The Awareness of Islamic Branding among Modern Malay Muslim Women (MMW)

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Abstract

This article investigates the understanding of Islamic branding of products and services on modern Malay Muslim women (MMW). It is set against a significant phenomenon in Malaysia where modern MMW struggle with purchase decisions when faced with Islamic branding, a form of marketing in the Muslim world where Islamic symbolisms and values are conveyed through the marketing mix. This article aims to investigate the connection between halal marketed and the lifestyles of modern MMW. A total of 30 modern MMW in Kuala Lumpur were interviewed face-to-face using semi-structured interview method; in addition two focus groups were conducted in 2010. These participants were recruited through snowball sampling for two focus groups and 30 face-to-face interviews as data for this article. All participants were asked about Islamic branding and the following questions were posed; what did participants know about it; did they purchase products with that branding; and how they reconcile traditional Muslim values with modern lifestyle in their everyday routine. The findings show that Islamic branding especially products must have halal requirement, which it does affect modern MMW in their daily lives especially food purchases. The article emphasizes the importance and implications of halal certification in Islamic branding, consumer behavior, advertising and purchasing decision in Malaysia.

Keywords – Halal, Muslim, Consumer behavior, Islam, Islamic branding, purchasing decision, advertising

1. Introduction

Islamic branding refers to the marketing of products/services that enhance Islamic values. Islamic values include consuming products/services that observe the *halal* requirement of the *sharia* law. *Halal*, an Arabic word means legal or allowable (Rice & Al-Mossawi, 2002). *Sharia* law refers to rules, which Muslims have to obey and practise at all times (Haddah & Lummis, 1987). Islam requires its followers to believe in one God, Allah, and the prophet, Muhammad. The followers have to build a belief system (Alhabshi, 1994) as a basic need in their lives. Believing in God, the Prophet, and the faith of Islamic values is at the root of every aspect of human life according to *Sharia* law. *Halal* and *haram* (forbidden) are serious matters in the *Sharia* framework (El-Erian, 1986). Thus, as the majority of people in Malaysia are Muslim,

the Malaysian government considers this matter seriously. This study is set against a significant phenomenon in Malaysia where modern MMW struggle with purchase decisions in order to consume products or services confidently and practice Islam as a way of life. Furthermore, the reason why Islamic branding should be highlighted is to help Muslims to re-connect to their cultural and Islamic roots.

In the newly emergent Islamic culture industry, a series of images, practices, commodities and knowledge are marketed specifically to Muslim women (Gokariksel & McLarney, 2010). Islamic branding is the idea concept that has been introduced to address the needs of the Muslim market. According to Temporal (2011), Islamic branding is associated with the branding and marketing of products or services to the Muslim irrespective of whether the Muslims are from a country where they form a majority or a minority. Lombard (2007) agrees that branding is needed to create a market differentiation. Thus, Islamic branding will be a specific criterion for Muslim market that wants products, services, brands and communications that are *shariah* compliant. Modern MMW will have peace of mind if there is a *shariah* friendly market that understands Islamic values and principles.

Women are viewed as important consumers by marketers because a significant number of family purchasing decisions are influenced by them (Barletta, 2006; Yahya, 2006). There are opportunities for women to work outside the house; delay marriages and shifts societal standards lead to some adjustments in the family decision-making. This trend has also increased women's power in influencing family purchase (Jaya & Singh, 2009; Fischer, 2008b; Sidin, Zawawi, Wong, Yee, Busu & Hamzah, 2004). Nielsen Survey (2011) reveals that women have control the majority of purchasing decisions in a household and their influence is growing. Furthermore it is about 20 million dollars expected spending by women a year, and this figure is to grow in the next five year by 40% (Pawlikowska, 2011).

