

Reflecting on the Role of Embodiment in Sufi Zikr

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Design research and HCI increasingly explore techno-spirituality. We investigated Sufi practices of group zikr, a ritual practice of remembrance of God. Our past work used interviews and collaborative autoethnography to explore the experiences of people practicing zikr in online or hybrid settings. In this position paper, we reflect on our past work to surface new directions and questions for combining Sufi perspectives with the design of interactive tangible spiritual artifacts. This position paper marks the beginnings of new work for our research team, and raises more questions than it answers.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Religion, faith, spirituality, computer-mediated communication, human-computer interaction, technological mediation, Sufism, Islam

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1 Introduction

HCI and design research increasingly explore faith, religion, and spirituality (FRS) alongside technology, investigating and designing for techno-spiritual interactions as a meaningful part of many people's everyday lives [23]. Recent work has helped configure the design space of tangible and embodied interactions with spiritual tangible interactive artifacts [21], investigated experiences of Christian online workshop services [30], and studied how a Buddhist community shifted online during the pandemic [12],

We have studied Sufi spiritual practices of group *zikr*, a ritual practice of remembrance of God, in groups that did this online or hybrid, through individual interviews and collaborative autoethnography. Our prior work [17] investigated, *What is the experience of practitioners doing zikr online? How does technology mediate that experience? What are opportunities for HCI design for such communities?* To understand experiences of remote participation in zikr, we also compared to experiences of in-person participation. We interviewed participants and used autoethnographic methods to reflect on our own experiences as Sufi practitioners doing zikr online and in-person. This past work detailed how (i) participants described experiencing a sense of shared spiritual energy during zikr, (ii) sensory experiences play an important role in this spiritual energy, (iii)

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technology mediates sensory and spiritual experiences online, and (iv) community is an important part of both online and in-person participation. In this position paper, we go beyond our past work to reflect on new directions for exploring Sufi perspectives in the design of spiritual interactive tangible artifacts. At this point in our research process, this position paper aims to raise more questions than it answers:

- How might we treat our own bodies as a resource for spiritual and religious meaning?
- How might we foreground the experience of the sacred in the everyday?
- How can design research explore alternative perspectives on selfhood and the more-than-human through Sufi practices?
- How can design research explore Sufi perspectives on care?

2 Background and Related Work

2.1 What is *zikr* in Sufi Islam?

Sufism is a part of Islamic tradition, in the West often described as "mysticism", "esoterism", "asceticism," and other terms. Chittick, an Islamic scholar specializing in Sufism, argues that any attempt to define Sufism is fraught due to challenges in terminology and translation [10]. The meaning of the word Sufi itself has been contested over centuries and used in a variety of ways both by proponents and opponents of Sufism. While Sunni, Shia and other Muslims can identify as Sufi, Sufism can also be marginalized within mainstream Islam.

Sufism can be understood as an expression of authentic religious experience [15]. To offer a very short description of what this means as distinct from other aspects of Islam: According to Prophetic tradition of Muhammad (peace be upon him) as well as the Quran, Islam has three basic dimensions: submission (*islam*), faith (*iman*), and doing the beautiful (*ihsan*) [10]. The first two categories encompass legal and doctrinal matters such as voicing testimony of faith, fasting, rules of prayer, etc. This is the speciality of jurists and theologians. The third category, "doing the beautiful", is more difficult to define and is ordinarily not addressed by either jurists or theologians. Sufis focus on this category [10]. As such, Sufism can be understood as "the theory and practice of holistic, experiential knowing of Divine Truth" [1].

Sufi communities usually organize as a group around a teacher. A leader of a Sufi order is called a *pir*, who continues the lineage of the teachings of his/her *tariqa* (school/order). Knowledge is passed down from teacher to student over generations. Some members are formally initiated into the order and take on the responsibility of continuing the lineage and eventually become a *pir*. Over many centuries of passing along Sufi practices and adapting them to the needs of their communities, there have been many different lineages and a great variety of Sufi practices, some continuing to this day.

One of the most important of Sufi practices is *zikr*, which means "remembrance." Remembrance of God is commanded by the Quran and, according to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught different techniques and practices of remembrance, which have been passed down through generations. Later Sufi teachers and schools added to and modified these practices, resulting in diverse *zikr* practices internationally. The central element of *zikr* is to recite the Shahada (the foundational testimony of faith), and the divine names and qualities of God (Allah). Depending on the tradition of a particular *tariqah*, this may include a variety of embodied practices, such as melodic chanting, bodily movement, and/or quiet contemplation.

The Sufi groups we studied practice *zikr* through chanting and rhythmic recitation while sitting in a group circle, without musical accompaniment. The goal of practicing of *zikr* is to connect the human experience to the divine and, eventually, "the 'union' (sic) with God, or the full realization of human perfection..." [10]. Islamic studies scholar Rozehnal describes, "Sufism is best understood

as a path to experiential knowledge (*ma'rifa*)... Sufis strive for a direct, intimate, unmediated, and transformative encounter with God" [24, p. 39]. Zikr is one such bodily ritual practice, which we focused on in our prior study.

2.2 Faith, religion, and spirituality (FRS) in HCI

Buie et al. offer working definitions for faith, religion, and spirituality. Spirituality can be described as "a person's relationship with the sacred or transcendent, with their ultimate values, with what purpose and meaning that relationship enables them to create in their life; the search for the sacred or transcendent" [7]. Religion can be described as "beliefs and practices that support a person's relationship with the sacred, whether practised alone or with others" [7, p.7]. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'faith' as "to give credence to, believe in, trust" [13]. Relevant to our focus on Sufism, we note that Allah is simply the word for God in Arabic and is not specifically Islamic; in English usage Allah typically has Islamic connotations. These definitions are useful, yet we recognize the complexity of these concepts that can vary significantly across religions, cultures, and individuals.

