

# SOCIAL ATTITUDES, BEHAVIOR, AND CONSEQUENCES SURROUNDING COVID-19 IN QATAR

## Findings from a Large-scale Online Survey

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### Abstract

Amid the outbreak of the contagious novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), states were put in an unprecedented situation never encountered before. The Qatari government applied certain preventive measures to contain the spread of the virus. Still, knowledge of public risk perceptions and behavioral responses surrounding the COVID-19 epidemic is still emerging, and clear quantitative data remain limited. This poster summarizes the results of a SESRI study that investigated social attitudes, behavior, and consequences surrounding COVID-19 in Qatar. Online survey was conducted in both Qatar and Kuwait from November 2020 to January 2021. A total of 2,282 citizens and residents of Qatar were interviewed, in comparison to 1,184 completed interviews in Kuwait.

### Introduction

Over the past four decades, a large number of empirical investigations have examined public risk perceptions, psychological and social distress, and behavioral responses associated with epidemic outbreaks. These studies have found variation in responses to epidemics according to age (Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987), socioeconomic status (Kunz-Ebrecht, Kirschbaum, & Steptoe, 2004), and employment type (Norbeck, 1985), among other factors. However, the applicability of previous results to the case of COVID-19 is limited by the fact that preventive measures to contain the spread of Coronavirus far exceed the use of quarantine. Due to the novelty of the Coronavirus outbreak, quantitative studies of risk perceptions, behavioral responses, and trust in governmental policy surrounding COVID-19 remain very rare. In view of the limitations of existing data, SESRI designed and implemented an original survey that examined social attitudes, behavior, and consequences surrounding COVID-19 in Qatar.

### Methods

The research team designed an original online survey and then collected data from the survey over a three-month period from late November 2020 to early January 2021. Participants in Qatar and Kuwait aged 18 years and older were recruited to participate in an online survey via advertisements placed on the most widely-used social media platforms: namely, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The advertisements were restricted geographically by Internet (IP) address, so that only individuals located inside Qatar and Kuwait saw the advertisements and were asked to take the survey. The survey measured public risk perceptions, attitudes and behavioral responses, and psychological distress related to COVID-19 in Qatar, with data from Kuwait providing a comparison case. Determinants of intentions to comply as well as actual compliance with state-mandated preventive measures were also identified, in addition to social and demographic information about respondents.

**Figure 1** Knowledge of COVID-19 by Citizenship

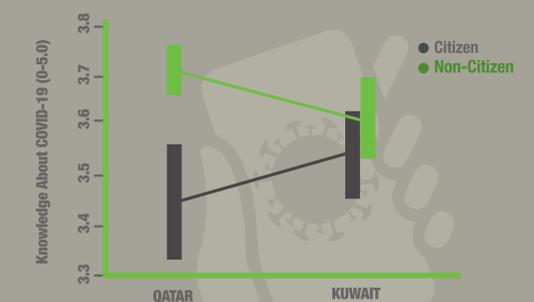


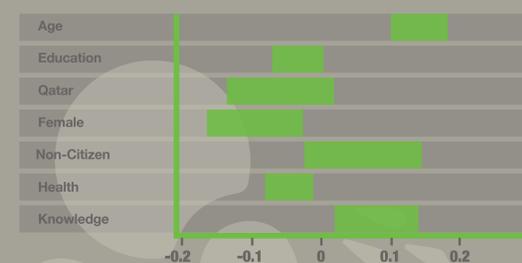
Figure 1 summarizes responses from Qatar and Kuwait, according to respondent citizenship (citizens versus non-citizens). The data reveal that knowledge of COVID-19 (measured on a 0-5 scale) is significantly lower among citizens in Qatar as compared to expatriates in Qatar, but not in Kuwait. There is a statistically significant gap in COVID-19-related knowledge in Qatar between men and women, with women being more knowledgeable on average, even after controlling for relevant factors such as education, age, health, and so on.

**Figure 2** Knowledge of COVID-19 Over Time



The data collected over the three-month period shows a clear upward trend in public knowledge about the pandemic. Knowledge about the virus is a significant predictor of other attitudes and behaviors of individuals in Qatar, including risk perceptions and adherence to preventative measures, and so disparities in COVID-19 knowledge based on gender, citizenship, or other factors can have real-world impacts.

**Figure 3** Correlates of COVID-19 Risk Perceptions



Results show, first, that COVID-19 is viewed as less serious by Qataris as compared to non-Qataris; but no such difference exists in Kuwait. Second, females in both countries tend to view COVID-19 as less serious, but this difference is not statistically significant. As shown in Figure 3, an individual's tendency to perceive COVID-19 as more dangerous relative to other medical emergencies is associated with the following factors in order of importance: non-citizen status, objective knowledge about the virus, and age. Conversely, more educated individuals, individuals in Qatar, women, and healthier individuals are associated with perceptions of COVID-19 as being less dangerous.

