Are There Any Virtue, Justice and Care on Religion Exploitation in Advertising?

Eksploitasi Terhadap Nilai, Hak dan Kesucian Agama Dalam Pengiklanan

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ABSTRACT
Good advertisements always tend to build a great imaginary of their brand and allowing the viewers to think and create their own interpretation about the ads. This so-called imaginary is very important in order to create more engagement between viewers and the advertisement. Even with truth-in-advertising laws in place, some advertisers set out to defraud, offend, or mislead the public with literally thousands of different ways for a business to get a message to the consumer. Day by day, we are exposed to numerous of ads that are using Islamic ‘look like’ ads or religion approach as not just to attract customer attention but their belief as well. The problem statement of the study is about the interpretation of the message contained in the advertisement that has the elements of Islamic religious values. It is because, each of the viewers must have their own interpretation of the advertisement featured mainly on non-Muslims. Each of them must have their own interpretation of the ads displayed especially to the non-Muslim. 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 interaction, readings, value, beliefs, and observation. If the advertising messages that, contain ‘noise’ that plays with religion sentiments remain allowed, the other people from another religion will be assume to be accepting it as a social norm. 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. This research aims to investigate the noise effects on the exploitation of the religion from the non-Muslim perspective and to understand the meaning of signs commoditization of religious values on the advertisement by the non-Muslim. Therefore, ten different brand ads are selected and self-recorded by researchers comprising billboards and social media advertising. These ads represent images / visuals and texts that are believed to contain Islamic religious values. In fact, some of the ads that are selected once viral because of the visual or textual content used by the issues rose in the study. The study used a qualitative approach of having a group discussion for an insightful into different perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards the topic. The session guided by the researcher and acts as a moderator. There are eight participants involved in this group discussion. Besides, they are non-Muslim representing the generation Z. This study is expecting to understand the effect of advertising that uses the Islamic value of the non-Muslim and how they evaluate such advertisement.

Keywords: advertising, advertising ethics, semantic noise, Islamic value, cross culture

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ABSTRAK


Keywords: iklan, etika pengiklanan, ‘semantic noise’, nilai Islam, silang budaya

Introduction

In marketing, advertising plays an important role in attracting the consumer attention. Each of these advertisements has something unique to tell about. Selecting the right words, images, symbols, format, the tone is an example of the criteria for the message that later transform these content of a message (thought, ideas etc.) into a symbolic form of encoding (Bergström, 2009). The effectiveness of a communication is simple; the lesser of noise is the better. Do not let the viewer confuse with multiple messages, be relevant, sell solution but not too much. Various marketing strategy been used to fascinate the public simply to lure their attention.
towards the product advertised. However, marketers should be aware of various environmental differences that they have to address before any advertising campaign is launched, such as media restrictions, cultural, and legal factors.

Other than that, culture and local environment sometimes guide consumer judgments and behaviors as in understand brand management strategies that may affect the way ads messages are received. In fact, not just culture, there are variety of products and services also uses religion 'value' by putting quotes verses from the Quran and Hadith on product label or displaying pictures of Islamic leaders who brought the image to attract consumers to buy the products they sell. Nizam Yatim (2015). Thus, the validity of the content in the advertisement is dubious in term of the message strategy whether the headline use of even the visual related to the message. This may invite various reactions from people of multi races communities especially those who do not know the basic background of Islam. The use of the word like ‘jus Sunnah’, ‘kismis doa’, ‘dibaca dengan ayat-ayat Al-Quran’, ‘makanan Sunnah’, ‘patuh syariah’ are among words highlighted in their ads in getting trust easily for the Muslim customer even though this approach is open can confuse other than to deceive the public. It goes with the use of visual such as portraying the ‘Islamic look’ of men or women and even more severe to be connected with an inappropriate product that can lead to religious defamations. Each of them must have their own interpretation of the ads displayed. Playing religion sentiment to attract customer for personal interest and business is simply not fair. In fact, this should be prevented from misunderstanding not just for the Muslims but to the others as well. The commercial value of a product is supposed to be separated by religion (Safiyyah, 2016).

