Social Media, Consumer Behavior and Marketing Strategy: Implications of "Halal" on Islamic Marketing Operations

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Abstract

The paper broadly examines the role of social media in Islamic marketing strategy development within the context of the reported shift towards more relationship-oriented approaches to marketing. Social media platforms have emerged as key communication tools in relationship marketing in part because of their ability to facilitate on-going two-way communication between an organization and a mass audience, whilst maintaining the push-messaging capabilities of traditional marketing. There is therefore growing academic interest in exploring the factors that influence the adoption and use of social media for business development purposes. There is a similarly growing interest in the field of Islamic marketing, due in part to its sheer size, as well as the relatively significant influence that Islam exerts on the consumption behaviors of Muslims and on the operations of business managers. The goal of the paper, then, is to describe the role that social media platforms play as brand communication tools in an Islamic marketing context. We begin the paper with a brief exposition of the concept of Islamic marketing, highlighting some of the factors influencing academic developments in the field. Next, we discuss the main ways in which the use of social media by marketers and consumers alike influence Muslim consumer behavior. Finally, we conclude the paper by examining the effectiveness of the evolving role of social media platforms as tools with which marketing managers can influence the purchase behavior of Muslim customers.

Keywords: Halal, Islamic Marketing, Marketing Strategy, Social Media

1. Introduction

1.1 Islamic Marketing

Marketing is an established discipline with long traditions, but the understanding of what it precisely encompasses continues to evolve, much in line with a growing body of knowledge on the discipline and the changing environment in which it is conducted. The leading organization for marketing scholars in the United States, the American Marketing Association, most recently defined marketing as "the activity, set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners and society at large" (AMA, 2013). This definition casts marketing as more than just a management function. It emphasizes value creation on both sides of an exchange as a desired marketing outcome, recognizes the complexity of the environment in which marketing activities occur, the variety of participants in the marketing process, and its social responsibility to a range of stakeholders. This definition, seemingly less criticized by marketing scholars than preceding AMA definitions, has been adopted in many college marketing texts.

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The recognition of marketing as a process involving multiple actors with ostensibly different objectives factors in interactions, commitments and exchanges amongst these actors and introduces trust as an important aspect of the marketing function.

This relationship-based approach to understanding marketing offers helpful explanations of marketers' efforts to maintain and enhance customer loyalty (Sohail, 2012) and has been argued as underpinning a paradigm shift from the more transactional models of marketing that dominated the earlier marketing literature (Grönroos, 1994). By comparison, Islamic marketing is an emerging discipline that can be broadly described as seeking to integrate orthodox marketing theory with Islamic teaching and ethics. Most of the scholarly work has only appeared in mainstream management journals within the last decade, and although now more widely studied in the academic community, a universal definition of Islamic marketing does not yet exist. Academic commentary on the concept appears to draw on, among others, aspects of Muslim consumer behavior, marketing communications by organizations aimed at Muslim populations, and the testing or application of Islamic ideology to broader marketing principles (See further, Alom & Haque, 2011; Wilson, 2012). Different approaches are emerging as bases on which theory-building might conceivably be built: One approach (e.g. Allah Pitchay, 2012; Hashim & Hamzah, 2014) for instance seeks to contextualize the process of 'doing' Islamic marketing within existing marketing principles with a view to distinguishing Islamic marketing practice from conventional marketing strategy development. Another (e.g. Borzooei & Asgari, 2013; Roumieh & Garg, 2014) seeks to explore the extent of the relationship between the use of standard business management tools and elements of Islamic marketing strategy development. The roots of the current paper may be traced to this second approach to the extent that it seeks to address the role of social media in Islamic marketing strategy development. Having said that, a number of Islamic marketing scholars have pointed out the existence of several other potential lines of enquiry useful for exploring the Islamic marketing concept both within the marketing field and in combination with other disciplines (Wilson, 2012; Wilson et al, 2013).

