of the theory of symbolic annihilation—that women should be seen as productive members of the workforce—has been met in the case of Qatar. As we know, numbers of younger Qatari women in the workforce are increasing, even as the taboo to depict women in media remains. We also know that women are visible in *majaalis*, and that is an important forum for women's public life. But *majaalis* are single-gender affairs, so while young women and girls may be able to find role models and examples of older women seeking and enjoying educational and career pursuits, those examples remain invisible to the other, more powerful half of Qatari society—men. Symbolic annihilation theorized the relationship between the discursive representation of women and their material reality as mutually constitutive, but our deeply contextualized analysis reveals a more nuanced reality. Qatari women are, by and large, not represented visually in the local news media, yet they do participate in increasing numbers in the workforce. In this context, however, there is no expectation that Qatari women would be visually represented in the media due to the cultural taboo against it, so their absence is not constitutive of the material reality as it would be in a society that carried an expectation of equal representation of genders in the media.

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