

## RELIGION AS BRAND IMAGE IN LOCAL BEAUTY BRAND ADVERTISING

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### ABSTRACT

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*The cut-throat competitive market environment has made the advertising field very experimental and hence advertisers are adopting different measures to attract the attention of their target customers. Many companies try to convince Muslim consumers that their products are Shariah-compliant. In persuading whether or not their claim has any truth value, it is perhaps inevitable in today's capitalist world that religion come to be commodified. This advertising conflict practice is important to study especially in evaluate the social interaction in the formation of meanings for individuals or even society. The presentation of religious symbol or iconography basically been utilized by all the religions of the world so that each religion could identify each other. In advertisement, these symbols can be communicate through object, picture, sign, word, or even complex artistic forms and gestures used as a kind of key to convey religious concepts, association of certain ideas or events. The study is conducted to examine the influence of religion on local beauty brand and discover the Islamic commodification of brand image on advertisement by Muslim & Non-Muslim. The 'signs' used is more than selling purpose but implied with hidden messages and influences that later affects actions and thoughts of the viewer as well as what they do automatically are often governed by a complex set of cultural messages and conventions. 9 respondents from different*

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*background were selected from a convenience sampling method in semi-structured interview to provide more opportunities to glean insights about the topic. Culture has been perceived as a high influential aspect in advertising strategy especially in term of visual and text used. Cultural values of different background of viewers also governs ideas in giving interpretation of what was served to them in the advertisement. Even though they do understand it is a matter of brand image towards targeted consumer which is Malay-Muslim, some advertisement have the potential of misleading messages which can be considered as a harmful approach to the collective behaviors of the society. This so called 'normal' advertisement is a tactful manner that consumer goes psychologically under the pressure of advertising persuasiveness rather than to sell the products as the basic aim of advertising.*

*Keywords: Brand Image, Advertising, Religion in Advertising, Commodification, Visual Communication Design*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Great brands are generating emotions which shaped in the minds of consumers and not in the market place. Branding is more than just labels on products or packaging on the shelves of a store but good brands are stored in the minds of customers. Any successful brands are built by a strong and positive image of their brand that directly impacts the consumer buying behavior. Snyder (2017) state that majority of consumer believe that most advertisement is dishonest which lead to misleading, incorrect or had left out information even though marketers or even advertisers are aware that ethics build trust. Trust is the key in building brand and corporate loyalty from consumer. Not all advertising achieves message clarity and noise often stands as the culprit, which means anything that serves as a distraction from the message (Crow, 2010). The phenomenon of advertising that sells the image of Islam is not just to create believability but can be misleading as well as deceiving the public especially in a multi-racial country. The use of religion in commercial marketing field might, in the minds of some, raises the issue of appropriateness as well as the relevancy to resolve to such activities. Advertising medium is visual communication design work that abounding with symbols. The presence of religion symbols or icons in commercial can be presented in many forms to convey concepts and relationships. Analogies, figures, forms and picture are a few examples of religious symbol that embraces from abundantly wide variety of types and meanings. According to Abbas Dadras (2015), good used of symbols in advertisement create interaction and communication between the producer (brand) and the receiver (audience) aesthetically. However, the additional religion value plays an important roles in individual's emotional

experiences, thoughts and behaviour. The study made by Taylor, Halstead & Ulvoas (2017), religious symbol had a significant role in enhance perceptions of service provider quality especially to the audience with stronger religiosity levels. There are a lot of research on advertising related to visual communication, ethics, culture or even religion. However, all has been done separately without looking at the connection between all these that has been applied in our advertising trend including the commodification of religion in advertisement which allows the other people from another religion to assume to be accepted as a social norm. Religion nowadays are becoming one of the commercial value messages in their advertising strategy in words such as ‘*Sunnah*’, ‘*Mesra solat*’, ‘*patuh syariah*’ or even in visual in their ads in getting trust easily for the Muslim customer even though this approach is open can confuse other than to deceive the public. Thus, the study is conducted to examine the influence of religion on local beauty brand and discover the Islamic commodification of brand image on advertisement by Muslim & Non-Muslim as shown on the advertisement on Figure 1.0 below.



