

## **MARKETING ISSUES FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY OF SWEET T BEAUTY CARE**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

This paper intends to explain the issues and practice of marketing strategies of Sweet T Beauty Care, the new player of health and beauty company in Malaysia. Specifically, directed into their current game play to catch the world's attention, especially through the online platform. There are three (3) segments in this paper that are the classic way of market segmentation, 4P's application in their system, and current issues facing by the company. Each of them carries a different definition, impact, and factor upon the participant's lived experience, which will be discussed further. The base dispute of this paper is to see the alignment between the current marketing practice and the points that touched and followed the Shariah compliance promoted in Islam. The qualitative research method that is a case study is chosen to represent an inclusive description of the respondent's lived experience on the selected phenomenon. The founders of this brand joined this study through a deep semi-structured interview session with open-ended guide questions. This study's findings cannot be used to generalise the whole of Malaysia as it only analyses a small sample size. Therefore, analysis of additional data from the other company's practice and its issues on marketing strategies may be necessary for comparison and to reaffirm the results. Further investigation is also needed to isolate the specific elements and significant differences in ratings. This study would be useful for government agencies, policymakers, educational institutions, society, and health and beauty players themselves to competently manage, observe, plan, and monitor their marketing strategies that portray the image of the religion.

***Keywords:*** *Islamic Practice, Marketing Issues, Marketing Practice, Sweet T Beauty Care*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sweet T Beauty Care (STBC) is a new player in the health and beauty industry that officially launched its first product on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2019 and named it as Magica Super White (MSW) Vita C. MSW Vita C is a collagen supplement that consists of three main functions which are anti-aging, skin cell renewal and whitening. This company mainly operated in Kelantan, but widely spread its wings throughout Malaysia resulted from splendid teamwork from their dropships, agents, and stockists as well as direct coaching from the founders.

Currently, this company absorbing two ways of marketing practices that are offline (traditional) and online (current) methods (Bird et al., 1970; Eze et al., 2012; Kamleitner et al., 2019). For the offline method, they get engaged with the physical stores and outlets to be assigned as their legit stockist that purchased over a hundred boxes of MSW Vita C at once

and resells at a standardized price of RM70. Today, in Kelantan, more than ten stores and outlets registered as their stockists, and the number keeps increasing as per the case been discussed and analysed. Nonetheless, as this paper wanted to put the focal on the online platform, limited discussions regarding the offline platform will be included accordingly.

The online method of marketing is almost a must in any industry to ensure growth and sustainability as well as brand awareness since this platform offered various classes of choices depends on the capability and capacity allocated (Barrera & Ponce, 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Srivastava & Dorsch, 2020). For this case, Facebook, and Instagram ads (advertising) are the most common styles as they deployed it on a daily basis with the disclosed amount of budget. Besides that, they aggressively appointed an Indonesian celebrity that is famous in Malaysia as their icon to blowout the brand name across both counties of Malaysia and Indonesia at the beginning of their establishment. In addition, on July 7<sup>th</sup> last year, COVID-19 sparked an idea for the founders to come out with the trial pack size of MSW Vita C with only RM35. The core reason for this size to be launched is due to concern over their customers and potential customers that facing a hard time and struggling from the world's pandemic (Reinsdorf, 2020; Zhang, 2021; Zou et al., 2020). In the present day, they allotted the young spouse of Instagram famous (instafamous) as their ambassadors. To firm the team, a line of young instafamous selected to be their face of the product. Their roles not only to feast the benefits of the product but to pour more information about the brand, too, especially for the Millennials and Gen Z. This is because those are the targeted generations that care the most about their appearance and look regardless of gender (Lee et al., 2019; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Schurgin et al., 2020).

All in all, despite the ups and downs in placing their brand into the market, this company battling with ethical marketing issues from the Islamic perspective especially the online platform strategies. In depth, the founders wanted to embrace the balancing in both the world and Hereafter's benefits to be a better *ummah* and *khalifah* to remain *khusnul khotimah* (Akter et al., 2019; Muda et al., 2019; Nasution & Rafiki, 2019).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The ethical issue is almost a wholly issues in marketing that can drive the company into early break off before the milestone is paved. This is because the ethical issues covered the area of manufacturing, promoting, delivering, consuming, and others (Abratt, 1989; Appel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2020; Haynes, 2017; Lee & Jin, 2019). Referred to the previous findings, there are a few standpoints related to the ethical issues, namely, surrogate - indirect advertising about prohibited or harmful products (e.g., alcohol, cigarettes), exaggeration - false claims to boost the product, puffery - unacceptable product descriptions, unverified claims - without scientific and legal claims, stereotyping women - portray women as a sex symbol to publicize a product, and false comparison - false and misleading product comparison.

