A recently posted YouTube video of a young group of Qataris who are helping to rebuild a school in Brazil has drawn the ire of some nationals, in part because the female travelers were not dressed in the traditional abaya and headscarf while on their trip.

The seven Qataris—three men and four women—are spending 21 days in the South American country as part of a Vodafone Qatar-backed initiative to help people in the remote Amazonian village of Ararinha.

The adventure is part of Vodafone’s “global firsts” program, which urges societal contributions while helping to create unforgettable memories through the use of technology.

In addition to the attire issue, critics have targeted Vodafone for hosting a mixed-gender trip, and the women themselves for traveling abroad without their families, which detractors said was a violation of Qatar’s conservative Islamic principles.

However, other Qataris have rejected that perspective, calling it “backwards” and “hogwash.”
Though the Facebook post has been taken down, Qataris have continued the conversation on Twitter, under the hashtag #VodafoneInsults (Vodafone insults the people of Qatar).

Once again, there were many remarks critical of the trip itself and how the women were dressed:

[Translation: This is undoubtedly a promotional program. To hell with marketing that is done at the expense of our values and the teachings of our religion.]

[Translation: Even if the women in the video are Qatari, they have parents who can set them straight. Leave people alone.]

[Translation: To organize such a gender-mixed trip that is not in keeping with our conservative society is indeed an insult to the people of Qatar.]

But several people also disagreed with the critics:

[Translation: I haven't seen any insult to Qatar. As for the girls, I don't consider any girl who incomprehensibly abandons her abaya a Qatari.]

Vodafone has also responded to the wave of criticism, telling Doha News in a statement:

“We fully respect our local culture and the seven Qatari youths, who we refer to as Adventurers, have been selected from a number of nominations. They have travelled to Brazil with full parental consent and they are accompanied by senior expert trainers as they volunteered to be part of this cultural journey. These senior experts are there to give all the necessary guidance to the group and ensure their full safety. They are challenging themselves to achieve something they never thought would be possible.”

Cultural differences

Vodafone is not the only company in Qatar that has unintentionally inflamed some local sensibilities in recent years.

Shortly before National Day in 2012, Ooredoo (then Qtel) quietly removed a YouTube clip of a flash mob it organized at Landmark Mall. It included Qatari men doing traditional dance, women lip-singing patriotic songs and expats breakdancing all at the same time as a huge crowd looked on.

It also showed locals and expats almost engaging in a kind of dance-off—a scene that a few nationals labeled "disgusting.”

Also that year, the talent show Arab Idol canceled auditions in Doha after criticism from the Qatari community, despite support from many residents.

Each time, there was mixed reaction in the local community, suggesting shifting perspectives on what it means to be Qatari amid a push for modernization and the prevalence of international influences in the country.

The trip

The seven Amazon Adventure volunteers, who are between 17 and 14 years old, are about a third into their trip, and will remain in Brazil until Aug. 28.

They will climb one of the nation’s highest mountains, SugarLoaf, hunt for ag at Mount Everest’s peak.

Here, the youth will fulfill the main purpose of their trip—to build a school from the ground up, with the help of the local community.

The school, which burned down six months ago, served as the sole educational facility for three remote communities. Some students would take a canoe for around an hour to attend classes.

The volunteers will help rebuild the school to accommodate some 300 students, as opposed to the previous 90. They will also work to construct a village center where locals can host celebrations and ideally attract tourism to their remote area.

The names of the those taking part are: Mohammed Al Shammary, Leila Al Tamimi, Aisha Al Naama, Tameem Walid Al Hammadi, Noor Al Muhannadi, Maqdeem Al Naama and Mohammed Adel Al Naimi.

They are being led by Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah Al Thani, who last year became the first Qatari to climb and raise Qatar’s flag at Mount Everest’s peak.

