The Use of Religious Symbols in Local Brand Advertisement as Objects of Trade

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ABSTRACT

Good advertisements always tend to have the eye-catching elements and have to be memorable for the viewer. The cut-throat competitive market environment has made the advertising field explode with different marketing techniques and ideas not just to inform but transform the viewer's belief, in other words to influence people. Each of these advertisements has uniqueness to state. Starting by selecting the right words, images, symbols, format and tone are examples of common measures for the message that later transform these content of a message (thought, ideas etc.) into a symbolic form of encoding by the viewer. Selection of visual communication design is more than just a nonverbal communication. In any advertisement, it is a study that combined design, cognitive psychology and semiology in response to the highly developed commercial society. Unfortunately, these visual communication designs are implied with hidden messages and influences that later affects viewer actions and thoughts. Selling Islamic value or called so Islamic 'look like' ads is one of the hard sell marketing communications in getting trust easily for the Muslim consumer where the religious notion presented as objects of trade, a commodity where else the product as main subject is denied. The aim of this paper is to reveal in comprehensive the religious commodification through advertisement specifically by Malaysian local brands. The main data of the research is billboard advertisement advertised by local brands as the main documentation. A content analysis is used to analyze all documented billboards using Semiotic analysis other than literature study. The result of the study shows the existence of representative form of Islam, and is being exploited as commodities to be traded in most parts of the ads. These symbols are combined as one of the commercial element, manipulated and designed mostly through the use of words, phrases, and images. The adaptation of Islamic values will represent nothing for some whilst it can lead to the elements of fraud and misleading especially in a Multi-religion country. The words or visual used might slightly differ in meaning which may cause confusion.

Key Words: Advertising, Commodification, Visual Communication Design, Semiotic, Religious Symbol

INTRODUCTION

Creativity plays an important role where distinctive advertising generates the best results whereby it is the best way to communicate to the targeted audience. Advertising helps informs the customers about the brands that were available in the current market which give them a variety of possible option. It is done using various media types, with different techniques and methods that possibly think most suited to be used by advertisers. Each of these advertisements has something unique to tell about. However, not all advertising achieves message clarity and noise often stands as the culprit, which means anything that serves as a distraction from the message (Crow, 2010). This kind of ads usually combines unrelated objects or symbols to create a divergent story line. Engagement is one of the important keyword in presenting ads whereby it may influence over the product and persuade the audiences while develop an emotional attachment to the brand. One of it is using the concept of 'iconicity' or 'icon' which refer to an analogical relationship between its constituent signs or symbols and the things that they represent in communications theory (Scolari, 2009).

Culture, lifestyle, history and related places are an example of icon that much widely used in connecting a story in ads to their intended audience. However, there are also some ads consciously or not designed with deceptive or misleading claims, distorted claims which are lack of information to support the advertisement and misinterpretation which leads to the elements of false advertising. In fact, there are variety of products and services also uses religion 'value' by putting quotes verses from the Quran and Hadith on product label or displaying pictures of Islamic leaders who brought the image to attract consumers to buy the products they sell as reported by Irwan Muhammad Zain (2013). This religion value has become the 'icon' in their visual communication as to gain trust and attention by the viewer. The critical part in any ad is the message based on the selected visual communication symbols. This "noise" or so called as semantic noise is type of disturbance in the transmission of a message that interferes with the interpretation of the message due to ambiguity in words, sentences or symbols used in the transmission of the message (Bergström, 2009). Some associations are derive from common human experience other than knowledge, lifestyle, culture background or social skills (Dawns, 2013). The word or visual used might slightly or far different meaning in mind which causes confusion; which can adversely affect the receiver's understanding of the message. Humans have the capability of responding in a different way and is afraid of that something served on a regular basis in the long term will also poison the minds of a handful of them and become a social norm; something that is acceptable. With the growth of the internet and new media, advertiser has more option in getting closer to the public regardless of age, time and place other than traditional medium for a maximum impact. With this mass manipulation, information delivered with the integration of other symbols also might lead to different meaning-making process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Design is significantly more than basically to arrange or even to edit; it is to include value and meaning, to exaggerate, to persuade, to sensationalize and maybe even to amuse. The visual communication field is attentively communicating through any visual means presented using numerous different methods to get their idea across. According to Yang and Hsu (2017), visual communication design or VCD is more than nonverbal communication. It is a study that combined design, cognitive psychology and semiology in response to the highly developed commercial society. Robin Oshell (2017) in his book mention that, design elements such as color, type, texture, value and shape are the most basic part in creates and manages the production of visuals; that later transform into movement, symbols, and images. Advertisements is an example of visual communication design used in our daily life contain little or no verbal message, relying on visual messages of illustrations or the mental associations created in the viewers' minds as they scan the art. These symbols are embedded as the communal creation of the social world in which we live that called as social construction (G.Jimenez & Pineda, 2017) because any visual symbols is understood to mean not only itself but also some other ideas or feelings; which carry meaningful variation that denote things than objects in empirical reality.