From another dimension of marketing ethical issues are related to the Islamic perspective. Islam is the second largest religion in the world with approximately 1.9 billion Muslims globally. Specifically, Malaysia ranked in the top 25 as Muslim majority countries with 16,318,355 Muslims out of the total population (32,776,194) which equal to 61.30 percent (WPR, 2021). That is why the execution and application of Islamic teachings are perceivably crucial in all *halal* industries in Muslim majority countries including Malaysia. For that reason, it is rational to forward the idea of the Islamic perspective into marketing ethical issues for the health and beauty industry, too. Furthermore, among the latest studies also revealed about the product and production process, consumer right, advertising principles, and morale orders from The Almighty to be adhered by the business owners in achieving the ultimate purpose of life (Alsharari, 2018; Mamun et al., 2020; Purnama & Safira, 2017; Yahya & Mohamad Rasit, 2019).

To that end, it is not exaggerative to highlight that the marketing ethical issues and Islamic teachings possibly should remain unimpaired. Considering that the Al-Quran and As-Sunnah are sacred and exceptional referrals for Muslims.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Moustakas (1994) stated that phenomenon means to flare up and show itself. It also carries a definition of a broad sense of experience in generating new knowledge. Any phenomenon is appropriate to be measured as a starting point if it is not an empty illusion. The authors conducted the study onto the founders of STBC as participants of the study to deeply understand about the current practice of the company. This study is not suitable to run through the quantitative research method since it will be more on emotions, facts, experience rather than numbers (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

To begin with, the unit of analysis (UOA) of the study. By definition, it is a portion of the content to be coded from the context of the level of words and sentences used (Weber, 1990), participants responded in the interview (Feeley & Gottlieb, 1998), and participants' diaries (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992) that encompassed the length, complexity, latent meanings (Kondracki et al., 2002) and manifest meanings (Milne & Adler, 1999). In a simpler thought, the UOA also can be defined as a focus of the study. Each category carries a different direction and a different unit of observation (UOO) of the study (Mertens, 1998). The companies of the UOA are selected to be applied along with this study, with the documents and individuals as the UOO. This is because the researcher wants to uncover the practice of this company while looking at issues and possible suggestions to be aligned with the Islamic teaching.

Semi-constructed questions were asked, and the snowballing technique was applied to obtain more data and information from the participants. This type of interview is a novel-type and human-to-human-type interview because it allows the participants to share complete details. Moreover, some of the scholars mentioned that do not stop the participants only to answer the research questions as it will drift away from the feeling and momentum of the sharing moments (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Smith & Osborn, 2008). To make it flow seamlessly, the questions should be started with general questions like demographic information. For this reason, it will craft the uncomfortable and reluctant in the participants if the session begins with a sensitive topic (Breakwall et al., 2012). Thus, the authors started the interview with the demographic and more general questions to ensure the participants' contentment and convenience in voicing out their thoughts.

## **EMPIRICAL RESULTS**

In this section, the authors divided it into three (3) parts named as the classic way of market segmentation, 4p's application in this case, and their issues and discussions regarding the marketing issues which looked at the online variation strategies to be aligned with the Islamic practices.

### **The classic way of market segmentation**

There are four (4) ways of classic market segments used and remain relevant to be practiced. To begin with the demographic, followed by geographic and the last two items are psychographics and behaviour (Carracedo & Miliaev, 2021; Hunt & Arnett, 2004; Lynn, 2011; Romppanen, 2021; Töpfer, 2015).

