# NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES:
## THE USE OF PRAYER BEADS IN EVERYDAY LIFE IN TURKEY

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## ABSTRACT

**This paper issues how and why objects are used to negotiate identities in the course of daily life. Turkey, which is a socio-politically charged context that is formed of tensions between Islamic and secular groups, thus presenting a conflict between various distinct identities, is selected as the field of the study. Within this context, the use of a religious product group; prayer beads and their mechanical and digital variations, are studied to explore how identity discourse is reflected on the objects. The fieldwork, which was enriched by ethnographic research methods, consisted of interviews with the members of a certain religious group, frequenters of a mosque and shopkeepers of religious product market. Conclusions on how identities are constructed through objects and reflected on objects are driven.**

**Keywords: identity negotiation, prayer beads, prayer practice, tespih, zikirmatik**

## INTRODUCTION

There is a multitude of fractions within a society where different identities live together, and various ways in which identity presents itself. The way people dress and ornament themselves is probably the most obvious tools to express oneself. According to Simmel (2003), as expressed in his article *The Philosophy of Fashion*, the way of dressing is an expression of one's mindset, lifestyle or social standing. Likewise, for Lamont and Molnar (2001), who studied the consumption patterns and fashion tendencies of black people, explain that black people, along with status consumption, i.e., premium brands and luxury products, colourful dressing, eye-catching and unique

styles and combination of styles are used to express the black identity. By the way the dress, black people demonstrate that they can dress chic, fashionable, unique and even better than white people so that to express and negotiate their socio-cultural competence and collective identity.

In the context of Turkey, as well, identity is studied over fashion items or dressing codes relating to the dynamics of social class and socio-political standing (Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Saktanber, 1995; Sandıkcı&Ger, 2007). Sandıkçı and Ger (2007) studied women with headscarves or turban and explained how veiling is used for identity formation and negotiation among secular and Islamic groups and among the further fractions of Islamic groups such as "pious woman" and "modern consumer".

However, what is relevant to us as designers of industrial products is the place and meaning of objects we design with respect to identity discourse. From a structuralist perspective, object, subject and social context construct each other in intricate relationships. We, as human beings, have fundamental relationships with the material world that surrounds us. As human beings our awareness of ourselves and the world is constructed through our relationship with the physical environment (Piaget, 1977). For Bourdieu (2003), knowledge on objects is formed and interpreted through the embedded schemes, which are formed socially and individually by the dynamics of social class relations within the society. Thus, each and every object falls into a socially predefined category to which Bourdieu (2003) calls the process of distinction. Therefore, objects are emphasized as indispensible part of society and "studied as traces of social relations and macro-social trends in technology,

economics or political structure (Shove et. al., 2007:6).

Besides carrying embedded meanings, objects are physically *there* and used for certain practical functions. So, a theory of objects should necessarily take into account the fact that they are *used*. Moreover, each object gets involved in people's lives in various ways, specific to that object and the specific use context (Shove et. al., 2007; Miller 2005). Therefore, for this study a material culture perspective, which inquires into the very materiality and specificity of objects, and accepts the view that beliefs and drives of a society are reflected on and can be read through its material objects, will be adopted. Prayer beads will be focused on to explain how identity discourse is reflected on the objects and on the ways in which objects are used.

## FIELDWORK AND THE IDENTITY OF THE RESEARCHER

The case of this study is based on the fieldwork conducted for my master's thesis which explored the use of prayer beads in everyday life in Turkey in a broader sense (Tonuk, 2011). Turkey, which is the only example of a secular Islamic country, presents various tensions between various social groups. Turkish Republic was founded by demolishing the links to an Islamic Ottoman past. However, the social, political and cultural tensions between the so-called *Islamic* and *secular* groups continued throughout the history of the Republic. Currently, a right wing party is leading the parliament, and the debates on Islamic dress codes and other Islamic symbols are continuing and are used publicly by the citizens.

