CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING ISLAMIC ART AND CULTURE IN COMMERCIAL BRANDS

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Abstract: This research studies the current use of Islamic art in commercial brands in order to identify key challenges and address major considerations in the designs. Firstly, a survey was conducted to evaluate user perception of current use of Islamic art and cultural influences in brands. Next, case studies were employed to analyse the current application of Islamic art. The research shows that, even when simplified, Islamic art symbols are still recognisable and provide a strong identity of Islamic culture. In addition, embedding simplified Islamic art symbols in commercial products can increase sales. However, the lack of clear guidelines can result in high risks of misuse, misinterpretation which could damage the reputation of the brands. This paper identifies key challenges and proposes how to address them properly. These challenges will encourage designers creativity to apply new Islamic art symbols appropriately in commercial products.

Keywords: Islamic art, Commercial products, Brand value

1. Introduction

Continuous changes in the economy have encouraged brands to search for new ideas and concepts of developing competitive advantages in order to offer different, yet attractive, products. Organisations excel in creating strong visual identities, and image can encourage consumers' positive attitudes (Dowling 1993, Van Riel 1995, Van Riel and Blamer 1997). Brands today not only try to differentiate their products' image, style, message and experience, but also seek to reach the highest level of consumer loyalty and appreciation. Previous research discovered strong relations between a favourable visual identity/image and superior business performance. In addition, Martineau (1958) stressed the essential elements that constitute a retail image in a consumer's memory are: layout and architecture, symbols, and colours. Posteral (2004) similarly argues that the "look and feel" of people, places and things are more important than we think. Image and brand identity have a significant effect on enhancing brand value and can encourage better business performance by enhancing differentiation and competitive advantages. Thus, the management of brand visual identity plays a key role in transmitting images to stakeholders and in differentiating the firm in the marketplace (Dowling 1993, Gorb 1992). More specifically, brand identity is expressed through names and symbols, logos and colour schemes (Dowling 2001). In visual design literature, the use of symbols and symbolism in communicating brand strategy is widely acknowledged (Carter 1982, Henrion and Perkin 1967, Margulies 1977, Olins 1990, Pilditch 1970, Van Riel and Balmer 1997). Also, Norman (2004) asserts that beautifully designed products make people feel good, which in turn puts people in an open frame of mind to be creative and find solutions to the problems they face. In addition, some brands try to use

their products to engage with consumers' lives and be a part of them in order to strengthen their relationships and move from the unknown to a strong informal relationship.

Brands must also be attractive, pleasurable and fun at the same time. However, Brunner et al. (2009) state that "the difference between a great product and a merely good product…is that a great product embodies an idea that people can understand and learn about – an idea that grows in their minds, one they emotionally engage with." Currently, global brands are trying to inject cultural values into their products in order to penetrate new markets. They need to maintain the global brand identity while adding a cultural flavour into their designs to increase sales. Noticeably, there has not been any significant development in terms of applying Islamic art to international brands/products. Recently, top brands such as Coca-Cola and Starbucks have applied Islamic art to their products to celebrate Ramadan in the Islamic countries despite the fact that these brands do not have any Islamic roots. They clearly want to make their products appeal to Islamic markets. The issue is, designers tends to limit their designs to the traditional Islamic art applications in brands which shows that creativity was not considered as key factor when designing or applying the Islamic art symbols. Thus, the absence of a guideline that address many different aspects of Islamic art can enourage use of many elements that may not be used within the previous applications in branding.

2. Background research

Islamic Art: Since the 7th century, Islamic art has flourished and celebrated its distinctiveness and uniqueness of cultures among Muslims. Due to its superb use of colour and great balance between design and shape, it creates an instant visual impact with observers. The strength of Islamic art is its aesthetic appeal that reflects rich cultural values of the Islamic world. It is also a visual way for Muslims to see the spiritual world and the whole universe. Islamic art does not necessarily mean a symbol of Islam, but is named "Islamic" due to it being the combination of artists' creative thoughts of Islamic philosophy and Islamic spirituality, as well as an expression of people living in lands where Islam has an influence on daily life.

Figure 20. Examples of contemporary Islamic art

Islamic art & brands: Historically, Islamic art has been extensively studied in relation to the religion of Islam or its history. It is observed that research on commercial applications of Islamic art is lacking. Hence, the full potential of Islamic art in branding has not been explored. Due to the absence of specific guidelines and/or framework, Islamic art is applied to brands according to the designer's own intuition. As a result, there is a strong chance of failure in capturing the real values of such extensive and magnificent art. Hence, this research intends to protect the essence and values of Islamic art from any misinterpretation and/or misuse in the branding process. In order to achieve this goal, the researchers investigated various subjects (namely Islamic art history, principles, literature, existing brand models and customer needs) to identify key challenges.

