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EXPLORING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN PROCESSING VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN ON ISLAMIC COMMODIFICATION IN ADVERTISING

MOHD FAUZI BIN HARUN



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FOR DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF ARTS, COMPUTER AND CREATIVE INDUSTRY
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2021



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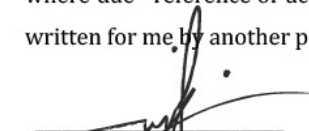
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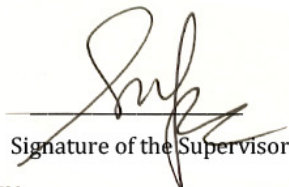

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ABSTRACT

Visual communication design is a necessity in advertising. However, it carries different interpretations by different audiences. Therefore, this study was conducted to discover Islamic commodification signs on advertisements, with attempts to understand the meanings of those signs, and to investigate their effects of semantic noise interpretations of the messages. This study's meaning-making framework adapted two important theories in the visual field – symbolic interactionism and communication model. This study began with a content analysis of seven billboards and continued with semi-structured interviews to get in-depth feedbacks from a maximum variation purposive sampling of 12 informants. Practitioners of visual communication field like art director and graphic designer, lecturer, and student from the same field were also involved. This study's qualitative analysis was coded by three main themes using thematic analysis in Atlas.ti namely the commodification sign, sign meaning and noise effects. The subsequent analysis used symbolic interactionism theory in describing the result. Islamic elements were indeed present in most of the ads, often in images and texts as emotional interplays of interpretations with many other forms of symbolism, intuition and even imagination in symbolic perception. The existence of Islamic symbols is transformed into a commercial entity that is used to enhance the effectiveness of advertising and causes communication noise – a confusion that affects the recipient's understanding of the actual message; especially to non-Muslims. Consequently, it allows the real meaning to be changed even though it is significant to the targeted group of Malay-Muslims. Overall, these ads should be emphasizing on the product-type, functions, and benefits over everything else, to avoid exaggeration and misrepresentation of the products or the religion itself, made by the multi-racial audiences as the receivers. The findings are clearly significant to marketers or advertisers whereby although cultural elements are significantly important in advertising, the understanding of symbol appropriateness within the communication element is required.

Keywords: Advertising, Islamic Commodification, Visual Communication, Culture, Symbolic Interactionism





MENEROKA PERBEZAAN BUDAYA DALAM MEMPROSES REKA BENTUK KOMUNIKASI VISUAL KOMODIFIKASI ISLAM DALAM IKLAN

ABSTRAK

Reka bentuk komunikasi visual pada iklan adalah satu keperluan dalam pengiklanan namun ia mampu memberi interpretasi berbeza bagi setiap penonton. Oleh itu, kajian ini dijalankan untuk meneroka komodifikasi simbol-simbol berkaitan Islam dalam iklan, memahami maksud tanda-tanda tersebut, dan mengenal pasti kesan tafsiran kabur semantik mengenai mesej yang ingin disampaikan. Kerangka kerja kajian ini mengadaptasi dua teori yang signifikan dalam bidang visual iaitu '*symbolic interactionism*' dan model komunikasi. Kajian ini dimulakan dengan analisis kandungan terhadap 7 papan iklan dan seterusnya temu bual separa berstruktur melalui persampelan variasi maksimum oleh 12 informan pelbagai latar belakang di bawah persampelan bertujuan melibatkan pengamal bidang pengiklanan, pensyarah bidang visual dan pelajar. Analisis kualitatif ini dikodkan kepada tiga tema utama menggunakan Atlas.ti sebagai instrumen analisis tematik iaitu komodifikasi tanda, makna tanda dan kesan gangguan rangsangan komunikasi. Seterusnya menggunakan asas teori '*symbolic interactionism*' dalam memberi huraian dapatan. Elemen berkaitan Islam sememangnya wujud dalam kebanyakan iklan melalui bentuk imej dan teks sebagai interpretasi emosi dalam berinteraksi. Kewujudan simbol-simbol agama Islam ini telah diubah sebagai satu entiti komersil yang dimanfaatkan sepenuhnya untuk meningkatkan keberkesanan iklan sehingga wujud gangguan rangsangan komunikasi seperti terjemahan yang mungkin sedikit atau jauh berbeza dari segi maksud sebenar terutamanya kepada yang bukan Islam. Seterusnya, memberi ruang kepada makna sebenar berubah kepada perkara yang lain walaupun ia relevan digunakan terutamanya kepada kumpulan sasaran iaitu Melayu-Islam. Kesimpulannya, pendekatan iklan sebegini harus menekankan tentang produk berbanding perkara yang lain seperti jenis produk yang dijual, fungsi dan manfaat daripada produk supaya ia tidak digunakan secara berlebihan dan memberi gambaran yang salah terhadap produk mahupun agama oleh masyarakat pelbagai latar belakang. Dapatan kajian ini amat signifikan bagi pereka iklan mahupun bahagian pemasaran di mana kefahaman dalam menyesuaikan sesuatu simbol dalam elemen komunikasi adalah penting walaupun elemen budaya adalah kunci yang mempengaruhi pengguna hanya melalui iklan.