Al Thani has dedicated a number of physical challenges to charitable causes and is also leading 12 Qatari youths up Mount Kilimanjaro in October to raise funds for Gaza.
Vodafone Qatar is tracking and sharing the trekkers’ every experience with the public through social media. Since launching the project mainly on YouTube, Facebook and a dedicated website, the company said videos have received a total of some 11,000 likes, 100,000 shares and one million views.

Commenting on the recent removal of the criticized video from Facebook, a Vodafone spokesperson simply said:

“We share a variety of content on different channels so it might differ depending on the channel.”

Thoughts?

Qatari’s Amazon Adventure to Continue
After Vodafone Withdraws Support
by Elysia Windrum, with Riham Sheble & Shabina S. Khatri
Doha News, August 18, 2014

Local telecom provider Vodafone-Qatar has announced that it is no longer supporting an ongoing charity excursion that it initiated, after fielding harsh criticism from members of the community.

However, the Amazon adventure is expected to continue as planned.

This month, seven young Qatari—three men and four women—have been trekking their way through Brazil to arrive at a remote village and help rebuild a school there that recently burned down.

Through hunting for meals, making their own fires and shelters and climbing a mountain, the volunteers have been putting their survival skills into play for the past 11 days.

Part of the adventure involved sharing the journey through photos, videos and tweets.

Vodafone Qatar is no longer backing the initiative. In a statement, the company said:

“Mixed reactions

Criticism of the mixed-gender trip, which some said violated Qatar’s conservative Islamic principles, has steadily grown since then, developing into a debate about Qatar’s identity amid a push for modernization.

And yesterday evening, Vodafone-Qatar’s board chairman announced that it was no longer backing the initiative. In a statement, the company said:

“This decision to completely withdraw from this project and cease all kinds of support to it reflects our Chairman H.E Sheikh Dr. Khalid bin Thani Al Thani’s commitment to seeing Vodafone Qatar providing the best services and initiatives that are suitable to the norms and values of the Qatari culture.

“We will have no responsibility of this initiative from here on in. This initiative will now be the sole responsibility of the production company overseeing the project.”

Mixed reactions

The announcement sparked a host of mixed reactions last night on social media. Under the hashtag #فونادوقون_سخريه_أفعال_طبر (Vodafone insults the people of Qatar), many locals expressed support for the company’s decision:

"@VodafoneQatar We will have no responsibility of this initiative from here on in. A brave decision to completely withdraw from this project and cease all kinds of support to it reflects our Chairman H.E Sheikh Dr. Khalid bin Thani Al Thani’s commitment to seeing Vodafone Qatar providing the best services and initiatives that are suitable to the norms and values of the Qatari culture.

We will have no responsibility of this initiative from here on in. This initiative will now be the sole responsibility of the production company overseeing the project.”

Translation: The majority made their opinion clear and the company responded. Isn’t this the freedom that you want? Then why are some people upset?

Others were angry about the move:

There have been a million ROTA trips where girls didn’t wear their hijab and abaya but now suddenly that’s an issue.

Where’s the support?

Lost my respect for Vodafone Qatar, nobody on that trip did anything wrong and instead of supporting them you fall under pressure „_„

But a YouTube video post last week sparked ire in the Qatari community after some of the female participants were shown not wearing abayas or headscarves.

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Vodafone’s Amazon Adventurers

What’s next

In response to questions about how the program will proceed from here, a Vodafone spokesperson told Doha News that all responsibility has been put in the hands of a local production company that is filming the journey.

The spokesperson said the company is equipped to ensure the security of the adventurers. She added, “Our full financial obligations towards this project are already met and fulfilled.”

Speaking to Doha News, the company—Mediadante—said that “Vodafone is going to pay the full financial obligation of our contract. It was never in question.” However, because the telecom provider has withdrawn its name from the initiative and taken its website about the journey offline, it is understood that Mediadante will no longer produce a live online documentary about the adventure, as originally planned.

