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Viewpoints

Global Business Discourse – Reflections from a Cultural Nomad

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to document and disseminate the full experiences of the author following a series of events hosted by UiTM MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor; and attending World Halal Week, Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia; during the first week of April 2013. The paper shares the content and key findings presented at these events, which took the form of a workshop, guest lecture, keynote, and panel session; and is supported by further reflective narratives, analogies and allegories. The underpinning methodological approach has been termed an ‘Eagle Eye Gestalt’, which presents an innovative approach to antipostivist phenomenological analysis, rooted in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). The key arguments presented are that global business discourse, for both practitioners and academics, necessitate the championing and implementation of 21st century Culture, Branding, and Transformational Leadership strategically. Furthermore, consideration should be given to nurturing an environment, which is conducive to facilitating inspiration, social interactions, and networking opportunities – all with an intended purpose dictated by business imperatives.

Keywords: Culture, Branding, Leadership, Islam, Muslims, Halal, National Identity, Social Media, Qualitative Research

1. Background method

This paper is written as a reflective viewpoint narrative. The approach that I have adopted is one that I have termed an ‘Eagle Eye Gestalt’ method to investigating phenomena. This is where having circled and hovered above an emerging phenomenon and its surrounding landscape, I have made attempts to frame general principles and observations; alongside a swooping view of key anecdotal experiential and expert observations – grounding and enriching study with storytelling, allegories, reflection and reflexivity. This method of erudition has been progressively developed over a series of conceptual papers for the past five years (Liu and Wilson 2011; Wilson, 2011; Wilson and Grant, 2013; Wilson and Hollensen 2013; Wilson and Liu, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Wilson and Morgan, 2011; Wilson et al, 2013)

A eureka moment happened to me with a Malaysian eagle owl perched on my shoulder at the Kuala Lumpur bird park in 2012. The owl was the symbol of my secondary school, sitting above the Latin phrase *SapereAude*–‘dare to be wise’ or ‘dare to know’. The eagle has long embodied attributes and sentiments in religions, mythologies, national symbols and coats of arms across continents – marrying the four and even five elements.

Die Gestalt is a German word for form or shape. Gestalt theory is a term in psychology used to describe an organized whole (of ‘things’, messages and symbols) that are perceived as more than the sum of its parts. The idea being that cognition and senses organize objects in their entirety before perceiving their parts, as products of complex interactions among various stimuli in a noisy world.

Inspiration for developing this method in more detail followed Sidney J. Levy’s presentation at the 2012 Consumer Culture Theory conference, at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. Levy used the analogy of a fish ‘swimming in the culture’ as a

description for his approach. From a Culture Theory perspective, he spoke of the necessity of researchers being immersed within a sea of culture; and that particular geographies and cultural settings required further intuitive interrogation. In tandem, anthropologist, branding and business strategist, Holt (2004) argues for the *cultural approach* widening the field of analysis, by embodying a view, which he terms comparably as a ‘bird perspective’ – drawing from anthropological narratives and inductive reflections from within societal phenomena.

I have a strong view that classical scholarship has long sought to develop terms, which not only define, but also do so through symbolism – as a reminder, an artefact, and insight into a scholar’s ontology. A further case in practice being the Delphi Technique (Bowling, 1997). *Delphi’s* etymology links it with *matrix* –conveying concepts of ‘womb’, ‘origin’, ‘mother’, ‘sense of place’ and ‘medium where something is developed’. Similarly, *Dolphin* shares the same root as Delphi, and the ancient Greek god Apollo assumed dolphin form, when visiting his sanctuary in the site of Delphi, in lower central Greece. Within ancient Greek mythology, Delphi was the place where the god Apollo reigned and protected the navel of the Earth. It is also considered to be the genesis for the modern Olympics. It was in Delphi where Apollo communicated through a priestess oracle and the future was predicted (Charles-Picard, 1969; Baxter, Cargill, Chidester, Hart, Kaufman and Urquidi-Barrau, 1978). The priestess’s words were recorded and then subsequently interpreted and debated by others.

With these things in mind, this viewpoint piece shares my thoughts, feelings and experiences following an invitation to collaborate with UiTM MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor; and attending World Halal Week, Kuala Lumpur in the first week of April 2013.

2. Setting the Scene

I like to travel...

Memories of my father's salami and tomato sandwiches, and a bottle of Pear Drax in my Muppets lunch box– whilst on a primary school trip to the zoo...

Memories of secondary school trips, and tours abroad later as a musician – the adrenaline; the pacts made not to go to sleep; buying cheap souvenirs; eating strange snacks from duty free and service stations; the jokes...

Memories of one of my first business trips – an expense account; a box of business cards, but no smart phone; not knowing many people, and the expectations of your director to perform and hit targets in the back of your mind...

Memories presenting some of my first conference papers – months of research, writing, scrutiny, revisions, and seeking permission for funding...

...And now memories of my week with UiTM and World Halal Week.

