

## **Aligning the Marketing Mix of Islamic Products with Islamic Values: The Case of Naelofa Hijab**

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**ABSTRACT :** *The marketing of Islamic products has been under microscope in Malaysia in recent months following the launching of BeLofa by Naelofa Hijab at a well-known night club in its capital, Kuala Lumpur. The incident sparked debates among NH's fans and followers as well as Islamic scholars and academicians, particularly in social media. The debates gave rise to issues and questions on how Islamic products should be properly marketed. This paper is looking at how Islamic related product should be marketed by examining available literature on Islamic teachings and marketing practices, established marketing principles and the marketing mix approach. This paper focuses on issues and trends currently relevant to Islamic related products and at the same time, determines whether the present practice is suitable or should be revised accordingly.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Islamic products, marketing mix, modest fashion, hijab, Islamic values*

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Date of Submission: 28-04-2018

Date of acceptance: 14-05-2018

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1. Background**

In February this year, the owner of NH Prima International Sdn Bhd – a Malaysian actress and a manufacturer of modest fashion range which include hijab (head covers such as scarf, shawl, and turban), Neelofa chose a popular entertainment outlet in Kuala Lumpur to launch her latest product, Be Lofa Turban by Naelofa Hijab. Subsequently, when the news of the launching made into the press, and videos were posted on YouTube, Neelofa and her company had come under fire for being unIslamic. She was called names such as munafik (hypocrite) for launching the termed Islamic product at a venue deemed unsuitable for such product. In fact, even the Mufti (Islamic jurist) wrote her an open letter advising her to adhere to Islamic values in marketing and selling her products for they are viewed as Islamic related products and directly affiliated with the religion of Islam. In the end, the company tendered a public apology for the decision to launch its latest collection of turban in a night club and acknowledged that it would take into account the issues of religion and culture in conducting its business in the future.

#### **1.2. Overview of the Issues**

Interestingly, the Be Lofa Turban was sold out within 48 hours after its launch at Zouk. In this present time when people are connected digitally, what Neelofa did can be termed as a marketing stunt or gimmick that prompted viral response in the social media and online buzz and as a result, turning her products into sought after items.

In any business sense, what she did was a successful marketing strategy that resulted high sales and returns. However, as pointed by the response from the majority of her followers and fans in the social media, as well as comments and opinions by the jurists and academicians in the mainstream media, what she did was in contradiction to the values of Islamic teaching and practices.

Then, what is deemed suitable for marketing of Islamic products and what is not? If what Neelofa did was wrong, then what is right? Is there any examples that can be chosen to be the best solution for marketing mix of Islamic products? These are the questions that will be attempted to be examined by this paper and possibly provide an answer to them.

### **II. MARKETING MIX**

#### **2.1. Definition**

In general term, marketing mix refers to the set of different tools that a company uses to market its products or services to the market. A proper definition of marketing mix as outlined by Philip Kotler is “...the set of controllable variables that the firm can use to influence the buyer’s response”. Marketing mix is

considered by many as the foundation to capture market share and to generate sales. The four main components of marketing mix are product, price, place and promotion or commonly referred to as the 4Ps of marketing.

## **2.2. The Basic 4Ps of Marketing Mix**

### **2.2.1. Product**

Product refers to the items that actually being sold by the company. Product can also be in term of service. The product must deliver a minimum level of performance; otherwise even the best work on the other elements of the marketing mix will not do any good.

### **2.2.2. Price**

The second element is Price. It refers to the amount charged for a product or service. Pricing depends on a multitude of other direct and indirect factors such as the costs of production, segment targeted, ability of the market to pay, and the supply – demand factor. Putting a price tag on a product can be tricky and a business can use a variety of pricing strategies in accordance to their overall business plan.

### **2.2.3. Place**

Another important part of marketing mix is Place. It refers how the product gets to the customers, in short its point of sale. In every business, catching the eye of the consumers and making it easy for them to purchase it is the main goal of a good distribution or product placement strategy. Vendors pay a premium price for the right place. In fact, as the saying goes, it is all related to the mantra of a successful retail business, i.e. 'location, location, location'.

