

iPray: Understanding the Relationship Between Design & Use in Christian & Islamic Mobile
Prayer Applications

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Mobile applications are multiplying rapidly. In the iTunes app store alone, more than 1.5 million apps are available and more than a billion have been downloaded (Lunden, 2015). While not all of these apps are religious in nature, a good portion are (Campbell, Altenhofen, Bellar, & Cho, 2014). Religious mobile applications are computer programs that are designed to run on mobile devices (i.e. smartphones, tablets) that give users the ability to engage in religion through utilitarian tools (i.e. reminders, study tools, social media) or provide a space for religious practice (i.e. studying sacred texts, praying, focusing or meditating) (Campbell, et. al, 2014).

To date, app studies in general are lacking with most focusing on specific technological affordances such as web browsing (Chen, 2007) and engineering issues (Wasserman, 2010, healthcare (Nystrom, Asuzu, Amin, Schindler, Wira, 2015) or location-based services (Pirker, Gutl, Weiner, Garcia-Barrios, & Tomintz. 2014). Additionally, there are only a few religious app studies, although interest in the area is increasing (see Campbell et. al, 2014; Hutchings, 2014; Wagner, 2013). None of the current religious app studies gathered data from actual users engaging these apps in their daily religious practice. Thus, our knowledge of these apps is limited to that which we can learn only from the artifact. This study seeks to fill the gap in this area by focusing not only on the apps themselves, but also on the people who use the apps.

The goal of this study is to understand the relationship between religious mobile app design and use through multiple qualitative methods including textual analysis and user

experience testing. Specifically, this study investigates the manner in which mobile app affordances (i.e. possible actions) are understood and used in app design, as well as how users actually understand and engage app affordances. Two different religions, Christianity and Islam, are used to provide a comparative analysis as well as to validate the findings through source triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). Prayer, or communication with God, in these two religions are also closely linked as it is a practice that is deeply ingrained within daily routines. Therefore, this study looks at Christian and Islamic prayer apps, which are defined as those in which users listen to, type, or otherwise engage in communicating messages to a monotheistic deity (Campbell et. al, 2014).

Based on the stated criteria as well as the literature on digital religion and religious apps, the following research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How do app designers understand the religious practice of prayer, and what strategies do they use to translate related practices into specific mobile app affordances?

RQ2: How do users understand the religious practice of prayer, and how do they engage with different prayer app affordances?

Studying not only the content and structure of Christian and Muslim apps, but also app designers' and users' understandings and intentions related to these apps, offers a more nuanced understanding of how and the extent to which app design impacts upon religious app use. These research questions relate to current work within digital religion studies as they focus on how religious practices are situated within the blurring line of online and offline contexts. Particularly, this study is located within the fourth wave of digital religion research, in that it seeks to explore this increasingly enmeshed online/offline context.

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