To achieve maximum communication potential, selected symbols have a duty to present a prospective creation that determines exactly what certain products mean to group members. It has to do with its function, context of use and 'targeted' communication. However, not each translation are well established whereby issues such as unfortunate communication using improper colours, symbols, language or even between **religious culture blocks as each culture groups have their own values that apparent themselves in specific visual preferences and interpretation (**Sinclair, 2015**). In addition, human values might also be different within the same culture as each individual are comes from different knowledge, social-environment, lifestyle etc. Culture undeniably applies to all angles of human life from personal relationships to conducting business which include advertising industry. It helps to** building common bases for audience to interact within **by convincing them that a product is meant for them. According to Kathryn Sorrells (2015), culture is shaped by the historical, political, social and cultural context in which they live that distinguishes** one group of people from another. However, there are two non-material cultures which are religion and culture that seems like a complex ideas to study and after all, scholars and philosophers have long debated the meaning of these terms where they are not embodied in physical objects (Moore, 2014). Nevertheless, Eliot & Haffenden (2014) suggests that culture and religion have a common root and that if one decays the other may die too like such as Malay culture that are connected to Islam. This so called 'ethnoreligious' help to define, support, and limit one another in ways that can enrich or weaken our modes of conduct, however we cannot do without any of them. Through this concept, religion is closely tied to a particular ethnic group and those who belong to an ethnoreligious group usually define their identity through both their ethnic background as well as through religion most of the time. One of the aspects in

advertising is influenced by culture as much as the stories that they are enveloped within as a sources of content in their communication. Thus, the topic of culture in local brand advertisement cannot be separated with religion as they are particularly bound together for both economic entities as well symbolic entities especially in Malay culture context.

Commodification in Advertising

Advertising is considered as a major element for the economic growth of the marketers to compete with other brands with the same products. Rapid growth of globalization also has turned advertising to a more pervasive and powerful in its impact and affect especially for local brand to compete with international brands. However, all the developments and changes in advertising do not come without a price whereby advertising can lead to ethical issues as well. These ethical issues can be in many forms such as women exploitation, subliminal perception and advertising to children, deceptive advertising, and other issues which can lead to moral deterioration of the society (Borchers, 2013), which later effects on cultural values of the society. The need of advertising is for companies to convince consumers to buy their products; some follow the letter of the law in most cases and some try to exploit the consumer minds by slip other elements that related to their interest, lifestyle and trends. All these elements are created as the mediator because people are concerned with their social meaning displayed on the ads whereby the content is interacting with each other instead the product itself.

In contemporary capitalism, advertising plays a central role as to convince people to buy a product or into an idea for profit which later impact on the creation and mediation of wants and needs. However, the role of advertising as a cultural form should not be overlooked whereby it has become influential in the social as well economic construction. Subsequently, different creative strategies, social and cultural interests were integrated by advertisers can become disassociated from the products they are promoting and be esteemed individually justify, as works of art. In this way advertising infuses a story of their own to make them more attractive by combining other messages in a way to communicate. Commodification comes from two different words which are commodification and commodity. Hence, to Yasir (2015), the concept of commodification is the process of transforming things valued for their use into profitable items that are valued for what they can bring in exchange. To him, this 'thing' is not just a tangible item but also include other details especially in advertising where it can be presented by varies of taste, geography, religion, culture, time, gender, age and much more. In recent years, advertising and religion has become one of the interest topics to be discussed as religion has an effect on consumers' perception too (Fadhil Akbar Purnama & Anya Safira, 2017).

