

# MISUSE OF ISLAMIC ATTRIBUTES IN FOOD PRODUCTS LABELLING AND MARKETING IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

Various marketing techniques have been used to capture consumers' attention. Among them is using Islamic attributes. This practice has led to various negative impacts on the consumers and the Islamic dignity itself. The aim of this study is to identify the misuse of Islamic attributes in food products' labelling and to investigate the extent to which the use of Islamic attributes impacts the consumer and the Islamic dignity. In order to achieve the objectives, library research was carried out to collect relevant information. The materials also include online materials gathered from Google search engine. The materials are not only limited to the English language but also cover Malay language materials. The qualitative data from the library study was analyzed using the content analysis method. There are various types of misuse; first, is Quran-related such as Ruqyah, secondly Sunnah-related such as using the term Prophetic foods or the word Sunnah itself, thirdly by using Islamic icons. Fourthly, by using Islamic act of worships such as prostration in prayers and the fifth category is using an Islamic or Muslim's name. The last category is by using *Jawi* writings or Arabic terms in the label or trademark. These marketing techniques may lead to numerous effects, among others degrading the authority of Sunnah, health concern and exploiting Islam for commercial gain. The findings may act as a starting point to the policymakers in proposing some guidelines on the use of Islamic attributes in food product labeling and marketing in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** *Food products, Islamic attributes, labelling, marketing, misuse.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2017, a new trend offering a service for do'a or prayer in Mecca or known as Valet Do'a has emerged. These packages vary according to the place and time the prayer to be performed. The customer who wants to use this service must pay to the person or the service provider some amount of money. They alleged that prayers made in Mecca would be accepted by Allah. This service has been condemned by a few Muftis, among others the Mufti of Federal Territory Dato' Sri Dr. Zulkifli Al-Bakri. He asserted that this service which contradicted with the syariah principle was not practiced by the Prophet or his Companions. Valet do'a is a clear act of manipulation and may deceive and confuse the public. Thus, this kind of service should be stopped ("Official Website Mufti

of Federal Territory,” 2017). This opinion was supported by Tan Sri Dr. Abdullah Mohd Zin (previous advisor of the Prime Minister) who asserted that Muslims should not indulge in a business that may deviate themselves from the Islamic teachings. He also warned that religion should not be used as a mean to get rich or used for political ends. (Zin, 2017). JAKIM also made a statement to caution the public not to engage with activities relating to Valet do’a as this practice is prohibited in Islam. The Director, Tan Sri Othman Mustapha contended that the packages offered can be considered as religious exploitation for personal profit. Islam encourages its followers to pray wherever they are and not confined to specific places.

Similarly, the use of Islamic attributes in marketing and labeling of food products is increasingly popular and widespread in the Malaysian market. The producers use the terms such as *Sunnah* food, *Ruqyah* verses, Islamic names and logos, and many others on their label, as well as making claims that 30 *Juzu*’ of Al-Quran verses have been recited on the product. This is because currently, along with the rise of BMF campaign; the people have high interest towards Islam. Whatever it is said as the efficacy of the Qur'an, so many believe that without prior inspection (Ahmad, Yakub, Razzak et. al., 2015).

There are other examples where the Islamic names or affiliates have been used as trademark for dangerous products, for instance, *Kopi Al-Ambiyak* and *Kopi Pak Sheikh*. In 2014, a man was found dead after drinking this coffee. It was discovered that the coffee was banned by the Health Ministry for containing sildenafil and tadalafil, which are often claimed to be able to increase sexual performance. The Ministry of Health has confirmed that the coffee has been banned in early 2014 (Shagar, 2014). This case was upsetting since it uses Islamic attributes as their trademark.

Recently in 2018, a product named *Jus Sunnah* has been found by the Ministry of Health to be dangerous as it contains steroids (Md Denin and Kamarudin, 2018). This case may be an eye-opener to the public as to the danger of using Islamic attributes in marketing of food products. The use of these marks must be controlled so as not to deceive the consumers and to protect the *maqasid* Syariah or Syariah objectives.

