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Capitalising on Religiosity of Consumers: A study of Commercials of Olper's milk

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ABSTRACT

The use of religious symbols in advertising is pervasive, especially in Islamic countries. Religious symbols, themes and rituals are depicted in advertising of strong brands. In this article we have discussed islamic religious symbols and themes in the advertising of olper's milk which is a popular milk brand in Pakistan. We have used an interpretivist framework and have adopted a semiotic visual analytic approach. We have given a classification of the symbolism and have found that these are abundantly used in these ads. We claim that all this symbolism has origin in the ideology and is adopted for popular cultural use. The common symbols used include the primary static symbols like a crescent, calligraphy, patterns of herbs, shrubs and flowers; while the dynamic symbols like salah, Hajj and fasting are also widely applied. These symbols then give rise to secondary symbolism which is used as abundantly as the primary ones. These symbols are especially used in ads during religious events like ramazan.

INTRODUCTION

Ideas are communicated in symbols-both verbal and visual. These symbols are in turn dictated by the cultural and religious ideologies of the senders and receivers.

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Advertising is one of the most powerful vehicles through which companies communicate with their target audience. Being an expensive communication vehicle, ads are used carefully thought out signs and symbols in order to make a lasting impression on the audience and to make them take action. This article discusses how religious signs, symbols and themes are utilised in advertisement in Pakistan to attract and convince consumers and to create a good brand image. Ads during the month of Ramadan have been analysed in detail and themes have been drawn. Religious themes and symbols are commonly used all over the world; this should be especially

the case in muslim countires where religiosity is comparatively higher as compared to nonmuslim countries(Pew Research Center, 2008).

In this article we analyse the ads of Olper's milk which is a famous brand of Pakistan. It is produced by Engro Chemicals Pakistan limited. Since its launch in 2006, within a short period of time, the brand has become one of the top brands of milk. One of the success factors of Olpers is its advertising campaigns which mostly capitalise on cultural and religious themes.

In the first section of the article, symbolism in religion is briefly discussed in the next one. Some prominent Islamic symbols are elaborated and finally the use of these symbols in cultural artefacts like ads is discussed.

Religious Symbolism

Symbolism is so pervasive that we hardly notice it; it is even harder to define it. Sperber (1975) has defined symbolism as something that is mental but is not rational or something that is semiotic but lacks language to express it.

In human imagination some things take the shape of something else which they call symbols (Avis, 1999). All religions are symbolic. Beliefs, rituals, acts and the ways people interact take on a symbolic meaning as they represent something in the mind of a person (Boyer, 1993).

So, religious rituals and events take the form of artistic objects, typography or gestures and rituals. Religious symbols and their underlying ideologies can be discerned from the script, rituals, and art of the religion and help us understand myths and values.

In each culture and religion, there is a concept of some transcendent being which cannot be grasped without symbols, these symbols give a standard language for comprehending and communicating these 'religious truths'. these are present in all religions-monotheistic as well as polytheistsic .There are myths, values, ideologies behind these symbols. so a study of these symbolisms can give us an idea about the ideologies, mythologies, and values of a society.

Symbolism in islam

All religions are symbolic. In Christianity and Hinduism, the visuals of god, angels, and other illustrations symbolize their ideology. Similarly, Bhuddiist art depicts the Jatakas or the stories of Buddha's previous births (Dehejia, 2013).

Islam, on the either hand, is an aniconic religion. it strictly forbids depiction of living beings. That is why we see other religions have representations of thier holy entitites and personalities but not so in islam.

But no religion or ideology can remain iconless for long. Icons and images do creep in sooner or later; and Islam is no exception. The start of religious symbols took place later, probably during Ottoman rule (Bin Abu Bakar, 2015).

In Islamic culture they first came as calligraphy and geometric patterns. The major part of symbolism consists of text (calligraphy) and patterns (geometric patterns mostly). While celestial objects like stars and crescent and terrestrial objects like shrubs, leaves and flowers are also used.

Categorization of islamic symbols

Islamic symbols can be categorised based on whether they are static or dynamic or primary vs secondary. static symbols are those which are fixed, don't move in space or time; dynamic are those which are moving like prayers or circumambulation of the kaaba. The static symbols can then be divided into: text and geometric patterns; celestial symbols like star and crescent; and terrestrial like shrubs, flowers and leaves. These are basic symbols, they then give rise to secondary symbolism like dress and buildings, which are based on these primary symbols. So the following section is arranged in this order.

