Visualization of Islamic Religious Symbolism on the Internet: A Conceptual Blending

VERONIKA TZANKOVA
& THECLA SCHIPHORST, PhD

ABSTRACT An exploration of the conceptual blending of religion in its visual representation on the internet begins with the recognition of religion as a system of symbols that are disseminated through a mediating environment. In the tradition of visual information, religious symbols have gained a status of both an "ancient modern" nexus and as a dependable medium retaining cultural identity.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Islam-related religious images: symbols and representations as a part of today's visual culture reflected on the Internet both as form of content and as interface design "particles" (individual visual sub-parts that combine to form a unified interface design). This is based on the assumption that a great many sacred representations seem to constitute the "visual morphology" of design by inducing a subconscious framework of contextualized information. Filtered through new technologies, the meaning of religious images and symbols has been estranged from their original roots and shifted toward a dialogue between the medium of representation and its viewer, establishing a relationship of trust, based on: (1) historically embedded meanings and mappings—socially and habitually evoking reliability through a shared social identity; and (2) pre-set scenarios of normative behavior and interaction.

Specifically, this paper investigates the cultural schemata of religious imagery found on the net as a part of the emergent cognitive principles of content models and interface design.

INTRODUCTION The critical analysis of web interface design and principles relies heavily on the understanding of the cultural factors that manufacture a given cultural perception of reality. In this paper, we examine the presence of Islamic religious images and symbols as graphic elements in Islam-related web sites, and argue that this specific presence plays a key role in the induction of certain positive, trust-enhancing perceptions, caused by the importance of religion in the formation of an understanding of reality in Muslim communities.

This paper is divided into two main parts: in the first par we examine the importance of religion—Islam—in defining worldview, normative expectations, and social interactions from a socio-cultural perspective. In the second part we analyze specific examples of Islam-related website interfaces and present an argument to illustrate how the embeddedness of religious images and symbols is a dominant factor for evoking reliability and positive emotions in the user—whether on a cognitive or an intuitive level. We treat symbols as entities that are referring to a pre-existing world.[1] In other words, our analysis emphasizes the translation of values *from* the physical reality *into* the terrain of graphic interface design and the homogeneity of evoked belief-sets as applied to analog and digital interactions. In our examination, we treat graphic elements as representations of invisible values and social attributes of a culturally defined understanding of reality. Our analysis takes a hermeneutic approach to the deconstruction of the symbolism that goes beyond what is visible to the human eye. Our goal is to touch on the significations of religious symbols and images that form the network of socially shared modules of thinking, feeling, and understanding. From this perspective, we are interested in the substantiation of Islamic symbols through the materiality of graphic web interfaces, where significations exist in a socially shared understanding of reality that outstretches individual consciousness.

ISLAM, SYMBOLS, REALITY

In this section, we consider the social fabrication of meaning through an examination of Islam as a religious and cultural system. Most, if not all, social meaning is based on significations—whether in the form of linguistic nodes or other forms of non-verbal symbols. In this case, we focus mainly on Islamic non-verbal symbols as representations of normative codes and social identity which "function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their worldview—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order."[2]

Of particular interest to us is the characteristic ability of sacred symbols to synthesize moral values, mood, and worldview—attributes and operations which are crucial to the main argument of this paper. The particular instance of Islam-related websites provides a unique case which holds that in order for these characteristics to gain social importance religion and its mores preserved as a powerful influence on its practitioners. In the case of most Mus-

PJIM PARSONS JOURNAL
FOR INFORMATION MAPPING

VISUALIZATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM
ON THE INTERNET: A CONCEPTUAL BLENDING
VERONIKA TZANKOVA & THECLA SCHIPHORST, PHD

lim societies, the preserved power of Islam is evidenced through its current functioning as a legal system and the lack of separation between religious and governmental authorities. The parallel and simultaneity of Islam both as a moral and legislative guide elaborates the immediacy between "a set of beliefs," and social construction of normative dimensions of social reality—within which we include the articulation of 'sinless', high moral values: "In Islam the ultimate source of moral authority is absolutely unambiguous. As a guide to how individuals and society ought to be, the Qur'an proclaims its moral authority on the basis of its being the very Word of God, for in Islam God revealed Himself not in any historical personage, but in a Book. The moral ideal thus established by the Qur'an is at once objectively knowable, universally applicable to all peoples and times…"[3] It is the perceived objectivity of the moral code and its application of "right" and "wrong" in Islam that constitutes and conducts ethical social interactions.

