



Applying Islamic market-oriented cultural model to sensitize strategies towards global customers, competitors, and environment

Islamic
market-oriented
cultural model

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this conceptual paper is to attempt to introduce an Islamic market-oriented cultural model to illustrate the role of market orientation within an Islamic culture.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper proposes an Islamic-based view of a market-oriented cultural model that aims to help understand how cultural principles, practices, and values are discussed within an Islamic culture, and subsequently understand the effects of this view on the market performance of the exporting firms. Reviews of literature in market orientation and cultural values served as a foundation for the development of the conceptual arguments. The model is adapted from several market orientation and cultural frameworks including Homburg and Pflesser, Hofstede, and Schein.

Findings – National culture, which underlines employee's cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs, has a profound impact on organizations and thus its impact on market performance should not be underestimated.

Research limitations/implications – Since the paper presents only the conceptual framework, it does not include empirical validation of the argument. Further empirical research could be carried out in order to validate the arguments presented in this paper.

Practical implications – In response to increased global competition, firms need to employ effective international marketing strategies in order to enhance performance. When exporting halal products, managers need to comply with Islamic guidelines, practices, and standards that serve as the main criteria by which Muslim's customers' needs and preferences are met.

Originality/value – The conceptual framework integrates market orientation with Islamic cultural values. The discussion strengthens the need for firms to apply an Islamic market-oriented cultural model when they deal with customers in Muslim countries.

Keywords Market orientation, Islamic, Culture, Organizational culture, National cultures

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Muslims comprise one of the largest consumer markets in the world today with an estimated world population of 1.6 billion people across the world and US\$2.1 trillion worth of halal goods and services were exported globally (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). All sizes of firms – multinational corporations and even the small and medium enterprises – are exporting halal goods and services with success.

In order to export halal products internationally, firms need to employ effective and efficient market strategies based on information obtained from the market, including customers, competitors, and the environment. With such information, firms can further develop their organizational values, norms, practices, and structure in order to be proactive



to the volatility of the market, competitiveness, and diverse needs of the global customers. For example, if firms desire to export halal goods and services for Muslim customers, they will need different strategies and implementation as compared to exporting the goods to non-Muslim customers. Their marketing strategies must be aligned with Islamic values, standards and guidelines, yet previous studies have only attempted to understand strategic marketing decisions based on western ideologies and principles (Nakata and Huang, 2005).

International marketing requires a different way of thinking, differing largely between the eastern and western beliefs and cultural values (Low and Tan, 1995). Yet it is crucial to establish marketing strategies that are compatible with both the organizational culture and with customers who have diverse preferences – in this case, for example, Islamic requirements. However, there are still gaps in the attempt to understand strategies that are Islamically rooted – that is, those which give consideration to Muslim’s customers’ needs and requirements as well as to firms that comply to Islamic requirements, practices, guidelines, standards, and principles (Baligh, 1998). This paper will discuss the role of market orientation from a cultural perspective by sensitizing information about the external market (such as global customers’ diverse needs and preferences, competitors’ practices, and intensity of environment) towards the internal perspective (the organizational culture). With such market information, a firm is able to fit its organizational structure towards the culture values it desires to market to – in this case the Islamic cultural values (Baligh, 1998).

In the field of international business, international marketing and cross-cultural marketing, it is evident that doing business in different countries poses many challenges including marketing products and services globally (Young and Javalgi, 2007). Furthermore, Leung *et al.* (2005) all have agreed that the issue of cultural convergence or divergence raises the important question of “whether standard business practices will emerge or change?” To answer such questions it is critical to understand that there are cultural differences in business practices (e.g. strategic market-orientations), and to explore the effects of culture on standard business practices. Islam creates an identifiable culture because it provides a way of life for people in many aspects of their lives, both at organizational and personal levels. The challenges in doing business in Islamic countries thus come from the fact that people have diverse management styles, communication values, and decision-making processes.