Likewise, Muslim women are a special, fresh target market in marketing world, although they are not new in the industry, both as consumers and producers (writers, editors, models, designers, business owner, etc). They have been identified as a niche market with particular needs and desires, mostly attributed to performing Muslimness (Gokariksel & McLarney, 2010). As well as modern MMW in Malaysia is considered a lucrative consumer group that consumes goods and services products but bounded to religious guidelines or pre-Islamic cultural tradition. In order to become a better Muslim and to practise the Islamic way of life, modern MMW have to filter certain criteria in products and services to fulfill the Islamic standard requirements.

The objectives of this article were to find out modern MMW's responses on Muslim brands in Malaysian market and their understanding about Islamic branding. This article will explore a substantial market for Muslims, in which the values and principles of Islam are taken seriously in terms of influencing the everyday way of life. This study focuses on Islamic values that are portrayed in brands, names, terms, signs, symbols or any other features that identify goods and services as representing Islamic branding. The findings from this article will help to contribute to the knowledge relation to Muslim women and consumerism. Modern MMW may overcome their purchasing dilemmas and thus help them follow their Islamic values more easily and confidently.

2. Literature Review

Generally, this article will cover the gaps in the literature on Islamic branding of products/services in relation to the understanding of Islamic branding on MMW in Kuala Lumpur. There has been little research on Islamic branding. In addition, research to see how MMW reconcile commercial Islamic branding with traditional Muslim values has still not been covered. Furthermore, most of the literature did not discuss the impact of Islamic branding influencing modern MMW's purchase decision.

The Malaysian government has set up an agency, the Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), which is responsible for observing and assisting to develop an plan of Islamic affairs in Malaysia. JAKIM is also responsible to authorize the *halal* logo and the certification of the *halal* industry in Malaysia. In addition, Halal Industry Development Corporation (HDC) is another agency appointed by the government to work with JAKIM in order to promote the *halal* industry in Malaysia. It is shown that Malaysian government has long been committed towards developing the *halal* industry. In addition, consuming genuine *halal* products is required by the Islam religion.

Islamic branding is part of the concept of "branding". A formal definition of "branding" is a name, term, sign, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or services as distinct from those of another seller" (O'Guin, Allen, & Semenik, 2014). Hence the *halal* logo is the "*name, term, sign, symbol, or any other feature*" (p.21) that identifies Islamic branding as distinct from other brands. This represents the product aspect of Islamic branding.

HDC in their website also defines *halal* as permissible with regards to food. Halal food should not contain any pig content, faeces. Semen, blood, canine content, human tissues or meat from inappropriately slaughtered animals (El-Erian, 1986). In addition, its relevancy in fact extends to non-food areas such as personal care and cosmetic products, pharmaceuticals, others consumer goods finance and services (Halal Industry Development Corporation, 2013). Islamic banks are the financial institutions offering *halal* interest-free financial instruments that conform to *sharia* law (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007; Gerald & Cunninghamm, 1997; Haron, Ahmad, & Planisek, 1994; Rammal & Zurbruegg, 2007).

"*Halal*" term is not limited for food products, but it means more than pork-free (Shafie & Osman, 2006), which include all ingredients in variety of personal care products such as perfumes, toothpaste and pharmaceutical products (Fischer, 2007). In addition, Islamic banks are the financial institutions offering *halal* interest-free financial instruments that conform to *Sharia* law (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007; Gerald & Cunninghamm, 1997; Haron, et al., 1994; Rammal & Zurbruegg, 2007).

The *halal* symbol plays an important role in convincing Muslim consumers to purchase particular products (Fischer, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Shafie & Osman, 2006). In London, supermarkets such as Tesco and ASDA are already encouraging *halal* standards by selling products with the *halal* logo (Fischer, 2007, 2008a). In Malaysia, the *halal* logo is very important and used to convince Muslims that the products are *halal* and have been through *Sharia*-compliant procedures. As for manufacturers, the *halal* logo could help them market

their products effectively among Muslim consumers. Properly labeled products with the *halal* logo could help consumers purchase with more confidence.

