Hijabies, Proxies, and Difference

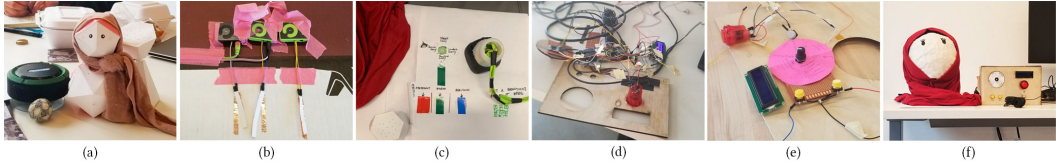SAMAR SABIE, Department of Information Science, Cornell Tech, USA

Fig. 1. The Hijabi Mannequin Proxy Object (a) Early prototype, (b)(c) Using ready-made mp3 chips (d) Switching to Raspberry Pi, (e) Radio dial for intro, hijab stories, recording, and FAQ channels (f) Final artefact

Hijab is an Arabic word referring to a veil/head cover. Islamic traditions mandate adult women to wear it in the presence of certain types of men (non-mahrams) 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 of Proxy Objects.

CCS Concepts: • **Social and professional topics → Religious orientation**; • **Human-centered computing** → *Interaction design process and methods*.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: difference, cultural sensitivity, secularism, modesty, interactive devices

1 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, while relegating their beliefs and differences to the private realm so as to co-exist peacefully as a public [1]. Scholars from philosophy [2], political science [5], and urban sociology [7] have contended that this approach 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 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) university campus is further complicated when such difference stems from practicing a religion. That is because the salient liberal model predominant in such contexts is built on rationalist Enlightenment ethos and a view of faith as a cognitive framework rather than a system of legislations and enacted rituals [2]. This creates a paradox, for practicing Muslim students for example, 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 stratagems to speak about and deal with religion-based difference on campus, and the individual nature of difference, created tension between my desire to integrate with the campus community on the one hand and maintaining my Islamic values on the other. I then showcase through two examples of how HCI can be leveraged for engaging with difference and reducing the discomfort associated with it.

2   RELIGION-BASED DIFFERENCE AND CAMPUS SECULARISM

My upbringing in the Middle East was highly imbued with Islamic teachings. After moving to North America at the age of 17, I continued to practice my religion by observing both individual private acts of faith such as praying and fasting, and more public aspects such wearing the hijab and acting modesty with non-mahrams (a mahram is a male family member with whom marriage is not allowed such as a father, brother, uncle, or nephew). Before starting my PhD, I spent ten years at a large university in North America that was established in the 1800s and has a large Muslim population. 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 practicing Muslim female student fairly seamless. In August 2017, I moved to a different institution to start my PhD and was based in its brand-new NYC campus (which only offers graduate programs). 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 (stunning) new campus for reality to settle in: not being able to partake in most mainstream socializing activities (as they happened over alcohol), being close with lab members (all male at the time), sharing accommodations in Airbnb's during conferences and trips, celebrating non-Muslim holidays, petting the neighbors' dogs while waiting for the elevator in the dorm, using the co-ed gym, and consuming label-less food for fear it does not meet Halal standards, among others.

Attempting to bring up these differences 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? After a while, this "decision fatigue" does take its toll, especially when navigating a PhD that was still in a highly ambiguous state. Second, being conflict averse by nature and the only Muslim in the PhD cohort at the time, I could not speak about my restrictions so as not to offend others (e.g. when male colleagues asked for my number or asked to attend a social gathering I had organized for females colleagues), put them in an uncomfortable situation (e.g. turning down a handshake), reject hospitality (e.g. dinner invites), or 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 reasons 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. Ultimately, it was served so I sat as far back on the table I almost fell off my chair. It took nearly a year for me to finally open up to two faculty members that I did not wish to sit at a table if there is alcohol on it, and longer for other things. Third, very few could be trusted with my quandary, potentially because it is religion-based. Seeking advice from the wrong persons easily turned into self-sabotage: they saw it as scientifically 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

uncomfortable 5-minute confrontations (about many topics in general), I refrained from that idea. Lastly, the two times when I requested accommodations (a reflection space, and 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 Jewish 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. Equally importantly, some of them were more confrontationally competent than me, having no issue walking up to their advisors and colleagues and explaining their religious practices and accommodations.

