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## Islamic Representation in Television Advertising and Its Impact on Modern Malay Muslim Women

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### Abstract

Advertising is an expression of cultural values, and by applying religious elements, it does effect consumer's purchasing behaviour. The effectiveness of television advertising as the medium of communication may affect the purchasing behaviour among Muslim women in order to practice Islam as a way of life. Marxis theory (McFall, 2002) has been used in this research to study the relationship between the people and the object (advertisement). The outcome of this study to see the relationship between the impact of Islamic branding of products and services and the purchasing decisions of modern Malay Muslim women in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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### 1. Introduction

The role of television advertising in Malaysia is important as other advertising in any medium or country in the world. Basically, the function is to attract viewers to buy or to get the goods and services advertised. However, the role of television could be stronger in delivering the advertisers' messages. Television claims to portray reality but largely creates its own reality, and so is advertisement. Both may appear to affect us more directly by providing us

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with information, skills and knowledge, which affect our behaviour and, occasionally, touch the very heart of our existence as people.

Religion defines the ideals for life, which in turn are reflected in values and attitudes of societies and individuals. Islamic culture is one of the most affluent systems of values, which sculpts a momentous road map for its followers in their social life. Advertisers in Malaysia started to realize that Islamic cultural also could be used as the purchasing attribute that can influence the Muslim consumers, especially in Malaysia.

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of some television advertisements in Malaysia which adopting Islamic values on modern Malay Muslim women (MMW) in Kuala Lumpur. There have been intentional advertisements portraying women with headscarves as models on television commercials as well as symbol like *halal* appeared during the commercials. For some viewers this will represent nothing, on the other hand some people believe this will give a good sign in influencing other Muslim women to dress up properly as what Muslim women should based on Quran and Islamic teaching.

This Islamic values advertising, directly and in some way is promoting Islamic morale values in order to adopt Islam as total way of life. By portraying women model with headscarves on the commercial, this could encourage modern MMW who are not wearing headscarves to change their lifestyle according to Islamic attire. In addition, with *halal* logo appearing on the television screen during the food or non-food products' advertisement, it would help mothers or any Muslims to concern about the provision of ritually pure (*halal*) food in their daily consumption. Obviously the communication process played by television, in sending the messages to audience could be turned out well.

This study employed a qualitative approach in order to see the impact of Islamic representation in television advertisement on modern MMW in Kuala Lumpur. The data collection for the research which handled two focus groups and 30 semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The participants are all modern MMW who lived and work in Kuala Lumpur. Snowball sampling was used in recruiting the participants.

This article covers the background of Malaysia, how the heterogeneous culture encourage harmony lives in the country. Next is the summary from the interviews. Followed by a discussion section by comparing Marx' Theory in commodities with the role of advertising. Lastly is the conclusion for the research.

## 2. Malaysian Context

The term 'Modern MMW' refers to Malay Muslim women who have been formally educated in secondary and/or tertiary institutions. Hence they may possess a high certificate, diploma or tertiary degree. They are workers, professionals or housewives, and are usually up-to-date with Muslim fashion. Ackerman (1991) defined the ideal modern Malay women in 1980s are from middle- or working class who always prioritize domestic household in their lives, modest, wearing traditional Malay attire, shy and not socializing with men. However, borderless world offers variety of culture especially shown in Malaysian television provided models for the lifestyle Malay women in Kuala Lumpur sought to emulate. The modern lifestyle change the way Malay Muslim women attitude, from passive to very energetic 'superwomen' which require them to go with the flow. Simple but casual attire like wearing jeans and other Western attire, using cosmetics and socializing freely with men are common for contemporary modern MMW as long as they always have the limits as Muslim.

Kuala Lumpur the capital city of Malaysia provides variety of leisure, entertainment, facilities and services to occupy the urban lifestyle. These advantages are free to use by everybody though, some of them are not allowed for Muslims. Thus, as written in Malaysian Constitution (amended in 2007), Islam is the national religion but other religions such as Buddhism, Christian or Hinduism may be practices in peace and harmony in Malaysia ("Move to define law ", 1996). Therefore, most of activities or events organized in Malaysia, multicultural will always as a theme in order to respect other races.

