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Researching Islamic marketing: past and future perspectives

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons underlying the recent interest on Islamic marketing, discusses past research on the topic and offers a future research perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a critical review of the existing literature. It offers ethnoconsumerism as a way to develop a situated understanding of Muslim consumers and businesses.

Findings – Two distinct phases, omission and discovery, characterize the existing literature. Omission derives from the stereotyping of Muslims as traditional and uncivilized people and Islam as incompatible with capitalist consumer ideology. Discovery relates to the identification of Muslims as an untapped and viable consumer segment and the increasing visibility of Muslim entrepreneurs.

Research limitations/implications – A deeper understanding of Muslim consumers and marketers requires doing away with essentialist approaches that reify difference. Instead of focusing on differences future research needs to pay attention to how such differences play out in the daily lives of consumers and examine the religious, political, cultural and economic resources, forces and tensions that consumers experience and negotiate as they (re)construct and communicate their identities as Muslims.

Practical implications – Managers should not assume Muslims to be a homogeneous and preexisting segment. They should focus on the daily practices for which the product may be relevant and generate solutions that will help Muslims live proper Islamic lives.

Originality/value – The paper draws attention to the potential problems in carrying out research on Islamic marketing and highlights the dangers of an essentialist perspective.

Keywords Islamic marketing, Muslim consumers, Islamic market segmentation, Essentialism, Halal market, Islam, Ethnography

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

The interest in understanding the relationship between Islam and consumption and marketing practices has been increasing in recent years. One can trace such interest in the establishment of specialist journals, the growing number of research articles published, the organization of academic conferences and executive workshops and the production of high profile consultancy reports. Accompanying this rather sudden and strong interest is inevitably the question of why? Why is there an interest in Islam and marketing and why now?

A closer look at the literature suggests that underlying this attention is the identification of Muslims as an untapped and viable market segment. Analogous to the cases of other non-mainstream consumer groups such as blacks and Hispanics in the USA, for example, the increasing visibility of Muslims as consumers is intimately linked with their purchasing power. This power is articulated especially through the emergence of a Muslim middle class, which is, although geographically dispersed, united in its interest in consumption and ability to afford branded products (Nasr, 2009). Along with the Muslim middle class, there is increasing visibility of Muslim entrepreneurs,

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a new breed of businesspeople, located in both Muslim-majority and minority societies, who are keenly pursuing Islamic principles as well as capitalist aspirations (Adas, 2006; Osella and Osella, 2009). Overall, it appears that the changing demographics and purchasing power of Muslim consumers and the success of Muslim entrepreneurs have begun to render Islamic marketing a scholarly and managerially attractive field.

However, there is also certain unease that the term "Islamic marketing" generates. The "Islamic" accent carries with it the potential of reifying difference rather than interaction. First, it implies that when addressing Muslim consumers the practice of marketing needs to take on a particular Islamic character. Such marketing is assumed to be different from marketing in general. Second, it implies that Islamic marketing targets Muslim consumers, consumers who are distinctively different from consumers in general and that it utilizes specific resources, skills and tools that are relevant and appealing to this particular segment. Finally, it also assumes that there is a preexisting and uniform Muslim consumer segment, which can be targeted, reached and, to a certain extent, predicted by marketers. Such assumptions have the danger of generating an essentialist perspective that produces a rather static and stereotypical understanding of Muslim consumers and businesses and related consumption and marketing practices. What I argue instead is a focus on the interaction and co-constitutive relationship between Islam and marketing (for a more detailed discussion of the ideas presented here, see Sandıkcı and Ger (2011)). Research in this area needs to go beyond searching for differences to understanding how Islam and marketing mutually inform each other and how Muslim consumers and entrepreneurs negotiate Islamic values and consumerist and capitalist aspirations in their daily lives and practices. What follows next is a critical overview of the existing scholarship on Islam and marketing. I then outline a perspective for future research that is more sensitive to the complexities and contextualities of Muslims and their consumption and marketing practices. I conclude by discussing various managerial and policy implications of this perspective.