Realizing the innate confrontational limitation in my personality (plus my chronic minority status which did not change after two years on campus), I decided to turn to mediums familiar and comfortable to everyone in the ICT community: design, making, and HCI interaction principles. Through such means, I asked: *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?*

3 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 raising issues, 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 maker and audience the time, space, and autonomy to reduce the uncanny and uncomfortable nature of difference.

In August 2019, I won a Cornell grant to organize a Proxy Object exhibition at a gallery in the campus vicinity. The gallery board rejected the idea of incorporating pieces inspired by religious experiences, demanding a non-confrontational, noncontroversial, and non-denominational exhibit. After two months of trying to fold their criteria into Proxy Objects, my colleagues and advisors told me to just focus on what design requirements are necessary for such objects to represent me as a (conservative) Hijabi subject. I took the advice and proceeded to do the project on campus (diverting the grant to a different community project).

With the campus as the location, I focused Proxy Objects on introducing the campus community to the ways of what Hijab might mean or entail, some required "accommodations", and the community reactions towards that. Below, I describe the Hijabi Mannequin and the Hijabi and Prince proxy objects.

3.1 The Hijabi Mannequin

The first project in this series is the Hijabi Mannequin, which I built with an undergraduate research assistant from NYU (who is also a hijabi). We designed this artefact after a series of conversations

Fig. 2. The Hijabi and The Prince Installation

amongst us, with hijabi youth in NYC whom I had worked with before, and non-Muslims. Some therefore wanted to "touch" the hijab, see how it does not fly away in the wind, or check if it can be taken off (a common misconception around hijab seems to be that we never take it off!). Others told us stories of children and youth who pulled down a classmate's hijab just because the teacher told them not to, or because they were curious to see if the wearer has hair (we do). Generally, one of the common things that emerged in these conversations is how "politeness" often creates a wall of silence around matters of difference. The other is the "haptic" interest in the subject, which we sought to address through the Hijabi Mannequin.

This interactive artifact (Figure 1) creates a conversation around the most conspicuous symbol of Islam: the hijab. As a mannequin, it can be touched without embarrassing or offending anyone. My research assistant built the mannequin using papier-mâché, which we then painted and affixed eyes using duct tape. We used one of my headscarves, and secured it using a safety pin. The mannequin "speaks" and listens through an accompanying radio with four channels: Introduction, Hijab Stories, Reactions, and FAQs. We collected the stories from YouTube, especially TEDx talks that introduced and demystified the topic to a wide audience. Because we were interested in acknowledging the multiplicity of opinions and curiosities around the subject matter, the radio fostered a two-way conversation through a voice recording feature for asking questions and leaving reactions (accessible from the third channel). Hardware wise, I tested ready-made mp3 players but with the recording feature, I switched to raspberry pi.

3.2 The Hijabi and the Prince

While demystifying was the goal behind the Hijabi Mannequin, this project was driven by a desire for indirection. Partly an art installation, partly a low-fidelity prototype, the Hijabi and the Prince (Figure 2) investigates how interactive objects can engage on behalf of their makers in the narration and indirection around hegemonic cultural norms. Like the Hijabi Mannequin, this project is a Proxy Object but for a different topic: handshaking across genders within the context of Islamic traditions.

In early March 2020, one of my family members was attending a conference in the US. One of the badge add-ons available upon registration was a no-handshaking sticker, a measure brought

about by the onset of the Covid-19 outbreak. For years, I had wished for a measure like that in conferences and other professional contexts I occupied, but these were not available.

The series of Photoshop generated watercolor-like prints depict the true story of a Hijabi woman who turned down the handshake of the Norwegian prince when he visited her mosque. The prints go into what the story was, why it happened, how people were reacting to it on twitter, and what implications can be drawn from it for our campus. The last print suggests that "next time you meet someone new, consider asking how they like to be greeted". The Hijabi and the Prince is a series of Photoshop generated watercolor 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. answering the last question, I say "next time you meet someone new, consider asking how they like to be greeted?".