Travelling alone to the other side of the world, from London to Malaysia, gave me plenty of time to catch up and reflect upon our dynamic zeitgeist– through watching the world go by; airport lounges; duty free stores; piles of magazines; endless hospitality; on-flight movie entertainment; and various elevator-style conversations with people you will probably never talk to again, but who have etched an image in the annals of your life-shaping views and experiences. One stark difference between London and Kuala Lumpur is the warmth in which travellers are greeted, fed and watered. In Kuala Lumpur I feel like a thoroughbred Arabian horse. I'm met by professors and a driver, on a Sunday afternoon, with wide smiles; even though I am several hours late. In London, I can't help thinking that our guests comparably are treated more like *burros*. It wouldn't be uncommon to expect an email outlining the best route to your hotel, using London underground [alone]; warm wishes of a pleasant hotel meal [alone] and rest after your long journey; and a suggestion that you should get a taxi to the university on Monday [alone]; signed off with a "tell the receptionist when you are on campus". Having made

this point, I wouldn't want you to think that us Brits are cold fishes – we're just different fishes, who swim in colder waters. But some fish like me have grown accustomed to swimming in colder and warmer waters. Learning to 'swim' and to 'fly' have been key aspects of my discoveries and development.

So, as you've probably worked out by now, I love to travel, I love think; and I'm particularly fascinated by culture and all of those differences. I've spent most of my life trying to understand all of these 'things', issues and interactions that we attribute and attach to that word, *Culture*. This paper will hopefully give you food for thought and suggestions of ways that culture can be allowed to permeate more scholarly and commercial activities – for competitive advantage and more importantly enjoyment.

3. The Research Workshop

An editor's views on academic publishing and generating impact - tales from the rice fields.

A large portion of this workshop was dedicated to presenting rules of good housekeeping. Unfortunately, I think that the process of scholarship and taking things to publication are often taken as being understood and obvious. Students pass assessments, academics have doctorates - and so we must all know how to get published, and have material ready to be published right? Well maybe... Previously, I've worked in commercial magazine publishing on consumer titles, and published as a musician – and I've seen many things that have never seen the light of day. This is not to say that those things were never any good, but that it's a long road to being published, and there are a lot of places that you have to pass through – each with their own gates and hurdles.

I shared a lot of prescriptive information and anecdotes; but at the risk of over simplifying things, a successful and consistent track record of publishing takes: practice, persistence, patience, and teamwork. It means being (or your manuscript being) in the

right place, at the right time, in front of the right people, in the right format. It also requires a detailed understanding of the landscape, and therefore information. Being good is not enough, or even having a great paper is not enough – these are useful things to have when making your journey.

I also proposed a new model for scholarship, beyond simply peer reviewing and writing journal papers. ‘Tales from the rice field’ was the allegory I used to make my point. The rice fields, are wet and muddy. Growing rice is back breaking work. But, it’s worth it - because rice tastes so good! Plus, rice is one of those foods enjoyed all across the globe. Publications are like the rice of scholars. So the suggestion is this: academics working towards publishing farming cycles. Often the perception is that the product is the growth of a publication and this is where process ends. Using rice as an analogy, the idea here is that real value comes from harvesting, treating, cooking and eating. We should do more therefore to disseminate the findings from our publications, using social media, meeting and sharing with others post publication, and enjoying this experience. This harvesting, treating, cooking and eating is the aspect that academics often overlook; but in industry practitioners would argue that there is little point producing, if enough time is not taken to encourage consumption and to benefit from it. Consumption is not just peer review, or waiting to be *Googled* and cited; consumption should be judged also by the wider audience and collecting their thoughts and feelings.

Therefore, one of my recommendations was that scholars should write blogs and magazine articles - as a way to shape new ideas; brand and claim the territory; proactively promote their work in other channels; create a buzz; and gather rich feedback data. Anecdotally, using online platforms like Academia.edu, I have been able to see what keywords people used to find my articles, what country they came from - and this data has influenced future fields of study, the keywords I have used, and titles.

4. The Guest Lecture

Title: *Emo Malaysian and Indonesian youth culture – the phenomenon of Dual Cool.*

Having spent a great deal of time researching and writing about this topic, it was a privilege and a thoroughly enjoyable experience to be able to share my findings with an audience whom this topic is largely about. I also have to say that it was a bit nerve racking, because I did wonder whether students would agree with or see things in the way that I was sharing. Having said that, the thrust of the lecture was one which presents this group of individuals as an exciting, dynamic and important segment – so if there were to be disagreements, then it was likely to be on aspects related to this segment's thoughts, feeling and actions; and whether mine was an accurate enough representation. I take it that the questions, smiles, an empty box of business cards, the inaugural smart phone group photos, and no subsequent trolling, meant that my thoughts were largely well received.

For me, arguably the most exciting and significant segment in today's global market lies in the hands of Muslim Youth. Advertising and Branding agency *Ogilvy Noor* has estimated that over half of Muslims are under 24 years old and that makes for over 10% of the World's population (Ogilvy Noor, 2011). Furthermore, more recent academic opinions on globalization are taking alternative positions than previously argued. de Mooij (2011) gives consideration to the effects of *globalization* and *global consumer culture* – and in particular those that produce negative effects. de Mooij (2011) observes that,

“In practice, notwithstanding the worldwide reach of television and the internet, in many people's lives, in consumption or entertainment habits, be it music or sports, the people of different nations continue to have different habits, tastes, and loyalties. Instead of causing homogenization, globalization is the reason for the revival of local cultural identities in different parts of the world.” (p.5).

