

## **Islamic and Western Ethics in Advertising**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Ethical advertising and Islamic advertising appear dissimilar as the former refers to Western ethics and the latter Islamic ethics. The question of whether ethical advertising should be used in place of Islamic advertising is raised in the paper. This discussion is significant as selecting an apt concept for advertising to Muslims is essential. This is supported by Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that claims a person's conception of the world is dictated by language. When the concept of Islamic advertising is used, Islamic ethics and not Western ethics is brought to the foreground. The article springs a surprise of whether there is indeed the demarcation between Western and Islamic ethics or not. Western categories of normative ethics have been used by Muslim scholars with the difference being the prerequisite for adapting Western ethics using the main sources of Islam in the form of the Qur'an and Sunnah.*

*Keyword: Advertising, Islamic ethics, Islamic perspectives, western*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When we ponder on ethical advertising for Muslims, there is the question of whether it should be called ethical advertising or Islamic advertising. The argument here is centred on the importance of having the word "Islamic" in Islamic advertising rather than calling advertising that is acceptable in Islam as ethical advertising. This stems mainly from distinguishing the form of ethics that is acceptable in Islam from the forms of ethics that are not Islamic. It is paramount to understand that unethical behaviour, with the emergence of social media in advertising, is apparent; hence, the notion of monitoring the evolving practices of the advertising industry should be sourced from universal ethics that are normative. This should be exemplified by advertising and public relations agency leaders who should adhere to ethical guidelines and conduct trainings to keep up with the evolving advertising trends (Schauster & Neill, 2017). Advertising ethics is an important matter and an area for disagreement which is not as troubling as if the subject of ethics were avoided altogether (Drumwright, & Murphy, 2009). The question of whether the normative forms of ethics are acceptable in Islam as advised by scholars is discussed here. The paper is divided into the following subtopics: explaining on Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, defining ethics from Western and Islamic perspectives and elaborating on ethical and Islamic advertising.

#### *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: Language and Reality*

The significance of developing a concept that is apt for the context in which it is used could be explained by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is essential to determine the appropriate conceptualisation of advertising for the Muslim market. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that the language structure (grammar, syntax and vocabulary) determines one's perception of phenomenon and differs according to diverse languages and cultures (Lucy, 2015; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, &

Roy, 2014). Islamic advertising needs to be conceptualised as it puts forth the practice of advertising from the perspective of Islamic ethics. Language contributes to the development of culture and the formation of an Islamic culture should be the main goal of Islamic advertising through its conceptualisation. Language was the first to attain a form that was highly developed and perfect which is a prerequisite to the development of culture on a holistic level, charting the contributions of language to culture (Sapir, 1949).

There are researchers who have approved and disproved of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Penn, 1972). Penn reported the Lenneberg study depicting how the restrictive influence of linguistic categories on cognition is evident when speakers of English are able to easily identify the colours that could be named in English, underscoring the idea that language limits one's cognition of the world. On the other hand, Penn also reported that according to Osgood, despite diverse languages and cultures, human beings have common meaning systems and common symbols. The paradox of the approval and disapproval of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is apparent here but the writers claim that this was due to the fact that the understanding of the hypothesis was different by the different scholars.

What is key here is forming and promoting a uniformed understanding of the concept of Islamic advertising across all cultures of Muslim countries. Based on the Sapir-Whorf understanding, the semantic structure (in this case the vocabulary) fashions or limits the ways in which a speaker conceives of the world. With this in mind, it is important to get right the terms we use to define our concepts as they define our perception and world view. The question of whether we should call advertising to Muslims "Islamic advertising" or use "ethical advertising" is brought into the foreground. Should there be different types of ethics for different fields? The answer to this is 'no' as general ethics can be adjusted to suit diverse contexts, and whilst there may be no specific need to formulate separate ethics, we could name ethics used for advertising as professional ethics or ethics that belong to business and communication (Kačerauskas, 2019). The paper puts forth the idea that there ought to be ethical advertising for the Muslim audience with the nomenclature of Islamic advertising.

