

LITTLE UMMAH – AND THE FLOATING WORLD OF THE DRAGON



JONATHAN (BILAL) A.J. WILSON
SENIOR LECTURER & COURSE LEADER,
UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH, LONDON UK
EDITOR: JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC MARKETING,
EMERALD GROUP PUBLISHING.



September has been a fun and busy month for me. I wanted to share these experiences, which have helped me to shape the following argument: culture, spirituality, branding, public relations, and social stakeholder relations are driving globalized pluralism. We are witnessing the age of niche chic. The global consumer artisan, as a second supplementary career - who seeks rich interconnected experiences and views the world through multi screens. No job is for life; and as we work harder and for longer, the lines between work and play are being blurred. As the virtual world extends virtually everywhere, fantasy and reality are also becoming blurred. We are unleashing the inner dragon in us that brings together land, air, fire and water.



So what happened in September?

I was invited by the Azerbaijan State Committee for Religious Groups to participate in a trip called the 'Silk Road of Tolerance' alongside a press conference for the launch of their centre for religious tolerance.

Award winning author and advertising guru John Grant, launched his new book called, *Made With: The emerging alternative to Western brands*, which charts the rise of brands from the Muslim Majority region, from Istanbul to Indonesia. Earlier on in the year, following a series of brainstorming sessions and as a sort of prelude whilst he was researching for his book, John and I wrote a conceptual paper together published in the *Journal of Islamic Marketing*¹, which introduced some key questions and arguments.

I watched the queues in the Ginza district of Tokyo, Japan first hand – as they patiently waited for their champagne gold iPhone 5S. As a Londoner, I was a bit upset though to see that the iPhone 5S is much more expensive in the UK than it is in New York, or Tokyo – so unfair!

I was a speaker and panellist at the fringe event titled: "The importance of Islamic finance in UK growth" at the Labour Party Conference, UK Government All Party Group on Islamic Finance and Diversity in Financial Markets. This is a precursor to my work on Halal with PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), where graphic designers Peter Gould, Ruh Al'alam² and I have produced infographics³ and content for the forthcoming annual World Islamic Economic Forum (WIFE)⁴, to be hosted in London – which is set to attract some 2,000 delegates from 85 countries, and has been well supported by the Mayor of London.

And, to cap all of that off, London also saw the UK's first Halal Food Festival⁵, with appearances from mainstream celebrity chefs, and more Muslim bling and chic than I have seen for a while!

All of this travel also meant that I got to catch up on those movies that you normally don't know about, or have time to watch – courtesy of in-flight entertainment. I watched Iron Man 3 and daydreamed about what technology will be at my fingertips in my lifetime. It made a change not to see Muslims as the bad guys in 'Olympus Has Fallen' (but poor Koreans!). I was amazed at how many product placement spots Google got

in various films, like Robert Redford's 'The Company You Keep' (what did journalists do before Google?); and not to mention of course the most blatant corporate marketing vehicle I have seen in a while with 'The Internship'. It was also interesting to see an increase in the number of Malaysian and Indonesian movies. And of course, I topped up on my important diet of Chinese, Japanese and Korean movies.

So what did this whistle-stop buffet of sensory experiences do to me? Well, the common ground appears to be how people are reacting, connecting, and finding a space, in response to globalization and integrated platforms - through the language and meaning of brands. I think vital to all of these break-through branded experiences is their aptitude at presenting and celebrating a rich cultural experience, which fuses the old with the new; and is punctuated with objects of desire, rituals, and emotive storytelling. I would also go further in saying that the emotions which are being evoked are about a kind of neo-spiritualism, worship and reverence; and framing religion as a lived cultural experience - whether that's Halal, an iPhone, or even superheroes.

The other interesting development is the apparent desire in all of these examples for consumer pluralism - pointing societies and communities towards being encouraged to maintain their own cultural traditions, alongside over-arching inclusive interests. One size can fit all, but that doesn't mean that all have to be one shape. This is interesting, because it opens up the idea of using layered approaches - where a niche concept is a vehicle for attracting a wider core and surrogate audiences at the same time.

Previously, niche was intended to be niche with the hope of maybe going mainstream. Or, in the case of ethnic, faith, special interest, and high-end technology targeted offerings; many are designed to remain niche - at times in response to mainstream not catering for enough needs; or as a badge of honour, keeping it real and grassroots authenticity. Now more ethnic and religious groups want their special interests and needs to cross-over, and appeal to all with a sense of pluralism. Everyone needs a business-grade smart phone - even if that's just to check the GPS of your friends in the school

playground, so that you can arrange where to video your next YouTube clip, in hope that it will go viral and has the potential to monetized; or you want to start an Arab Spring.

So, is all of this a response to globalization; the call to commercialise more and more things; minority groups' confidence; a quest for unearthing and celebrating the authentic and unique; or spring-cleaning away the cobwebs of tired stereotyping and generalisations? Social media is assisting this both evolutionary and revolutionary process, by allowing for more intricate messages and stories to be communicated. Google has produced an interesting think piece on multi-screen consumer behaviour⁶. In the case of the Muslim community, it's clear that 9/11 and subsequent geopolitical events now are driving especially middle-class educated Muslims to try and claim social and commercial spaces in order to counteract negative perceptions, without sacrificing their identities, and which develop cultural economies which cross-over.

