

# The advertising standardisation debate revisited

## Implications of Islamic ethics on standardisation/localisation of advertising in Middle East Islamic States

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to bridge the gap between previous examinations of advertising standardisation and consideration of Islamic ethics to develop a better understanding of how Islamic values influence global advertising strategy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is based on a critical review of the literature. The paper presents a conceptual framework which considers both the environmental influences and Islamic ethics which need to be considered when developing advertising strategy in Middle East Islamic States.

**Findings** – The authors assert the importance of considering Islamic ethics when planning advertising in the Islamic Middle East. In particular, six dominant ethical dimensions are provided for marketing scholars and practitioners to observe: unity (*Tawheed*), *Iman* (faith), *Khilafah* (trusteeship), Balance, Justice or *Adl* and Free will.

**Research limitations/implications** – The conceptual model presented provides a useful starting point to generate further academic debate and empirical verification.

**Originality/value** – The paper extends our understanding of the influence of Islamic ethics on advertising and contributes to the wider marketing standardisation literature by considering religion as a key driver in the debate.

**Keywords** Advertisements and promotions to Muslims, Islamic marketing, Islamic business ethics, Islamic markets, Islamic marketing mix

**Paper type** Conceptual paper



### Introduction

This paper aims to bridge the gap between previous examinations of advertising standardisation (Fastoso and Whitelock, 2007; Melewar *et al.*, 2000; Melewar and Vemmervik, 2004) and consideration of Islamic ethics (Rice, 1999; Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002) to develop a better understanding of how Islamic values influence global advertising strategy.

The Muslim consumer is recognised as a growing global consumer group with significant purchasing power (Alserhan and Alserhan, 2012; Wilson *et al.*, 2013).

Although the literature is keen not to stereotype Muslim consumers, and several authors warn against viewing the Muslim consumer as part of a homogenous group (Alserhan and Alserhan, 2012; Jafari, 2012; Sandikci, 2011; Melewar *et al.*, 2000), evidence of new markets targeting Muslim consumers is rapidly emerging. Businesses have embedded religious values with commercial activity, and new market segments are emerging within categories such as clothing, food, travel, entertainment and media to meet the needs of the Muslim consumer (Sandikci, 2011). In addition, there is an increase in demand for Islamic studies: *halal* supply chains, tourism, finance and banking (Wilson *et al.*, 2013). The emergence of new market opportunities has generated considerable debate among academics and practitioners regarding appropriate marketing strategies and tools to use when communicating with Muslim consumers (Abdullah and Ahmad, 2010; Behboudi *et al.*, 2014; De Run *et al.*, 2010; Kruckeberg, 1996; Yusuf, 2010; Zakaria and Abdul-Talib, 2010).

There is widespread recognition of Islamic marketing as a separate discipline (Wilson and Grant, 2013; Wilson and Liu, 2011). One area within Islamic marketing that is attracting increasing interest is advertising. While there have been a number of studies examining the particular Islamic values that advertisers should observe in their advertising (Haque *et al.*, 2010; Melewar *et al.*, 2000; Kalliny, 2012; Kalliny *et al.*, 2011), there has been limited discussion in the literature regarding the influence of Islamic ethics on global advertising strategy (Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002). This paper aims to bridge this gap and explores the influence of Islamic ethics on standardisation/adaptation advertising decisions in Middle East Islamic States.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, the existing literature on advertising standardisation is reviewed, and then we discuss the importance of Islamic ethics. In the following section, we outline the implications of Islamic ethics for advertising messages in the Middle East, and then we discuss the implications of these dimensions for advertising standardisation. The paper concludes with a summary of the main influences on advertising strategy in the Middle East Islamic States, limitations of the paper and recommendations for future research.

### Global advertising strategy debate

The debate in the international marketing literature over whether to standardise or adapt the marketing mix across borders has been ongoing for decades (Bodewyn *et al.*, 1986; Levitt, 1983; Quelch and Hoff, 1986; Theodosiou and Leonidou, 2003). Those who advocate a standardised approach to the marketing mix argue that standardised products offer advantages of economies of scale and provide a consistent global brand image (Schmid and Kotulla, 2011). In contrast, proponents of adapting the marketing mix to suit the local market argue that a standardised marketing strategy ignores the local culture and tastes, and some studies have identified adaptation as perceived to provide competitive advantage (Navarro *et al.*, 2010).