In a similar vein, cross-cultural understanding mandates that the strategic market-orientation needs to be assessed and implemented differently by multinational corporations. Such decisions are culturally bound because different geographical locations require different approaches; managers must fully understand challenges arising from the abovementioned marketing mix strategies. Kustin (2004) has established that it is difficult to achieve marketing mix standardization when implementing a global marketing strategy, and in fact it has been suggested that standardization is only effective in homogeneous market (Jain, 1989) while adaptation and localization strategies are needed in heterogeneous markets (Akaah, 1991; Kustin, 1994; Duncan and Ramaprasad, 1995). Hence, the issue of global standardization vs localization continues to persist over the years (Birnik and Bowman, 2007; Okazaki *et al.*, 2007; Vignali, 2001). Furthermore, according to Low and Tan (1995), there are differences in western marketing strategic thinking which need to be fully understood. In this paper, the main objectives are:

- to explore the effective use of market orientation to assess external forces such as global customers, competitors, and market environment; and

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- to understand how external forces shape internal forces such as the organizational culture (i.e. organizational practices, guidelines, and procedures), which need to be sensitized to the Islamic cultural values.

In sum, we have identified several gaps in the literature in terms of understanding market-orientation strategic decisions from a cultural perspective (Narver and Slater, 1990; Homburg and Pflesser, 2000). At present, marketing decisions are usually based on a western management style of strategic thinking and business decisions. Studies that look at marketing decision processes based on an Islamic market-orientation are nascent or non-existent. Yet, it is obvious that halal products require the compliance of Islamic marketing decisions in which there are no studies that look at Islamic marketing. The argument made in this paper clearly points out that in order to market and export halal products, market-orientation decisions need to follow an Islamic guidelines and standards due to the rising needs for halal products and services (Baligh, 1998; Rice, 1999) at a global level.

1.1 What is market orientation?

Global economic integration and the evolution of information and telecommunication technologies have intensified competition in global markets (Hitt *et al.*, 1998). In response, multinational corporations have increasingly pursued cross-border external strategies, while at the same time developing distinct internal strategies to respond to global customers. Empirical research around the world has reconfirmed market orientation as critical for firms' business success (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Narver and Slater, 2000).

A number of scholars in the marketing field have provided definitions of market orientation. For example, Narver and Slater (1990) and Shapiro (1988) defined market orientation as the coordination and integration of the firm's resources, directed towards the creation of superior customer value. The behavioral perspective on market orientation focuses on the information processing activities within the firm. While firms may be highly market-oriented from a philosophical perspective, their behavior may not necessarily be equally market-oriented (Jaworski and Kohli, 1996). Accordingly, scholars in this area point out that an organization's culture, which is manifested through shared values and beliefs, cannot automatically be transferred to its behavior; as such, the adoption of the marketing concept as a philosophy will not directly produce market-oriented behavior.

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) advocate generating market intelligence from the markets. Organizations need to accumulate information about customers' wants and needs, as well as monitoring competitors' behavior and actions. Additionally, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) broaden the scope of information-generating activities to include consideration about exogenous market factors such as competition, technology, and regulations, all of which may have direct and indirect effects on customers' present and future needs and preferences. Generation of market intelligence can be done through both internal and external methods. Information can and should be generated in departments throughout the organization. (Cadogan and Diamantopoulos, 1995; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). The intelligence dissemination phase of market orientation relates to the diffusion of the intelligence throughout the organization. Specifically, market intelligence must be communicated and disseminated to all relevant departments and individuals in the organization (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990) either through formal or informal channels, and must flow both laterally and vertically within organizations (Maltz and Kohli, 1996).

Response design and response implementation refer to the actions taken in response to market intelligence generated and disseminated in the earlier stages. The market-oriented organization has to respond to or act on the market intelligence gathered or disseminated by selecting target markets, designing and offering products, and producing, distributing, and promoting products and services in a way that elicits favorable customer response (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990).

An organization's degree of market orientation thus depends on the extent to which it successfully gathers information about competitors and customers, disseminates this information to relevant organizational parties, and responds and acts on the information gathered and disseminated. Thus, the market-oriented organization is much more capable of acquiring and satisfying customers (Narver and Slater, 1990). The cultural view can be distinguished from the behavioral perspective on this basic principle, and is discussed in the following section.

1.2 Market orientation from cultural perspective

The cultural perspective of market orientation is based on the idea that the marketing concept and market orientation are one and the same (Shapiro, 1988). Thus, the marketing concept is the driving business philosophy of market-oriented organizations. This is because, as argued by Dreher (1994, p. 155) firms' market orientation is "embedded in the cognitive sphere and influenced by personal factors, leading to a certain view of reality and forming organizational characteristics such as goals, strategies, structures, systems and activities." Furthermore, Narver and Slater (1998, p. 235) stress that market-oriented culture is the manifestation of an underlying belief system within the organization.