From this perspective, within the limits of social performance, being a believer serves as a guarantee for implementation of high moral standards in social interactions. In other words, the articulation of a 'believer' status becomes the signification, the symbol, and the representation of morality, as defined by the ultimate sources of Islam.

Another aspect of the phenomenon of articulation of a "believer" status in Muslim societies which is of importance to our study is its contribution to the formation of a specific identity that emerges from the dialectic between individual and social[4] and which manufactures a sense of a communal spirit and a supporting community. It should be stressed that the formation of a socially shared Islamic identity becomes a product of the dialectic between the personal and religious, as religion plays a key role in the functioning of the social apparatus.

TAXONOMY OF ISLAM-RELATED SYMBOLIC PICTORIAL REPRESENTATIONS IN GRAPHIC WEB INTERFACE DESIGN AND SOCIAL MEANING

In this section, we examine the implementation of Islamic images and symbols in graphic web interfaces: the inclusion of Islam-related digital artefacts as design decisions in website interfaces. We argue that the presence of these images and symbols provokes a positive emotional response in the users by an emphasis of Islam: (a) as a moral guide and (b) as a part of their social identity whether on conscious or subconscious levels. Our analysis takes a hermeneutic approach through close reading of selected websites that we consider to be a digital exteriority of Muslim sociality. Although our conclusions are based on a limited number of websites, we treat these not as entities in isolation, but as representations deeply rooted in the scope of a wider social context and a social reality that is located above the individual. From this aspect, our selection of websites is a part of a social institution defined by the rules of Islam. It should be noted that the selected sites are meant to address mostly Muslim users; thus, practitioners of religions other than Islam are not within the scope of the argument.

In the previous section we discussed the relationship between Islam, conduct of social interaction, and symbols (in the broadest sense of the word). In this section we examine Islamic symbols and images as graphic elements of website interfaces. Before developing an analysis of the digital representations of Islam, we highlight that online Islam-related graphic elements are a product of two levels of signification: the first is the "believer" as a symbol of morality and specific social identity (described above); and the second is the signification of 'believer' status represented by the presence of digital Islamic artefacts as a part of the website interface. In other words, the examined Islamic images are a symbol of both a symbol of morality and a certain social identity.

SIGNIFIED BY:
Digital Islam-related artefacts **2ND LEVEL OF SIGNIFICATION**

SIGNIFIED BY:
Articulation of a "Believer" status **1ST LEVEL OF SIGNIFICATION**

Morality, defined by Islam

FIGURE 1: *Levels of signification*

This double level of signification/symbolization determines the parameters of the chain-interaction between the person /source represented "behind" the digital interface, the user, and the website itself. From this perspective, the direct relation between religion and social conduct is translated within significations that lie in a wider scope of human experience.

Within the domain of human experience, and religious symbols as a synthesis of social knowledge, we acknowl-

PIIM

P J I M PARSONS JOURNAL
FOR INFORMATION MAPPING

VISUALIZATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM
ON THE INTERNET: A CONCEPTUAL BLENDING
VERONIKA TZANKOVA & THECLA SCHIPHORST, PHD

edge the role of tradition as a nexus between ancient and modern, and as a transmitter of social knowledge through time. As Berger states, religious tradition is the embodiment of socio-religious experience, and is mediated for those who do not have the opportunity to procure it themselves.[5] Max Weber formulates the same issue in a slightly different way emphasizing the role of non-Christian religions as an independent causal element triggering action throughout history.[6] This is to highlight that within the domain of graphic website interface design, Islamic symbols substantiate the history of socio-religious experience, ideology, action, and all those "nights of glory that might otherwise engulf all of life."[7] Religion as tradition and a nexus between ancient and modern time also constitutes the complex interconnectedness between social identity formation and provocation of specific positive emotions.

We examine these concepts through a detailed consideration of the categories of major non-verbal representations that construe the symbolization of Islam. For the sake of clarity, we note that some symbols may fit into more than one category.