This is to prevent certain parties from taking advantages with misleading interpretation from the message of the ads and religious images also misinterpreted by the others especially in Malaysia where the demographic of the receiver are from various races, religion or even knowledge. Such ads would pose a question to them as well, what are their understandings, response or even how they analyze it, these are what they called as an extensive influence on consumer perception, consumer purchase, and consumer behavior by advertising semantic noise. Considering cultural differences including symbology, tradition and behavior is a good thing in reaching audiences quickly and effectively. However, noise will always be the barriers which may affect the message from being interpreted in the way the sender intended especially when it involved cross-religion. These vague ads if not regulated properly, can be the social norm even though it wasn’t the meaning of real Islam. But, how culture effects Islam religion in Malaysia context? Culture is shaped by the historical, political, social and cultural contexts in which they live where they shared meanings system that are passed from generation to generation through symbols that permit human beings to communicate, maintain and develop knowledge and understanding about life. According to Eliot & Haffenden (2014) who study on T.S Eliot writing, culture and religion help to define, support, and limit one another in ways that can enrich or weaken our modes of conduct, however, we cannot do without any of them. Therefore, when people in a culture believe strongly in a given religion, it can have a huge impact on their culture and only then their culture comes to accept only those behaviors and ways of thinking that are acceptable to their religion just like Muslim-Malay in Malaysia, cross each other.
**Literature Review**

The power of media, they are not just to inform but transform the viewer belief; influence people positively and/or negatively. Advertising plays a significant role in stimulating sales (Hackley, 2010). The failure of the advertising will occurred due to the wrong encoding of the message. According to the advertising definition of American Marketing Association; the characteristic of “informing” and “convincing” are underlined (Elden, 2009). Advertising primarily includes informing the consumers about a product. Advertising has played a strategic role notably in informing consumers about a newly introduced product in the market. It is the first step to deliver information about a good or service in an accurate, convincing and healthy way for being known, adopted and bought by the customers. The other basic characteristic of the advertising is convincing by getting enough information to be convinced. Convincing will be as easy so the message of advertising is convincing and reliable; such as the product is durable, qualified and the price is affordable (Batı, 2010). Other than these three components, religion also has now become one of the commercial value messages in their advertising strategy in words or even in visual (Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, 2012) especially in creating believability for the Malay consumers.

The phenomenon of advertising that sells the image of Islam, if not regulated properly not only to curb the abuse of religion in publicize the product but also give a different interpretation of meanings to the non-Muslim community as well. Their understanding may vary according to the level of knowledge that they have through social interaction, readings, value, beliefs, and observation. According to Bergström (2009), this is what is called as semantic noise; type of disturbance in the transmission of a message that interferes with the interpretation of the message due to ambiguity in words, sentences or symbols used in the transmission of the message. The impact of ‘semantic noise’ in advertising not just can cripple the image of Islam but could confuse and mislead others to the extent of damaging the faith to the Muslims. In communication, these cause distortion in the efficiency of an advertising message and interfere with the receiver’s interpretation of the message (Samau, 2016).

Due to the abundance of products in the market, an overwhelming number of advertising messages compete against each other. Hence, drawing attention from the customer has become a scarce resource. Furthermore, advertising message can only be processed if the consumer consciously perceived them. This is when creativity plays an important role where distinctive advertising generates the best results. From the play of emotions, problem-solving or even testimonials, there are a few more advertising techniques that can be shaped in the marketing plan. However, some of them unashamedly using Islam as their approach in drawing attention to gain profits (Saufi Hassan, 2016). Datuk Seri Abdul Rahman Osman, a Pahang Mufti once said in an interview with Utusan in 2016 (Bernama, 2016) stated that this unethical act not just can lead to the elements of fraud and misleading but feared that eventually affects Islam. It is afraid of that something served on a regular basis in the long term will also poison the minds of a handful of them and become a social norm; influence by the symbolic interactionism. This means, a person who lives in the same environment often drives common meaning to particular symbols because symbolic interactionism is a study of the interaction between the individual and the groups. The differences in interpretation can be pretty small, even unnoticeable, in regular communication between people from the same culture, age, education, and experience, or drastically different because of such things as culture, age or experience (Ryan & Conover, 2004).
1. **Visual Semiotic**

