

SELLING RELIGIOUS RITUALS IN INDONESIA Commodification of Umrah Pilgrimage by Travel Agents

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Abstract: The flourishing lucrative business of Umrah pilgrimage in Indonesia has disrupted pilgrims from the substantial meaning of Umrah as a form of worship. The travel business industry designs some umrah packages as merely commonplace travel packages, instead of as a form of devoted worship. Innumerable number of umrah travel agents relentlessly promote attractive packages for umrah pilgrimage at an affordable price using any possible marketing strategies to win customers, the attempts which downgrade the pilgrimage as a mere traded commodity. This paper aims to reveal the marketing strategies of Umrah travel agents to promote their umrah packages, which is highly correlated with the commodification of religion. This article finds two primary marketing strategies of umrah travel agents: product design in various umrah packages, celebrity endorsement, involvement of managers of religious social institutions as distributors, and giving bonuses. The process of commodification of Umrah is carried out by incorporating popular cultural sentiments in Umrah products, and turns umrah into a product of worship that offers convenience.

Keywords: umrah travel agency, umrah marketing, commodification of religion

Introduction

Pilgrimage is one of the essential worships in Islam that is mainly conducted by paying some visits to some sacred sites. Pilgrimage in Indonesia has several meanings. To give illustration, visiting the tombs of the so called sunan or wali (saints) is also form of pilgrimage.¹

¹ Syaifudin Zuhri, *Wali Pitu and Muslim Pilgrimage in Bali, Indonesia: Inventing a Sacred Tradition* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2022).

However, the focus of the paper is the major pilgrimage in Islam; hajj and umrah. Hajj serves as one of the five pillars of Islam to improve the religious devotion of a Muslim. Hajj is an obligatory worship for every Muslim once in a life time. Meanwhile, umrah also refers to an Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, the same as Hajj, but it is not compulsory (sunnah/highly recommended). Although Umrah is generally performed during the Hajj season, Umrah can also be performed separately from Hajj throughout the year apart from the Hajj season. The peak of Umrah is in the month of Ramadan, because this month is believed to be the month of manifold rewards for all the good deeds of Muslims.²

Nowadays, there has been an escalating trend of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage from year to year along with the increasing number of Muslim population worldwide. The growth of Muslim population was apparent from the release by Pew Research Center, 2017b, denoting that by 2025, the number of Muslim population in the world had reached 1.8 billion, amounting to 24% of the world's population.³ This data indicates the large potential of the Muslim market to enhance the development in various sectors, including religious tourism through the Global Halal Market.⁴ As a country with the main authority for religious tourism in the form of Hajj and Umrah, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2015 prepared a budget of 88 billion riyals to start the five-star hotel projects containing 343,000 luxurious rooms to accommodate the targeted increase in the number of religious tourists visiting Mecca by 6% every year for worship.⁵

In terms of Umrah, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah and General Authority for Statistics of the Government of Saudi Arabia noted that within a period of ten years, from 2008 to 2017, Umrah pilgrims who came to Mecca amounted to 52,832,376. In 2016, the largest number

² See F.E. Peters, *The Hajj, The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1995).

³ Ahmad Jamal, Kevin Griffin, and Razaq Raj, *Islamic Tourism: Management of Travel Destinations* (CABI, 2018).

⁴ Sukesu and Wanda Prasadio Akbar Hidayat, "Managing the Halal Industry and the Purchase Intention of Indonesian Muslims: The Case of Wardah Cosmetics", *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 13, 1 (2019).