When looking specifically at Malaysian and Indonesian (and especially Muslim) Youth, I argue that rather than these individuals becoming 'Westernized', as has been suggested by traditional quarters, and equally by Eastern and Western sources; these Youth are in fact entering an age of new becoming. This is the *New School of Dual Cool*. They can be more than one thing at the same time, that's what makes them cool, and that's where 'the cool' lies. For if this is a simple case of Westernization, does this mean that the 'West is best', and are Youth moving away from being 'Asian', 'ASEAN', 'Malaysian', 'Indonesian' or religious? Or is it that they see their identities as being governed by their own rules, which are open to inspiration and truth wherever it exists? Evidence for the last perspective lies in the increase in visible practice of Islam by Muslim youth – most notably in their dress and the conversations on the Internet, which are there for all to see. Muslim Youth are consuming commodities that were thought of not to necessarily have any Islamic reference or relevance and they are *Islamifying* them.

In addition, I would argue that East versus West, or Muslim versus The West thinking harms the development of understanding – as it implies separation. And more importantly by inference supports the idea that the strongest brands, media platforms and educational systems lie outside of the hands and inception of ASEAN nations; which then profiles these youth as being intellectually impoverished and followers. Therefore if this is the case, Asians, and most notably Muslims, may now and in the future be profiled as romantics who were once great, but now live in the shadow of the enlightened West.

However, gaining insight into consumer perceptions in the youth market is tough: because how many brands can predict whether they'll be the next cult, or cool thing – especially when tastes change so quickly? If we add into the mix the fact that especially for Muslim youth, they are balancing adherence to their faith (which is taken from information largely based upon classical texts), with living in the here and now

(meaning that some texts have to be brought up to speed with the world today) – then there are plenty of debates to be had.

We are seeing how social stakeholder networks and Web2.0 are driving increasingly dynamic communications, which are both influencing and engaging more parties. The result is the creation of ‘collective individuals’, who converge around culturally embedded and ‘human’ brands. This supports the idea of Global identities, which enhance local cross-border sub-cultures. Furthermore, consumers don’t just consume they look to do two things. Firstly, they share as a form of social capital and gains from the idea of reciprocity. Evidence can be seen on YouTube where consumers are reviewing their purchases, sharing fashion tips and entertainment. Secondly, where possible, consumers seek to monetize what they own. Consumers think about whether this sharing can lead to a revenue stream, future career, sponsorship opportunity, or if items can be sold in online auctions. This however doesn’t mean that Youth are spending more money on everything. Some spending on designer labels has increased; but equally spending on movies and music has declined in favour of illegal downloads. Therefore, Youth look to get the best value for money, from a holistic standpoint.

More recently, the YouTube sensation ‘The Harlem Shake’ is showing a progression towards syncretism; and individualism attained through collectives. Currently, 4,000 clips of various Harlem Shakes are being uploaded every day, by everyone from the BBC, Manchester City, Northumbria University, and University of Georgia men’s swimming and diving team. For me, this signals how the field of marketing, lead by social Branding and Public Relations is expanding (anyone and everyone views themselves as a potential gatekeeper or PR activist) and the need for professionals to reassess how they maintain their relevance and control is crucial. Stories now are judged more and more by how many hits, comments and likes they have; and whether they appear towards the top of Online searches.

Conclusions

So what of the future? Be prepared to witness the reigns being taken by a generation of informed, self-mediating, empowered and technologically savvy urbanites. For them, heritage is progressive: they embrace the eradication of hierarchy and knowledge that simply translates to power. Instead: diverse networks; the sharing and adaptation of information; and ultimately the positioning of Islam as a ‘co-brand’ with other spheres of life offer more of a pull. So perhaps it could be argued that we are coming full-circle to the early golden days – where faiths like Islam, Christianity and Buddhism gifted social mobility and empowerment through structured innovation.

Moving forward, youth seem set to gravitate towards greater collaborative consumption and new ways of interpreting what faith means – and how it shapes life in the here and now. This could mean that the role of religious leaders or scholars changes. Rather than being autocratic sources of knowledge and verdicts, they will be brought into an arena of democratic collaboration and consultation with the wider community. Youth check and check again, from wide ranging sources and they aren't afraid to voice their opinions.

Perhaps a notable example of this can be taken from the Arab Spring – where communities mobilized themselves using social media, in a form of leaderless opposition. If this can be understood then that's great – because messages and ways of understanding can be reached transparently, quickly and virally. If misunderstood, then equally as transparently, quickly and virally, things can move against organisations and brands. For businesses and governments, I am sure that they are hoping young people will be preoccupied with calling for *Arab Spring Sales*, rather than for more Arab Springs. But distracted mindless consumerism, at the expense of social concern, has a long-term effect on knowledge economies – because then where will the new

innovators, leaders, economists and thinkers spring from, without a nurturing of their minds?

5. The Keynote

Conference: 1st Global Business Discourse 2013 (GBD), UiTM MARA, 3rd April 2013, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The title of my keynote was “Sighting the crescent of ‘Brand Islam’ & Halal: a Cultural imperative”. In essence, I advocated the need for culture-centric transformational leadership; which relies upon the implementation of three conceptual stages. Firstly the pull to adopt; followed by allowing and facilitating the ability of ‘others’ to adopt; and finally galvanized by activities spearheaded by branding.