Basic Static Symbols

As mentioned above, static symbols are those that do not incorporate movement. These are explained below:

Calligraphy and Geometric Patterns

Islamic art has its genesis in the **Quranic calligraphy** (Javadi and Kamal, 2014) .The Quran is in Arabic and Muslims all over the world consider only the Arabic text as the Quran and not its translations in any language (Ayoub, 1997; Mohammed, 2005). So the Quran is written in Arabic text.

Celestial Symbols

Celestial symbols like **star and crescent** have been used in the islamic world since the Ottoman era. Although they predates islam, they have come to symbolize islam being depicted on the flags of countirs like Pakistan and Turkey.

Terrestrial Symbols

In contrast to celestial symbols, terrestrial symbols have their origin in the earth, its trees, shrubs, leaves and flowers. They have a pleasing and soothing effect on the viewers.

Secondary Symbolism

dress, buildings and the use of colours are all affected by the primary symbols, so we can think of them as derived symbols, these are in turn discussed below:

Colours

The color green has been associated with Islam. This is probably derived from the green of herbs, shrubs and trees. The covers and bindings of the Holy Quran are often green. The dome of the prophet's mausoleum is green; the mausoleum domes of many saints are in the same color. Some Muslims believe the color was worn by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself (Bin Abu Bakar, 2015). Golden is also considered another sacred color being the color of the Roza e Imam Hussain. The dome of the rock is also golden in color. Similarly, black and white are also used.

Dress and Modesty

Islam stresses modesty, whether its in dressing or in dealings, muslims women are under obligation to cover their bodies. Islam also encourages beuaty and beautifull dresses so for muslims, dress serves not only the function of covering the body but also adorning it. Religion then becomes an expressive element of the dress. so all the elements of Lamb & Kallal's (1992) EFA(Expressive, Functional & Aesthetic) model are applicable here.

Around the world, muslim women wear different types of veils but mostly they are black or white . During the Hajj the women wear white dresses and their faces are showing while men wear only a white unstitched loincloth. The colour, fit and design of dresses are all dictated by the religious ideology and symbols. muslim men and women can easily be spotted from the dress they wear.

Architectural Symbols

While buildings are geometric objects themselves, the interiors as well as exteriors can be decorated with the primary symbols discussed above. Islamic buildings can be clearly discerned

from Hindu or Buddhist buildings even from their shapes and geometric structures. Mosques and shrines have their unique islamic identity, recognizable by domes, minarets, mihrabs as well as pattern designs and calligraphy on the walls.. The foremost buildings are the Kaaba and the roza e rasool. The Kaaba is a cubic shaped building inside the *Masjid e Haram* in Makkah which for Muslims is the holiest place in the world. Many Muslim consider as the centre of the world (Eliade, 1991; Mubarok & Aliyah, 2019). The building of kaaba is shrouded in a black cover while there is a black stone (*Hijr e aswad*) within the eastern corner of kaaba. *Kaaba* holds great symbolic significance in the minds of Muslims. It is a cube while the circumambulation (*Tawwaf*) is carried around it in circles in counter-clockwise direction. All the planetary bodies also circulate the sun in counter clockwise direction. While the cube inside the circle also holds symbolic significance. Other than the cube-shaped kaaba, mosques with domes and minarets have a symbolic value for muslims.domes are believed to have come from Christendom through Ottomans (Kouider & Ivashko. 2018)

Literature Review

Rituals and Events

The symbolism discussed above is static. But there are other dynamic symbolism which work as acts and rituals. These shape the day to day life of the believers. Daily prayers, fasting in Ramadan, hajj and eid are included in this category. they are discussed below: The foremost symbolic act is the prayer (Bowen, 1989) which is performed five times a day. Every act of the prayer has some symbolic significance. That's why prayers are frequently shown in religious ads. The other main rituals are fasting, Hajj and Eid. The month of Ramadan, the days of hajj and two eids are the events in islamic calendar that have symbolic status.