As part of Islamic branding, preparation, packaging, storing and transporting products and services are important as mentioned in *Sharia* law. Shafie and Osman (2006) in their study specified the challenges of marketing *halal* products including code number representing these specific ingredients on the packaging. Hygiene should be applied everywhere including at the food outlets. The food outlets should also display the clear *halal* logo. On the other hand, Sharma and Williams (2006) assert that it is important to have a Muslim staff in the manufacturer of the Islamic branding of products/services, so that the products/services will be more genuine in building such a brand.

Packaging labels are also very important to avoid confusion. Labels and ingredient information on packaging labels will help customers feel confident when purchasing products (Fischer, 2007, 2008a). The effects of the Islamic way of religious perspectives on packaging remain largely unstudied to date. However, researchers from the area of information technology did research on '*RFID tag for halal tracking in Malaysia*' (Norman, Md Nasir, & Azmi, 2008) to explain the important of packaging in Islamic branding. This article also identified the market opportunity to deploy such technology in packaging. In Norman, et al., (2008), a quantitative method was used to gather data from *halal* and non-*halal* users around the Klang Valley, Malaysia. They found that users needed an appropriate system to help them purchase products from the mass market.

Alserhan (2010) consents that packaging is part of component that manufacturers have to concentrate on because it has all the information about the *halal* logo, the ingredients, and the right packaging could attract the right target audience. That could be one of the approaches to communicate with the consumer from certain region, cultural or religious background. For instance, non-*halal* products that sell in hypermarket in Kuala Lumpur are located separated from the other products with special tag and label in order to respect Muslim consumers (Alserhan, 2010).

Malaysia has made considerable economic, political and cultural progress. The combination of its complicated political background, which influences policy making so much, its stronger economy base and its cultural variety make it an ideal subject for this study. Its multi-ethnic background also make it unique as a training ground for global marketer, especially in devising their marketing strategy and advertising campaigns. The role as Islamic country is a bonus to become a *halal* hub, which can attract Muslim tourists from all over the world and give more purchasing power for local Muslim consumers. And this phenomenon also will enhance the advertising industry to be more sensitive with Islamic requirements, which can help to boost a confident modern MMW in purchasing behavior.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore how modern MMW practise *halal* requirements in their daily routines. A qualitative research method was chosen because the researcher required an in-depth understanding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of practising *halal* issues among modern MMW. The method is appropriate because semi-structured interviews are particularly useful for gathering the story behind a participant's experiences (Kvale, 1996). The interviews were

conducted in the Malay language and were audio recorded, with the participants' permission. The researcher, who is of Malay ethnicity, interpreted the transcripts into English.

Snowball sampling was the principal method used to recruit participants in both the focus group and individual interviews. Two focus groups were conducted in February and March 2010 before the interviews. A total of 30 modern MMW were interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured interview method. The identities of participants from both interviews are renamed to protect their anonymity.

The data gathered may give the meaning of Islamic branding of products and services on modern MMW in Kuala Lumpur. For this reason the author looks at a number of products that have the *halal* label which it could be easier in my explanation during both interviews, focus groups and face-to face interviews. During the focus group the author displayed products such as food based like pasta sauce, ketchup and cereal; and non-food products, for example shampoo, talcum powder, toothpaste and mouthwash in front of the participants to make my questions clearer. Each product was represented by two brands, one representing Islamic values, and the other not. Interviews started with familiarizing with all the products displayed in front of the participants. They were free to observe, touch or read anything on the products. When moderator begun the session with icebreaking and introducing the title of the research, almost all the participants nodded their head seem like they knew what will be asked to them.

Two groups of women, married and unmarried, who aged between 25-35 years old were gathered for the purpose of data collection. The aim of the interview was to find out about MMW's opinion about Islamic branding. Participants for the first focus group were recruited through personal contacts (relatives and friends) of the researcher. Subsequently, snowballing and purposive sampling were used to recruit participants for the second focus group. All of the focus group participants were very co-operative and supportive.