Figure 1: Local beauty brand advertisement with Islamic brand image

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The blue color is associated with Celcom or belongs to Pepsi, golden arch represents McDonald's and ‘*Wau*’ indicates Malaysia Airlines. These stimuli are coming from an extensive advertising, campaigns, signage’s, mega launches, promotional offers, labelling and much more. Customers respond to these stimulus each day consciously or not and the stronger stimuli the stronger responses will be. Each of these advertisements has something unique to tell about. Selecting the right words, images, symbols, format, the tone is an example of the criteria for the message that later transform these content of a message (thought, ideas etc.) into a symbolic form of encoding as written by Belch and Belch (2014). Such influence may affect new experiences and information is interprets; understanding about people and cultures (Duffy & Thorson, 2015). Brands that are strong or even iconic are the ones that consumers are deeply involved with. According to Burns & Fawcett (2012) cultural icons perform as

symbols in individuals' lives which provide them with means to understand and relate with the world. These icons come to represent a certain type of story that consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties. From the anthropological perspectives, culture is a shared meanings system that are passed from generation to generation through symbols that permit human beings to communicate, maintain and develop knowledge and understanding about life. Mehmood and Tandon (2012) state that culture can be referred as the symbols of manifestation of particular individuals, groups and societies use to make sense of daily life and to articulate their values. However, religion and culture seems like a complex ideas to study and after all, scholars and philosophers have long debated the meaning of these terms. This in turn gave the impact they have had on our comprehension of the social world around us.

According to Chace (2016) based on T.S Eliot writing, culture and religion help to define, support, and limit one another in ways that can enrich or weaken our modes of conduct, however we cannot do without any of them. When people in a culture believe strongly in a given religion, it can have a huge impact on their own culture and only then their culture comes to accept only those behaviors and ways of thinking that are acceptable to their religion. This is in-line with the meaning of Malay culture whereby according to Milner (2008), the Malay definition is one who is adapting the Malay way of life, culture, traditions and customary practices and are of the Islamic faith as defined in the Malaysia Constitution. Though this definition is puzzles over what precisely are Malay constituent elements as some Filipinos and people of Sumatra may be affected. Religion has always facilitated to define what is proper and fitting as well as has frequently prohibited the use of certain appeals for example materialistic, sexual and others (Ima Ilyani Ibrahim, Nur Rashidi Johari, Mohamad Niza Md Nor, Zulaiha Ahmad et al, 2016). A wrong misinterpretation of the visual communication design makes a religion been misled by other members of the society. Howarth (2011) state the fact that there 'are' plenty of communication work with reference to intercultural differences. However, most of it is not seriously cooped whereby messages are seen to be encoded by the symbols and nuances of one culture which may not be accessible for someone from another culture. Therefore, symbolic consumption is a central issue for researchers and advertiser as products can provide functional and symbolic benefits for their audience.

### ***Brand Image***

'Dettol' reminds of germs and hand washing before eating. The bond is not just physical but uses 'emotional glue' that attach itself to a specific association. These associations are important to emphasize brand values and maintain the top of mind awareness such as luxury, indulgence, certain product features, advantages

