Islamic marketing and branding: thinking outside the box

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Islamic marketing and branding: thinking outside the box

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Abstract: Islamic marketing is a field which represents an opportunity to expand and improve the marketing specialisation and to reformulate and restructure business paradigms overall. Taking another look at the organic formulation of views and viewpoints in business means that research areas and alternative frameworks can be explored for the benefit of all market stakeholders. Looking at the market from an Islamic perspective offers a chance to think differently about markets and market frameworks, and allows improvements and corrections to be made to current market imperfections and inequities. This short piece discusses a few points important in conducting business from an Islamic perspective, and highlights some opportunities for future studies.

Keywords: Islamic marketing; value-maximisation; Muslim, halal; ethics.

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1 Introduction

One of the best things about the establishment of a new Islamic marketing outlet – the *International Journal of Islamic Marketing and Branding* – is that it reflects the opportunities Islam provides all around us. In this case, a chance to share and grow knowledge – all the way to China!

2   Abundance and value-maximisation

Islam is a teaching of abundance. The earth and heavens are abundant with resources, available to all people, without discrimination. The sun shines on everyone. The world has water for people, plants and animals to drink, to wash with, and/or to use for irrigation. This understanding of resource availability stands in stark contrast to the traditional economic model, on which economic thought – and, therefore, marketing thought – is based. Viewing resources as scarce encourages a scramble for them, resulting in an abrasive form of competition aimed at 'not only trying to own the resources but trying to prevent others from owning them' [Kazmi, (2005), p.281]. Where scarcity of distribution of resources exists, requiring people to cooperate to survive, the 'filter of Islamic values' (Rice, 1999) should be applied. So, for example, resources would not be allowed to be diverted for the production of luxuries, until the production of required necessities was achieved (Siddiqi, 1981). This approach prepares an infrastructure from which all can benefit – a framework for all to use for creativity and innovation, allowing equal access to opportunity for all. This is particularly poignant in Islamic teaching, as everything – from a person's individual wealth, to his or her assets and land, belong to Allah, and are trusts – on the management of which everyone will eventually be judged. In this way, economics and ethics are intertwined (Naqvi, 1981).

Another foundation of Islamic business teaching is that of requiring markets to provide value. Value, as a macro-level goal, requires societal interests to be identified and served before any other/s. 'Value-maximisation', as it has been coined (Saeed et al., 2001; Ali et al., 2013) seeks to structure markets in a way which maximises societal justice. An operation of this concept is evident in the traditional layout of marketplaces (souqs). The sellers of one item/type are all clustered together, rather than far apart. This is an opposite format to that promoted in traditional economics, where vendors of the same item/type should be separated so consumers are distributed between them (as in malls). This allows great variations in price, in quality, to exist without consumers being easily aware of the differences. This structure typifies a foundational motivation of profit maximisation – the pursuit of profit as a main goal. With no constraint on profit seeking, by structure or regulation (Al-Faruqi, 1995), conditions of monopoly, hoarding, environmental degradation and other outcomes which can cause societal harm, are possible. Similarly the sale of items/activities which damage people and their societies may be justified. A value-maximisation approach does not allow any of these conditions. Some items may not be sold or distributed under any circumstances. And other harms are curbed within a structure which, first and foremost, seeks justice for societal interests.

Further, a natural by-product of the pursuit of value-maximisation is profit. Obviously, Muslims are motivated by the material, and Islam acknowledges this (Qur'an 28:77). Muslims are required to work towards improving their situation, and to be eligible to receive resources. It is simply that we are not free to seek wealth without limitation. A criticism of taking, or changing to, a value-maximisation approach has been an imagined potential loss of profit, but simply reconceiving potential profit centres can address this. Zulkharnain and Jamal (2012), in their consideration of hotels in Malaysia, have pointed out that the fear hoteliers have of 'going dry' to meet the requirements of becoming an 'Islamic hotel', in terms of profit loss are unfounded, and the money is more than recovered through increased local family dining and family travellers.