The fieldwork, which lasted for about a year from March 2010 to May 2011, was enriched by ethnographic research methods. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews and observations on the daily life of devout Muslims, who obeyed the five pillars of Islam and accepted Islamic principles as a guide to their lives. The interviews and observations took place at a mosque, a gathering house of a religious group and a religious site in the capital of Turkey. I joined the prayer rituals and social activities of the devout Muslims to get involved in their daily life and to observe their relationship with the objects. 13

female and 8 male participants joined my research. The results concerning identity discourse and negotiation of identity that are reflected on the use of objects are demonstrated in this paper.

It is important for the explanation of this research to position the researcher. I was a total outsider to this field. I was neither religious nor knew their culture nor was dressing religious. Although, I was expecting the fact that I was not one of them would limit the findings of my research or even prevent me from having access to these groups, it contributed significantly to the findings of my research. From the beginning, identity discourse was present. My participants would first question me saying sarcastically "Those from you are not usually interested in us" or they would ask "Why did you choose this topic?", "Did your teacher assigned this topic to you?" They would place me as the 'other' from the beginning and explain how they navigate their way around this 'other' or distinguish themselves by the objects they are using and the way they do things or how they organize their daily life and practices. I, on the other hand, would modify my dressing code, not dressing as openly as I do normally and wearing an overcoat even, to show that I respected their values, would use a daily language involving religious phrases and the like. My presence in the field was a negotiation from the very beginning both on my side and on the side of participants to cope with the issue of 'other'.

## OBJECT AND THE SELF

We are surrounded by objects in our daily life. A variety of objects are orchestrated to organize and shape daily life and practices so that to make the world in accord with what it should be like. Also, by being carriers of meanings and ways of expressing and transmitting these meanings as well, objects make, maintain and reproduce social and individual relationships.

As Shove et. al. (2007:4) state objects "feature as semiotic intermediary, carrying meanings and resources for the construction of individual and collective identities". Objects are seen as signs and symbols and are rendered as means for the circulation of meaning and the reproduction of interpersonal relations. Thorstein Veblen, who is

regarded as the first sociologist to recognize the social significance of consumption (Miles and Paddison, 1998), argues that objects are a means of expressing, transmitting, and maintaining meanings on wealth and social status. Some goods, such as alcoholic beverages, came to symbolize superiority as they were consumed by the noble, successful men. This pattern of social communication by using superior goods and consuming excess and right kind of goods to express wealth and status became incumbent on modern man (Veblen, 2005). Objects are used for stating something about their owner, regarding who he is, his kinship relations etc. within the social context he lives in (Miller, 2010; Douglas, 2000; Shove et. al, 2007).

Moreover, objects also maintain and reproduce social and individual meanings and relationships (Shove et. al, 2007; Miller, 2010; Douglas, 2000). As an example, Hebdige (2001) in his study, *Object as Image: The Italian Scooter*, demonstrates that how user clubs of Lambretta and Vespa used distinct signs such as pennants, badges or colours to distinguish their group and regenerated further distinctions such as berets or cowboy hats to foster and express their identity and thereby created further divisions among user clubs.

However, "objects are not just semiotically communicative: they are also pragmatically useful" (Shove et. al., 2007: 5). A variety of objects are orchestrated to organize and shape daily life. As Warde (2005: 131) states "engaging in particular practices and that being a competent practitioner requires appropriation of the requisite services, possession of appropriate tools, and devotion of a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice". For Reckwitz (2002: 252), "carrying out a practice very often means using particular things in a certain way". For this reason, objects are involved in daily life of subjects, affecting how things are done; thus, shape how daily life is organised. As Shove et. al. (2007) summarize, stuff are required for the "design and conduct" of daily life, therefore, they are substantial for the "accomplishment of daily routine". To clarify, practices are not only defined as doing things. A practice is defined as "a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the

world is understood" (Reckwitz, 2002: 250). Practices are a blend of individual and social knowledge that are embedded in the mental schemes of individuals (Bourdieu, 2004). For Bourdieu (2004) practices are an "immanent law", embodied schemes, in which the social practices acting as structuring structures which themselves are structured, form the "unconscious order" of society, which he calls as *habitus* (Miller, 2010: 53). For Bourdieu (2004: 108), *habitus* is a structure of dispositions that produces and reproduces practices.

