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Islamic marketing and conventional marketing theory: a brief case study of marketing what Muslim women wear

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Abstract: All research comes from a particular perspective, and therefore has inherent bias. In applying paradigms developed within, or for, one culture or group, the question must be raised as to how applicable the paradigm is when applied to other groups or cultures. This paper considers symbolic interaction theory when applied to Muslim women and what they wear. The paper concludes that the theory is not a very good fit for Muslim women's clothing, but with adaptations could still be used. It also proposes that other theories could also suffer from the same, or similar, problems of fit, but may be satisfactorily adjusted to be useful in different contexts.

Keywords: Islamic marketing; symbolic consumption theory; Muslim women; clothing; research; paradigm fit; consumer research.

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1 Introduction

The academic field known as ‘marketing’ is a discipline that has evolved from Western economics. Western economics modelled its frameworks and research paradigms from the pure sciences, which had a research tradition of some length, and were replete with their own biases and premises (Belk, 1995; Elmessiri, 2006). For example, pure science, dealing with inanimate matter, strove for objective, replicatable, experiment-based, logical findings (Elmessiri, 2006). Included in this objective ‘scientific’ approach is a position of secularism (Fox and Lears, 1983), as ‘spirituality’ or the spiritual dimension was not seen as consistent with objective science (Roald, 2001; Yamani, 1996). This position, taken in academic writings, is consistent with the trend in western societies towards secularism in general, which can be seen in the declining numbers attending church services and lower numbers self-identifying as a member of an organised religious group in census data. Both Elmessiri (2006) and Sennett (1974) argue that secularisation has replaced a societal belief in transcendence, with one of immanence, in the West.

From economics, marketing also adopted research approaches which embraced the scientific ‘rational man’ theories of human behaviour, and these have been widely used – are in fact, preferred – in the discipline (Belk, 2009). More recently, and especially in consumer research, there has been a move towards a more ‘anthropological’ or ‘social science’ approach than was obvious in earlier stages of the development of marketing (Belk, 1995), in order to address the obvious fundamental differences between the focus of pure science and the focus of consumer research and the natures of the samples studied in each case. However, the adoption of theories and perspectives from anthropology has still meant using frameworks which have sprung from a similar organic position (i.e., developed in a western society) and an ‘emperial’ position has often been shown in these traditions when dealing with non-western peoples as noted by a number of authors (e.g., Burton, 2009; Sardar et al., 1993). An example of this is Geertz (2000) who stated, “we were the first to insist that we see the lives of others through lenses of our own grinding and that they look back on ours through ones of their own” (p.65). This perspective, along with the body of Geert’s work, has been extremely influential across the social sciences. Very recently, concerns about the effect this type of overarching ‘grand narrative’ (and their assumed universalism) have been raised (Boulanouar, 2011b; Jafari et al., 2012).

The appropriateness of the established theories and frameworks is of critical importance to the field of Islamic marketing. The Qur'an, as a source of guidance, has a number of names, one of which is Al Furqan¹, which can be translated as “the differentiator”. This means that the Qur'an, and by extension Islam, is a guidance to differentiate between what is wrong and what is right. In addition to using the Qur'an as a source of guidance, there is the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammed (s). In one hadith it is narrated that the prophet(s) said, “The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim (male and female)²”. Therefore, Muslims should seek knowledge and take the best from it from whatever the source. They should sift knowledge through the Islamic teaching and decide what is beneficial and what is not, what needs adjustment and what must be rejected outright. Keeping that objective in mind, this paper uses symbolic consumption theory as an illustrative example to examine how well the theory applies to a Muslim consumer, in this case Muslim women who observe adherent dress in public.