3 Success, segmentation and globalisation

The Qur'an describes successful people as those who are 'inviting to all that is good (khayr), enjoining what is right (ma'ruf) and forbidding what is wrong (munkar) (Qur'an 3:104) [Beekun, (2004), pp.1–2]. For Muslims, Islam is both a way of life and a universal truth. However, Islam has never been a monolith (Elmessiri, 1997), except in the oriental depiction (Bryce et al., 2013) or the colonised mind (Mukherji, 2004). The 'globalisation of markets' theory (Levitt, 1983) which expected the worlds needs and desires to homogenise as people were exposed to more of the same goods, cultures and experiences through travel, media and the internet, has been pervasive across marketing thought. However, De Mooij (2010, 2013), in her important work on culture, has noted that research has shown that once basic needs are met, rather than converge, people's consumption diverges consistent with their local and national cultures. Given that, across a group consisting of 1.8 Billion who share a culture, consuming in line with their Muslim culture should surprise no-one. Rather than reducing Muslim consumption to its bare bones, the acknowledgement and need meeting of this significant segment is both profitable and forecasted to become more so (Stephenson, 2014). In this way, branding to the ummah rather than individual Muslim nations can not only be successful, but is a reasonable strategy (Alserhan, 2011; El-Bassiouny, 2014). Identifying the Muslim nation as a segment, rather than identifying just a geographical national segment for Muslims, also acknowledges the free will of individual Muslims, their diversity and variation(s) (Bouma et al., 2003).

An acceptance of the globalisation thesis has led to a focus on similarities between (especially) nation states in the marketing literature when, in fact, it overlooked the bountiful research opportunities which existed (and still do) in the differences. Globalisation is driven by mass marketing, that is, a profit-maximisation doctrine. As Helena Norberg-Hodge notes, "globalisation … attempts to amalgamate every local, regional, and national economy into a single world system" [Norberg-Hodge, (2002), p.59]. Consequently, there has been a vast body of research generated which seeks 'the global consumer' responding similarly to the global products now available in the global markets. However, such a consumer does not, and has never, existed (De Mooij, 2010). It has been argued that societal perceptions change with strong national branding, and with Islam as a shared culture for nearing 2 billion people, why cannot the branding be of nation (ummah) rather than nations? Muslims share a teaching that, even at a very basic (uncontested) level, recommends formats for daily life – what to eat, prayer, clothing norms etc. Even when Muslims are classified as 'ethnic' or 'cultural' (that is, at the 'least committed' end of the spectrum) (Sander, 1997), there are consistently some consumption 'tells' – such as eating halal meat – and this consistency has been made clear in the literature (Alserhan, 2011).

While there have been examples of 'problematising' the segmentation of Muslim consumers on the basis of their affiliation with Islam, this understanding reduces Islam to a monolith, and also fails to recognise it as a culture. What is absolutely logical, is to consider the Muslim ummah as a market, rather than to consider Muslims as consuming firstly with the bounds of their national identities. This position is supported by Al Faruqi (1982, p.163), who points out that the "the absoluteness of Islamic culture did not make it intolerant of the ethnic subcultures of its adherents, of their languages and literatures, of their folk customs and styles" – this is visually evident when one considers the range of clothing that Muslims wear adapted to their local climates and other needs (Boulanouar,

2006, 2011). Further, Al-Faruqi makes clear that the local culture is still distinguished from Islam by keeping the 'adah (local culture) in its proper place, which is 'subservience to the culture of Islam' [Al-Faruqi, (1982), p.163; Al-Qaradawi, 1984]. This perspective honours the difference between Islam and Muslims, which is often conflated in the literature (Imam, 2005). It also allows Muslims to be segmented on their commonalities, while allowing small-scale, localised or (geographically) nationalised study of particularities – often called 'identity projects'. Islamic marketing, too, has a far greater potential scope than just considering Muslims another 'cute context' – a charge which has been levelled against consumer researchers in the past (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 2007). Not only is there scope to reform and reformulate the 'way we do business' for the better, there is plenty of room for serious, organic theory-building contributions as well.