Scholarship on Islam, consumption and marketing

Despite the fact that there have been Muslims for centuries and that they have engaged in consumption and trade, interest in the relationship between Islam and marketing has emerged only recently. A closer look at the marketing and extant social science literatures suggests that the scholarship on Islam and marketing can be discussed in terms of two distinct phases: omission and discovery.

Omission

The phase of omission refers to the dearth of interest in conceptualizing and studying Muslims as consumers. In the consumer behavior and marketing literatures, religion in general is an understudied area. Within this general scarcity, attention on Islam, consumption and the marketing relationship is even scarcer. The omission was partially related to the marginalization of Muslims as low-income and uneducated people who did not constitute a significant market for branded products. In this respect Muslims were similar to the world's poor, or what Prahalad (2004) labeled the "bottom-of-the-pyramid". As they were not worthy of attention economically, they remained unknown scholarly.

However, omission was also due to the stereotyping of Muslims as traditional, uncivilized and even militant people. As Said (1978) lucidly demonstrated in his book, *Orientalism*, the prevailing Western view of Islam and Muslims as the inferior

other of the West has been a historical construct, a trope that was based on false and romanticized images of the Middle East and Asia. Said argued that Western writings of the Orient depict it as an irrational, weak, feminised "other" in contrast to the rational, strong, masculine West. Underlying this contrast was, according to Said, the need to create "difference" between West and East that can be attributed to immutable "essences" in the Oriental make-up (Said, 1978, pp. 65-7). In the business context, such Orientalist representations worked to produce and reinforce a view of Islam as incompatible with capitalist consumer ideology and gave way to categorizing Muslims as outside the values and practices of Western consumer culture. This incompatibility view had different justifications.

From the perspective of "Islamic economics", a body of literature grounded in medieval Islamic thought (Kuran, 2004), the incompatibility has been necessary, deliberate and real. This scholarship has advocated the merits of Islamic economic institutions and values and argued that Islamic principles provide necessary guidance for today's economic practices (Siddiqi, 1992; Kahn, 1995). In regard to consumption, there has been the tendency to treat consumer culture as crass, decadent and corrupting traditional values. Depicting consumer culture as wasteful, harmful and immoral, fostering individualism and hedonism, the proponents of Islamic economics instructed Muslims to live modest lives and refrain from conspicuous and excessive consumption. Against the evils of a consumer culture associated with Western values, Islam has been offered as an antidote (Kuran, 2004).

While Islamic economics deliberately sought to set apart Islamic consumption values and practices from the Western consumer culture by denigrating the latter as wasteful, excessive and the root cause of many societal problems, several prominent sociological analyses carried out in the 1990s propagated a similarly incompatible view of Islam and capitalism but due to a different set of reasons (Turner, 1994; Barber, 1995). Common in these studies was the focus on the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its ideological repercussions. From this perspective, the problematic relationship between Islam and capitalist consumption, or *Jihad vs McWorld* in Barber's (1995) famous phrase, has been related to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as a reactionary response to the conditions of postmodernity.

For instance in his book *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*, Turner (1994, p. 90) argued that "consumerism offers or promises a range of possible lifestyles which compete with and in many cases, contradict the uniform lifestyle demanded by Islamic fundamentalism". According to Turner the cultural, aesthetic and stylistic pluralism fostered by postmodernism and the spread of global system of consumption contradicted the fundamentalist commitment to a unified world organized around incontrovertibly true values and beliefs. While "the consumer market threatens to break out into a new stage of fragmented postmodernity in late capitalism," fundamentalism "acts as a brake on the historical development of world capitalism" (Turner, 1994, p. 80). Reminiscent of Huntington's (1997) "clash of civilizations" thesis, these works reproduced a view of Islam as in a clash with capitalist consumerism.