2 The voices of ‘others’

There have been calls in the literature to ‘hear the voices’ of different groups – i.e., to let them speak for themselves, not be filtered through a narrator – to talk rather than be talked about (Burton, 2009). Recently, there have been several studies which answer this call (Sandıkçı, 2011; Boulanouar, 2011a), but the approaches vary considerably. A position asking researchers not to ‘essentialise’ studies of Muslim populations has been taken, with the argument put forward that “It is too restrictive to examine the Muslim market solely through the perspective of religion” [Sandıkçı and Rice, (2011), p.12]. The argument could be made that segmenting on religion as a ‘first cut’ is not only sensible but necessary, given that this group has high numbers, with many researchers asking if this segment is the fourth ‘billion’ (after India, China and women) (Alserhan, 2011; El-Bassiouny, 2010) – each of which have been initially segmented in this broad way. In the place of ‘essentialist’ views, ethnoconsumerism (Venkatesh, 1995) is suggested – the idea of looking at the group from within their reality. In the case of Muslims, this means a consideration of Islam as a culture and a source of guidance (Said, 1998) for all aspects of life. While an ‘essentialist’ representation assumes Islam is monolithic or unidimensional, that is a misunderstanding of how the discourses on Islam are constructed. “Islam is undoubtedly the faith of transcendental monotheism, the belief in Allah (the one and only God), who transcends both man and nature. But monotheism does not lead to monism; on the contrary, it leads to plurality and diversity. For from a strictly Islamic point of view, except for God, everything else exists in variety. Therefore, there is not one single Islamic discourse, but rather a variety of discourse that manifest the various endeavours (ijtihad) of the Muslims, within a specific time and place, to understand the world around them and to interpret the Qur'an” [Elmessiri, (1997), p.1]. Ethnoconsumerism requires an examination and incorporation of the context of the sample into the approach made to participants and also interpretation of the data gathered. In the case of Muslims, the shared teaching forms the foundation, and well-spring, of the shared culture which stretches across ethnicity and language, geography and distance (Burton, 2009; Kazmi, 2005; Said, 1998), with regional variation both catered to by the teaching and developed ‘on the ground’. It is essential to understand what is important to ‘them’ and the elements that make up their context/background must be sufficiently covered. This means the social, political, economic and geographical background (Flyvbjerg, 2001), also the institutions (Mittelstaedt, 2002) and, with that included, a meaningful and insightful contribution can be made to the current body of consumer research literature.

3 Symbolic consumption theory

Levy introduced the concept of symbolic consumption to marketing in 1959, and is widely quoted as saying, “Symbolic consumption refers to the tendency for consumers to focus on meanings beyond the tangible, physical characteristics of material objects” (Levy, 1959).

From the publication of Levy’s (1959) article onwards, symbolic consumption has been an area of interest in the marketing literature, with the idea that products can “[serve] as a means of communication between the individual and his significant

references" [Grubb and Grathwohl, (1967), p.24]. It is argued that, "all consumption holds some kind of expressive meaning" (Wattanasuwan, 2005). To convey symbolic meaning, "a minimum of two conditions must be present – a symbol should be identified with a group, and within this group it should communicate similar meanings" [Hogg and Banister, (2001), p.218]. Symbolic consumption includes all social practices, from what is eaten to what is watched, and is especially easily illustrated in a visible, or publicly consumed good. The focus of the theory, as Dittmar (1992) makes clear, is that for products to succeed as communication symbols, the meaning must be socially shared and produced continually during social interactions.

A 'short-hand' of symbols develops in societies around symbols which are called stereotypes. These stereotypes "tend to mask in-group diversity and individual differences and therefore may take the form of 'pathologising'" [Kagitçibasi, (2007), p.330] – a situation where negative attributions are made to groups despite evidence that they are untrue. An interesting example of this is discussed by Franks (2000), where white women who reverted to Islam and adopted the hijab were subjected to racist taunts such as being called 'Paki', when they were clearly not Pakistani.