The decision of whether to standardise or localise advertising strategy has received considerable attention in the literature (Agrawal, 1995; Fastoso and Whitelock, 2007; Melewar and Vemmervik, 2004; Melewar *et al.*, 2000). Similar to other areas of the marketing mix, much of the literature debates the advantages and disadvantages of standardisation. A standardised approach is seen to offer the potential for cost savings, better planning and control, and synergy of brand image (Melewar *et al.*, 2000). However, the decision of whether to standardise or adapt advertising strategy needs to

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consider the importance of environmental factors such as market infrastructure, government regulations, local culture and customer lifestyles (Kango and Nelson, 2002). In particular, socio-cultural factors are seen to be major obstacles to standardisation and authors argue that to ignore local consumer values, beliefs and norms in advertising communication will make it challenging for advertisers to engage with consumers (Haque *et al.*, 2010). This may explain why studies have found that large multinational enterprises perceive culture, language and education as having a key influence over the decision to adapt their advertising (Melewar *et al.*, 2009).

The influences on advertising standardisation are well documented in the literature (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). The main external factors influencing advertising are seen to be socio-economic conditions, consumer orientation, environmental/ecological attitudes, media infrastructure and government control/regulation (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). The authors suggest that religion has also been identified as an influencing force on advertising strategy (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989).

Precise definitions of what constitutes standardised advertising continue to be debated, although there appears to be some consensus in the literature that a standardised advertisement is one where all elements except the copy remain unchanged (Melewar and Vemmervik, 2004). Because there is no agreement about elements of standardisation, we must take this to mean that all creative elements are used consistently across borders. Hence, while copy may be translated, the inference is that copy must be translated only and not adapted in any way. Similarly, all visual elements should remain the same if we are to comply with this definition.

While a number of studies have been undertaken in different countries to explore the perceived advantages and disadvantages of adopting standardised versus adapted advertising strategies, to date, only one study has examined this topic from Middle East manager's perspectives (Melewar *et al.*, 2000). This study examined perceptions of managers in Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and identified that while a consistent image, control and cost efficiencies were advantages of standardisation, government regulations and cultural differences made a standardised strategy problematic (Melewar *et al.*, 2000). The study considered the influence of culture, language, consumer tastes and habits but did not address the influence of religion. Hence, our knowledge of the influence of religion and specifically Islamic ethics on the standardisation of advertising in the Middle East Islamic States is limited (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989).

#### *The importance of Islamic ethics*

Muslim countries have a legal system based to a greater or lesser (post-colonisation) degree on Islamic law (*shariyah*) derived from the Qur'an (the Muslim book of revelation) and the Sunnah (tradition of the Prophet Mohammed) in addition to the rulings of Muslim scholars (Alserhan, 2011; Charrad, 2001). Naturally then, Muslim countries have school systems which socialise children and develop curricula to support the prevalent ideology in their society, "its educational philosophy, its value system, and its concept of human nature" (Hegazy, 2006, p. 145). It is widely accepted that the prevalent ideology in Muslim societies differs from that in Western societies in many respects, and given that, it is obvious that the business ethics of Muslims may also be very different in particular situations to those expected in a Western context. The importance of understanding Islamic ethics in business has been well documented in the business

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literature (Rice, 1999; Hassan *et al.*, 2008; Marta *et al.*, 2004; Handy 1990; Abbasi *et al.*, 1989; Najjar, 1992). Scholars argue that Islam embraces all aspects of social, economic and also political life and creates a distinct culture in both business and personal dealings in Muslim countries (Arham, 2010; Feiz *et al.*, 2013; Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999; Wilson, 2012; Yusuf, 2010). Ethics, in a Muslim context have even been considered the nutrition of the soul (Shahata, 1999).

