'Islamic' consumers, markets, and marketing: A critique of El-Bassiouny's (2014) "The one-billion-plus marginalization"

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In her article entitled "The one-billion-plus marginalization: Toward a scholarly understanding of Islamic consumers", El-Bassiouny (2014) attempts to provide "a comprehensive conceptualization for Islamic marketing and its foundational principles within the context of the Islamic faith" (p. 48). The present essay critiques some of the key assumptions that underpin El-Bassiouny's discussion and her subsequent propositions for "future testing", which are meant to offer an "enlightened understanding of Islamic consumers" and "benefit academics, practitioners, and policy makers" (pp. 42–43). This critical account argues: (1) apolitical and ahistorical analyses of markets and marketing phenomena in relation to Moslem geographies will only replicate imaginary juxtapositions between the West and Islam; (2) exceptionalist depictions of Moslem consumers can exacerbate inter- and/or intra-cultural misunderstandings; (3) theological and ethnocentric definitions of Islam and the oversimplification of Islamicness are less likely to help advance marketing theory, practice, and education in a global era.

1. Introduction

As researchers advocating the study of the intersections of Islam, consumption, and markets for over ten years, we are highly enthusiastic about new publications that seek to broaden our understanding of such interrelationships. Given the gradual growth of scholarship on religion within marketing, the recent emergence of a stream of research that came to be known as 'Islamic Marketing' has been a timely development. The term 'Islamic Marketing' officially emerged only in 2010 when Bakr Ahmad Alserhan, as the founding editor, initiated *Journal of Islamic Marketing* and published *The Principles of Islamic Marketing*, the first book on the subject, in 2011. The field quickly expanded with the establishment of an annual global conference, introduction of additional international journals, and publication of new books (for a summary, see Sandıkcı, 2011). However, despite its growth as an academic ubject, Islamic marketing has yet failed to gain widespread recognition in the general area of marketing (Koku & Jusoh, 2014; Wilson et al., 2013) and achieve a legitimate status within the leading institutions of the field, such as the American Marketing Association, (British) Academy of Marketing and the Chartered Institute of Marketing.

Concerned with this lack of acknowledgment, El-Bassiouny (2014) embarks on presenting "a comprehensive conceptualization for Islamic marketing and its foundational principles within the context of the Islamic faith" (p. 48). The author's main point is that despite their large population in the world, Moslems are marginalized in different areas of marketing research, practice, and education. Such an oversight, she argues, can not only cause opportunity cost to the firms that look for international growth but also lead to conflict and misunderstandings between Islamic and non-Islamic (Western) cultures. Hence, in order to address the "scholarly gap in marketing, communications, and related literatures (e.g., psychology and history)" (pp. 42–43), El-Bassiouny proposes a framework to evaluate Islamic religiosity and offers a number of research propositions to assess its implications for consumers, marketing practitioners, regulatory bodies and educators.

We applaud El-Bassiouny for attempting to "assemble the theoretical foundations of Islamic marketing" (p. 42), offer an "eye-opener" account to its under-researched areas, and discuss "possible positive potentials [of Islamic marketing] … for marketing thought in the millennium" (p. 48). Yet, as the author proceeds in her article, she makes a series of unwarranted claims that raise concerns about her conceptualization of "Islamic marketing and consumers" and her "propositions" that are meant to offer an "enlightened understanding of Islamic consumers" and "benefit academics, practitioners, and policy makers" (pp. 42–43). These claims can ironically counteract the author's good intention of resolving the potential risks of misunderstandings, conflicts, and divides between the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds. To be more specific, El-Bassiouny's exceptionalist, apolitical, and ahistorical approach to the study of Moslem consumers as a "distinct market

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segment" oversimplifies the complicated intersections between Islam, markets, and marketing on the one hand and the heterogeneous and contested nature of Moslem geographies on the other hand. Although, the author sporadically acknowledges the existence of diverse interpretations of religion and religious practices amongst Moslems, her overall theological and ethnocentric definitions of Islam and Moslems overshadow the important implications of such diversities in her thesis.

We believe that El-Bassiouny's account exemplifies the fundamental ontological and axiological problems that characterize much of the existing work on Islamic marketing. At the ontological level, an essentialist and exceptionalist understanding of Islamic religiosity and identity permeates the analysis, culminating in a simplistic, universalistic, and reductionist view of Moslem consumers and marketers. At the axiological level, a fundamentalist politics informs the approach, establishing the purpose or value of research as propagating a view of the 'Islamic' as the morally superior alternative to the 'secular' (and less Islamic). While no research is value free, unreflexive commitment to a particular worldview problematizes the very notion of scientific inquiry and jeopardizes the potential of Islamic marketing to "provoke[s] rational scholars to think about the fairness of trying another paradigm" (p. 48).

