
On the Divide of Conceptualizing Islam: Which Islam is Represented?

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection of the authors' work with a Muslim population, the members of which exhibited diverse views of Islam which they developed through their interaction with other cultures. I therefore argue for the need to be extra cautious when researchers claim to represent "Islam" or a "Muslim" population in their work. I reflect on three levels of tension might arise in our attempt to represent "Muslim" populations. I then conclude with a broader question of representation (without filters) for HCI researchers to consider.

Author Keywords

Islam; Diversity; Identity; Representation; Culture.

CSS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing~ Human computer interaction (HCI);** *HCI theory, concepts and models;* Please use the 2012 Classifiers and see this link to embed them in the text:

https://dl.acm.org/ccs/ccs_flat.cfm

Introduction

Accounting for cultural contexts beyond the western model of culture has been widely acknowledged in HCI. Minorities and marginalized groups from different cultures have been the center of attention in the recent

movements toward a more inclusive HCI. One of these groups is the broad Muslim population (e.g. [1,2,3,10]). A distinctive aspect of this group is its identification based on religious identity, as opposed to the traditional cultural and ethnic identification of other marginalized groups. What is problematic with this is that (1) the Muslim population is large (over two billion), diverse and spread out culturally and geographically [12]; and (2) the interpretations of Islam and Quran (the holy book) have evolved and diverged throughout the past 1400 years [4,9]. As such, this has created representation issues of Muslims in media, research and politics. In this paper, I discuss three levels of representation issues and their implication for HCI researchers.

Representation Issues of Muslims

Due to the diversity within Muslim population, the question of which Islam is represented remains a challenging endeavor for researchers working with this population. Below I reflect on three levels of differences in conceptualizing Islam to consider when representing Muslims in research and design.

(1) The difference between researchers and participants

HCI researchers working with Muslim population are typically intellectual cosmopolitans with high levels of research (and philosophy) education gained in Western countries. Thus, even in cases where these researchers are cultural/religious insiders (i.e. Muslims), their education may influence their philosophical views of Islam and typical correlated matters such as gender equality and human rights. Intellectuals thus are more likely to adopt a more moderate and progressive conception of Islam which complies with universal

ethical standards. The process of re-conceptualizing Islam is usually supported by the maxim of "cultural Islam [6]" which suggests there is a distinction between Islam and Muslim practices (culture). Thus, to counter *Islamophobia* [5] and the widespread criticisms and radicalization of Islam, intellectuals would either attribute these problems to culture or to the misinterpreting of sacred text by religious scholars. The former is the most common approach, whereas the latter is usually denounced among Muslims. Typically, intellectuals use terms such as "authentic Islam", "pure Islam", "real Islam", "true Islam" or "timeless Islam", to refer to a version of Islam that is not abused by certain cultural atrocities [6].

However, the way intellectuals represent Islam may not reflect the same views of the population under study. Since Islam and culture are heavily intertwined in many Islamic societies, and questioning scholars' validity is denounced, ordinary Muslims are discouraged to engage in such debates. Perhaps the majority of Muslims are in fact "Muslim by culture" maintaining a certain set of beliefs and practices inherited from their cultural environment [6]. This means they do not actively engage in understanding and conceptualizing Islam. Taken this consideration into account, it is necessary to investigate the difference between researchers and their participants in terms of their conceptualization of Islam. This can address the question of which Islam is represented? Is it that of the researchers' or the participants'?

Further, if attempting to represent the participants' Islam, another question is triggered regarding: which Islam is represented? Which scholars (if any) have influenced the participants' views? In which culture? These questions create another level of issues

(diversity of Muslim populations), discussed in the next section

(2) The differences within the Muslim population

The diverse nature of Muslim populations, including diverse views of religious scholars, makes it evident they are not monolith and there is no such thing as the so called "true Islam". Not only the differences arise on the macro between Islamic cultures and countries, but also on the micro within each culture and community. The power dynamic and the dominant societal groups play a role in dictating what Islam is in many Islamic communities.

For instance, different generations may have different views of Islam. However, as I found with my participants, even when some young people have different or more progressive views, in practice, they prefer not to challenge their parents or the elder generation as a whole. Moreover, Islam has been dominantly interpreted by male and many Islamic societies are deeply patriarchal. Thus, it is more likely that the dominant perceptions and views of Islam in Islamic communities are infused with the patriarchal culture and dominated by males dictating what is right and what is wrong. Particularly, when it comes to women's issues, there is a clear divide between men and women as men in many Islamic countries tend to be less supportive to gender equality [11]. Nonetheless, some women in fact may be instruments for the patriarchy [7]. Additionally, the recent growth of a group of young people identify as non-practicing Muslims or ex-Muslims in online platforms express difficulties in exposing their views in real life in their Muslim communities. Opening up about one's struggle with some religious rulings is stigmatized and perceived

as committing a grave sin and thus may be shunned [7]. Therefore, this group live (and are perhaps studied) as part of the Muslim population with the dominant views in their community.

These power dynamics bring a challenge to researcher in terms of representing Islam or Muslim communities without perpetuating the dominant groups' views over the minorities (based on age, gender, views ..etc)

(3) The difference between inner and outer perceptions of the Muslim population

Muslim populations are portrayed in mainstream media (and research) as oppressed victims of dictatorships, Sharia laws, wars or Islamophobia. Women especially are more subject to the perception of having being oppressed, having little to no agency, or being "traditionally submissive" as per the statement attributed to David Cameron [8]. Thus, the public image of Muslims implies the need for a savior to rescue them, be it the West, media or us, researchers. However, working closely with a Muslim population may reveal that this is not how they perceive of themselves. Either they have a different "interpretation" of their situations or in fact, many of them, including women, are content with their culture, regime and the legal systems. In many cases, they would acknowledge the existence of social problems, but they would perceive them as something inevitable for any society to have, and that such problems do not necessarily box them in the victim narrative.

On the other hand, commercial media has attempted to represent a modern westernized version of Muslims. For instance, Muslim women wearing modern styles of hijab portrayed in commercials as symbols of inclusive brands. However, some have claimed this is

misconstrued representation of ordinary Muslim women and does not resonate with their ideals [7]. It is perceived as modified western version imposing an ideal of what Muslim women should look like. As such, it is crucial for researchers to be wary of the mainstream representation of Muslims and how it might influence researchers' work to fit within the mainstream accepted narratives by other academics and publishing journals.

Conclusion

Echoing a question raised by Mariam Khan [7]: "when was the last time you heard a Muslim woman speak for herself without a filter?", I conclude with the question of: how might we represent Muslim populations considering the effects of the filters listed in this paper?

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