

## **PERCEIVED ISLAMIC SYMBOLS IN VIDEO COMMERCIALS: AN IDENTIFICATION EXERCISE FROM PAKISTAN**

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**Abstract:** Emerging markets have received much attention from researchers recently, as these markets are going to be the next big consumer market and understanding consumer behavior is key to competitive advantage. Consumer behavior is shaped by factors such as culture, experience, personality, and religion. Despite realizing potential, religion has not been given due importance and the scarcity of empirical studies is evident in religious marketing. Religions are often represented by means of commonly used and accepted symbols, though these symbols are complex and sometimes create an issue of sacredness and appropriateness to be used. To understand the role of religious symbols, first it is important to identify the symbols which are considered religious by the consumers. This study is an attempt to identify symbols that are considered Islamic when shown in Video commercials and the value that consumers associated with these symbols. A mix method approach is taken for this study, first in-depth interviews and informal discussion were conducted with academic and industry professionals. Then, an elicitation survey was conducted to understand perception of students studying in universities situated in federal capital and provincial capitals of Pakistan. Experts provided more value-oriented responses with non-exaggerative, truth based and honest advertisement as the core of Islamic symbols. Responses from elicitation survey are presented as per frequency of occurrence and top ten symbols that are considered Islamic when shown in video commercial are identified. These symbols provide an opportunity for firms to understand which symbols have a more symbolic association with Islamic values and using these symbols may positively influence Muslim consumers' attitude and purchase behavior.

**Keyword:** Islamic Symbols, Video Commercials, Muslim Consumers

## Introduction

In quest of explaining consumer behavior comprehensively, marketing researchers have linked consumer behavior to related fields, with most of the fruitful results coming from behavioral science. Symbolism and self-concept are two of the major areas that have been linked with consumer behavior (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Mick, 1986; Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk and Preciado, 2013). Researches in early 1950s highlighted importance of symbolic values and benefits associated with products and also provided empirical evidence of a strong contribution of symbolic values to consumers (Gardner and Levy, 1955; Levy, 1959). Symbolic association with product and perceived value play an equally important role in consumers' choice of the product along with functional characteristics. For instance, Mick (1986) claims that "the consumer world is a web of meanings among consumers and marketers woven from signs and symbols ensconced in their cultural space" (Mick, 1986, p. 196). Three important features of such consumer worldview are highlighted in the above statement. First, there are entities who try to reach to the consumers, for instance producers, service providers and marketers. Second, symbolic value is created through promotional activities to reach consumers, and lastly, consumers may perceive these symbols differently according to the cultural settings they live or believe in. All these features explain the way consumers choose a product and are consumed.

Conventional marketing considers consuming products as a response to some underlying needs and the functional attributes of the products. Overall, research into human motivations to purchase products can be grouped into two domains. One is the cogent and economic model of consumer behavior that suggests that consumers make purchases based on rationality and they evaluate the product's functional attributes for their purchase decisions (Schiffman & Kanuk 1994). For example, the efficient mileage of a car is the functional attribute. Other researchers, however, suggest that consumers are not always rational in their purchases; they can purchase a product to express self-identity and emotions (Holbrook 1980; Holbrook & Hirschman 1982). Accordingly, the information processing and decision-making processes depend on the nature of the product. For example, consumers can express their self-identity by owning a particular car brand. This psychological value of a product is gained from personal and socio-cultural preferences. There are many factors that shape one's personal behavior such as culture, experience, personality, and religion (Naseri and Tamam, 2012; Mooij, 2018). Among these, religion can be termed as the most influential factor to influence personal preferences and behavior (Naseri and Tamam, 2012).

