The Commodification of Religion as Symbolic Interactionism in Advertising

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Abstract
The power of media is not to simply inform, but to transform the viewers' beliefs, and to influence people positively and/or negatively based on their interpretations. Thus, this study was conducted to understand Islamic commodification signs on advertisement and to explore the effects of semantic noise interpretation based on the visual communication design meaning used. Symbolic interactionism and communication model are the two important theories in the visual field that are used as the main framework of the study. The study began with content analysis of 7 billboards as case study and continued with semi-structured interviews to get in-depth feedback from 12 informants. Maximum variation sampling was selected ranging from industry practitioner, educator to students from the same field. Thematic analysis is applied in this qualitative study, and subsequent analysis using symbolic interactionism theory in describing the result. The Islamic element is often appear in images and text as part of culture preferences. The ads seem to be more influenced by religion which raises issues of ethical that can mislead content; convey religion-related messages about products. The commodification of visual communication design has become the mediating link to greatly enhance the effectiveness of advertising even though it may cause confusion that affect the recipient's understanding of the actual message (communication noise). Even though the used of Islamic symbols is emotional stimulus that engage ideas to the targeted group (Malay-Muslim) but these ads do not symbolise a highly significant guarantee as a successful motivation aspect of communication. Advertiser should emphasize more over everything else such as product type, function and benefits of the product itself. Although cultural elements are very important in advertising, an understanding of the appropriateness of a symbol in the communication element is necessary to marketer or advertiser to avoid exaggeration and misrepresentation of products by the multi-racial audience.
Keywords: Advertising, Islamic Commodification, Visual Communication Design, Symbolic Interactionism

Introduction

The visual communication design (VCD) used in advertising is more than just creativity for selling purposes, it is implied with hidden messages and influences that later affect actions and thoughts. Each of these ads has something unique to tell. Each of these VCD is designed with a specific function to convey ads message to the audience as a symbolic form of encoding (Belch and Belch, 2014) and improve customer response. Various marketing strategies are used to fascinate the public simply to captivate the audience's attention towards the advertised product. In fact, there are many products and services that also use religious cues to help market their products. This approach 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). Morris and Waldman (2011) also stated that visual metaphors (texts and images) in ads are commonly linked to culture, which will be strategically designed to capture attention and reinforce concepts. Such influence may affect new experiences and information it interprets; and the understanding about people and cultures (Duffy & Thorson, 2015), especially in our local ads' environment whereby the audience are coming from various multi-religion backgrounds. Each one of them must have their very own interpretation of the ads displayed.

Local content features aim to embody the character of the culture, which hopefully makes the targeted customers easily understand and attracted by the message on the ads, as stated by Adîr, Adîr, and Pascuc (2012). However, some parties are taking advantages through the situation by incorporated their business or even products with Islamic imagery and symbols on attracting consumers, their preferences and eventually satisfaction (Dadras, 2015). Thus, religion commodification 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 (Ornella, 2013). Ahmad et al. (2015) mentioned Islamic commodification in ads attempts to easily gain attention and beliefs from the public. It is persuasive, despite their claims hardly having any truth values, perhaps due to the capitalism world that religion has become commodified. According to Mayaningrum and Triyono (2016), the unethical act of transforming valued into a commodity (economy value) can lead to elements of fraud and misleading, which eventually may affect the image of Islam. Mokhlis (2010) stated that religion is one the influential elements for advertisers to affect the audience's consumer behaviour as a symbolic mediator; the relation between the symbols and social construction of reality by influencing their personal structures of beliefs, values and behavioural tendencies using religious values.

Visual Communication Design (VCD)

VCD is a broad term encompassing not just graphic design but information design, instructional design and visual information (Lester, 2013). Malamed (2011), VCD is creating graphics that are comprehensible, memorable and informative; both cognitively and emotionally. It 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. It's more than nonverbal communication which includes drawing, graphic design, colors, signs, typography, symbols, illustration, and much more to get the message point across or even designed to identify a seller's goods or services (Kelley et al., 2015). Each of

these visual messages is designed with specific functions that contribute to the development of social and cultural contexts and environments. Based on Lester (2013), the nonverbal elements of ads able to communicate complex meanings to consumers that go beyond the obvious, direct meaning of the perceived ads as ads not only designed through words. Image has the ability to convey much more information, more accurate and faster than words which make the viewer easily to absorb as well remembered with much less effort (Yeshin, 2006).

