
Influences of Islamic culture in marketing and the role of Halal certification

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Structured Abstract

Purpose – This study has the objective to investigate the role of Islamic culture in marketing because of the large presence of Muslims in the world and, consequently, of the potentialities of this market. This research, considering this introduction, aims to:

- 1- underline the role of Halal certification in marketing decisions’;
- 2- identify the most relevant features of Muslims as consumers.

Design/methodology/approach – This research is divided into two main parts. In the first one the authors have reviewed some of the most important studies relative to religion and marketing (in particular analysing the relationship between marketing and Islam principles) and those relative to Halal certification. In the second part, finally, this research shows the findings of a preliminary questionnaire administered to a sample of Muslim consumers in Bari, Italy: specifically this questionnaire explores the role and the knowledge of the Halal certification and how their religious principles influence their purchasing decisions.

Originality/value – This methodology puts in evidence some important aspects to consider when the target group is represented by Muslim consumers. First of all a large percentage of the sample declared to consider the Islamic religious precepts during the purchasing process, showing that they are fundamental guidelines in their choices; moreover green is the colour they would prefer to identify Halal products. In reference to the Halal certification, data show that it is not much known by Muslims in Bari. The originality of this study lies in the fact that research on religion and marketing has been deepened only by a niche of scholars: religion represents an important cultural factor of peoples so it can have sociological implications also for marketing initiatives. In this perspective this study represents a contribution to understand better Muslims as consumers.

Practical implications – The outcomes of the application show that it is essential to study the Islamic culture if marketers want to target Muslim consumers. This market, characterized by a large demand, represents an opportunity for companies in reference to

Muslims who live in Western countries. From this point of view the Halal certification could represent an important marketing tool, on the condition that there is a marketing communication strategy, which has to become central to inform consumers, and a deeper survey on the profile of the Muslim consumer, in order to implement marketing initiatives more suitable for them.

Keywords – Religion and marketing, Islamic culture, Halal certification

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

1 Introduction

The interest of scholars and practitioners in understanding the relationship between Islam, consumption and marketing practices has been increasing in recent years (Sandikci, 2011). Yet, it is still very difficult to find a comprehensive and proper definition of Islamic marketing as it seems that only a limited research has been done on this subject (Hussnain, 2011). No doubt it is an emerging field and it will take a long time to realize its full potential: a positive perspective is given by the fact that it is finally getting much needed attention which it deserves because if handled properly it holds the key of creating a successful system to analyse and concretely consider and satisfy the potential needs of 1.7 Billion Muslims worldwide. The Islamic perspective on commerce and on its marketing implications is quickly gaining momentum and importance in today's global economy for many reasons. First, Islam, being a practical religion with clear daily procedures to follow, shapes the attitudes and behaviours of its adherents, the Muslim consumers, who represent more than a fifth of the world population. Second, the financial crises of 2008/9 shattered the world markets which had followed conventional financial wisdom, while allowing those practising Islamic finance to prosper and make significant gains. In the September 2008 quarter, when share markets in London and New York were a third of their peaks, Dow Jones's Islamic financials index, in contrast, rose 4.75 per cent. Third, as a result of the oil boom, as well as other factors, many Muslim countries are becoming the most affluent consumers in the world. Fourth, the level of foreign investment in Muslim countries is increasing. Fifth, there is a movement towards forming a Muslim trading bloc, although such a bloc might take some time to materialize. Finally, sixth, there is a strong push towards the Islamization of countries where Muslims are a majority through laying down clear Islamic codes of conduct in all walks of life, and commerce is no exception to this (Saeed et al. 2001).

2 Theoretical background and literature review

This paper is an effort in this direction to lay the foundation of and advance Islamic marketing as a new discipline, particularly applied to food products. In fact, food plays an important part of religious observance and spiritual ritual for many faiths. Apart from the nutritional value, food has a significant societal, historical and religious role (Siti Hasnah, 2011).

In many societies, religion plays one of the most influential roles shaping food choice (Musaiger, 1993, Dindyal, 2003). Yun, Verma, Pysarchik, Yu and Chowdhury (2008) found that consumers consider buying new products if the products do not violate or contradict their consecrated ideas. As accorded by Delener (1994) and Pettinger, Holdsworth, & Gerber (2004), religion can influence consumer attitude and behaviour as well as food purchasing decision and eating habits (Mullen, Williams and Hunt, 2000, Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2001). The impact of religion on food consumption depends on the religion itself and on the extent to which individuals interpret and follow the teachings of their religion. Most religions such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism forbid certain foods, for example pork or beef except for Christianity that has no food taboos (Sack, 2001).

