

Advertising Ethics: A Quranic Perspective

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Abstract

Advertising is one of the most important aspects in the business world. It can be a breaking point to determine the profitability of the company. This industry has a very significant impact not only on individual companies but also on the GDP of a country due to the aggregate amount of revenue generated yearly. Most of current researches focus on the issue of unethical advertising and their impacts on the society. Rarely can be seen researches which focus from a theological perspective of advertising. This article provides a thorough insight on a Quranic perspective on advertising.

Keywords: Advertising Ethics, Quran, Theological Perspective, Unethical Advertising

Introduction

According to Wilson (2005), the first advertisements that fit the modern day definition of advertising appear in newspaper in the seventeenth century in America. While Wilmshurst & Mackay (2004) stated that in Britain from 1800 to 1848 the advertising revenues collected increases almost twofold and this is largely due to the increase of population during that period of time.

For decades many scholars already highlighted various ethical issues in the industry which bring negative social impacts. Since our society continue to growth, the impact of unethical advertising become more clear by the day. It is enough to assume that there is still no concrete solution even after decades of research from many scholars. Even there are laws and rules passed by the authority who watch over the industry, those ethical issues still exist. Since the advertising agency consist of people with very creative mind, the agency also become more creative to “cut through the clutter” to gain attention and brand awareness (Waller, 2004).

This paper is an effort to find an alternative perspective and possibly answer to the ethical issues in advertising through the enlightenment from the Qur'an. And surely without doubt we can find the guidance from it as evident in the Qur'an:

“This is the book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah” (Al-Qur'an: Al-Baqarah 2:2)

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Literature Review

Advertising can be categorized under five major functions; marketing, communication, education, economy and social functions (Bovee & Arens, 1986). Wells, Moriarty, and Burnett (2006) suggested functions of advertising such as building awareness of products and brands, create brand image, provides product and brand information, persuade people, provide incentive to take action, provide brand reminders, and lastly reinforce past purchases and brand experiences.

Some scholars argue that advertising can prop up ethical issues (Drumwright, 1993; Indrayana, 2004; Tinarbuko, 2002; Kunkel, et al., 2004; Aitchison, 2002; Tanudjaja, 2002). These ethical issues include women exploitation, subliminal perception, advertising to children, deceptive advertising, and other issues which can lead to moral deterioration of the society (Shabbir & Thwaites, 2007; 1998; Blair, Stephenson, Hill, & Green, 2006). The fact that potentially unethical advertisements are reaching the marketplace suggested that current methods of evaluating advertisements may be insufficient for some of today's controversial or innovative campaigns (Bush & Bush, 1994).

Deception is defined as a false or misleading claim in advertising (Hyman, 1990). According to Armstrong, Gurol and Russ (1979), there are three important components of salient deception such as belief, falsity and relevance. From a deontological perspective, an advertising claim is potentially deceptive if it can be shown to encourage mistaken actions by consumers. An advertisement is considered to be misleading or deceptive only if it is reasonable to expect that persons exposed to it, or those targeted by it, would come to hold false beliefs as a result of exposure to it (Attas, 1999). It is argued that deceptive advertising can be shown to be morally objectionable, on the relatively weak assumption that it is evidently wrong to harm others (Carson, Wakutch, & Cox, 1985).

What is commonly thought of today as subliminal advertising began in 1957 when a movie theater experiment subliminally directed the audience to "eat popcorn" and "drink Coca-Cola" (J. Broyles, 2006). Even after the researcher, James M. Vicary admitted that he had invented his experiment's result (Gray, 2000; Rogers, 1992-1993; Rotfeld, 2001), the concept of subliminal advertising continues to be an issue today (J. Broyles, 2006). Even in the article, *The Lowest Moment in Advertising*, the author argues that the most offensive and the most tasteless advertisements in the 90s ranges from being sexually explicit in nature up until being insensitive to some parts of the society especially the minorities (Anonymous, 2003).