   Promotions is one of the activities in marketing by selecting the right communication channels and determine the strategy on how to communicate to change the recipient's attitudes and behavior (Muller et al. 2011). In marketing communication process, it begins with how the message will be conveyed by the sender. Hence, it is necessary for any advertisers to determine how symbolic visuals obtain the aforementioned meanings so they are better to develop the effective advertisement. After the message is transmitted to the selected channel, the receiver or the viewer of the ads decodes the message; the process of translating the encoded message back into thought or comprehension. How well is the message decode? It depends on the receiver’s comprehension skills, attitude, knowledge, culture, social system and much more (Dawns, 2013).

   Visual sign such as words and image are the most prominent elements used in advertising and it can be considered as a discrete unit of meaning in sign (Baldwin & Robert, 2006). This semiotic study broadly defined as the structures of meaning-producing events in both verbal and nonverbal forms. The idea of the sign represents is decoded by the person who views and interprets the sign; in most situations, the sign is connected to an object or idea that it represents. It is because reading and interpreting signs are a fundamental cultural activity including for the purpose of marketing and advertising. That is why semiotics plays a key role in determining the success or failure of any endeavor. The existence of the sign is related to its integration in order to create a concrete process of meaning making or called as semiosis. This is refering the relation between the sign and object is specified according to a code (Desmedt, 2011). Based on semiotic theory, sign is a physical object with meaning consisting of what they termed as 'signifier' and 'signified' whether the substance is verbal, visual or a complex mixture of both. The semiosis process involved three basic elements which are the representamen (form which the sign takes - from picture, word, legislative representatives etc) object (semiotic subject-) and interpretant (interpret meaning / idea). According to Scolari (2009), semiotic involves both codes and signs as any system of symbols that can be taken as significantly substituting for something else.

   Through the effective deployment of visual or even text used and performative (such as actions by the consumer) elements, companies can strengthen their brand value and trust (Askegaard, 2001). Sending the wrong signals can be extremely harmful not just to the brand but effects the consumer as well because, in any ads, they are selling 'new belief' as well. In assembling meaning, the theory of interactionism also closely related especially when it comes to the interaction between the individual and the groups/society based on the ideas of George H. Mead (1934), Charles H. Cooley (1902) and W. I. Thomas (1931)(Carter & Fuller 2015). Hence, this symbolic interactionism looks at individual and group meaning-making, focusing on human action instead of large-scale social structures. Any advertisement will have these elements as symbolic significance to important reference groups by graphic used, visual, text and any other visual communication design. For Herbert Blumer (1969) as mentioned by David A. Snow (2001) there are three main principles of symbolic interactionism which are, human beings respond toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them, second these meanings arise out of social interaction and the third one social action results from a fitting together of individual lines of action. It is because humans have the capability of responding in a different way, and do so much of the time where there is no single objective "reality"; there are only (possibly multiple, possibly conflicting) interpretations of a situation.
2. Ethics in advertising

In Malaysia, advertising is governed by Advertising Standards Authority or known as ASA. The body was set up in 1977 to promote and enforce high ethical standards in advertisements used in Malaysia media. Malaysia is one of the countries known with the diversified multi-culture and multi-religious country. Thus, advertisers have to consider about the cultural context before broadcasting or publishing any advertisement in the country. According to Mohd Helmi Abd. Rahim (1996), Islam plays a large role towards the formation of advertising guidelines in Malaysia. For example, it is prohibited to use women as sex symbols in advertising. Ads also often deflect the image of a product that is actually an image that is not related to the product at all; relates to the fact that the advertising used symbols that is often exaggerated, so instead of presenting information about the inventory of goods and services, but create new needs or value (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002). In any marketing communication, visual representation is largely use to produce meaning, brand images, and great simulations that create association in consumers’ minds. These representations are act as modern substitute for myth and ritual and, directly or indirectly, it uses semiotics (the science of signs). Other than to promoting products, advertising serves as an important and interesting historical document whereby marketers invest products with meaning for a culture whose dominant focus is consumption. Such influence may affect new experiences and information is interprets; understanding about people and cultures (Duffy & Thorson, 2015).