Theory-building in the field is at the present time somewhat clouded by an apparent tendency of several writers on the subject to offer little more than generic verses on fairness, transparency and accountability from the Qur'an and Hadith as the basis for constructing a distinctive Islamic marketing identity, one issue with this being that a number of the themes identified in such frameworks exist in broadly similar manners in the hermeneutics of other world religions (See for instance Bartells, 1967; Friedman, 2000), and indeed to some extent are advocated in the secular marketing ethics literature (Smith & Murphy, 2013). Much clearer is evidence of a large, diverse and growing Islamic consumer market around the world, in particular its hitherto unacknowledged middle class (Temporal, 2011). Equally observable is the relatively recent sharp growth in international academic interest in the discipline of Islamic marketing (Temporal, op. cit., Hussnain, 2011; Adnan, 2013). Managerial and academic interest in the field is fueled in part by the acknowledgement of a sizeable and growing *halal* industry, exemplifying the relatively significant influence that Islam exerts on the consumption behaviors of Muslims (Borzooei & Asgari, 2013). Business owners and managers, even in non-Muslim majority settings, appear to be integrating into their strategies, a responsiveness to Islamic law and practice in the production and marketing of their products, as evidenced for instance in aspects of their advertising and promotion [note 1][i], product labelling [note 2][ii], packaging [note 3][iii] and other business management activities, to signal their desire to address the consumption preferences of the Islamic consumer market. To this end, social media platforms have demonstrable potential as brand communication media that can contribute to the unlocking of erstwhile underserved markets (Dominici, 2009). As such, a case can be made for an examination of the role of the use of social media in achieving Islamic marketing objectives.

1.2 The Meaning and Implications of the Halal Concept

"Halal" is an Arabic word that is used to identify an item as lawful and permitted for procurement and use by Muslims. In essence, a product is halal if it is compliant with Islamic Sharia law. By extension, the procurement and use of non-compliant products is prohibited, or *haram*. More than just resulting in passive acknowledgement of the nature of a product, halal is recognized as a deep and distinct product characteristic that influences Muslim consumers' purchase behavior on a spiritual level (Borzooei & Asgani, 2013). An indication of the economic significance of this level of influence can be gleaned from the size of the Muslim consumer market, which is well documented in the marketing literature: Approximately 1.6 billion people at the time of writing, expected to expand to well over 2 billion by 2030.

In terms of the future sustainability of this market, it has been reported too that about half of the global Muslim population is under the age of 25, and Muslims are expected to account for around half of the global population under 18 years of age by 2050 (Temporal, 2011). Though geographically dispersed, a significant proportion of the Muslim population reside in the emerging economies of the BRIC countries (that is, Brazil, Russia, India, China) and in the 'next' group of emerging economies – the MINT countries (that is, Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey), suggesting a potentially key role for Muslim population groups to play in future global economic development (Wilson, 2014).

These trends have not escaped marketers' attention, and in recent years, marketers appear to have begun to acknowledge halal as a fundamental positioning tool, given its ability to project a distinctive brand personality to Muslims (and non-Muslims alike), as well as its ability to appeal in particular to Muslim consumers' sense of trust. Thus, a wide variety of consumer and business goods and services including food, clothing, financial products, tourism, real estate and the creative arts have come to be designated and positioned as halal (Sandicki, 2011).

2. Islamic Perspectives on Marketing Strategy

In their eponymous textbook on the subject, Perrault, Cannon & McCarthy (2010) described marketing strategy as a "big picture" of steps a firm intends to take towards the realization of its marketing objectives – objectives that incorporate a target audience as well as a related marketing mix. The marketing mix refers to controllable decisions taken by a firm for the purpose of satisfying its target audience. Historical perspectives on the evolution of the marketing mix concept are well documented in the literature (See for example Goi, 2009; Jain, 2013), but at any rate, in the Perrault et al framework, marketing mix decisions are categorized into the following four elements - the so-called 4Ps: "Product", "Price", "Place" and "Promotion". Over the years, in the face of relentless changes in the business environment, the 4Ps framework has often been criticized as an oversimplified model of marketing operations (Grönroos, 1994; Goi, 2009; Fitzgerald, Cavanaugh & Bhiro, 2014), with the merits of alternative frameworks such as the 7Ps of the 'extended' marketing mix (made up of the original 4Ps listed above plus three additional decision categories of "people", "process" and "physical environment") as well as the 4Cs of "customer value", "cost", "convenience" and "communication", not to mention several others, being fairly regularly put forward in academic and practitioner publications [note 4][iv]. Through the myriad changes in technology and consumer behavior, the 4Ps framework remain amongst the most robust and widely-used categorization schemes for organizing the variety of strategy decisions that marketers do control. For the purposes of this paper therefore, we structure our marketing strategy comments around the 4P framework, and within that, briefly consider aspects of Islam's moderating role, through the concept of Halal, on conventional marketing practice, especially in the development of markets in non-Muslim majority settings.