In addition, Deshpande and Webster (1989) and Deshpande *et al.* (1993, 2000) also appear to approach market orientation from a cultural perspective. Their "customer orientation" describes a specific set of beliefs that puts the customers' interest first and ahead of other stakeholders, which is consistent with Narver and Slater's (1990) view. Hooley Lynch and Shepherd (1990, p. 7) take a similar perspective, viewing market orientation as a guiding philosophy for the entire organization. For example, they state that "marketing is clearly an organizational philosophy – an approach to doing business," suggesting that business performance will be improved through the development of attitudes and values within the organization.

In an attempt to re-examine the market-oriented culture paradigm, Homburg and Pflesser (2000), posit that organizational culture, including shared values, norms, and artifacts, are in fact antecedents to firms' market-oriented behavior. This approach is consistent with the cultural view. Specifically, Slater and Narver (1995) describe market orientation as a value system which provides strong norms concerning behavior and information interpretation. Furthermore, Narver and Slater (1998, p. 235) argue that a strong culture produces reliable behavior and performance. Another perspective of market-oriented culture comes from Harris (1998, p. 360) who states that market orientation is "the dominant, dynamic segment of an organization whose orientation, attitudes and actions are geared towards the markets." Harris' (1998) view of market-oriented culture appears to come from Schein (1992), Narver and Slater (1990), Hatch (1993), and Webster (1993).

In short, the underlying assumption of the cultural perspective of market orientation is that organizational attitudes, values, and beliefs determine the firms' behavior, and ultimately their performance. Having provided an overview of the perspectives that have been used in various market orientation studies, the following section presents the

theoretical framework of market orientation based on the cultural models of Homburg and Pflesser (2000), Hofstede (1991), and Schein (1992).

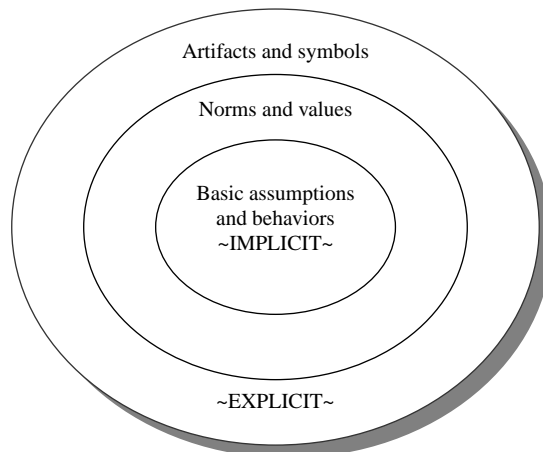
2. Understanding the conceptualization and characteristic of culture

2.1 Meaning of culture

Culture is an intricate and complex concept that is difficult to research because it is hard to measure objectively. It is equally difficult to measure culture subjectively when it is embedded in human behaviors, either observable (overt) or hidden (tacit). Hofstede (1991), Schein (1992), and Trompenaars (1994) suggested an “onion” model (Figure 1) to describe the characteristics and the multiple layers of culture. This model shows the different layers of culture, with the degree of complexity increasing as one moves from the outer layer to the core. In the outer layer, what people have or own is manifested in artifacts or material objects. In the middle layer, what people think is reflected in their beliefs, attitudes, and values. Finally, in the innermost layer or core, what people do is determined or at least colored by their normative patterns of behaviors and assumptions.

2.1.1 Artifacts, products, and symbols. At the outermost layer of the onion, artifacts, products, or symbols are recognizable based on gestures, words, images, or objects. These symbols are commonly shared among people within the same culture. One example is jargon (words or language used within certain groups of people to describe their specialty). For example, medical doctors use different terms than the average person for explaining the flu, and lawyers have different ways of explaining a contractual agreement that laymen may not fully understand. This layer is explicit, superficial, changeable, easily copied or modified by other groups, and consists of behaviors that are easily recognized or observed.