Advertising communication has three components which are the advertiser, the message itself, and the resultant consumer beliefs about the advertised product (Russo, Metcalf, & Stephens, 1981). According to Attas (1999) the message in advertising can be verbal or non-verbal.

Method (Thematic Exegesis)

The term thematic i.e. relating to a theme, is used to describe the method in which an exegete selects a group of verses related to a single theme. We may also call this method synthetic because it does not seek to impose human experience on the Qur'an, rather it seeks to synthesize these verses and their meaning into a single composite view and to unite human experience with the Qur'an. In this method the exegete does not interpret the Qur'an verse by verse; rather the exegete attempts to study the whole Qur'an by taking up single theme from various doctrinal, social, development, cosmological and ethical themes dealt with by the Qur'an (Muslim, 1997, p. 16). This method seeks to find or to discover the Qur'anic viewpoint concerning a particular issue from among the various issues related to life and the universe.

For example it can be used to study the Qur'anic approach regarding prophethood, economic theory in the Qur'an and the cosmology of the Qur'an. However it should be mentioned that the kinds of Qur'anic studies which occasionally referred to as "thematic exegesis" i.e., the studies of some exegetes concerning some specific topics such as *asbab al-nuzul* of the verses, the *nasikh* and *mansukh* of verses, the metaphors

used in the Qur'an, etc. are not thematic exegesis. Such studies are compilation of a number of the problems which are raised in analytic tafsir (Al-Dhahabiy, 1992, pp. 150-151). While the prevalence of the analytic method in Qur'anic studies, which has dominated tafsir literature for several centuries, has impeded the development of Qur'anic thought and resulted in its acquiring a quality of repetitiousness, so much so that we may say that centuries passed after the exegetic works of al-Tabariy, al-Raziyy and al-Tusiyy without Islamic thought being able to create anything really new despite the extensive changes brought about over time in the various spheres of human life (Al-Sadr, 1981, pp. 7-55).

Findings

The three basic element of communication are the sender, message and receiver. Advertising is a form of communication which the advertiser as the sender, the target audience as the receiver while the message is information in the form of verbal and/or non-verbal. In the Qur'an we can find how Allah view each of these three elements and the connections among it.

For the element of message sender and receiver, the selection of the Quranic verses are based on the code of conduct and the limitation of responsibility. For the element of the message itself, the selection is based on how to form the message and to who shall bear the responsibility for it. The result for the element of message sender shown on Table 1 and Table 2. Each table will be follow by explanations to elaborate the findings.

Table 1: Quranic Verses on The Sender& The Message Elements

No.	Chapter & Verse	Essence of Verse
1	<i>An-Nahl</i> (16:125)	When delivering message, use wisdom in doing so.
2	<i>Muhammad</i> (47:29-30)	There are signsfor ill intention and they will receive painful torment in the afterlife for they used to tell lies.
3	<i>Al-Baqarah</i> (2:10)	
4	<i>Al-Fussilat</i> (41:20-23 & 41:46)	Every person will be held responsible and confronted with all the good and evil deeds he/she has done.
5	<i>Al-Imran</i> (3:30)	
6	<i>Al-Qiyamah</i> (75:14 & 75:36)	
7	<i>Ya-Sin</i> (36:65)	

Any deeds of actions, the responsibilities of it outcome shall be bear by the one who do it,thus a basic universal logic and principal. There is no argument that the message itself cannot be held responsible for anything and the responsibility of it will be on the person who create and deliver the message in the advertising. This proof by the way Allah put together the one to create the message and the form of the message in the same verse as in the *An-Nahl* (16:125). There are other verses which not related to this topic where Allah put the behaviour together with the person who do it. As example is:

“O you who believe! Make not unlawfur the Tayyibat (all that is good as regards foods, things, deeds, beliefs, persons) which Allah has made lawful to you, and transgress not verily, Allah does not like the transgressors” (Al-Qur'an: Al-Ma'idah5:87)

The verse *An-Nahl* (16:25) also told that the form of the message shall be compile in the way which will really suitable with the characteristics of the receiver audience. It is encouragement for the sender to be

creative in the compiling the form of the message. The message should creative yet consist with all applicable laws and rules.