We are witnessing the age of the global artisan, as a second supplementary career. No job is for life; and as we work harder and for longer, the lines between work and play are being blurred. As the virtual world extends virtually everywhere fantasy and reality are also becoming blurred. People appear to be pleasure-seeking more, and the quest for pleasurable work is part of that too. A world of superheroes, who are also entrepreneurs, chefs and entertainers; looking to save humanity, with a moral purpose, a virally marketed cause, gadgets; and rewards up for grabs in an afterlife. But these aren't superheroes like Batman or Spiderman who hide behind masks, away from society. It's also now cool to be the sort of superhero that takes 'selfies' on your smartphone to share with the world.

Illustrating this point further through an analogy, I'd like to take you on a journey to the Floating World. This Floating World, is an allusion to the term often used to describe the urban pleasure seeking lifestyle, of the Edo period in Japan's history. *Floating World* is a translation of the Japanese word, *ukiyo*. This term

collectively covers: tea houses, theatres, actors, celebrities, geisha, brothels, middle class, sumo wrestlers, samurai, and merchants of the time - who have been preserved in many wood-block print artefacts, known as *ukiyo-e* [pictures of the floating world]. Ironically, *ukiyo* also has a





homophone, which means 'Sorrowful World'. The Sorrowful World is the Buddhist place of death and rebirth, from which one seeks liberation. This concept is not unique to Japanese thinking, as in Arabic the word *surah* almost has something which makes a homophone - with a little poetic licence, if we take a Hip hop approach to blurring sounds, and especially if we read it in its English text. Then, it can be translated, depending on the context, to mean either: a chapter of the Holy Qur'an, or a picture. In fact the root word from which *Arabic* is derived, means to state clearly, to declare, or to give a hansom.

So, the Floating World could be an image-evoking allegory to explain the prevailing cultural phenomenon present around the modern world, especially in developed societies. It makes me reflect on whether urban life centred in consumption (and allegorically branding) is 'pleasure seeking' or 'sorrowful'? And, does this mean that we should be more concerned by all of this, or is it a welcomed opportunity? It is apparent that self-defined constructed identities rely upon cultural commodities, as a means to locate like minds and bring people together. Branding activities are

serving as pictorial artefacts for marketers and consumers; capturing and preserving slices of life and culture – and these are governing many of the products, services, activities, experiences and people, which make up our Floating World.

All of this got me thinking some more...

The Halal Food Festival was a well-received and rich experience. I couldn't help thinking though that it was packed with people desperate for more of the same more often. The Muslim world, especially from the Gulf, Malaysia, and also China are investing heavily in London. China is key to the Muslim world because they have, by some estimates, 50 million Muslims; they have developed a Halal hub in northwest region with more than 120 companies and reached a production volume of more than US\$1.27 in 2012.

Now I love ethnic enclaves. Think of those China Towns around the globe, and the idea that where ever you go you can have a taste of the Chinese experience. Whether you're Chinese and home-sick; or you're not Chinese, but are love-sick for Chinese food, culture and a more intense experience, it's there. For that matter, I also love 'Little Italy' in various cities, 'Tokyo Street' in Kuala Lumpur's Pavilion Mall, and Ibn Battuta Mall in Dubai. With the new phenomenon of the role of religion as a cultural lifestyle entity,



could the Muslim world take things a step further and follow suit?

Can you picture a *Little Ummah* concept in non-Muslim countries? Think about a shopping complex, alongside riad style apartments, gardens and fountains; women only spas, swimming pools and gyms; a mosque; a souk with perfumeries, ceramics, and spices; coffee shops; an art gallery; food courts; and office space for small businesses and professional services firms with a specialism in Muslim markets. When Halal and Islam are positioned like this, as a lived experience, rather than just products, then I think this is when this already sizeable niche will get even bigger and cross-over. Tourism and hospitality are the life-blood of Muslim economies now. Looking forward, if they are fused with the benefits of being positioned in the West, could this be the thing that helps the Muslim world to build those bridges that

once stood in the golden age of Islam?

Of course at the moment I'm painting a picture, which tells a story yet to be brought to life. But in all seriousness I'm writing this piece for two reasons. Firstly, to put out an open call to those people who buy into this vision and would like to make it happen. And secondly, because I am of the strong belief that good marketing in this space has to see Muslim consumers in a similar way to that which is often written about China and the Chinese.

During my trip to Azerbaijan, I remember seeing a mural on the ceiling of an old Azerbaijani palace, which depicted a dragon breathing flowers, and a woman with the body of a winged lion. I was told that these images were supposed to symbolise the ideal of Muslim rule – all the attributes of a dragon; the idea of companionship with strong female role models; with peace and tranquillity,

rather than breathing fire down peoples' necks. Now I've spoken about the garuda previously, and the dragon has its traditions in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Is now the time to rebrand the Muslim world as a *peace dragon*?

¹ Wilson, J.A.J. & Grant, J. (2013), "Islamic Marketing – a challenger to the classical marketing canon?", *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, Vol.4 Iss.1, pp.7-21.

² <http://www.peter-gould.com/>

³ <http://www.halalbranding.com/>

⁴ <http://blogs.fco.gov.uk/domicijermey/2013/09/12/london-and-dubai-to-help-islamic-finance-thrive/>

⁵ <http://halalfoodfestival.com/>

⁶ <http://www.google.co.uk/think/research-studies/the-new-multi-screen-world-study.html>