But the seven Qataris are continuing their trek to the village of Ararinha. In a statement to Doha News, Rosie Garthwaite, executive producer of the project and Mediadante founder, said:

“Inspired by other Qataris, who have set a philanthropic example before them, these young people are proud of the difference they hope to make to the education and therefore opportunity of the people they have met in this remote region. We look forward to seeing a joyful outcome to the project. And a successful future for these individuals and those they are working with in the jungle.”

The participants currently have limited phone connectivity and have conveyed that they do not wish to comment on Vodafone’s withdrawal of support until after finishing their task of rebuilding the school. They are due back in Doha after Aug. 28.

Online, some residents have begun to question what will happen after that:

[Translation: Qatar is a democracy that guarantees personal freedom. The girls have the legal right to sue anyone who participated in defaming them.]

Fatima Al-Rumaihi © Al-Jazeera • - 17 Aug 2014

[Translation: To those applauding the decision of ending support, what exactly have you gained now? The trip is still on, but won’t be broadcasted. Was the solution that Vodafone pull out only?]

Precedent

Vodafone’s decision to capitulate to critics is not so unusual in Qatar, where other companies have also back-pedaled on initiatives after sparking negative reactions from the local community.

In 2012, Ooredoo (then Qtel) quietly removed a YouTube clip of a flash mob it organized at Landmark Mall that was criticized for showing some nationals and expats engaging in a sort of “dance-off.”

The same year, the talent show Arab Idol canceled auditions in Doha after criticism from the Qatari community, despite support from many residents.

More recently, local criticism was thought to play a role in the removal of the “head-butt” statue on the Corniche, which is now undergoing restoration at the Museum of Modern Arab Art (Mathaf).

However, Vodafone’s response did come as a bit of a surprise to some, as just days ago, the company showed no signs of pulling out of the excursion.

Last week, when asked for its response to ongoing criticism, the company told Doha News:

“We fully respect our local culture and the seven Qatari youths, who we refer to as Adventurers, have been selected from a number of nominations. They have travelled to Brazil with full parental consent and they are accompanied by senior expert trainers as they volunteered to be part of this journey. These senior experts are there to give all the necessary guidance to the group and ensure their full safety. They are challenging themselves to achieve something they never thought would be possible.”

Thoughts?

Qataris’ Support Group Formed to Ease Amazon Adventurers’ Return to Qatar

by Elysia Windrum, with Riham Sheble

Doha News, August 20, 2014

A number of Qatar residents, mostly locals, have set up a support program for the seven Qatari youth who are currently rebuilding a school in Brazil as part of a charity effort.

The volunteers have come under fire over the past week, as many members of the local community engage in a debate about Qatari identity and cultural norms. At issue is whether it is appropriate for Qataris to go on a mixed-gender trip without parental supervision, and for women to remove their headscarves and/or abayas while abroad.

In response to the criticism, Vodafone Qatar this week pulled its name from the “Qatar Firsts” initiative, which it had started and is continuing to fund under contractual obligation.

For their part, the volunteers have said they will continue their work in Brazil, with the help of local production company Mediadante, which was originally hired to film the endeavor.
What's next

The team is expected to return to Doha on Aug. 28, and relatives of the adventurers—particularly the four females ones—have said that the women are shocked and upset about the backlash.

To show their support for the volunteers, some Qatar residents have set up a coed support group that advocates against cyber-bullying and gender inequality. The position is in response to tweets about the Brazil trip, Islamic values and westernization:

"#دﻴﻨﻪﻋﻦﻣﻨﺴﻠﺦمﺠﺘﻤﻊﰲﻳﻄﻠﻊاﻟﺠﺎياﻟﺠﻴﻞﻧﺒﻲمﺎﻫﺬياﻟﺘﻐﺮﻳﺐﻣﻮﺟﺔﺿﺪﺗﺤﺮكﰲﻳﻜﻮنﻻزمﻗﻄﺮ_أﻟﻬﻞ_ﺗYSISءﻓﻮداﻓﻮﻧﻋﺎداﺗﻨﺎﰲﺪّﺣﻤﻴﻛﻞوﻋﻦ" —اﻟﺴﻮﻳﺪيﻓﻴﺼﻞ@(F_AlSuwaidi) August 18, 2014

[Translation: There has to be a serious movement against this westernization wave. We do not want the young generation to grow up alienated from their religion and all that is good in our traditions.]