Accordingly for a long time Muslim consumers and businesses remained invisible. While the incompatibility view justified the lack of academic and managerial interest in Islam and marketing, the lack of interest further reinforced the incompatibility view. This cycle came to a halt in the last decade when marketers discovered the Muslim consumer.

Discovery

There have been several social, political, cultural and economic developments underlying the recent interest on Muslim consumers and businesses. Overall, in the past decades an increased centrality of Islam has become visible across Muslim geographies. In line with this, several studies on Islamic movements appeared (Esposito, 1998; Wiktorowicz, 2004; Bayat, 2005). These studies discussed political ramifications of these new Islamic movements as well as the effects of the Islamization of everyday life. The events of 9/11 inevitably had an important impact in this emerging interest. Initially, the attacks were read mainly as a reaffirmation of the insurmountable differences between Islam and the Western civilization. The attack on the World Trade Center was seen as a symbolic attack against global capitalism. However, the attacks also accelerated the interest in understanding Muslims and their social, political and cultural life worlds.

The emergence of new Islamist social movements (Wiktorowicz, 2004; Bayat, 2005) has been a key development shaping the political landscape in the last decades. Earlier Islamist movements were rather homogeneous and static collectivities motivated by resistance to Western-style modernization and secular modernity (Esposito, 1998). New Islamist movements, on the other hand (Wiktorowicz, 2004; Bayat, 2005), are not merely reactionary collectivities. Rather than being militant groups seeking a change of regime to *Sharia*-based polity, new Islamist social movements are seen as strategic activist structures organized around loosely defined networks and groups that promote particular values through the proper observance of Islam. As such, they parallel the logic of new social movements and seek to create "networks of shared meaning" (Melucci, 1996) through the mobilization of various resources such as political parties, religious organizations, NGOs, schools and social networks (Wiktorowicz, 2004; Bayat, 2005). These movements, such as the Turkish-based Gulen community, provide important strategic resources – financial, educational, cultural and social – to their followers (Agai, 2007).

Studies also indicate that market and consumption play important roles in the growth and spread of these movements (Yavuz, 2004; Boubekeur, 2005; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010). In the case of Turkey, for example, Yavuz's (2004) study showed how Islamic groups have benefited from the new "opportunity spaces" created by economic liberalization. These market-oriented venues to spread ideas and practices, such as the media, financial institutions and businesses, have been instrumental in both propagating the Islamic lifestyles and generating financial resources for the Islamic movements. From a similar perspective, focusing on the change of the meanings and practices of *tesettür*, modest dressing, in Turkey, Sandıkcı and Ger's (2010) study documented how consumption and marketing of fashionable *tesettür* have contributed to the increasing visibility and growth of a new Islamic collectivity. Overall, research on new Islamist movements indicate that in these communities, the feelings of belonging happen less through formal membership in a hierarchical structure but more through engaging in shared patterns of consumption.

A related and equally important development has been the emergence of Muslim entrepreneurs (Demir *et al.*, 2004; Adas, 2006; Osella and Osella, 2009). The term has been used in reference to a new class of business people, located both in Muslim-majority and minority societies who successfully blend Islamic ethical principles and values with capitalist business practices. In the case of Muslim-majority countries, the emergence of this business class has been linked to the neoliberal restructuring of economies and the changing dynamics of religion-market interaction (Demir *et al.*, 2004). In the case

of Muslim-minority countries, it has arisen from the changing nature of the Muslim diaspora and their increasing confidence and political, economic and cultural power (Saint-Blancat, 2002). In both cases, these new Muslim entrepreneurs appear to be well connected to the networks of similar-minded business people and benefit from their connections within the new Islamist collectivities and business organizations.

Some scholars liken Muslim entrepreneurs to Weberian Calvinists (Adas, 2006). Similar to the Calvinist work ethic, Muslim entrepreneurs "sanctify hard work, economic success and pursuit of wealth as important religious obligations" and believe that "a good Muslim should be an entrepreneurial Muslim" (Adas, 2006, p. 129). In pursuing their entrepreneurial goals they seek to combine religious and economic activities through Islamic ethical values and norms. As Osella and Osella (2009) observe these entrepreneurs "inscribe their specific business interests and practices into rhetorics of the 'common good'" (p. 203) and see combining material success with moral connectedness as the "exemplary contemporary way of being a modern, moral, Muslim" (p. 204).