It is imperative to consider ethics in advertising due to several reasons. Firstly, advertising uses women, children, selling points and creative concepts that could influence audiences in negative ways from objectifying women and their sexuality to manipulating children as customers, exaggerating selling messages of products that go beyond the truth and producing ambiguous creative concepts that make no sense. Secondly, there is the alarming finding of practitioners encountering greater prospects to behave unethically and the deficiency of training in advertising and public relations ethics for practitioners that could result in more unethical practices (Schauster & Neill, 2017). Thirdly, there is also the downside from the commercial standpoint of the use of controversial advertising perceptions as they negatively affect attitudes to advertisements (Kadić-Maglajlić, Arslanagić-Kalajdžić, Micevski, Michaelidou, & Nemkova, 2017) that could in turn affect sales. Of concern here is the type of ethics that Muslim advertising practitioners should be using when targeting to Muslim audiences as there are Islamic ethics and Western ethics evident.

### *Western Ethics and Advertising*

Western ethics were developed some 2,000 to 2,500 years ago by the ancient Greeks when humans started to reflect on the ideal way to live and their concern for morality and customary standards of right and wrong conduct and moral codes (Duignan, 2010). From a rationalist perspective, ethics and knowledge are inseparable with Socrates and Plato altering the epistemological

discourse through Plato's development of Socrates' rationalistic ethics where good and justice serve as the foundation of reality; Aristotle upholds that wise decisions are a signal of a righteous way of life and a social order that is fair (Kačerauskas, 2019). Aristotle provided the earliest books with 'Ethics' in their titles and lectures on ethics that were compiled and edited by his companions (Tiles, 2002). For the writer, Aristotle regarded the traits of humans that were worthy of admiration as excellent traits that the adjective "ethical" (*thik*) could be applied to.

There are several categories of Western ethics. Some have segmented moral philosophy into meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics (Fieser, n.d.; Kagan, 1997). Despite the segmentation, there is a connection between the three types of ethics. Kagan (1997) on the other hand explains there is no obvious demarcation between meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics but they differ in intensity. Normative ethics is concerned with ground-level questions about how one ought to live that also require views on meta-ethical issues as in the case of a defense claim for normative ethics that will have a meta-ethical claim as well as second-order questions on the nature and point of morality; applied ethics about applying normative ethics to difficult or complex cases – these instances prove their connection. McCloskey (1969) mentions that the different types of ethics can also be categorised as different levels of morality as we move from having morality (applied ethics) to discovering what is good (normative ethics) and analysing our moral beliefs and pursuing their rationale (meta-ethics). Other writers have divided Western ethical theories into relativism, utilitarianism, egoism, deontology, the divine command theory and virtue ethics (Al-Aidaros, Shamsudin, & Idris, 2013). Of these, the writers claim that divine command theory agrees with Islam the most as religions such as Judaism and Christianity are the only standards used to identify ethics. It is not agreeable to call advertising to Muslims as Divine Command Advertising as a more specific reference to Islam should be made. With the different types of ethics, it is imperative to select the most appropriate form agreeable to Islam identified through its nomenclature or there will be misunderstanding as to the form of ethics one relates to.

This article shall ponder on normative ethics that is focused on how advertising practices should be. Normative ethics could be segmented into: 1. consequentialist ethics (or teleological ethics of which utilitarianism is the dominant form) - this type focuses on the expected outcomes of actions; 2. deontological (or Kantian) ethics, which focuses on the actions themselves (with actions usually evaluated according to rules); and 3. virtue ethics, which underscores the virtues or moral character behind actions (Adeel, 2015; Ives & Bekessy, 2015). Other writers have indicated a dual form of segmentation for normative ethics: deontological and teleological theories (Vitell, Paolillo, & Thomas, 2003).