Relate to the case, for the demographic side, STBC embattled those who are 16 years old and above regardless of the gender and education background, since MSW Vita C is an affordable collagen supplement for all ranges of income earners. Some scholars said, for a new

business, it is recommendable, to begin with, a small circle of target customers as a geographic movement in market segmentation (Kampamba, 2015; Setini & Caisar Darma, 2020; Williams Jr. et al., 2020). But, for this company, they embarked on the advancing step where a limitless restriction in the nation, state, region, and neighbourhood type is applied. However, STBC steadily and carefully set their game for both psychographics and behaviour segmentations by the reason of the attitudes, opinions, interests, and values (psychographics) and media habits, purchase frequency, brand loyalty, and channel usage (behaviour) easily changed compared to the first two elements (Bird et al., 1970; Costa et al., 2018; Dion & Borraz, 2017; Doherty et al., 2017; Du et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2019; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019).

From the Islamic point of stands, marketing segments divided into a few details contains spiritualistic (targeting Muslim community), ethical (avoid cheating and lying), realistic (room for improvisation according to the situation), and humanistic (considering the environment and society) (Arham, 2010; Floren et al., 2019; Mamun et al., 2020; Rishi & Halder, 2015; Sandikci, 2011). Further, knitted the statement with the case of STBC, put aside the issue of targeting only the Muslim community, they touched all other elements with balanced. This is because, there is no spot to cheat or lie, since the price is standardized and testimonials shown are from their existing customers, and all steps at the manufacturing level are strictly followed the Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) factory's rules and regulations. Along with that, the open-door concept applied for any improvement to safeguard their continuity and customer satisfaction. Lastly, as long as all the three elements are pursued, the humanistic part is considered done.

### **Marketing mix of 4P's concept and application**

Back to the old times, McCarthy (1960) introduced the 4P's in marketing, contains - price, promotion, product, and place as the most common variables in constructing the marketing plan and strategy that widely known as the marketing mix that extensively studied until contemporary times (Bahador, 2019; Hosaini, 2020; Karim & Habiba, 2020; Sudari et al., 2019). Continually, in the recent era, breathing in the same variables of 4P's, the scholars elaborated the marketing mix from the Islamic perspective to fit the Islamic market and community by adding up another P which is People (Abuznaid, 2020; Febriansyah, 2019; Ishak & Abdullah, 2012; Shafin & Kasim, 2018). Using the ideas from those scholars as a guideline, this company meets all the criteria highlighted in it. To begin with the price, it is decided after six (6) months of market research and market testing to ensure the standardized price is an affordable price for all ranges of income earners. Second, the adaptable of a promotion where the main agenda is to inform, persuade, remind, or reinforce (Colley, 1961) the marketing strategy within the *Shariah* compliance, for example, to what extent this company taking care of the *aurah* issues while promoting the product and the level of exaggerations in delivering the product info.

Enchanting place as a third component is a product itself. In the Holy Book of Al-Quran, Allah commanded in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 219 and verse 275 that Islam strictly prohibited any kind of business with the base of alcoholic drinks and pork, gambling, interest (*riba*), and prostitution (Ali, 2020). Notwithstanding, this company is free from any of that since the process of producing the MSW Vita C is from the lab test and rigorously required approval from the related ministries. Then, the place must not harm customers to get the product, and having said that, STBC preferred to use two delivering methods, namely, 1) Cash on delivery (COD) - the customer placed an order, the logistics team will deliver the product to their door and the payment made, 2) Postage - mainly used for those who stayed beyond the radar of the logistics team, and the payment made upon order. The last and additional P is People, where the authors stressed fairness, merciful and balanced in dealing with the business

between the seller and the buyer because both of them are the most significant creature of Allah.

### **Issues and discussion**

From the Islamic point of view, the ethical issue faced by this company is about the *aurah* of the icon, ambassador, and faces of the product while promoting the product. As far as at their concerned, most of the videos and pictures from the icon did not cover the *aurah* properly. This is strongly instructed by Allah in the Holy Book of Al-Quran, Surah An-Nur (24), Verse 31, when He said a woman must cover her *aurah* appropriately in front of the strangers, including lowering the gaze and the adornments she puts on (Ali, 2020). Conversely, this action theoretically did not include as stereotyping women since no action was shown as a sex symbol in any manners or postings. Conventionally, STBC executed the marketing plan victoriously deprived of manipulated any fundamentals stated by Haynes (2017). To take into account, in their social media like Facebook and Instagram, all the data mentioned are acceptable to digest as a piece of information due to the way they presented it with testimonials and facts. Meaning to say, there are no surrogate, exaggeration, puffery, unverified claims, and false comparison detected in their operation and management, except the *aurah* stay unsolved.