From Malaysia to Turkey, India, Syria, the UK and Australia, these entrepreneurs design, manufacture and market products that are crucial to the development of modern Muslim identities as consumer subjects. Some examples that have received media attention include Turkish *Tekbir*, an Islamic clothing company; Syrian Newboy Design Studio, producer of *Fulla* dolls; Australian Ahida, marketer of modest swimsuit *burqini*, a term derived from merging *burqa* and bikini; and the UK-based *Emel*, a Muslim lifestyle magazine. In each case, an aspiration to achieve business success and help Muslims live properly Islamic lives underlines the entrepreneurial story: *Tekbir*'s fashionable clothes aim to "make covering beautiful" and inspire women to adopt the veil (Sandıkcı and Ger, 2007; Gokariksel and Secor, 2010); *Fulla* dolls act as role models for Muslim girls, offering an alternative to the promiscuous and hedonistic Barbie (Yaqin, 2007); the *burqini* acts as a "modernizing invention that brings Muslim women's fashion and leisure pursuits (nearly) up to speed with those of their non-Muslim female counterparts" (Fitzpatrick, 2009, p. 4); and *Emel* provides lifestyle tips informed by Islamic principles and ethical consumerism to its readers (Lewis, 2010).

Finally, there has been a growing recognition of a Muslim middle class, keen on blending Islamic values and a consumerist ethos (Wong, 2007; Nasr, 2009). As in the case of Muslim entrepreneurs, the emergence of a Muslim middle class is closely linked to the broader socio-economic developments. In many Muslim countries, neoliberal economic restructuring programs have been influential in creating not only new business domains but also opening up countries to foreign brands, shopping malls and various contemporary marketing practices. In countries like Turkey, Egypt, Malaysia and Indonesia to name a few, accumulation of wealth concomitant with the increasing influence of Islamic movements had resulted in the creation of a new middle class "conservative in values but avant-garde in consumption practices" (Sandıkcı and Ger, 2002, p. 467; also Wong, 2007; Nasr, 2009).

Recently, looking over the marketplaces in Muslim-majority and minority contexts as well as the digital space, one can observe a wide variety of products which are positioned as Islamic and *halal* and targeted at Muslim consumers. These offerings range from clothing to holiday resorts, food, gated communities, hajj packages, decorative objects, CDs and MP3 recordings of sermons, pop music, toys, lifestyle magazines and TV and radio stations. Nasr (2009, p. 14) frames the consumption demands of a global Islamic

middle class as an economic counterbalance to China's consumer power and asserts that "this upwardly mobile class consumes Islam as much as practicing it, demanding the same sorts of life-enhancing goods and services as middle classes everywhere". Overall, by harmonizing religion and consumption in everyday practices, the new Muslim middle class contributes to the making of a new Muslim identity that draws from multiple resources.

The corporate world soon attended to these developments. Since the late 2000s, consultancy reports highlighting the importance of addressing the Muslim market began to appear (Kearney, 2007; JWT, 2009; Ogilvy and Mather, 2010). Common in these reports is the emphasis on the size of the Muslim market and its purchasing power. Although it is acknowledged that much of the approximately 1.6 billion Muslim population is quite poor, the number of consumers with sufficient purchasing power is deemed as significant enough. Overall, the goal of these reports has been to educate and instruct Western multinationals in Islam and Muslim lifestyles.