De Certeau (1984), inquires into the *ways of doing*; i.e. the logic of practices within power relationships, by which he means: users develop tactics within the dominant power to cope with the dominant power, which constitutes the strategies. For De Certeau (1984: xix), most everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character and "must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities'". De Certeau (1984: xvii) defines tactic as "the ingenious ways in which the weak makes use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices", the actions of the weak, who try to operate in the society, which he calls as tactics within the mainstream strategies. Practices and objects are manipulated for these tactics. Objects are rendered as significant for the conduct of daily practices and daily life in that they define how daily life is realised and organised. For this article, how objects are manipulated, practices are reproduced and tactics are developed will be discussed with regard to identity discourse.

## PRAYER PRACTICE AND THE OBJECTS OF PRAYER

In Islam, a proper Muslim has to practice his belief by performing worshipping practices to show his belief. One has to practice, repeat, reinforce, improve, enhance and enrich his conduit. Several objects aid these practices. Tespih is the most prevalent of these as it aids counting, which is the core of these prayer practices. Muslims, except for Wahhabis, have been using prayer beads to count their prayers. As in many other cultures, counting is the core of religious practice and therefore, prayer beads are central to this practice. Muslims call their prayer beads *tasbih*, in modern Turkish *tespih* (Wesnick, 2009).There are two

sorts of worshipping practices in Islam in which prayers are counted, thus accompanied by tespih: *Salat* and *Dhikr*.

Salat is one of the five requirements of belief in Islam. It is performed five times a day but, devout Muslims may choose to do more than five. Salat, as stated in Qur'an helps to keep people away from evil or sin and it is a meritorious and important practice for Muslims. It was advised by the prophet Muhammed, to recite certain phrases precisely 33 times in each salat (Yıldırım, 1971). Therefore, in this central worshipping practice, devout Muslims use tespih to count their prayers (Figure 1).


*Figure 1.Tespih for Salat that has divisions consisting of 33 beads.*

*Dhikr*, is a devotional act that reinforces one's bonds with Allah, in which His name, His good qualities or His Messenger are recited. Although it is not one of the five pillars, due to the good deeds promised for those who perform dhikr, devout Muslims try to dhikr as much as possible. To count the extreme numbers that the prayers are recited in these pervasive practices, Muslims use tespih with 100, 500 or 1000 beads (Figure 2) or zikirmatik[1] relatively recently.


*Figure 2. Tespih which consists of 500 beads*

In Turkey prayer beads are used for several other purposes, besides being used to count prayers; such as means of expressing fanaticism (Figure 3), sign for rowdiness, when swing at hand or a distinguishing symbol for religious groups (Sarıcı, 2008: 128).


*Figure 3. Tespih, which has the beads in the colour of a soccer team, which expresses fanaticism,*

Even the participants who do not count their prayers were using tespih. They stated that tespih reminded them of praying and they prayed more 'peacefully' and 'satisfied' while using tespih. They preferred using tespih at home when they wanted to pray by 'feeling' the prayer. The materiality is significant for the relationship between object and the user. Due to the tactile stimuli of tespih uniting the body with prayer, people attach deeper meanings to tespih. Most participants stated that they felt more at ease with tespih, they felt the prayer better, whereas zikirmatik was regarded only as a tool for counting.

All participants of this study regarded tespih as symbol of Islam, Allah or their belief. The Imam of the

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[1] *Zikir-matik* is the Turkish name given to mechanical or digital counters. Zikir is the Turkish word for allusion. -matik is a Turkish suffix used to suggest automation, quickness or practicality, for example ATMs, are called *Bankamatik* in Turkish, a usage similar to *banko-mat* or *vendo-mat.*

mosque claimed that it was unnecessary to use tespih, moreover it was a wrong doing to attach sacredness to tespih. However, he himself was using tespih. He explained the reason as follows: *"It is not appropriate if all the community has tespih but the Imam hasn't, not having a tespih will be regarded as a lack in belief, so if I don't have a tespih among these people as the Imam, it will be ragarded as a deficit."*