### **2.2.4. Promotion**

The final part of the basic concept in marketing mix is Promotion. This alludes to a process of informing, inducing and impacting a shopper to settle on decision of the item to be purchased. Promotion can include personal selling, advertising, publicity and sales promotion as well as word of mouth, press reports, incentives, commissions and awards to the trade. It can also include social media comments and reviews as well as contests and prizes.

### **2.2.5. Other Ps in marketing**

Besides the above mentioned 4Ps that made up the basic concepts of marketing mix, presently there are other Ps that can influenced or impacted how a product is marketed. Nowadays, the Ps in marketing mix may include several others like Packaging, Positioning, People and even Politics as the vital mix elements.

## **2.3. The Importance of Marketing Mix**

Each of the components of the marketing mix is intrinsically linked to one another. They influenced and impacted each other in making up the strategy for success for a business organization. The right combination of marketing mix can push the business to achieve its business success and in the case of imbalance mix, it may create negative impact to the business and it can take a very long time to recoup.

One thing for sure is that the marketing mix depends on a lot of tedious research, market surveys and consumer understanding to ensure the right blend of every component. To illustrate this, one example came to mind is the failure of TouchPad by Hewlett Packard in July 2011. Time magazine reported that HP TouchPad was intended to compete with Apple iPad. However, despite million dollars press events and promotions, the HP TouchPad was a huge failure and was discontinued after seven weeks of its launch. As a result of the failure, HP wrote off \$885 million in assets and incurred an additional \$755 million in costs to wind down its webOS operations, ending all works on the TouchPad's failed operating system (Time, 2011). Since then, HP has continued to struggle to maintain its edge in the market.

How can a well-designed product like HP TouchPad fail to capture the market? The answer is simple – failure in marketing! As explained by Tony Wheibe in his blog, the failure of the gadget can be contributed to the wrong placement of product by HP's vendor, Best Buy. According to Wheibe, "*...It is true that the TouchPad was not a hit with consumers, but Best Buy didn't give the tablet much support either; the TouchPad is often hidden in a corner in the store.*"

We can say that a mismatch in marketing mix can impact poorly on the existence of the product in the market. Therefore, having the right mix of the marketing tools definitely will help in the businesses' plan, whether to capture new market, to maintain existing market or to lead that targeted market.

### III. ISLAMICMARKETING MIX

#### 3.1. Overview

Islam is not merely a religion, it is the way of life. The basis of Islamic faith and way of life sprouted from the syahadah i.e. the acceptance that Allah is the one and only God, and that the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. is his Messenger. Anything that in contradiction with this basis is unacceptable on whatever ground.

The holy book of Islam, the Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah remain the two main references for all aspects of life of Muslim, including how to go about doing business, managing a country to marriage and treating the planet. Interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah by way of Ijtima' and Qiyas by the Islamic jurists are the other two acceptable references in time of dispute.

In Islam, business is a preferred economic activity as shown by the Prophet Muhammad SAW who himself was a trader before revelation came to him. The preference of trading honestly as viewed by Islam is stressed by the Quran where the saying of Allah in verse 29, Surah Al-Nisa' states:

*"O Believers! Do not devour one another's possessions wrongfully; rather than that, let there be trading by mutual consent. You shall not kill yourselves. Surely Allah is ever Compassionate to you."*

From the verse, we can see that Islam encourages business and trading as part of economic field for its followers, and as human being, ones need to have a mutual consent when trading with another party and should avoid non-halal transactions. Based on the explanation above, business activities are permitted in Islam. Hence, since marketing is part of business activity, it is considered as equally important in Islam.

Taking into account the accepted principles of marketing, it is therefore wise to place Islamic views on marketing mix side by side and examine the alignment between them. For the purpose of illustrating clearly the alignment of the blend of marketing by NH Prima International Sdn Bhd in promoting its range of modest fashion, we include People as part of the analysis.

#### 3.2. Islamic Views on 4Ps plus People

##### 3.2.1. Product

Islam forbids products and services that bring direct and indirect harm to human being. Al-Quran and Sunnah explicitly mention carrion, pork and alcohol, and any products that derived from those three as the forbidden products. They are termed as haram or non-halal. Besides them, blood is also forbidden to be consumed while services such as prostitution, gambling and the use of interest (riba') are also haram. Muslims believe that in leading their lives in this world, it is imperative that they do not stray from the teaching of Islam and the mission to seek the pleasure of Allah. In doing so, it is understandable when Muslim consumers abstain themselves from products and services forbidden in Islam.