4   Work, good deeds and culture

Islam encourages work. The last Messenger(s) was asked what type of earning was best and replied, "a man's work with his hand and every business transaction which is approved" (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 846). Therefore, Islam has a considerable business ethics teaching and, in fact, the last Prophet(s), was a businessman. As such, Islamic teaching both provides an ethical model and a leadership model. Under a conventional business ethics framework, Islamic business ethics would be considered a universal ethics model. This model developed by Kant, emphasised duty and responsibility and applied to everyone, everywhere. The criticism levelled at Kant's model has been that no-one is responsible for the consequences of a decision (Ghillyer, 2012). However, from an Islamic standpoint, the most significant problem is with the delineation of the term 'duty'. Islam looks at the intention of the act (Kant's categorical imperative), but, considers the intention alone insufficient to make an unethical act, ethical (Al-Qaradawi, 1984). When a good intention is followed by a permissible action, then we have worship (ibadah), and that is when a Muslim's act enters the realm of 'good deeds'. Humankind is required to participate in their purification through active engagement in life – amidst the tests of this life. Correctly managing ethical dilemnas is a chance to earn good deeds.

Sandikçi (2011) points out that Muslim practice is often approached as a binary between what is lawful (halal) and what is not (haram). As Islamic teaching makes clear, most things are halal (lawful), and actually the basic standpoint is that the item is halal, unless legislation (shari'a) had identified it as otherwise. However, a failure to consider halal and haram as two distinct poles, supposes convergence to a certain point and then divergence based on culture, interests, local conditions following that within a culture shared by a nation. In this case, a Muslim one, the distinction between halal and haram is a process that begins with an intention (making an 'ends justifies the means' (utilitarianism) defence impossible). Categories of 'halal' and 'haram' rather than being a simple binary, entail five stages between an act that is required and one that is prohibited – required (fard), recommended (mustahabb), neutral (mubah), detested (makruh) and, finally, prohibited (haram). As Sanchez-Runde et al. (2013) point out; the differences in ethics between groups are more often disagreements on the practice, rather than the value itself.

A halal process requires earnings to be halal (ie, from lawful sources). Any portion of earnings from non-halal sources 'contaminates' earnings from acceptable sources,

making all earnings unacceptable – just as ink makes drinkable water, undrinkable. So, income from gambling, interest (riba), profits of crime, alcohol, all serve to pollute earnings. And all items purchased with these earnings are also polluted, so cannot generate baraka (blessings) from Allah – the food fed to the children, the new house, the new car, the swimming lessons – and, they cannot receive the exponential reward available to all permissable spending, on all allowable items, from all acceptable income. There is no good deed possible from disallowed spending. As you can see, halal earnings are all part of a halal process!

Islamic business ethics, consistent with a value-maximisation approach, also has a component of benevolence (disallowing any consideration of 'caveat emptor' (ethical relativism)). Benevolence in dealing with employers, with employees, with debtors, with those who have less than you, are of lower rank than you or who suffer in ways in which you do not. Also required is a consideration of all stakeholders in a society when conducting business – suppliers, buyers/consumers, debtors, the general public; stockholders – including owners and partners, but also competitors and the needy; the natural environment – encompassing care and protection of animals, environmental pollution and ownership; and also general social welfare – considering the weak and the destitute – giving Islamic business ethics 'in-built' CSR!

However, Islamic teaching does not and cannot support capitalism, when capitalism privileges capital and is a model of profit maximisation. A capitalism which has other inherent characteristics, requiring a "focus on satisfying material objectives alone [which] impedes rational thinking of people and makes them slaves of marketing firms" (Beekun, 2004); a capitalism doctrine from which dominant business ideologies leave marketing executives incapable of accessing any mechanism or conscience that could act as a brake on feeding their drive towards maximising their earning (Al-Faruqi, 1995; Saeed et al., 2001). These formats are described as dhulm – injustice, exploitation, oppression.