There are also expressions embedded in the use of tespih. Using a 33 beaded tespih, swinging tespih at hand playing with it constantly during the day and using the tespih out of the purpose of praying are regarded as indicators of rowdiness, authority expression in a group and snobbishness by the participants of this study. If a man is swinging his 33 beaded tespih at hand, and showing off with it, it is a behaviour that is frowned upon. They favour tespih to be held decently at one's hand, even in pocket without showing to anybody. One of the participants said: *"It is not an accesory to swing at hand or so. Swinging a tespih does not fit to man, it is not appropriate, to sway a tespih at hand to catch attention, it is not an appropriate social behaviour, kind of priggish I would say."*

The place of tespih in the daily life and conspicuous demonstration of a religiously constructed daily life reflected on the objects are also expressions of identity. Most devout Muslims did not carry tespih during the day as they might go to toilet and the like which is disrespectful to tespih and to Allah. In their houses, they would hang tespih, along with other religious symbols, on the walls of their houses to construct their Muslim identity and express the degree of their Muslimness. They would conspicuously place the tespih that has fallen on the ground to a higher place to demonstrate their true believer identity and the respect and value that they give to their faith.

Also their organization of daily life around religious precepts and obsessively practicing prayer rituals are part of pious identity. One of the participants expressed it as follows: *"Does a Muslim ever have spare time? A Muslim is supposed to worship and recite Allah continuously".* Another participant said: *"I recite Allah, throughout the day"* and she continued explaining: *"The duty of human heart is to dhikr...*

*Blood travels through the veins with the name of Allah... It is told in the Book [the Qur'an] to recite Allah while sitting, laying and standing. As it is adviced to dhikr in all the three states of man, we must dhikr continuously".* Another participant explained*: "On my way to bazaar from the house, I pray to Muhammad".* Another participant told that he prayed some certain prayers, each at least three times, until he fell asleep. As it can be understood from these examples, besides the object itself, the manner of using tespih and the place in everyday life and domestic organization is highly associated with identity discourse. Object as a meaning carrier itself and the way of using and place in daily life is utilized to construct ones identity.

About 20 years ago, mechanical zikirmatiks were introduced (Figure 4). This is a simple mechanical counting tool, which has no indication that it was made for counting prayers or for any religious purpose. It seems to be a profane object for counting. Indeed, it is used in other contexts. For example, this object is used by the security check at the entrance of shopping malls, where it is used to count the customers entering the mall.



Figure 4. Mechanical zikirmatik

About five years ago, digital zikirmatiks were introduced that has a similar formal structure to the metal mechanical zikirmatik. In time, different variations of digital zikirmatiks developed. Those were mostly applied forms of small electronic appliances, such as mp3 players (Figure 5) or tamagotchi toys (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Digital zikirmatik in the form of mp3 player



Figure 6. Digital zikirmatik in the form of tamagotchi toy

With the introduction of *ring zikirmatiks,* which are smaller and can be worn around the finger like a ring (Figure 7), according to interviews, zikirmatik started to be more commonly used in daily life of Muslims.



Figure 7. Ring zikirmatik

All the participants regarded tespih as a symbol of Islam, Allah or their belief. They also assumed that secular groups also regarded tespih as a symbol of Islam and the Islamic way of life, so there is a high risk that seculars would associate tespih with *backwardist* and *religionist* connotations. Therefore, most woman participants stated that they avoided using tespih in public places, they would rather use zikirmatik. One of the younger girls in the gathering house said: *"I don't prefer using a tespih outside, so that people don't assume me as hoca (religious leader). I mean if you carry a tespih, they treat you as*