##### 3.2.2. Price

The principle of 'adl (just and equitable) can be regarded as one of the factor used in deciding the pricing strategy in Islam. In brief, 'adl is the concept of just and fair. The Islamic concept of 'adl is very comprehensive and implies fairness and equity in everything a person says or does. The same principle also applies when putting a price on a product or service as Islam emphasizes on safeguarding the welfare of man. Therefore, cheating, price manipulation, charging of interest, overtaxing and price speculating and dumping price are all disallowed in Islam. As the Prophet SAW said and reported by Abu Dawud, "No one withholds goods till their prices rises but a sinner" (Hadith No. 3440, 980).

##### 3.2.3. Place

According to Islam, distribution channels must add value to its goods, not make it a burden for the buyers (Diya' al-Din, 1983:15). The distribution from place to place should not cause harm to others but increase value of its product.

##### 3.2.4. Promotion

According to Anwar and Saeed (1996) promotional tools, particularly advertising, play a significant role in value orientation, for they shape and mirror the values of society. Advertisements and other promotional measures, when applied in Islamic societies, should project Islamic values. Therefore, retailers must pay special focus to designing promotions that would help in advocating Islamic values, strengthening customers' good characters, and spreading truth in society.

Promotions are justified on the basis of Islam's support for trading activities. As mentioned earlier, Islam has permitted trade and encourage business trading as evident in the quoted verse of the Quran. Since the goal promotions is to enhance business, activities like advertising, PR, sales promotions, and contests are in line with Islamic teaching if they are consistent with Islamic principles and edicts. Thus, companies can engage in promotional activities to achieve the aim to inform their consumers, who are entitled to know the exact qualities, quantities and value of products on the market.

### **3.2.5. People**

In the marketing mix, people is considered the fifth element after the basic four elements – product, price, place and promotion. The quality of service for people is very important to meet the needs towards Islamic market oriented culture. It is important because it underlines the employer and employees' cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs, which have a profound impact on the organization.

The element of people in conventional marketing mix encompasses a long line, from producers, distributors to consumers. As stressed by Latif and Misbah in their paper, the element of people could help the firms or marketers to understand the specific requirement of their Muslim customers, improve market sensing and processing information in responding towards customers' needs and wants. Last but not least, it also able to monitor their competitor in the target market to defend against their strategies and moves.

In examples shown by the Prophet Muhammad SAW, Islam emphasizes the importance of being kind to others including customer, employees or people in general. As the Prophet said in one of his hadith reported by Bukhari: *“God will show compassion to those who show kindness while buying, selling and recovering debts”*.

Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad is the perfect role model to follow suit in activities related to business and trading, for he is the man who possesses the mahmudah (noble) characteristics. There are four noble characteristics that should be practiced by human being according to Islam i.e. siddiq (truthful), amanah (trustworthy, responsible), tabligh (advocate, convey) and fathanah (wise, clever).

## **IV. ANALYSIS**

### **4.1. Overview of Modest Fashion Industry in Malaysia**

The recent years saw the uprising of Islamic related business, ranging from food & beverages, modest fashion, education and many others, in Malaysia. In the modest fashion segment, arrays of products particularly hijab, abayas and jubah (long, loose dress – robe) have been reinforced into the mainstream products. Being the pioneer brand of instant hijab in Malaysia, NH Prima International that owned the brand Naelofa Hijab, became the overnight star of the market.

Just how big is the market value of modest fashion in the world? In 2016, Muslim's spending on fashion and footwear is amounted at US\$254 billion, recording a four percent increase from the previous year. This number is expected to reach US\$373 billion in 2022 with a growth rate of 7 percent a year. In term of Malaysia, the country came into top ten list of modest fashion sector for the first time last year as stated in the State of the Global Islamic Economy 2017-18 Report by Thomson Reuters.

Muslim women spent US\$44 billion on modest fashion in 2015. Such growth has meant that more mainstream players in the high street fashion market will be entering the segment of modest fashion, with their own line of hijab, modest garments and related accessories, following suit the steps taken by Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) which launched its first collection of hijabs and abayas in early 2016.