These non-verbal communication elements helps to differentiate any brand with distinguished visual identity. Therefore, make it memorable, unique and easy to distinguish from the other competing or available ads. Nevertheless, 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. This communication noise can happen in any VCD (Eisend, 2016), whereby it will distract the audience from the real message and obstruct the communication transmission process. Which mean, audience are not only interpret the product/services in terms of its physical appearances but also in the perspective of the image in relation to the social and psychological background of each discrete end user (Ruchi, 2012). Hence, made certain symbols and icons work more effectively as ads in reaching its potential consumers than others.

Symbolic Interactionism
Communication in ads is important to create or increase brand awareness by sign or symbol, color, typography or even graphic elements which are designed to identify a seller's goods or services (Kelley et al. (2015). Based on Lester (2013), the nonverbal elements of ads able to communicate complex meanings to consumers that go beyond the obvious, direct meaning of the perceived ads as ads not only designed through words. And this is how symbolic interactionism was adapted, advertisement used symbols to communicate something about their brand by creating an association in people's minds. Prior socio-cultural studies suggested that people learn the method of viewing and processing objects from society (Seo, 2010). 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. Othman (2017) mentioned successful communication in an ad is the one that focusing on a specific audience with information that fits with the selected group's needs. This concept is started by sociologist George Herbert and the use of symbolic interaction term is originated by Herbert Blumer (Gkiouzepas & Hogg, 2014) as shown on Figure 1 below, which means any visual that was confront by the anyone are recall with what values, beliefs and meanings that are attached to the visual by culture arise from the process of social interaction. The exchange of meaning is believed to be the way in which people make sense of their social worlds (Bakar et al., 2013).

Figure 1: The classic symbolic Interactionism process model that introduced by George Herbert Mead in 1934 (Gkiouzepas & Hogg, 2014)

The interpretation of actions because of symbolic meanings might be formed differently for anyone during the decoding process. The interpretive processes through objects and events are activated during the course of interaction whereby meanings are not fixed to one but are subject to change according to situation or social context changes. Media such as ad contribute significantly to the definition of the world around us since the media has become one of the key social actors who reproduce existing cultural meanings and who can also transform discourses and beliefs. Thus, the symbolic meaning in ads message is designed to attract the corresponding feelings and emotions; more chances that the audience will remember a product by reaching their desires and motives (Ragnedda, 2011). According to Petrovicia (2014), the symbolic interactionism perspective frequently have a strong influenced by the interpreter interaction with society or significant reference groups. Thus, individuals are expected to relate to objects or events based on their symbolic meaning given by society; formed in social interactions and interpreted accordingly. However, meanings possessed by the decoder does not contain the similar cultural meanings possessed by the encoder (Howarth, 2011), as symbols are capable of holding complex meanings for individuals. The intended message becomes modified during the decoding stage of intercultural communication in light of the fact that the culturally different repertory of communicative behavior.

Methodology
This qualitative study started by selecting seven highway billboards with Islamic commodification characteristics as the artefacts of the case study as shown on Table 1 below. These 7 billboards from 5 different brands are represented by the use of two or more Islamic visual cues in their VCD's selected from a total of 21 billboards that have the potential of case study for this research which photographed during the two days' session from Ipoh to Ayer Keroh, Melaka and back again to Ipoh, Perak. Analysis of all seven billboards using semiotic model is the first stage of data analysis to explain the mechanisms and functions of visual communicators to have a better understanding of how the signs produce meanings especially on Islamic commodification. The exploration ranging from the interpretation and process of signs, indication, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism to signification and communication. And, semi-structured interviews are being the main body of the research strategy together with the help of photo elicitation from the observation documentation that was done earlier.