Similar to other aspects of business, consideration of Islamic ethics in marketing communications activity to Muslim consumers is seen as essential (Kruckeberg, 1996; Yusuf, 2010). Islam is a framework that is organised under a first, fundamental and umbrella concept called *tawheed*. *Tawheed* refers to a unified creation, under one omnipresent, omnipotent Creator. In Arabic, the language of Islam, that Creator is called Allah. The acceptance of Allah's unity, control and capacity over every "thing" living, seen and unseen is the cornerstone of Islamic belief. According to Armstrong (2004), this constant awareness of Allah is what sets observant Muslims apart from others. According to the primary text in the field of Islamic marketing, there are six principles which frame Islamic ethics and, therefore, should guide the ethics of Muslims. First is, naturally, *tawheed*. *Tawheed* means unity, so is anti-discrimination – all people are to be treated fairly and equally. Second is *Iman* (faith). *Iman* concerns the conscience; Muslims should act within the *Shariah* (Islamic Law), and only choosing what is halal and remembering Allah. Third, *Khilafah* (trusteeship) reflects the intelligence Allah has given to the human creation over other creation (Dhabouadi, 2006) and emphasises the trusteeship (rather than ownership) of the Earth's resources. It means that the resources given or allowed to people by Allah, which are purposely distributed unevenly among them (Bassiouni, 1993), must be distributed evenly by them and in a halal way (Al Faruqi and Al Faruqi, 1976). Similarly, remembering resources are trusts, not owned by any one person, there should be no waste. Fourth, balance (*tawazul*). This principle emphasises value maximisation over profit maximisation (Siddiqi, 1981; Saeed *et al.*, 2001; Chapra, 1992) because Islam emphasises duties over rights (Alserhan, 2011). The basic needs of society should be met and, in this way, individual needs are also met. Fifth, justice or *Adl*; justice in Islamic business requires the prohibition of usury, that contracts be honoured and that wealth should be productive. It also emphasises the importance of (halal) work. Finally, free will (*Al-wasatiy-ya wa Al-hur-riy-ya*) means that human beings, using the intelligence they have been given, and in their role of *khilafah*, have freedom of choice in their behaviour – they can do the right thing, or the wrong thing according to their life constraints. The more freedom a person has, the more responsibility he or she has according to Islamic law. So with free will goes responsibility (Alserhan, 2011). It should be noted that the six dimensions that make up an overview of Islamic ethics are disparate and intertwined, consistent with the overarching concept of unity (*Tawheed*). Treating people in a fair and just manner extends beyond personal relationships to all aspects of life. Hence, any form of marketing activity should also observe that communication needs to be fair and just.

*Tawheed* is an acknowledgement of transcendence and is both a societal (horizontal) and a personal (vertical) concept; it accepts that there is a further, different and higher motivation than simply the views and impressions of others (immanence). This consideration of transcendence means Islamic ethics must consider the "process" each act undertakes. In contrast to the Machiavellian ideal that the means can be justified by the ends, in Islamic teaching, the entire process must be halal (lawful) and that means

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there can be no “mis-steps” along the way to be considered an ethical undertaking. Hence, from the initial planning of advertising campaign through to the final TV commercial or print advertisements, it is important to observe Islamic ethics (Wilson and Hollensen, 2010).

*Tawheed* explains how Muslims must relate to others (societal/horizontal relationships) for the benefit of both the others and the self (individual/vertical relationship), and so, naturally, it follows that given that ethics requires interacting with others, Islamic morality is an ethic of action (Al Faruqi, 1992) – one could argue particularly so in the case of a communication medium such as advertising.

Hence, while Islamic ethics should to be taken into account when undertaking all business activity, advertising in particular needs to observe ethical considerations, as this is usually the most visible channel of consumer communication.

### *Implications of Islamic ethics for advertising messages*

The need to observe Islamic ethics in advertising appears to be a consistent theme in the Islamic marketing literature (Arham, 2010; Feiz *et al.*, 2013; Haque *et al.*, 2010; Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002). Indeed, Michell and Al-Mossawi (1999, p. 151) argue, “A sensitive understanding of the Islamic religion and the basic laws may be essential for success in advertising communication because Islam is a way of life to Muslims”.

Arham (2010) argues that all marketing activities should be in the spirit of Islam and guided by Islamic ethics. This implies that in addition to advertising strategy and messages, all aspects of the advertising process and practice should be in accordance with Islamic values. The notion being that all aspects of advertising should observe Islamic ethics, strategic planning, creative development, research, production and media planning and buying. This relates to the overarching concept within the Islamic ethical framework of unity (*Tawheed*). Hence, advertisers need to consider the whole advertising process and not just the advertising message that is produced (Table I).

Some authors warn that ignoring Islamic ethics could be detrimental to the brand, “Advertising that does not take into account the sensitivities of Islamic values and culture, may result in lost sales and perhaps company image” (De Run *et al.*, 2010, p. 29). One study undertaken in Saudi Arabia identified Western style advertising would be seen as unwelcome by some consumers and concluded ignoring consumer concerns could have a negative impact on the brand in the Saudi Arabian market (Al-Makaty *et al.*, 1996).