Advertising is a system comprising of discrete sign just like language which serve with a system of differences and oppositions in transferring meaning. Thus, a visual association possibly made between some product that later construct additional meanings and symbolic around the brands (Roosvall, 2016). Advertising actually plays an important role in influencing social attitudes and moral standards other than just being a profit making device by using commodification as commercial dimension in their advertising that has been

rooted and still been used by many companies that are desperate to make a buck. The visual communication designed used was presented to convey certain information associating the product, services or brand and in doing so the product as subject is denied. According to Hana Qodzari Mayaningrum and Agus Triyono (2016), the concept of commodification was indeed used in advertisement to create more attention from the consumer as business strategy with the goal to increase sales and religion is one of the examples. The transformation of religion value change into object of trade as exchange through cultural representative from religion as spiritual function into obvious commercial value. The commodification were used selected symbols to deflect and to take into account others' needs and consumer are convinced to think the items are more effectives with the highlighted commodity. This religion exploitation were clearly seen visual used such as wearing *serban* or head cover, *hijab, tudung* or even the used of words that are related to Islam. Great advertisements tend to designed with something that audience can relate to in stereotypical settings. The reason is that advertising was a medium of mass communication that produces and imitates certain discourses comprehended as social formations and cultural symbols due to their symbolic significance to important reference groups.

Semiotic

To understand the intended message of any advertisement requires knowledge of cultural context and ability to make the correct inferences Malamed (2011). Hence, made certain symbols and icons work more effectively as advertisements in reaching its potential consumers than others. Sending the wrong signals can be extremely harmful not just to the brand but effects the consumer as well because, in any ads, they are selling 'new belief' as well. According to Martin Solik (2014), semiotic refers to the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behaviour, analysis the systems of communication and the explanation which gives us a change in understand the nature of social processes. A sign contains of anything which produces meaning that was established by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as well as the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (Dyer, 2015). The semiosis process involved three basic elements which are the representamen (form which the sign takes - from picture, word, legislative representatives etc) object (semiotic subject-) and interpretant (interpret meaning / idea) which Peirce describes it's a triadic relation. Unlike Sausure who emphasis language as the most significant sign system compared to other sign systems that exist in the real world because it plays an important role in constructing reality, Peirce paid so much attention to the exact description of the sign. Peirce did not believe a straightforward twofold association between a sign and an object as a significance relationship but it is more on how we perceive or understand a sign and its relationship to the object it is referring to which is not necessarily a material or concrete object (Halina Sendera Mohd. Yakin & Totu, 2014). Therefore, the definition can be understood as something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity or meaning in context.

For the advertiser, semiotics works by assisting them to have subtle cues that help to attract target audience towards the brand, product or the service. The theory reflexively helps advertising to easily identify target market by placing hidden signs in persuade the viewer to buy a product. A symbol used in any advertisement is stands for something and is meaningful by association. Some

advertisers attempts to connect cultural myths in from the society and some plays on cultural knowledge or common references, to be relevant to the target consumer. However, meaning can vary widely among individuals even they are exposed to the same reality.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the study were to reveal in comprehensive the religious commodification through advertisement specifically by Malaysian local brands. The expansion of media for marketing resulted from the globalization process has intensity prompts local brands to develop successful marketing strategies to compete both local and global competitors. The success of the commercialization of local brands in local markets can be seen clearly with the 'war' of advertisement especially on billboard ads on highway as part of their advertising mediums. Billboards aren't very effective in getting response but they are incredibly powerful at building brand awareness with easily registered information as the information served are easy to remember as it is compact (Parente & Hutchinson, 2015). With strong visual impact it helps to reach an enormous variety of customers with a single advertising tactic.