Commercial arts: Nowadays, many types of art have been exploited in branding. Several studies have proved that applying appropriate art can help differentiate products and brands from those of competitors as well as increase brand values. For example, Davis and McIntosh (2005) state that art can "satisfy customers' desires for beauty, excitement, enjoyment, and meaning." Art goes beyond

enhancing brand experience; it can encourage dialogues between brands and customers and conversations among customers. In this way, insights about interests, tastes and perspectives can be captured and used to strengthen relationships with individual customers or to design innovative offerings. Currently, most commercial applications of Islamic art are created based on designers' interpretations without any guidance. The lack of clear guidelines could lead to improper and incorrect use of Islamic art in commercial products. As a result, the researcher aims to develop a guideline for commercial applications of Islamic art that matches contemporary lifestyles of target markets, while maintaining the religious values and meanings. This paper addresses three key issues:

- Critically examine current commercial applications of Islamic art
- Compare commercial applications of Islamic art with those of other arts
- Identify key problems from brand and consumer perspectives

3. Aim

The aim of this research is to investigate the current use of Islamic art in brands and commercial products in order to identify key challenges and suggest how to address them appropriately. In order to achieve this aim, there are four key objectives to be completed.

1. Evaluate the current commercial application of Islamic art.
2. Identify user perception of the Islamic patterns and cultural symbols.
3. Analyse and identify key challenges of using Islamic art commercially.
4. Propose a strategy to assist designers in applying Islamic art appropriately.

4. Methods and results

There are two methods employed in this research. Firstly, case studies were employed to evaluate the current applications of Islamic symbols in brands. Secondly, a questionnaire was used to gain further insights about user perception of the use of art and cultural influences in commercial brands.

4.1. Case studies

4.1.1. Case 1: Coca-Cola marketing campaign in Turkey 2008.

This case was chosen to demonstrate the strong interest of applying Islamic art among international brands, such as Coca-Cola.

Figure 2. Coca-Cola marketing campaign in Turkey 2008

Table 4. Coca-Cola Case Study Analysis

Client	Execution	Evaluation
Coca-Cola	**Aim:** To communicate Ramadan core values by using symbols of Islamic art and imagery of Ramadan's heritage with contemporary execution **Big Idea:** Celebration, togetherness and acceptance – three key elements are represented by the use of Islamic patterns that look like fireworks and bursts of activities surrounding the bottle	✓ **Appropriate:** The Islamic art element usage was <u>not</u> appropriately applied as it does not signify the real Islamic culture ✓ **Recognisable:** The art and graphics were <u>blended</u> with the Coca-Cola style ✓ **Relevant to contemporary lifestyle and brand context:** In Ramadan, people stay away from music and partying as they put all their effort into living like the poor

4.1.2. Case 2: Starbucks cup for Ramadan in the Middle East.

This case was selected to represent how Islamic symbols were used as part of brand experience in non-Islamic brands.

Figure 3: Starbucks cup for Ramadan in the Middle East

Table 2. Starbucks Case Study Analysis

Client	Execution	Evaluation
Starbucks	**Design:** The Starbucks cup has a special design for celebrating Ramadan using some Islamic art and cultural symbols, such as crescents, star and minaret as well as Islamic arches filled with ornamental patterns	✗ **Appropriate:** The texture and the background colour were <u>not</u> the best choice to help deliver the message ✓ **Recognisable:** Good selection of symbols as star, moon, minarah and patterns are considered significant graphics of Islamic art and culture ✗ **Relevant to contemporary lifestyle and brand context:** lack of strength and consistency

4.1.3. Case 3: Designer Nawal Almaimani's 2009 Collection.

This case was selected to represent how Islamic symbols were used as parts of brand experience in Islamic brands.

