

*Preparing Undergraduate Designers Using the Results of a DE&I Survey of  
the Local Design Industry*

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**Abstract**

This paper presents and analyzes the hidden biases in the Dubai design industry and proposes a pedagogical framework to assist students in transitioning into the workforce by equipping them with relevant tools to tackle their occurrences and engaging in reflection around their own biases. Diversity of Dubai is heralded everywhere, yet many designers experience bias from clients, colleagues, and employers. The framework of the survey was based on bias studies conducted in the USA by AIA and in the UK by BIID, with questions modified to align with cultural appropriations applicable to the UAE. Understanding that bias exists is the first element, then followed by bias interrupters. ‘Bias Interrupters for Architecture’ is published by AIA and it discusses various strategies that can help firms’ “diversity metrics, foster a culture of belonging, and make progress toward eliminating bias” (AIA). Data was collected from September until December, 2022. Findings from the survey and approaches from the bias interrupters report will inform lectures, tasks, discussions and other tools in professional practice class and any other classes which support students’ understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Survey findings are expected to confirm that various biases exist. By illuminating both what students may face as professionals and their own hidden biases, they are better able to identify bias and to not engage in similar behaviors. It is important to tackle this issue from various angles simultaneously. Therefore, teaching students the significance of their role in this equation is also an important aspect of everyone’s success.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, UAE Interior Design, UAE Architecture

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## Introduction

The composition of UAE society is unique, in that roughly 88% of the population are not citizens but expatriates. Dubai consistently has a far larger expatriate population than the local / Emirati population which is currently 11.48% of the total (fig.1). At the American University in Dubai (AUD), the same holds true for the student body – the majority of students in the Interior Design (ID) department are expatriates from GCC countries, largely having grown up here. The makeup of the ID department reflects this as well – with five full time faculty: 3 female/2 male; 1 American, 1 Italian, 1 Canadian/Iranian, and 2 Lebanese.



Figure 1: Breakdown of UAE population

Diversity in terms of nationality and/or cultural background is the norm in the UAE. In February 2018, the UAE government approved the National Strategy for Advanced Innovation, this is part of the UAE's goals to shift the economy from oil-based to knowledge-based. As listed on the UAE government website, "The innovation strategy aims to position the UAE among the world's top leaders of innovation and to develop a type of thinking that encourages experimentation and taking well-thought-out risks to achieve the goals of UAE Centennial 2071." (*Home - The Official Portal of the UAE Government*, n.d). According to Kemeny, one of the ways to drive organizational innovation is through a diverse workforce ("Immigrant Diversity and Economic Performance in Cities," 2016). Additionally, in 2015, the UAE government established the UAE's Gender Balance Council, to "ensure that Emirati women continue to play a leading role in the development of the UAE...which will support the UAE's vision to become one of the world's top 25 countries for gender equality by 2021" (*Home - the Official Portal of the UAE Government*, n.d). Likewise, the law in the UAE does address discrimination. There is a law in the UAE which is known as the 'Federal Decree – Law No. (22) of 2021', enshrines equality and non-discrimination in article 4, stating equality and non-discrimination in the workplace. Issues such as diversity, inclusion, and equality are prevalent in most sectors in the UAE economy as a result of the makeup of the society and government led initiatives.

One reason Dubai is so attractive to expatriates is the economic growth, fueled in large part by the construction sector. According to a report by Mordor Intelligence, "The construction sector is the essence of the UAE economy, and the industry is expecting rapid growth in the coming years. The construction industry plays an important role in the economic upliftment

and development of the country.” (*UAE Construction Market Analysis - Industry Report - Trends, Size & Share*, n.d.). As reported in the Emirates News Agency WAM, the Arab Monetary Fund estimates that in the UAE, the construction industry contributes \$36.8 billion to the GDP (2022). The relevance of the construction industry in the UAE is succinctly summed up in Love That Design’s Interior Design Industry Insights for 2023, “What started a little over two decades ago in the form of an aggressive yet strategic push towards a non-oil powered economy has resulted in the creation of a budding, diversified business ecosystem. This ecosystem has generated a need for world-class global design and has created an attractive force that has pulled in design firms and talent from across the world.” (*LoveThatDesign*, 2022).