Religion is one of the potential individual factors that will shape consumption decisions, especially among the Muslims (Jamal, 2003). Food in Islam is contained within the concept of *halal* (permitted) and *haram* (prohibited). A growing concern amongst the Muslims about the food that they consume and the ingredients in it, has led to a stimulus in demand for “Halal” food (Sungkar, 2010). Halal food is consumed not only by 1.7 billion Muslims around the world, but also by at least 500 million non Muslims (Sha Peng Cheng, Honorary Director of China Islamic Research Center as cited in peopledaily.com.cn, 2011). Halal is no longer just purely religious issue. Halal is the careful consideration and deliberation of a subject matter from all angles especially in the economic and scientific sense (Teng, Siong, Jusoh & Mesbahi, 2013). The halal consumption is also influenced by factors of health, hygiene, taste, environment friendly, respect for animals’ welfare and social issues (such as religious identity and degree of acculturation) (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2005; Bonne & Verbeke, 2006; Burgmann, 2007). Halal products are growing in popularity among non-Muslim consumers due to animal treatment concerns and the perception that Halal products are healthier and safer. Moreover, according to Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America’s (IFANCA, 2012) latest report, the focus on food being wholesome also creates a strong opportunity to market Halal food as a lifestyle choice. With an annual growth rate of 10-15%, the halal food market in the USA, as reported by IFANCA, will exceed \$20 billion by 2015. This is fuelled by an expanding population of Muslims as well as increasing acceptance of halal as the meat of choice, by those of other faiths. According to a recent Pew report, the US Muslim population will grow from 2.6 million in 2010 to 6.2 million by 2030. IFANCA estimates the US Muslim population at 8 million today and doubling by 2030. The non-Muslim halal consumption growth rate can be attributed to the demand for safe, hygienic and humanely produced foods and the realization that halal certified products meet those needs. the new “organic product”, especially in the USA and Europe where consumers already pay premium prices for organic foods. Many non-Muslims have already chosen to eat Halal food because of the perception that it is a healthy choice. It is expected that in the next five years, the consumption of Halal food will increase among the health-conscious markets (Golnaz, Shamsuddin & Mad Nasir, 2012). Religion provides guidelines for not only Muslim consumers but also channel the behavior of non-Muslims consumers (Delener, 1994). The impact of religion has an

internal influence on the lives of individuals and guides different rituals and behaviors. Understanding the role of food in cultural and religious practice is an important part of showing respect and responding to the needs of people from a range of religious communities.

The globalization of the world economy makes it a requirement for world businesses to be familiar with the Islamic perspective on commerce in order to understand the factors shaping the behaviours of Muslim consumers. Businesses that neglect the acquisition and utilization of such knowledge risk alienating a large proportion of their Muslim target market (Saeed et al. 2001). The Islamic religion has a finely tuned set of rules concerning all aspects of life. By recognizing these rules, the knowledgeable firm can not only serve the spiritual needs of the Muslim community but also capture a truly unique position in the Islamic marketplace (Sacharow, 1995).

The variety of views mentioned above comes to the conclusion that the existing definitions of marketing are accurate for the usual perspective, but inaccurate from the Islamic perspective which hold to Islam, faith (*iman*) and kindness as the core in actions. The inaccurate definitions lead to inefficient marketing strategy by the marketers in their efforts to cultivate Islamic marketing. This definitely inhibits the attempt to form a society of marketers and consumers who love each other and simultaneously refute the real Islamic aspiration.

Therefore, Islamic marketing is determined to be different than other typical or conventional marketing. Arham (2010) discussed the concept of contemporary marketing in Islamic perspective. He came out with four research questions: (1) what are the characteristics and philosophy of the Islamic marketing? (2) can certain products or services be considered ethical when someone's belief is exploited by marketing? (3) what are the Islamic marketing strategies? and (4) what are the future challenges in introducing Islamic marketing? He summarized these concept by suggesting the importance of forming Islamic marketing based on the philosophy in order to identify the elements in assembling Islamic marketing. He even characterized four main characteristics of the Islamic marketing of spiritual, ethical, realistic and humanistic.

Islam is not just a religion, it's a way of life then it must provide people the guidelines on how to conduct business. The study of Islam in particular is important, as in the Islamic faith the boundaries of the spiritual and secular are transcended. The holy book Qur'an provides guidance in all aspects of human activity, so religion influences the direction of products choices that both individuals and governments are making about alternative forms of its development and practice. This unifying tendency is also found in the concept of ummah (a world community) and sharing of a number of widely held tenets (Hodge, 2002). However, the study of Islam (or of any world faith) must also be seen in local contexts—as a type of “glocalization” (Robertson, 1994; Salazar 2005)—as a religion's ideology and practice are elaborated, understood, and subsequently reproduced in particular places (Eickelman, 1982) and communities (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990). The development of Islam in any country or region has been affected by numerous historical, ethnic, economic, and political factors.