FIGURE 2: *A screenshot of IQRA Book Center's logo found on their web site. Vector outline of a mosque situated in the left top corner of the site.*

FIGURE 2: *A screenshot of www.middleeastsystems.com's logo. Vector outline of a mosque within the logo of the site situated in the top right corner.*

VECTOR ART

We specifically analyze the visualization of Islam through vector art within Islam-orientated websites and the core religious experience that is represented within these sites going far beyond the presence of verbal content. For example, there is a frequent use of vector-icons that typically outline a mosque that constitutes a logo. The use of a simple outline with no further details is both abstract and direct, leaving little room for an arbitrary reading. It is simultaneously metaphoric and unadorned, thereby creating a highly accessible religious reality—relatively simple to perceive, while in consent with the culturally-understood inexpressibility of the divine. This pictorial representation becomes the visualization of an integrated and socially shared system of beliefs which set the normative dimensions of (para) social interaction. Thus, in addition to visualizing something as ineffable as a system of moral guides, the implementation of religious symbolization translated from the physical reality into an electronic one gives rise to a virtual social platform where rules are congruent with the social dimensions of interaction between practitioners of Islam. In terms of the focus of socially constructed reality and computer-mediated interaction, visualization of Islamic values through vector art becomes the manifestation of otherwise insensible online public understanding of morality, and transforms the symbolization of how the people/source "standing behind" the logo of the web-sites construct their image in the online public domain. It is within the framework of this public image that the concrete habits of sociality associated with the norms of Islam create positive emotional response in the user through familiarity of interaction conducts.[8]

CALLIGRAPHY

What is distinct about calligraphy is the presence of the text both as an art object and a verbal expression. Since one of the governing forces in graphic interface design is aesthetics, let us first explore the presence of calligraphy motifs as art objects. Our attention is focused on the perceived structural integrity between the calligraphic symbol and the other elements on the page. Following its emblematic function, we propose that graphic integrity can be seen as a product of a deeper cultural integrity. In analytical terms, the role of the calligraphic element can be considered an entity in-between two layers: the first a structural variation within the graphic grid and the second a cultural mask of a system of normative rules that are attached to a certain social command. The cultural dimensions of the structural integrity of the interface can be exemplified by a hypothetical situation where the calligra-

PJIM PARSONS JOURNAL
FOR INFORMATION MAPPING

VISUALIZATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM
ON THE INTERNET: A CONCEPTUAL BLENDING
VERONIKA TZANKOVA & THECLA SCHIPHORST, PHD

phy element is taken out of its original location and placed into a culturally non-related context. In such a (hypothetical) situation, the role and function of the element and its relation to the site would remain unclear, revealing no clue of ideological affinity.

Let us shift our focus to the textual aspect of calligraphy motifs, recognizing them as a piece of text defined by verbal content. Most of these calligraphic motifs are passages from the Holy Qur'an and contain the name of "Allah, the Greatest and the Kindest." From a socio-linguistic perspective, the creation of meaning is pre-defined by the existence of the underlying coding system of the language and thus meaning is impersonal.[9] In this context, the quality of language to greatly reduce the possibility of various interpretations because of its fixed values establishes the dimensions of a social reality, which is viewed through the prism of Allah and Islam. The inclusion of the sacred name of Allah on website interfaces "involves an imperative, a commitment which impels men to act"[10] in a specific, religiously pre-determined, moral way. In this situation, the users of the site are assured that any interaction, whether social or para-social, would be conducted under the norms of Islam, again ensuring certain reliability.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND NON-ABSTRACT IMAGES

Photography and non-abstract illustrated images of mosques and/or minarets are probably the most frequently observed representation of Islam. These differ from vector art representations by their more direct recognition of symbolization. At the same time, a photograph is less formal than calligraphy because it does not directly carry within itself the name of Allah making the representation-type suitable for more casual or business oriented websites.