The prints are viewed in the order indicated on placards. The prints encompass two layers of information based on how involved the viewer wants to be with the topic. The first layer is communicated through the visuals themselves without any narration or commentary. Some prints may not tell much but the story they collectively report is still discernible to some extent.

The second layer of information is communicated on secondary placards concealed behind the main placards. This concealment is intentional in order to: 1) make engagement with this topic and its ideological underpinnings optional, and 2) make an analogy to the way difference tends to be pushed to the private realm in our societies. Interested viewers would have to come closer and pull out the secondary placards – this renders the engagement both optional and intentional. The Twitter roll showcases the internet reactions so that the viewer has a more encompassing understanding of this controversial question: was the Muslim woman rude in staying true to her religions and turning down the prince's handshake? The roll length indicates that the internet had a lot to say (and I did not include all the tweets).

4 DESIGN VALUES

My approach to designing is grounded in modesty as a principle I live by, which means (in an Islamic sense) deflecting unnecessary attention especially from men. Modesty in the context of Proxy Objects takes on a utilitarian tactical meaning through the idea of taking attention away from me and bringing attention to the system a play and to the issues of people on the other side. More concretely, these translate to the following design requirement that I articulated and expressed in the Hijab Mannequin prototype and the Hijabi and the Prince prints:

Attention-Deflecting: Proxy Objects recall the Wearable Body Organs and the Alien Staff [8, 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 in the name of politeness means that 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.

5 REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

In post-exhibit conversations with viewers and users, The Hijabi and the Prince garnered affirmative reactions about the need to engage with matters around cultural divergences more often, especially given the (awkward) interactions that could arise because of them. Here, I will dwell instead on the Hijabi Mannequin, specifically one user reaction recorded on the radio that offers a lot to unpack. The reaction below is from a female colleague whom I had worked with for nearly two years at that point, stunned me:

> "More than anything the stories in the exhibit and in touching and looking at the hijab which I barely know how to pronounce, you know btw, which is you know a problem (chuckles) I think in a number of ways. But is more questions you know than answers, more uhhmm…questions come up issues come up regarding why? You know why … do… women wear the hijab? What does it mean to them? I've learned just from listening to stories what some of the challenges are …wearing it. The experiences which, some of which are shocking and uhm give me pause. But I still would like to know …what makes a woman you know in 2019, quite frankly, wear a shibab? What does it mean? And does it mean the same thing.. in all cultures? In all countries? And does it mean something different to a younger woman versus her mother or her grandmother? And then what does it mean to the men that she ..uh knows from family to brothers to possible to friends to possible love interests to husband? What do her children say about it when they… are young and asking questions about their culture. Just so many questions much of which is my own ignorance, but I'm glad this exhibit exists because … I thought of a couple of questions I think of a couple of questions when I see women in hijabs. But this exhibit has made me think of so many more."

My colleague clearly had a lot of questions, but never asked them prior to this "provocation". How much then goes unasked/unsaid about differences we see all the time in multi-cultural societies? Equally important questions would be: is there value in raising these conversations? Or should we stick to polite silence? Further, in engaging with conversations during the research phase of this project and in building the proxy objects, I started to wonder about how much is lost, abstracted, and stripped away in the use of personas is in HCI. Generalization is exactly the goal of personas. If describing a Muslim user, label it as such, call it Mohamed, and get a cartoon image of someone with a beard, brown skin, or a head taqiyah. How can we re-conceptualize the practice of personas so as not to lose the specificity that comes with difference?

The goal of speaking about difference is not to merely engage in conversations, but to activate different modes of interactions, values, and norms. In a campus setting, that meant requesting religious accommodations through the chaplain office and department administration. Difference in institutional settings is typically dealt with through the term "Underrepresented Minorities" or URMs. But this label lumps up a group of individuals who are themselves very different from each other. But difference is textured and the specificity of difference matters. Each person is a situated combination of histories, experiences, beliefs, and behaviors. Difference is an infinite cascade of difference, there's no standard tolerance, and it cannot be approximated or generalized. It is not enough to think for example about someone as strictly as Muslim. For example, I am more on the conservative side in terms of practicing my faith; other Muslim women may have no issue with shaking men's hands or socializing in contexts where drinking happens.

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