or even sensuality. Studies show that emotion helps to create a powerful memories in people's minds and in turn, these memories motivate them into taking action. The term brand image has been defined with variations in definition by different scholars (Lucy, James & Kim, 2014). According to Mehmet Gökerik, Ahmet Gürbüz, Ismail Erkan, et al (2018), brand image can be defined as a unique bundle of associations within the consumer's mindset or a set of beliefs held about a specific brand that is usually organized in some meaningful way. This definition was build based on Keller's early definition whereby the application provide a 'self-identity', value and tries to create, maintain, protect and enhance brand image that will take the products forward for a long-term brand success. Brand also closely associated to emotions, particularly when religion is involved as religion is highly complex human and social feature. Such distinction invites religious implications and is necessary for any companies especially in Islamic markets to understand. The character and value of the brand is reflected by the use of image as visual communication. However, these images conveys emotional value and not just a mental image. This differentiation of image in comparison with other product/brand is important according to Jumiaty Sasmita & Norazah Mohd Suki (2015) as company with a favorable brand image might sustain competitive advantage and enlarge its market share and achieve better position in the market especially in the era of new media. According to Sheffield (2006), advertising has reflected the needs of a society that desired more than just facts whereby it needed love, hope and security too. Advertisers or even marketers penetrate almost every aspect of our life: economic, social or even cultural in their advertisement in creating engagement in meaningful branding efforts. Strong brand are not only created by quality but also for the image that they have designs on the environment as consumers preferences (İşoraité, 2018).

There are differences between Islamic products and Islamic brands especially the 'Islamization' of international product that originally non-Muslim brands (Baker Ahmad Alserhan, 2010). Islamic brands also viewed differently by different people in different places even they are from Muslim consumers (Yuslina Liza Mohd Yusof & Wan Jamaliah Wan Jusoh, 2013). Baker Ahmad Alserhan (2010) highlighting that there are three different ways of how Islamic branding can be define which are Islamic brands by religion or halal brands (Shariah-compliant), Islamic brands that are originate known from Islamic countries and the third one is brands that come from or owned by non-Islamic countries, however it was designed specially to target the Muslim consumer. Influence engagement is the keywords, a product that symbolizes a human value that they ratify resulting a more positive attitude toward the product and a bigger possibility of purchasing it. In contrast with a product that symbolizes unfavorable attitude that they reject resulting a lower probability of purchase (Allen, Gupta & Monnier, 2008). A study done by Munazza Saeed and Ilhaamie Binti Abdul Ghani Azmi (2014), Muslims are conscious consumer and they have a positive

attitude towards shari'ah compliance products that significantly influences their intention to purchase the intended products. The religion approach in the advertising is rather satisfying appropriate and relevant to Islam consumer needs. In Malaysia itself, many brands manufacturing uses Halal processes as well as working with Halal accreditation to fulfill the fast-track growth in Islamic markets locally or even to be exported in global market.

### *Islamic Advertising*

According to Reichert, Latour and Jooyoung (2007), advertisement designed is intentional manipulation of visual images or symbols that has unintended social consequences especially in term of morality quality that was highly valued by all traditional cultures. This, subconsciously affect our lives by harvest and sale of human attention even there are times not in a good way such as false advertising. Fadhil Akbar Purnamaa and Anya Safirab (2017) write that, over the past few years, there is a growing number of research taking place on the relationship between advertising and religion. Advertiser practically doing the promotional activities that affect social and culture norms of Islamic ethical system unenthusiastically (Ali Shafiq, Ahasanul Haque & Kalthom Binti Abdullah, 2016). The term of 'Islamization' is the employment of brand-Islamization strategies based on information obtained from the business environment which is the Islamic market including customers and competitors. Islamic advertising is known as a marketing communication that based on the Shariah compliance laws and begin since the late 1980s whereby the interest in Islamic advertising began to rise (Cader, 2014). However, Islamic brands cannot be Shariah-compliant until they fulfill several conditions related to ingredients, impacts, logistics and intentions which is Islamically called as 'halal' or wholesome products. It also should not be haram neither should it be harmful to user or even to the social value.

