

Sun Dial uses mobile phones to alert Muslims to prayer (w/Video)

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Sun Dial is a mobile application that uses images to alert users to the five daily prayers of Islam. Credit: Susan Wyche

Religious technology may seem like an oxymoron, but as more people obtain mobile phones, iPhones and other devices to help them manage their lives, it's only natural that many of them will be using their gadgets to help them enrich their spiritual life as well. Researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology have developed a mobile application known as Sun Dial, which alerts Muslim users when it's time to perform the five daily prayers known as salat. The device is currently being discussed this week at the human-computer interaction conference, CHI, in Boston.

"We have to understand religion because it's such a central part of peoples lives," explained Susan Wyche, doctoral candidate in the College of Computing and GVV Center at Georgia Tech.

Designing technological devices for religious use may be very different from designing devices for traditional uses in office settings.

"Efficiency and productivity tend to be driving forces when designing technology for offices, but these are not as central when designing applications for the home or religious settings. Why would you design a device that makes someone pray faster?," said Wyche.

Wyche, along with her research team, chose to focus on Islam for this study, partially because of the religion's popularity worldwide and partially because Muslims have historically used technology such as compasses and telescopes to help them determine the direction to face during prayer.

Working with seven focus groups, they determined that the greatest interest from the participants lay in prompting them when it was time to pray — not by using text, which some commercial applications use, but through imagery combined with audible alerts.

Sun Dial tells users that the time to pray is approaching by using an image of the sun lining up with a green circle. When the sun lines up with the circle, it's time to pray.

"Unlike similar systems, ours relies on graphics rather than text and graphs to communicate prayer times. Users drove this choice by telling us that tracking the sun was the most religiously valued method to determine prayer times."

Wyche and colleagues tested their application with Muslims from

Georgia Tech and the greater Atlanta area for two weeks with favorable reaction. They're currently working on implementing a few design changes such as a digital clock and a vibration alert. Eventually, they plan on making the application available for download.

"Sun Dial provided more than functionality or a prompt to the prayer times; it also contributed to users' religious experience by reminding them they were part of a larger community. More broadly, carefully considering imagery is important when developing mobile phone applications, particularly ones that support personal and emotional activities, which may be sacred or secular."

Source: Georgia Institute of Technology

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