Religion, specially Christianity, is used in form of symbolic interaction with consumers, without announcing it or using it as mainstream message (Sahlaoui and Bouslama, 2016; Taylor, Halstead and Moal-Ulvoas, 2017). However, as

far as Islam, another growing religion, is concerned has not been given due importance in marketing activities and Islamic symbols are hardly used in advertisements (Hasan *et al.*, 2016). Even though, Muslims constitute around one fourth of the world's population and are active participants in global economy in various capacities. Muslims can be found in noticeable roles such as traders, service providers, investors, economists and politicians. Muslim market is growing at an ever-increasing rate and next chunk of consumers to be looked for by businesses is primarily composed of Muslim consumers. According to Thompson Islamic economy report (Thomson and Dinar, 2018), Islamic economy (economic activities by Muslim consumers and producers) sized \$2.1 trillion in 2017 and estimated to be more than \$3 Trillion in 2023 at compound annual growth rate of 8%, whereas global economy growth rate is 4.2% that is almost half of the growth of Islamic economy. Therefore, giving Muslim markets and consumers due attention in academic research has become essential, and to understand Muslim consumers Islamic symbols has become even more vital than ever before.

Islamic symbols are complex and due care should be given when using them to advertise through different mediums, as they may be accepted in one form of presentation and rejected in the other. For instance, a verse from the Holy Quran (Holy book of Muslims) may be accepted among the Muslims in video commercials (Referred to as VC hereafter) or audio form, whereas rejected when printed on a product, as it may seem derogatory for the holy script (Al Karim, 2015). For instance, Nike in 1997 launched a shoe with an "Air" logo on it; which was supposed to represent flames (Al Karim, 2015). However, it resembled to Arabic word "Allah" and thus created unrest in Muslim countries and Nike had to recall the shoe and change the design (Cateora and Garaham, 2002) even though, word "Allah" has a great significance and symbolic value for Muslims its presentation was unapproved by the Muslims. On the other hand, another issue raised was against "Lays" chips producers in Pakistan, where messages across country were circulated with content claiming lays to be a "Haram" (Haram is an Arabic word which means forbidden to consume for Muslims) (Moiz and Khan, 2014). Lays, in return, casted Junaid Jamshed a musician turned into religious scholar, in their VC to assure consumers that chips are "Halal" (an Arabic word which reflects permissibility for Muslims). The response from consumers was overwhelming and lays managed to get back their market share (Moiz and Khan, 2014). These examples show that symbols carry huge importance and their in-depth understanding can unleash true potential for marketers. It is therefore important to explore the symbols which are perceived Islamic by consumers and will be acceptable the way they are presented.

Furthermore, it is realized that consumers associate value with symbols, this symbolic value is consumers perception of suitability of the symbol and the

form it is presented (Akbari, Gholizadeh and Zomorodi, 2014). Symbols with high symbolic values will attract more attention and help in creating positive attitude towards brand (Bakar, Lee and C, 2013). However, hardly any literature is seen regarding assessing symbolic value of Islamic symbols used in VCs, and it's about time to understand which symbols are considered Islamic and which are not, by the consumers (Sandıkcı, 2018). It is therefore imperative to identify symbols that are perceived Islamic by the consumers when seen in VCs. A few researches have presented Islamic symbols and their symbolic values (Bakar, Lee and C, 2013; Akbari, Gholizadeh and Zomorodi, 2014); however, they are for symbols printed on packaging of the products. Islamic symbols in VCs are yet to be studied for their symbolic values. Thus, this research is among the early attempts to answer, "which symbols (Symbolic cues) are perceived as Islamic when shown in VCs and how much symbolic value do they mean to the consumers"?

Marketers are trying hard to gain competitive advantage and create a unique identification, and their attraction towards religious symbols is quite rational. However, when Islamic symbols are used in marketing activities, practitioners have less support from literature to guide which symbol to be used in their campaigns, especially when multi-channel approach is adopted. As discussed earlier, there is some literature available on product packaging but when it comes to complex situation of VCs hardly any literature is found. It is imperative to understand that symbols printed on packages and shown in VCs are much different, as case of Nike discussed earlier. Therefore, this study will help marketers understand and identify the Islamic symbols that can or cannot be used in VCs.

### **Literature Review**

According to symbolic interactionism, individuals in a society are social beings and learn about the objects around them and give them meanings according to their interactions with the environment (McClellan and Shryock, 2010). In such social interactions, an individual's role and situation or context are important factors to generate an appropriate response. Consequently, human beings do not respond to the situation or event as it happens but based on their interpretation and definition of that situation or event (Burbank & Martins 2009). The behavior of the individual mainly depends on the interpretation and the context of behavior. The Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT) stems from psychology and social psychology, where human behavior is shaped by the individual self as well as by others in the society. This understanding of symbols and their interpretation has significant implications for human behavior, such as predicting consumer buying behavior and their self-concept.