Mohammad Ekramol Islam and Mohammad Zahedul Alam (2013) state that the detailed ethical guidelines in Islamic law basically are abstract done by decoding the guidelines run from Islamic sources such as the Quran and Sunnah into specific screening procedures to ensure that advertisements are in line with Islamic law. This shows, the advertisement is far from just an ads that contain the image that is prohibited from the Islamic principles such as nudity but need to have certain spiritual value, safe, socially sound and obviously not to destroy the moral base of the people. In addition, Aniss Yusairah Abdul Kadir and Al-Hasan Al-Aidaros (2015) also added that promotion of an advertisement should portray the true picture of product as Islam prohibits the practice of over promising and exaggeration. This ethical boundaries is set up to promote moderation so that customers do not feel deceived and avoiding provoking desires that can never be fulfilled. Andreini, Rinallo, Pedeliento et al (2017) mention that there are two

types of religious approach used in contexts used by marketer or advertiser whereby in a globalized context, it is not necessarily intended to be disrespectful and the use of religious imagery by marketers is ever more common. The first approach is when religion is accommodating through acknowledging the religious needs of heterogeneous market segments such as in the case of hospitals or airports with interfaith chapels or prayer rooms. The second one is the exploitation of religious symbolism, art, icons and artifacts for commercial purposes that adopted by religion-insensitive organizations. It is easy to recognize this image because of semantics, which is the relationship between the symbol and its social or cultural meaning. Through this discussion, Islam has already prepared appropriate standards in the practice of advertising to avoid the exploitation of the basic instincts of consumers to obtain private gains. Thus, Islamic advertisement is more than just a visual of mosque, al-Quran verse or even crescent and star.

**METHODOLOGY**

An integrated marketing campaign helps to create a memorable communication and reinforces central message consistency to keep the targeted audience top-of-mind. This study is concentrated on billboard advertising as this outdoor advertising is considered a mass-market medium that being viewed by various background of audience just like broadcast, TV and cinema advertising. Other than it was simply a way to boost brand awareness, this medium also presented by few words and stunning visuals in grabbing the attention of their messages. Three brands billboards were selected as shown on Figure 2.0 below as the case study after been analyze semiotic ally.



Figure 2: Five billboard from three different brands for case study

These five billboard were selected from nineteen billboards of local beauty brand as it represents by two or more Islamic commodification in their visual communication design with example shown on Figure 3.0 below. These visual communication design can be represented by type (text, slogan, typography), image or visual used (photography or even illustration), sign or symbols, graphic, color and layout.

	Visual Communication Design		
		Type	1
		Image	2
		Sign/ Symbol	3
	-	Graphic	
	-	Color	
	-	Layout	

Figure 3: Example of analysis: Islamic commodification by using three different Visual Communication Design element

Symbols communicate through assigned meaning. Thus, a content analysis suites to analyze which forms and contents are used in the advertisements (what is offered to the recipients). Disciplines within social sciences especially communication as well as advertising are subjected to concerned with the functions and effects of symbols, meanings and messages. The emergence of the information society, texts, contexts, images and interfaces (Lazović, 2012) leads to a lot of literature that discusses its nature and how it is greatly impact our daily lives. The analysis of advertisements in the same or different culture can be done through semiotic approaches. This is done to identify the constituents of a picture and relate these to themes, concepts with wider cultural meanings because even the simplest images can be interpreted and reproduced differently by different background of viewer.

A total of 9 respondents (3 Chinese, 3 Malays, 2 Indian & 1 Bumiputera) took part in a semi-structured interview that was conducted in end of 2018 using snowball sampling. This non-probability sampling is chosen as the respondents comes from different religion and culture background as well as different states and educational background by primary data sources nominating another potential respondents to be used in the research. Semi structured interview was selected as it is suitable in studying human experiences and observations (Hamza Alshenqeeti, 2014). Different people are remarkably have different perceptions about particular facts or events as different people are faced with unique experiences that generate different perspective of the data that were collected. The gathering of these complexities into a singular database help to generate

conclusions with more depth and truth of emotional response, which benefits to the study in which emotional response often drives a person's decisions making or influences them in their behavior (Watson, 2007).