Religio-cultural Themes

islamic identity, religiosity and in general the daily life of a muslim can be categorized uder islamic themes. although there is no objective criterion for discerning islamic themes, these can be inferred from the dress, and rituals like prayers, fasting and hajj.

Individuals as Symbols

Individuals like singers, sport stars, actors and religious personalities can become symbols (Intezar and Sullivan, 2021). According to the meaning transfer model of McCracken(1989), in the minds of consumers, these meanings are transferred to the brands they endorse(Roy, 2018).

Religious personalities like Junaid Jamshed, Maulana Tariq Jameel are behind many brands and Islamic themed commercials. These symbolised personalities can then be utilised in advertising in a symbolic way.



Figure 1: A classification of symbols

The Origins Of Symbols: Beliefs And Ideologies

Behind all the symbolism is the belief and ideology. For example, belief in one God leads to aniconism and the avoidance of human figures in art; this also restricts the art and leads to other ways to express. In art and creativity, imposing restrictions always lead to more creativity.

Islamic belief is summarised in five pillars: Confession of faith (Shahada); Prayer (Nimaz), Fast (Sawm); Pilgrimage (Hajj); Alms tax (Zakat). These are the basic pillars which can explain all other symbols. The foremost is the belief in one God without any partners; all the other beliefs and symbols emanate from this very basic belief.

This is shown in the figure below



Figure 2:

Religious Themes And Symbols In Advertising

Religious themes and symbols frequently appear in our dramas, theatres, movies, music and advertisements. These symbols are also frequently used in advertising (Mehmood and Kazim, 2018). According to Haque et al. (2010), religious themes have a potential to increase the awareness among consumers in islamic countries.

Advertisers commonly pick up the popular cultural and religious themes as they are already popular among the masses (Karen and Mallia, 2009). the ones mostly used in Muslim countries are discussed above.

Mehmood and Kazim (2018), using a simple review of ads, have studied the religious symbols in Pakistani advertising. According to them the most used religious symbols in advertising are holy places like mosques, shrines, accessories appearing in religious ads are headscarf, rosary and skullcap, the imagery of minarets and crescent also has appeared as symbols; sehri, iftar, praying, recitation of Quran and whirling dervishes appears as ritual and practices. Their study however is about the PEMRA codes and not specifically about how these symbols are used or what their effects are. Moreover, they have not utilised the proper visual analytical methods and techniques for their analysis. These are the most commonly used symbols and our study also searches for these and other similar symbols and themes.

Within Pakistani culture Islam is the dominant religion and islamic religious events are celebrated all over the country with very respect and joy. These events in Islamic religion include Eid ul Fitr, Eid-ul-Azha, Chaand Raat, Ramadan, Hajj, Sehri, Aftari etc. similarly, Prayer, Azaan, decent dress like Shalwar Kameez for both men and women, dupatta on head (haya), family gathering, chand(crescent), Minarets and domes of mosques etc.have all a symbolic value in islamic culture.

Kalliny et al., 2019 have studied religious symbolism in advertising and the consumers' attitude towards these ads in the context of two different countries, and have concluded that the religion of consumer and country, commitment to religion, culture and how clearly the symbolism is utilised all play a role. The same can be inferred about the Pakistani audience but we can expect some differences too because pakistanis are more emotional about religion.

Capitalizing on Faith and Religiosity

Advertisers are always opportunists. They see religious and cultural events as another opportunity to promote their products. This is true of every culture and religion; islamic countries are no exception. the fact that use of sex appeals and sex symbols is prohibited and religiosituy is prevalent, leads to increased use of religious events and themes in advertisisng in these countries. The month of Ramadan is considered very peaceful, full of harmony, sin-free and showered with blessings. brands consider this month as an opportunity to get closer to the consumers.

Advertisers try to get the most out of religious events like Ramadan and Eid but Ashura is never seen in advertising. The reason is, it is about the death of the Prophet's beloved grandson and in advertising, showing death is a taboo that causes negative emotions (Caulfield et al., 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study, and we have used an interpretivist approach. This framework highlights the role of culture and ingrained values in knowledge creation (Putnam & Banghart, 2007). The purpose of this study is to understand how advertisers capitalise on the religious ideologies of the consumers. An interpretivist approach will help in understanding this aspect of advertising. Using visual rhetoric and semiotic visual analysis (Danesi, 2017), we have interpreted imagery in these ads, and have derived conclusions based on the themes in the images and our interpretations of them.

