Hijabis, Proxies, and Difference

Samar Sabie
Cornell University
NYC, NY 10044, USA
sks286@cornell.edu

Abstract

Hijab is an Arabic word referring to a veil/head cover. Islamic traditions mandate adult women to wear it in the presence of most men to maintain modesty. A Hijabi subject living in the West can find herself conspicuously different in many contexts, a minority, and sometimes unable to partake in many hegemonic practices that go against her religious values. The salient discomfort in speaking about difference and a general secular atmosphere can make it hard for her to bring up this tension or propose alternatives. This paper describes the motivation and design guidelines for HCI that supports the self-advocacy of a Hijabi subject in the context of a graduate Western university through the concept Proxy Objects.

Author Keywords

Difference; cultural sensitivity; tangible user interfaces

CSS Concepts

● Social and professional topics~User characteristics~Religious orientation ● Human-centered computing~Human computer interaction (HCI)~Interaction techniques

Introduction

The Western model of liberal democracy posits society members as rational, equal, and autonomous agents who engage in orderly negotiation processes to advance their interests, and relegate their controversial beliefs and differences to the private realm in order to co-exist peacefully as a public [1]. Scholars from philosophy [2], political science [5], and urban sociology [7] have contested this approach because it promotes homogeneity and blindness to the very difference it seeks to foster [6],

conceals the coercion at play by the majority group [4], and jeopardizes the democratic right of "the other" [10]. Engaging with difference in a secular context such as a graduate ICT university campus is further complicated when such difference stems from practicing a religion such as Islam. That is because the salient liberal model is built on rationalist Enlightenment ethos and a view of faith as a cognitive framework rather than a system of legislations and rituals [2]. This creates a paradox for practicing Muslim students as Islam draws no divisions between private beliefs and public behavior, and its teachings regulate every aspect of life including clothes, interaction among genders, food consumption, and daily worship practices.

In this paper, I narrate how the lack of robust stratagems to speak about and deal with religion-based difference on campus, and the individual nature of difference created tension between my desire to intergrate with the campus community on the one hand and maintaining my Islamic values on the other. I then showcase through two examples how HCI can be leveraged for engaging with difference and reducing the discomfort associated with it.

Religion-based Difference and Campus Secularism

Before starting my PhD, I spent a decade at a large, 192-old North American university with a large Muslim population. The four factors (location, size, age, and demographic) contributed to that institution having robust diversity initiatives, religions accommodations, and embedded cultural sensitivities. That made my experience as a Muslim female student who practices a conservative strand of Islam largely seamless. In August 2017, I moved to a different institution to start my PhD and was based in its brand-new NYC campus. Analogously, the sheer newness, small size, and generally secular and homogenous student population rendered many aspects of the enculturation process at odds with my faith.

It only took a few weeks at the new campus for me to realize that I could not partake in a lot of mainstream activities such as socializing over alcohol, being friends with male colleagues or sharing accommodations with them during conferences and trips, celebrating non-Muslim holidays, petting the neighbors' dogs while waiting for the elevator, using the coed dorm gym, and consuming food not meeting Halal standards, among others.

Being different and attempting to bring it up to find a solution has been a multi-layered challenge. First, I was in a constant state of weighing options and making decision: to do because everyone does, or to not do because it might be Islamically non-permissible? Second, being conflict averse by nature and the only Muslim in the PhD cohort, I could not speak about my restrictions so as not to offend others (e.g. when male colleagues asked for my number or to attend a gathering I organized), reject their hospitality (e.g. dinner invites), put them in an uncomfortable situation (e.g. turning down a handshake), come off as the "disruptive PhD" (e.g. proposing bubble tea happy hour), or dispute a system that is strongly secular. Either I said nothing or had to find twisted reasonings for bailing out. For example, following a dinner invite from a professor, I spent a week researching them and forecasting the probability of alcohol being served (it was served; I sat as far back on the table I almost fell off my chair). It took nearly a year for me to open up to two professors that I could not sit at that table if there is alcohol on it, and longer for other things. Third, very few could be trusted with my quandary because it is religion-based. Seeking advice from the wrong persons easily turned into self-sabotage: they saw it as unjustifiable (compared for example to allergy-

induced dietary restrictions which are inevitable/rational), self-inflicted "suffering", or imposed by family "which I now live far away from". Fourth, there were simply no channels to scrutinize difference that exists in the social terrain of campus other than casual conversations. I considered giving a five-minute talk about my restrictions at a department lunch but decided against it after hearing from some colleagues that most would not want to sit through an "uncomfortable 5-minute confrontation". Lastly, the two times where I requested accommodations (a reflection space, a private hotel room during a research retreat) led to backlash as some felt it was unjust resource allocation and that the accommodation process lacked transparency.

Collectively, the absence of channels to speak about difference (despite institutional interest in diversity) and the general secular atmosphere made me feel excluded from many opportunities. Overtime, our campus gained momentum for women, community service, and LGBTQ initiatives. But the fight for religious and cultural sensitivity was *my* fight; I had supporters but no one else needed such accommodations. Even conversations at the Tapia conference for diversity in computing revolved around race, disability, and gender while faith and culture remained a "blind spot" as a member of the ICT community noted. Admittedly, some of the Muslim students I met at Tapia had an easier time because there had other Muslims in their departments or because they were more confrontationally competent than me.

Realizing this limitation in my personality and my chronic minority status made me turn to the mediums familiar and comfortable to everyone in my ICT community, namely design and HCI, and ask: How can design create channels for speaking about uncharted issues of difference when direct confrontations are hard or undesirable? How can design support the individual expression of difference as a form of self-advocacy? And how can design facilitate a transparent and informative process for requesting and accommodating difference?