2.1.2 Norms and values. According to Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988, p. 61), norms are “prescriptive principles to which members of a culture subscribe.” The underlying hypothesis of cultural value studies is that people from different cultures differ normatively in their value orientations, which ultimately cause differences in the overt behaviors of many of the people much of the time. Hofstede (1991, p. 8) defines values as



Sources: Adapted from Hofstede (1991), Schein (1992), Trompenaars (1994) and Zakaria (2006)

Figure 1.
The “onion” diagram:
manifestations of culture
at different levels

“a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others.” Schwartz’s (1992, p. 2) definition is more elaborate, stating that values are “desirable states, objects, goals, or behaviors, transcending specific situations and applied as normative standards to judge and to choose among alternative modes of behavior.” In support, Scarborough (1998) asserts that values are in large part culturally derived. As a result, cultural values drive a person’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

2.1.3 Basic assumptions. This innermost layer provides an in-depth understanding (and sometimes an explanation) of the differences and similarities of values between cultures. Basic assumptions are the implicit or hidden aspects of culture which spring from needs at the core of human existence (Trompenaars, 1994). Basic assumptions are behavioral rules that regulate actions and guide people to workable ways of managing their relationships with the environment (external adaptation) as well as with other people (internal integration) (Schneider and Barsoux, 1997). At this core layer, behaviors often have unconscious motivations because basic assumptions are not articulated and are taken for granted. Other scholars contributed additional dimensions to culture: Hall (1976) concerning time, space, and context; Hofstede (1991) concerning work-related values; and Trompenaars (1994) concerning business values. Hofstede’s basic assumptions enhance comprehension of the complexities of culture, which is vital for organizations or people who need to work together to find solutions to shared problems.

3. Applying Islamic market-oriented organizational cultural model to understand market performance

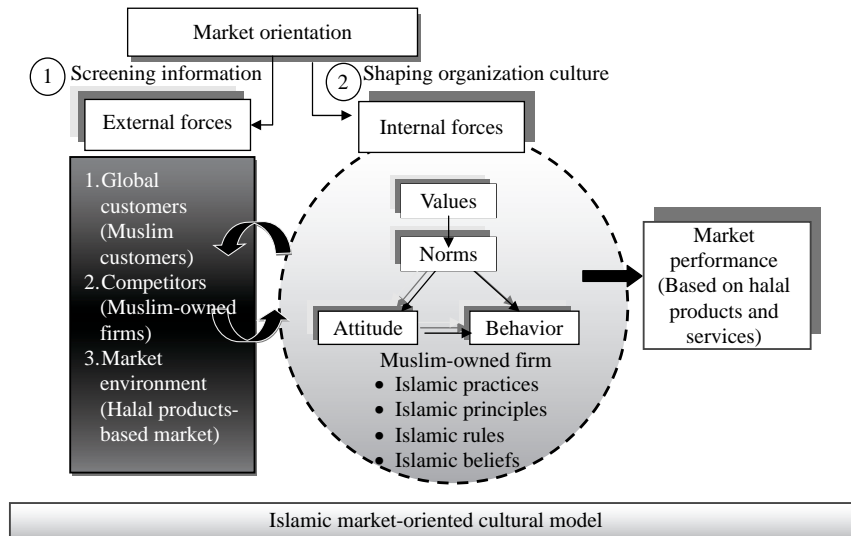
By drawing upon the Homburg and Pflesser (2000) cultural model of market orientation, we further incorporate cultural dimensions introduced by the onion model of Schein (1992) and Hofstede (1980) (Figure 1) as a lens through which to view organizational market orientation from an Islamic cultural perspective. Hofstede (1980) applied the concept of “customer mind-set” of employees to highlight his original conception of cultural “programming.” According to Hofstede, culture establishes a standard way of life or set of routines with which people will comply, i.e. practices, guidelines, and procedures. In this study, we discuss Islamic cultural values as exemplified in the rules and procedures of producing halal products for export. At the same time, firms also need to fully recognize the preferences and needs of Muslim customers that lead them to make purchase decisions, such as a high desire for halal products.

In this paper, we apply market orientation’ as an information-based approach to making a firm more sensitive to the various cultures that it deals with. For firms that wish to export halal goods, the culture in question is built on Islamic values. As shown in Figure 2, market orientation impinges on two types of information about the market:

- (1) external forces; and
- (2) internal forces.

The model illustrates three types of information about external forces:

- (1) *Screening information.* Who are the customers and what are their preferences and needs?
- (2) *Screening information.* Who are the competitors and what marketing practices and procedures they use?
- (3) *Screening information.* What is the market environment?