The idea of 'pathologising' emphasises the requirement for the (same) meaning to be shared, and raises the question, if the meaning is not shared, does the item still have symbolic properties? The same symbol can have different meanings to different groups in and out of context. In some contexts, the hijab could be regarded as a symbol of (Muslim) women's' oppression by (Muslim) men (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006), whereas to the wearers themselves it is a symbol of religious identification and commitment (Yamani, 1996; Roald, 2001; Boulanouar, 2011b). Corrigan (2008) using another perspective on the headscarf of school girls in France asks: "Is the sight of an Islamic head covering a threat to the foundations of the French Republic? The short answer is yes, it is – at least from the point of view of the French Republic" (p.7).

This raises the objection to how symbolic consumption is represented in the literature. That is where people are considered to buy consumer goods as 'signs' instead of 'things' (Boulanouar and Boulanouar, 2012). Campbell (2007), suggests regarding consumption as an activity where individuals employ the symbolic meanings attached to goods to both construct and inform others of the lifestyle or identity and, hence, that consumption is best understood as a form of communication, rests on five linked assumptions:

"that in studying the activity of consumption sociologists should focus their attention, not on the instrumentality of good, but rather upon their symbolic meanings ... that consumers themselves are well aware of these meanings (which are widely known and shared) and hence that the purchase and display of goods is oriented to these rather than the instrumental meanings of goods .. following on from this, that these activities should be regarded as being undertaken by consumers with the deliberate intention of 'making use' of these meanings, in the sense of employing them to 'make statements' or 'send messages' about themselves to others ...the content of these 'messages' that consumers send to others ... are principally to do with matters of identity (or 'lifestyle') ... and, the reason for sending messages to others is to gain recognition or confirmation from them of the identity that consumers have selected" (pp.159–160).

The points raised by Campbell are relevant here, as they point out that there may be considerations other than the strictly horizontal (person to person) communication considerations within consumers' choices of visibly consumed products. The consequences of the acceptance of this superficial interaction has been to alter the 'norm'

in place up until the 1800s when “appearances were put at a distance from the self, now they [are] believed to represent and even involuntarily reveal the self” (Tseelon, 1991). In the case of a Muslim sample, this one to one, or one too many, public presentation of the self can also apply. However, the underlying assumption that there is no more than that in the act of preparing one’s clothing for public consumption misses a pivotal point. Muslims have not only a three dimensional approach to consumption (Mohamed, 1996) (spiritual) in addition to the literature’s two (sensory, rational); but within that ‘extra’ dimension there are two prongs to the relationship with Allah (‘God’). The horizontal (or social), between the individual and their families/community; and the vertical, directly between the individual and God. This third dimension (spiritual) is superior to the remaining two dimensions, and this consideration is stronger the more adherent the Muslim is. Given that much of the recent interest in the Muslim segment has been due to their increased purchasing power and the rise of the middle classes across the Muslim world (Boulanouar and Todd, 2006), the absence of the consideration of the spiritual dimension in its entirety, and the vertical prong in particular, in much of the research is a significant omission.

4 Application of theory

For a Muslim ‘other’ then, what makes up their reality? Davies (1988), states that the reality for Muslims is the Qur'an. The legal system in Muslim countries is originally based on the Qur'an, and even if extensively altered, the original framework was from that text, just as the western world used the Bible to formulate its laws (Charrad, 2001). In most majority Muslim countries you hear the Athan five times a day (the call to prayer), the food is halal (killed in the Islamic way in the case of meats [not including pork], without disallowed ingredients such as pork and alcohol in the case of other foods), there are many mosques, the language – even if it is not Arabic – is peppered with Arabic expressions which relate to Islamic teaching and practice. Significantly, there is an acknowledgement of omnipresence amongst Muslims that marks them out from other people (Armstrong, 2004). Islam is what unites the ‘ummah’ as a universal and perfect teaching with localised cultures existing beneath the ‘Islamic umbrella’ – and with the teaching supporting these deviations (McMichael, 2002; Said, 1998; Kazmi, 2005; Maududi, 1960). In the case of Muslim women’s publicly consumed dress for example, in the Indian sub-continent, this can be manifested in the shalwar kameez, in Malaysia the baja kurong, in the Gulf states the abaya, in the Morocco the djellaba, in Sudan the thobe. As the teaching simply calls for it to be long, loose, opaque and unperfumed (Al-Albani, 2002) this diversity reflects the discourses referred to by Elmesseri (1997) earlier, and shows the clothing guidelines in Islam to be, similarly to the overall teaching, un-monolithic (Mohanty, 2003).