The individual interviews were held in Kuala Lumpur, three months after the focus groups to allow transcribing of focus group discussions and to develop the interview questions. Individual interviews took three months to complete and their primary purpose was to ensure that the overall thematic and theoretical arguments of the research were covered. Thematic analysis of both focus groups and interviews was undertaken.

4. Result and discussions

The purpose of the fieldwork reported here is to find out from consumers (MMW) in Kuala Lumpur about their perception on Islamic branding and how this branding affected their purchasing behavior. This first stage of data analyzing from focus groups were also helped in developing the second stage of interviews (face to face semi-structured interviews) by identifying and clustering themes. Both data collections explored audience attitudes to and perceptions of the Muslim identity, attitude, availability (halal products), influence, interaction, product/brand (values), freedom (to choose/buy), and needs. Finally, the analysis will also include an investigation of the way in which Islamic values, communications and strategies influence the behavior of modern MMW in their purchasing.

For the purpose on this article, three main points have been highlighted to exemplify how modern MMW interact with the existing scenario. The three issues are:

1. *Halal* is a must in food products
2. Brand familiarity
3. The trustworthiness of the *halal* logo

4.1. *Halal* is a must in food products

Consuming *halal* food, in general, is one of the most important practices among Muslims. Most participants involved in this research emphasized that food or anything related to foodstuffs should be *halal*. The main concerns expressed by participants after observing a few products displayed in front of them were:

> I don't really mind about *halal* in these products, e.g. shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash and talcum powder. However, for food products, I do want them to be *halal*. (Lina)

> I am very particular about foodstuffs. *Halal* food is very important for Muslims. On the other hand, I don't really mind whether other stuff like shampoo, toothpaste are *halal* or not. (Habibah)

> I am very concerned about food, compared to non-food goods. (Umaimah & Rina)

> For me, it is a must to eat *halal* food. (Norain)

> Since it is a must in Islam to eat *halal* food, so, I must choose it. In addition, eating *halal* food will help to clean our soul and personality. You are what you eat. Other than food, I don't mind about the products' *halalness.* (Rohaya)

> Definitely I will go for *halal* food. It does not matter where it's being manufactured. Food must be *halal*, other products (besides food) will be considered. (Anita)

> Normally for food, I will make sure it is *halal*. To avoid anything suspicious I usually cook at home, and rarely dine out. (Umairah)

Findings show that consuming *halal* food is one of the religious requirements and Muslims are bound to follow the teaching. Rohaya who was single and just graduated for her university degree, highlighted that it is a must to eat *halal* food and that she has no choice but to obey her religious beliefs. Habibah, a single young lady and worked as an executive in a local bank, emphasized the importance of *halal* food for Muslims but she was not worried about the *halalness* of other goods. Anita, 35 years old and an Event Manager, also stressed *halal* food, regardless of its origins; Umairah, 32 years old and a housewife, preferred home dining in order to avoid suspicious food ingredients.

The participants were aware about the Muslim values that drove them to eat *halal* food. Umairah chose to eat at home because she was concerned about frauds with *halal*

ingredients (e.g. containing pork), which have been spread recently through the mass media. This kind of attitude shows that these modern MMW are attached to their religion in a way that makes them interact positively with the 'regulation' (Boone, Vermeir, Bergeaud-Blackler, & Verbeke, 2001).

Boone et al. (2001) relates the importance of consuming *halal* meat with self-identity, attitude or habit. By using the theory of planned behavior, Boone et al. (2001), investigate individual characteristics that are important in a religious food decision. The theory shows that self-identity, for example as a Muslim, could be the main reason that *halal* food is a priority in the Muslim diet.

Nevertheless Boone et al. (2001) also emphasize *halal* meat consumption in France although Muslims are a minority in that country. The key point from their research is a strong personal conviction for consuming *halal* food. It does not matter where the food is manufactured or where the Muslims are livings, *halal* food will always be the priority diet. This attitude is believed to lead them to become good Muslims both physically and spiritually.