Likewise, symbolism is an expression of a consumers' self-image or self-identity. Therefore, researchers extended the SIT to explain symbolic

consumption and proposed that the theory may explain consumer behavior, in that consumers associate symbolic meanings with products that they consume (Leigh & Gabel 1992; Solomon 1983). Researchers contend that consumers often structure and portray their self-concept and behavior via the subjective experience that they derive from consuming products (Chernev, Hamilton & Gal 2011; Solomon 1983). The chosen product then reflects the consumers association to a particular group based on the symbolic meaning that the group has attached to the product (Henley *et al.*, 2009). Among the tightly held societies or groups, religious association is one of the strongest and consumers give special attention to such symbols.

### **Symbolism and Religion**

Symbols have influential effects on individual's attitude and behavior, while represented in any form including slogans, practices, and stories (Rainer, 2016). Symbols often become religions' generic representation and are stereotypically evaluated as the intensity of religious belief or religiosity. Such behavior is primarily shown due to abstract theological notion of religion. Generally religious symbols include physical objects such as the Christian cross, Christian fish, the Jewish Star of David, and for Muslims Mosque or crescent (indication for start of months and year) for Muslims along with behaviors such as genuflection and baptism and stories such as the creation story. According to Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1966, p.4) Religion with regards to symbolic interaction may be defined as:

*“Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivation in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Roberts 2004; Wilkes, Burnett and Howell 1986)*

Religion is considered to be one of the most influential aspect in shaping human values and behaviors at both the personal and societal level (Naseri and Tamam, 2012). The role of religion is not restricted to a specific religion, rather it has proved to be important social institution for individual's behavior and societal values (Hogg, Adelman and Blagg, 2010; Naseri and Tamam, 2012). Consequently, individuals and institutions use religion to guide them in decision making and choices are bounded by religion's commandments. Such important role has attracted marketers to take help of religion not only to understand consumer behavior but also use religious symbols in attracting consumers.

### **Religious symbols and advertisement**

Even though attitudes and behaviors are directly influenced by religion rooted aspects of culture, religion's impact on advertising have been only very modestly studied (Mokhlis, 2009; Naseri and Tamam, 2012). Naseri & Tamam (2012) mentioned three significant researched categories in

religion and advertisement. These categories are attitude towards advertising of controversial products (Fam and Grohs, 2007; De Run *et al.*, 2010), presence of religious values in advertisement (Al-Olayan and Karande, 2000; Kalliny and Gentry, 2007) and the consumers reaction to advertisement containing religious cues or symbols (Henley *et al.*, 2009; Taylor, Halstead and Haynes, 2010; Bakar, Lee and Rungie, 2013; Hasan *et al.*, 2016)

Existing research on consumer attitude mainly examined the effect of symbols but the intensity and importance of these symbols is still understudied. Mostly, businesses use religious symbols in their marketing drives prior to a major religious event, which increases the intensity of such symbols, while some use it as a constant approach of delivering message to consumers. For instance, the fast food restaurant chain In-N-Out Burger prints passages from the Bible on its food wrappers and cups (Alhouthi *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, it is important for marketers to understand religious commitments and symbolic values to build inroads into a particular market.

### **Islamic Symbols and advertisement**

Islamic culture is a combination of symbols containing historical, religious, and mystical elements. Symbols can be found everywhere in everyday social life from minarets in the market to paintings of holy places in the drawing rooms. It would be unjust to say that comprehensive understanding of Islamic values and culture can be built without understanding the rich density of symbols that are, associated with ancient history and tradition and are extensively followed in modern cultures and societies that have embraced or embracing Islam (Antonio, 2008). Islamic symbols come from diverse sources. Most share a common nexus with The Holy Book (Qur'an), life and mission of the Prophet Mohammed and the genesis of Islam, but others are legacies of ancient sources that date from before the emergence of Islam (Antonio, 2008). However, consumers understanding and perception about these Islamic symbols may vary and, even though, the symbols may have originated from a single source may be perceived differently. Symbols play an important role in shaping individuals behavior and when consumers are exposed to religious symbols, their evaluation of product is affected (Dotson and Hyatt, 2000; Bakar, Lee and C, 2013). For marketers, it is imperative to understand which symbols may be associated with Islamic values and which are not, or rather it would be appropriate to say to understand 'symbolic value' of Islamic symbols. An identification exercise was conducted by Abou Bakar, Lee & Rungie (2012) in Pakistan to explore the Islamic symbols. The top 5 symbols identified in that elicitation survey are (highest to lowest frequency order) Mosque, Crescent, Green Color, Rosary and Sword. However a noticeable thing is in these symbols verbal cues are not given importance by the consumers, primarily for the reason that the study involved symbols that are considered Islamic when printed on product packages.