Teleological ethical theories are derived from the Greek word *telos* that means "an end" and based on outcomes judged as positive or negative (Baumane-Vitolina, Cals, & Sumilo, 2016). For the writers, utilitarianism is a theory that is classically teleological and utilised in economics to explain rational decision making. The theory is authored by a philosopher of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jeremy Bentham and a scientist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, John Stuart Mill. Utilitarianism, a theory of consequentialism is often applied to media professions and governs what is right by considering the benefits for the majority (Schauster, 2019). With teleological theories and utilitarianism focusing on outcomes serving as a basis for assumptions on economic choices that people make in their everyday lives, deontological ethics and Kantian ethics on the other hand underscore universal moral principles that should be applied by people in their life focusing on duties and obligations not outcomes whilst virtue ethics by Aristotle puts individuals in complex embedded relationships which lead to the path of achieving real happiness (Baumane-Vitolina et al., 2016; Mandal, K., & Parija, 2016).

The association of utility to happiness is obvious in utilitarianism. Utility is an object that produces benefit, goodness, happiness and advantage for Bentham (1996) who identifies the principle of utility as recognising man's subjection to his empire and assumes that at its foundation, the goal of this is to develop contentment in accordance with reason and law used to approve or disapprove every action. Mill (2003) created the term "utilitarianism" which assumes that efficiency and the quest towards a higher level of satisfaction level lie as the foundation of human morality. Thus, each conduct is (morally) acceptable if it increases satisfaction and happiness, and wrong if it causes the opposite as highlighted by utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle. This principle espouses that actions are right in proportion if they endorse happiness, wrong if they produce the reverse of happiness and happiness is meant by intended pleasure, the absence of pain and unhappiness, and the deprivation of pleasure.

Other than the association of happiness to utilitarianism, the utilitarian approach advocates that decisions are made based on the greatest quantity of benefits for the greatest number of individuals which is known as the consequentialist approach with the outcomes determining the morality of the involvement (Mandal et al., 2016). The two variations of utilitarianism are: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism deals with decisions conducted for each individual case, analysing the benefits and harms in promoting overall superior consequences but is criticised as biased as it is conducted without examining past experience or evidence. Rule utilitarianism determines that no prediction or calculation of benefits or harms is performed but the morally correct decision is one that complies with moral codes or rules that lead to better consequences.

On the other hand, deontological theory is closely affiliated with Immanuel Kant. The term "deontology" is produced from the Greek words *deon* (duty) and *logos* for science (or study of) and weighs which choices are morally required, forbidden or permitted (Alexander & Moore, 2016). Kantian ethics underscores that one's sense of duty is paramount in an ethical lifestyle. The sense of one's duty in being ethical is a system of obligations one must abide by out of a sense of duty, regardless of what one might otherwise prefer (Bowen & Prescott, 2015). Kant's most characteristic contribution to ethics was his assertion that one's actions possess moral worth only when one does his or her duty for its own sake (Duignan, 2010). Kantian ethics provides the foci of duty that must lead to the ends (Kant & Abbott, 1909). Deontology is manifested in dialogic communication that the ancient Greeks and Romans perceived as a tool for discovering the truth and generating ethical decisions (Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015). The writers explain that dialogue contains the central principle of Kantian deontological ethics where respect and empathy for others are overriding and that individuals are always treated as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end. The moral idea of one having his or her sense of duty is also found in the Kantian perspective of mass media that offers the importance of one's obligations of having the duty to convey the truth and to serve the public interest; action from the lens of moral law is duty and the theory of duty is the basis of moral philosophy and the doctrine of ethics (Kant, 1997). The source of Kant's supreme principle of morality is a standard of rationality called the "Categorical Imperative" (CI) that is described as an objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we should always emulate notwithstanding any desires or inclinations we may have to the opposite direction (Johnson & Cureton, 2019).