Some of the tweets so far include:

Paul Gerhard @pgerhard • 18 Aug 2014
Don't let cyber-bullies take you down. Shame on those who hide behind their screens #isupportqatarfirsts

Ali Al-Ansari @AliTheAnsari • 18 Aug 2014
#istandwithqatarfirsts #isupportqatarfirsts those people make me proud as a Qatari, not the people who shamed them.

"#istandwithqatarfirsts #isupportqatarfirsts because there's more than one way to be Qatari. I'm proud of all their choices."
— Mohammed D. Fakhro (@MoeFakhro) August 18, 2014

Connectivity in the Amazon has been limited, but volunteers do have access to the internet. While they are aware of the backlash, family members have told Doha News that the group is fully occupied with their endeavor and rarely check social media sites.

Family reaction

After Vodafone pulled out of the Amazon adventure trip, it took down a website that was supposed to regularly update readers with photos, videos and posts about the trip. This means friends and family are no longer able to track their loved one’s moves or see what they’re up to.

However, Mediadante is apparently sending regular photographs and updates to parents’ emails, and families have also said they’re still in touch on a daily basis.

Mediadante has also said that they will continue to post updates on their website, but no footage will be shared with the public until the trip is over.

A telephone is also being carried along by the group, and families have been provided with the number.

With the seven adventurers thousands of miles away, many of their loved ones have been dealing with the fallout at home.

Fahad Al Tamimi, a brother of one of the female volunteers, told Doha News that he has chosen to ignore critics and support his sister. He said:

"None of them were well-informed. When I explained everything to my sister, she was shocked and didn’t know what to do. She asked if she should continue with the trip and I told her she definitely should and should forget about the minority of people expressing their extremism. It’s only their opinion.

So far, two hashtags have popped up on Twitter: #isupportqatarfirsts and #istandwithqatarfirsts.

Members are encouraging residents to use the hashtags to let the female trekkers know that they have support back home.

In an email, the female Qatari founder of the support group urged people to contribute to society with their perspectives, and complaint to Vodafone’s main headquarters about what has happened.

What’s next

In an email, the female Qatari founder of the support group urged people to contribute to society with their perspectives, and complaint to Vodafone’s main headquarters about what has happened.
She was unsure how to react at first because she didn’t want to cause any more commotion. She told me she won’t be wearing the abaya or veil because she’s in the middle of the Amazon and it’s far too hot. She did say that she would ensure she wore long sleeves and trousers though, and ensure she was respectful."

Al Tamimi added that he had anticipated criticism from the local community, but didn’t expect it to get so nasty.

He also confirmed that his sister Leila, along with the three other women, are now determined to complete the trip for both themselves and the villagers who are relying on a new school for their children.

The women have become their own firm support network and are helping each other pull through, Al Tamimi said.

Other family members of the adventurers have expressed anger at the community reaction.

Nasser Al Naama has two sisters partaking in the excursion, and said he was disappointed with the actions of the public and Vodafone. Speaking to Doha News, he said:

“These innocent girls have been used as scapegoats for something that has nothing to do with them. People have made it a personal victory to see my family defamed and Vodafone has also abandon them.”

Al Naama’s parents also said that they fully support their daughters Aisha and Maqdeem, and have urged them to continue with their journey.

Al Naama’s mother told Doha News:

“Some people are only focusing on the hijab. I don’t understand why. It’s a personal choice. I wear a hijab and have done since I was 15 but they don’t want to. I don’t judge them because of it, and neither should anyone else.

People should focus on the girls’ education, ways of thinking and maturity rather than whether they cover their hair or not. If people don’t want to progress and change then what to do.”