The informality of illustrated pictorial representations and the reality-orientation of photography set the dimensions for a more informal interaction, where the concept of the self of the user as a social unit is more broadly addressed. This is partially because this kind of symbolization deals with Islam more as a cultural system rather than a religious system. In other words, individuals that live in Muslim communities and have developed an Islamic cultural identity, but are not necessarily "believers," are involved in the process of interaction because of the realistic visual translation of familiar forms from their physical reality (mosques) into the digital realm. The radical inclusion of the user's self within the spectrum of a cultural identity triggers the reflexes of "belonging"[11] that are deeply rooted within humans because of their social form of existence. This social relationship is based

FIGURE 4: *A screenshot of a part of Islamic World's website, www.islamic-world.net. A calligraphic motif praising the name of Allah is situated in the right top corner of the site.*
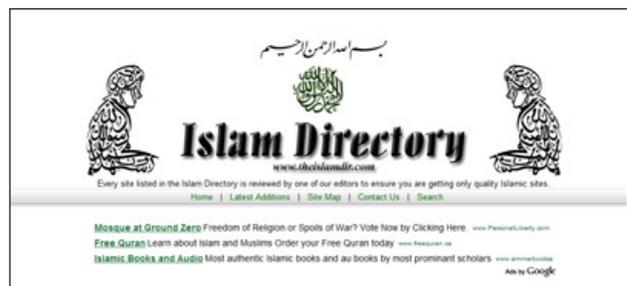

FIGURE 5: *A screenshot of www.theislamdir.com containing calligraphic elements in the form of two praying human figures in the top part of the site.*

FIGURE 6: *A screenshot of http://digiartport.net/daarul-naeem/main.html containing animated calligraphy in a Flash application.*

PJIM
**PARSONS JOURNAL
FOR INFORMATION MAPPING**

VISUALIZATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM
ON THE INTERNET: A CONCEPTUAL BLENDING
VERONIKA TZANKOVA & THECLA SCHIPHORST, PHD

on the identification with a cultural community. This is founded on the recognition of what is already known by the individual in contract to the relation between the new and the unknown that provokes a sense of uncertainty and consideration of possible negative events.[12]

FIGURE 7: *A screenshot of a part of www.islamware.com's site with an illustrated mosque cupola in the left top corner of the site.*

FIGURE 8: *A screenshot of a part of www.islamicity.com's website with a photograph of a mosque in the left top corner.*

FIGURE 9: *A screenshot of www.fajr.com with a photograph of a mosque near the center of the site.*

GREEN COLOR

In Islam, the color green is associated with sacredness, paradise, and nature thus becoming an abstract symbol of the divine and an evoker of positive emotions (in contrast to Western tradition where green is considered a cool and not-arousing color[13]). The use of green nuances as applied to major graphic elements of a website interface locates the site directly in the spectrum of religious ideology and intrinsic values.

As human color perception is almost instantaneous and does not require an investigation at a more detailed level as more complex forms do, the color green becomes immediately distinguishable as a property of the artefact. In conjuction with the socially defined symbols, color defines additionally assigned qualities that "stand behind" the interface. From this perspective, the color green serves as a symbol of Islam and a second level signification of morality.

FIGURE 10: *A screenshot of www.3dislamicart.net with a dominating green color scheme of the interface.*
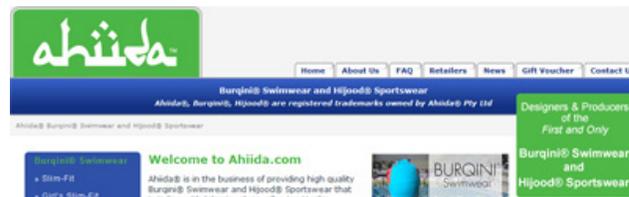

FIGURE 11: *A screenshot of http://www.ahiida.com with visual domination of the green logo in the left top corner of the site.*

PJIM PARSONS JOURNAL
FOR INFORMATION MAPPING

VISUALIZATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM
ON THE INTERNET: A CONCEPTUAL BLENDING
VERONIKA TZANKOVA & THECLA SCHIPHORST, PHD

CRESCENT

> *"It has sometimes been supposed that the crescent is the symbol of Islam as the cross is the symbol of Christianity. But the crescent is only sporadically found on Muhammadan buildings before the rise of the Ottoman Turks, and does not appear to have been regarded in the early centuries of the Muhammadan era as in any way distinctive of the faith of Islam."*[14]

Despite the discussion whether the crescent can be considered a symbol of Islam because of its lack of popularity during the rise of Islam, our analysis focuses on its current status of signification. The presence of the crescent on a number of Islamic counties' national flags (such as the Republic of Turkey, Pakistan, Algeria, and others) indicates that despite the historical disputes, the crescent is currently being associated with Islam and functions as a symbol of Islam. In current studies, the crescent is referred to as the symbol of the relationship of Allah to human beings.[15]

Although not commonly used on website interfaces, the crescent is present as a graphic element signifying an involvement with Islam. Along with a religious affinity, the crescent is believed to evoke positive rising emotions for believers in Islam.[16] It is within the scope of users' emotional attitude that structures the dimensions of interaction with the sites implementing this symbol as a positive social experience.