5 Criticism of Islamic marketing and Muslims

There have been claims that Islamic Marketing studies have/are essentialise/ing Islam and the focus should be on particularising or even individuating research to avoid the binary of 'halal' and 'haram' (Sandikçi, 2011). There are two problems with this characterisation. One is that Islam and Muslim are two separate entities, and the conflation of the two terms has led to some confusion across social science research (Imam, 2005). An example of this is Ger's (2013) criticism of Islamic marketing, when perhaps 'Islamic branding' is a more appropriate descriptor (or, better, Muslim branding). By failing to separate the teaching (of Islam), from the performing of Islam (by Muslims), attributions and criticisms are unclear. An example is the 'negotiabilty' of what is halal or haram in Islam (there is no negotiation) versus within particular Muslim groups (as is possible, see Karataş and Sandıkcı, 2013). The second is that disallowing the grouping of 'Muslims' as a huge segment alongside the other three 'billions' (India, China and women), denies the many commonalities across Muslims (Imam, 2005) in how Islam is understood and practiced which have been identified in contemporary research (Alserhan, 2011). Naturally, when considering a group so large, there exists perhaps limitless potential for 'identity projects' both within and between geographical nations, regions and collectives. The rich individualised context allows a detailed consideration of particularised identity projects such as those well represented in the recent literature – for

example, Sandikci and Ger on Turkish middle class women consumers (Sandikçi and Ger, 2005) and Sobh and Belk on UAE and Qatari middle class women's consumption of spaces (Sobh and Belk, 2011) and clothing (Sobh et al., 2014).

There have been criticisms, in the literature, of the ethical practice of Muslims (e.g., Rice, 1999), but this does not detract from the fact that Muslims have had the honour and the privilege of receiving a comprehensive ethical framework. Although, Muslims are reminded of their obligations to work towards their own improvement, they are also promised help – "…Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves…" (Qur'an 13:11). Branding tailored to appeal to Muslims has also been criticised (e.g., Ger, 2013) for taking a superficial and self-serving approach to Muslim consumers, which is a valid and useful criticism. Islamic marketing, as part of a complete reworking of the business/economic system, rather than being part of a capitalist format, has a framework to transform the economic system for the benefit of all.

The Islamic ethical system, which is considered to be from Allah and unbounded by time, emphasises both individual responsibility and group responsibility. Whilst Islamic teaching also acknowledges there are stages of moral development – in Islam there are two, child and adult, in conventional theory there are three (e.g., Kohlberg, 1981) – it also acknowledges three stages of soul development – ammarah (12:53), lawwamah (75:2) and mutma'innah (89:27). At the highest level (mutma'innah) you should 'love Allah more than your trade' (Qur'an 9:24). How a person, a dynamic creation endowed with free will, goes through these stages is also effected by his/her influences – personal, family, peer, life, situation. However, the primary locus of control in Islamic ethics is the person themselves; it is not an external locus of control as in other paradigms [Kazmi, (2005), p.282]. Islamic teaching does not accept the corporation as a legal 'person' – businesses are not recognised as a separate entity – therefore people are individually both responsible and liable (Beekun, 2004).

As Saeed et al. (2001) notes, we are responsible for how we train our subordinates [and students], how they utilise the skills we teach them in 'suppressing and subduing the rational thinking of consumers, and to what degree [we] support and respect local cultures and environments' (p.135). Of course as researchers we also have obligations to try to develop the knowledge and contribute to the literature.

This Journal represents an opportunity for academic thought and ideas for practical application, as well as an opportunity for sadaqa jaryya, remembering we leave the earth with our deeds alone for company.

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