With the increasing corporate attention on Muslims as consumers, academic research in the area also began to intensify. Although there has been some research on consumption practices of Muslims (Yavas and Tuncalp, 1984; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2002, 2010; Esso and Dibb, 2004; Mokhlis, 2006) and the implications of Islamic ethics on marketing practices (Rice, 1999; Saeed *et al.*, 2001; Wilson, 2006; Hasan *et al.*, 2008), scholarly literature on Islam and marketing has been largely missing. In recent years, studies addressing different domains of marketing in the context of the Muslim markets, such as branding (Alserhan, 2010; Wilson and Liu, 2010), market orientation (Zakaria and Abdul-Talib, 2010), new product development (Rehman and Shabbir, 2010) and sales promotions (Abdullah and Ahmad, 2010; Yusuf, 2010) have begun to appear.

In general terms, the discovery of Muslims as consumers resembles the discovery in the USA of ethnic communities such as blacks, Hispanics and Asians as viable market segments. In all these groups there has been a shift in meaning from "disadvantaged" or "marginalized" consumers to a lifestyle community embedded in the language of consumption. Studies investigating the emergence of Hispanics, blacks and other ethnic collectivities as consumer segments report that these segments were not preexisting entities that marketers simply needed to appeal to but constructions (Davila, 2001). In other words, there was no distinct Hispanic consumer to which marketers could sell their products. Rather, it was through marketing practices such as segmentation and targeted product development and advertising that Hispanics came to be Hispanic consumer groups.

A closer look at the making of the ethnic markets suggests that similar processes are in operation in the development of the Muslim market. For example, one can observe the emergence of consulting, research and communications companies or units within existing firms specialized in marketing to Muslims. Segmentation surveys aimed at profiling Muslim consumers are now being conducted. There is targeted advertising appearing in specialized media. Also, there are lifestyle media, both in traditional and digital forms, aiming to build a platform through which companies can talk to Muslim consumers and Muslim consumers and businesses can talk with each other.

Studies on ethnic marketing also show that marketers represent these groups in an assimilationist manner and aim to create the image of a unified market. For example, when marketers refer to the "Hispanic market" they tend to gloss over many different nationalities that are included under this label (Davila, 2001). Clearly, there is no single

and uniform Hispanic or black consumer collectivity and taste structure. At the very least, social class, gender and age dissolve these collectivities into multiple overlapping and conflicting consumption tastes and practices. When approached critically a similarly essentialist understanding of Islam and Muslim consumers appears to shape much of the contemporary discussions. This understanding becomes especially visible in two key areas: the focus on segmentation and the emphasis on difference.

Both academic and managerial writing on Islamic marketing tend to emphasize segmentation. Religion is regarded as the common descriptor that explains and potentially predicts the behavior of Muslim consumers. Although there is a recent acknowledgment of inter-differences, such as those among Muslims living in different countries (Nasr, 2009) or Muslims with different social class positions (Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010), religion continues to be seen as the homogenizing force across the Muslim population. This perspective has two potential drawbacks. First, it leads to an overemphasis of religion at the expense of other aspects of identity such as gender, social class, age and their interactions. Furthermore, Islam itself is not monolithic and is constituted of many sects. How Islam is experienced and practiced in daily life can vary significantly across different sects.

In existing research and practice there is also an overt focus on difference. Muslims are generally depicted as consumers inherently different from consumers in general. Here, similar to multicultural marketing debates (Burton, 2002), there is an underlying assumption that Muslim consumers have shared characteristics that set them apart from other (read Western) consumers. The emphasis on differences assumes a static model of culture where categories such as Muslim, black or Hispanic come to be seen as essential and fixed. Such an approach offers only a surface level and stereotypical insight into identity and behavior and helps little to the understanding of complex empirical realities of people. The focus on difference (re)produces an essentialist understanding of Muslim consumers as really distinct from consumers in general, as if they have no shared characteristics at all.