Within the 4Ps framework, product is defined as "the need-satisfying offering of the firm" (Perrault et al, 2010 p.229). These include decisions regarding product benefits, packaging, warranties, branding and ancillary services. A product is seen as one that combines all these attributes to offer total benefit satisfaction to the customer. With regard to products, Islam mandates Muslim buyers to only consume products declared to be halal. In line with this, Islam prohibits sellers from hoarding goods, over-stating product features and inaccurate scaling practices during negotiations or transactions (Allah Pitchay, 2012). Perhaps the most visible manifestation of contemporary marketers' attempts to offer products consistent with the halal concept can be seen in the food sector where, in recent years, a number of small and large firms alike, including multinational restaurant chains such as McDonald's, Subway, and KFC have opened up several halal-only outlets around the world in non-Muslim majority locations, whilst at the same time deepening their offerings of halal products in their more conventional outlets (Poulter et al, 2014). Manufacturers and other producers in the sector, including Nestlé and several retail chains have also been marketing an increasing number of brands made with accredited halal processes (Temporal, 2011). Beyond the food sector, similar illustrations exist in the fashion and personal care industries in which Asian manufacturers (most commonly from Malaysia and Indonesia) have historically operated, but where western producers like L'Oreal, Unilever and a growing band of smaller online producers are now to be found making and selling a range of halal-certified clothing, cosmetic and grooming products (Temporal, op. cit.).

Place refers to decisions made in order to get goods and services where, when and how the customer wants them. These include decisions related to distribution, storage, the possible use of intermediaries, and related customer service issues (Perrault et al 2010, pp.285-286).

One way by which companies demonstrate their responsiveness to Muslim groups is through the allocation of significant shelf space for halal-labelled products within retail settings (Heine, 2012) or the allocation of dedicated service representatives in the financial services sector (Roumieh & Garg, 2014). Nonetheless, there is recognition in the place framework that different target markets may desire, or from the marketer's perspective, be most effectively served by differentiated place strategies – a situation that invariably results in the existence of multiple customer service levels offered by companies for the distribution of goods and services.

Such practices place conventional marketing operations in potential conflict with Islamic teaching, as in the place context, Islam mandates the uninterrupted flow of goods and services from seller to buyer (Anwar [2010], cited in Allah Pitchay, 2012) and to this end, forbids marketers from manipulating the distribution system in any way that negatively impacts product availability or in some other way creates extra burden for consumers or resellers. Promotion relates to decisions made for the purpose of aiding communications between the firm and the buying public, usually for the purpose of influencing the buyers' attitudes and behavior. Decisions here might concern the choice of appropriate communication methods, including advertising, public relations, and a host of options in-between. Typically, marketers seek to blend a variety of promotion methods to fit the customer and environment they operate in (Perrault et al 2010, p.363). Anecdotal evidence in places like the United States point to growing promotion efforts by business organizations targeted at Muslim populations that are intended to develop or enhance relationships with those populations. It is instructive that the bulk of these promotional efforts appear to be launched through social media platforms, relying on these to build the traction that extends the reach of the message to more traditional outlets, and ultimately to broader audiences (Heine, 2012). With regard to promotion, Islamic teaching prioritizes the revelation of all known information about promoted products and prohibits the concealment of any facts about a product, including product defects or product information that may not be immediately accessible to potential buyers. For some types of advertisements for instance, this may well require going beyond conventionally stated product information and in some way affirming the advertised product's halal credentials as part of the disseminated marketing information. As such, certain promotional techniques such as email advertising, considered by some to be old-fashioned marketing, but seen by others as a resilient and cost-effective marketing tool for smaller and growing businesses (Roumieh & Garg, 2014), may offer distinct advantages to marketers seeking to build relationships with geographically dispersed customers like Muslims, as they sometimes tend to be in non-Muslim majority settings. Moreover, certain media outlets, including social media platforms that potential target audience members can opt-in to, may offer specific operational advantages over others. Beyond these, there are further prohibitions in Islam on false product assertions (*kadh:* an Arabic word that means "deception"), unproven product claims and exaggeration of product benefits by sellers (Allah Pitchay, 2012).