With dialogue possessing ethical principles, the act of coercion is frowned upon in Kantian ethics. For Kant, although the morality of action cannot be based on ends, having a goal in mind is not unethical, but imposing one's will on others is unethical (Paquette et al., 2015). Central to Kantian

moral philosophy is also the idea of autonomy, that human beings are self-governing agents (Bowen & Prescott, 2015). The writers mention that the Kantian principle of ethics is known as the formula of humanity (persons) that underscores the respectful treatment of humanity by oneself as both a means and an end in view of persons being autonomous agents. To treat someone merely as a means, on the other hand, is to treat that person as an object to be used for one's own purposes, without considering his or her status as an autonomous agent.

Another form of normative ethics is virtue ethics that focuses on one's moral actions according to rules than outcomes (teleological ethical theories) and duties and obligations (deontological ethical theories). Twenty years ago, virtue ethics did not gain much prominence but now it has and focuses on virtue rules such as "Be honest", "Be generous" and "Don't lie" that make up the essence of virtue ethics from the neo-Aristotelian perspective of developmental ethics that is as an ongoing process of learning through the acquisition of virtues (Annas, 2015). Virtue ethics focuses on the habits and abilities that an individual needs to obtain and practise to become a good human being who can act in a rational and compassionate manner and fulfil essential ethical commitments to other people (Ess, 2011). Aristotle, McIntyre and other virtue ethicists mention the observation and application of best practices representing professional wisdom and moral character (Wilkins & Coleman, 2005).

Which forms of ethics are recommended by scholars of advertising? Advertising practitioners from the Western perspective are recommended to use teleological approaches (where right or wrong is determined by an evaluation of consequences or results) or deontological approaches that determine right or wrong based on duties, intentions and the nature of the act and normative ethics at meso (individual), micro (organisations or groups) and macro levels (advertising effects on society) (Minette E Drumwright, 2012; Minette E. Drumwright & Murphy, 2009). Would Islamic advertising agree with this advice? Next would be the discussion on Islamic ethics and advertising.

## ISLAMIC ETHICS AND ADVERTISING

In Islam, ethics and religion are closely intertwined. Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina were the predominant Muslim philosophers who delved into the realm of ethics. Al-Kindi was the main philosopher of ethics in Islam, Al-Farabi was the primary systematic philosophical thinker who established a philosophical system of thought agreeable with the Greeks (especially with Aristotle and fundamental human virtues) and Islamic teachings and Ibn Sina, the spiritual successor of Al-Farabi, came in close proximity to the Judaeo-Christian idea of the caliph as an intermediary between God and man from the Shi'ite perspective – an idea full of controversy that disrupts the concept of Tawhid (Morgan, 2011).

Islamic ethics of *akhlaq* is religious ethics as it is driven by the acceptance of the belief in Allah and in life after death, secular ethics is independent of religion (Morgan, 2011). Ethics from the Islamic perspective are standards that prescribe what man ought to do, address virtues, duties and attitudes of the individual and the society and are related to customs, traditions as well as beliefs and world views (Hashi, 2011). The intertwining elements of virtues, cultures and beliefs in the definition of ethics are apparent. From the Western perspective, the terms "ethics" and "morality" have different roots as "ethics" is derived from the Greek word "ethos" and "morality" is derived from the Latin word "mores" or "morals"; morals is what is "commonly felt and done" and ethics is what is "appropriate and rational" whereas in Islam, the principle is knowledge of morality (*ilm-ul-akhlaq*) where character is the object of enquiry (Sohani, 2017). As Muslims, what makes us spur to greater

heights in the realm of ethics? Man is obligated to be ethical and has been entrusted by Allah through the responsibility of fulfilling ethical, religious and social responsibilities towards His creations while applying one's intellect with knowledge (*'ilm*) of the Revelation (Sohani, 2017).