The emphasis on segmentation and difference is related to a normative view of Islamic ethics, that is, the conceptualization of Islam as a set of rules and norms that are unequivocally and indiscriminately followed by all Muslims. One good example of the limitations of a normative view of ethics and a resultant focus on segmentation and difference is the concept of *halal*. There is an insistence of *halal* in both academic and managerial writings. However, how *halal* unfolds in particular markets and product categories is very complex and dynamic. Consider for example the case of modest dressing. There is a host of studies conducted on veiling and modest Islamic dress in various parts of the world (Mernissi, 1991; El Guindi, 1999; Gole, 2003; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010). These studies indicate that what is deemed as appropriate religious clothing differs from context to context. Moreover, within one country, the meanings and practices of veiling vary across time and different social classes. For example, Sandıkcı and Ger (2010) show how a new form of veiling, referred to as *tesettür*, emerged in Turkey in the late 1970s/early 1980s and transformed tremendously in the next decades. In the early days *tesettür* had a rather uniform look, consisting of a long loose overcoat and large headscarf. This new veiling style was initially adopted primarily by young, urban and educated middleclass women who were formerly uncovered and whose mothers usually were uncovered. Their adoption of *tesettür* was seen as a symbol of growing Islamist opposition to secular, Westernized lifestyles. Despite the Turkish

Government's attempts to contain it, *tesettür* spread. Yet, by the 1990s, its uniform look fragmented into a plurality of styles and a lucrative and globally-connected *tesettür* fashion market developed. Recently many different styles and expressions of modest dress circulate in the public space. As this example indicates, although *halal* is a common denominator of the Islamic belief, how *halal* is interpreted, negotiated and experienced in the daily lives of Muslims is complex and dynamic.

Future of research on Islam, consumption and marketing

The examples and discussions presented above indicate that a deeper understanding of Muslim consumers and Islamic markets and marketers requires doing away with essentialist approaches that reify difference. In other words, instead of focusing on differences and imagining the Muslim market as separate from the market in general, we need to pay attention to how such "differences" play out in daily lives of consumers. We need to examine the religious, political, cultural and economic resources, forces and tensions that consumers experience and negotiate as they (re)construct and communicate their identities as Muslims. Such an approach requires a focus on practices and discourses and their interrelationships rather than consumers in isolation.

Ethnoconsumerism (Venkatesh, 1995) provides a useful framework to develop a situated understanding of Muslim consumers. As Venkatesh (1995, p. 2) explains, ethnoconsumerism "is a conceptual framework to study consumer behavior using the theoretical categories originating in a given culture". It calls for studying behavior on the basis of the cultural realities of individuals rather than imposing preexisting categories to explain that behavior. In order to achieve this one needs to study "actions, practices, words, thoughts, language, institutions and the interconnections between these categories" (p. 4). Hence, from the perspective of ethoconsumerism, while studying or addressing the Islamic market, asking the question of "who is the Muslim consumer?" and trying to answer it only through the lens of religious norms and values produces only a limited understanding. Instead an ethnoconsumerist perspective urges scholars to concentrate on understanding particular Muslims in particular contexts and examine the practices, discourses, power relationships and dynamics that characterize those contexts. Varying Islamic discourses interacting with other discourses and relationships provide different interpretations of religiously appropriate consumption. Different understandings and experiences of Islam enable as well as constrain different consumption practices. Given such multiplicity, understanding the dynamics of "Islam in local contexts" (Eickelman, 1982) becomes imperative.

A situated understanding of Muslim consumers also calls for attending to the interaction and intersection of religion with other identity variables. The communities of Muslim consumers are linked by faith but, as with other consumer groups, they are also marked by gender, class, age, nationality, ethnicity, etc. For example, consider Muslims in Germany, Turkish Muslims in Germany and Islamists in Turkey. Although Islam is the common description, identities, practices and dynamics are very different in each of these cases. Accordingly, future research needs to address how Muslim religiosity interacts with other ideologies, ethics, values and subjectivities rather than asking questions such as: do all Muslims think the same? Do all Muslims behave in the same way? Do all Muslims want the same products and services? Do Muslims want Western brands or Islamic brands? They do not all think the same, they do not behave in the same way, they do not all want the same products and they want both

Islamic and Western brands. Studies that explicate the social, cultural, economic, political and historical dynamics and actors that have shaped and continue to shape the identities of Muslims as consumers will help render stereotypes redundant and provide novel insights into the religion-marketing intersection. In this regard, there is a general need for studies that examine the formation of consumers and marketers in different religious milieu – be it Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu or else.