⁵ Jahanzeeb Qurashi, "International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Commodification of Islamic Religious Tourism: From Spiritual to Touristic Experience Commodification of Islamic Religious Tourism: From Spiritual to Touristic Experience Commodification of Islamic", *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 5, 1 (2017).

of Umrah pilgrims came from Egypt, followed by Pakistan, and Indonesia with 699,612 pilgrims. In the following year, 2017, the number of umrah pilgrims from Indonesia saw a significant rise and ranked second after Pakistan with 875,958 pilgrims. The number of umrah pilgrims from Indonesia is constantly on the rise from year to year. In 2018, it reached 1,050,000 and the number soared considerably to 1,292,000 in 2019.⁶

Along with the ever-increasing trend of umrah pilgrimage, the last ten years has witnessed the flourishing establishment of new associations to supervise Umrah and Hajj travel agents, such as ASPHURINDO (Association of Indonesian Hajj and Umrah Organizers and In-bound), HIMPUGH (Special Umrah and Hajj Organizers Association), AMPHURI (Muslim Association for Hajj and Umrah Organizers of the Republic of Indonesia), KESTHURI (Association of Hajj and Umrah Travels of The Republic of Indonesia), PRATAMA (Association of Hajj and Umrah Travels), and SAPUHI (Alliance of Hajj and Umrah Organizers of Indonesia). Each association houses hundreds of travel agents.⁷ The Directorate of Umrah and Special Hajj recorded that the number of travel agents has now reached 1,436 agents.⁸

This article aims to reveal the commodification practices carried out by Umrah travel agents in Indonesia. Since the site is located million miles away from Indonesia, Umrah requires an endeavor, both in terms of costs and physical strength, which makes it a highly sacred worship. Ideally, the Umrah travel agents shall apply a certain strategy to maintain the sacredness of umrah pilgrimage in their product promotion and marketing. However, it is noteworthy that the current promotion and marketing strategy of umrah packages has downgraded the sacredness of umrah pilgrimage as part of religious worship to the merely profane religious tourism, void of its spiritual aspects.

⁶ “Saudi-Larang-Umrah-Jemaah-Indonesia-876-Ribu-Terbanyak-Kedua,” <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200228111308-20-479019/saudi-larang-umrah-jemaah-indonesia-876-ribu-terbanyak-kedua>.

⁷ Firman Muhammad Arif, “Penyelenggaraan Ibadah Umrah Berbasis Maslahat”, *Journal of Islamic Economic Law* 4, 1 (2019): pp. 22–39.

⁸ Umar Mukhtar, “Kemenag Ingatkan PPIU Segera Sertifikasi Biro Perjalanan,” <https://ihram.co.id/berita/po34sf370/kemenag-ingatkan-ppiu-segera-sertifikasi-biro-perjalanan>.

Therefore, this research aims to address the existing niche on the need to gain better insight on the marketing strategy of umrah travel agents.

The data in this article were collected through interviews with six managers of umrah travel agents or Umrah travel organizers (PPIU). To ensure the data validity, the researcher also interviewed the guides of the umrah group, the KBIHU managers, and the member of the umrah group to ensure that their responses confirm the validity of the existing data, bringing a total of 12 informants. In addition to using in-depth interviews, data mining techniques were carried out by way of participant observation. This technique was done when the researcher carried out the pilgrimage in 2009 and become an active member in the former hajj pilgrims activities organized by KBIHU. The researcher also performed Umrah in early 2020. This participatory observation technique allowed the researchers to make direct observations and talk with travel managers, guides, and pilgrims. Another data mining technique was documentation. Some documents were taken from the institution's profile, annual report, brochures, photographs, video recordings of Umrah trips, and other information or news on the institution's website.

The first part of this article discusses the development of Hajj and Umrah in Indonesia. The second part concerns with the commodification of religion by portraying a case study on Umrah, and the last part is allocated for data analysis and conclusions. The long waiting period for performing the Hajj pilgrimage in Indonesia has encouraged the massive emergence of Umrah travel bureaus, which eventually spurs high levels of competition in this business. As a consequence, the marketing strategies carried out by the travel bureau have positioned umrah pilgrimage as an industrial commodity that places umrah as a mere tourism package.