Data sources:

Visual data which included TVCs and print ads were collected from print media, billboards, and the internet.

Sampling

The ads which distinctively used Islamic Ideology as their backdrop were selected using a judgemental purposive sampling wherein we used our own judgement in searching and selecting images that had explicitly used religious themes and symbols.

We were looking out for a particular type of sample which could only be collected using the expert judgement of the person collecting it (Sekaran, 2003). The person collecting the sample used their visual judgement to discern the commercials having the religious symbols and themes needed for this study. Mostly, the search query consisted of keywords like, "ramzan commercial", "eid commercial" "Pakistani commercial" "Hajj commercial" etc. Once a query returned a result which was judged suitable for the study, more videos appearing in the same window were checked. Later, the first author visited archives and libraries, and checked newspapers for print versions of these commercials. Google image search was also conducted after refining our search queries.

Analysis Method

We have strived to interpret the meaning of cultural artefacts through a semiotic visual analysis approach (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). using this approach images were interrogated in order to understand the meanings, significance and uses of symbols in these ads. The authors being teachers of marketing and arts are experts in their field and were well trained to conduct a semiotic visual analysis.

Generalised principles were derived from the data using an inductive approach.

ANALYSIS

In this section, we have analysed one TVC and some print media commercials.

The first ad that we are going to discuss is the TVC *Hum Mustafavi Hain*. Based on our judgemental methodology, we deemed this to be a very important commercial as it contained almost all the themes and symbols of islam.

Olper's TVC:Hum Mustafavi Hain

The current ad is based on Qawali, *Hum Mustafavi Hain* (we are Muhammadans) (Shoaib, 2009). The ad used the combination of static and dynamic symbols to show universality of Islam and how muslaim occasions every where in the world is celebrated with the Olpers brand. religious themes, symbols, artefacts and architecture are all utilized to form a connection of the brand with muslim consumer.



Figure 3 Olper's *Hum Mustafavi Hain* TVC : Religious signs and symbols are used abundantly in the ad. **a**. Olper's logo inside a mehrab; **b**. Morocco's Hassan mosque at night; **c**. whirling dervishes in Turkey; **d**. a white pigeon perching on a dome in the foreground while another dome is visible in the background; **e**. A model (Atif Aslam) praying in a mosque. The arches and fanoos of the mosque are visible.



Figure 4 Olper's *Hum Mustafavi Hain* TVC: **f.** Girls in hijab **g.** Arab men in traditional Arab dress, a camel is also visible in the background. The background colour too is suggestive of deserts **h.** Pakistani family breaking fast and praying **i.** Men in the mosque breaking fast and praying **j.** Badshahi mosque inside Olper's O.

Use Of Symbolism in Olper's TVC

Olpers TVC usedIslamic symbols, both static and dynamic as well as primary and secondary. Figure 1.a shows the static symbol where olper is sown inside the merab

The ad very clearly elaborates the use of islamic symbolism and themes in advertising. Based on our analysis, we found the following themes:

The use of the Islamic patriotic Qawwali, *Hum Mustafawi Hain* and the depiction of unity and islamic brotherhood shows the use of islamic identity in order to appeal to consumers. muslims from different parts of the world are depicted to show universal brotherhood and unity. The unity aspect of the month of Ramadan has the power to bring all Muslims together from all around the world (as is shown in the TVC in the beginning).

They are shown performing their prayers, sehri and iftar. In one scene, the entire family is sitting together and breaking their fast. This highlights the values and traditions of the society.

The TV ad starts with a picture of Olper's. The Olper's logotype is written within a red colored mihrab (a niche inside the mosque wall indicating the direction of Kaaba) which is suggestive of a mosque. A mihrab also symbolises the gateway to paradise (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022) mihrabs are said to have originated during the time of the Prophet in Madina (Kouider & Ivashko. 2018).

A model is shown as having prayer beads in his hands and praying to God (picture not shown here). Prayer beads are the sign of piety among muslims. Next are shown some far eastern young grils wearing white scarves showing their Muslim identity(Figure 2-f).

From this scene onwards [time], the couplet *Hum Taa baa bad Saai o Tagheuurk wali hain* is sung.