This multi-patterned fabric of similarity and diversity is reflected in a number of

branches of Islam of which the most numerous are Sunni and Shia. Islam possesses a religious law called Shariah which governs the life of Muslims and which Muslims consider to be the embodiment of the will of God. This law, which caters to the needs of Islamic society, is essentially preventative and is not based on harsh punishment except as a last measure. The faith of the Muslim causes him or her to have respect for the rights of all others; it aims at preventing transgression against the universe as a whole (the living, the land, the sea and the heavens). Uniting all Muslims, however, are five pillars or basic spiritual duties: declaring one's complete faith that Allah (God) is the only Supreme Being and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah; performing five prayers a day; donating 2.5% of annual income through zakat (a charity tax to help the needy); fasting (which includes no eating, drinking, nor intimacy) during the daytime in Ramadan; and making a pilgrimage to Makkah (Muhammad's birthplace) at least once in a person's life if one is able. Beyond these duties, there is diversity among individuals who self-identify as Muslims (Smolicz, 1981). Thus, within the global Muslim community there is diversity from the blending of religion, culture, politics and historical influences. The Muslim world embodies both a common set of religious beliefs as well as a complexity that rewards investigation and rejects any simple label or categorization. Islam provides either general or detailed instructions about what is permissible and what is not and companies seeking to engage in business with Muslim consumers need to know these underlying beliefs that drive the Muslim consumers' behaviour.

In general, all Muslim practices and acts are classified under the following categories (Leaman, 2005):

1. **Halal**, or permissible. It has three levels:

- *Wajib*, or duty; obligatory acts. Failure to perform them is a sin. Duty can be described as the Core Halal, without which a firm can't be seen as Shariah-compliant. Implications: firms must perform *Wajib*. Examples include being honest and transparent.
- *Mandoob*, or likeable; preferable but not obligatory. Not performing *Mandoob* is not a sin. Likeable can be described as the Supplementary Halal. Implications: do if possible. Examples include being helpful and going the extra mile.
- *Makrooh*, or despised; not preferable, discouraged by religion and usually seen as a last resort. Engaging in *Makrooh* doesn't result in a sin unless it leads to one. The most obvious example of *Makrooh* in Islam is divorce. Although it is Shariah-compliant, it represents the border between compliance and non-compliance. It is loathed by society. Implications: avoid if possible.

2. **Mushtabeh**, or doubted; acts that a Muslim should refrain from because they might be *Haram* themselves or they might lead to *Haram*. Businesses should refrain as much as they can from engaging in doubted activities for the fear of being perceived to be unscrupulous by Muslim consumers. Firms engaging in these activities risk a *Fatwa* being issued against them.

3. **Haram**, or not permissible; all acts condemned explicitly or implicitly by the Islamic religion. Engaging in them or in activities leading to them is a sin.

The implications of these categories on the marketing aspect of business are very thorough and encompass the entire marketing mix for both services and goods. The first component of the conventional marketing mix, e.g., is the product. In Islamic marketing, however, it is the Halal product, and the difference between the two is huge. From an Islamic marketing perspective the product that a company sells must be entirely *Halal*. This means that all inputs, processes and outputs must be Shariah-compliant, i.e., the product and all that has been involved in its creation, delivery, and consumption must be environmentally friendly and totally harmless, as Islam clearly prohibits causing harm to anything that God created (all-embracing harmony in the universe). An *un-Halal* or *Haram* product will be very difficult to sell to the Muslim consumer because the Muslim consumer's behaviour is mostly dictated by the common understanding of what is permissible and what is prohibited under the Shariah law. Being Shariah-compliant is the quickest way to promote the company and its products.

This discourse identifies a rich, expanding body of knowledge, a number of themes and areas for further research.

3 An empirical survey

Religion represents an important reference point in Muslims' life, as already observed. In this paper the researchers want to explore its influence in their purchasing decisions as also studied by Bakar, Lee and Rungie (2013) who highlighted that religious symbols affects Islamic consumers. For this purpose a questionnaire has been realized: it is important to underline that this is a preliminary questionnaire because the authors' objective is to use the obtained information in order to enlarge the survey and to study more deeply the features on Muslims as consumers.

The questionnaire, administered online, analyses fundamentally the influence of religious principles on purchases, the knowledge of Halal certifications, the appearance of food packaging, the importance of brand and the role of labels.