Table 1: Image of billboards for the case study

Elhajj	Nuraysa
Jus Al Sunnah Gold	Masyhur by D'herbs
imanni Skinz	

Maximum variation sampling through the selected informants helps the researcher with opportunity to gain a deep holistic view of the research problem and wide-ranging variation in dimensions of interest from all available angles as much as possible towards the specific case study (Creswell and Clark, 2017). This type of purposive sampling investigates the story behind each respondent as they are unique and different from because of certain characteristic particularly knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. These 12 informants are coming from different race and religion, culture and work experiences who are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge and experience which also assisted by documented visuals during the interview session. These two groups of maximum variation sampling are between a group of industry experts (Art Director, Marketing Executive, educators) and a group of final year students in the field of design & advertising. This student is representative of audience but with the basic knowledge of advertising field in broaden the scope of understanding regarding investigated case study. The following steps were describing, classifying and interpreting the data for a specific meaningful information during the interview session on what they have in common, or on the differences between them by identifying all the main concepts.

Results Analysis
Symbolic interactionism theory where applied throughout the analysis process which focusing on how people use symbols to create meaning especially from the sociological perspective (Lai, 2014). There are three main themes been discovered based on the analysis that are coded as signs, messages (meanings) and effects which related to communication process (from transmitting the messages to message decoding by the audience). This process systematically categorizes and develop texts into small groups, especially the association of symbolic meanings with the advertised products by looking at cultural and communication meanings.

Qualitative research is based on subjective, interpretive and contextual data with reference to specific topics or issues. Therefore, 15 sub-themes were set up under the 3 main themes (as shown on Table 2 below) which are commodified Islamic signs, meaning and effects. There is also a sub theme of other that looking for their suggestion towards the issue. All discovered themes are analysed using Atlas.ti in organizing intellectual work even more quickly, and to identify categories of data together for easy comparison (Scales, 2013). Methodological triangulation using traditional labelling the needed text also being applied to seek confirmatory data and to improve trustworthiness of data. This thematic analysis helps classifying, sorting, coding, and arranging information in ways that enabled the identification of patterns in the data and most importantly to help to generate generalization.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes discovered during analysis.

	Main theme	Subtheme
1	Commodified Islamic signs	Attention
		Islamic Features
		Relationship of Features to Islam
		Islamic commodification
2	Signs meaning	Visual Communication Design Meaning
		Knowledge
		Advertising Message
		Relationship with Product
		Relevancy
3	Semantic noise effects	Brand Image
		Believability
		Emotion
		Visual making influence
		Social Interaction
		Culture Representation

There are indeed different Islamic signs used to reflect an image or character for the advertised product, which are the elements of images and texts. These two visual metaphors are commonly linked to culture, which strategically designed to capture attention due to its size which obviously reinforce the Islamic concepts or features. Metaphors through images or texts in ads create concepts beyond experiences and require the audience to stretch their

own imaginations to build meanings especially to non-Muslim audience. Thus, religious engagement is used to construct the reality of life by the utilization of VCD elements as a persuasion in ad evaluation which suitable to capture the respective targeted audience attention. This formation of product attribute beliefs from the information acquisition process creates a mutual communication by retrieving the audience's visual memory through this 'Islamic look' component. However, Islamic features aim to embody the character of the local culture as part of information codes distract audiences from the ads core message, and at times, shifting to 'misinformation' on the meaning transfer.
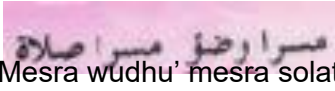
Discussion