## **DISCUSSION**

Despite given the potential power of global brands especially in today's e-commerce world, most local companies are still interested in investing their brands with local status. Some are showcasing the image of luxury, elegance to symbolize of success but some are sharing common values with their targeted customer to sustained trust that will hold in their hearts and minds with the aims to gain high trust levels in the relationship. Cultural values determine the perception of viewer whereby these advertisement are not promoting the product they want and need but how that product will fit them. Therefore, they have their own 'unique' elements of visual communication design to fit with consumption patterns and requirements of the audience that possibly affect their advertising content. Even though successful communication in an advertisement is the one that focuses on a specific audience with information that fits with the selected group's needs. However the advertising information that was displayed indirectly viewed by multi-racial society that later does effects the literal meaning of a sign and the implied meaning of a sign designed. As a non-personal communication, advertising not only helps in promoting the product to earn profits but it is a medium of the exchange of ideas as well as believed by most of the respondents.

Islamic value are strongly found influence on Malaysia Malay culture and the influence is reflected on these commercials especially in text and image; both from content analysis and interview session. All respondents believe it is deployed to create a stronger bond between the brand and the targeted customer. Exposure is the keyword in established brand image as it was the key in deliver a great first impression to establish a strong, positive, consistent brand identity. Through the analysis, they believe that all the billboards have the elements of Islamic commodification in creating their brand image that is determined by a variety of components mainly type or message presented, image used and logo for one of the brand. Most of the advertisers displayed the pictures of talent or figure in the advertisement as their first attraction element and indirectly create emotional response which draw greater attention. Thus, made it has more impact than words even though it was often used merely to reinforce it as a second option. Moreover, some non-Muslim respondents are not familiar with some words that made them disassociate the message with the product sell. In turn, this made the images as a main non-verbal cue to construct their interpretation. The size of the visual also plays an important role in giving emphasizing and attention to them especially for a billboard size advertisement which in line with the content analysis done. The portrayal of talent is the main information cue in their advertising with their gestures, wardrobe and color that related to Malay-Muslim

values. This focal point has made their product as second or third option to be viewed. The utilization was made to give people a specific image for these brand that speaks faster than words which made the viewer easily absorb as well remembered with much less effort even though some believe it was irrelevant. Thus, it is clearly that they are shifting the attention far from the product that they sell. Most of the respondent also doesn't remember the brand name that was advertised compare to the image presented to them.

Type is another elements that make up a brand image for any brand since these lines are intended for higher visibility applications in advertising. As a local brand, there are no foreign-sounding name as a symbolic association of local cultural values and easily to make a connection between local brands to local consumers. The local Malay language used as a brand name also believed to aim primarily at impressing Malay-Muslim consumers as a strategy of attraction and trustworthy. This bond is exclusively based on strong emotional connections as a result of the perceived shared values between the local beauty brand and their targeted consumer. Malay language used also used as the most important features to transfer the message they intended easily in all copywriting of these billboards. The application is to make sure it is easier to be perceived and believe that they are one and the same with the brand. All advertisement headline used were clearly terms that are related to Islam for most of the respondent especially Muslim but to some non-Muslim, the respondents were unsure to some meaning of the advertisement. However, they believe that it is terms that is relating to Islam especially when Islamic brand image are already created in their mind based on the image used. However, confusion arises in terms of improper use of headline that does not fit with the product sell create a complexity of product information especially to the non-Muslim in some ads. Most of them believe that all words that was displayed on the headline was an Islamic term specifically for Muslim user even though it is not. And some believe that it is a statement of highlighting the product usage even though the headline used never highlighted the functional benefits or feature based ingredients to build an identification of Islamic brand image. Therefore, to the non-Muslim audience, these headline might lead to a misleading information in their marketing communications and confusion from the nature of the product itself which is beauty product. This made the advertisement is not achieving message clarity based on the symbols represented. Even some non-Muslim respondent believe that some of the product is meant specifically for Islamic ritual or practices. The result not only gives a new image for the product but will also influence their predictability in social relationships to understand of each other's actions especially towards Muslim. To understand a real message of these advertisement, they need to have knowledge of cultural context and ability to make the correct inferences. *Jawi* writing used in some of the advertisement or Arabic words as mentioned by the non-Muslim also gives a significant brand image to be associate with Islam. However, the *Jawi* writing