By deconstructing an advertisement, we learn how it was assembled and discover its underlying message. Therefore, discovering its message, discover the way in which words and pictures work together to reinforce the message to maximize the impact of advertising. According to Amirul Akmal Redzwan (2017), Islam does not encourage names and terms in Islam being exploited for marketing purposes because such ads may lead to confusion, deceived others. Therefore the objectives of the study are to investigate the noise effects on the exploitation of the religion from the non-Muslim perspective and to understand the meaning of signs commoditization of religious values on the advertisement by the non-Muslim.

Methodology

One of the central issues in our local advertising environment is the audience are come from various multi-religion background. Thus, the interpretation of the message contained in the advertisement that has the elements of Islamic religious values is still blurred and fewer discovered especially from cross-cultural angles. This problem statement is involving semantic noise in non-verbal communication and the hidden messages presented may negatively affect the efficient and effective transfer of visual information. This will influence viewer that later affects their actions and thoughts in their daily social interaction as these kind of ads consume information and great simulations that create association in consumers’ minds.

Ten advertisement were collected with two of it are international brand. These ads are coming from billboards and social media ads. All of it is recorded by self-photograph and print-screen. Sample of these advertisement are as Table 1 below. The advertisement selected is used as a case study based on different product, different copy and visual used.
Table 1: Example of advertisements for the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertisement</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Type of Visual Communication Design with Islamic value / element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MP3 player</td>
<td>1. Copywriting</td>
<td>‘Sapuan sunnah’ untuk kerja-kerja sunnah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Visual</td>
<td>- Muslim women’s with niqab</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A focus group discussion was conducted on 13 May 2017 involving 8 participants and being moderated by one of the researcher. The main criteria of the participants are non-Muslim, age falls under generation Z with a different social interaction background such as schooling history, intercommunication with Muslim friends and neighbors. Gen Z as mention by Bergh and Behrer (2013) was a generation that born after 1996, which means their current age are below 22 years old. This research is using a semi-structured data gathering method in which a purposively selected set of participants gather to discuss issues in a lively and natural discussion amongst themselves (Brennen, 2012). The session starts with a short introduction; the purpose and scope of the discussion. The session was guided as well with the ten advertisements collected to seek their meaning-making based on each visual communication design used.

This method allowing the participants more than just agree or disagree with each other but its provides an insight into how they thinks about the issue, different range of opinion and ideas and variation that exists in terms of beliefs and their experiences. The session recorded in video as to have accurate and permanent record other than accompanied by writing the key points for a better analysis. The key findings are soon will be described, analyzed, and written in a report as to synthesize, identifying the frequent ideas that came out during the conversation and reviewing the notes made to summarize the information.
Findings & Discussion

Usually, meaning is constructed by social and cultural forces, thus visual representation is very important. As a pervasive representational form, advertising reflects and creates social values. The first objective of the study is to find out the signs commoditization of religious values on the advertisement by the non-Muslim. According to the focus group discussion session, majority of the participants does not understand the ‘terms’ that related to Islam that has been used in the ads and just a few of them heard it before but didn’t know what does it means for. Hence, text is not one of the options when they want to relate an ad that can consider as ‘Islamic’ look. The words that they familiar with is such as Quran that refer to the Islam scripture and ‘Nabi’, some of them knew the meaning for nabi is prophet but they cannot relate it the used of the words on the ads that are not related with Muslim needs. Therefore, this is an example of semantic noise where interference created when they exposed to an ad however; they got different meaning or even cannot relate it in a relationship. This means they have a slightly different meaning in mind and this can cause confusion. They said that, even though they have a good social interaction with the Muslim friends or even neighbours but when it comes to religious matter they don’t talk about it too much to avoid misunderstanding. They also a passive search of information in obtaining more details what they have seen or heard before; made them difficult to analyze the information. However, they were agree that an ads that implemented ‘Arabic’ look writing which is actually a Jawi words or Quran verse totally considered as one of the Islamic commodity that been applied in the advertisement. Unlike the used of Halal logo, even though it is a Jawi writing but for them in Malaysia it is something that common which referring to the suitability of the product towards Muslim users. Nevertheless, there is no problem for them to consume it and it never intended to discriminate against anyone.