The Islamic features' appearances often emerge in local contents as a form of distinctive symbolic interactionism of the Malay-Muslim culture; to emphasize its significance to the targeted consumer so that they easily understand and attracted by the message on the ads. This stimulus lead to the fastest recognition of the audience as its symbolically communicate something about themselves. The Islamic features' characteristics are decoded within the context of the audience socializations, observations or even experiences. The present of Islamic VCD strengthen the ads to reach their consumers due to the visibility (big-sized display) and it's directly draw much attention whereby it will provide some contexts to the image as a part of information codes. Images such as wearing *telekung*, *niqab*, *jubbah* and *doa* gesture are projected as a symbol of interaction which engages social institutions' illustration that include religion. Thus, stimulating the ads in building their brand image emotionally, feeling and associating with the brand – these are factors that holds a significant influence and reference to the audience, compared to other presented VCD elements as shown on Figure 2 below. The portrayal of image by their attire and gestures as the main visual signifying Islamic values will cause the audiences to easily define themselves within the context of their socializations, exhibit the relative importance of these symbols to the prospective group members by the judgment of that VCD's. They highlight the distinctive symbolic interactionism of the Malay-Muslim culture, from social customs to presenting characteristics or behaviour of people such as through the attire, the language and term, as well as the gestures shown, attempts in gaining consumers' believability by linking consumers' behaviour preferences as the marketing strategy.

Gesture of *dua* and reciting a religious book (assume as Quran)

Attire of *kopiah, jubbah, niqab* & *telekung* that wore for praying

Significant Muslim identity through the use of gesture and attire as a social institutions' engagement that creates an impression of the 'brand image' of the advertised product

Figure 2: Image commodification as emotional stimulation in building the product brand image

As a result, religious values play a key role in giving significant effects to these images to create a belief system that may affect the audience's attitude towards the products while the presence of Islamic signs in copywriting is act as a mediator of information and ideas. Thus, both are influential elements for advertisers to affect the audience's consumer behaviour by influencing their personal structures of beliefs, values and behavioural tendencies using religious values. Terms such as *haji, umrah, Al-Sunnah* and *wudhu'* are regarded as words that make a noteworthy influence of symbolic meaning to Islam as shown on Table 3 below. The terms are understood with high social value context that help the advertisers to decide who to interact with as selling point foundation for their targeted audience that makes significant information and ideas. With the help of both textual and visual content, these VCD are embedded into memory which stimulates both verbal code and image, while words can only generate a verbal code. This help to engage with the audiences quickly, effectively, as well as emotionally. This made the VCD as an "exchange" elements rather than a "use" to communicate the meaning instead of fulfilling the needs based on the advertised product.

Table 2: Text as translation of language as well as symbolized culture references

Sign		
Symbol		**Index**
Category: Terms		Terms that symbolized Islam, relation to their value and practices
UNTUK HAJI DAN UMRAH — Tenangkan Jiwa Dalam Ibadah	Headline & headline	
PRODUK MESRA WUDUK	Headline	
Mesra Wudhu' & Mesra Solat	Slogan	
Al Sunnah	Brand name	
Masyhur 8+1	Brand name	Terms that symbolized Arabic language
Category: Writing style		Writing style (*Jawi* script) that symbolized Islam which has a similar appearances of Arabic writing style
الحج elhajj	Logo	
ڤرودوق مسرا وضيء — Produk mesra wudhu'	Headline	
مسرا وضؤ مسرا صلاة — Mesra wudhu' mesra solat	Slogan	

Not all non-Muslims be able to understand the exact meaning of the terms but they do regard it a reflection of the Malay culture which leads to 'self-identity' and value. Given the difficulties in language barrier, the interpreters' (specifically the non-Muslims') considerations are based on the visual cues displayed, especially images that were portrayed in the ads. Thus, the displayed images provide a framework in organizing information about the ads; create a belief system that may affect the audience's attitude towards the products. When a particular culture is presented by a particular VCD's, the audience will also create emotional respond to those meanings in various ways such as tendency to be interpretive with his/her thoughts. It can be within the signification contexts such as relating the terms with Islamic values, Islamic needs, or usages theologically in the concept of symbolic interactionism. To others, it could suggest beauty and product benefits such as good for skin with the visual cues of women and cosmetic product images. For the non-targeted audience, they connote meaning by depending on the context of meaning and the association based on what is being displayed. They will assume the Muslims usually have particular needs to be follow while the product as the subject is denied while decoding the message. The Islamic features projected in the signs are important to be highlighted since they are regarded as a mirror of the brand key values (religion) from the eyes of the non-Muslim receivers as well as to adhere the dominant Malaysian Islamic practices such as women in hijab.