The construction industry can be broken down into essential roles: those that commission projects, those that design projects, and those that build projects. Design firms in the UAE take many forms, from large international firms, to local fit-out companies offering design services, and everything in between. Architects and Interior Designers (sometimes called Interior Architects) work closely with one another, sometimes as consultants and sometimes as colleagues within the same firm. Both interior designers and architects can be referred to simply as ‘designers’, as roles are complementary and overlap. The diversity of the region is evident in the makeup of these firms. The professions related to the construction industry, and especially Interior Design, are highly collaborative; it takes various roles and responsibilities to move a project from conception to construction.

Around the world Interior Design is a predominantly female led profession; this is true of both the perception and the reality, perhaps owing to its origins in interior decoration, a profession deemed “appropriate” for women (Tuchek, 2020). According to DataUSA, in 2020 83% of the US Interior Design workforce was female (*Interior Designers | Data USA*, n.d.). This is also true in the UAE.

In this paper we will investigate the makeup of the leadership roles in terms of gender, ethnicity and highest qualifications. We will explore the readiness and enthusiasm of interior design students to take on leadership roles in their careers. We will discuss bias interrupter strategies including some key findings as well as steps that some firms are taking to implement these interrupters. Lastly, we will discuss how we have incorporated this work into the classroom.

## **DEI Existing Research**

The global design industry has been engaging in self-reflection for several decades. Within Interior Design, nearly 30 years ago, Interior Design educators were talking about cultural diversity at the 1994 Futures Roundtable in Chicago, IL. At this roundtable, 16 participants from both Interior Design education and practice determined that global cooperation, business values, *cultural diversity*, and technology were noted as important areas to the profession (*Jani et. al*, 2007). As the Architecture profession has been established for a greater length of time than Interior Design, this discussion extends back 55 years at least (Travis, 2018). More recently, the American Institute of Architects (AIA), along with The Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California Hastings College of Law conducted a 2021 quantitative study of bias based on gender and race/ethnicity in the practice of architecture (*New Report: The Elephant in the (Well-Designed) Room: An Investigation into Bias in the Architecture Profession - WorkLife Law*, 2021). They received 1,346 architectural professionals’ responses to their Workplace Experiences Survey. Key findings relate to open

racism and sexism, with white men having a different experience than all other groups in architecture workplaces (Fig 2 & 3).

**“...Most women of my generation left the profession entirely because of discrimination and lack of opportunities. Those who remain in the profession literally all own their own firms, most with their husbands or other small offices, it was the only way to survive. Data will show female ownership or women in principal roles, but only because they were forced out of other offices or denied career advancement opportunities in offices they worked.”**

**—White woman**

Figure 2: AIA survey

**“Racism is pervasive in all work environments (e.g., job sites, client meetings, office). Equal opportunities do not appear to be extended equally to colleagues of similar experience level... We are perceived as the ‘help,’ not the leaders when oftentimes we are more capable of leading the job. Minorities having more degrees, more years of experience, more quals never equate to white males with less experience, as they are better-connected individuals. Constant country club behavior.”**

**—Multiracial woman architectural professional**

Figure 3: AIA survey

In 2020, the British Institute of Interior Design (BIID) did its first ever survey of the profession, citing a lack of demographic data on the make-up of the UK's interior design profession (*Diversity in Interior Design Survey Results*, 2021). They received 363 responses. We refer to a quote from the survey to get a glimpse into challenges faced by women (fig. 4).

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Whilst I worked for other designers and architects: Racist jokes in offices that I have worked in ; Less qualified colleagues being promoted above me ; Less pay compared to colleagues who do same work ; Better projects being given to other colleagues ; Shouted at on site for no obvious reason ; Being overly qualified but still in more junior roles so I have had to start my own business.

Figure 4: from BIID survey

Within the region, Construction Week Middle East magazine conducted a survey in 2019 for women architects focused on gender discrimination at work. Respondents were asked about sexual discrimination, unequal pay, and attitudes towards women. Their survey garnered 141 responses from more than 10 countries in the Middle East. More than 75% of the women who completed the survey said they had experienced sexual discrimination in meetings with clients, contractors, engineers, planners and other architects (Alsammarae, 2019).

### **Methodology**

Since the UAE is so diverse and the Interior Design industry is heavily female led, the research will explore real experiences within the design industry in the UAE. As educators, our interest involves understanding how the findings help us best prepare our students to join the professional world.