From a critical perspective, future studies should examine how marketing practices help construct Muslims as viable consumer segments. Questions such as – what are the politics of representation of Muslims in advertising, media and other marketing spaces and what purposes do they serve? What are the power dynamics involved in such representations, who benefits from them and who is excluded? – remain intriguing and challenging. While there are similarities between Muslim consumers and other non-mainstream consumer groups, the particularities of Muslims also need to be evaluated. While racism has been important in the construction of ethnic markets, it is highly likely that Islamophobia will have unique effects in the construction of the Muslim market. On a related domain, the interplay between religion and politics need to be unpacked. Understanding how Islam and marketing interact in contexts with different political ideologies and experiences of democracy present interesting research avenues.

Certainly more research is needed on Muslim entrepreneurs, their motives, aspirations and interpretations and implementations of marketing principles. While ethical and religious principles seem to be articulated loudly by Muslim business owners, to what extent words and deeds correspond needs to be empirically assessed. Furthermore, keeping in mind that managers operate within the boundaries of the competitive conditions, how their practices are informed by market forces and structures should also be explained. In examining how MNCs compete in Muslim geographies as well as how Islamic companies compete against MNCs in both Muslim majority and minority contexts, researchers will benefit from adopting a situated and socio-culturally informed approach. Finally, critically informed comparisons of Islamic marketing principles and practices with those of green marketing, fair trade and ethical consumption initiatives constitute interesting research paths. Religion is a key force shaping the contemporary world and is likely to remain as such. Hence unpacking the religion, consumption and marketing interaction will contribute not only to marketing theory but also to our understanding of the contemporary world.

Managerial and policy implications

It should be clear by now that marketing managers should not assume Muslims to be a homogeneous and preexisting segment. Instead they should focus on the daily practices for which the product may be relevant and generate solutions through the product for everyday problems in that particular context. For example, the emphasis should be on the solutions that will help Muslims be better Muslims and live proper Islamic lives rather than focusing the attention only on achieving the "halalness" of products. Moreover, such solutions should take into consideration that the interpretations and understandings of better Muslims and proper Islamic lives are multiple, dynamic, contested and negotiated. One-size-fits-all-Muslims products will be unlikely to deliver sustainable success. Instead companies that help consumers solve their daily problems and moral tensions are likely to succeed.

To understand Muslim consumers, market researchers need to go beyond a parochial reiteration of the pillars of Islam or demographics of Muslims in different geographies. Managers of Western companies need to develop a situated understanding of Muslim consumers and of the Muslim entrepreneurs who compete with them. That is, they should approach each market considering its specificity – its competitive, moral, sociohistoric and political market context. Muslim marketing managers will find the underpinnings of Holt's (2004) cultural branding strategy to be very useful in developing their own strategies. If national myths can serve to construct iconic brands, so can religious myths. Muslim marketing managers can potentially employ Holt's cultural strategy to develop global brands like Al-Jazeera.

In addition to the above managerial implications, there is also one potentially important policy/governance implication. Research makes it clear that Muslim consumers and managers share ideals and ideologies such as the consumerist ethos and capitalism with their cohorts. Moreover, Islamic ethics of compassion, generosity and giving to the poor seem to resonate with the notion of corporate social responsibility. Perhaps, Muslim entrepreneurs and managers of MNCs can learn from each other and provide more effective and sustainable benefits to the societies in which they operate. Furthermore, in an era when multiculturalism seems to be no longer embraced, focusing on the moral and ideological commonalities as well as global socioeconomic interdependencies may contribute to more peaceful inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-national relations. Highlighting similarities rather than differences might indeed enhance a dialogue between civilizations.

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