Even though cultural values are adapted as ads appeal, and it is a significant contributor to successful persuasion but the association of bringing the idea of religion into cosmetic ads is exaggerating and inappropriate to some people. Multiple combinations of Islamic features in VCD (images together with texts) are believed to have commodification of Islamic values, more than to just relate brands with personality traits of the buyers. When their symbolic features gain much greater attention compared to their functional value content, the ads considered as having less relevant VCD elements. The codes can be misrepresenting in forming social knowledge on a particular meaning. The words played through headlines and the manipulation of Islamic images lead to message distortion which affect their believability and knowledge. On the other side, the elements are understood to decode and highlight the products that are specifically made for the Muslims' preferences. The features shown are a common indicator for Malay products, to show that they are Islamic-compliant, or Malay-made, as a process of construction by the creator of the ads to the audiences, even though not all ads are actually made by a Muslim company. The association of brand-related emotional image cues are assumed to give be defined as trust, belief and positive image that hopefully give confidence to the customers. Even though the VCD displays dramatize the value of the product, but it is said as still an affective display which refers to a particular social representation within a culture.

In effort to make the promoted products become more appealing to Muslim consumers, marketers are positioning their offerings to look like Islamic brands. Even though all ads in the case study drove a good attention but the audience's brand name recall for the ads was negative. The commodification of VCD in the ads made the brand exposure to be focusing on the images alone, instead of developing their brand names, which is one of the important elements in branding. Brand association is a vital factor for any marketers in gaining consumers' positive acceptance on the advertised product or brand. And the only brand component that they champion on is the usage of Islamic features as their brand identity that associates their product with their customers, that dictates brand awareness. Therefore, the

given signs are a strategy of consumer beliefs, preferences about their brands and it becomes a relatively strong link as well as niche element that creates a memorable impact for the public. Religion and social approval cue combinations in the visual and textual presentations have increased the consumers' brand evaluation as a visible element in their brand identity.

There are several factors that Islamic features could increase the audience believability such as brand familiarity or someone who even faithful to religion. However, the audience that regards the exaggeration will affect their trustworthiness also can't be denied. This made relationship between religiosity and buying behaviour in marketing area is still unpredictable, specifically to Muslims. The bond between the presented signs are supposed to make a significant value in transferring a strong and meaningful message to the audiences. Whereas in here, the information is limited, there are no effective claims, the VCD presentations are too 'hard sell', and the approach (Islamic feature) is also look too similar. On the other hand, from the eyes of non-Muslims, the ads are tailored to fulfil the needs of Muslims, and the messages presented are understandable - according to the needs of Islam for the Malays. To them, Muslims have special needs, and Islam has guidelines that need to be followed by their respective adherents. Even said so, it is undeniable that the issue of knowledge limitation could lead to messages' misinterpretation about Islamic values, especially on terms that were unclear to the non-Muslims. The unusual or uncommon words used have built a communication barrier that makes them rethink about the context of the product usage as advertised. This communication noise does not have the advantage of immediacy in passing product or brand information.

Billboard is an effective channel that has a great impact on the public and inclusive informative agent to the society especially when they never seen it before. The public will only ignore the ads if they are already familiar with it. Thus, outdoor ad is a part of the indirect information especially to non-Muslims'. Ads affect their believability and knowledge which holds a mirror to the masses that reflects a specific lifestyle of the audience. Indirectly, an understanding about a community and its culture can be translated through such influence with the signs resemble the expression of religion, morality, authority, values, as well as ideology of local cultural themes in ads more than just an act as a form of market adjustment process (marketing adaptation) to attract targeted consumer. The images and terms used projected the image of Islam even though the non-Muslims are unfamiliar with some terms, but they learned new terms about Islam. In contrary, not all the public will have a similar opinion as the Islamic commodification in VCD of the ads does not construct the real culture of the Malays in the country, but more on an exaggeration as a reference to the people. The execution is just to optimize the attraction values for marketing purposes only, and the exaggeration of Islamic values might have a negative implication such as cosmetic ads can be easily misjudged especially to non-Muslim since they can't find logical reasons between religion affiliation with the promoted cosmetic product. The elements of fraud can also occur through 'Islamic look brand image' such as not getting approval from the pharmaceutical department. The Islamic images are used as exploitation and it does not symbolise a highly significant guarantee as a successful motivation aspect of communication. Cultural representative conflict may also exist from the portrayal of *niqab* and *jubbah* in the ads, whereby certain interpreters will describe the features as not reflecting the Malay culture - but more towards the Arabs. Therefore. even though the presence of Islamic features in