Our professional survey was distributed to Interior Design alumni from both AUD and Heriot Watt (from the past 15 years), sent out to our professional networks and Advisory Board members via email and on LinkedIn, and was shown as a link on both LoveThatDesign's newsletter and as part of a design-industry recruiter's email signature for a month in the fall of 2022. The survey was available from September-December 2022.

The basic findings of the survey show the following.

We had 95 responses from which 67.4% were female, and 32.6% male. A closer look at the breakdown of nationalities shows that Indians are the largest group, followed by Egyptians and then Pakistani and Syrians, followed by Jordanians, Americans and British and lastly Emiratis at only 1% which constitutes 70% of the answers. The remaining 30% are made up of many different nationalities each at 1 or 2% each (Table 1).

Nationality	Percentage
Indian	36.8%
Egyptians	9.4%
Pakistani	5.2%
Syrian	5.2%
Jordanian	4.2%
American	4.2%
British	4.2%
Emirati	1%

Table 1: Breakdown of 70% of the nationalities of the survey

The data reveals that almost 35% of the respondents have more than 12 years of experience in the field which is closely followed by 26% respondents who were relatively new to the profession with up to 3 years of experience (fig. 5).

Largely similar to the above, the breakdown of the roles in the company shows 24% at partner level and 24% at junior designer level (fig 6). However, it also raises the question of the roles of the respondents who had more than 12 years of experience. Further investigation of the data reveals that their roles were mainly director, manager or partner.

Number of years in the design profession  
92 responses

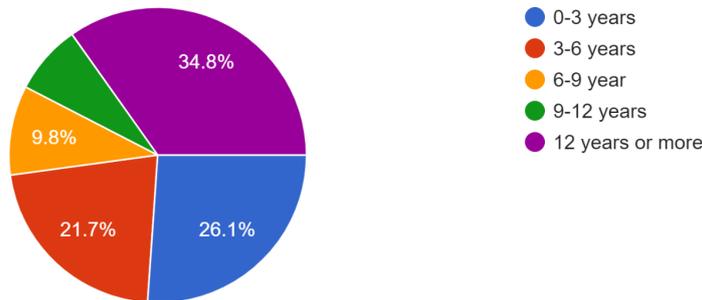


Figure 5: DEI survey of Professionals in Dubai

Role in current company?  
89 responses

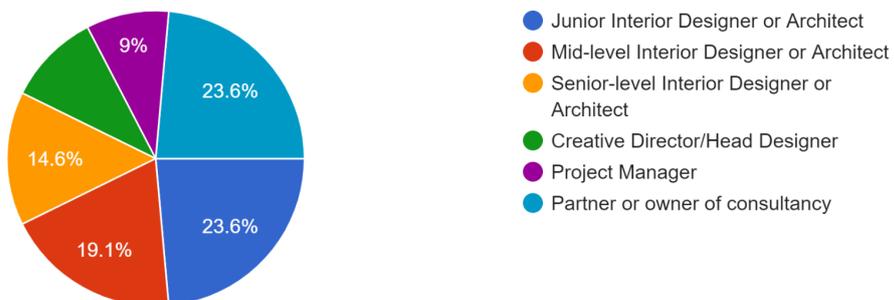


Figure 6: DEI survey of Professionals in Dubai

Yet when we looked deeper into more senior roles, there was a sharp contrast between what males and females were doing in the workplace. Not accounting for years of experience, we can observe that 9 female respondents are Senior Designers, but only 4 are Creative Directors and 3 are Project Managers out of 62 respondents. Whereas only 4 out of 30 male respondents were Senior Designers and 5 were Creative Directors and 4 were Project Managers. Senior level management positions have a strong representation of men and an equal or lower representation of women (fig. 7). On a similar tone 12 out of the 62 women are partners as compared to 9 men in the role of partner or owner, which resonates with the comment found in AIA survey (fig. 2) above that women are “forced out” or “denied career advancement opportunities”. More women are seen in more junior to mid-level roles, whereas more men are seen in mid-level to senior management roles despite the fact that a higher percentage of women have more experience in the profession with the exception of respondents with more than 12 years’ experience (fig. 8).