The Development of Hajj and Umrah in Indonesia

Since the 1900s, the Hajj pilgrimage (including Umrah) has become a distinctive religious practice with high level of complexity especially being compared with other spiritual pilgrimages in other religions in the world.⁹ One of the most notable practices of Hajj pilgrimage that grabs the attention of the academic circles is the practice of Hajj pilgrimage in Indonesia. There have been many books written

⁹ Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 4-5.

to discuss the history of Hajj in Indonesia, which dated back in the Dutch colonial period in the area known as the Dutch East Indies (the archipelago). During the Dutch settlement, the management of hajj pilgrimage had to comply with Dutch political policies,¹⁰ especially during the heightening spirit of Pan Islamism in Arab countries that worries the Dutch would motivate the pilgrims to fight against colonialism and imperialism.¹¹ Hence, the Dutch imposed a policy of strict selection and significant reduction of quotas for pilgrims by way of charging high administrative fees and taxes before departing and when returning.¹²

In subsequent periods, there was a tug of war in the management of hajj between the government and the private sector.¹³ This contest of authority was based on the fact that the long period and costly expenses of pilgrimage required a particular institution to manage all the related services for the pilgrims from their departure to the holy land and their return to the homeland. The prospective profit for managing the countless number of people who make Hajj pilgrimages invited the attention of the private sector. During the early independence period (beginning of the Old Order), the management of hajj was left to the private sector, YPHI (Indonesian Hajj Travel Foundation). There was then a change of policy when the government implemented the NASAKOM (Nationalist Religious Communist) doctrine. President Soekarno introduced the stages of reform in the management of the pilgrims. The handover of authority to the private

¹⁰ D Van Der Meulen, "The Mecca Pilgrimage and Its Importance to the Netherlands East Indies", *The Muslim World* 31, 1 (1941): pp. 48–60; Saleh Putuhena, *Historiografi Haji Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2007).

¹¹ Kris Alexanderson, "A Dark State of Affairs': Hajj Networks, Pan-Islamism, and Dutch Colonial Surveillance during the Interwar Period", *Journal of Social History* 47, 4 (2014): pp. 1021–1041.

¹² Dick Douwes and Nicolaas Jan Gerrit Kaptein, *Indonesia Dan Haji: Empat Karangan*, vol. 30 (Jakarta: INIS, 1997); Moch Nur Ichwan, "Governing Hajj: Politics of Islamic Pilgrimage Services in Indonesia Prior to Reformasi Era", *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 46, 1 (2008): pp. 125–151; Meulen, "The Mecca Pilgrimage and Its Importance to the Netherlands East Indies"; Jacob Vredembregt, "The Haddj. Some of Its Features and Functions in Indonesia", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 118, 1 (1962): pp. 91–154.

¹³ Ichwan, "Governing Hajj."

sector, the government monopoly, and co-management characterized the management of hajj in the reform stages.¹⁴

During the New Order era, the government took over the entire process of hajj through a monopolistic policy. The government directly handled all services related to Hajj affairs, ranging from determining hajj quotas, setting costs, to handling luggage and catering. There was a horizontal cross-ministerial collaboration in hajj management, by coordinating the lower institutions: governors and regents who had to comply with the upper level authorities. This monopolistic policy by the central government is part of the accommodative politics to approach Muslims. This persuasive policy was emphasized by the departure of Suharto to perform the pilgrimage with his family and ministers in 1991.¹⁵ The growing number of pilgrims went along with the positive economic growth and the rise of the tourism sector in general. This condition led the central government to stipulate *ONH Plus*, now *Haji Plus*, an executive class pilgrims in 1980. This stipulation was highly welcomed by travel agents which relentlessly offered their various Hajj packages ranging from regular Hajj and *Haji Plus*. *Haji Plus* became the religious, social, and political legitimacy of the wealthy urban residents.¹⁶

In the Reform Era, the management of the hajj was still under the full control of the government. However, the management and implementation of Umrah and Hajj plus were left to the private sector.¹⁷ The rapid growth of Indonesia's economy gave rise to the expanding number of upper-middle income Muslim community along with the increasingly democratic atmosphere of government policies. This condition was conducive for the wave of Islamic militancy in the public sphere as obviously shown by institutional religious symbols and a new lifestyle.¹⁸ The role of the private sector was increasingly visible when the government launched the Minister of Religious

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Robert W Hefner, *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Ariel Heryanto, *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics* (England: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁶ Moeslim Abdurrahman, *Bersujud Di Baitullah: Ibadah Haji, Mencari Kesalehan Hidup* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2009).