Sources: Adapted from Homburg and Pflesser (2000), Hofstede (1980) and Schein (1992)

Figure 2. Impact of Islamic culture on organizational market orientation

First, Muslim customers are have high priorities, preferences and needs for halal products and services. Because Islam provides specific guidelines and principles for the consumption of goods and services, Muslim consumers have a high demand for halal products that comply with the Islamic approach (Al-Khatib *et al.*, 1995; Rice, 1999). These include food handling and processing, food content and ingredients, and foods that qualify for the certified Halal logo/brand. Clearly a firm needs to understand two things, namely:

- (1) customers’ culture by matching perfectly or closely to their tastes, preferences and lifestyle; and
- (2) organizational culture – aligning the organizational culture with marketing effectiveness in which it is operating in (Leisen *et al.*, 2002; Vignali, 2001).

For example, Islamic ruling on food handling dictates the procedure for slaughtering animals for consumption need to strictly be performed by Muslim employees where the act of slaughtering needs to begin with the name of Allah. This is because such act is not merely the saying of the word “Allah” but it must be accompanied with a person who has the faith as a Muslim. In essence, all the proper procedures need to be taken in order for the goods or services is awarded the halal certification. Hence, the Halal logo or label cannot be taken lightly; the halal label needs to be certified by a credible authority. In Malaysia, for example, JAKIM is the authority with the power to endorse food and services through its logo or sticker (Sirim, 2004).

Second, what are our competitors’ practices and procedures that make them better or more effective than our firm? For competitor firms, we need to understand whether they have put Islamic strategies in place. For instance, if they are staffed by Muslim employees who are strong in their cultural values (i.e. Islamic values), then the firm will have less difficulty inculcating those principles needed to produce halal goods as

compared to non-Muslim firms. However, it is possible for non-Muslim firms to be as competent and competitive with Muslim firms in adopting Islamic values and principles when producing halal products and services.

The last aspect of market orientation is the intensity or volatility of the market environment. In particular, the key question is how intense is the market for halal products? As previously mentioned, the Muslim customer market is growing. So is the demand for halal products and services. However, if the demand for halal products keeps rising, it is of high concerns then if there will insufficient firms that are not competent to export halal goods due to lack of knowledge and understanding of Islamic marketing. In that case, Muslim-owned firms need to seize this opportunity and employ effective market strategies so that Muslim market can be captured. Once accurate market information about the external forces has been obtained, a firm needs to be proactive or responsive towards its internal forces in shaping the firms' organizational culture. For halal food exports, firms need to adopt a complete approach to Islamic culture in order to successfully implement procedures, principles, rules and practices of Islamic values. In essence, the employees need to fully adopt, understand and comply with relevant Islamic practices, principles, rules, and beliefs (Rice, 1999) in order to legitimately produce halal-certified products. Only Muslim employees can do this easily and whole-heartedly because their values are consistent and they are appreciative of such practices. However, for non-Muslim firms, organizations need to inculcate the Islamic values so that the appreciation and total adoption of Islamic values can be acculturated among the employees in the firms. Failure to incorporate organizational culture that adopts the Islamic practices, procedures, structures, and values will then lead to failure in producing halal products that strictly comply with the Islamic standards as required by Muslim customers. For Muslim firms, because the Muslim employees have Islamic beliefs, they will have no difficulty inculcating such faith and demonstrating the right attitude. For non-Muslim firms, they need to learn and understand the Islamic rules necessary to produce and export halal goods; specifically, a firm needs to answer the question of 'what is needed to produce halal goods?'

It is well established that national culture interacts with organizational culture, and that employees of a firm will manifest their cultural values in the way they work, communicate, organize, and manage tasks (Tayeb, 1994). With this assumption, we extend Homburg and Pflesser's (2000) market-oriented cultural model to include the interactions and dynamics of two different types of forces, external and internal (Figure 2). For example, the national culture of the employees – in this case, Islamic culture – will affect the organizational culture in terms of the values, norms, attitudes, and behaviors. Each of the employees carries an Islamic belief system, encompassing values, norms, and attitudes. The dynamic between national culture and organizational culture takes place on two levels. On one hand, top management attempts to inculcate the appropriate Islamic principles, practices, rules, and procedures which in turn shape the organizational structure. On the other hand, employees form a collective behavior that also sets the tone for the organizational climate and culture.