Proxy Objects

Psychologist John Dewey argues that art can "break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" [3]. Leveraging that and the affordances of technology as an affable content purveyor, I propose Proxy Objects as a first step towards bringing up difference, religion-based or other, and easing the tension around it. These objects are interactive art-like artifacts that allow the integration of custom audio, video, photos, and text. They engage on behalf of their authors in contesting, proposing, prescribing desired behaviors, and eliciting audience reactions. When placed in hallways, lounges, and labs, these artifacts create a break in human-human confrontation, giving both the author and audience the time, space, and autonomy to help reduce the uncanny and uncomfortable nature of difference.

In August 2019, I won a university grant with a partnering gallery to organize a Proxy Object exhibition. The gallery board dejected the idea of incorporating pieces inspired by my experience, demanding a non-confrontational, non-controversial, and *non-denominational exhibit*. After two months of trying to fold their criteria into my Proxy Objects, I was advised to just focus on what design requirements are necessary for such objects to represent me as a conservative Hijabi subject.

I detail below my design requirement as exemplified by the Hijab Mannequin (HM) prototype and the Hijabi and the Prince (HP) prints. These Proxy Objects are part of a series I am working on to introduce to campus community to the
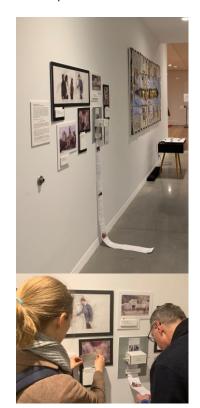
Figure 1: The Hijabi Mannequin

Figure 2: Visitors interacting with the Hijabi and the Prince

ways in which I am different, what accommodations that entails, and the community reactions towards that difference. HM introduces the most conspicuous difference about me (hijab) through a mannequin that can be touched to demystify the headscarf, accompanied by oral stories on what it means and the experiences of wearing it. HP is a series of Photoshop generated water-color like prints depicting in text and visuals the story of a Hijabi woman who turned down the handshake of the Norwegian prince when he visited her mosque. The prints go into the what, why, twitter reactions, and the implications of that story for our campus. In answering the last question, I say "next time you meet someone new, consider asking how they like to be greeted?". Proxy Objects for a Hijabi Subject fulfill these requirements:

Attention-Deflecting: Proxy Objects recall the Wearable Body Organs [8] and the Alien Staff [9] which are shaped as mouth pieces and hand-held objects to tell the story of their carriers to the public. But a Proxy Object has to do the telling on my behalf as I slip unnoticed. Being the different one all the time, I do not want artifacts that draw yet more attention to me; I delegate the attention to them. Our lab visitors have seen and sometimes inquired about HM since she was built in July 2019, and HP has been telling the handshaking story since Dec 2019 in a hallway without me being there.

Slow, Modest, and Optional: When an artifact is going to speak about the most important aspect of my life, i.e. religion, I wanted this information to be precious, respected, and only viewed by those who are interested or ready for it. This goes against dominant, fast, and attention-drawing tech paradigms. In HM, stories about the headscarf is retrieved by listening to a radio-like device playing at relatively-low volume through an ear piece. In

HP, content about handshaking is placed in hidden placards. Interested viewers have to come close and retrieve them. A visitor once noted: "I like the mirroring of the slips of paper being concealed and the head scarf-which also conceals." The prints are also subdued but hint at their content, and a warning is giving in the introductory placard that the information presented is about religion, to ensure optional engagement.

Incorporate Familiar Experiences to Reduce Discomfort: HP, a juxtaposition between classic art, touch, and a cascading twitter roll, and HM vintage radio experience echo the familiar demo culture on campus but for an unfamiliar issue.

Fosters a Conversation: a primary goal of Proxy Objects is to foster a two-way conversation that acknowledges the multiplicity of opinions around its content and any accommodation concerns. HM allows recording voice reactions which can also be heard by switching to the a "reactions" channel, and I plan to add "submit tweet" feature to HP. These reactions would have to go through a filtration process (done by a non-Hijabi/non-Muslim for sanity purposes) before they are incorporated.

Allows Creedal Ventilation: the wall of silence created around difference as a form of politeness means I am rarely asked why I do or do not do certain things. It is often suggested that I explain my reasons using rational factors such as germs or allergies (for not eating halal food). Proxy Objects provide a platform to get into Islamic ruling and rationale behind it. HM and HP both speak about the concepts of modesty and mahram (a mahram is a male family member with whom marriage is not allowed such as a father, brother, uncle, or nephew) to explain the headscarf and handshaking.

References

1. Seyla Benhabib (ed.). 1996. Introduction. In *Democracy and Difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 3–18.
2. William E. Connolly. 2005. *Pluralism*. Duke University Press, Durham.
3. John Dewey. 1954. *The Public and Its Problems*. Swallow Press, Athens.
4. Jane Mansbridge. 1996. Using Power/Fighting Power: The Polity. In *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Seyla Benhabib (ed.). Princeton University Press, 46–66.
5. Chantal Mouffe. 1993. *The return of the political*. Verso, London.
6. Anne Phillips. 1996. Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas, or a Politics of Presence? In *Democracy and Difference*, Seyla Benhabib (ed.). Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 348–359.
7. Richard Sennett. 1992. *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY.
8. Krzysztof Wodiczko. 1994. Alien Staff. *Assemblage*, 23: 7–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/3171229
9. Krzysztof Wodiczko. 1999. *Critical vehicles: writings, projects, interviews*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
[10] Iris Marion Young. 1996. Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy. In *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Seyla Benhabib (ed.). Princeton University Press, 120–134.