It cannot be denied that to illustrate the operative marketing movement is from the total sales made every month, as well as the growth in the number of people getting to know about the brand itself. To clarify, a list of the effective marketing strategies that can be exercised in this industry, such as to cause marketing, direct selling, co-branding, and affinity marketing, earned media (PR), point-of-purchase marketing, internet marketing, paid media marketing, word of mouth advertising, social network and viral marketing, and, storytelling (Chaovalit, 2014; Chin & Md Harizan, 2017; Plumeyer et al., 2019; Woschnick, 2019). Bring it back to the case, more than half (direct selling, earned media (PR), internet marketing, paid media marketing, word of mouth advertising, and, social network and viral marketing) of it already implemented by this company in promoting their first product, and the outcome is positive since there is an increment in sales as per case been discussed. Despite that, the participants expressed their worries over the methods used. For instance, the company used to sponsor some stage shows which the program mix between male and female, spread the information widely using paid advertisement which unable to confirm where the money will be invested in, and, create some viral content as a remix or redo from the original version.

Past two (2) years, Malaysia's budget 2020 has become a hot topic to be discussed at all levels regardless of the education level and income earned, even, among the youngsters. In one of the Ministry of Finance's points, he spelled out that, the government will credit RM30 into the e-wallet of every Malaysian who is 18 and above and earn less than RM100,000 a year, to making digital payments through e-wallets (BNM, 2020). The good point and opportunity discovered by the company to apply to be part of the issuer of e-wallets or join-venture with the existing listed issuers so that the customer can pay the product almost everywhere. It also a good strategy when it comes to the promotion part because this company can be more creative like a discount and points for e-wallets users. The points collected after the purchase made can be redeemed into something valuable like to redeem the product, free postage, or free gift once achieved some points. Expectedly, upon the application of that strategy, unquestionably STBC able to pull more crowd to put the eyes on their brand. On the flip side, the company still in considering stage due to unconfirmed flow in and out the income of their potential existing listed issuers.

To wrap it all, aforementioned by the studies, a seller should provide a product or service that meets the needs, wants and demands of the customers (Armstrong et al., 2017; Basnet & Seuring, 2016; Bustinza et al., 2013; Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020; Morgan et al., 2019). By doing that, STBC can avoid marketing myopia, a mistake of paying attention to a

specific product rather than their benefits to be shared. From the Islamic standing, as a Muslim seller, this company shall tap all the five (5) elements of *Maqasih Shariah*, that are the protection of religion (*ad-deen*), life (*an-nafs*), mind (*al-aql*'), lineage (*an-nasl*), and property (*al-mal*) to achieve the ultimate goal of life in the Hereafter (Akram Laldin & Furqani, 2013; Kholish & Roy, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

With effective and spot-on marketing blueprints and strategies, without a doubt, this company can expand its brand name and product line beyond the current limit. To take into account, this company can invest not only in collagen supplement product, but more than it, like, slimming product, a health drink product, or skincare, which might be already in their distant future planning. Nonetheless, the consultation and operationalization of Islamic teachings and perspectives should be taken into consideration as a major drive to be followed.

Correspondingly, this study might be a possible solution for the other industry players to monitor, control, and plan their marketing strategies. At the end of it, hopefully, it might be able to reduce the ethical impact of it. Even, looked at the Islamic point of view, Allah SWT directed that His servant to plan in life and not totally surrender when facing any issues:

For each (such person) there are (angels) in succession, before and behind him: they guard him by command of God. Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls). (Al-Ra'ad: 11)

Conclusively, as for the government, and policymakers, hopefully, this study can contribute a bit in handling and helping the marketing strategies of the health and beauty companies in Malaysia because the continuity of it could ultimately lead to nonorthodox impacts of the Islamic teachings and practices. They might want to see this phenomenon from the earlier education and exposure over the precedents and repercussions of both marketing strategies and Islamic perspective. The role as a leader of the community cannot be denied but compelling in balancing, strengthening, and developing the nation. The Almighty Allah once directed in the Holy Book of Al-Quran:

And We made them leaders, guiding (men) by our command, and we sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practice regular charity ; and they constantly served us (and us only). (Al-Anbiyaa: 73)

In drawing things to a close, it can be said that perchance this study might help to educate society to spark awareness if they have a chance and equipped enough with the readiness to read the whole study.

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