Scholars argue that advertising needs to take into account the socio-cultural and religious sensitivities of the consumers in Islamic states (Haque *et al.*, 2010). They posit advertising should be consistent with religious understanding and advertising appeals need to ensure they observe religious knowledge. In the case of Islamic services such as Islamic banking, for example, this means advertising should be different from other banking advertisements (Haque *et al.*, 2010). Although they do not specify how such advertising would look, they do suggest including religious terminology in advertising as a means to provide consumers with the affirmation of the Islamic integrity of the brand (Haque *et al.*, 2010). The use of words such as “*Bismillah*” (in the name of God) or “*Assalamu Alaikum*” (peace be upon you), they argue, can enhance advertising messages (Haque *et al.*, 2010). While it would not be appropriate to adopt religious terminology for products or services unless they are Islamic brands, the notion of

Islamic ethical dimension	Consideration within advertising	Authors
Unity ( <i>Tawheed</i> )	Advertising strategy and practice	Arham (2010), Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002), Luqmani <i>et al.</i> (1989)
Faith ( <i>Iman</i> )	Affirmation of Islamic integrity	Haque <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Trusteeship ( <i>Khilafah</i> )	Messages should not mislead vulnerable groups	Luqmani <i>et al.</i> (1989)
	Respect of elders	
	Respect for women	Luqmani <i>et al.</i> (1989), Melewar <i>et al.</i> (2000), Al-Makaty <i>et al.</i> (1996), Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002), Luqmani <i>et al.</i> (1989), Al-Olayan and Karande (2002)
Balance ( <i>Tawazul</i> )	Avoid excessive brand advertising	Haque <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Justice ( <i>Adl</i> )	Advertising should be fair and truthful. Messages should avoid deception. Factual appeals seen to be preferential	Arham (2010), Haque <i>et al.</i> (2010), Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002), Luqmani <i>et al.</i> (1989)
	Avoid comparative advertising messages	Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002), Al-Olayan and Karande (2002)
Free will ( <i>Al-wasatiyya wa Al-hurriyya</i> )	Advertising content	Fam <i>et al.</i> (2004)

**Table I.**  
Islamic ethical considerations for advertisers in Middle East Islamic States

providing affirmation of Islamic integrity in cases where the brand adheres to Islamic values is an important one and relates to *Iman* or *faith* (Table I). Consideration of *Iman* is hence an important consideration for advertisers in Middle East Islamic States.

Advertising messages should not mislead vulnerable groups like the poor or less educated (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). Furthermore, the literature highlights the importance of showing respect to elders in advertising and warns against disrespectful messages (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). In their Middle East study, Melewar *et al.* (2000) emphasise the importance of demonstrating parental advice or approval in advertising messages. The authors argue that even for children's products, there should be less emphasis on children as decision makers (Melewar *et al.*, 2000). These findings highlight the importance of demonstrating *Khilafah* (trusteeship) in advertising messages. Advertisers should ensure vulnerable groups are not misled by the advertising and that messages are respectful to parents (Table I).

A further consideration for advertisers is how women are portrayed in advertising in the Middle East. The literature highlights the need for advertising messages to respect women (Al-Makaty *et al.*, 1996; Al-Olayan and Karande, 2002; Luqmani *et al.*, 1989) and recognise their contribution to society (Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002). In particular, the use of sensuous images of women are seen likely to offend consumers, and authors suggest advertising images need to ensure women's bodies are covered or alternatively use cartoon characters which are less likely to offend consumers (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). Other authors are keen to highlight the importance of ensuring women are modestly dressed and suggest that this should include the wearing of long dresses that cover their body and wear a head

covering that does not show any hair (Al-Olayan and Karande, 2002). The way women are portrayed in advertising is seen to be of special importance in Saudi Arabia (Al-Makaty *et al.*, 1996). The authors argue that women are only allowed to appear in television advertising if the product is directly related to them and if they are appropriately dressed. They note that similar to other authors, this means women need to be wearing a long dress and have their heads covered and no hair showing. They also suggest that the appearance of women may be perceived by some to be contrary to Islamic values (Al-Makaty *et al.*, 1996). Advertisers need to consider the ethical implications of their use and portrayal of women in advertising (Table I).