4.2. Brand familiarity

As the first question asked about their familiarity and preference on buying the product, most of them seem to choose something which they familiar or use to it from childhood. For example when asked about their preference of mouthwash, the brands displayed were Colgate and Listerine, 50% of the participants from both of groups chose Listerine as their first choice.

> I would prefer to choose a product/brand, which I have been using since my childhood. I don't even notice whether my preferred product has the *halal* logo or not because that is my regular product/brand and I am very comfortable to continue using it. (Zaidah)

Meanwhile, for food products, some participants were quite particular about choosing food for them or the family to eat. Some of them still feel that brands they used to consume in childhood are acceptable, because that was what their parent fed them. For instance, cereal brands displayed during the interviews were Kellog's and Carrefour's; Kellog's received the majority of the vote.

> I will choose Kellog's because I have used to it since I was kid. Eventually, there is a *halal* logo on the Kellog's packaging. However, since I am really used to it, I never look at the packaging or label before I take it from the shelf. If no *halal* logo was displayed on the box I would not notice it and would still buy this product, because I am happy to consume cereal from this brand. (Habibah)

> Yes, I also never notice the *halal* logo on the packaging, especially for products like shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash etc. As long as I am happy with the brands, it suits me, and will go for that. On the other hand, for food products, I am a bit particular, especially look for *halal*, sometimes, because I use to consume some food brands or go to my usual restaurant, I don't really notice whether the food is *halal* or not. (Umaimah)

Additionally, Islam as the national religion in Malaysia does influence Muslims in their purchasing (Fischer, 2007). The fieldwork revealed that living in Malaysia offers comfort to Muslims because the country is Islamic and supports their beliefs. Modern MMW, who are considered have good career such as Zaidah, Habibah and Umaimah felt they are surrounded by a comfort zone and assumed that everything sold in Malaysia is *halal.* This idea was common in Malaysian Muslim's minds decades ago. However, it has slowly been questioned because there have been a number of controversies surrounding the sale of *halal* goods in Malaysia. Umaimah, 32 years old and a dentist, told that even though she was particular about *halal* foodstuffs, she was still positive about the non-*halal* symbol brands she used to consume for non-food products. She was happy with her food purchases, but because of the controversies she was becoming a little more particular about foodstuffs. The opinions expressed by Umaimah in relation to this issue indicated that these modern MMW identify themselves as loyal, which implies they are satisfied with what they used to consume and intend to continue purchasing the same brands. However, they may change products if the preferred product is no longer *halal* and does not serve their needs and requirement. Boone et al. (2001) reveals that "different 'decision' segments exist within the *halal* market" (p. 375). Peers, family or other communication medium such as media could be the main influence in their "decision" (p. 375).

The intention to buy the same brand over time could possibly be influenced by the brand familiarity. This could become a commitment for consumers because they have beliefs and feelings that give them purchasing intentions (Ha, 1998). Ha (1998) described how Unit Brand Loyalty integrates two elements; attitude (towards consuming) and behavior (purchasing). In addition, a subjective norm (external factors) is introduced to avoid any unbalance between the two elements of Unit Brand Loyalty.

Meanwhile, Fishbein (1980) underlines how attitude influence may predispose the attitude that Muslims have towards goods/services. The modern MMW in the current research believed that Islam was the situation that led to their attitudes toward *halal* consumption. On the other hand, the 'decision' to consume also could be influenced by subjective norms, which is an external opinion such as friend or family (Fishbein, 1980; Ha, 1998). As this research is about the interaction of traditional Muslim values with *halal* goods/services, the subjective norm has been changed to Muslim values.

4.3. The importance of halal logo for Muslim

The *halal* logo plays an important role in convincing Muslim consumers to purchase particular products (Fischer, 2007, 2008a; Shafie & Osman, 2006). In this era of food technology, ingredients are presented in code number, which for some people they would not understand what it would represent for. Therefore, for some people to see the logo it is enough to convince them that products they bought are safe to consume.