¹⁷ Ichwan, "Governing Hajj."

¹⁸ Noorhaidi Hasan, "Islam in Provincial Indonesia: Middle Class, Lifestyle, and Democracy?", *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 49, 1 (2011): pp. 119–157.

Affairs Regulation Number 30 of 2013 that allowed banks provide large hajj bailouts by only paying 5 million rupiahs to save a seat for hajj pilgrimage. As a result of this convenience, there was a manifold increase of the number of Hajj registrants. Pilgrims had to wait for a long queue for years and even decade to get the chance to perform hajj pilgrimage.

By 2020, the waiting list had amounted to 4,225,698, while the quota for hajj pilgrims was only around 200 thousand per year. To give illustration, Bantaeng Regency, South Sulawesi queues for 41 years, while East Java reaches 26 years. This long queue is projected to continuously soar along with the growing number of Hajj registrants.¹⁹ The same goes for Umrah. The increase in the number of Umrah pilgrims each year, which range from 20% to 40%, will certainly continue to escalate along with the length of the waiting list for pilgrims.²⁰ The explosion in the number of Umrah pilgrims has incurred some problems, especially in the cost competitiveness among Umrah agents. Many agents offer low-cost Umrah packages that are fairly unreasonable. The problem occurs when the agents who offer low-cost Umrah packages are unable to dispatch prospective pilgrims. Among the examples that is captured by the news quite extensively is the case of the First travel. To overcome this intriguing situation, the government issued KMA Number 221 of 2018 regarding the minimum standard of umrah fee of 20 Million rupiahs. This policy opened up the opportunity for agents to set tariffs highly above the standard price by mentioning facilities and services as the legal excuse for cost determination.²¹

The Commodification of Religion in Indonesia

The significance of the pilgrimage for Indonesian Muslims, accompanied by the various challenges, have provided a showcase of how the religion has been commodified in Indonesia. In relation to this, it is worth noting to quote Fealy that highlighted the intertwining and

¹⁹ Ministry of Religious Affairs, "Waiting List", <https://haji.kemenag.go.id/v4/waiting-list>.

²⁰ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200228111308-20-479019/saudi-larangan-umrah-jemaah-indonesia-876-ribu-terbanyak-kedua> accessed on May 2021

²¹ [https://kemenag.go.id/nasional/kemenag-resmi-tetapkan-biaya-referensi-umrah-rp-20juta-dk6a6u#:~:text=Jakarta%20\(Kemenag\)%20%2D%2D%2D%20Kementerian-%20Agama,tahun%202018%20tentang%20BPIU%20Referensi.](https://kemenag.go.id/nasional/kemenag-resmi-tetapkan-biaya-referensi-umrah-rp-20juta-dk6a6u#:~:text=Jakarta%20(Kemenag)%20%2D%2D%2D%20Kementerian-%20Agama,tahun%202018%20tentang%20BPIU%20Referensi.) accessed on May 2021

mutually influential relationship between religious and business sectors in history. Experts in social and cultural sciences agree that religion has had a major impact on business growth. Such relationship is attributed to the commodification of religion in business activities.²² In this regards, Fealy defined the commodification of religion as the act of commercialisation of Islam, or the turning of faith and its symbols as a commodity that can be bought and sold for profit.²³ Meanwhile, Kitiarsa explained commodification as a mutually influential relationship between the market and religion. This relationship gives rise to commercialization or the activities of buying and selling. Commodification is the practice of commercializing an activity that is not commercial by nature.²⁴ Likewise, Einstein highlighted that the commodification of religion refers to an attempt to turn religion into a marketable product.²⁵