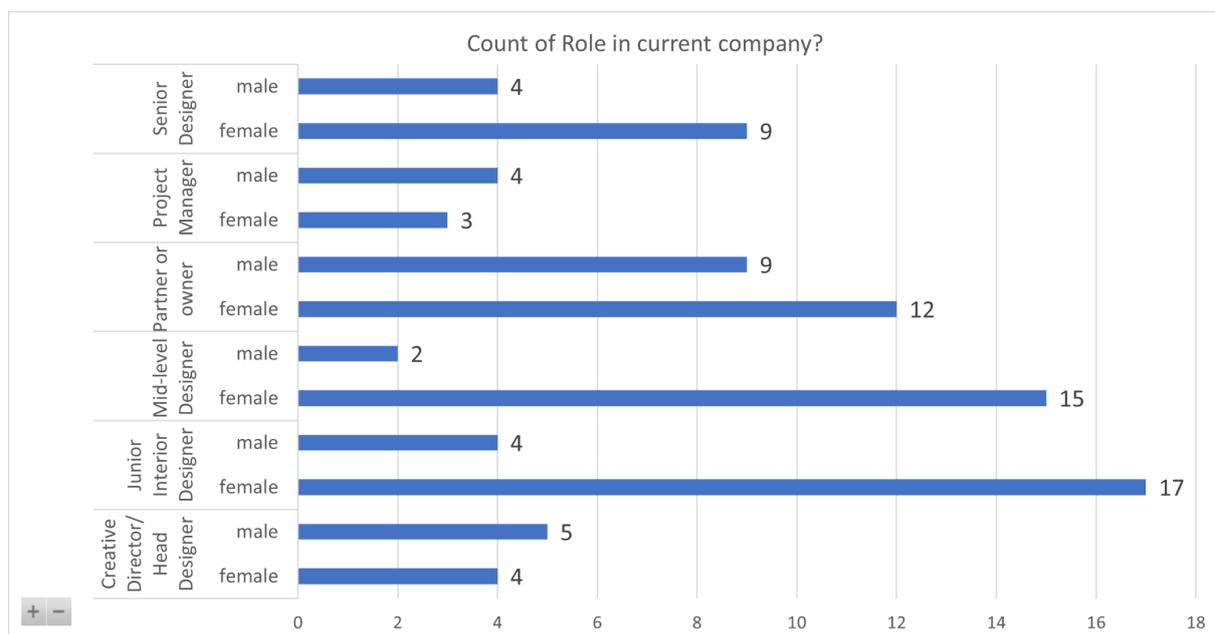


Figure 7: DEI survey of Professionals in Dubai

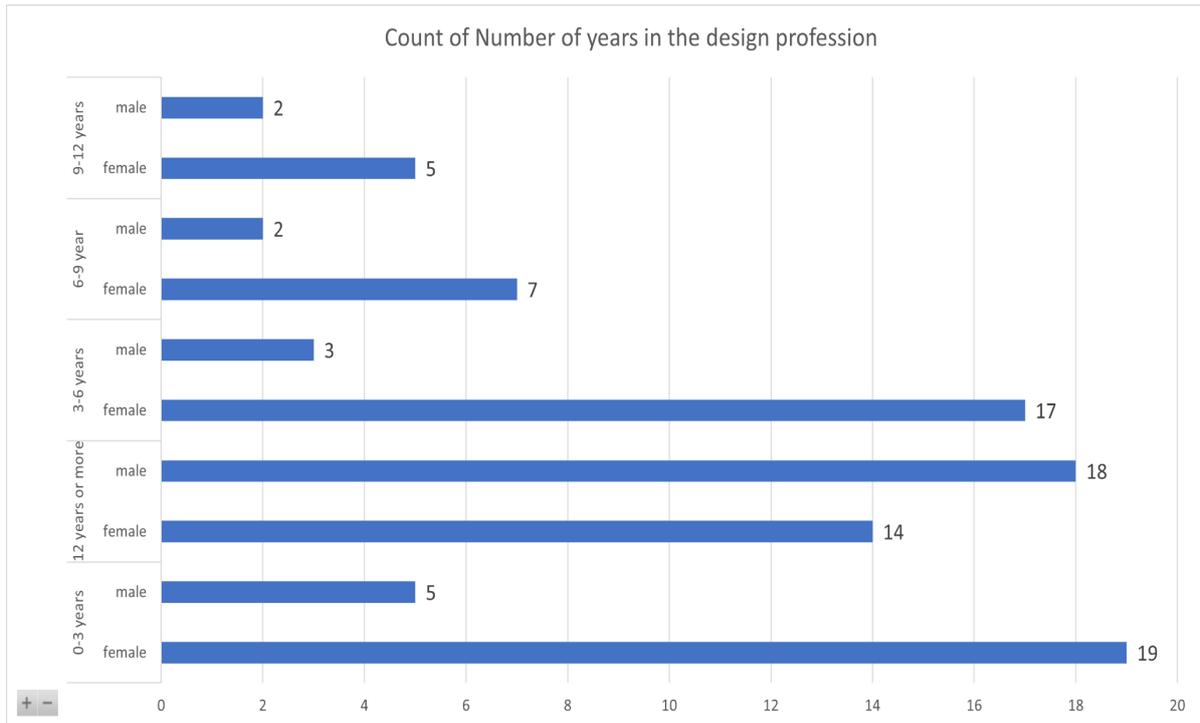


Figure 8: DEI survey of Professionals in Dubai

Similar numbers stated that their race/ethnicity has created barriers to their progression in the design industry. Our survey received responses from 30 different nationalities which is representative of the diverse population of UAE, but it makes it difficult to analyze instances of racism based on nationalities. Therefore, we have looked at incidents of racism based on gender. The number of women who experienced racism is almost double or higher than that of the men which is similar to the 2:1 women to men ratio of the respondents.

Higher number of women experience negative reactions to justified anger than men. Similarly, women experience more pushback to assertive behavior than men, and higher number of women are made to feel that their success is a result of luck rather than their own hard work (fig. 9, 10, 11).