Most of married participants, they are quite particular in their buying. According to them, they may be very careful when choosing food products in the market. They believe that everything they take will have an effect for their mental and physical development, especially for children.

I am always looking for *halal* products for my family; food or non-food products. This is because it gives us peace of mind as a Muslim. We would never feel suspicious, and always confident in our daily practise. (Intan)

As a teacher, food can help in developing mental and physical. Good food, including the process of making it and the ingredients can affect human personality, some people say, "we are what we eat". In that case, I prefer to buy *halal* products. (Aisyah)

I would prefer to buy *halal* products for my family, especially food. Besides the logo, I do check the ingredients, because not all *halal* foods are good for children. (Zainab)

Since I'm married and have children, I am particular about *halal* products. I still check the ingredients of the food products because the *halal* logo has been misused by some irresponsible manufacturers/producers. It is a priority in my purchasing to get the *halal* one, even for non-food products like shampoo or toothpaste. (Athirah)

Those who have family are very particular about food choice. However, they tend to adopt Islamic way into their lifestyle. In addition, family women were concerned about their children's health, development (mental and physical), and education. Most of them believed that food is the first thing they should look at in order to fulfill their children's needs. Aisyah, who is a teacher also agreed with this statement yet she was not married. The benchmark for this requirement is the *halal* logo. The modern MMW in this study did check the logo on the packaging before purchasing. Those who are more particular also looked at the ingredients in order to make sure the food contains appropriate emulsifiers, enzymes, fats, or gelatin. Non-*halal* ingredients could mean that the whole food is *haram* (forbidden).

The issue raised in this section shows that modern MMW make choices reflecting their religious faith. Their identity as Muslims kept them aware of what they should and should not buy. In addition, the participants revealed their attitude toward Muslim values and Islamic values products: that traditional Muslim values are always a priority in their life.

The *halal* logo plays an important role in convincing Muslim consumers to purchase particular products (Fischer, 2007, 2008; Shafie & Osman, 2006). In this era of food technology, ingredients are presented by code number, but some people may not understand what they represent. Therefore, for some people, to see the logo is enough to convince them that products they bought are safe to consume.

Additionally, *halal* also applies to personal care, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. The modern MMW in this study who chose to practise an Islamic lifestyle chose goods such as shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash, cosmetics or pharmaceutical, branded as *halal*. Although the goods stated above are not food, choosing *halal* goods gave the modern MMW peace of mind especially in order to perform the basic five prayers in a day.

In Malaysia, the *halal* logo is very important and use to convince Muslims that the products are safe and have been through *Sharia*-compliant procedures. Shafie and Osman (2006) agree that the *halal* logo does play a role in consumers' purchase decision, however their paper also highlights that some producers have misused the *halal* logo (Fischer, 2007, 2008b) to maintain their market share with Muslim customers. Fischer (2008b) discovers that *halal* certification has become value-added marketing in the Malaysian market, and that is why some manufacturers and producers have misused the *halal* logo in order to keep their sales.

The issue raised in this section shown that MMW would make choice reflecting their determination in religious faith. Their identity as Muslims is always keep them aware on what they should buy and should not. In addition, the participants revealed their attitude toward Muslim values and Islamic branding, which traditional Muslim values are always priority in their life.

5. Conclusion

Discussions with 40 modern MMW through focus groups and face-to-face interviews revealed their understanding of Islamic branding and how they define Muslim brands. These modern MMW have their own definition through their understanding of Islamic branding and Muslim brands. They believed that by consuming *halal* food as outlined in *Sharia* law, they would be better Muslims. *Halal* requirement does affect modern MMW in their daily lives especially in relation to food consumption. In addition, this data analysis is suggesting that Muslim values are the strongest determinant for modern MMW. The present research is the first section of a project studying *halal* practising determinants with modern MMW. It gives an idea of which variables are important in understanding and predicting the consumption of *halal* goods/services consumption.

Acknowledgement

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