Price, in the marketing mix context, is the term used to describe the amount charged for something of value. This is inclusive of all costs, discounts, allowances and pricing tiers. In conventional marketing practice, price is a function of the marketer's specific marketing objectives, developed in light of known customer preferences and the marketer's legal obligations (Perrault et al, 2010), all of which tend to allow a measure of flexibility in pricing policies that is widely practiced in the travel and leisure industries for instance. Building such flexibility into pricing strategies can be problematic in an Islamic marketing context. On the one hand, healthy competition, including self-operating mechanisms of price adjustment is considered halal (Allah Pitchay, 2012), but taking undue advantage of this to slide into the territory of unjustified price discrimination is haram, as that is deemed to be a form of *riba* (An Arabic word equated with obtaining an increase in capital without having provided requisite services. See further Allah Pitchay, op. cit.). Much of the price-related information in Islamic marketing appears to converge around the issue of riba, specifically its avoidance, which appears to be the dominant theme in explaining the type of product innovations that have been developed in recent years in the growing Islamic finance industry, for example (Temporal, 2011).

2.1 Social Media and Marketing Strategy

We broadly define social media as internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Included in this description are websites like Facebook and YouTube which allow content creation and sharing, micro-blogging sites like Twitter and Google Buzz, and news repositories like Wikipedia and Digg. Through these platforms individuals and organizations increasingly organize their interactions with the wider society, and business organizations in particular implement aspects of their marketing strategies.

While many companies that deal in halal products or in other ways engage with Muslim markets have set up online presence through their websites, observable and anecdotal evidence suggest that comparatively few appear to be actively taking advantage of the online interactivity facilitated by social media, and the potential that these have for the enhancement of the relationships they have with their customers. It is perhaps not surprising then that relatively few research papers have been published on the integration of social media into the marketing strategy of such organizations. Marketing activities have historically involved one way communication (e.g. through advertising) between a marketer and a would-be customer. In more recent times, larger and smaller firms alike appear to have been adopting and implementing two-way communication methods as an integral part of their marketing strategy in line with the broader environmental shift towards relationship marketing approaches referred to in the introduction to this paper.

Social media platforms have emerged as vital components of these methods, in part because of their ability to facilitate on-going two-way communication between an organization and a mass audience, whilst maintaining the push-messaging capabilities of traditional marketing. The ability to target an intended audience (even geographically dispersed ones) and measure subsequent results also heighten their attractiveness to marketers. From an organizational perspective therefore, social media platforms offer companies a relatively low-cost and sustainable method with which to establish and maintain relationships with partners and members of the online communities to which they belong, as demonstrated in the digital space activities of organizations such as ummaland.com, islamicity.com, and the erstwhile muxlim.com websites. Communications emanating from this approach can be both two-way and in many cases occur virtually in real-time, which in a marketing context, highlights their ability to aid in the planning and implementation of focused and timely marketing strategies, as well as their potential to aid in responding fairly rapidly to market-place developments.

At the most basic level, social media platforms can be used to generate brand awareness, especially among members of targeted product/brand online communities, and through them to members of the various social networks to which they belong. However, as Roumieh & Garg (2014) caution, there is as yet little research evidence that speaks conclusively to the notion of the loyalty of consumers attracted to a brand via social media platforms, although previous research at the entrepreneurship/ marketing interface suggests this may well depend on the relative strength of the specific ties developed through particular social media platforms (O'Donnell, 2004), which is itself indicative of the fact that some social media platforms may be inherently more effective than others in achieving certain communication objectives. In any case, social media technologies provide wider and more-easily managed opportunities for businesses to collaborate with customers and other members of their value chain, and to extend the reach of direct selling efforts by maintaining relationships with clients and other stakeholders (Glenn, 2011). Accordingly, organizations are better able to use social media platforms to target a specific population of consumers with marketing information, and just as significantly, to take advantage of web-based consumer recommendations as launching pads for a specific type of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing campaign, which the marketing literature has consistently shown to elicit greater trust by consumers than marketing information received via generic media sources (Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik, 2010; Kozinets et al, 2010). Thus, social media platforms where reference group behavior can be observed, discussed and shared, can serve as effective tools with which to deliver WOM recommendations and model expected behaviors.

