

## **Islamic Faith and Attitudes Towards the Advertising of Controversial Products**

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### **Abstract**

In a constantly changing and increasingly globalized world, religion still plays a significant role in influencing social and consumer behavior. This study will analyze what influence Islamic faith and intensity of belief has on attitudes towards the advertising of particular controversial products and services. A questionnaire was distributed to 209 people in Turkey. The results indicated some statistically significant differences between the devout and the lenient Muslims which can have important implications for marketers.

### **Background**

The influence of religious beliefs on individual and social behaviour is well documented (see Greeley, 1977; Hirschman, 1983; LaBarbera, 1987; Uppal, 1986; Anand and Kumar, 1982; Luqmani *et al.*, 1987; Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999; McDaniel and Burnett, 1990; Waller and Fam, 2000; Birch *et al.*, 2001). However, a review of the pertinent literature showed only a handful of studies that directly examined the influence of religion on marketing communications. Moreover, the religious studies which did look at the influence on marketing communications focused only on the influence of Islam on advertising content and regulation in Saudi Arabia (Luqmani *et al.*, 1987) and message contentiousness among Gulf Co-operative Council countries (Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999). Both of these studies revealed the importance of understanding the Islamic religion in relation to effective advertising.

In particular, Luqmani *et al.* (1987) claim that provocative and unconventional advertising strategies and advertisements must obtain prior approval from religious authorities. Failure to do so will result in alienation of a wide segment of the conservative Saudi public. The findings from Michell and Al-Mossawi's (1999) study of Gulf Co-operative Council countries showed religiously strict Muslims scored lower in terms of recall and were unfavourable towards contentious advertisements relative to lenient Muslims (one who practices Islam). The findings suggest that there is a difference in perceived controversial elements in advertisements between a devout and a lenient Muslim. These findings also highlight the importance of matching creative execution, message content, and etc. to a society's socio-cultural environment (Peebles and Ryans, 1984). Suffice to say, an alienated public will certainly have a negative attitude towards the advertisement and brand recall (Zinkhan and Martin, 1982; Gardner, 1985). Michell and Al-Mossawi (1999) claim an offensive advertisement will not be effective in capturing an audience's attention or changing his/her attitudes.

The effects of religion on the advertising of controversial products remain largely unstudied to date. The aim of this study is to narrow the current knowledge gap by examining the attitudes of Islamic followers on the advertising of controversial products. Specifically, we intend to examine whether intensity of religious belief has an impact on offence towards the advertising of controversial products.

## Controversial Products

Various types of products, both goods and services, have been suggested by past studies as being controversial when advertised, including cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear, and political advertising. Academic research in this area has described these products as: "unmentionables", "socially sensitive products", "decent products", or "controversial products" (Wilson and West, 1981; Rehman and Brooks, 1987; Shao, 1993; Shao and Hill, 1994; Fahy *et al.*, 1995; Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Waller, 1999; Waller and Fam, 2000). Wilson and West (1981) described them as: "... goods, services or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented" (p.92). They presented a number of examples, including: "goods" (for personal hygiene, birth control, warfare, and drugs for terminal illness), "services" (for abortion, sterilisation, VD, mental illness, funeral directors, and artificial insemination), and "concepts" (for political ideas, palliative care, unconventional sexual practices, racial/religious prejudice and terrorism).

## Methodology

To obtain some measure of offensiveness towards the advertising of specific controversial products, a questionnaire was distributed to a convenience sample of university students in Turkey. Turkey is a country with a high percentage of Islamic followers. The rationale for using university students as subjects has been a research method practiced worldwide for many years, mainly for their accessibility to the researcher and homogeneity as a group (Calder *et al.*, 1981).

The survey instrument included a list of 17 products from which respondents were asked to indicate their level of personal "offence" on a five-point scale (1=Not at all Offensive, 5= Extremely Offensive). The list of products include: Alcohol, Charities, Cigarettes, Condoms, Female Contraceptives, Female Hygiene Products, Female Underwear, Funeral Services, Gambling, Guns & Armaments, Male Underwear, Pharmaceuticals, Political Parties, Racially Extremist Groups, Religious Denominations, Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention), and Weight Loss Programs. Also included in the questionnaire were questions relating to demographics, religious belief and intensity of religious belief (1=Not a Devout Religious Follower, 5= A Devout Religious Follower).

The 17 product items were factor analysed using a varimax rotation. The result was four different groups (reliabilities between 0.60 and 0.82): Gender/Sex Related Products (eg. condoms, female contraceptives, male/female underwear, etc.); Social/Political Groups (eg. political parties, religious denominations, funeral services, etc.); Addictive Products (eg. alcohol, cigarettes, etc.); and Health and Care Products (eg. Charities, sexual diseases like AIDS & STD prevention, etc.).

A total of 209 useable questionnaire were returned with 99% of the respondents identified themselves as Muslim and reasonably devout followers (mean score of 3.46 out of 5). The average age is 21 years old with male (64%) more than female (36%) respondents.