Kata Kunci: Iklan, Komodifikasi Islam, Komunikasi Visual, Budaya, '*Symbolic Interactionism*'



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ABBREVIATIONS

Ad/ads	Advertising / advertisement
ATL	Above the Line
ASA	Advertising Standards Authority Malaysia
BTL	Below the Line
Copy	Copywriting
CMCF	Communications And Multimedia Content Forum Of Malaysia
CNN	Cable News Network
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia
LED	Light-emitting diode (a semiconductor diode which glows when a voltage is applied).
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
PLUS	Projek Lebuhraya Utara Selatan
R&D	Research & Development
SMS	Short Message Service
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TTL	Through the Line
TVC	Television Commercial
VCD	Visual Communication Design



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



1.1 Introduction

Good ads tend to build great brand imaginary, allowing the viewers to think and create their own interpretation about them. This so-called imaginary is very important to create more engagement between the viewers and the ads. However, in the current fragmented market, the marketers are facing tough competition from their competitors. The cut-throat competitive market environment has made the advertising field highly experimental, and hence advertisers adopt different measures to attract the attention of their target customers.





However, some of them unashamedly use Islam as their approach in drawing attention to gain profits (Hassan, 2016). Mohd Zin (2017) reported that the phenomenon of advertising that sells the image of Islam does not create believability alone, yet it could be misleading and deceiving the public too, especially in a multi-racial country like Malaysia. There are many researches on advertising related to visual communication, ethics or even culture. However, they were all done separately without looking at the connection between the visual communication, ethics and culture that are applied in our advertising trend, including ads' commodification of religion which allows other people from other religions to assume to be accepting as a social norm. Hence, the study will take a closer look on how the non-Muslims decode the meaning of sign commodification on religious values on the ads, and the noises on manipulative ads as the visual communication design (VCD). This advertising conflict practice is important to be studied to evaluate the social interaction in the formation of meanings for individuals, or even society. All VCDs that were used in this kind of ads are associated with interpretation, action, and interaction that are important, especially in different culture environment.

1.2 Background of Study

The power of media is not to simply inform, but to transform the viewers' beliefs, and to influence people positively and/or negatively. Creativity plays an important role where distinctive ads generate the best results. From the play of emotions, problem-solving or even testimonials, there are a few other advertising techniques that can be shaped in the marketing plan. Each of these ads has something unique to tell. Selecting the right words, images,





symbols, formats, and tones is an example of the criteria for the message, that later transforms these contents (thoughts, ideas etc.) into a symbolic form of encoding, as written by Belch and Belch (2014). Many practitioners believe that cultural intermediaries construct the meanings for goods, and it has become a tool to be used in the creation of cultural meanings for brands. Basically, the effectiveness of communication is simple: the lesser the noise, the better it becomes. Not all advertising achieves message clarity, and noise often stands as the culprit, which means anything that serves as distraction from the message (Crow, 2010).