These Islamic symbols may be perceived differently when viewed in isolation comparing to more integrated and complex presentation, such as in VCs. For instance, Hijab is considered a Islamic symbol with high value (Akbari, Gholizadeh and Zomorodi, 2014), however when presented in VC the same can have a different perceived value when interacting with different social circles or representing a product with less Islamic value. Therefore, this study is an effort to understand how consumers perceive Islamic symbols when shown in VCs and which symbols they perceive as Islamic.

### Methodology

In this study exploratory method of inquiry was adopted to understand consumers' perspective about Islamic symbols in advertisements, more specifically in VCs. First, brainstorming sessions were conducted with experts of the field in an informal way. Experts for the discussion can be selected based on credentials or accuracy of their previous predictions (Colson and Cooke, 2018), in this study experts were chosen based on credentials, that is PhD or proven experience. In this study three (03) experts were chosen from academia having Ph.D. in marketing, specifically in area of Islamic marketing. While five (05) practitioners who had experience of over 10 years in advertisement and who have been involved in producing ads with Islamic symbols were chosen. Respondents profile is given in table 1. This process helped in understanding and identifying key issues revolving Islamic symbols in advertisement. Further, an elicitation survey was conducted to identify Islamic symbols.

**Table 1**

Respondent #	Gender	Age	Qualification	Affiliation (Academia / Industry)	Experience
01	Male	47	Ph.D.	Academia	14 Years
02	Male	41	Ph.D.	Academia	11 Years
03	Male	36	Ph.D.	Academia	03 Years
04	Male	51	MBA	Industry	26 Years
05	Male	46	MBA	Industry	17 Years
06	Male	41	MS	Industry	13 Years
07	Male	39	MBA	Industry	13 Years
08	Male	38	MBA	Industry	10 Years

Profile of experts contacted for interview

### Elicitation survey

As discussed above, hardly any studies can be found on listing the consumers' perspective about Islamic symbols in VCs, so the first task was to identify symbols that are perceived Islamic when shown in VCs. Many symbols can be termed as Islamic based on Holy Quran and books of Hadith, but as the focus

of study is consumers' perception, it seemed appropriate to identify symbols through consumers' responses. To gather responses an elicitation survey was conducted among 103 consumers, studying in graduate and undergraduate programs in Federal and provincial capitals (Karachi, Quetta, Lahore, Peshawar and Islamabad) of Pakistan. Many researchers have used elicitation surveys (Lee and Murphy, 2005; Colson and Cooke, 2018) to inquire about any object or behavior which is previously understudied. Elicitation surveys are important tool to understand and build new concepts for new contexts for better comprehension of the problem (Fishbein and Middlestadt, 1995; Malhotra, Agarwal and Peterson, 1996). This elicitation survey identified symbols that were perceived Islamic and had high symbolic association with Islamic values. Respondents were given blank paper sheet and were asked to write down whatever comes to their mind after listening to phrase "Islamic symbols in VCs". Respondents were not asked to reveal the identity to reduce pressure of providing socially acceptable answers.

### Results

The discussion with experts provided insight into Islamic symbols and their understanding of consumers' perception towards these symbols. The experts were reached out after taking an appointment and were briefed about the purpose of discussion. All the respondents believed that Islamic symbols are quite evident and mostly people value them high. The most valuable symbols included Holy Quran (the last divine book recited by Muslims), Makkah (where Kaa'ba is located, towards which Muslims face while praying), Madinah (Place where last Prophet P.B.U.H spent his last 10 years along with his companions after the migration) and crescent. Islamic months start with sighting of moon and is long been associated with beginning of Ramadan (the holy month for Muslims) and other festivals for Muslims such as EID. The experts were of the point of view that many symbols, specially relating to attire, are subjective and more culture dependent, hence may vary from region to region and person to person.