*religionist".* She continued explaining *"[Zikirmatik], in buses or so, makes one considerably at ease. Without anybody noticing, I do the [dhikr]".* Another participant explained her distress as follows: *"In the past they would only stare, but now they even harass verbally. Saying 'those' are here again or 'they' are growing in number. They regard us as religionist extremists. Now that there is this kind of a polarization in the society, there is more pressure in comparison to the past. Therefore, I think it is needed to keep quiet, and be patient for a while, I mean not to provoke 'them'... Zikirmatik is more comfortable in this sense. Tespih catches the attention of people around... They stare, harass verbally, look down at us, but with zikirmatik you can comfortably pray without being noticed. My husband uses zikirmatik as well. In the midst of crowd it doesn't catch attention, that is the most important."* As one of the shopkeepers stated it went further than being condemned or harassed by the seculars. As he said: *"This country went through a 28 Februrary coup, there was a postmodern coup, ... military bothered the folk. They arrested those who were using tespih and silver rings and such. So people tended towards those digital counters and stuff not to attract attention."* Some others who do not use zikirmatik, stated that they preferred hiding their tespih in their bag, and dhikr with their hands in their bag, placing their bag on their lap. So, they still continue their practice but by changing the *way of doing* and developing *tactics,* devout Muslims negotiate their identity in the society. They neither give up their practices nor continue the way they did, but by developing tactics they operate in the society, and position and disposition themselves through the objects they are using.

Some participants stated that thay hid their tespih due to religious constraints. *"I keep the zikirmatik in my pocket, and pray conveniently, can one ever understand what I am doing? You can't pray outside, Allah says to hide the worship and the sin both, one should be modest. It would be a conspicuous act to take out a huge tespih and dhikr".* One of the male participants explained how he dhikr in buses, paying attention to not to show off with his praying. *"In buses, I hold my tespih between my legs like this [showing how he puts his two hands in between his legs while sitting]. If I sit in the front seat, nobody can see. Not to hide, but also not necessary to show. In mosques and*

*such I pray comfortably."* One of the participants has a significantly different opinion about this matter. She says she hides her prayer by keeping her tespih in her bag to protect other (secular) people from gossiping about her and thus causing them committing sin. She explained: *"In bus, I hold the tespih in my bag like this. I would not prefer praying out in the open in a public that is unaware of religion. They'll say, look at her she is praying the tespih, so they'll commit a sin just because of me ... That means she is condemning, she'll gossip, that is a sin. So to protect her, I disguise, not to cause her commit a sin because of me".* And she continued suggesting a way of disguising a tespih as a bracelet (Figure 8): *"If you say I cannot do without a tespih, you can disguise it as a bracelet, with a matching outfit, so nobody would understand you are performing dhikr. I used to do so a lot when I was young."*



*Figure 8. Way of disguising a tespih like a bracelet, as one of the participants demonstrated.l*

One of the elderly participants stated that she did not use tespih in the presence of other men due to moral restraints. She says: *"I won't use the tespih in the prescence of other men. With my own kids it's okay, but not in the prescence of other men. It is like buttoning up your jacket while coming before a chief, everything has a manner of doing. But I can use tespih here [in the gathering house of the tarika], these places are for worshipping".* Due to modesty which is regarded as religiously appropriate, they prefer hiding or disguising their tespih or dhikr practice as other people might think they are showing off or being conspicuous of their prayer.

Moreover, zikirmatik is regarded as an innovation and a modern tool. For some participants it is a sign of literacy and being modern that it means keeping up

with the requirements of leading a modern life. Therefore, participants of this study are keen on using these objects to express that they can also be modern and literate.

They used these objects in various ways either to conduct a praying practice, express self identity or political identity or to organize their daily life according to religious precepts. It can be argued that Islamic groups negotiate their identity through the use of products. Muslims use and appropriate products for religious purposes to live as proper Muslims and to live as they believe it should be lived like. Both the current tension between the secular and Islamic groups that can be dated back to the foundation of the Republic, and the religious modesty codes are reflected on the use of objects. Moreover, objects and ways of doing are appropriated as *tactics* to negotiate these distinct identities.