Various marketing strategies are used to fascinate the public simply to lure their attention towards the advertised product. In fact, there are many products and services that also use religion 'value' by putting quotes and verses taken from the Holy Quran and Hadith on product labels, or displaying pictures of Islamic leaders to attract consumers to buy the products (Zain, 2013). This is an example of how religion is used as an external benefit from its use, for specific interests. This is called as the commodification of religion in ads. According to Ibrahim and Akhmad (2014), consumerism does not serve with alternative values, yet it indirectly sells something that involves other values as well such as cultural or even religion.

1.3 Problem Statement

Other than to promote products, advertising serves as an important and interesting historical documentation whereby marketers invest products with meanings for cultures whose





dominant focus is consumption. The VCD used is more than just for selling purposes, it is implied with hidden messages and influences that later affect actions and thoughts. What we automatically do is often governed by a complex set of cultural messages and conventions, depending on our ability to interpret them instinctively and instantly. Thus, the validity of the content in the advertisement is dubious in term of the message strategy - whether the headline used, or even the relation of the video with the message. Such influence may affect new experiences and information it interprets; and the understanding about people and cultures (Duffy & Thorson, 2015).

One of the central issues in our local ads' environment is the audience coming from various multi-religion backgrounds. Day by day, we are exposed to numerous ads that use Islamic 'look-like' ads, or religion approach that are not just to attract customers' attention, but their beliefs as well. Many practitioners have been using religious cues to help market their products, which may influence the consumers' product preferences, especially for Muslims, since Islam is their life code that determines and influences every aspect of their lives, including their consumption behaviours (Bakar, Lee & Rungie, 2013).

Based on the conducted needs analysis, even though the ads are probably targeting Muslims only, based on the visual communication design used, all backgrounds of audiences are actually exposed and aware of the existence of such ads. Each one of them must have their very own interpretation of the ads displayed, both to the Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. How did they perceive it? What is the depth of their understanding? Their understanding may vary according to the level of knowledge that they have through social interactions, readings, values, beliefs, and observations. The use of words like '*jus Sunnah*',



'kismis doa', 'dibacakan dengan ayat-ayat Al-Quran', 'makanan Sunnah', 'patuh syariah' are among the words highlighted in their ads in getting the Muslims' trusts, even though this is an open approach that can confuse and deceive the public. Azian Mohd Zain (2017) is a senior lecturer in advertising, and in an interview, he mentioned that this is a hard sell approach that really works for some people, as revealed by Audrey Anak John and Muhammad Daniel Iqram (2017). The same goes with the use of visual aid such as the portrayal of 'Islamic look' of men or women, which is even more severe when relating it with inappropriate product that can lead to religious defamation. The messages on the VCD used are easily accepted especially if the Islamic value elements are emphasized in the ads.



Figure 1.0. Example of advertising medium that using Islamic commodification in their visual communication design

As highlighted by Ahmad et al. (2015), Islamic commodification in ads attempts to easily gain attention and beliefs from the public. Many companies try to convince Muslim consumers that their products are Shariah-compliant. It is persuasive, despite their claims hardly having any truth values, perhaps due to the capitalism world that religion has become



commodified. However, very little research has attempted to shed light on this cross-disciplinary relationship between religiosity and VCD, especially in ads. This unethical act can lead to elements of fraud and misleading, and it is feared that this can eventually affect the image of Islam, as mentioned by Ibrahim, Johari, Nor et al. (2016). Prior socio-cultural studies suggested that people should learn the method of viewing and processing objects from society (Seo, 2010). This is how symbolic interactionism was adapted, advertisement used symbols to communicate something about their brand, such as a person wearing *jubbah* and *serban* to communicate that he is a devout man. It is easy to recognize this image because of semantics - the relationship between the symbol and its social or cultural meaning. In symbolic interactionism, it is a symbol used that is related to specific cultural group of people and their beliefs. However, the central idea is to shift the attention to the interpretation of subjective viewpoints, and these interpretations form social bond (Carter & Fuller, 2015).