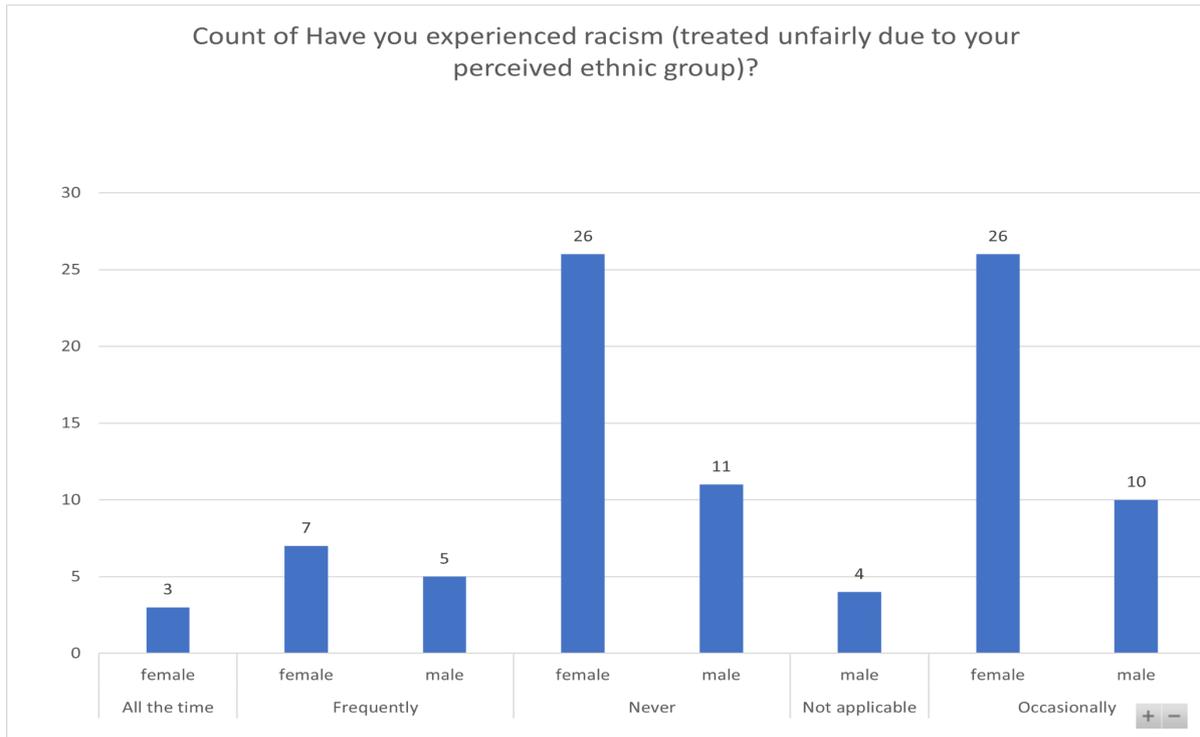


Figure 9: DEI survey of Professionals in Dubai

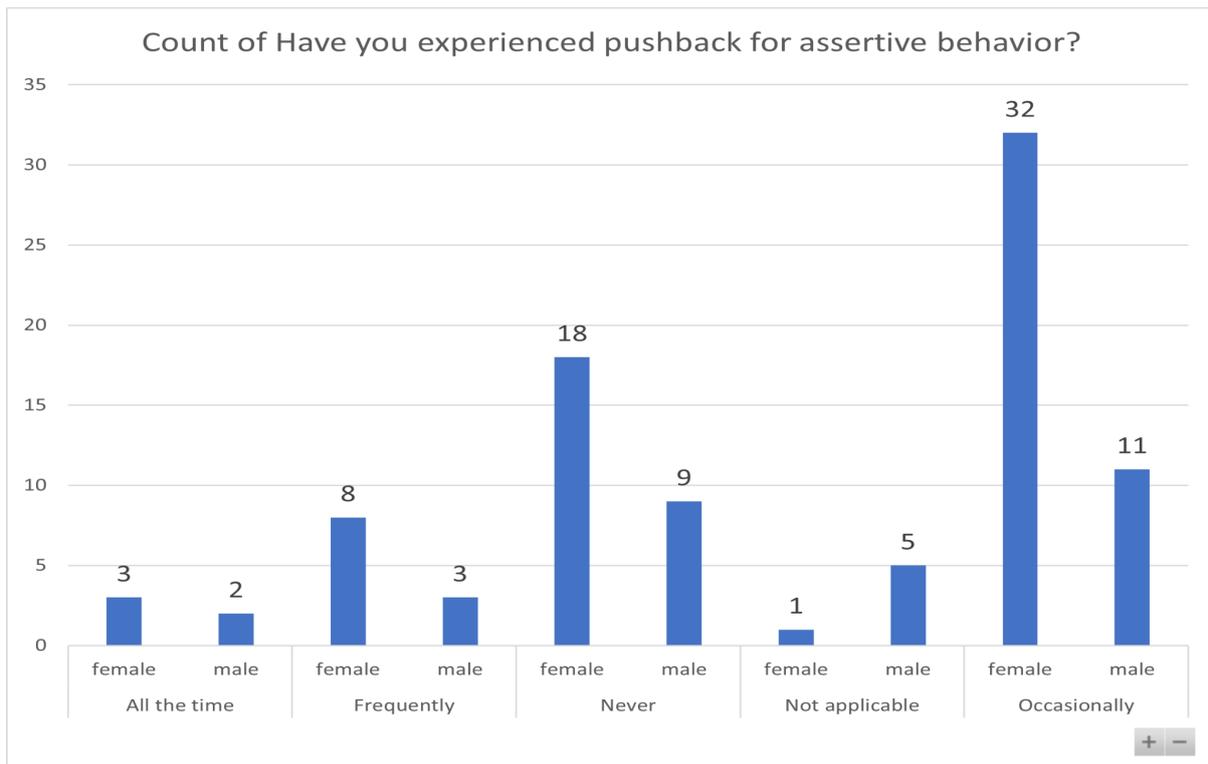


Figure 10: DEI survey of Professionals in Dubai

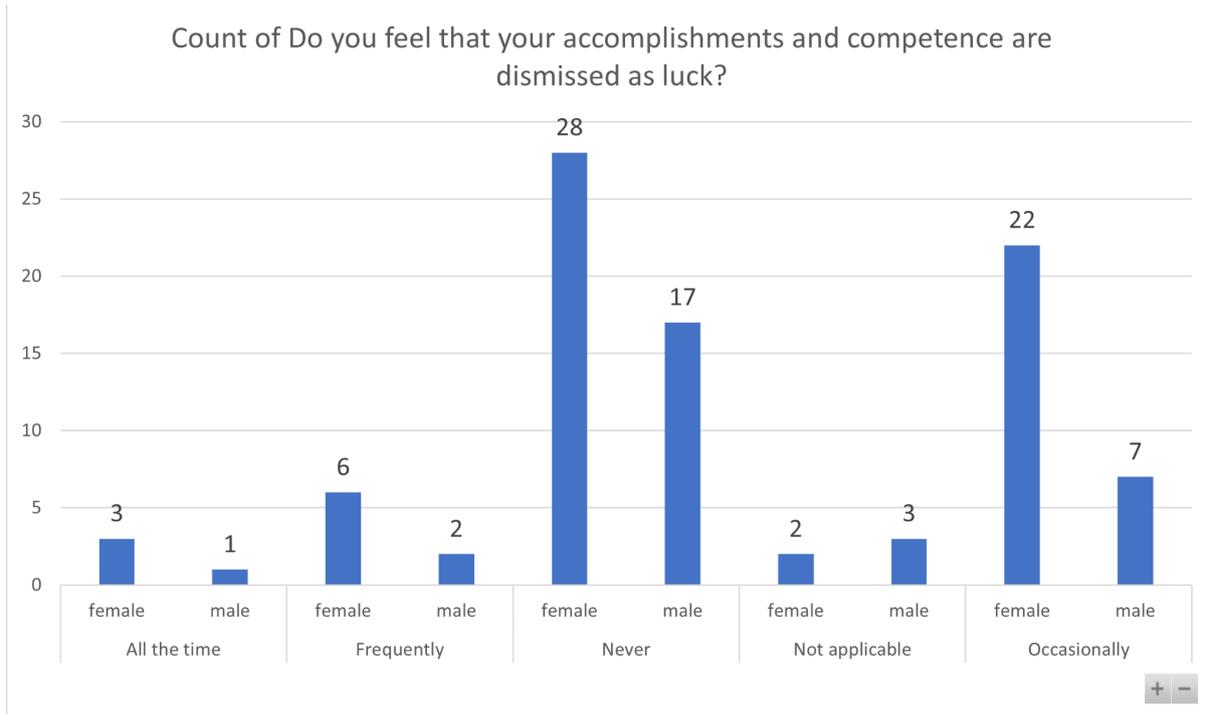


Figure 11: DEI survey of Professionals in Dubai

Have you experienced racism (treated unfairly due to your perceived ethnic group)?  
93 responses