Malaysia is a multicultural country with Malay (56%), Chinese (33%), Indian (10%) and others (1%) (Deng, Jivan, & Hassan, 1994). The advertising industry in Malaysia in 1990s portrays the multicultural society on the Islamic faith in this country. The then Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stressed on modern *Islam Hadhari* (modest Islam) during his ruling in order to portray Malaysia as global hub of Islamic commerce especially developing *halal* hub and in Islamic finance (Thakar, 2007).

The idea of *Islam Hadhari* is to position Malaysia as one of the most dynamic and modern Islamic nation in the

world without compromising on the moral values and authentic identity of Islam (Thakar, 2007). This inspiration has been applied in most every social agenda in Malaysia, including advertising industry. Television commercials, that always portray beautiful women Western-style model in promoting their products, shifted to modest women in Islamic dressing with headscarves. However, these appearances are only for certain products, which Malays are the target audience. These trends reflect the lifestyle of Muslims (modern MMW) in Malaysia.

Deng, Jivan and Hassan (1994) outline the advertising guidelines in Malaysia, where Islamic law become as a base in Malaysian Constitution as well as in shaping Malay culture. The guidelines are (p.156):

- Intimate scenes are not permitted.
- Sleeveless dresses are banned on Malaysian television
- Elusive matters of decency and taste are concern.
- No direct advertising of tobacco on television.
- Advertisements for alcohol are not permitted on television, unless the advertisement is for the company name only.

Though the above guidelines seem to be strict to Malays, this atmosphere is promoting the new progressive Islamic civilization, give ample room to ‘values’-oriented living, brings pride in economic achievements by rooting successes through moral obligations.

In another point of view, this approach is encouraging modern Malays to value their roots and the religion, Islam. Furthermore, this resurgence also can be called as *da'wah*. *Da'wah* is an invitation to Muslims or non-Muslims to join the faith. The faith, which related to belief to become a good Muslim which based on Al-Quran and what the Prophet taught. Generally, the objective of *da'wah* is to promote morale and invite Muslims to adopt Islam as total way of life (Ackerman, 1991).

### 3. Interviews

A few types of television commercial were previewed in front of face-to-face interviews participants. There are *Sunsilk*, *Colgate*, and *Pizza Hut*. Every participant saw different commercial and only interact base on one of the selected advertising. The participants were asked whether they were influenced by Islamic values in advertising such as the portrayal of women with head-scarves, purchasing decisions, the way they interpret the advertising and the reconciliation with traditional Muslim values in their new modern lifestyle. There are a lot of responses related to the television advertising and its role from the participants. Few are selected in representing others, which the responses are quite similar.

Based on *Sunsilk* television commercial, which portray a young woman with headscarves replacing her boyfriend in ‘futsal’ tournament. The woman represented modern MMW who is energetic, casual with jeans and T-shirt, but still dressed up modestly according to Islamic teaching. The climax was when the woman scored by flying kick. This to show that the woman who is characterized as Muslim woman and at the same time aggressive due to her confident with her appearance.

Most of the participants felt easy with the commercial. About 80% of the respondents who watched the commercial admitted that was the way modern MMW should appear. They are not supposed to feel shy and afraid to do what they want. Aida has seen this advertisement before on television and she think this is a good example of portraying modern lifestyle. According to her, young Malay Muslim women always feel uneasy when come to headscarves, for them that would not portray them as good-looking women, and will limit them to dress-up with up-to-date fashion. However, this advertising shown that by putting headscarves, a woman still look comfortable to interact with anybody and to do what ever she wants with up-to-date fashion as long as she aware the limit as Muslim women. Though the advertising was about hair shampoo and no hair was shown during the commercial, Aida was still agree with this commercial because the advertiser use ‘lifestyle’ to represent how comfortable a woman to do her activity if she does not have hair problem.

In addition to Aida’s opinion, Salmah also gave almost the same one. Salmah said this kind of advertisements are good in order to show to young women that dressing according to Islam will not be portrayed conservative. Dressing accordingly like how the model dressed up is enough in order to go along with religion teaching. Salmah also said

that she was attracted to the this kind of commercial during its first time aired on television, and did go to the shop to look for the shampoo which suit her who also wearing the headscarves.