Figure 4. Designer Nawal Almaimani's 2009 Collection

Table 3. Nawal Almaimani Case Study Analysis

Client	Execution	Evaluation
Nawal Almaimani (Fashion Designer)	**Design:** Uses many colours, different fabrics, textures and Islamic art patterns. Her collections focus on creating modern traditional garments known as the "Abaya" as well as modern dresses and scarves to make the Hijab more fashionable. Most of her designs use Arabic calligraphy	✓ **Appropriate:** The collections and logo focus on applying excellent Islamic art graphics, calligraphy and symbols on women's garments ✓ **Recognisable:** Graphic design is deeply rooted in the Islamic art and can be easily recognised ✓ **Relevant to contemporary lifestyle and the brand context:** Her designs help to preserve Islamic culture using a modern twist so that modern women can appreciate it and feel stylish

4.2. Survey

The survey was a combination of online and offline questionnaires to ensure a good mixture of participants from different age groups and cultural backgrounds. The questionnaire comprised of multiple choice and rating questions, and general information about the participants. The total number of participants including offline and online users from Saudi Arabia and other countries is 117. The survey results will be analysed and later integrated with other findings to form a basis for the guidelines. Based on the questionnaire results, further insights were gained on consumer opinions about brands' use of culturally influenced symbols and graphics on their products. The questions were designed to cover a variety of aspects regarding this application, such as:

- The strength of the symbols and level of user recognition
- The level of the visual simplicity
- Essential elements for applying cultural symbols in brands
- Benefits of using art and cultural symbols in the brand context
- Advantages/disadvantages of applying art and cultural symbols in brands

The responses were collected, analysed and compared to find out the perception of users and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the existing applications of Islamic art symbols.

Figure 5. Examples of art and cultural symbols used in the questionnaire

Table 4. Questionnaire Analysis

Main Aspects	Survey Results	Creative Design Directions
Strength of the symbols	• **60%** found problems in specifying the symbols' origins	**Do:** Symbols should be strong enough to signify the meaning
Level of user recognition	• **65%** failed to associate design elements to cultures	**Don't:** Cultural images should not be complex
Visual simplicity	• **46%** thought that symbols and graphics were over simplified • **33%** referred to improper use of cultural	**Do:** Make sure that art and symbols are properly simplified without losing traditional values and core meanings

	symbols as cheap design	
Design elements/cultural symbols	• **52%** suggested that use of colours distracts users from recognising cultural symbols	**Do:** Consider colours, creativity, simplicity, artistic style, innovation, and culture and heritage as top priorities
Benefits of using art and cultural symbols in the brand context	• **76%** strongly agreed that such use could create direct emotional connection with the brand • **54%** said the art and cultural symbols helped brands build strong relationships with consumers • **68%** suggested that such combinations could make the whole brand experience memorable • The majority thought that this could help differentiate the brand	**Do:** Designers should weigh the benefits of applying art and cultural symbols in brands against possible consumer confusion or disapproval. Some cultural symbols and graphics give a positive image and make the brand look more appealing. This combination could help local people become more familiar with new brands

5. Discussion

Lack of creativity in the current use of Islamic art has led to many difficulties in recognising Islamic art. The issue occur as many designers rely on their own intention when using Islamic art in brands. For instance, the conducted survey results revealed that the use of Islamic art on the coca-cola can did not deliver the right message when 60% and 65% failed to recognise the symbols' origins and to which culture they belong respectively. In this research, challenges of using Islamic art and cultural aesthetics are addressed in order to encourage designers to be more creative by considering these challenges rather than follow the traditional symbol and pattern applications of Islamic art in brands. Thus, designers needs to be creative but within an organised and structured guidelines.

In the rapidly shifting market environments, cultural branding is necessary for marketers and brand managers to understand people and local cultural values of the country in which the brand would like to operate. Without understanding a country's core cultural values, miscommunication in branding and advertising is likely (De Mooji, 1998). Culture acts as a stringent screener that considerably influences message meanings because the encoding and decoding of messages is fundamentally different between cultures, particularly Eastern and Western cultures. "Due to differences in culturally based traditions, religions, and histories, individuals in distinct cultures tend to hold a different set of values and preferences. These cultural differences are, in turn, reflected in the content of marketing communication" (Aaker, 2000). Beyond the functionality issues, accommodating aesthetic elements that appeal to user emotion is extremely crucial in the development of a "user-centric" design (Norman, 2004).