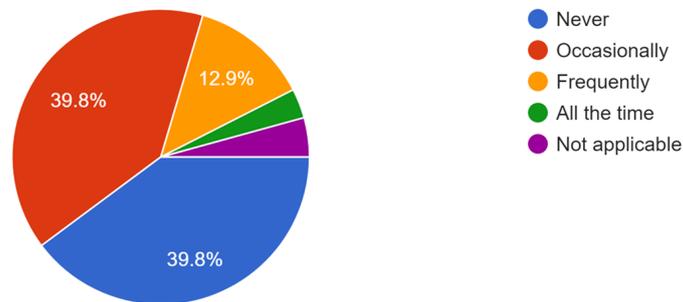


Figure 12: DEI survey of Professionals in Dubai

### Students in UAE

In order to establish a baseline for our current students' understandings related to DE&I, a second survey was sent via email in early 2023 to students at various stages within the Interior Design program at AUD. Given that our student population is majority female and of expatriate backgrounds, survey responses related to sexism and racism were of greater relevance.

We had 27 responses (92.6% female, 7.4% male).

Have you experienced racism (treated unfairly due to your perceived ethnic group)?

27 responses

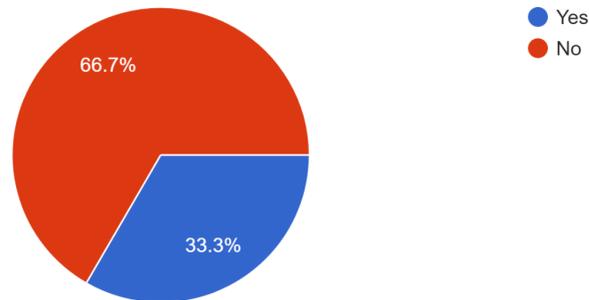


Figure 13: DEI survey of Students in Dubai

Have you experienced sexism (treated unfairly due to your gender)?