Brands are seen to occupy a space whereby they are collaborative language shapers and meaning creators; jumping and joining territories. For those that consume these brands, their *raison d’être* makes perfect sense. Brands are the vehicle for connecting, and even the seemingly unconnected - leading to transactional exchanges and wealth creation. Wealth, or value, in this context doesn’t just mean hard economic metrics; it also encompasses more culturally dependent concepts of social capital, perceived well-being, status, mind-sharing, and altruistic patronage. And so in turn, a more recent cultural phenomenon sees wealth and value being defined by the masses, who judge and mediate their own legitimacy. Brands are no longer just in the hands of corporates. The power of consumption and Social Media are fusing, empowering and levelling diverse vertical and horizontal segments, whereby consumers are active stakeholders and gatekeepers.

The Islamic Paradigm

I began by presenting a new perspective on the driving factors behind Muslim existence, past and present [Figure 1].

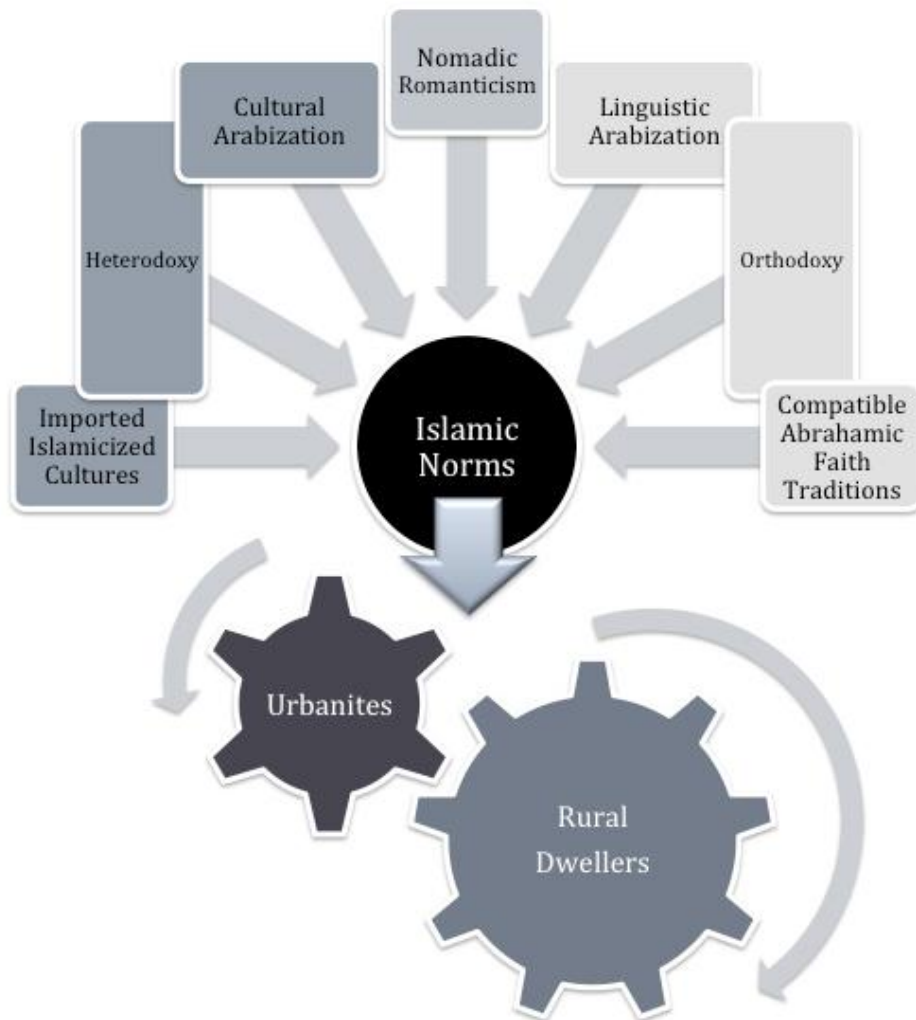


Figure 1: Driving factors of Muslim existence (Wilson, 2012)

Notably, this model highlights:

- Key influencing factors in Islamic Leadership

- That Islamic Leadership balances, and at times oscillates between orthodoxy and heterodoxy
- Bedouin nomadic existence is a source of romanticised inspiration, rather than an actual and pure trait of Islamic Leaders
- That Leaders mediate between several cultures, driving homogenisation under an Islamic belief system
- Urbanites are the driving force behind leadership and the practice of Islam.

I argue that in Islam, whilst Bedouin culture plays a pivotal role, there has always been a movement towards economic development. Furthermore, key individuals from urban backgrounds have been most influential in this process and have attempted to harmonise diverse cultures. Clear differences in interpretation and cultural fusions can perhaps be most visibly seen today by the styles and ways in which those Muslim females that choose to wear headscarves. More specifically within countries, there also appear to be both regional differences and individual fashionable expressions, which govern how headscarves are worn. For example, the distinct differences in Morocco, between the shorter and more colourful headscarf styles in cities, in comparison with longer black cloaks sported in villages close to the Sahara. These observations concur with the views expressed by IbnKhalidun (2005), where urbanisation changes tastes and encourages fashionable cultural consumption.