In recent years, Malaysia has emerged as one of the global trendsetters in modest wear. Malaysian Islamic fashion gained a serious foothold in the last five years after several public figures, especially popular Malaysian actresses, models and artists started to revert to modest yet fashionable get-ups with matching head covers. This included Noor Neelofa Mohd. Noor or famously known as Neelofa by her fans and followers.

Seeing the potential in modest fashion, Neelofa started NH Prima International with her sisters and launched Naelofar Hijab, a collection of trendy instant and pin-less hijabs, in 2014. In the first year of its operation, sales of Naelofar Hijab recorded RM50 million (US\$13.1 million), exceeding twice its initial target, and in 2017, its sales rocketed by 30 percent compared to previous year. For her success with her business, Neelofar was featured in Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia: Retail & E-Commerce last year.

### **4.2. Analysis of Naelofa Hijab's Launching Event according to Islamic Marketing Mix Views**

Since its inception, NH Prima International has been relying on social media to market its lines of hijab collections. Naelofar Hijab are sold online and in outlets, including its flagship store in Kuala Lumpur, and its more than 100 stockists. Online marketing through social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram is NH Prima International's main marketing strategy to build brand awareness as well as sales promotions. Naelofa Hijab (the brand) benefits indirectly from Neelofa's (the owner) feature in print advertisements of other brands as she is a famous name in Malaysia as an artiste, model and actress. For clarity sake, we would be focusing our analysis on the three elements of Islamic marketing mix i.e. place, promotion and people, as we accept the fact that product and price of Naelofa Hijab are well adopted within the parameter of these elements.

#### **4.2.1. Place**

In February 2018, NH Prima International launched its latest collection “Be Lofa by Naelofa Hijab” at ZoukKL in Jalan Tun Razak, Kuala Lumpur. The launching coincided with Neelofa’s 29<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. A description of Zouk KL in a tourism website [www.kuala-lumpur.ws](http://www.kuala-lumpur.ws) is as follows:

“Zouk KL has relocated to its new home at Jalan Tun Razak with 11 nightlife concepts under one roof, ending its 10 year-long streak in Jalan Ampang. Set within the massive TREC (Taste, Relish Experience, Celebrate) entertainment hub, the iconic super club is a unique combination of nightclub, bar, live music venue and restaurant. Zouk means 'party' in French Creole and this world-famous club certainly lives up to its name, with each of the club’s spaces featuring different decor and offering diverse clubbing experiences. Zouk KL is best known for welcoming an ever-changing line-up of international DJs such as legends Paul Van Dyk and Tiesto, and more recently Hardwell, Martin Garrix and Laidback Luke. They also host themed party nights like retro Mambo Jambo (70s and 80s hits remixed with house music) on Wednesday nights.”

This is the kind of place the launching of *BeLofa* turban took place. Of course, if we take it literally with the definition of place or placement of the product i.e. where products are displayed and distributed, the chosen place of the launching event can be considered as insignificant. The customers won’t be buying the headdress in Zouk KL but through NH Prima International’s distribution channels. However, as hijab is considered sacred in Islam and a symbol of pureness and sanctity, ordained by Allah to Muslim women, the choice of place to introduce NH Prima International’s latest product line should not be taken lightly.

As a Muslim and a woman who covers herself according to Islamic rules, Neelofa should decide on a suitable, proper place for the launching. Of course, she got what she hoped for when her turbans were sold out in a matter of minutes after the sale started. To achieve the same effect may take a bit longer if she didn’t launch her line in Zouk KL, yet the name of her brand itself can be a selling point and she does not need a controversial venue to gain the momentum needed.

#### **4.2.2. Promotion**

As put forward by Anwar and Saeed in their paper, the aim for marketing in Islam is to promote Islamic values, to build good characters and to spread truth in the society. Hence, this underlying aim must always be the core message of the promotional activities carried out by marketers. In the case of Naelofa Hijab, its way of promotion lies heavily on the media social advertising and electronic word of mouth of its followers and fans are mostly its customers. The brand also benefited from the advertisement featuring its owner, Neelofa in other unrelated brands’ advertisements.