## INDICATIONS FOR DESIGN

Some of the findings provide practical information on how to design tespihs and zikirmatiks that are fitting better to their use context, not to mention the aim of this study is not to put tespih and zikirmatik into a user test nor to provide direct input or guidelines into such a design process. In the current socio-cultural context as regards to social and political aspects of living Islam in Turkey, tespih and zikirmatik find different usages. Two patterns as hiding and disguising are noticeable in this study. In the current socio-cultural context, the participants reported that they wanted to hide or disguise their prayers and the tools they use for prayers because of two reasons. First one is not to catch attention of seculars and not to reveal the extent of their Muslimness. Second one is to obey the modesty codes of Islam by keeping their prayers unrevealed. The need to *hide* or *disguise* the certain prayer practices and products for this purpose for social concerns is an important insight for designers. This aspect of hiding and disguising is also significant for design process in that objects are usually designed to be visible and to express certain values and affordances for specific target groups. However, for this product group a total different approach presents itself. The findings of this study tell more about the role, place and use of objects in daily life and the interaction between users and objects. In-depth and

insightful information for both design research and practice is provided.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study showed the ways in which an object is used, appropriated and adapted and related practices are reproduced to negotiate identitieswithin the social and practical arrangements of the mundane everyday life. Design is a discipline that is fed by various disciplines. With this study I propose that along with technical aspects, socio-cultural aspects should also be integrated into design research and design process.

For this purpose, literature on the meaning of objects, practical role of objects in daily practices and daily life, practice theory and the logic of users' operations are explored to understand the intricate relationship between the use of objects and social and practical contexts. How people use and make use of objects besides the proposed usage are shown by explaining the drive behind these usages to provide an in-depth insight for designers on the intricate and multi-dimensional relationship between objects, practices and their socio-cultural contexts.

Objects are used in daily life to make it in accord with what the individuals think it should be lived like. Objects, tespih and zikirmatik with different use contexts and ways of using, enable this organization for devout Muslims, which is informed by Islamic precepts on how life should be lived. To keep prayer within almost every moment of their lives and to practice and live as their religion requires to be practiced or lived like, devout Muslims *make use of* objects.

To countinue the practice of counting prayers even in public, they utilize some other tools. For example, they use a counter which is devoid of religious connotations so that other people do not recognize their prayer practice. Also, to obey the social and moral codes and religious decency, and to negotiate their identity regarding the aspects of the current socio-cultural dynamics but to continue praying throughout the day they adopt and appropriate tools.

This adaption and appropriation process, however, does not replace the pre-existing or conventional objects and practices. Participants of this study do not abandon tespih and simply go on with new objects, tools or methods. Also as revealed by the interviews with shopkeepers, the sale rate of tespih has not changed since the introduction of zikirmatiks. Various sorts of tespih and zikirmatik co-exist in the market. Tespih with its symbolic values and the meanings attached to it reamins as a sacred, religious object which is used to accomplish meritorious prayer practices by feeling the prayer and by praying deservedly. The place of prayer is kept sacred by special tespihs devoted to this practice by individuals, while to place prayer into daily life the profane tool, zikirmatik, is employed. These *tools,* which only serve for the function of counting, are not objects specialized for prayer practices nor sacred objects to which more personal and special meanings are attributed. They are just used as practical *tools* to hide prayer and diffuse prayer into almost every moment of daily life. Participants of this study are using tespih with their sacred, meditative worshipping practices but for the prayer which goes on throughout the day they prefer using other *tools* which are better integrated into physical activity and the conditions of socio-cultural context.

For the specific case of tespih and zikirmatik which are the objects used to aid the most pervasive practice, the participants stated that they used these objects in various ways express identity or to organize daily life according to religious precepts again to express religious lifestyle. In the current socio-cultural context of Turkish everyday, the participants reported that they wanted to hide or disguise their prayers and the tools they use for prayers because of two reasons. First one is not to catch attention of seculars and not to reveal the extent of their Muslimness. Second one is to obey the modesty codes of Islam by keeping their prayers unrevealed. Also to express modernity. It can be argued that Islamic groups negotiate their identity through the use of products. Muslims use and appropriate products for religious purposes to live as proper Muslims or modern citizens or not to attract attention with their pious identity or to live as they believe it should be lived like.

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