Following observations, I assert that the critical success factor is not so much that Bedouin culture itself is strong, through being monolithic and impenetrable, but instead that it has evolved adapted and embraced many facets of other cultures, under one collective identity, 'Brand Islam'. It could be argued that recent phenomena in the Arabian Gulf region, in places such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) embody this mind-set of shifting cultural sands. The transition, which has been described by some as Arabs moving from *the camel to the Cadillac*, has transformed the region into a globally

recognised hub of activity – ranging from finance, sports, tourism and education. Also, reflecting upon how Great Britain and Malaysia have moved forward from the Commonwealth Empire past also offers further meaningful comparisons and analogies. Therefore, key considerations appear to be how leadership is managed over a long period of time, and how this is achieved - when the number of followers under the pastoral care of a leader grows and diversifies.

Transnationalism and Units of Identity

In Islam there is a strong concept of encouraging the Muslim faithful to work towards creating one global *ummah*(Arabic for nation or community). In tandem, the term ‘*asabiyyah*(Arabic for social solidarity, unity, social cohesion, tribalism and clanism), like *ummah* existed pre-Islam. ‘*Asabiyyah* however tends to carry some negative connotations, unlike *ummah* - because scholars have interpreted ‘*asabiyyah* as implying loyalty regardless of adherence to Islam. In many ways therefore, ‘*asabiyyah* shares common concepts with Confucian ideas of filial piety and respect for family bonds and elders; whereas *ummah* champions Muslim social solidarity across race, social status, and territories, above family ties.

When reviewing societal units in a modern context, Rohner (1984) notes that for many parts of the world concepts of *society* have become synonymous with those of a *nation*. Rohner (1984) goes further in asserting that the concept of a *nation* is a *Western* one, originating from circa nineteenth century – where boundary setting has become more about political expediency, rather than to separate neighbouring societies. Therefore, I argued that analysing separable sub-cultures linked to national identity, rather than simply nationality, becomes of more significance when attempting to understand the Muslim *ummah*.

Brand Islam

Also, I asked whether the rise in significance of brands and nation brands as identifiable national artefacts, such as flags, branded goods, and ingredient brands, are precursors of an emerging modern-day trend in the ummah and what I have termed *Brand Islam* – which are driven by:

1. **The economic argument** – where data is presented and calculated to demonstrate the market potential through financial value; and future sustainability through population figures
2. **The consumer-based perspective** – which articulates that beyond the market value and size, there exists a consumer-based religious obligation to develop the sector, which views profits as one criteria, but not necessarily the key criterion.
3. **The geopolitical imperative** – where commerce linked with Islam is influenced by geopolitics, which reciprocally affects factors such as international relations, political stability and national brand equity.

Furthermore, is this an offensive or defensive response to globalization? As an extension of this thinking, can brands also be seen as a modern day phenomenon, which marks culture's and individuals' way of mediating the effects of Globalization, by preserving manageable units of meaning and identity? Furthermore, if profit maximisation is taken to be a socio-culturally centred value calculation, as opposed to a reducible financial value: then humans can be viewed as collective individuals, who balance rationality, emotions – and that these form the essence of cultured human existence. Likewise, is unification under a concept of ummah enough to denote homogeneity?

The implications are that if the Muslim ummah is to strengthen its Islamic marketing and branding activities, there needs to be an evaluation as to what constitutes positive nationalism and whether individual Muslim nation brands can work both individually

and collectively under a banner of healthy competition, for a greater good? This is an area of contention amongst the traditional Islamic scholars and some more practising Muslims, who may see this as tending towards the more negative traits of 'asabiyyah. Nevertheless, I argue that strong nation brands are one of the most powerful ways to change societal perceptions – with Japan and Germany being cases in practice.

However, with Islamic nations, cultures are perhaps more important than nations. It is not that the nation is unimportant, but given the diversity of cultures in which the dominant Muslim population is, religion appears to be not as important as ethnicity - which is conflated to denote someone being classified as being habitually a Muslim. On the other hand, Pan-Islamic branding *could* draw together rather diverse cultures.

Labelling the Halal

Notably, the Halal industry is growing and crossing sectors. However, interpretations as to what halal means, especially in the here and now, need further consideration. While there are religious textual references (ahadith and Qur'an), which offer guidance, it still remains contentious how these can and should be applied. One example of such a case is the hadith that not only calls for cursing of the person who drinks alcoholic wine, but also the seller, the wine maker and the grape farmer (growing grapes for this purpose) (Wilson and Liu, 2010). This has implications on how the hospitality industry can serve its customers, with halal assurances, and what assets can be insured. Other key areas are the differing opinions on how animals are slaughtered, and ingredients in products such as pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and fragrances.

Furthermore, current conventional thought calls for brand building through projective techniques - where meaning, identity, and personality are ascribed to the brand. However if linked to something like Halal branding, regardless of how human a halal brand is, Halal has to be judged by the space, context, time, and individuals with which it is associated.

Islamic English?