A few frames forward, a young character is shown saving an old man from falling boxes and leaving. The old man is wearing the old style Turkish cap. Being a good muslim entails helpig others and respecting elders.

This ad has many scenes showing muslims from different nationalities breaking fast with the same spiritual happiness. This shows that the same rituals are followed all over the islamic world thus exhibiting the universality of islam.

In the final frames the mughal-era Badshahi mosque is shown coming inside the Olper's O. This has multiple levels of meanings: this is the final link of the brand and the religion, history and the culture.

In the next section, we discuss the print media commercials that capitalise on religious themes and symbols.

As a general practice, the ads of a company or brand are not created and aired in isolation. They are usually part of a campaign, which consists of TV advertising, billboards, internet and social media activity, other promotional activities such as road-shows as well as print ads in newspapers and magazines. All this is done in order to give a consistent and unified message to the consumers as viewers integrate information coming from various sources (Anderson, 1971; Foster, 2014). That's why the TV commercials of Olpers are complemented by the same images appearing in their print media ads.

Some of the company's print media advertising is reproduced here for discussion and analysis.

Below are the print media commercials of Olper's. They use various symbols, patterns and designs to reflect an Islamic and local cultural identity. example ads are reproduced and explained below:

Example: Islamic Design Pattern:

Olper's Ramadan print media ad, Note the design of the ad and the calligraphy. The design patterns follow the designs in mosques, shrines and prayer rugs. The Olper's package is also designed in the same pattern. During Ramadan, companies introduce special ramadan packages with special ramadan designs and logos.



Figure 5: Geometric patterns and calligraphy in Olper's ad.

Example: Islamic Architecture as derived symbolism

In the image below, Lots of minarets and domes with crescents are shown. The sky is red with white stars and crescent (Olper's color pattern)



Figure 6: Islamic architecture as secondary or derived symbolism with primary celestial symbols. Social Responsibility

In the image below, an OOH (Out-of-Home advertising) campaign is shown. In this campaign, which consisted of TVCs (Har baijaan table ki jaan), Facebook, Twitter campaigns and out of home volunteers of Olper's, food was collected from well off households and distributed to the less privileged households in the neighbouring areas.



Figure 7: Ad showing a CSR campaign.

Harmony And Consistency In Images: Ad Colour Theme And The Brand Colour

Figure 8 is an ad by the brand which shows a beautiful use of white and red colours. A white pigeon is being flown by the lady in white dress with red *Dopatta*. The male is wearing white. In the background are light white clouds. The Olper's pack is red and white. Note the white pigeon in flight on the packages. White shows purity and piety. It is the colour of milk. White pigeons are also found at various places of worship. So there is a perfect correspondence with the Olper's brand colours.



Figure 8:

Endorsement of Religious personalities as a religious symbol

As discussed previously, religious personalities, sport stars, actors and singers, all can be symbolised and used in advertising (Intezar and Sullivan, 2021). These personalities are used widely in Pakistani ads. In religious themes based Ad that the endorsement of religious personalities increase the viewership and credibility of the event or product for the sake of promotion. The endorsement of religious personalities also can be marked as religious symbols in advertising. Some of the famous religious personalities appearing in ads are Junaid Jamshed and Dr Aamir Liaqat.

Dynamic symbols: Religious Rituals and Artefacts



The ad on the left is base on a "slice of life" from a Pakistani Muslim family's life. A child is shown between a mother on the left side and a sister on his left side. This ad shows the *roza kushai* ceremony. Child is having his first fast of the Ramzan as the roza is one of the hardest prayers which shows the love of children towards Islam which is very effectionating heart warming and proud element for all the Muslim community. His sister is offering him a glass of milk, while the mother is holding a date in her hand

to offer to him for breaking the first fast. The mother is looking very proudly at her child. There is an eye movement in the ad. One of the major elements of this ad is "dua" (prayer). The child shown in the ad refreshes viewers hopes and faith in Allah, the ad highlights the values and traditions. This picture of a child shows innocence, peace, affection and love. The colours and the elements are well balanced. The merging of colours is very creative and the use of patterns is also very attractive. The slogan "bhar lo apni zindagi pur umeed ujalun sy" (fill your life with the lights of hope) is very entrancing. Companies take these events seriously as is evident from the fact that the company develops special packaging and logos for Ramadan.