21 local brand billboards advertisement were selected from the whole collected pictures during the observation from Ipoh, Perak to Ayer Keroh, Melaka. Majority of these brands also having more than one billboards along the highway to remind the viewer about existing of their product and can often later associate it with the brand and company. Majority of the advertisement are come from cosmetic brand such as Nuraysa, Merve, Aurawhite, Meeracle and much more. The study of signs which is used to analyse a wide variety of systems of representation is much used in communication study and this study is using semiotic that was develop by Peirce as he explored signs with a broader context of representation, object and form instead referring to only meaning in 'reality' by Saussure. The visual of any billboard design is essentially more or less are the same format and style. However, the only thing that differentiates them is what they placed or visual communication symbol used on that billboard to reach their audience such as how the visual look like, what colour, what headline and much more. According to the Pierce triadic semiotic model, he highlighted three main parts which are representamen, the form of the sign take (not necessary a physical object), second is an interpretant, the interpretation in mind and the third one is an object to which the sign refers (Solik (2014) and this approach is suite to be used as the content analysis guide for the study. Through this method, the analysis helps to determine the meaning of the advertisement other than to promote their brands or products within the context, both social and cultural as it is a common practise for advertisers to use culture and predominant cultural beliefs in their advertisements in efforts to reach their audience more effectively.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There is various visual communication design or Islamic religious symbols used on our local billboard brand advertisement such as color, text, image or even symbol. The least symbols used were graphic whereby these graphic is represent by an arabesque design and an arc or mosque dome silhouette. It Is probably even though billboard is quite big in size but it is hard to compress so many elements in one visual vocabulary especially when the design need to have a

deeper emotional connection with the main image or even headline. Texts and images are the two main symbols that are most widely used as visual communication design that contains Islamic religious elements on local brands billboards. These two elements stand out as highway billboards are designed without involving many elements in its layout and the audience attention span is much shorter compare to other mediums. The effective used of these two elements not just to bond with the brand essence but both are connected in giving a relevant context and ability to draw the audience into the body of the advertisement. Therefore, it is not possible that these two elements are essential in emphasizing their ads against other elements whereby audience should be able to pick up the key points and main message of the ad within seconds. These two symbols can be identified more quickly and comprehensively than verbal language especially when it was used in large size as to emphasize or to create attention in the whole design hierarchy compare to the product sell.

These two visual communication symbols are clearly being exploited determine by the size and all selected billboards are having the same approach. Thus, made commodification are exist and the basic element in a culture is always the choice of the creative strategy of advertisers based on buyer behavior such as lifestyle, attitude, gender, perception, habits, behavior, wants and needs. All this elements were embedded whether in their copy, visual or mixed of both. To face strong competition from foreign brands, cultural relevance is the right key word as to represent local culture or become part of the local brands main strategy especially in tackling Malay-Muslim audiences. Indirectly, while the words and the visual are tend to engage with consumers in a way that feels local to them, actually they are selling the value of 'Islam' in gaining trust instead highlighting the quality of the product. It might good in representing image of Islam but the relevancy to the product sells sometime are just blurry. This is what called as the powers of engagement whereby the advertisements are ingenious at leaving impression instead draw them with just promotional content such as promotes specific features or makes claims about what the product was. Here, the objective is to slip ideas and seed memories that will influence the audience behaviour to the brand.

The use of hijab is among the most widely used subjects and it's not something that strange to look at as nowadays hijab is a sophisticated symbol for Malay-Muslim. Even though the term and the used of headscarf or hijab is two different things but it is shown as a trading value for most advertisers. It is obviously a construct of commodification for commercial purposes which it translates into the cultural context of the target consumer of Malay-Muslim. According to Islam Hijab is an obligation to all women not just to cover their hair as headscarf. It is about to cover the *aurat;* from the toe to the feet without any curves and hijab should be long enough to fall down to cover the chest area as mentioned by Nursyamimi Saidi (2014).
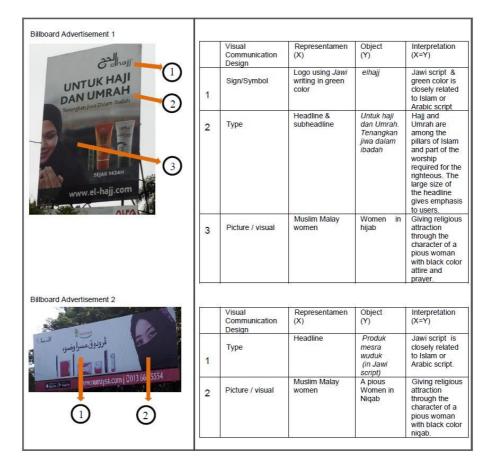
Table 1.0: Example of Islamic religious symbols in local brand advertisement as objects of trade analysis

Billboard Advertisement 1

	Visual Communication Design	Representamen (X)	Object (Y)	Interpretation (X=Y)
1	Sign/Symbol	Logo using *Jawi* writing in green color	*elhajj*	Jawi script & green color is closely related to Islam or Arabic script
2	Type	Headline & subheadline	*Untuk haji dan Umrah. Tenangkan jiwa dalam ibadah*	Hajj and Umrah are among the pillars of Islam and part of the worship required for the righteous. The large size of the headline gives emphasis to users.
3	Picture / visual	Muslim Malay women	Women in hijab	Giving religious attraction through the character of a pious woman with black color attire and prayer.