The socially constructed meanings are important in deciding responses and help to determine, sometimes inaccurately, the meaning of the represented symbols. In this case, they are working from different understandings, such as different primary language or basic cultural characteristics. The word or visual used could have slightly or far different meaning in mind, which causes confusion, which can adversely affect the receiver's understanding of the message, like the discovery during the needs analysis study. Based on the needs analysis study, most of the respondents believed that there was a high existence of VCD with Islamic commodification, especially in texts and images. This will influence their predictability in social relationships to understand of each other's actions. If continued, this could lead to an interaction problem in the society, especially towards Islam.



1.4 Research Objectives

The research objectives below are within the research circle subject which is the visual communication design on Islamic commodification in ad. Research objectives of the study are:

1. To investigate the Islamic commodification signs on advertisement.
2. To analyze the meaning of Islamic commodification signs on advertisement.
3. To explore the effects of cultural differences on semantic noise interpretation of the message.

1.5 Research Question

The research questions below are within the study circle subject which is the visual communication design on Islamic commodification in ad. Research questions of the study are:

1. What are the Islamic commodification's signs on advertisement?
2. How the interpretation of Islamic commodification signs in the advertisement?
3. What are the semantic noise effects understanding by cultural differences on the message?



1.6 Significance of Study

a. Practitioner

The usage of visual communication is a much more impactful way to get any advertising message across that has been implemented by majority of advertising practitioners because it does has a huge benefit for obvious reasons. It is not just visual communication that makes sense but make 'cents' as well. The study hopefully helps to improving nonverbal communication in VCD especially in the usage of commodification signs. In any VCD, advertising practitioner has to ensure that a clear and unified message is important in overall meaning that was decoded by viewer to avoid mislead meaning and risk of confusion between the relationship of image and message by producing highly perceivable and meaningful visual messages. Other than that, designer or even advertiser have the opportunity to utilizes signs and symbols but in appropriate details to break down information into manageable pieces that are easier to absorb. The exploration set of VCD criteria and tools may land optimal solution in communicate ideas and information effectively for their future marketing-communications efforts.

b. Public

The used of VCD for outdoor media is not something new in the country as it is immediately recognized by the brain, as opposed to words, which have to be processed and take more time. Hence, the selection of visual attention is important in





delivering the central message of an advertisement. The study of visual communication that highlighted the issue of cultural differences in Islamic commodification context is none other to understand the adaptation of different cultural background of the public in the Muslim environment/country. Through the study, we as part of the society or even the concerned parties can manage any differences appropriately and effectively. Thus, lead to a greater intercultural communication among the society members. The study also will discuss the behaviors of members of other culture to understand of sociological development from their meaning making process.

c. Student and Researcher



In the information age and modern media society, the subjects of role of visual, perception on images surely implies the possibility for the emergence of new idea or even enables some kind of answer. It is essential and always of any culture represent by a specific visual component, hence, it is crucial to understand the social processes involved that lead to general explanations of social interaction changes. It is an exciting fact that visual communication compromises an ideological, sociological and aesthetic at the same time as a legitimate mode of intellectual discourse to the kind of society in which we live as it change in time. The study leads towards the integration of valuable interdisciplinary communication concepts into visual communication design with the prior knowledge. It is mutually beneficial to the development of useful design tools or even for future research on other



communication-related disciplines with potential value to visual communication design.

1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 Cultural Differences

‘Culture’ is probably one of the most disputed words within the social sciences and outlined with different definitions in sociology, cultural anthropology, cultural studies and media studies besides social psychology. According to Commun & Koley (2018) culture is complex characteristic and knowledge that acquired by a human as a member of particular group of people which includes language, religion, beliefs, arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits as highlighted by Taylor who is pioneered in put forward a comprehensive cultural concept in the 19th century. It comprises of collective patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization or in short as cooperative practices.

