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Are the United Arab Emirates and Qatar's Public Diplomacy Strategies Effective? ^[1]

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar generously invest in their public diplomacy and nation branding strategies in an effort to enhance their reputational security. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) pursues public diplomacy focusing on tourism, women's empowerment, and religious tolerance while Qatar leverages culture, sports, and its polarizing role mediating in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This investment raises questions about how effective the UAE and Qatar's strategies are for shaping ordinary citizens' views. The U.S. is an important economic and security partner of Gulf countries , making the views of ordinary Americans crucial to consider.

To answer this question, we draw on original, nationally-representative web-based surveys of 2,000 US-based respondents conducted by Verasight in 2024. We find that a large proportion of Americans do not know enough about the UAE or Qatar to form an opinion about the countries. Those who do have an opinion are evenly split between having a positive or negative view. Yet, we find that the UAE's strategies create positive views of the UAE among Americans of diverse gender, ethnic groups, education levels, and political leaning, while Qatari efforts appeal more narrowly to college-educated males who lean Democrat.

We argue these effects are due to identity-based differences (i.e., gender, race) in the topics that interest Americans (e.g., sports, politics) and the types of traditional and new media sources they use. Males for instance are more likely to follow politics and sports and to view traditional news sources—mainstays of Qatar's strategy—while females and those from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to follow content on lifestyle and tourism through new media sources such as Instagram—topics and platforms that often feature the UAE.

We first assessed the extent to which Americans have a view of the UAE or Qatar. When asked, "What is your perception of the UAE/Qatar? (Positive, Negative, Neutral, Don't Know, Prefer not to say)," the "Neutral" response was the modal answer in both countries: 41% and 45% for the UAE and Qatar, respectively. (Figure 1). A further 26 and 32 percent of respondents stated that they do not have an opinion about the UAE and Qatar, respectively (i.e., "Don't Know").

Figure 1. Perceptions of the UAE and Qatar among US Residents

Chart

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Source: Verasight poll from July 25-29, 2024 and October 1-11, 2024.

This 6 percent gap in having an opinion suggests that the UAE has been slightly more effective than Qatar at reaching ordinary Americans with at least some information about their country. We note that evidence of UAE's strategy, in the form of videos and images on social media of Americans visiting Dubai or promoting such products as "Dubai chocolate" are highly salient in the USA. (Image 1).

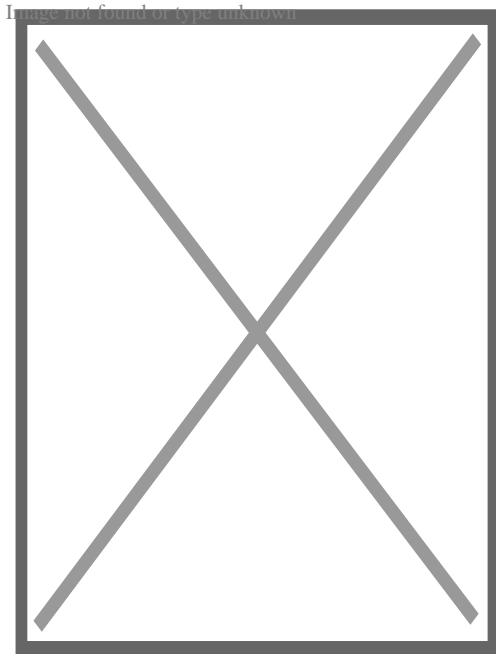


Image 1. "Dubai Style" Chocolate marketed by Lindt, for sale in a Safeway store, Beaverton, Oregon, USA (2025). Photo credit: Lindsay Benstead.

Our findings also suggest troubling gender and education gaps. In multivariate analysis, we find that males are 11% more likely than females to hold an opinion about the UAE and 16

percent more likely to have an opinion about Qatar. Similar gaps exist across education levels.

These gaps could be due to the propensity for individuals from some groups to be news avoidant or to be less interested in politics. To the extent that individuals avoid the news, they may know less about these countries—especially Qatar, which has recently been covered in news stories on the World Cup and the Israel-Gaza War. According to a 2008 study conducted by Pew Research, U.S. women expressed greater interest in news stories about health, safety, and the weather, while males were more interested in stories about US policy, the Supreme Court, the U.S. economy, and international affairs, including the Middle East. Since women are over-represented in the news-avoidant group, it is not surprising that females are less likely to have information about the these countries—particularly Qatar.

Those who do have an opinion—only about a quarter of Americans—are split between seeing the countries positively or negatively: 12 percent have a positive view of the UAE, compared to 13 percent for Qatar, while 16 percent have a negative view of the UAE, compared to 14 percent for Qatar. (Figure 1).

Younger Americans are more likely than older citizens to have a positive view of the UAE and Qatar. But multivariate analysis reveals that different segments of the population are more likely to see the UAE and Qatar positively. Nonwhite ethnicity (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and other) and residence in the South compared to the Midwest predict a higher likelihood of holding a positive view of the UAE. (Figure 2). Yet males are no more or less likely than females to have a positive view of the UAE, just as Republican and Democrat respondents are equally likely to see the UAE in a positive light.

Figure 2. Predicted probability of having a positive view of the UAE

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Source: Verasight poll from July 25-29, 2024 and October 1-11, 2024.

Our findings thus suggest that the gender-balanced and inclusive public diplomacy strategies of the UAE, which focus on tourism, cuisine, women’s empowerment, and religious tolerance allow the UAE to reach a diverse group of Americans across gender, race, and political

identification groups.

In contrast, those who have a positive view of Qatar are disproportionately male, college-educated, and Democrat-leaning (Figure 3). Males are 20% more likely to have a positive view of Qatar than are females, for instance. Republicans are 15% less likely to have a positive view of Qatar compared to Democrats.

Figure 3. Predicted probability of having a positive view of Qatar

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Source: Verasight poll from July 25-29, 2024 and October 1-11, 2024.

Our findings thus suggest that Qatar's public diplomacy strategy focusing on sports and politics is most effective among males with a particular educational and political profile. Its risky and polarizing role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is effective among Democrats, but may undermine its goals among other segments of the US population, such as Republican-leaning Americans.

We find that many Americans still know relatively little about the Gulf countries, despite the United States' economic and security ties with both countries. Those who do are split between seeing the UAE and Qatar positively or negatively. The UAE's inclusive, gender-balanced strategies create positive perceptions of the UAE among Americans of diverse gender, ethnic groups, education levels, and political orientations, while Qatar's strategies appeal to college-educated males who lean Democrat.

We argue that this effect is due to gender-, race-, and class-based patterns of engagement with issues and topics and on different media sources. Males, for instance, are more likely to follow politics and sports—mainstays of Qatar's strategy—while females and those from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to engage with or create content on lifestyle and tourism using some social media sites like Instagram and Facebook.

Some may argue, however, that Qatar's strategy is effective because it reaches younger,

Democrat-leaning, college-educated men who tend to be politically-mobilized. Yet it may also alienate others, including groups that are more numerous in the military (i.e., Republican males).

Our findings also suggest that UAE and Qatar can do more to amplify information about their country through platforms that have a broad reach, such as social media. User-created content on topics like tourism and culture that are of broad interest to Americans can be a powerful way to reach ordinary citizens from diverse backgrounds and interests with a country brand. Given these insights, each country can craft strategies that take into account topics and media sources that would reach new demographics.

Learning more about how individuals encounter news and information about the UAE and Qatar and how it shapes their perceptions is critical to broaden our understanding of public diplomacy and international relations in our globalizing world.