usage as a logo is not a wise option whereby there is no sense for a cosmetic brand as mentioned by most of the respondent. Giving life to a brand can be enjoyably creative, but then the message is a serious matter to avoid misleading construction of interpretation based on what was displayed on the advertisement. Exaggeration of elements used was believed effect positively for Muslim in term of their trustworthy and stimulate motivations towards the product even though some of the ads need clearer narrative to avoid misleading information. However to the non-Muslim, most of them need more informational content regarding the product instead of what they are highlighting currently. Non-Muslim believe that all claims composed are realistically giving the right information needed to the Muslim as it should be, which made the advertisement doesn't influence them even though some of the advertisement need more explanation and ambiguous claims as said by most of the Muslim respondent.

Through visual communication design, any advertisement can have distinguished visual identity and all these ads successfully associate their brand with the intended image which is 'Islamic' look even though some does not represent how Islamic advertising should look like in real. The tangible and known signs for Islam is used as to symbolize distinguished core values characterized their targeted audience which influence consumer behavior in all of these ads. The text and image are two distinguish elements that create Islamic look brand image from the other competing or available advertising especially to the non-Muslim. To them, they look this kind of ads as something that was normal and unique for a local Malay made product based on the appeals that frequently applied that relate to the values of the Malay culture. They believe that Malay market have their own needs especially when it comes to religion based on their understanding that make their brand image different from other brand and justify its existence. It is because reading and interpreting signs are a fundamental cultural activity including for the purpose of marketing and advertising. Some Muslims are intrinsically motivated by looking at the marketing approach as it was a guarantee for quality, honesty and satisfies the religious requirement. It somehow created a good impression of the brand more than just a logo other than the quality is served. All visual communication design used is associated with various interpretation, action and interaction in different culture environment. When this approach is served on a regular basis in the long term will also effects the development of Malay-Muslim social and cultural contexts and environments and become a social norm especially in today's limitless marketing medium. Additionally, these advertisement fundamentally shows current trends in social preferences and they reveal cultural values and norms of the target audience. Subsequently, they becomes the mirror of the times people live in.

## **CONCLUSION**

Business is a one of the activity that is supported by Islam and it is good to give consumers what they really want. However, Islam does not support any fraud, deception and exaggerated claims about the products. The positive sides of these local beauty brand billboards advertisement, it does not focus on beautification of women or even bodily function of model that are absolutely prohibited by Islam, even the non-Muslim are aware about it. It is somehow a good brand recognition as well as build a good reputation and an expectation towards local brand image in advertisement. However, message transferred can be misled by most of the non-Muslim audience based on image or even headline used as they always assume the word they don't understand linked to Muslim needs even though it is not the message means. The purpose of advertising should be the guidance of consumer rather than too emotional soft sell persuasion to buy that product even though they believe it is part of their brand image. This inconspicuous claims can lead to significantly higher levels of false beliefs not just towards the brand but Islam too which may enable disliking attitude of consumer to that particular brand. Islamic commodification symbols establish brand identity for these local beauty product are transferred to the brand, sometimes creating confusion. Thus, it is important to check the cultural differences, which have to be taken into consideration to can help advertiser to transfer the idea in form and content of the advertisements. Due to the great influence of advertising, it is the moral duty of advertisers to practice ethics code whereby advertisement is a tangible ways of any brand to present their business in the best light. Building strong and lasting brands are more than just beautiful images in advertising but trust and credibility as brand image is firmly in the hands of the consumer, especially when they control the conversation in multi-racial country. Relevant authorities also should take any measures in term of Islamic value that ethically does not use within the context with such cases in advertisement content as they might get a wrong message on Islam. Brand image should encompasses both visual communication design elements and brand associations with reliability and quality. The efforts of clear description in the advertisement hopefully build a better credibility of local brand promotion and clearly meet the requirement of Islamic advertising.

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