## METHOD OF THE STUDY

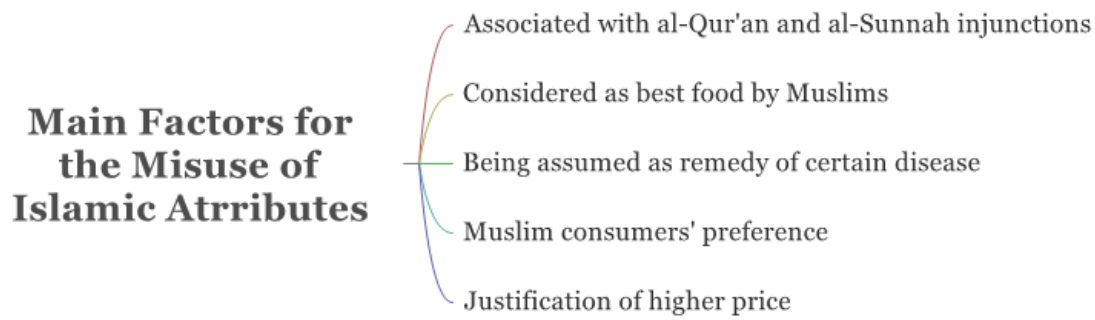
This study employs a qualitative method which is based on secondary data available in previous writings. Therefore, the authors carry out library research in the form of content analysis of the relevant literature that includes magazines, books, journals, newspapers and conference papers between 2013 and 2019 to collect relevant information and data. The materials also include online materials gathered from Google search engine. The materials are not only limited to English language but also covers Malay language materials. The authors conducted thematic analysis which includes the following terms: ‘Prophetic Food,’ ‘*Sunnah* food,’ ‘*Ruqyah*,’ and ‘misuse of religion.’

## CONSUMERS’ DEMAND FOR ISLAMIC FOOD PRODUCTS

The use of Islamic elements in marketing and labeling of food products is increasingly popular and widespread in the Malaysian market. This is due to the high demand from the consumer owing to various factors such as the rise of BMF campaign, and high interest of people towards Islam currently (Ahmad et al., 2015). The consumption of *sunnah* food has become a trend (Basir and Othman, 2016) because products based on "*sunnah* food" or *ruqyah* food and drink (being read al-Quran verses onto them) are often referred to as the best food. They believe that these products may cure certain diseases (Zain, 2013a). The Malaysian Muslim community,

are easily appeal when it comes to the advantages of practicing the *sunnah* as well as the health benefits obtained from the consumption of sunnah food. This trend has also led to the dumping of *sunnah* food products in the market (Ahmad et al., 2015).

A recent study by Khadher Ahmad, Mohd Yakub @ Zulkifli Mohd Yusoff, Monika @ Munirah Abd Razzak, Mohd Azam Yakob, Raja Jamilah Raja Yusof, Nurulwahidah Fauzi, Khalijah Awang, 2015 observed that the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad has been misused in marketing and promotion of sunnah products. Similarly, Shukur et al., (2016) also found that these products are part of a marketing plan for some entrepreneurs to promote the product. Similarly, producers tend to use these Islamic attributes to attract Muslim customers to buy their products. More importantly, these attributes rationalize selling the products at higher prices (Zin, 2017 and Irwan Zain, 2013b) (Shukur et al., 2016). Based on the perusal of literature, the authors have identified five (5) main factors leading to the misuse of Islamic attributes in marketing and product labeling. The following figure lists all the factors.



**Figure 1: Five Main Factors for the Misuse of Islamic Attributes in Marketing and Product Labelling**

## FIVE MAIN TYPES OF MISUSE OF ISLAMIC ATTRIBUTES

Osman, Ahmad, & Jalil (2019) categorized the use of Islamic elements into five categories which are Quran-related such as *ruqyah* where Quranic verses are claimed to be recited or written on specific products, *Sunnah*-related such as “*makanan Sunnah*” or Prophetic foods Islamic icons and pictures such as pictures of mosques. Next is, Islamic performance of worships such as prostration in prayers, and the last category is Islamic or Muslim names such as *masjid*, *Sunnah*, and Ahmad

### *Quran related*

There is an understanding that “*Ruqyah*”, which refers to recitation of certain Quranic verses into a product, renders the product to the best food (Shukur et al., 2016), while some believed that the product is more blessed compared to other ordinary product.. *Ruqyah*, by terminology is a form of protection for those affected by the disease, as well as the Quranic verses which are recited to them due to various illnesses in anticipation of healing. In the etymology of the Shariah, *ruqyah* is a prayer and reading which contains the blessing of Allah’s help and protection to prevent or prevent disease and illness.( Berita Harian Online, 2016). *Ruqyah* refers to prayer therapy recited by practitioners during treatment sessions (Deuraseh, 2007). In practice, it contains various types of recitation selected verses of Quran, prayers as recorded in the hadiths, undefined source of prayers, or even spells.