For them, colour some time also plays an important role in displaying Islamic look such as green because to them this kind of colour has been used a lot in marketing campaign in any media especially when it comes to special occasion such as Raya promotion. Hence, for them green is Islamic colour as they habitually perceived and experienced in their lives. However they refutes that this kind of colour as selling the image of Islam as it also been widely used by many other advertisement and the colour chosen evoke some sort of specific emotion such as addressing branding or positioning against a direct competitor. People believe that say a picture is worth a thousand words and todays, most advertising is highly
visual in nature. They also believe in this scenarios and its usage can make a huge impact in their marketing strategy. As part of the social community, the used of women wearing hijab or ‘tudung’ in an advertisement is not something new for them. They believe that it is just part of the advertising strategy that will speak more to the targeted audience which means the Malay audience. The advertiser is just using the right promotional messages to their prospective buyers. Usually, there are some key messages in advertising to persuade viewers and even though they are highlighting the image used. Even they are using Muslim women complete with ‘tudung’, the message written on headline and sub-headline help them to understand the message intended to be delivering. It looks Islamic but it is not just for the Muslim even though the model who is not really in shariah-compliances look; not accordance with the Islamic principles.

On the other hand, they perceived Niqab or a woman who covers their face especially in black colour as Islamic symbol in ads. We also found that, the usage of Arabic or Middle East elements as well as if the advertisement supported by the elements of Arabic writing will increase their believability that the product is just for Muslim. This kind of ads usually been ignored as it is not meant for them. Unfamiliar product brand that used women in Niqab and supported by words in Malay that they does not understand also the kind of ads that they believe for Malays or Muslim as it evoke the Islamic representation. Even the product is generally for everybody such as cosmetic, food and beverages but when it comes to the representation of visual used they might hesitate to try it on. Differently if it is a well-known brand, they believe this kind of ads wont influenced their purchasing behavior. Strong brand in the market and brand image is regarded as opinion and consumer confidence in the quality of products produced. They assume that, it is just a reflection of their marketing campaign as they already knew about the quality of the brand have to offer or the product benefits. This is interesting, it is all about branding; or known as promise of value that delivers a certain distinctive customer experience that engaged consumers emotionally as the brand becomes easily recognizable.

Hence, visual used as symbolism in advertising are designed to represent a particular brand. It is indirectly sets many cultural norms. It plays on many local culture and beliefs, hoping to relate to the majority of the consumers. They had seen it a lot in outdoor media such as billboard, TV commercial or even poster in groceries store. With dozens collection of attributes on familiar brand that has a lot of benefits to meet their needs, it is not easy for them to accept something with uncertain promises on the quality as required. This act is created by a representation of the variety of experience that is used as a basis for consideration from the effect of consumer perceptions of a product at the same election on the irregularities or the dominance of the product. Situational factors such as store locations or does not present in the major market store also influence their behavior and perception towards the brand. Moreover, limitation of knowledge on Islamic terms or words sometimes does affect their understanding towards the ads whereby they deeply depend on the visual used as representation of the message. For them, if there is a picture of the product on the ads, it is very easy for them to digest more quickly and generating a more favorable evaluation even though a headline will compel them to read more about the products or services. Copy in any ads is designed to get the reader to respond or highlighting the key components of a product or service and communicating them to potential customers in a way they can relate to. Hence, ads with a cryptic copy would not be an option for them as they are not the ‘potential customer’. As a multi-racial country, they believed that they need to see an ads based on the key message that the engaged in context regardless the visual or copy used. Therefore the images used typically go hand-in-hand with the copy even they
didn’t really helpful in term of meaning but they can understand it meaning within the context based on the other symbols representation.