As moderation in living is encouraged, this leads to some authors arguing that costly advertising is seen as unnecessary (Haque *et al.*, 2010). While the authors do not provide clarity on what is meant by costly advertising, the notion that excessive advertising of a brand would be contrary to Islamic ethics is worthy of note (Table I).

The need for advertising messages in the Middle East to be fair and truthful and avoid deception is well documented in the literature (Arham, 2010; Haque *et al.*, 2010; Luqmani *et al.*, 1989; Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002). In particular, Arham (2010) stresses that promotions should not over promise and leave consumers feeling deceived. Some authors suggest advertisers should avoid advertising messages based on perceived product benefits and use factual appeals to avoid advertising been seen to be misleading (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). The literature warns against excessive exaggeration in advertising messages, as this is seen to be a form of lying (Haque *et al.*, 2010; Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002). This is an important consideration for advertisers who wish to build trust with consumers. Hence, observing justice or *Adl* is essential (Table I).

A further aspect of advertising related to justice or *Adl* is the use of comparative advertising. Several authors suggest comparative advertising is less desirable in Arab cultures (Al-Olayan and Karande, 2002; Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002). In their study of magazine advertising in the Middle East, Al-Olayan and Karande (2002) identified that few advertisers use comparative advertising. Their findings suggest brands with a strong competitive advantage prefer to use terms such as “the best”, “number one” or “better than any other product” rather than direct comparative messages. They argue Arabic culture encourages people not to compete as this could be harmful to others, and hence advertising messages should recognise this. Similarly, Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002) suggest that to uphold fairness, advertisers should avoid using comparative advertising in the Middle East. The fair treatment of competitors respects justice or *Adl*, and advertisers considering advertising strategy in this region should be mindful of the implications of using such a creative route.

The style of communications is seen to be important in Middle East advertising. The literature suggests that communication should be polite, demonstrate an appreciation for diversity and reflect justice (Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002). Authors have also identified a number of contentious elements that should be avoided in communication material such as alcohol, gambling and nudity, which are prohibited and non-prohibited elements such as pop music, songs and revealing images of women (Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1995, 1999; Wilson and Hollensen, 2010). Studies also suggest that gender/sex-related products, socio/political groups and health and care brands are seen as more

contentious than other categories (Fam *et al.*, 2004). Similarly, reference to violence, unwholesome environments and cigarettes are noted as themes to avoid in advertising messages (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). Authors also advise against using price-led messages which are considered too direct and rude for some Middle East consumers (Haque *et al.*, 2010). The guidance provided in the literature reflects the ethical value of unity (*Tawheed*), and advertisers should consider the overall style of communication when developing advertising campaigns (Table I).

Communication style should also consider the type of imagery used. In their study of Middle East advertising, Melewar *et al.* (2000) identified imagery that should be avoided in advertising messages. They suggest dogs and statues may be seen as inappropriate imagery for the Middle East. Other imagery that should be avoided include showing food served using the left hand and wearing shoes while seated which are insensitive to Islamic tradition and culture (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). In contrast, the authors suggest the use of poetic symbolism such as Arabic proverbs and phrases and pictures of indigenous animals and birds, such as horses, camels and falcons, and the use of Arabic architecture, calligraphy and floral designs in advertising (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). The choice of images used in the art direction therefore plays a key role in the Middle East advertising. The use of images in communication needs to be evaluated against the Islamic ethical dimensions.