However, the term *ruqyah* specifically refers to finding a cure using verses from the Qur'an or prayers taught by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). On the other hand, finding cure from genies, spells and other types of sorcery is known as *jampi* (chants) or *pukau* (hypnotic) or *santau* (a form of black magic) in the Malay and Muslim community (Ahmad et.al, 2015).

Healing through *Ruqyah* (incantation) especially using the Qur'anic verses, recitation of *du'a* (prayer) and *Ruqyah* (incantation) with *Mu'awwidhat* (protector) verses are among the most widely and popular traditional practices intended to afford protection and healing of diseases caused by *Jinn* and devil in Malay-Muslim society (Deuraseh, 2007). It is undeniable that mysterious diseases do happen, thus people opt for alternative medicine, i.e., water that has been read *ruqyah* verses on it. This practice has caught the attention of the previous head Imam of the National Mosque Datuk Hassan Mahmud, who acknowledged certain parties who used the Qur'an with the intention of leveraging their products. Consumers are advised not to be easily influenced by the sale of products that use Qur'anic texts to leverage the business. It is also worried that it may lead to *syirk* as the power to heal only belonged to Allah. The consumer should not buy the product merely because of the label, fearing that it may deceive the consumer (Zain, 2013a). Khader et al. (2015) discuss certain guidelines on the permissibility of *Ruqyah*, according to Islam. Among them are language, technique, and implementation, the person implementing it and most importantly it must not lead to *syirk* or deviation from Allah.

### ***Sunnah and Hadith related***

There are a lot of food products, especially healthcare products using the term *Sunnah* food on their packaging to indicate that it contains certain ingredients and to denote that the product is 'better' and more Islamic than other ordinary products. This practice is also to attract Muslim customers to buy their products (Utusan Online, 2017; Zain, 2013a). The meaning of *Sunnah* food has been discussed by Ahmad et al., (2015) Basir et.al, (2016) and Shukur et al., (2016) as the best food, the food that meets the body's healthcare criteria, the food mentioned in the revelation (based on the Qur'an and hadith), and the food that the Prophet (peace be upon him) once took. Ahmad et al. (2015) identify four views regarding the definition of "*sunnah* food"; [First view]: Malaysians define "*sunnah* food" as all foods derived from the Qur'an and al-Hadith. [Second view]: Academicians state that all foods that bring goodness and *maslahah* to humans are either mentioned in the Qur'an, al-Hadith, or are mentioned in both, are referred to as "*sunnah* food." The second argument came from the Qur'anic verse: Translation: "O mankind, eat the lawful and good of what is on earth, and do not follow the steps of the devil; because the devil is indeed real enemy to you [al-Baqarah (2): 168]. [Third view]: Some members of society perceive "*sunnah* food" as dates, pomegranates, honey, raisins, and *al-Sawda* '. In simple terms, those who have the following perceptions arise due to the limited information on *sunnah* food and only understand the definition of *sunnah* food in parallel through the influence of advertising on television glass and radio funnel. [Fourth view]: This group thinks "*sunnah* food" is obtain by way of making and practicing parallel to the *Sunnah* with respect to procedural matters such as ensuring the workers to cover their *aurat*, abide by having the ablution at all times, as well as reciting the Qur'an during the process.

From the practical aspect, consumers must practice *basmalah*, eating with right hands as claimed by Islam. These definitions are more comprehensive to show the Malaysian consumer's perspective. However Shukur et al., (2016) added new categories where the weak Hadith of Prophet (*Hadith Dhoif*) has been exploited to leverage the product, for example products based on goat's milk, dates, honey, and *habbatussawda* '. There are also cases where producers put the *hadith* on the packaging just for commercial purposes to indicate that it has some benefits but did not specify how the Prophet took the products. Even though there is no doubt that dates, honey, goat's

milk have their benefits, however, it should be clarified that the term *Sunnah* food is not limited to these food only since the Holy Prophet also ate other food such as bread and meat. In other instances, the food producer claimed specific ingredients in the product, even though the quantity is very small. For example ‘Milo Zam Zam’ drink in which the quantity of *Zam-zam* water is so small compared to other ingredients. Thus, it is feared that the claim only acts as a marketing strategy of the producer (Shukur et al., 2016).