Another key development has been the ascendance of English language. English in particular, because it is the worldwide language of business. In tandem, while Arabic is the language of Islam and with Islam spreading across the globe, Arabic it is not the mother tongue of most Muslims, which means that it is often used alongside another mother tongue to derive meaning and understanding. Therefore, today I argue that English has grown in its importance in connection with Islam, as it is more widely understood. Another case in practice being the use of the term 'non-Halal'. In contrast, Haram [the opposite of Halal] appears to resonate in the eyes of individuals with much stronger sentiments. This is because the conscious consumption of or engagement in Haram activities, without repentance, carries with them the risk of spiritual or physical punishments (within Islamic law, or in the hereafter). As a result Muslims tend to adopt a position of avoidance, in the face of doubt. In Malaysia the term non-Halal is used in preference to Haram, in the signage of non-Muslim restaurants. This appears to confirm the perceptions of the word Haram encouraging censure, by both Muslims and non-Muslims – but also shows how Islamic English has become a new expression understood by all.

However, having made these points, a key question is what sort of English – as most people who speak English have it as a second non-native language. Also, non-English languages are in turn influencing English - as collectively they all express culturally specific patterns, which are embedded in contextual situations. Evidence points to the strongest global brands being known according to strong linkages with English language text and English derivatives, shaped by non-English language natives.

Islam in the Marketplace

And so, I suggest that the most significant innovations will arise from a transformative leadership, which embraces and galvanises a broad-base of cultures. From the backdrop of exponential growth of consumerism, exhibited through the rise of *halal* offerings across industry sectors (Wilson and Liu, 2010), and the recent transformational effects of tribes and collectives harnessing social media: the reigns will be taken by a generation technologically savvy urbanites. Moving forward, Muslims seem set to move towards greater collaborative consumption and new ways of interpreting what faith means – and how it shapes life in the here and now. All of that however is based on the assumption that enough people are plugged in, use and have access to the Internet. For those that are not, then they risk being left behind, and branded as second-class citizens – with no access to vital information; unable to respond via e-channels, or quickly enough; and insufficient traceable history used to assess potential for financial support and employability.

A final reflective consideration was made to whether in postmodern societies; Leadership and Management can still be viewed as having one universal framework, which is a panacea to all challenges faced. Also, building on this point, in light of softer approaches, which consider relationships, reciprocity and collaboration: are those MBA corporate strategy allegories that draw from military experiences still as conducive? Moving beyond a period, which is typified by the ‘macho’ 1980’s ideals of overt power, dominance and colonisation through brands: should business people review historical exploits from more than one perspective - which are softer, more feminine, reflective and empathic?

Furthermore, for female leaders, the picture painted is often very much one of a macho paradigm, which maybe somewhat uninspiring for them. It is worth mentioning that in Islamic studies there are books such as Ghadanfar’s (2001), which remedy this shortfall

- talking exclusively about the significant contributions in scholarship and leadership of Muslim females.

For *Islamic* business people, these fields of study are crucial. I highlighted the burden on us to attain and synthesise a wide range of knowledge from cross-disciplinary fields, which is perhaps greater than in other sectors. The suggestion therefore is that more scholarship is needed in this field - where we seek to collaborate with academics particularly in: anthropology; Islamic theology and jurisprudence; modern and ancient languages; popular culture, sociology, behavioural psychology, and geopolitical history. With Muslim consumer behaviour also going through a rapid and transformational growth, it is possible that gaps in knowledge may appear, unless these factors are remedied.

I also advocate the age-old art of storytelling within marketing, which can take on board another dimension and prevents the alienation of messages. For, in every military battle there are inevitably winners, losers and casualties. In support of this point, many US brands for example attempt to divorce themselves from politics and war - whereas previously they were used to galvanise support behind war efforts.

The global marketplace necessitates that brands weave their way through such complicated dynamics. Also, many Muslim countries are in direct competition with each other, through commodities, concepts and interpretation. So this begs the question, if each of them is using overt Islamic historical and religious marketing messages in tandem, will this lead to further problems?

More so now than ever, we have become cultural hybrids and surrogates – where traditional classifiers such as ethnicity, nationality and class say less about us than our possessions, language and social networks. Also, looking at the rise of Muslim world and Asian influence, are we moving away from a world of Mad Men towards one of Ahmad Men? [pun intended (^_<)]. In the face of these changes, what new Eastern-

centric approaches can we use to reinterpret realities? Furthermore, much of our cultural understanding and study in business is rooted in Western notions and constructs of nation, society, gender, obligation, spiritualism, collectivism, and context. But, in the Middle East and Asia, if we investigate Western notions of masculinity and femininity for example, they can mean very different things. So much so, that perhaps these variables make comparisons difficult. For example, I'm sure that you have seen bearded men from the East, greeting each other with kisses, wearing sweet fragrances, kohl around their eyes, sarongs, and jewelled rings, for centuries; or businessmen with brightly coloured cute charms hanging from their smart phones. And yet, 'they' too are cultural chameleons that can change according to their environment.

Micro-Managing Culture

Having made the argument for the significance of culture, my recommendation is that, in a given scenario, culture should be analysed and understood on different interconnected levels – and the best way to do this is to participate. The following model offers guidance as to how these levels can be categorised, and how they relate to each other [Figure 2].