Billboard Advertisement 2

	Visual Communication Design	Representamen (X)	Object (Y)	Interpretation (X=Y)
1	Type	Headline	*Produk mesra wuduk (in Jawi script)*	Jawi script is closely related to Islam or Arabic script.
2	Picture / visual	Muslim Malay women	A pious Women in Niqab	Giving religious attraction through the character of a pious woman with black color niqab.

Interpretation is a subjective phenomenon process and may also differ from one person to another but the visual representation used in the local brand billboard ads significantly a depiction of the social legacy an image acquires from it group in the present. Therefore, although basically the image featured is consider as polite but it is not as outlined by Islam such as loose and non-bodily clothing. Majority of the 'hijab' symbols featured on the ad is the image of the head covering rather than the real meaning of the hijab. This is highlighted by a woman's image wearing a turban or short head cover. These are among the norms that are considered as common but convey the wrong message to the audience, especially to non-Muslims. In some way, this approach is promoting a modern Islamic lifestyle and good morale value but literally it is more towards to the influence of contemporary fashion trends. The current Muslim fashion industry is indeed increasingly influencing the appearance of hijabs and clothing itself. Media interact between individuals that later effects their feelings, thoughts, and actions in the society, not just either to buy what they see or talk about what they saw to other people. It is about social acceptability or even encouraged the incorrect belief as the viewer have a different understanding, knowledge, social relationships, environments, cultural differences and various other factors with Islamic faith. This is normal for each individual whereby psychological stimulus, natural impulse, willingness, feeling, conscious motive or not, sentiments, ideas, behavior, norms, values, cultural demands, status or necessities of the social system constitutes an individual act which in turn imposes the behavior of the

community. Thus, what's been shown to them has a strong influence in various dimensions in each of community life. There are also some advertisements that visualize their image of women with hijab in a proper such as by using close –up technique or having some graphic element in front of them. Thus, made the image used look modest without showing up any body part of the talent.

Figure 1.0: Example of kids wearing '*Tudung*' in local brand billboards advertisement

Some advertisement also showcasing kids wearing '*tudung'* even though in Islam they are not obliged yet to wore. Thus, making these ads looks too hard in selling the value of Islam in their promotional strategy as shown on Figure 1.0 above. With the expression of Malay-Muslim cultural value and religious elements the advertiser hopes to influence their targeted audience about their brand. Other than to make it as their central idea of their brand personality, it additionally helps the brands to be received by the people of a specific culture if they are identical to the cultural perceptions of that culture. Other religious symbol as object of trade in some of the billboards ads is portraying a male talent wearing a '*songkok*' to show he is a Malay-Muslim man or to give means that the product is made by Bumiputra Muslim. All these ads are not just able to promote choice but there have something in common which is the visual used are simply reflect existing cultural values that speak to the potential customer in a way they understand and appreciate. However, the big question marks is how does the religion-cultural related to the product sells? Basically, they aren't selling the product but they are manipulating its audience with religious values and belief to develop a strong connection in communicating with the masses.

Other than image, text is the second visual communication design that is widely used in local brand advertisement with the present of Islamic value as object of trade. The words choose representing the message that directly affect the users' impressions towards the brand especially since it only takes users about less than 10 seconds to watch the billboard. Language is the main fundamentals of communication and its well-used to tackles the targeted audience by using Bahasa Melayu as it it is easy to be understood and there are also some advertisement added with *Jawi* writing. Local-cultural aspects are well applied here as the products are produced locally and targeted to domestic users. Cultural aspects are particularly important in advertising since the effectiveness of messages transmitted is determined typically by the relevance of the words and other symbols they employ. Numerous many tactics been applied in creating their