#### *Implications for advertising standardisation*

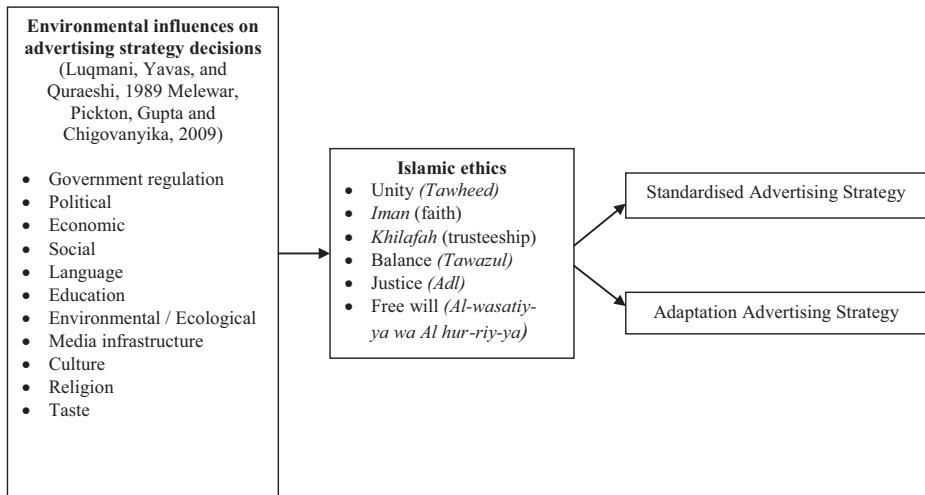
The Islamic marketing literature highlights the importance of considering Islamic ethics when planning advertising in the Middle East region. In particular six dominant ethical dimensions are provided for marketing scholars and practitioners to observe: unity (*Tawheed*), *Iman* (faith), *Khilafah* (trusteeship), balance, justice or *Adl* and free will. The extant literature on Middle East advertising provides evidence of the elements of advertising that need to be considered, and we have related these to each of the dimensions of Islamic ethics (Table I).

Religion has been previously identified as a distinct factor that influences the advertising standardisation decision alongside socio-economic conditions, consumer orientation, environmental/ecological attitudes, media infrastructure and government control/regulation (Luqmani *et al.*, 1989). To date, however, there has been limited consideration of the exact ethical dimensions advertisers should observe. Identifying the precise nature of these dimensions in relation to advertising is helpful, as it enables a more holistic approach to formulating strategy and deciding whether to standardise or adapt advertising in Middle East Islamic States. Hence, advertisers need to evaluate the advantages of cost saving, better planning and consistency of brand image offered by standardised advertising against all the external influences of the local market, including the ethical implications.

In addition to the environmental influences, advertisers need to consider the specific nature of the communication style, imagery and copy and evaluate these against Islamic ethics (Figure 1). To be effective, advertising needs to resonate with the target audience, and this requires creative platforms that are appropriate. Thus, advertising campaigns that include creative elements that do not respect Islamic ethical values are unlikely to be successful in the Middle East Islamic States.

While this seems to suggest that all international advertising should be adapted for the Middle East Islamic States, this is not necessarily the case. Advertising strategy

**Figure 1.**  
Islamic ethical  
considerations for  
advertising strategy  
in Middle East  
Islamic States



needs to consider the wider environmental influences and Islamic ethics when developing advertising for this region; however, in cases of Islamic brands, a standardised approach may be appropriate. Global Islamic brands in areas such as clothing, travel, media, entertainment, halal supply chains and logistics, travel and tourism, Islamic banking and Islamic finance may find it appropriate to take advantage of the benefits of a standardised approach.

### Conclusions

The literature highlights the need for advertisers to take Islamic ethics into consideration when planning advertising strategy for the Middle East Islamic States. This paper has highlighted the importance of observing the six dominant ethical dimensions of unity (*Tawheed*), *Iman* (faith), *Khilafah* (trusteeship), balance, justice or *Adl* and free will in advertising messages. These provide advertising with clear guidelines for advertising in the region.

The current paper extends our knowledge of advertising standardisation by applying Islamic ethics to advertising to provide a more holistic view of the influences on advertising decisions. The paper highlights the importance of religion on advertising decisions and provides evidence of the influence of Islamic ethics on communication style, copy and imagery.

While we have drawn on empirical evidence from previous studies in the area, the limitations of the current paper need to be noted. Many of the studies in the area are old, and some were undertaken when advertising had only recently been introduced to the country of study. Hence, attitudes towards advertising may have changed since this time. Furthermore, not all Middle East Islamic States have been studied in the literature, and hence, it would be unwise to generalise the findings to all Middle East Islamic States. These limitations highlight the gaps in the current literature and provide opportunities for future research in the Middle East.

Future research could examine current attitudes to contentious advertising in the Middle East. For example, a wider study of countries that have not previously been

examined would be a fruitful area for further study. Additionally, future research could explore current advertising practice in the region. To our knowledge, there has only been one other study that has examined practitioner views of advertising standardisation in the Middle East region (Melewar *et al.*, 2000). At the time of study, few global advertising networks were established in the Middle East, and examination of current advertising standardisation policy, planning and practice would be of interest. The current paper hopes to provide a basis for further debate and encourage future research in this relatively unexplored field.

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