In our view, essentialist, exceptionalist, and authoritative reading of Islamic religiosity and Moslem identity inhibits productive theoretical engagements between Islamic marketing scholarship and marketing theory at large, and, hence, perpetuates the belief in the marginalization of the subject of Islam in the marketing field. We propose that the underlying reasons of such perceived marginalization should be primarily looked for in the Islamic marketing literature's lack of sufficient engagement with critical theory and self-reflexivity. To date, the bourgeoning literature of Islamic marketing has hardly transgressed the boundaries of ethnocentrism, exceptionalism, and culturalism (see Ger, 2013; Jafari, 2012; Sandıkcı, 2011; Süerdem, 2013). Furthermore, as Wilson et al. (2013, p. 24) contend, "Islamic consumption and marketing, and scholarship to date have barely scratched the surface of relevant perspectives" broadly discussed in marketing and adjacent disciplines. Indeed, the lack of attention to the significant body of work on Islam and Moslems in political science, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, media studies and several other fields of social sciences and humanities has often led to false claims of 'scholarly gaps' and 'misconceptions' about the Islamic world. As a result, Islamic marketing scholarship has remained largely as a monotonous monolog within a community of scholars who demonstrate no or little interest in contesting some of the established reductionist definitions of religion and religiosity in an ever-changing world (see also Koku & Jusoh, 2014).

Contrary to the dominant conflict-averse orthodoxy of the Islamic marketing literature, we believe that contestation is not only useful but also crucial to the generation and operationalization of progressive knowledge, one that should relate to the everyday life reality of markets and marketing phenomena both within and out with Moslem geographies. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to prompt debate and critical thinking in order to re-examine some of most taken-for-granted assumptions about Islam and Moslems in the literature of (Islamic) marketing. Such an endeavor necessitates scholarly collaboration and dialog to address conflictual areas of research such as perceptions of religion and religiosity. To borrow from Kant (1998/1784, in Auer, 2010, p. 1180), without conflict, "all talents would remain hidden, unborn in an Arcadian shepherd's life, with all its concord, contentment, and mutual affection."

2. El-Bassiouny's core argument

El-Bassiouny sets out by highlighting that the global growth of the Moslem population coupled with the existing misconceptions about them (e.g., in the post 9/11 world) necessitates engagement with the Islamic world. Such engagement in her view is particularly important due to three reasons: (1) there is an increasing demand for *Shari'ah* compliant products and services (e.g., *halal*) amongst Moslem consumers;

(2) as a result of the saturation of domestic markets in the West, companies will have to look for growth opportunities elsewhere; and as an affluent market segment, Moslem societies should be considered as a promising target market; and (3) given such opportunities, still there is a lack of understanding about Moslem consumers who have a distinct "life outlook and buying characteristics that are directly related to their strongly-held religious beliefs" (p. 43).

El-Bassiouny also emphasizes that a lack of understanding the needs, values, and collectivistic cultures of Moslem consumers (particularly in the Middle East) will impose significant opportunity costs on the companies originating from non-Moslem countries: "when firms choose to ignore the Islamic market, they severely reduce their growth potential" (p. 44). To support her argument, she refers to "the lack of availability of Islamic dietary (lawful/*halal*) products in mainstream American retailers", "the cartoon crisis in Denmark and the subsequent mass boycott campaigns in the Middle East", and "the closure of Sainsbury's in Egypt" (p. 44). Her conclusion therefore is that in order to successfully penetrate the Islamic market and avoid consumer animosity, firms should have a better understanding of the "Islamic religiosity" ("Islamic ideology", "Islamic theology", "*Shari'ah*", "Islamic creed", or "*ad-din*" as used interchangeably by the author) and "transcendental values" that guide Moslem consumers' multiple interactions with markets and marketing phenomena.

To this end, the author recognizes the usefulness of the societal marketing concept which focuses on 'value maximization' (as opposed to profit maximization) in order to tackle a series of ills associated with wasteful consumerism, materialism and unethical market behaviors (e.g., deceptive practices, marginalization of the vulnerable, environmental damage). Nonetheless, she contends that even the value maximization philosophy of societal marketing does not adequately address the moral worldview and specific needs of Moslem consumers who exhibit a "unique lifestyle" (p. 43). As such, her thesis is that the Islamic marketing paradigm best captures the Moslems' view of marketing as:

> "The engagement in mutually-beneficial transactions related to products, services, and ideas that benefit society while adhering to the principles of the Islamic legislation (*Shari'ah*), and is a process that holds ethical responsibility for every person/entity engaging in these transactions in front of God" (p. 43).

The propositions El-Bassiouny puts forward are clearly formulated as a series of hypotheses geared towards testing whether or not the individual Moslem consumer, marketer, and educator who is high on religious personality is more likely to engage with the market and marketing phenomena in an Islamic manner. Such propositions are founded on the key assumptions that (1) "Muslims need a unique scale to measure their religiosity that is different from the Judeo–Christian framework upon which most of the literature is focused"; and (2) "Islamic religiosity can be divided into affiliation and commitment. Affiliation entails who is a Muslim, whereas commitment refers to what it is to be a Muslim. The former is informative, while the latter is transformative based on level of commitment" (p. 45). By the latter, the author means that those who hold an "Islamic Worldview" are more likely to have a "Religious Personality", which is the manifestation of religious beliefs in practice. Therefore, "an individual who is high on 'Religious Personality' will exhibit more of the marketing implications outlined in [the propositions]" (p. 45).

To sum up, El-Bassiouny defines Islamic marketing as a paradigm that advocates the implementation and integration of transcendental values through market practices. She also differentiates Moslems from non-Moslems in the sense that, inspired by strong religious values, the former have a unique lifestyle and engage with markets and marketing practices differently. The following sections will expose some of the key limitations of the author's theses. In order to present a concise, clear and fair critique, these assumptions will be discussed under three themes of marginalization, exceptionalism, and Islamicness.