1.7.2 Visual Communication Design (VCD)

Communication has been an element in definition of ads that shares meaning about brand. Branding is marketing concepts that defined by a name, sign or symbol, which is designed to identify a seller's goods or services that differentiate each



product or an organization from its competitors' (Brooking, 2016). Therefore, it is not just the physical features that construct a brand but it is the combination of physical and emotional cues or feeling that consumers develop towards the company or its product. These VCD includes drawing, graphic design, colors, signs, typography, symbols, illustration, and much more. According to Bergström (2009), all these are examples of nonverbal signals and cues used in ads. It's been practice by advertisers and marketers for so long in every aspect of product and brand promotion design.

1.7.3 Islamic Commodification

Commodification is constructed based on two words which are commodity and modification. It is the process of transforming valued into a commodity; turning it into an object of trade and economy value (Mayaningrum & Triyono, 2016). For Ornella (2013), religion commodification is refers to religious symbols that transform to commodities which involve the process of recontextualization of religious symbols, language and ideas from their original religious context to the media landscape, consumer culture and economic life. The obvious one was the attachment of religious values through a religious aesthetic to consumer products. According to Bakar et al. (2013), the presence of religious symbols is proven giving a positive impact in influences consumers' choice from ads to packaging design. In short, Islamic commodification plays a large role in how society views subcultures and deviance. The spiritual function of Islam is not to reconstruct the faith and practice but been reproduction into particular cultural context with commercial features





(Mayaningrum & Triyono, 2016; Yasir, 2016). Through this concept, the role of religion has been extend to consumer behavior and practitioners have used it as cues to help them market their products.

1.7.4 Advertising

Ads in common is a practice to influence a target audience's attitudes and/or behaviors in a competitive market nowadays. It plays a key role in any businesses by the ability to influence buyer decisions and drive purchases. According to Hackley & Hackley (2017), ads is a paid for promotional message from an identifiable source transmitted and suitable communication medium. It is conventionally seen as one of the sub-element of promotion in marketing mix such other than product, place and price. The term 'promotion' embraces any promotional communication that includes advertising as well as public relations, direct mail, point-of-purchase, sales promotion, personal selling, social media and much more (Davis & Hunt, 2017). The approach can be useful in promoting a new product or designed to promote existing ones and it has become common place in today's world to draw attention of people towards the marketed brand. It helps to create brand awareness and to inform the audience about the brands available in the market as well as the variety of products that is useful to them (Davis, 2009).





1.8 Limitation

The research was aiming at outdoor media specifically billboards on PLUS highway from Ipoh, Perak to Ayer Keroh Melaka only. Although the study attempted to examine all available forms media or even billboards from different routes or highway, this was not always possible. Too broad of case study subject also make any research hard to manage especially to have a deeper investigation compare to a narrowed subject. Thus, it allow researcher to do more specific searches that will provide more relevant results and prove the overall argument of the study. Moreover, majority believes that billboard is the main medium that they exposed to in the context of Islamic commodification in advertising and wide-open to various background of audience based on the early study done.



Second, to generalize larger results for larger group and to have in depth understanding on the visual communication process, interview session is not only set up with twelve informants that believe to be expertise about advertising which include respondents of Generation Y students from various background as the study sample. The selected students may not represent the entire population of interest but their background as an art, design and communication students are ideal in corresponding to the case study. The representative of this particular sample (Generation Y students) was selected because this group are mostly computer-mediated communication (CMC) user where they are grow up with a highly sophisticated media and comfortable with using digital interactive technologies for communication but faced intense implications in term of relationship, communication or even interaction in real world as mentioned by Venter (2017) and Singh & Dangmei, (2016). This low level in group involvement and meaningful interaction is beneficial in this study as



it will lead to different perspective of knowledge and experience of meaning-making process in the study especially in understanding and knowledge of different cultures.

1.9 Summary

This chapter had overviewed the key components of the study especially on the issue of Islamic commodification in advertising that was played by our local advertisers. It also includes the introduction, theoretical framework and statement of the problem that becomes the baseline of the research. The objectives of research highlighted hopefully manage to understand or explain the meaning-making process of interaction between the advertisement and the multi-racial audience. Keywords underlined here will be discussed further on the next chapter for critical evaluation in relation to the research problem being investigated.