## Results: Islam and Advertising of Offensive Products

The results show advertising of Social/Political Groups (mean = 3.73) extremely offensive followed by Addictive Products (3.48). Gender/Sex Related Products (2.58) was ranked third followed by Health and Care Products (2.42). See Table 1 below. The respondents were then divided into two groups, namely low (below the average mean of 3.46) and high (above the average mean of 3.46) intensity of religious beliefs. Overall, our study found the religiously devout respondents (n=35) were more likely to find advertising of Social/Political Groups (p<0.01) extremely offensive followed by Addictive Products (p<0.01), Gender/Sex Related Products (p<0.01) and Health and Care Products (p<0.01) offensive than the less devout followers (n=174).

**Table 1: Differences in Offensiveness based on Religious Belief**

Type of Religions	Gender/Sex Related Products	Social/ Political Groups	Health & Care Products	Addictive Products
Islam (N = 209)	2.58 (1.10)	3.73 (1.23)	2.42 (0.98)	3.48 (1.38)
Low Intensity (n=174)	1.78 (0.88)	3.48 (1.19)	2.11 (1.05)	2.83 (1.49)
High Intensity (n=35)	2.71 (1.08)	3.74 (1.24)	2.47 (0.97)	3.59 (1.33)
F-value, * = 0.05, ** = 0.01	60.498**	3.492*	3.920*	56.670**

### Managerial Implications

Two major issues can be derived from this research. First, religion does have an effect on the four controversial product groups. This is a major finding as until now, such a relationship remains largely unstudied by empirical research. The closest was to examine the impact of Islam on advertising content and regulation (Luqmani *et al.*, 1987), and message contentiousness (Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999). Second, the more religious one is the more likely that he/she will be offended by the advertising of controversial products. As reported in the findings, the ardent believers of Islam found advertising of Social/Political Groups and Addictive Products particularly offensive compared to the more lenient believers. The perceived offence could be traced to the ardent religious believers being generally more conservative, have greater concern for moral standards and possess more traditional attitudes (Barton and Vaughan, 1976; Wiebe and Fleck, 1980; Wilkes *et al.*, 1986) relative to their less religious counterparts.

**Social/Political Groups:** refers to advertisements relating to racially extreme groups, religious denominations, guns & armaments, funeral services, and political parties. The reasons for the offence could be linked to racist images, anti-social behavior and to some extent, reacting to the promotion of other religious denominations and funeral services, which can be culturally offensive. Islam, in particular, perceived this type of advertising as offensive. When confronted with this option, an agency manager could either reject the account or turn the negative into positive re-enforcement, such as, contrasting religious teachings with the by-products of anti-social behavior.

**Addictive Products:** include cigarettes, alcohol and gambling. Islam prohibits gambling and consumption of alcohol. Smoking is also prohibited amongst the stricter Muslims. In societies where Islam is the main faith like Turkey, advertising of alcoholic products is totally banned or heavily restricted. The promotion implications include avoiding the mass display of such products in the public.

**Gender/Sex Related Products:** include female and male underwear, condoms, female contraceptives and female hygiene products. Taylor and Raymond (2000) state that religion and social values concerning modesty and the offensive nature of the products make it difficult to promote socially sensitive products. This is reinforced by our results. Muslims in general and the more devout Muslims in particular, found the advertising of Gender/Sex Related Products offensive. One could trace this offence to the tenets of Islam. For instance, both Muslim men and women must cover their torso and upper legs at all times and women must dress conservatively in public.

Sex before marriage is strictly prohibited and all Muslims are obliged to conform to sexual codes (Deng *et al.*, 1994). Therefore, the advertising of male and female underwear would mean some parts of the body were exposed to the public. These advertisements could also conjure up images linking to nudity, subject too personal and/or sexist images which are against the Islamic teachings. The implications for international advertisers are that they need to know their target market very well. One of the Five Pillars of Islam is to remain 'pure' during the holy month of Ramadan. Hence, during this ninth month of the Muslim calendar, the best strategy is to avoid antagonizing the Muslim viewers is by not showing any advertisements that involved Gender/Sex Related Products. If it is not possible, perhaps the use of more discreet media like the Internet or direct mails could alleviate the problem.

**Health & Care Products:** consists of weight-loss programs, charities and sexual diseases drugs. This products group has the lowest score in terms of advertising offensiveness. The low score could be attributed to people getting used to such advertisements. For instance, Wilson and West (1995) suggested how the AIDS issue had changed what was previously thought of as "unmentionable". Similarly, the giving alms to the poor are the religious duty of every Muslim. Advertising of these products will be seen as challenging the obvious. Islamic believers, in particular, think that a true Muslim believes in the shari'ah, a code that governs the duties, morals and behavior of all Muslims. Hence, one deserves to be punished (infected with sexual disease) if a believer adopts a sexual lifestyle contrary to the shari'ah. Similarly, it is the religious duty of every Muslim to give alms to the poor and needy. To a religious Muslim such a plea, via an advertisement, is tantamount to him/her being an uncaring and irresponsible Muslim, a charge offensive to most Muslims.

## Conclusions

The main objective of this research was to examine whether the Islamic and intensity of religious belief has an effect on the attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products. From the responses of 209 people, evidently, the Islamic followers found the advertising of Social/Political Groups extremely offensive followed by Addictive Products. Next were Gender/Sex Related Products and Health & Care Products. Our study also found there were differences in the degree of offensiveness between devout and lenient Muslims in relation to the four controversial products groups. A limitation of this study is that Islam was examined on

a broad basis. That is, it was not possible to identify whether the Sunni Muslims or the Shiite Muslims were more offended by the advertising of the four controversial products groups.

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