In term of general promotional activities by NH Prima International, it seems that the core message to spread goodness and to promote Islamic values is always intrinsically combined in all of its advertisement by way of showing the beauty and virtue of covering the aurah (modesty) of Muslim women particularly among girls and young women. Since the focus of this paper is whether Naelofa Hijab is correct in launching its turban in a nightclub, in that particular event, the message to promote Islamic values can be seen as contradictory with the act of choosing the venue. It may be an oversight by the company but the word of mouth in term of comments in Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. on the social media platforms following the event became the testimony of the unacceptableness of the marketing mix in promoting the product.

#### **4.2.3. People**

People is another aspect that made up the marketing mix. Followers, fans, consumers, bystanders, etc. are the people element in Naelofa Hijab’s case. In this particular event, NH Prima International forgot the Islamic concept of “*hablumminallahwahablumminannas*” or the relationship between man and Allah (god) and the relationship between man and his fellow mankind.

What NH Prima International did as a promotional stunt at Zouk KL is a misleading act towards the religion of Islam and the Muslim in particular. As the company is also owned by Muslim, the events that followed the launching can be interpreted as a mockery towards their own religion and their fellow Muslim. To be proud of the teachings of Islam, a Muslim must strive to apply them, and not to do anything that are forbidden to do. This is something that will raise the status and increase the reward in this world and Hereafter. By saying that there was no alcohol or haram foods were served, choosing an improper venue is still a sin in itself, because Allah has commanded us not to sit in places where evil is committed, otherwise what befalls those who are committing the evil action will also befall us. Allah has warned the Muslim in the Quran, saying:

“And it has already been revealed to you in the Book (this Qur’an) that when you hear the Verses of Allah being denied and mocked at, then sit not with them, until they engage in a talk other than that; (but if you stayed with them) certainly in that case you would be like them” [al-Nisa’ 4:140]

NH Prima International, by choosing a haram venue, set a bad example to its vast followers, customers and fans, in a way, misleading them by producing good product but promoting it in a wrong place. It may not be intended at first, but the end of the event raised a lot of negativity and condemnation from fellow Muslims as

well as its own followers until talks about boycotting the brand surfaced, though failed since the hijab were sold out in a matter of minutes afterward.

## V. CONCLUSION

The principle “Islam as the way of life” for many Muslims continues to guide all aspects of their lives, including their consumption behavior. Indeed, the practice and adherence to Islam varies greatly among Muslims based on their age group, geographic region and country, cultural influences and other factors. Nevertheless, the number of Muslims identifying and adhering to Islam is quite high. According to Pew Global Attitudes 2015 survey of selected 42 countries, 83 percent of respondents from Islamic countries considered “religion as very important in their lives.”

It seems that NH Prima International was exploiting the conventional marketing mix tools to its benefit when it decided to launch its latest collection at a venue deemed improper by the Islamic standard. The company didn't take into account that Allah has favored the Muslim over other nations where He ordains Muslim to enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil.

Allah says in the Quran:

“You are the best of people ever raised up for mankind; you enjoin Al-Ma'ruf (all that Islam has ordained) and forbid Al-Munkar (all that Islam has forbidden), and you believe in Allah.”[Al 'Imran 3:110]

Lest the marketers of Islamic related products forget the whole elements that made up Islamic marketing mix, they should not distract themselves from following the right guidance in discharging the responsibility of enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil in all aspects of their marketing strategy and business plan. It is not an Islamic value to mislead people in combining pureness and dirt, so as in promoting “Islamic hijab” at the wrong place with improper activities.

NH Prima International should always bear in mind that they are selling Islamic products and their customers are mostly Muslim all over the world, therefore they should always take into account the importance not to disregard any Islamic values in what they do, how they do it and where they do it, in ensuring their products get to their consumers.

The Islamic marketing mix practices may need a lot more fine-tuning, but as long as the elements do not cross the Islamic teachings, it is acceptable for Islam is syumul i.e. all-encompassing, universal, and perfect; never jumud i.e. stagnation, inertness and solidity. And as the end note, when we realized that we are wrong it is wise to apologize and repent as NH Prima International did in the end.

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Nor Zainah Nordin Aligning the Marketing mix of Islamic Products With Islamic Values: The Case of Naelofa Hijab ” *International Journal of Business and Management Invention (IJBMI)* , vol. 07, no. 05, 2018, pp. 69–74.