**Figure 4** Adherence to COVID-19 Preventative Measures, by Citizenship

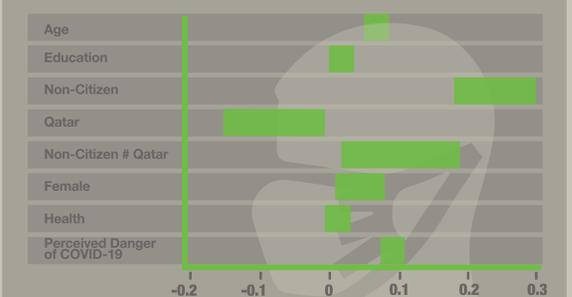
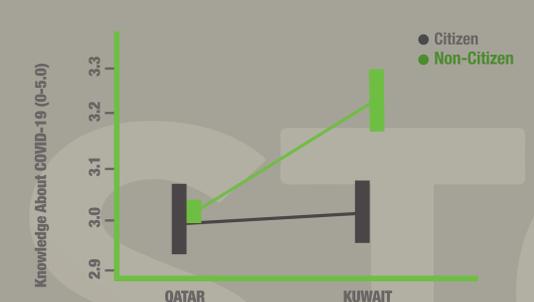


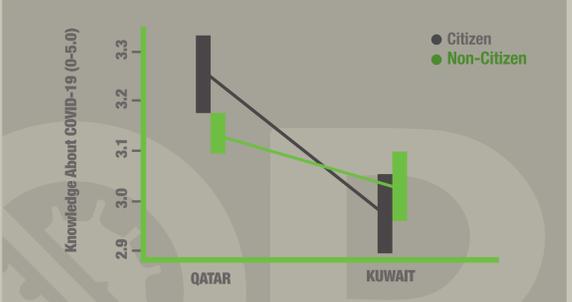
Figure 4 summarizes the impact of different variables on individual adherence to COVID-19-related preventative measures. As can be seen, the following variables have a statistically significant positive effect on adherence, in order of substantive importance: education, gender (female), age, COVID-19 risk perception, and non-citizen status (in Qatar and Kuwait). Notably, self-reported health status does not independently predict adherence to preventative measures.

**Figure 5** Attitudes towards the State Response by Citizenship



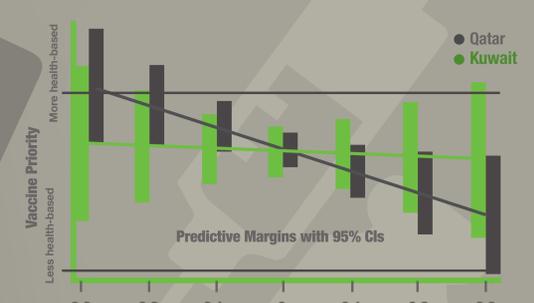
In Kuwait, non-citizens thought that the government reaction was too extreme relative to citizens, and this gap is statistically significant (see Figure 5). There is no significant difference between the assessments of citizens and non-citizens in Qatar, as both evaluated the state reaction to the pandemic to be appropriate (represented by 3, the midpoint on our 1-5 scale).

**Figure 6** Attitudes towards Public Reaction by Citizenship



Respondents were asked to evaluate the public reaction toward the COVID-19 crisis, if they thought it was sufficient or extreme using a 5-point scale. A number of factors influence respondents' views towards the public reaction to COVID-19: being healthy and being in Qatar (as opposed to being in Kuwait) affects one's perception of the public reaction positively. Results show that having more income and greater objective knowledge about COVID-19 negatively affects one's evaluation of the public reaction. Moreover, compared to Qatar, both citizens and non-citizens in Kuwait perceive the public reaction more negatively (see Figure 6).

**Figure 7** Risk Perceptions and Prioritization of COVID-19 Vaccine Recipients



As shown in Figure 7, analysis of perceptions of priority to receive the vaccine in relation to the perceived danger of COVID-19 showed that respondents in Qatar who are more fearful are more interested in being able to pay for priority vaccine access. This was not the case in Kuwait, however, as perceived danger of the virus did not have an effect on vaccine prioritization.

### Policy Recommendations

- Prioritize increasing public knowledge about COVID-19 in Qatar, especially among Qatari citizens and men, as greater knowledge is associated with greater compliance.
- Present clear explanations of important changes in public policy surrounding COVID-19, as such changes can have substantial impacts on risk perceptions.
- Spread accurate information about COVID-19 to combat the global online misinformation and debunk conspiracy theories and perpetuating myths.
- Redouble efforts to ensure public compliance with COVID-19 preventative measures, particularly among Qatari citizens and in relation to social gatherings as the data show that Qatari citizens report substantially lower levels of adherence to social restrictions.
- The government should continue the transparent communication about its approach of handling the crisis with the public, in order to achieve better results in facing the virus.
- Effectively communicate the dangers of COVID-19 in order to encourage citizens and residents to comply with restrictions and to take the vaccine.