Even in Islam, the issues regarding intention is hard to proof. Even though we can see the sign for the existing evil intention and desire in a person, in Islam we can only punish people based on concrete evidence. However, the verses from *Al-Baqarah* (2:10) and *Muhammad* (47:29-30) are proof enough that we will not be able to proof the existent of bad intention. This case is true for ethical issue such as deceptive and misleading advertising and also true if the advertiser actually want to seeds moral deterioration in the society through creative presentation of product such as perfume which show women with erotic acts.

As Allah says on multiple verses in the Qur'an, every person will be held responsible in the afterlife for all the good or bad deeds in this world. In the Table 1 there are verses extracted from 4 chapters. All this verses show that the responsibilities of human acts or the outcome of it either good or bad is shoulder by the one who do it. This put advertising in the same manner where the responsibility of any good or harmful effects bring forth by the message in advertising will be bear by people who create and deliver it.

Table 2: Quranic Verses on the Message Receiver Element

No.	Chapter & Verse	Essence of Verse
1	<i>Al-Isra'</i> (17:11)	Don't hasty and verify messages before belief.
2	<i>Al-Hujurat</i> (49:6)	
3	<i>Ash-Shura</i> (42:30 & 42:48)	Man will get what he work for and his misfortune is because of his own actions.
4	<i>At-Tur</i> (52:21)	
5	<i>Al-Muddaththir</i> (74:38)	

On the side of the message receiver from the context of advertising, it will be the target audience of the advertising or in economic term known as the consumer. The consumer will not have direct control over the advertising industry such as advertising agencies or broadcasting companies. However we shall not forget that ethical issues such as deceptive advertising only exist because the consumers are deceiveable.

This is the relevance of verses *Al-Isra* (17:11) and *Al-Hujurat* (49:6) on the Table 2 above. Issue such as deceptive advertising, misleading or fraud come from the failure of the message receiver to verify the messages. It is universal truth that nobody want to become the victim of deceit, misleading or fraud. However this does not lift the responsibility from the one who receive the message to consider it throughly before make any risky decision.

For any other issues such as women exploitation, subliminal messaging, children advertising and etc., the audience side as the message receiver still have responsibility on it. They can choose to expose or to not expose themselves, or those they supervise (e.g children) to any unethical advertising. They also can choose to hold whatever belief after watch an advertising, and further influence the belief of other with them. In case they took the wrong beliefs or actions and become victim of unethical advertising, it is cause by their own folly. This is consistent as shown on the Table 2 above for the chapter from *Ash-Shura*, *At-Tur* and *Al-Muddaththir*.

Conclusion

If we have more unethical people in the advertiser community, it will be no suprising we well see more unethical advertising in the industry. Since the use of regulation for this matter is unpractical, that leave us with only one option which is education. The education shall focus on the development of strong

appreciation on moral value among the advertiser community or the those who will become part of it such as marketing students in the high learning institution.

The element of message which is the advertisings andit continuous ethical issues is proven enough that laws, rules and authority is not enough to keep those unethical creative people from step over the line.It is an industry which rely on creative people after all. However, there is no denial that we still and always need the laws, rules and authority to watch over any industry. There is always room for improvement for those three since the environment of advertising industry continuously evolve.

The audience as the message receiver shall control what kind of ads they want to see and which is not. The effort must be put to educate themselves and more aware to not become so gullible. Its simple math and simple truth; the more gullible audience we have, the easier to distribute the wrong beliefs.

The advertising as form of communication which have three basic element the advertiser (sender), the advertising (message) and the audience (receiver). The failure from one element either intentionally or not, will render the other two elements useless and the by controlling one element we can control the whole outcome. For example, an deceitful advertiser create and distribute a deceitful ads, the audience watch the ads but never deceive by it.

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