Use of Colour

white colour in the dress shows peace, love, calmness and unity which is also very appealing. White is the colour of milk. Similarly the colour red used is one of the dominating and intense colours and is very effective in attracting attention. The colour combination is the colour of the package of Olper's which is very fascinating for the consumers.

THEMES

Based on our analysis and discussions, we derived the following themes.

Symbols Designs And Patterns

Texts, and geometric patterns which are commonly found on the walls and floors of mosques, sufi shrines as well as prayer rugs were employed on the package as well as ad copis. These were used to form a spiritual connection and a sense of familiarity among viewers.

Colour

Although green is the most revered color in islam, but here the brand uses its own brand colors in combination with the white colour and pegion which depicts the purity. so it means that not necessarily all symbols are used, only the ones which go with the brand only color and pattern scheme are mostly used.

Use of Religious Architecture:

The use of mosques, minarets, domes and mihrab is made. mostly they are generic designs but some specific instances like badshahi masjid is also seen.

Cultural Artefacts

Muslim around the world share culture with little variation because it is based on the same islamic values. Head-scarves, Arab's head gear, modest dresses, the dance of Turkish whirling dervishes are all the cultural artefacts that present religion and culture together. Any outsider can understand its presentation of the islamic culture.

Religious Music

The qawwali *Hum Mustafavi Hain* is used in Olper's tvc which is an example of the use of religious music. qawwali is especially relevant in South Asian context as the Sufi saints here have always used qawwali to attract the masses and spread their message.

Islamic Identity And Muslim Brotherhood

an important religious theme that we saw was the use of islamic identity and brotherhood in the ads. By emphasising the universality of Islam and showing Olper's as an important element of every religious occasion, the brand targets the Muslim market throughout the world with the same product regardless of the buyers' nationality.

Rituals

As the religious rituals are practices that express personal views and ideologies, both TV commercials and print advertisements use Islamic rituals to emotionally connect with their viewers.

Highlighting Cultural Values

Values like the importance of family, helping others in need and universal brotherhood are usually highlighted in these ads.

We see that there is a use of both the primary and secondary symbolism as well as the use of static and dynamic symbols. These are used to create emotional and positive feelings towards the brand.

The ads we analysed have relied heavily on religious symbols like Hajj, Ramadan, prayers which are the visible manifestations of islamic belief and are a part of the culture. The not so visible

parts like shahadah are not utilised, nor are events like ashura' which symbolises tragedy and death. The reason is that advertising uses visible and manifest symbols and the fact that death is never shown in advertising (Caulfield et al., 2021), so events like ashura' are avoided. The events which manifest happiness like Eid or which show romance like *Chand Raat* are focused more in advertising. The reason might be the advertisers want to associate with some positive emotions and not with negative ones.

The article adds to the understanding and the literature of religious symbolism in marketing by identifying the instances and the manner in which these symbols are used by popular brands. From a practioners' point of view, the use of these symbols and the occasions they are used, adds to the understanding of how top of the mind brands like Olper's utilize them to gain an advantage over their competitors and how other brands can copy or counter these strategies to their own advantage.

This strategy is not restricted to brand marketing only, even political personalities are using it in politics. Imran Khan, Chairman of Pakistan's one of the most popular political parties is an example of using islamic ideologies in his strategic political moves. His slogans like Riyasat-e-Madina (the state of Madina), political Jalsas (Amar bil Maroof) are clearely based on muslim ideologies.

CONCLUSION

Based on our analysis and discussions, we derived the following themes from analysis: cultural artefacts; religious architecture; unity and harmony coming out of following the same religion; endorsements from religious personalities; and the use of special packages, designs and logos for religious events. Brands use these as strategic tools to create interest and increase sales of their products.

Future Directions

In the future, studies can be carried out to understand and measure the impact of the use of religious themes in advertising. Other areas like politics and public policy can also test how religious symbolism impacts people's attitudes and how these can be utilised for best results.

Limitations

The study is based on visual analysis and goes deep into the mechanisms but doesn't tell us about causation nor does it measure the impact on sales. The sampling is done judgmentally and is not broad based so we cannot generalize the results to all the case and all the Islamic countries.

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