On the other hand, Asmah who was shown a *Colgate* commercial thinks that this advertising will help the Muslim buyers in their purchasing. She does happy with the current situation in television industry that portray Islamic values in their advertisement. According to her, who is a lecturer, *Colgate* does take an initiative to fix their reputation after an accusation on their non-*halal* ingredients in toothpaste. Now, with *halal* logo on their range of products as well as the logo is appearing during the commercial, Muslims (modern MMW) are more confident to choose their products.

Umi Kalsom has almost the same thought as Asmah regarding *Colgate's* commercial on television. Umi Kalsom said, she did influence on the controversy about *Colgate* products couple years ago. She was a quite loyal to *Colgate* brand that time, and had to stop using it immediately once the issue was highlighted. As a Muslim, Umi Kalsom feel responsible to avoid haram (forbidden) goods, even that is not food. Regarding the advertisement shown to her, she quite happy with it because it portrays Islamic lifestyle and the models also are Muslims with proper attire according to the teaching. The appearance of child in the commercial who need explanation about the toothpaste content was good exposure for other children in order to understand about Islamic.

Furthermore, the third commercial was about food products, Pizza Hut, which originally from Western and a fast food restaurant. Pizza Hut in Malaysia is belonging to KFC Holdings, which also popular with fried chicken recipes. These franchises also, once faced issue regarding the halal ingredients in their menus as well as the questions of their chicken's halalness. Besides, KFCs' franchises facing another issue regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict, which relates the company with Israel's and this raised unsatisfied feeling among Muslims and some of them boycotting the franchises. To handle the first issue, KFC Holding took the same approach as Colgate by having Islamic values in their advertisements. The Islamic representative includes using Malay models, Malay women with headscarves and putting the *halal* symbol during the commercials. This approaches does give the impact to Muslims (modern MMW), however for the second issue is quite difficult to manage because that is up to customers' principle even an announcement was made in media informing that Malaysian KFC Holding is no relation with Israel.

Therefore, responding to *Pizza Hut's* commercial, Aini has the confident on this restaurant. She also certain that KFC Holdings based in Malaysia does not contribute the profits to Israel. She does go to their franchises and believe that the menus served are halal. Aini has a principle regarding living in the new era that Muslims are supposed to limit themselves accordingly. Modern MMW might wear like Western, may go to international well-known restaurant like KFC or McDonalds or work with opposite gender in their routine because of that is how people live with it nowadays. She agrees with the way the television commercial in Malaysia try to portray Muslim lifestyle. Even, not all television advertising have this values, but some of them does please Muslim viewers and for adult, they quite happy to see it as a medium to help the young Muslim generations about their responsibility.

Anna, a 25 years old Muslim woman represents young generation in Kuala Lumpur, also happy the way advertisers portraying Islamic values in their commercials. That shows they are alert with Islamic sensitivity. Malay female models with headscarves and *halal* logo for food or non-food products are obviously promoting good moral especially to young generation. Anna also believes that this kind of advertising could be as *da'wah* especially to encourage Muslim women to cover their parts of the body, which are not suppose to be exposed and at the same time can do their routine like non-Muslim women too. She did influenced to the KFC's issue regarding the chicken's *halalness*, but after saw the television advertising and checked with friends, families and authorities like JAKIM, Anna has the confident now to eat chicken from KFC and their franchises.

Nevertheless, there were also participants who do not pleased with the scenario in Malaysian advertising. Some of the participants feel that were just acting, not genuine. They doubt whether the female models with headscarves are honestly wearing it. They assume the models just put the headscarves on for the acting for sake and she is not wearing it in her real life. Azlina, Azura and Ida have the same thought. However, they cannot confirm it, it was just an assumption and they honestly are not attracted to that kind of advertisements and not influence to buy the product advertised. Responding to the Sun silk advertisement, Azlina and Azura felt it does not suitable the way the advertisers tried to portray with the product they promoting. They were arguing the relation between 'futsal' match and hair shampoo. In addition, Azlina looks this scenario is more on commercial instead of portraying Islamic values.