27 responses

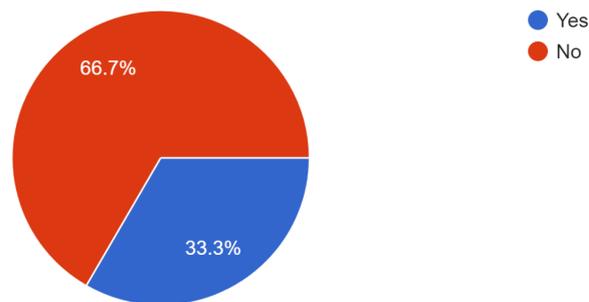


Figure 14: DEI survey of Students in Dubai

Overall, students' experiences with racism and sexism were less than that of the professionals (fig. 13 & 14). Yet students demonstrated awareness of these issues, with 77.8% of students responding that they think their future career may be negatively impacted by another person's bias. Students also demonstrated a drive to achieve a leadership role; 85.2% of students responded they wished to take on a leadership role (eventually), and 88.9% responded they would start their own firm in order to achieve a senior leadership position.

### **Within the Classroom**

These surveys have led to a change in AUD's Professional Practice course (required for 3rd year students). In spring 2023, we shared the surveys with students as an opening to a module on bias, DE&I, and bias interrupters. We then approached bias as a biological brain function, a way to organize information. To underscore this, we did an Implicit Association Test in front of students from Project Implicit (put together by researchers at U of Washington, U of Virginia, Harvard U and Yale U). We chose the test on genders and careers, and despite our best efforts, we showed slight bias towards linking males with careers and females with family. Students were encouraged to take additional tests on their own at home, with a goal of understanding that bias can be hidden, but that when revealed, we can make a more conscious effort to not act out of it.

From [biasinterrupters.org](http://biasinterrupters.org), we shared with students the idea of workplace bias interrupters:

“For organizations who care about employees who are more committed, innovative and loyal, a three-step approach:

1. Use metrics – businesses use metrics to assess whether they have progressed towards any strategic goal. Metrics can help you pinpoint where bias exists and assess the effectiveness of the measures you’ve taken to prevent or combat bias.
2. Implement bias interrupters – bias interrupters are small adjustments to your existing business systems. They should not require you to entirely abandon your current system.
3. Repeat as needed – After implementing bias interrupters, return to your metrics. If they have not interrupted, you will need to ratchet up to stronger bias interrupters.”  
(*Bias Interrupters*, n.d.)

Discussions with students included potential interview questions when applying for jobs, how to gauge a potential employer’s “culture”, and ways in which to address DE&I workplace issues. Our hope in all this is that students are aware that this exists, that they are not alone, and that they can bring pressure on their future organizations to better address DE&I, as it has a profound impact on financial performance.

Alongside this work students are also participating in an inter-university design competition. This competition is mentored by an international design firm (Dubai office) that is committed to both reaching out to students and discussing DE&I. By placing students in groups composed from different universities (both in the region and internationally), and with non-faculty mentors, students are confronted with the need to communicate effectively; they are pushed out of their comfort zone. It is also a benefit for students to experience professionals within their chosen field that work for an organization that values DE&I. This competition first ran in 2022 and is currently running its second iteration. Feedback from 2022’s reflection essays:

DE&I is very important, because it encourages us to recognize, respect and embrace others regardless of their differences. I believe that this competition is about coming together to share our different knowledge, experiences and ideas to have better discussions and better decision making, which ultimately leads to better outcomes

DE&I has a very important role to play in each of our lives. Be it a small play group or a large organization the aspect of being included and given the respect and equality that every human deserves is a necessity. Through this competition, having to work with complete strangers with different backgrounds and outlooks to life and design, was a very interesting process and it is essentially these difference that made us direct our thought to achieve a single perspective

The fact that we all came from different backgrounds made communication a bit more difficult, but we were able to reach a common point of understanding through multiple meetings

## **Conclusion**

Our survey has shown that despite the high presence of women in the design industry, they are not seen in management or senior roles in companies. We do see that there is a higher

number of women who are partners or owners; this is also reflected in the surveys from other countries - women start their own companies in order to achieve a leadership role.. Women receive pushback for assertive behavior, negative reactions to justified anger, and their accomplishments are dismissed as luck more often than not. Even though women are capable of answering certain questions they find the questions being addressed to others. We are not able to discern why this is the case due to the limitations of the first survey. We would continue to collect data through conducting focus groups or workshops on the topic so that there can be a wider discussion around the subject. Students demonstrate an awareness of overall DE&I issues, and know that they may have to deal with these obstacles in their professional lives. We would like to equip them with tools that can help them navigate through their professional careers so that they can achieve senior management roles in design firms if they choose to.

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