Table 5. Challenges and design direction on using Islamic art and cultural expression in brands

Challenges	Design direction
Islamic art symbols and cultural reference in commercial products	The biggest challenge is looking at what suitable Islamic art elements and culturally referenced graphics are to be applied in commercial products to convey Islamic cultural values. It is important to understand the cultural impacts and people's perception of Islamic art symbols and graphics. Graphics should be modernised to a certain extent to deliver the Islamic cultural value and enrich it by the use of Islamic art. Graphics should be developed from the user's perspective.
Colour combinations including patterns and textures	Colour plays a crucial role in differentiation, according to studies, colour can enhance brand recognition by up to 80%. It can affect people's moods and attitudes. Studies have shown that every colour has emotional implications, and many businesses use colour to influence people's buying behaviour. Moreover, different cultures react to colours in different ways, which may require colour testing in the market. To have an appreciable impact, colours must be chosen in reference to culture and marketplace.

Dealing with letters and Arabic calligraphy	Is the strongest element of Islamic art. Also highly appreciated in the Islamic culture as it is the language of the Quran. Many types of Arabic calligraphy exist and each developed in a different period of history. Using calligraphy can significantly enhance value and recognition.

5.1. Applying culture references in commercial brands

The findings of research and data analysis were integrated and presented through the diagrams and tables. The following section discusses how leading brands may use cultural expression in their branding strategy. Based on the findings, embedding culture in brands will strengthen the brand and consumer relationships. Three examples were carefully selected and analysed in terms of origins, cultural expressions and the effect on brand value.

Table 6. Analysis of brands and cultural expression

Brand	Starbucks	Shanghai Tang Cafe	Lion King Musical
Origin	USA	China	Africa
Cultural Expression	• Tables made of light-colour wood • Interiors – a combination of three colours: orange, green and light wood • A selection of visual accessories, such as mirrors, paintings, lamps and sculptures makes it feel lively • Stylish and calming music • Ethically sourcing the finest coffee beans • Good place to meet friends • Convenient store locations	• The first global Chinese lifestyle brand • Modern Chinese chic lifestyle and fashion • Black wood for tables and walls • Porcelain plates • Unique, vibrant energy, bold colours	• African geometric patterns • Colours of nature that represent the African style • Masks covered with symbols and graphics of Africa • African-influenced music, most songs in various African languages • Actors in animal costumes
Brand Value	• Contribute positively to communities and the environment • It is all about human connection • Customers feel a sense of belonging	• Transform the Chinese image based on traditional image and Chinese culture to modern and attractive style • Unique sensory experience	• The Lion King is Disney's most innovative and theatrical show so far

5.2. Islamic art application in brand

Figure 6. Andalusia Café photos from Saudi Arabia

Table 7: Analysis of Andalusia Café and application of Islamic cultural symbols

Brand	Andalusia Café
Cultural Expression	• Arabian culture driven style • Café name is to inspire the spirit of Muslims achievements through the history in Andalusia • The first local café to integrate between café and library full of books about various fields but also including wide range of books about Islam history, religion, Islamic art, etc. • Islamic art patterns cover many surfaces including walls and sofas, Dishes and cups are inspired by Islamic art pottery • Arabic calligraphy on parts of sofas and walls • Inspired by Islamic architecture such as arches • Televisions always run lectures about Islam in various fields
Brand Value	• Encourage middle aged to read as well as know more about Islam in an inspiring atmosphere • Promote Islam through use of many elements of Islamic art such as use of Arabic calligraphy and Islamic patterns. • Contribute positively to create a distinctive experience using the Islamic culture and heritage • Widely recognisable which will increase sales • Can attract non-Muslims to experience and understand the Islamic culture through the atmosphere • Propose the traditional Islamic art elements with a contemporary twist

It is clear that there is a significant potential for embedding cultural symbols aesthetically in commercial products; this will have a major impact on sales as well as help to make the customer experience more memorable and desirable. In addition, these symbols can add an artistic flavour that will make the brand more appreciated. In fact, design and aesthetics are said to be major differentiating attributes in the choice and preference of consumer goods (Zolli, 2004). Coca-Cola is the prime example of creating distinctive packaging designs using cultural symbols, art and shapes.

6. Conclusion

The study clearly indicates that certain images and symbols of Islamic art embedded in commercial products are widely recognised and acceptable. However, these images need to be properly simplified/modernised so that they can be understood easily and accurately. In addition, the level of awareness of Islamic art and Islamic symbols varies considerably from one person to another. Thus, there is a need to provide not only modern images of Islamic art but also a new style of Islamic art that is strikingly simple to be easily recognised. A good combination of contemporary Islamic art and commercial products can bring success to businesses operating in both Muslim and non-Muslim markets. However, the ideal combination can only be accomplished if the design process was established, applied and maintained within the proposed design direction.

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