The sample is not very large because of the low presence of Muslim population in Apulia region: for this reason it has been represented by 80 Islamic consumers. The first part of the questionnaire has revealed the personal data about the respondents: 64% of them are men, while 36% are women; from the point of view of age, 46% of the respondents is 27-30 years old, 35 % is 23-26, 11% is 31-34, 5% is 35-38% and, finally, the remaining 3% belongs to the 39-42 age group. In terms of occupational condition, the largest percentage of respondents is student (80%), then there are civil engineers and agronomists (16%), while a percentage of 4% is represented by laboratory assistants of the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute placed near the city of Bari. It is clear that the sample is constituted by a low diversity.

Defined the personal features of the sample, the questionnaire has focused the tendency of the respondents to follow the religious principles during their food purchases: a large part of them (90%) has declared to consider the Islamic precepts also during the shopping, while only a percentage of 10% affirmed to ignore them. Clarified this, other questions have been focused on the Halal certification: considering that most of the

respondents are affected by religion in their purchasing choices, it is clear that it is justified to believe that this certification is well known by Muslims in Apulia: actually this is not true, as a matter of fact 45% of them do not know it, even if there is a certain quantity of companies which present it. After this a list of companies has been presented in the questionnaire (only some of them are Halal-certified), in order to understand if the respondents knew this characteristic. These were the companies:

- Riscossa (production of pasta);
- Delizia (production of dairy products);
- Parmalat (production of milk and sweet snacks);
- Ferrero (production of sweet snacks);
- Eridania Sadam (production of sugar);
- Granarolo (production of milk and derivatives);
- Pernigotti (production of chocolate);
- Barilla (production of pasta and sweet snacks: in particular the respondents were asked to sign if they know that Mulino Bianco, a Barilla's brand, was Halal certified).

Also in this case the respondents revealed not to know the possession of that certification by these companies: as a matter of fact only 3% declared to know that Mulino Bianco is Halal certified (even if it is not true because it is certified Kosher, which is studied for Jewish consumers), while 1% affirmed the same thing in reference to Riscossa and Parmalat. These data are useful to reflect. In spite of their attention to the religion principles, the respondents are not very informed on the Halal certification: this also means that companies do not put into practice a good marketing communication strategy: in other words they pay attention to acquire the certification but they are not able to communicate it to Muslim consumers and this is obviously a mistake from a marketing perspective. To support this affirmation it is useful to analyse the answer to another question: "do you recognize Halal-certified products on shelves?". Also in this case most of them (65%) stated not to recognize them, so it is clear again that communication is weak, also in reference to visual characteristics: as a matter of fact 75% of the sample would like to have a differentiate packaging in order to distinguish an Halal-certified product. Probably packaging could play a more important role, in fact an insufficient attention to visual appearance does not help the less expert consumers to find the products with characteristics which they desire: only 5% of the sample does not think it is necessary to present a different packaging. One of the most important element of packaging is color: it has a symbolic meaning and it is linked to emotions and values, which can be different in reference to different cultures: considering this sample, green represents the ideal tonality for packaging, followed by black, yellow and a combination between green and red. This choice can be justified considering that green is the colour of Islam, used in different contexts (Chebel, 1997).

Brand is quite important for 45% of the respondents while 31% considers it very important, moreover labels represent a relevant element (for 70% it is very important and for 24% is quite important): brand and label are essential in their purchasing choices.

In the final part of the questionnaire the respondent could add some suggestions in order to improve the marketing communication in reference to their target; they would like to have:

- more information through advertisements and social networks;
- labels translated also in English for people who does not speak Italian very well;
- specific spaces in the supermarket, focusing particular attention to Halal -certified meat;
- a specific Halal symbol, projected not to be confused;
- a list of supermarkets where Muslims can surely find Halal-certified products.

4 Conclusion and limits of this research

Muslim consumers represent an important target also because they represent more than 1/5 of the world population. This means that it is necessary to know better their characteristics in order to make the supply meet the demand: for this reason it is important to understand the role of religion also in their purchasing decisions. The empirical survey has highlighted that religion represents an essential reference point also during their shopping experience and this is fundamental to consider in a well projected marketing strategy. Moreover it is clear that communication activities to this target are, at the moment, weak, as a matter of fact the Halal certification is partially known. From this point of view it would be useful to strengthen the marketing communication strategy, from different perspectives, for example those of advertisements and of visual appearance of products.

This research has some limits: first of all the empirical part is a preliminary survey in order to have an initial knowledge about Muslims as consumers. From this point of view it is necessary to enlarge this analysis in a more deep way: it will important, furthermore, to consider a larger number of respondents to have a more precise profile of this kind consumer.

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