By looking at various examples of religious significations, we see how Islam has been embedded in digital interfaces by various types of visual representations. We are also able to trace the possible social factors and positive emotions that these representations induce, thus setting the normative codes of interaction between the person/source represented 'behind' the digital interface, the user, and the website itself. In the context of digital interface design, the visualization of Islam becomes an instrumental mean that connects social identity, morality, and user

FIGURE 12: *A screenshot of Mama List's logo found at www.jannah.org/mamalist, a database of Islamic websites that contains the crescent as a part of its logo.*

experience through a chain of symbolizations and cultural aesthetics. What is articulated through Islam-related digital artefacts is the extra-personal cognition and historically embedded social knowledge that creates a sense of familiarity so crucial for positive user experience.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined the forms of visualization of Islam within the terrain of graphic web interface design. We reviewed the socio-religious factors that influence the recognition and perception of Islam-signifying elements and the possible reaction, or associations, they may evoke for the users. Our analysis took a hermeneutic approach and close reading of selected, websites while examining the parameters of interaction shaped by the normative dimensions of Islam and the presence of Islamic cultural identity.

We concluded that Islam-based representations on website interfaces constitute a "visual morphology" of design by inciting a subconscious information framework (an information map) respecting meaning and trust. The significations of religious images have gained a status of interlocutor between the medium of representation and its viewer, establishing a relationship of trust, based on historically embedded extra-personal cognition, socially and habitually evoking reliability through a shared social identity as well as pre-set scenarios of normative dimensions of interaction. We supposed that the cultural schemata of religious imagery found on the net are indeed a part of the emergent cognitive principles of content models and interface design.

BIOGRAPHIES

Veronika Tzankova is a masters student at the School of Interactive Arts & Technology at Simon Fraser University. Her background education in Civil Law was obtained in Turkey where she spent seven years of her life exploring the Oriental culture and its influence on moral values and language. Her current interests include Islam and digital visual culture, Islam and virtual reality, and discrepancies in analog and digital representations in Muslim societies.

Thecla Schiphorst is a Media Artist/Designer and Faculty Member in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. Her background in performance and computing forms the basis for her research which focuses on embodied interaction, sense-making, and the aesthetics of interaction.

PJIM PARSONS JOURNAL
FOR INFORMATION MAPPING

VISUALIZATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM
ON THE INTERNET: A CONCEPTUAL BLENDING
VERONIKA TZANKOVA & THECLA SCHIPHORST, PHD

NOTES

1 Armand Mattelart and Michelle Mattelart, *Theories of Communication: A Short Introduction* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998).

2 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), 89.

3 Barbara Metcalf and Joint Committee on South Asia, *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 333.

4 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge,* Anchor books ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 160.

5 Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation,* Anchor books ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

6 Thomas O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion,* 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983).

7 Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 46.

8 Herbert Bless and Joseph Forgas, *The Message Within: The Role of Subjective Experience in Social Cognition and Behavior* (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2000).

9 Gabrielle Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65, no. 1 (1990): 59–86.

10 O'Dea, 37.

11 Leigh Keeble, *Community Informatics: Shaping Computer-Mediated Social Relations* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001).

12 R. N. Carleton, M. A. Nicholas, and J. G. Asmundson, "Fearing the Unknown: A Short Version of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 21, no. 1 (2007): 105–117.

13 Patricia Valdez and Albert Mehrabian, "Effects of Color on Emotions," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 123, no. 4 (1994): 394–409.

14 Thomas Arnold, "Symbolism and Islam," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 53, no. 307 (1928): 155.

15 Phil Parshall, *The Cross and the Crescent: Understanding the Muslim Heart and Mind* (Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel, 2002).

16 Adnan Almaney, "Cultural Traits of the Arabs: Growing Interest for International Management," *Management International Review* 21, no. 3 (1981): 10–18.