### ***Islamic icons***

Some products used Islamic icons such as Mosque, Al-Quran as their trademark or logo. For example, ‘*Bihun Cap Masjid*’ (Mee with the picture of Mosque as its trademark) and *Beras (rice) Cap Masjid*. However, it was later figured out that the producer is not a Muslim, thus raising a question on the motive of using such icon as their trademark (Jalil, A. & Osman, S., 2018).

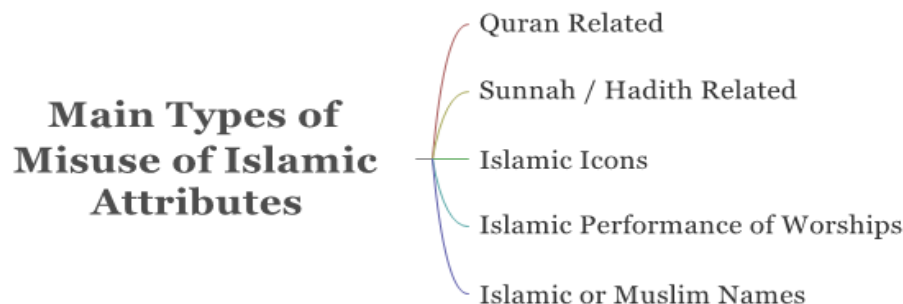
### ***Islamic performance of worships***

Some products display the act of Muslim worship in their packaging, such as the act of prostration or rising hand for *dua* or prayers. This act is clearly a sign of Muslim worship. This practice has been forbidden by the Mufti of Kelantan, who says the practice of selling drinking water which has been performed *tawaf* upon it and another kind of worship should not be commercialized to increase its price (Utusan Online, 2017).

### ***Islamic or Muslim names***

It is common and permissible for a product to use the owners’ name as its trademark. However, in some cases, Muslim name has been used for non-halal foods. One of the major outcries in Malaysia was the misuse of a Muslim’s icon name and a well-known halal brand to promote a pork burger. This case took place in 2016 where a local burger joint known as “Ninja Joe” naming its pork burger as “P.Ramly” (Palansamy, 2016). After a series of conflicts between the outlet owner and Ramly Mokni, the founder of Ramly Burger, Ninja Joe, has finally agreed to change their restaurants’ name into another name (Ida Lim, 2016; Lim, 2016).

These are some instances of the misuse of Islamic attributes in food product’s labeling in Malaysia. Since this issue continues to occur and keep increasing, it is crucial that special attention is given to regulate this practice. Figure describes all the five types of misuses.



**Figure 2: Main Types of Misuse of Islamic Attributes**

## Malaysian Islamic Authorities Response to the Misuse of Islamic Attributes in Marketing and Product Labeling

In response to the use of *ayat Ruqyah* and Quranic verses, as product labeling, the *Muzakarah Majlis Fatwa Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia* decreed that this scenario is very dangerous to the religious belief since it may lead to *shirk* (disbelief in Allah). It is important to note that the products and chants have no power to heal except Allah (Berita Harian Online 2016). Muslims need to carefully manage their lives so they do not deviate from the established grounds. Religion should not be a channel for wealth and political gain, thus people need to reject such exploitations (Zin, 2017). On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2016, JAKIM had made a press statement disallowing company and Malaysia Halal Certificate's applicants from using the terms '*ruqyah* verses', '*sunnah* food,' and the like on their labeling, advertising, and promotion of products applied for halal certification. Director-General of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) Datuk Othman Mustapha caution against buying those products labeled with such terms are often used as a marketing plan, but it was feared that might invite fraud on consumers who believe that products as more effective compared to other products (Basir, and Othman, 2016).

Due to these worrying scenarios, the Islamic Development Department Malaysia JAKIM has made a move to regulate this matter. In particular, companies and applicants of the Malaysian Halal Certification are not allowed to use the term '*ayat ruqyah*,' '*sunnah* food,' and the like on labeling, advertising, and promotion of products that are seeking or halal certification. This prohibition is stated in the circular on the regulation which was enforced on 15<sup>th</sup> Feb 2016 after the Trade Descriptions (Halal Certification and Marking) Order 2011 (Mutalib, 2016).

However, this prohibition is not exhaustive since it only confines the prohibition on the use of the word *Sunnah* food and *ruqyah*, while the usage of other Islamic attributes are still open to various interpretation.

## ADVERSE EFFECTS OF MISUSE OF ISLAMIC ATTRIBUTES IN MARKETING AND PRODUCT LABELING

The misuse of Islamic attributes has led to several undesirable implications. This paper discusses three undesirable implications in the following sub-sections.