Ethics in Islam and the West differ in their sources. The primary sources of ethics in Islam are the Qur'an and Sunnah (Ali & Al-Aali, 2015). There is literature that has extended the sources to encompass: (1) the Qur'an and Sunnah; (2) the Muslim heritage; (3) the human heritage and (4) reason and experience (Hamada, 2016). The basis of Islamic ethics is the Qur'anic verse: "You are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah" (Surah Ali-Imran, 3:110). Believers should enjoin good and forbid evil and this has to be done through Islamic advertising as well as other methods. Islamic ethics embodies an ethical system in the form of actions and words that are produced from the Qur'an and Sunnah (Hashi, 2011). Books on *adab* (good manners) and *makarim akhlaq* (noble qualities of character) that contain the earliest works on ethics in Islam demonstrate the extent to which they use the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Omar, 2010).

The person who perfectly exemplified *akhlaq* or Islamic ethics in his moral behaviour was Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him [pbuh]) as evident through his role for humankind: "And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds" (Surah Al-Anbya, 21:107) as Allah teaches man through the Prophet (pbuh). Allah is full of praises of the Prophet's moral righteousness and ethics for all to emulate (Surah Al-Qalam, 68:4): "And indeed, you are of a great moral character". There are also numerous Prophetic traditions that emphasise the complex relationship between ethics and Islam; one of them is a Hadith narrated by 'Abdullah bin 'Amr that mentions: 'Allah's Messenger (pbuh) neither talked in an insulting manner nor did he ever speak evil intentionally and he mentioned, "The most beloved to me amongst you is the one who has the best character and manners"' (Sahih al-Bukhari 3759, 3760, Book 62, Hadith 107). The Hadith clearly recognises the importance of having good character and how it is preferred by the Prophet (pbuh).

A good example of the ethical worldview of the Qur'an can be seen in Surah Al Isra', 17:31-39 where 'eight moral injunctions' are given to believers through the forbidding of killing, adultery, cruelty to orphans and the poor that are regarded as sins and evils to Allah (Sohani, 2017). What are ethical practices? For the writer, they comprise piety, humility and the fulfilment of the commandments of Allah mentioned by the Qur'an that act as a compass of ethical behaviour and "traits of character or *akhlaq*", encouraging good behaviour. "Indeed, (the) most noble of you near Allah (is the) most righteous of you" (Surah Al-Hujuraat, 49:13). Believers who act morally and ethically have reached a high status as stated in the Qur'an while those who have *akhlaq* have a higher standard of divine morality; all are fruits of *ihsan* or excellence in belief: "Is the reward for good [anything] but good?" (Surah Ar-Rahman, 55:60).

Ethics in Islam is normative because it prescribes what one should do or refrain from doing (Beekun, 1997; Mirzamohmmadi, Mollaei, Fard, Bahrami, & Omidi, 2017). There are overlaps between Western and Islamic ethics. This is obvious as there is the influence of Greek philosophy on Muslim philosophers like Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina who are described as being Platonic in their influence and approaches to virtues (El Fadl, 2017). Islamic ethics is associated with virtue ethics and deontological theories in normative ethical philosophy: Kantian (deontological), utilitarianism (teleological ethics) and virtue ethics (Adeel, 2015). There is also the inference that there is utilitarianism or teleological ethical influence on Islamic ethics through Farabi who believed that ethics is acquired and human's deliberate actions and authority can be ethically valued with

blessedness as the ethical purpose and greatest benefit (Mirzamohmmadi et al., 2017). This means that Islamic ethics can be associated with the Western categorisation of normative ethics with the difference in the sources of Islamic ethics used. Al-Aidaros et al. (2013) reject utilitarianism for Islam because for them, the only basis for this theory is the greatest number of results achieved is used to define the actions that are ethical.

Virtue ethics is connected to Homer, Plato and Aristotle and is said to be most related to Islam and Christianity during the Middle Ages and focuses on the agent's characteristic as being moral and the basis for examining the action's morality (Adeel, 2015). It is mentioned that the Muslim ethicist, Al-Ghazali, believed in virtue ethics and for him there are four principal virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice after analysing the soul and differentiating it according to faculties (vegetative, animal and human) with ethics more appropriate in the final two. Instead of using Platonic-Aristotelian ethics as a guide, Muslim philosophers and ethicists active during the Middle Ages used the Qur'an to generate five fundamentals of virtue ethics that are character-based: 1. Sound moral character, 2. Freedom of choice, 3. Conscience, 4. Intention and 5. Rejection of self-righteousness (Ali & Al-Aali, 2015). On the other hand, virtue ethics is rejected in Islam as the only basis of this is virtue ethics that embody: civility, cooperativeness, courage, fairness, friendliness, generosity, honesty, justice, loyalty, self-confidence, self-control, modesty, fairness and tolerance (Al-Aidaros et al., 2013).