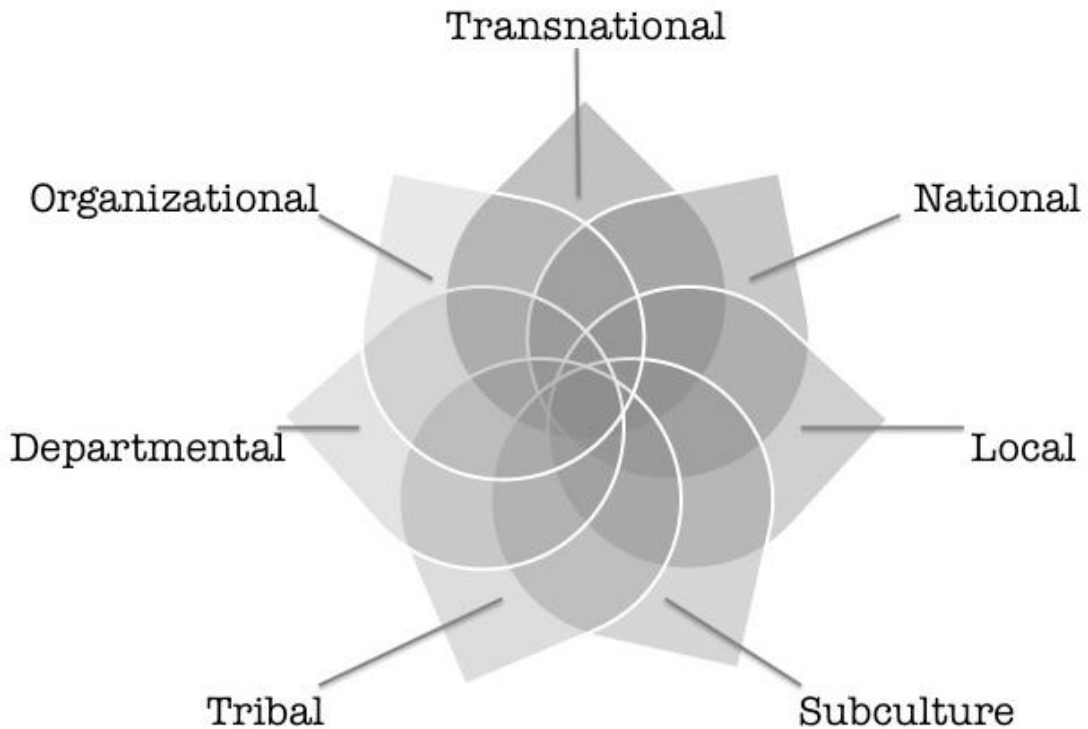


Figure 2: “The Petals of Culture” (Wilson 2013c)

Diagrammatically and symbolically, inspiration for Figure 2 came from the rare seven petaled cherry blossom. Just like the samurai revered cherry blossom: culture can be the symbol of power, victory, inspiration and feminine beauty. But, whilst every cherry blossom may look similar, they are different, occupy a different space, and are short lived – so too is culture.

The model should be viewed as a Venn diagram model with 7 variables. In some situations, only one cultural frame of reference may predominate, for example local customs. However, in other instances, several variables may work in tandem or against each other. There may be a subculture, which draws from local customs; or a

departmental culture, which clashes with organizational culture. So don't think of culture of one thing; and remember that to possess culture necessitates being cultured.

Macro-Managing Culture

From this basis and taking a broader cultural perspective, I outlined a framework that charts a macro-process of cultural understanding within a business-cultural context, and which attempts to reconcile global differences [Figure 3].

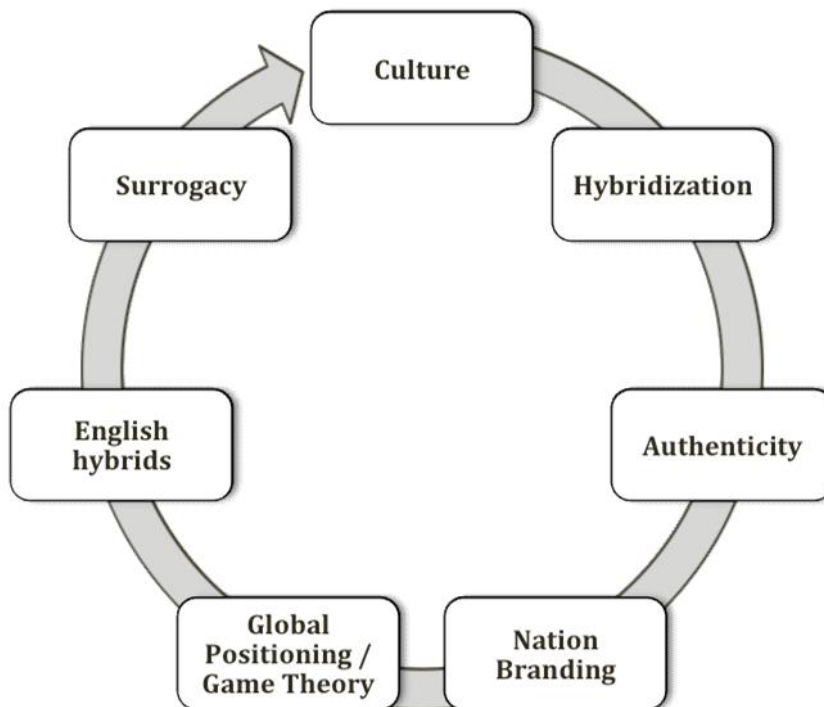


Figure 3: C.H.A.N.G.E.S. (Wilson 2011)

The position adopted here in the 'CHANGES' model is that brand analysis has to contextualise cultural factors, which govern stakeholder interactions. These should be mapped out according to: cyclical, dynamic and time specific communication networks. To this end, culture is transmitted through the subsequent stages of the model, with these stages representing critical rate-determining evaluative factors.