In sum, market orientation involves both external forces (the requirements of Muslim customers together with the practices of other Muslim-owned competitor firms, resulting in marketing mix decisions) and internal forces (the cultural values and practices of management and employees, resulting in implementation of those decisions). By using the Islamic marketing lens, the following arguments are made.

First, halal products need to comply with or match customer needs, preferences, and tastes; this raises the basic question “what are the quality elements required by Islamic standards for halal products?” Second, customers need to fully understand and appreciate the concept of “halal” as well as the differences between halal and haram products. It is of equal importance to explore both Muslim and non-Muslim customers’ perceptions of halal products since export customers comprise people from different cultural backgrounds. Third, whether the target market is local or global, customers’ preferences are diverse, thus different strategies need to be applied. The questions of localization vs globalization needs to be assessed together with customers’ wants and desires. Fourth, managers need to conduct promotional campaigns that are ethical with respect to, and sensitive to, the different cultural preferences; this includes such critical questions as: What kinds of advertisements are considered Islamically oriented? Are marketing campaigns using appropriate and acceptable words, symbols, and images? Are the contents of the products advertised accurately labeled as “halal”? Is the Halal logo certified and used effectively and efficiently based on the guidelines, policy and procedures set by the Islamic authorities? Finally, price is a critical factor for product differentiation, particularly when products are competing between low cost vs high price. A competitive price is based on the profit margin and analysis of cost and benefit. Firms need to understand how to set a price without deceiving the customers or excessively hiking up the price.

All these decisions have strong implications for multinational corporations that use market orientation to formulate more strategic ways to export halal goods. Islamic principles and values need to be considered and implemented since market behaviors are so strongly rooted in Islamic culture. Therefore, this paper attempts to identify ways in which market orientation can assist a firm to formulate international marketing strategies that are aligned with the information they obtain from external market forces – , i.e. customers, competitors, and environment – and in turn how that information can help to shape an internal organizational culture based on Islamic practices and procedures.

4. Implications and conclusion

Through the application of the market orientation concept firms are able to facilitate and respond to changes in the market. Firms that implement a market-oriented culture understand that satisfying customers’ present and future needs and wants through continuous assessment of the market is central to their success. This provides superior value for the customers, and enables firms to withstand competitive pressures and customers changing demands, and ultimately leads to superior organizational performance.

In the context of the present paper, inculcating an Islamic market-oriented culture is important because firms are thus better able to understand the specific requirements of their Muslim customers. Through a market orientation that focuses on Islamic culture, firms would be able to improve market sensing and processing of the information within the organization, which leads to a better response to customers’ needs and wants. Ultimately, this leads to superior performance due to the competitive advantage gained by creating and maintaining relationship with customers. Furthermore, through a better understanding of the customers, market-oriented organizations also should be better able to monitor their competitors in the target market. When a firm understands the requirements of its customers and markets, it is able to defend against competitors’ strategic moves. It is thus important that firms interested in halal exporting that have not

yet implemented an Islamic market-oriented culture should start to instill the elements discussed in this paper. Building on the work of other scholars, most notably Homburg and Pflesser (2000), this study has proposed a market-oriented emphasis on Islamic cultural values, norms, and practices.

Given the nature of the model shown in Figure 2, it would be appropriate to conduct a qualitative research study so that an in-depth analysis can be performed on the subjective components of Islamic culture. A case approach, in which selected organizations are chosen as a test case to explore the real impact of Islamic market-oriented culture on their performance, is recommended. Furthermore, additional research is needed to develop measures for the model outlined in this study, which include Islamic value systems, norms, attitudes and behavior. With the newly developed measures, perhaps, future research with a larger group of organizations can ascertain the causal relationship between Islamic culture elements and performance, and more generalized findings can be observed.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the extended model of Homburg and Pflesser (2000) will provide a basis for understanding the Islamic way of marketing goods to global customers when conducting international business. The market-oriented culture model comprises two forces, which work in a circular manner. The external forces first shape the internal forces. Once internal forces are congruent with the external forces, then all the organizational practices become culturally sensitized to the needs of customers, competitors and environment. Marketing mix decisions impinge strongly on the ability of firms to screen the environment and obtain as accurate information as possible. In the context of marketing halal goods and services, firms should be market-oriented in order to formulate effective and efficient marketing strategies that clearly reflect the Islamic way of doing business.

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