HCI increasingly investigates the role of digital technology in religious, spiritual, contemplative, or transcendent experiences. Markum et al. mapped a design space for religious and spiritual tangible interactive artifacts, and examined how tangible artifacts are enrolled in "mediating the sacred" [21]. Wolf et al. synthesize the past decade of HCI research on religion and spirituality, noting a shift towards community [28]. Claisse proposes designing for spiritual informatics [11]. Halperin and Rosner draw from Jewish Kabbalah to propose soulful speculation as an approach for imagining systems and experiences combining technology, the immaterial, and miracles [16].

Overall, researchers study how interactive technologies are used by religious and spiritual communities and how they give rise to a variety of techno-spiritual practices [3], underscored by recent workshops at DIS [22] and CHI [23]. Markum and Toyama investigate how practitioners navigate challenges of digital technology in their meditative and contemplative practices [20]. Claisse and Durrant studied how a Buddhist community shifted their practices online during the pandemic [12]. Our past work studied how Sufi groups shifted their practice of zikr post-pandemic to accommodate in-person and online hybrid participation [17].

Designers work to support religious practices with tangible designs. As examples of tangible FRS artifacts, Wolf et al. explored technology-mediated worship through provotyping [31]. Gaver et al. designed the prayer companion for the religious practices of a group of cloistered nuns [14]. Uriu, Odom, et al.'s SenseCenser supports memorial rituals in Japan [26]. Uriu and Okude's ThanatoFenestra supports Japanese traditional Buddhist ritual prayer for deceased ancestors [27]. Mah et al. designed a public installation inspired by elements of Tibetan Buddhist ritual interaction to help cultivate compassion [19].

Prior work also offers approaches, concepts, theories, or case studies. Akama et al. proposed designing for mindfulness by drawing from Zen Buddhism [2]. Wyche et al. designed a mobile application to help practitioners of Islam experience calls to prayer [32]. Wolf et al. proposed the Blessing Companion and an approach to designing for uncontrollability [29]. Chen et al. used cultural probes to inspire speculative designs combining Taiwanese folk religion and domestic IoT [9]. Byrne et al. take a playful approach to 'spooky' aspects of technology to offer 'other-worldly' considerations as a resource for design [8]. Buie et al. used imaginary abstracts to explore transcendent user experiences [5, 6].

Tasa and Yurtsever offer a Sufism-inspired approach to embodied design for TEI, highlighting how Sufism uses embodied rituals to help let go of the ego, and calling for greater recognition of the entanglement of embodiment and spirituality [25]. Islamic studies has also explored the role of embodiment in Sufism [18].

3 Questions

3.1 How might we treat our own bodies as a resource for spiritual and religious meaning?

Kugle writes about the role of embodiment in Sufism [18]. In Islam, Allah is said to be closer to oneself than one's own jugular vein; this suggests thinking about God as deeply inside yet transcending the body. Although sometimes Sufism is perceived as treating the body in a negative way, Kugle argues that Sufism treats the body as signifying the Creator (God) and as connected to the rest of the universe, created by God [18]. In this way, the body can be engaged as a nexus through which spiritual experience is made possible; e.g., through embodied exercises such as *zikr*. Therefore, we believe there is a space for design research to cautiously explore novel experiences of embodiment and reflection to support and expand Sufi practice.

3.2 How might we foreground the experience of the sacred in the everyday?

Zikr literally translates as remembrance and is about the remembrance of God. The practice of *zikr* is intended to help extend this remembrance into more of everyday life. Growing one's Sufi spiritual practice involves continuing and expanding this remembrance into more and more of everyday life; a desirable if perhaps unattainable goal would be effortlessly practicing *zikr* in every moment, in every breath. One challenge for a Sufi practitioner is to recognize the divine qualities in the everyday world, reflect on those moments of recognition and, in some cases, communicate these insights to others in their community. As design researchers who do *zikr*, this motivates us to explore how design might help foreground the experience of the sacred in the everyday.

3.3 How can design research explore Sufi perspectives on care?

According to common Sufi tradition humans have been tasked with trying to imitate God's divine qualities despite humans' frailty and foibles. These divine qualities are encoded in the 99 known names of Allah, the first two of which are transliterated as *Ar-Rahman* and *Ar-Raheem*. These are most typically translated as the Most Beneficent and the Most Merciful, but these names also carry strong meanings of being caring and kind. So, Muslims (including Sufis) must foster the quality of *care*, both in their hearts and in their daily interactions with the world around them. This motivates the question, how might HCI research on faith, religion, and spirituality explore Sufi perspectives on care and put this in conversation with existing HCI perspectives on care?

3.4 How can design research explore alternative perspectives on selfhood and the more-than-human through Sufi practices?

Reflecting on *zikr*'s aim of setting aside one's own lower self (commonly interpreted as one's own ego), we see opportunity to put this in conversation with Biggs et al.'s work on abjection and "decentering the human" in ecological, posthuman design [4]. Different traditions of thought, such as Sufism, could offer alternative framings and approaches to how one's sense of self/other/environment divisions could be blurred, merged, or temporarily lost in service of authentic spiritual experience, self-improvement, insight, and/or more-than-human approaches.

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