As has been discussed, English is the lingua franca of business and key to cultural transmission and understanding. But, as it is as second language to many more than hold it as a native tongue, English language itself demonstrates continual evolution – increased by ‘non-natives’.

The term *surrogacy* is also presented here as a conceptual argument, which attempts to highlight a phenomenon where:

- 1.Brands are viewed as people
- 2.People are sociable and seek to form tribal networks

From this:

- 1.Brands (as constructed entities with identities and personalities) want people to adopt brands as ‘their own’
- 2.People want to adopt brands as ‘their own’

Which yields the categorisation matrix, where:

- 1.Brands look to adopt (people) [dominant]
- 2.Brands want to be adopted (by people) [submissive]
- 3.People look to adopt (brands) [proactive]
- 4.People want to be adopted by brands [reactive]
5. **The end game is:** People encourage brands to adopt brands.

Final Thoughts

To conclude, my keynote appeared to have gone down well; with some excellent questions and discussions from the floor. Also, I was deeply inspired by the talks given by Professor Abbas Mirakhor; Dato’ Hazimah Zainuddin, from Hyrax Oil; Christian Rehren, Ambassador of Chile. I feel privileged to have shared a platform with such amazing individuals. As conferences go, this ranks up there as one of the most enjoyable and worthwhile.

6. Overall Conclusions, Final Take Homes and Reflections

The Cultural Imperative

Developing a collaborative, nurturing and friendly environment over the long-term is a vital part of global business discourse. For me, that means reflecting upon, gaining an understanding of, and participating in: evolutionary and revolutionary culture. Culture and commerce, whether commerce means taking literal or more figurative interpretations of transactions, are what make us human. Without culture, can there be any such thing as commerce? Without commerce, does culture survive? In the widest sense, we are all producers, consumers, and marketers of culture. Culture acts as an empty container for many 'things' - the things created by humans. Culture is shaped by space, time and context – with porous and elastic boundaries. These are equally transient and transcend. Understanding the lenses that we use to make sense of reality is crucial. These are the culture(s) of Culture(s), culturing, and being cultured. Or in other words, understanding the who, where, how, and why? And, the prepositions that apply to and link culture, like: of, from, by, with, beneath, despite, across, alongside etc.

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 has changed our realities. We now live in an interconnected world of hyper-communication, and virtually free exchanges – both physical and virtual. Anything and everything is shared through smart phones and tablets in real time. People check and check again whilst watching more than one screen. We tell people what we like more than ever - and we take notice of what other people like – global democratization using our thumbs. Also, it should not be overlooked that with an exponential growth of information at our fingertips and in front of our eyeballs, nothing disappears. So with such dynamism, technology has also created webs and trails of longitudinal significance – the dawn of big data. A key challenge will be to ensure that this remains a tool, rather

than a noose; and I often wonder with all of this whether the future will bring with it higher cases of mental sickness – anxiety, suspicion, and emotional antisocialism. Therefore, a key consideration for cultures such as Islam, with such rich and diverse heritage and geographies, will be how 21st century advancements are embraced, rather than ignored or demonized.

Plugging in Academic-Industry Network

Finally, in industry, it is commonplace to attend events that are punctuated with hospitality and sharing food; and on a day-to-day basis having informal ‘water cooler’ chats - which eventually materialize into drivers for new ways of doing business. These are the essential environments for brainstorming, sensing, and investigating new phenomena - all with a purpose for commercial and competitive advantage. Upon reflection, I wonder how often academics and students feel the pull to do the same? Are we networking enough and with purpose? Do we spend too much time looking at the smaller picture; or investigating according to methods, which ensure publication or the completion of an assessment - but at the expense of addressing the bigger picture, and not necessarily catering for the needs of industry?

So, should we devote more time to these invaluable experiences around travel and the new environments that this brings; tasty food and discussions; and inculcating our students in the art of debate and the canons of rhetoric; in settings that will serve them well in the corporate world?

Also, more importantly, the role of academia is surely to document more of that tacit information and discovery, which practitioners have little time to do - and for me this includes those eureka moments when in the classroom, over a tehtarik, and in front of plates of nasilemak? This means that I am advocating a more social approach to scholarship and the importance of investigating phenomena; where academics, students

and practitioners create spaces to interact in intensive bursts of creative expression – then to go away into isolation and solitude, to record, reflect, produce, harvest and share again.

Words of Thanks

Lastly, I would like to express how grateful I am to Professor SaadiahMohamad and NorlinNor for encouraging me to write this paper, and of course for inviting me - as hopefully now there is another compelling treatise, which will help to prolong our experiences and debates. And with that I sign off with *assalaamu 'alaikum*; and as they say in Scotland, *haste ye back* [hurry up and come back] - which might sound like a strange thing to say, but your 'place', as a physical, emotional, or mental space, could be mine also, if we choose to live as cultural surrogates!

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