### *Degrading the sanctity of al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah*

There are various negative impacts of the unregulated usage of Islamic attributes in food product labeling. Shukur et al. (2016) highlight the need for regulatory intervention to curb various attempts to exploit the hadith of the Prophet PBUH as a marketing strategy. This prohibition is because if the product does not give benefit to the consumer, the risk of the hadith of the Prophet (s) will be denounced. Thus, producers need to be responsible for the use of the "*sunnah* product" label because it risks the negative impact on *sunnah's* position as the second source of authority in Islam. This has also been voiced out by the Mufti of Kelantan Dato' Mohammad Syukri, who contended that this phenomenon has becoming a trend to put the term *sunnah* among producer without providing authenticity of the justification. He added that Islam considers any production that adheres to the *halalan* *toyyiban* concept which is in line with the Prophet's teaching as *Sunnah* ((Utusan Online 2017).

Shukur et al., (2016) highlight a good point to ponder where massive presence of *Sunnah* food has degraded the sanctity of Islam, which shows that Muslims practice *Sunnah* in food consumption only while neglecting the

Sunnah in other aspects of life. More importantly, it is feared that the use of Hadith to support the product could be regarded as lies towards the Prophet. On the practice of printing Quranic verses or *hadith* on the product's packaging, the former Chief Imam of National Mosque, Dato'Hassan has warned that the practice should be banned as Quranic verses and Hadith are sacred and should be preserved attentively. With regard to the practice of *ruqyah* or recitation of Quranic verses on certain products, he added that it is feared that this belief may lead to *syirk* (disbelief in Allah) as the power to heal only belongs to Allah, and not on the product. (Zain, 2013b).

### ***Health Misconception***

On the other hand, in some cases, these *sunnah* foods might not be suitable for certain health conditions. For example *Sunnah* food such as dates and raisins, which are high in sugar might not be suitable for a diabetic person. It may cause harm instead of curing the person. Thus, a comprehensive scientific research should be conducted on the production, handling, the efficacy of *Sunnah* food, as well as safety and quality control on all *Sunnah* based food (Ahmad et al., 2015; Tamizi, 2014). It is possible that the mixture of *sunnah* food with other ingredients has changed the chemical composition and nutritional value compared to the original material. Is it fair to make a claim that the food product as *sunnah* food? Similarly, the quantity of a specific type of food product should also be taken into account. The easiest example is the dates' juice which may also contain added sugar, is it good for health? (Basir, and Othman, 2016). Tamizi (2014) states that dates and raisins cannot be mixed based on Hadith of Prophet. He proposed that the preventive stance to avoid consuming raisins and dates mixed in a drink as an important precautionary step to maintain the health of human body. However, it is forbidden to drink dates or raisins that have entered 2-3 days since the fermentation process has started, thus it will turn to inedible liquor drink (Radhiah & Nazirah, 2018).

### ***Tarnishing the reputation of Islam***

It is worrying trend where manufacturers use the basis of *Sunnah* food to achieve commercial value per se by totally ignoring the impact on health. Not to mention the duplication by explicitly incorporate into a product added sugar, non- dairy creamer and malt, then labeled as *Sunnah* food (Basir et al., 2016). Although *Sunnah* food could always be seen as permissible and lawful (Halal), the safety, health and quality aspect of mixing them with other food ingredients which are suspicious (*mashbuh*) and hazardous (*madharrah*) in the production line is still ignored. Scientific perspectives of the implementation of standard policies and guidelines concerning the issue of *Sunnah* food ingredients, technology, and processing in beverage industry in Malaysia are still scarce (Radhiah & Nazirah, 2018). The utmost concern is towards the opportunists who exploit Islamic attributes to create more income. For instance, there is currently no authority to verify the claim that the products have been recited 30 *juzu* of Quranic verses is true or not. There may be an opportunist that only plays a recording tape of Quranic verses on the food product without the knowledge of the customers (Berita Harian Online, 2016).

## **CONCLUSION**

Preventing the misuse of Islamic elements is in line with the first and main Shariah objective of protecting the religion (*hifz al-din*). Regulation on food branding and marketing using Islamic elements is necessary to protect the sanctity and reputation of Islam. It is time for the regulators, particularly JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) and HDC (Halal Development Corporation) to come up with a comprehensive standard that provides guidelines on the use of Islamic elements in food branding and marketing, especially products with Halal logo and certification.

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