outdoor ads are relevant to depict respective consumer representation, they also lead to confusion to audiences from multi-racial backgrounds.

The exaggeration should not be used to verify their 'sharia-compliant' nature whereby it often misleads the consumers and forgets about the line between lie and truth, by over emphasizing on the product features or a services. The right product description can make the product becoming more relatable with the audience and build trust with the users by telling them what the product has to offer.

Conclusions

Culture appears to play a significant role in the use of emotional ads in the promotion of local products, and the culture also provides some insights for religion appeals. Its initiate social interaction and addressing specific self-identity by the used of cultural codes as signifier (VCD). From a marketing standpoint, the VCD commodification creates or suggests an Islamic brand personality that leads to the relationship development between the product and the signs used. Therefore, the appealing signs published a significant cultural sociological influence in making sense of the ads, by embedding meaning networks. The study shows emotional representation in images was successfully pulled in creating visual attention underpinning the cultural semantic complexity. As a local ad, cultural representation is also closely associated to religion symbols which constitute the key element of brand image to represent the Malay-Muslim lifestyle as their targeted consumer.

The commodification of VCD has become the mediating link in the contemporary information society which latter processed (including new information that can be developed) and perceived as objective reality. Exaggeration and extensive used of religion cues effects how audience decodes the message (meaning-making process) in understand the brand or product which lead to sign commodification. Islamic VCD can still be accepted if there is no exaggeration of the Islamic features, no over claims, and no selling of products that are unsuitable with Islamic image. Many believed that the message could mislead people, especially when the product description is not stated well in the design. The right product description can make the product becoming more relatable with the audience and build trust with the users by telling them what the product has to offer. Other than that, misunderstandings about Islamic branding concepts also lead to a greater course of meaning making in a multiracial society that leads to commodification and misinterpretation of Islamic values. Islamic ads are more than just a brand personality. The used of Islamic cues is only to give an external appearance of the product to the consumer but does not comply well with the meaning of Islamic advertising or marketing. Morality is demanded in projecting trustworthiness and honesty in Islamic principles, and not the exploitation of Islamic images or unproven claims that influence the emotions of the receivers; by reflecting religion brand associations in the consumer minds as 'self-identity' and value in the culture of consumer capitalism.

The importance of understanding cultural and religious values has become more evident together, not just the increasing globalization market specific to Islamic brands, but towards a multi-cultural environment of the local market. At one level, emotional strategy through Islamic cues is persuasive but rational values is also important in delivering a clear message regarding the advertised product to be advertised in a multiracial country. It is about

balancing between what signs to represent, and how to represent them to reduce noise effects in information exchange. Thus, this could help advertisers and practitioners to formulate appropriate strategies to enhance their brand image to obtain competitive advantage and business sustainability such as focus more on ways to engage audience by using a suitable VCD representation that limit the number of Islamic symbol appeals used in a multi-racial environment. The study also provided a strong evidence that Islamic signs in ads' VCD are well accepted, only if they are properly applied with a suitable product, especially to the non-Muslim audience. Other than to avoid the misunderstanding of the message, it also helps to create a favourable impression particularly among local young consumer markets that drive them to the product description. Simple messaging will support the campaign effectively in terms of providing product benefits (or rational appeals) that motivate consumers through information and logical arguments for a greater impact.

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