3. Conclusion

The goal of developing customer loyalty is one that many businesses have as it is a contributory factor to the sustainability of an enterprise. Customer loyalty is a cornerstone of relationship marketing, and organizations that succeed at this tend to devote significant resources towards their efforts in this area. Mutual commitment, communication and trust are key antecedents of relationship marketing which provides a helpful framework with which to examine Islamic marketing operations. However, this is only one possible framework out of many, and the concept of Islamic marketing remains, at the present time, a fluid one. As Jonathan Wilson asks with regard to the Islamic marketing concept: 'Are we talking about a religion, a culture, an approach or a business and management function? ' (Wilson, 2012, p.104). It is a challenging question which the collective literature would seem to be answering at the present time as "all of the above". This is hardly surprising given the disparate academic background of the community of Islamic marketing scholars.

One of the key conceptual challenges faced at the present time is due in part to the ambiguity of the Islamic marketing concept itself. 'Islamic marketing' sits somewhat uncomfortably between the ever-evolving business function of marketing with its innate bent towards self-promotion and profit-maximization on the one hand, and the conservative religious orthodoxy of Islam on the other which, among other things, teaches managerial transparency and prohibits unchecked profit-making. There is however little ambiguity about the idea that the Muslim market is essentially a lifestyle market. Sandicki (2011, p.251) likens the discovery of the Muslim consumer market to the 20th century emergence of minority ethnic market segments in the United States, and argues that marketing practices such as segmentation and promotion played a part in creating those market segments in the form in which contemporary marketers engage with them.

Perhaps the Muslim market will, in time, come to be seen in much the same light, but however it develops, organizations will need to recognize first, that central to Islamic consumer behavior is adherence to the halal concept, which may quite fundamentally affect how these organizations go about their production and marketing activities. Secondly, beyond the immediate implications of halal, the Islamic lifestyle is heavily influenced by certain rituals, symbols and values. Therefore, marketing strategies targeted at Muslim consumers need to be sensitive to Halal issues in order not to offend the very market they seek to attract through, for example, inappropriate product features, labelling, promotion, and so forth. At the same time, marketers that target Muslim customers need more than an overtly Islamic message with which to connect with them. Put another way, a consistent reflection of halal attributes in the overall business model, as opposed to superficial religiosity in isolated strategy contexts would seem to offer greater relationship potential with today's increasingly savvy consumers.   As with lifestyles more generally, it is normal to have some areas of commonality and areas of difference. The Muslim population is a growing one, and as noted earlier, is a highly significant segment of certain demographic groups, such as young people under the age of 18. On the one hand, it can be expected that such young Muslims will share many of the same behaviors and experiences that other non-Muslim young people have, for instance, in some of their leisure and communication preferences. At the same time as we have noted, Islam promotes certain values and requires very specific behaviors from its followers, and so marketers can expect these to engender certain level of collective distinctiveness in the profiles of these same young Muslim consumers. Organizations that establish and explore innovative ways with which to interact with their target market using these methods can rightly expect to benefit from them, but the wider lesson is that marketers should not expect to find homogeneous behavior throughout the Muslim world. A certain level of fragmentation can be expected to be encountered even in those markets otherwise bound by the hegemony of Islam. In reality then, multiple marketing strategies, informed by sound marketing research, will likely be required to engage with different segments of the Islamic market. Communicating with these segments will likely present both opportunities and challenges for marketers, but the ability of social media platforms to embed themselves in the lifestyles of many of their users ought to be perceived largely as an opportunity by firms that wish to use such platforms to generate and enhance relationships with customers. At the present time, there is not yet a long tradition of firms using social media platforms to engage with customers in a manner that revolves around the values and teachings of Islam, and so 'early bird' opportunities would seem to exist for firms that do these to position their brands differently from those that belong to secular and other marketers.

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[i] Heine (2012)

[ii] Poulter *et al* (2014)

[iii] Eat Halal (2014)

[iv] The 7P and 4C frameworks are highlighted here as models that have arguably gained the most prominence of the very many marketing strategy frameworks that have been published since the 1970s in particular. These two have made their way into mainstream educational and practitioner texts. An exposition of the 7P framework can be found in Lovelock and Wirtz (2011, pp.43-48) and a similar exposition of the 4C framework is provided in Robert Lauterborn's classic (1990) article in Advertising Age