The experts were then asked specifically about symbols that can represent Islamic values in VCs. The most common answer involved the Islamic values including truth based claims, non-exaggerative claims, no lies, honesty and empathy. However, when experts were asked that how these things can be symbolized, their concern was that it is long term approach and can be established by practicing hard. Further discussion revealed importance of values that can be symbolized included attire of men and women. Head scarf, Beard, modest dressing and less mix gender interaction were a few important things that could represent Islamic values for consumers.

Five experts highlighted the importance of women in advertisement and they enforced the claim that Muslim viewer give women more importance in the advertisement. Respondent 4 said that "... and if you show men in nicker with



*no clothes on it wouldn't create any issue, whereas showing a woman with sleeveless dress will create unrest and you will have to face backlash from people specially on social media".* Respondent 2 also had similar comment whilst putting emphasis on "... women in our society are more fragile and seen differently, therefore showing them in controversial attire or interacting with men in manner unacceptable for society creates problem for the brands". Highlighting the women again, four respondents said that women with more modest attire will attract more people and may create an Islamic image of brand, which in result may help them build reputation and increase consumer base.

However, two experts were skeptical about the concept and said that these efforts are for the worldly gains and Islam for sure doesn't encourage that. For instance, respondent number02 said that "... and unless these businesses intend to provide benefit to the consumers and society and comply to complete shariah code, how can they be considered Islamic? Only incorporating a few symbols that may represent Islamic values isn't enough and Muslim scholar and businessmen need to think on that".

Three experts were of the view that these symbols often backfire. Muslims over time have distanced themselves from true teaching of Islam and are involved in unethical practices. Seeing symbols associated with Islamic values may be interpreted as "an effort to cheat". For instance respondent 1 said "Muslims have made a lot of effort in creating such cheat image and merely incorporating symbols won't undo that". Another response elaborated similar thoughts "people no more trust on others with beard or scarf or other such symbols, and they are not going to do so through advertisements". However, they also highlighted the importance of asking consumers as it varies from person to person and situation that they are in.

### Elicitation Results

After brainstorming sessions with experts, a detailed elicitation survey was conducted from student of different universities. Students were asked to write down symbols that can reflect or be related to Islamic values when shown in VCs. A total of 58 responses mentioned male in gender and 40 mentioned males, whereas 5 respondent preferred not to mention their gender. Table 2 shows top ten symbols that were identified during elicitation survey.

**Table 2**

S.No	Symbol	Frequency
01	Holy Places (Makkah, Madinah)	87
02	Hijab	83
03	Mosques	76
04	Quranic verses	64
05	Qawali	61
06	Green Color / Shrines	56

07	Aazan (call for Prayer)	49
08	Men with Beard	43
09	Hilal (Crescent)	37
10	Rosary (Tasbeeh)	36

Frequency table for top ten symbols identified

In addition to aforementioned symbols other noticeable symbols identified were Sufi Relics, calligraphy of Qurainc verses and graveyard. Many respondents mentioned Islamic values such as brotherhood, charity, empathy, truth, non-exaggerative message, dignity, and kindness. However, as discussed earlier with the experts, incorporating such values in advertisement in shape of symbols is complex and needs storytelling to completely convey the message.

A noticeable result is hijab for women to appear in advertisement is valued very high. Different names are given by consumers for instance “burqa”, “Jilbab”, “Abaya” and “veil”, however all of these represent the concept of covering the head and body (El Guindi, 1999). In contrast to high number (83) for women related attire, men got relatively less attention and mentioned only 43 times. One of the reasons for such response is women’s primary role in Islamic conservative families is to take care of home related affairs and raise the kids in best manner. Furthermore, a few respondents mentioned that mix gender shall be avoided, and a few responded that women and men should be shown only in relevant VCs. However, this relevancy is subjective and may be more in-depth interviews or discussion be able to describe what is relevant to whom. Sufi Relics (also mentioned as Sufi whirling) a physical movement used by Sufis for meditation, was also mentioned by some of the respondents. Another noticeable response was about religious scholars and religious celebrities. An empirical experience of such instance is already mentioned in introduction of the study when “Junaid Jamshed” was hired by Lays to create a Halal impression. Furthermore, a few mentions were of introducing social awareness messages by Islamic scholars belonging to different school of thoughts, which could bring harmony among the nation.