Other Muslim scholars have also associated themselves with deontological ethics. Early Muslims debated on the Greek philosophical discourses on the sources and nature of moral obligations defining the two camps: the Mu'tazila that looked upon reason as a guide and the traditionalists (Ahl al-Hadīth) who argued that reason is unreliable, justice and virtue are only realised through revelation and that the pursuit of objective ethical principles or *al-sirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (the righteous path) is inseparable from divinity, making this form of ethics deontological (El Fadl, 2017). Al-Aidaros et al. (2013) disapprove the idea of deontological ethics as duties bound by universal ethics as the sources of these are not clear and hence this idea is rejected in Islam as it can only adopt Islamic principles.

Despite the opposition to some forms of Western ethics, namely deontological, teleological and virtue ethics, Muslim scholars have adapted them to suit Islam by examining them from the perspectives of the Qur'an and Sunnah. What is important here is to promote the idea of Islamic advertising that uses normative ethics as in what advertising should be like from the Islamic lens whether teleological, deontological or virtue ethics.

The holistic nature of ethics in advertising warrants it to permeate the process of advertising at the pre-production, production and post-production stages. This is supported by scholars who compartmentalise the different advertising process in different ways but nevertheless contain the similar holistic essence defining the process of advertising production as comprising: strategic planning, creative development, research, production, media planning and buying (Turnbull, Howe-Walsh, & Boulanouar, 2016). The writers recommend six dominant ethical dimensions for Muslim marketing scholars and Muslim advertising practitioners to adopt taken from previous literature: *tawheed* (unity), *iman* (faith), *khilafah* (trusteeship), *tawazul* (balance), *'adl* (justice), and *Al-wasatiyya wa Al hur-riyya* (freewill) through freedom of choice in their behaviour within the parameters of Islam.

In order to alleviate offending customers in advertising messages, Muslim advertising practitioners should be aware of the violation of Islamic advertising ethics (honesty, racism, sexism, intention and language of which the latter three are most significant) that would positively affect purchase intentions (Ghani & Ahmad, 2015). It is the obligation of Muslim advertising practitioners to be ethical in their advertising practices as part of marketing and business. Advertising is part of marketing that is part of business. Al-Ghazali's ethical business outlook indicates primary importance to the commitment to Allah, preventing harm as part of the ethical business practices and conducting business activities sincerely to benefit stakeholders are encouraged while profit maximisation is discouraged as other activities are more valuable (Sidani & Al Ariss, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Western and Islamic ethics at the onset appear different but do cross paths with Islamic adaptations of normative ethics that are namely: deontological, teleological and virtue ethics. Al-Aidaros et al. (2013) have rejected most forms of Western ethics due to their ambiguous or non-usage of Islamic references but exempt divine command theory due to its reference to religious beliefs in relation to Christianity and Judaism. There has been evidence that Muslim philosophers have adapted Western forms of ethics to suit Islam. Nonetheless, there is great significance to put forth a nomenclature of Islamic advertising that underscores the embodiment of Islamic ethics in advertising and the references of Islamic ethics as the Qur'an and Sunnah. The adoption of the nomenclature of Islamic advertising by advertising agencies also symbolises their agreement to a single perception of appropriate advertising practices which could address the quandry that agencies are in due to their lack of agreement of what is right and wrong (Schauster, 2019). There is certainly the need of a code of ethics for advertising practitioners producing Islamic advertising for the Muslim audience and this should be addressed in future.

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