As evidenced by the media, stereotyping and pathologising of Muslim women’s clothing is commonplace (Ghannoushi, 2005), and this is often true of academic research too (Turner, 1994). The combination of premises and assumptions lacking deep and broad contextual situating regularly misses that while Muslim women dress as they do for social reasons (horizontal – supported by the teaching) (Boulanouar and Todd, 2006), they also do so for individual reasons (fard/religious obligation, to please Allah) (Roald, 2001; Yamani, 1996). The motivation to follow the guidance provided by the

Qur'an and Sunnah on clothing which is publicly consumed by Muslim women reflects a consideration of transcendence, which is completely absent from the symbolic consumption theory model.

This theory reflects its organic roots (Davies, 1988; Elmessiri, 2006) and when applied to an 'other' there would, logically, be 'gaps'. Symbolic consumption theory cannot suitably explain, for example, why a Muslim woman would dress as she does in a hostile or even unwelcoming environment (McMichael, 2002; Oikonomidoy, 2007). That is, unless the element of transcendence is considered. The theory can explain some horizontal aspects of communication, but it does not explain any 'vertical', transcendent, 'person to Allah ('God')', aspects³.

The implications of the application of conventional theory to Islamic marketing are far-reaching. Muslims make up an increasing number of the world's people; they are the fastest growing group in the world between birth rate and reversion rate⁴, representing a growing middle class in developing nations such as Turkey. Muslim consumers are savvy and increasingly aware of their communal power (boycotting of Danish goods, political change such as the 'Arab Spring') and, when given the opportunity for free elections, Muslim nations keep voting in 'Islamic' parties (Palestine, Turkey, Egypt). In addition, it is a group which is widely reported as having a 'resurgence' of adherence or active interest amongst its constituents – not least in response to its media prominence and/or vilification (Razzaque, 2005). All of this makes the Muslim market very valuable commercially and very rich for the purposes of academic research.

5 Conclusions and discussion

This paper has considered a popular theory in consumer research (symbolic consumption theory) as it applies, or can be applied, to Muslim women and their publicly consumed dress. It illustrates how misleading a theory can be when consuming a highly visible item such as the hijab and applied to a sample for whom it was not originally intended, or for whom it was not developed. This is due to the theory itself having premises and assumptions built into it that consider only some aspects of the Muslim consuming experience as motivators for consuming. Muslims, however, have a higher/vertical relationship to consider as a source of guidance and motivation to consume. This element represents a gap in Symbolic Consumption Theory. In Islamic Marketing studies then, researchers must be very careful and 'sieve' all aspects of their work through Islam/Al Furqan (the differentiator). The choice of symbolic consumption theory as the illustrative example here was made even simpler given that women's head coverings in Islam incite such interest. This study then, does not advocate the rejection of the theory (or any other theories derived from western cultures), and nor does it promote the theory (or any other), once the vertical prong is added. What this paper advocates is awareness of using conventional marketing theories to study Muslims without first addressing gaps in the theoretical model, to represent the needs of Muslim consumers. It also seeks to develop Islamic Marketing as a discipline, highlighting that using Islam as Al Furqan (the differentiator), is essential in theory development. For future research, this paper opens the door for other theories from conventional marketing to be studied for their relevance in cross-cultural customers outside of Western markets.

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Notes

- 1 Qur'an 25:1 and 3:4.
- 2 Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 74.
- 3 For an empirical example, please see Boulanouar (2011b). Full citation in reference section.
- 4 People turning to Islam having grown up in another way of life.