In addition to symbols, a few products were also mentioned including Dates, Miswak (a piece of tree’s branch used by Muslims to clean inner mouth and teeth), Itr (non-alcoholic perfume) and olives. Milk, Rosary and Pen are also among top ten products mentioned. It is worthwhile to mention that Islam gives high importance to Pen and there is a complete chapter with the title Al-Qalam (Arabic word used for pen). Top ten products and their frequency is mentioned in table 3.

**Table 3**

S.No	ProductsIslamic	Frequency
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In	01	Dates	67
	02	Honey	54
	03	Miswak	49
	04	Ittr	48
	05	Olives	42
	06	Milk	39
	07	Rosary	37
	08	Pen	26
	09	AabeZamZam	25
	10	Figs	14

Frequency table for products mentioned as Islamic

addition to the products considered Islamic, a few mentions of products that are not permissible in Islam were also reported, which included Pork, Alcohol and tobacco. However, most of the Islamic countries have laws related to such products and they are not advertised. Beauty and fashion related products were also reported in less favorable category and discouraged to be advertised the way they are currently advertised. Another significant mention was about Undergarments and it is perceived among the respondents that they shall not be advertised or may be advertised with some decency. Summary of products mentioned in responses is presented below in table 4.

**Table 4**

S.No	Products Non - Islamic	Frequency
01	Alcohol	41
02	Pork	32
03	Tobacco	28
04	Undergarments	24
05	Cosmetics	19
06	Music Instruments	18

Frequency table for products mentioned as Non-Islamic

A few responses were beyond comprehension and needed detailed discussion which was beyond the scope of study, for instance “resemblance with Taliban”, and “Pride”. There can be many interpretations of these responses in both positive and negative way. Therefore, researcher did not present personal opinion on such responses.

### **Conclusion**

The discussions with experts and elicitation survey clearly indicates that there are few symbols which are unanimously considered Islamic and are of high

symbolic value for Muslims. Firstly, value system that governs individual's and society's behavior is given high importance by the experts and respondents of the elicitation survey. These values include truth, non-exaggerative claims, honesty, empathy, politeness, brotherhood, kindness and individual and collective social wellbeing. These values are consistent across region and culture, previous researches have also shown similar results with respect to Islamic values (Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002; Bakar, Lee and Rungie, 2013) However, incorporating them in VC in symbolic form is considered a complex issue and needs further investigation.

Among symbolic cues showing holy places including Kaa'ba, Madinah and Mosques, and Quran represents high symbolic values and incorporating them may influence consumers' perception toward advertisement and brand. Adding to that list, women attire is most important symbols that reflect Islamic value, especially headscarf and hijab. Women models may be dressed modestly for creating Islamic value in a VC. Globally this change is also noticeable, for instance French brand Lancôme chose Malaysian actress Neelofaas the first hijab-wearing ambassador for them (Thomson and Dinar, 2018) for Muslim countries. Furthermore, men with beard are also considered in high symbolic value category. However, clear discrimination with respect to gender is visible and their impact on evaluation of VC is still unknown and needs to be studied.

For advertisers, this study can be helpful to understand that which symbols are valued high and considered representative of Islamic value. In-depth understanding of these symbols is important before projecting them in VCs, as experts mentioned these symbols can back fire and create a negative impact on consumers. The feeling of religion being used to exploit can create long term reputation issues.

The results of this research can be used to answer more questions involving consumers' response to VCs, whether these symbols can impact the purchase intention and create a positive attitude toward brand and advertisement or not? Do these symbols create any value for the consumers? Additionally an important aspect of studying Islamic symbols is consumers' involvement in advertisement with these symbols and capability of these symbols to attract its viewers. Another dimension for future researchers is to understand the role of these symbols in creating Islamic brand personality, as it is a growing concern among Islamic marketing scholars.

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