For them, it is better to have an ads that audience friendly; put the idea into words or into pictures that easy to understand but still remain the local identity that reflect our social norm. Reading visual some time takes time to analyze (semiotically) if it placed side by side by the product image and using Islamic elements in dominant; Burqa and Arabic elements (including writing). The most effective visuals to power up communications and boost engagement for them are the usage of product image itself on the ads. Other supported visuals can help in expressing a brand but it should be relevant enough without distracting the audience’s attention; ads that take time to analyze the relationship. Therefore, it is clear that their observation is influenced by several measurements which are culture, sub-culture, social measurement, personal measurements which consists of the age and lifestyle. Other than that, they also influenced by psychological measurement including perception, beliefs and attitudes based on their surroundings. At the end of the day, positive brand image in advertising will enable marketing program can be enjoyed and be able to produce unique associations to the brand that always exist in customer retention.

Conclusions

In order to present an effective advertisement without creating misunderstandings and misinterpretations, it is necessary for advertisers to acknowledge the cultural and religion context other than the advertising ethics; to avoid mislead or defraud. There is often a fine line between what you can do and what you shouldn’t. But for a message or meaning-making to be effective, it is essential to advertisers to understand not only how to tailor a message to a particular culture but when such cultural-values-based messages are most effective.

Obviously advertising is a beneficial to any businesses in informing choice and it’s vital to new entrants in any market. When it comes to society though, and the big picture effects of advertising in general, it’s not good as it seem; you don’t see it, but somehow it does something. We participate daily in deciphering advertising images and messages. Yet, because advertisements are so pervasive and our readings on them can consider as sub routine sub routine, hence we tend to take for granted about the deep social assumptions embedded in advertisements. We do not ordinarily recognize advertising as a sphere of ideology. However, most of them using it in a wrong way just to play with the religious value without taking any other consideration or how it will be viewed by the other people with different religion.

Moreover, advertising messages should be designed to attract attention and hard to ignore. To impress the target group, advertisers need to create an advertising message that is always playing in mind and easy to remember. Think of different messages and get immediate attention. If all competitors advertise their products by highlighting low prices, or using extremist terms, but as a good advertiser we need to create something more unique without removing actual messages. Generate orders that show potential customers that we offer something worthwhile. Produce original and creative with clear messages. If you want to stand out among your competitors, easy advertising messages, attractive and enter emotional factors to attract customers to think about our products. Each advertising codes present in the advertisement convey a very different message when translated into different context, so advertisers should aware the needed of research to improve the efficiency of advertising with minimum negative impact of message.
As an advertiser we can also use the visual advertising media for a better impression. Pictures can show thousands of meanings on the contrary. If we want our advertising campaign to have a greater and lasting effect, it is advisable to use the right visual media. Advertising messages cannot be retained in user memory or target groups effectively without using visual media. Visual advertising helps customers develop a certain perception of the product / service. The usage of the visual media actually can help to avoid over dependent on written advertising messages that may neglecting and over-claimed that are not understandable. Television ads, billboards, flyers and visual print ads may pay more attention to your potential customers without the need to use words or Islamic or general terms.

Creating multiple versions of the same advertising concept will produce a good advertising effect as well especially in multi-racial community. This is because its will look more natural and comprehensive to the target group and wider audiences. The use of the terms will not be limited but still can produce of the same meaning. Indirectly advertisements messages still are available to consumers or target audience. For example the use of three different languages but the same visuals will help in delivering advertising messages and have good impact to consumers. Maybe the advertiser is too affected by the trend or by competitors and the advertiser lost the original meaning behind the message and the consumers is misleading.

References


**Internet**