Ida's statements were quite similar to Azlina and Azura, plus Ida felt that the advertising is only advertising. Diana saw the Sun silk is just to attract headscarves Muslims women to buy the shampoo and does not point out any message on attracting Muslims women who do not wear headscarves to change their appearance. Uda, on her response towards

Colgate products and the advertisements, she thought that would be nothing to do with Islamic resurgence. She did not influence with the Colgate halalness issue and she is still using the products from Colgate even during the issue was hot debated. Uda believes that this non-food product is safe and to consume it will not distract her belief in Islam.

Zaimah is among the Muslims who are boycotting Israel's products. She does feel angry, sad and sympathy on what happens in Gaza. Thus, all the commercial for products that have relation with Israel would not affect her, even the products also will be avoided. Although, she admits that she loves to eat fast food like McDonald and KFC, she has to stop it now and will stick to her principal until people in Palestine is advocated.

#### 4. Discussion

Advertising could represent culture in one country or region and that is why advertisers use culture component in promoting their products and to branding (Wernick, 1991). In particular, culture plays a significant role in Malaysia, where known as multiracial, multicultural and multi-religion or heterogeneous culture. Malay as dominant citizen always prefer to be related to Islam, which a national religion. Thus, Malay culture can be defined through Islamic faith and the interaction with different cultures.

McFall (2004) considers Marxist account to explain about advertisement and audience because the theory is the closest example to relate person-object relationship in capitalism. In Marxist theory, explains how the production system is inspired in "exchange" rather than "use" the goods produced (McFall, 2004). McFall (2004) asserts, "Advertising is one of the primary tools whereby products can attain exchange-value, where an appearance unrelated to use-value can be instilled" (p.39). She discusses that advertising use products' originality as a symbolic to convince the audience.

While Leiss (cited in McFall, 2004, p. 39-40) asserts advertising is a medium to convey message from the culture (Islamic values) to the people (audience). In advertising, goods have been seen as a model to communicate the meaning instead of fulfilling the needs. Though, Rice and Al-Mussowwi (2002) agree that advertising could deliver the values of society due to respect the Islamic teaching which include the portraying of different genders in one scene, the way female model dressing and the message through the selection words for the taglines. Deng, et al. (1994) consents that advertisers especially from Western should adopt Islamic values in their commercial particularly those targeted to Malay.

Marx's theory of commodities distinguished between two levels, "essence" and "appearance" (McFall, 2004). "Essence" is referring to product or message; meanwhile "appearance" is the reality medium that could have its own symbolic story. Nevertheless, Wernick (1991) has a different view towards advertising. The scope is bigger and the role is broader, which the impact in advertising is on both subjects (Islamic values) and object (audience). As advertisements reinforcing cultural values, and religious is one of the key elements in culture; Islamic values in advertising may affect the target audience. This scenario also could be seen in Middle Eastern context, where Rice and Al-Mussowwi (2002) belief the Islamic values in advertising can impact consumer behaviour and response to advertising message.

Back to Marxis theory as explained by McFall (2004) the "appearance" (advertising as the medium) could "masks" the message or product advertised. This is what some of the participants felt about advertising and they do not believe advertising can be a medium for da'wah. However, Wernick (1991) stresses that advertising is an effective medium in influencing people's lifestyle, preference, choice and decision-making. That is why Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002) emphasize that advertisers should carefully design the message they attempt to deliver in order to fit ideally in the society and culture. It is not as simple as creating such messages and sending it to someone, hoping they will react in a certain way.

#### 5. Conclusion

There are positive responses regarding the portrayal of Islamic values in advertising. Using television advertising as a medium to encourage other people to behave as Islam teaching asked could be possible because the commercialization in this industry is easy to attract target audience back into every facet of social existence in keeping with the idea of Islam as a way of life. Multicultural and hegemony religions in Malaysia are not the reason for

Muslims to be too liberal or secular. Other race and religion in Malaysia are understood about Muslim and Malay in Malaysia. Though they also would not have problem in accepting good morals, values, and modesty in their lives.

For advertisers, it is important to understand such consumers' attitude and behavior to ensure that they would be able to successfully market their products and services. Islamic values is an element of culture that affects consumers in many ways because it prescribes proper behaviour, eating habit, work habits and also the way of life. Thus, this element (Islamic representations) does effect on consumers' behavior (modern Malay Muslim women), which cannot be underestimated by marketers. Finally, this paper offers a glimpse of the Islamic values effect on advertising particularly in the Muslim culture.

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