copy especially the ads headlines as it was major introductory statement by targeting the right prospects and pulls them inside the ad to read more. Majority of the copy is highlighting benefits of their product but some are selling Islamic value such as 'Produk Mesra Wuduk' and Untuk Haji dan Umrah'. The usage of *Jawi* writing in some of the billboards also one of the techniques used in highlighting the image of Islam in the brand personality and to state that their product is targeted to Malay-Muslim. In positive side, it is a good effort in preserved this Malay writing as commercial usage but if it used to be exploited by using it to increase the reach and potential audience, it can kills the public trust on Muslim products that is growing up. *Jawi* writing is synonyms to Malay-Muslim as through history it is an Arabic letters that was adapted to Malay writing with some changes and improvements (Siti Hawa Hj. Salleh, 2010). It was a strong influence of Islam civilization to the region, however nowadays the use of *Jawi* writing outside of Islamic context is too minimal whereby it is much used to Islamic related matters.

Besides that, the ads with 'Islamic' phrase is also non-other clearly exploited the Islamic value as object of trade to increase the user believability towards their product even though their claim is still vague and can cause misunderstandings to anyone who's watching it. The public has to aware that there is no party has confirmed about their claim and they have a lot of option in creating their ads headline to the targeted audience as copy is a very specific type of content. It is designed to get the reader to respond or take action. The association of Islam religion and the products that they sell are questionable. Copy in any advertisement is act as a dialogue between the product and the user; they form mental images and create emotional connections. Thus, the copy is not just to tie the visual in context but selection of words and how they use it reflect the personality in whole design. Viewer knowledge is different and they are processing different meaning in mind. Thus, the copy with 'Islamic' look phrase is used to add more 'essence' towards the advertising effect. Localization and copy that associate with religious is different whereby localization is not just sending the message using the appropriate language but tailored the intended message using regional terms that effective in communication strategies. However, copy that focusing on religious value is displaying ads message that touch the Muslim faith and belief to increase their confident about the product compare to the rest. Brand image should be built in a way that is both accessible and unique to connect with consumers on personal level. This trust can be built by localization technique in ads communication strategy but it can't be build based on religion even though culture and religion are closely related in Malay-Muslim context. Localization in copy is widely used in any international brand to fit linguistically and culturally appropriate to the targeted market.

CONCLUSION

Every region has its own culture-specific behaviours and it is translated well in most of the local brands billboard advertisement by simply reflect existing cultural values. They lay a good foundation to earn consumer trust in the communities because people react and respond very differently to advertising that's tailor-made for them or not. Based on the analysis, advertisers customized messaging that's relevant to customers is the way forward based on the visual that they selected and how they craft their ads copy. As home-grown local brands, they connect with consumers on their playing fields by understanding people's

languages, cultures, and traditions even though some of them are out of bounds using religion sentiment in their ads. Just as the media of social communication that have huge influence in the society, so advertising, using different media vehicle, it carries values, proposes lifestyles, connects communities, shaping attitudes and influences behaviour in today's world. Thus, misleading ads portray inaccurate and deceptive information such as using Islamic value in order to get users to carry out an action is one of the dishonest tactics in the capitalism world. The engagement of culture is truly attractive and aspired them whereby semiotics demonstrate as a powerful tool to develop brand associations, help to create awareness besides increase brand values that make a difference in the market. Even though the culture in Malay context is associated with Islam, in some extend it can't be the main brand communication in advertising as it can be translated with different meaning especially in the multi-racial country. Quality of the product is so much important to be highlighted rather than selling the image of Islam and violate the trust of consumers. It is because the effectiveness of the product is not based on the present of Islamic value on it. The used of religion value as object of trade might invites a long-term effects such as negative perception on brand especially by the non-Muslim. Continue use without control seems to be accepted and true by the viewer. It is indeed a good advertising tends to be persuasive but advertisers need to eliminate misleading content in order to protect consumers. It is easy to the distinguish between ads that are persuasive using culturally context and those that are misleading by using religion value because advertisers should know how to walk a fine line between truth and fiction. The advertisement can be improve by ties consumer needs, wants and behaviours to the form of visual communication especially on outdoor ads such as billboard where people see it for only a few seconds or minutes at best instead of connect it to religion. Billboard is one of example of traditional marketing methods whereby it force advertisers to share the same message to one large audience, thus advertising should be design customize according to their interests so that the key points across fast. However, personalizing advertising content using religion is not an appropriate approach as advertising promotes values and social change. Such detrimental influence and not regulated accordingly, it may impact negatively upon the norms and values of a particular society or even religion.

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