The girls’ father expressed similar emotions, saying:

“We are very proud of our girls. They are not doing anything wrong. They are benefiting the country and society by taking on this humanitarian act.

There are a number of mix gender groups that travel together. They’re certainly not the first Qataris to travel in male company without their male family members. It happens all the time with university trips, studying abroad and in the workforce.”

One family is so angered by both the cyber attacks and Vodafone’s actions that they are currently seeking legal recourse, telling Doha News:

“We have a consultation (this week), so we will see what action will be taken exactly. We will get two lawyers if we need to. We don’t care about the money. We will pay whatever is needed to protect our daughter. We won’t stop until justice is served.”

Thoughts?

DOHA—Over the past few years, or roughly since it won the right to host the 2022 Fifa World Cup, Qatar has found itself at the centre of worldwide media attention—and mostly for unflattering reasons.

To counter this unwelcome spotlight, government bodies and local companies have been involved in putting together events, campaigns and social programmes to show that Qatar is moving ahead with the times. However, sometimes such events end up doing more harm than good to the country’s image.

One such example is the recent fiasco involving a group of young Qataris, who left for Brazil earlier this month to take part in an Amazonian adventure and community-building exercise.

The seven young men and women were backed by telecom company Vodafone and media production house Mediadante. The group is to stay in the South American country for three weeks, during which time they will live in the jungle, canoe through rivers and eventually help local children by rebuilding their school, which burned down earlier this year.

To ensure that the project received publicity, the group was heavily involved in a social media campaign, which included a video showing them leave Doha dressed in traditional Qatari outfits. Photographs taken in Brazil, however, showed that the young women had taken off their abayas and headscarves, which led to an outpouring of disapproval and outrage on social media websites.

Commenters, who were at first critical of the girls’ attire, went on to question the entire project as it was based on a “mixed” group of youth from both genders. A large number of young and progressive Qataris showed their support for the volunteers and their cause, turning it into a heated debate between both sides.

While Vodafone initially chose to continue its backing for the project, saying that the participants had their families’ consent, the continued pressure from locals and possibly some higher-ups led the company to cave in and withdraw its name from the project. It cited the chairman’s “commitment to seeing Vodafone Qatar providing the best services and initiatives that are suitable to the norms and values of the Qatari culture,” in a statement issued following the pull-out.

Those who were calling for action praised the company and its chairman but the move continues to stir debate on local news sites and social media forums. For young local women, the decision comes as a reminder that their country’s journey becoming an inclusive environment does not come without some roadblocks. According to
Alanoud Al Thani, a journalism student in Doha, the move highlights the fact there is a vocal minority, which is trying to impose strict laws and is unwilling to be tolerant and respectful of those who do not follow them.

"On guard"

"This is the first time we have seen such a large-scale attack on mixed-trips and hair showing, and it has put me on guard," Alanoud told Gulf News.

Gulf News contacted several young men and women to seek their opinion on the issue but most of them chose not to comment on the issue as they feared it would bring them into the public eye and jeopardise their ambitions.

Condemning the move, Alanoud said that by deciding to agree with the minority who are calling these women non-Qataris and unfit Muslims for showing their hair, Vodafone has shown that its morals are against that of personal freedom despite claiming that their telecom services have assisted women in developing countries.

After receiving several inquiries and complaints Vodafone stated that it had fulfilled its financial obligations for the project, confirming that its withdrawal was indeed, a face-saving publicity move.

While the Amazon adventure will continue as per schedule, it will be solely run by the production company, which posted an update on its website on Tuesday, to show that the group is moving on with the project, which ends on August 21.

Alanoud is among the dozens of local youth who have taken to social media and personal blogs to censure this latest blot on their country's image. Apart from bringing Qatar back into the world's focus for another unsavoury move, it will also put doubts in the minds of the young progressive individuals like Alanoud, who said: "These trips have been going on for years and they won't stop, but now men and women will think twice before promoting them online for fear of being bullied."

Pro-Qatar Social Media Campaign Backfires Horribly
by Rob Price
The Daily Dot, August 27, 2014

International telecommunications giant Vodafone has come under fire from personal freedom advocates for pulling a social media campaign at the behest of conservative Muslims.

The Vodafone Qatar campaign, called My First Amazon Adventure, was a joint effort between Vodafone and media production house Mediadante. Part of a wider effort to combat a wave of bad press, notably the alleged use of slave labor in the preparation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Doha, the project entailed a group of Qatari youth living in the Amazon rainforest in Brazil for three weeks, taking part in various team-building activities, and rebuilding a local school. The project has been publicized through social media, as well as on the Mediadante's blog.

An initial press release described the project as "all about human endeavor and achieving something remarkable for the first time enabled by the use of Vodafone technology." It's part of the telecom company's new global "Firsts" brand engagement strategy, designed to showcase people doing "remarkable things for the first time."

However, conservative elements of Qatari society have taken to social media to condemn the Vodafone-sponsored project.

One key component of the conservative criticism concerns the group's allegedly unsuitable attire. Gulf News reports that while the group's social media campaign "included a video showing them leave Doha dressed in traditional Qatari outfits," subsequent media released by Mediadante once the group arrived in Brazil revealed that the girls had chosen to remove their headscarves and abayas (a long, modest dress). Furthermore, the group has come under attack for being of mixed gender.

"To organize such a gender-mixed trip that is not in keeping with our conservative society is indeed an insult to the people of Qatar," tweeted one Arabic-speaking critic, Doha News reports. "I don't consider any girl who incomprehensibly abandons her abaya Qatari," said another. "May they not return (safely)," read a third.

This criticism has led Vodafone to withdraw its name from the project, citing a "commitment to seeing Vodafone Qatar providing the best services and initiatives that are suitable to the norms and values of Qatari culture."

"This decision to completely withdraw from this project and cease all kinds of support to it reflects our Chairman H.E Sheikh Dr. Khalid Bin Thani Al Thani’s commitment to seeing Vodafone Qatar providing the best services and initiatives that are suitable to the norms and values of the Qatari culture," Vodafone Qatar officials said.

"This decision to completely withdraw from this project and cease all kinds of support to it reflects our Chairman H.E Sheikh Dr. Khalid Bin Thani Al Thani’s commitment to seeing Vodafone Qatar providing the best services and initiatives that are suitable to the norms and values of the Qatari culture."
Vodafone’s Amazon Adventurers

The officials added: “We will have no responsibility of this initiative from here on in. This initiative will now be the sole responsibility of the production company overseeing the project.”

This decision left Mediadante with sole responsibility for the project—and Vodafone also appears to have scrubbed all record of the project’s existence from its Qatari site, with the advertised website address “vodafone.qa/amazonfirsts” now redirecting to a ‘404 not found’ page.

The actions of Vodafone and the attitudes of the Qatari conservatives are not without their critics. One Doha resident Gulf News spoke to, a journalism student named Alanoud Al Thani, said the events as highlighting a “vocal minority” characterized by intolerance.

Furthermore, Alanoud alleges that “by deciding to agree with the minority who are calling these women non-Qatars and unfit Muslims for showing their hair,” the telecoms company has “shown that its moral are against that of personal freedom despite claiming their telecom services have assisted women in developing countries.”

Other critics are taking to social media to vent their frustration, with many hijacking the project’s #QatarFirsts hashtag.

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A screenshot of Vodafone publicity material showing participants in traditional Qatari attire, along with their Twitter handles—many of which have since been deleted.

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A blog post on Mediadante’s site obliquely references the controversy, saying that the participants in the challenge have “seen everything written about them in the press and online,” and following a “great discussion about what to do over the next weekend,” the group “began what they came there to do . . . building the school.”

“Some leading members of Qatari society gave them a call and offered their support,” the post adds.

The participants will return to Qatar on Thursday, Aug. 28, to an uncertain welcome.

Vodafone did not respond to multiple requests for comment.