How did the commercialization of religion take place? Lukens-Bull described the stages of the commercialization of religion in two ways: commodity religification and religious commodification. On the one hand, religification of commodities is carried out by capitalist agents by first selecting products and instilling them with religious meaning. In this way, capitalist agents are not only able to turn these products into a mere way to meet physical demands, but are also adept at instilling religious pride and fulfilling the need for religious rituals. On the other hand, the commodification of religion user begins with meaning and seeks to express itself in material form. Here, the capitalist agents

²² Rizqa Ahmadi, Lilik Rofiqoh, and Wildani Hefni, "Brands of Piety? Islamic Commodification of Polygamous Community in Indonesia", *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 16, 1 (2022).

²³ Greg Fealy, "Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia", in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008), p. 15.

²⁴ Pattana Kitiarsa, "Buddha Phanit: Thailand's Prosperity Religion and Its Commodifying Tactics," in *Religious Commodifications in ASIA, Marketing Gods*, ed. Pattana Kitiarsa (New York: Routledge, 2008): pp. 120-140.

²⁵ Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, ed. Stewart M Hoover, Joyon Mitchell, and David Morgan (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

producers or sellers of products try to uncover the existing public sentiments to create the products that meet the public desire.²⁶

There is a completely intricate relationship between umrah as a sacred journey of worship and the market. The market has divided its customers into some certain segmentations that require a distinctive approach to make Umrah packages be widely accepted. The market is also known with high level of competitiveness. This is due to the fact that product in high demand leads to the emergence of new agents who see the potential and then seek ways to market it. Therefore, in terms of the relation between Umrah and the market, the role of a marketing strategy is inevitably at play. Some economic experts, such as McCarthy, have listed four primary elements of marketing strategy: product, price, place (distribution channel), and promotion.²⁷ In this line, an agent is required to design an attractive product, set a competitive price, determine the right distribution channel, and carry out promotions in the right ways. Marketing strategy is not only aimed to maximize product absorption, but also to dominate the market. Hence, the commodification of Umrah in this context is definitely unavoidable.

As a logical consequence, the commodification of Umrah has turned umrah into a commodity with financial value. It is safe to say that Umrah no longer can be seen as merely a sacred religious ritual; it has lost some extent of its sacred meaning because what emerges from Umrah nowadays is a series of product choices that offer their own level of satisfaction and financial expenses.²⁸ When a tourism destination is traded as a tourism product and tourism demand for luxury commodities begins to take effect, a fundamental shift in human values is taking place.²⁹

²⁶ Ronald Lukens-Bull, "Commodification of Religion and the 'Religification' of Commodities: Youth Culture and Religious Identity," in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, ed. Pattana Kitiarsa (New York: Routledge, 2008): pp. 220-234.

²⁷ Edmund Jerome McCarthy, Stanley J Shapiro, and William D Perreault, *Basic Marketing* (Irwin-Dorsey Ontario, 1979).

²⁸ Robert Shepherd, "Commodification, Culture and Tourism", *Tourist studies* 2, 2 (2002): pp. 183–201.

²⁹ Joan C. Henderson, "Islamic Tourism Reviewed", *Tourism Recreation Research* 34, 2 (2009): pp. 207–211.

Assorted Umrah Packages

In relation to that, it is Umrah travel agents to offer umrah packages at various level of prices. The price for the package is mainly determined by the length of the trip, accommodation facilities, types of aircraft, the coverage of additional destination, and so on. All of these are priced at different rates. The coverage of some of these items has led to the creation of various packages ranging from: Super Hemat (Highly Affordable), Hemat (Affordable), to Gold (Exclusive package). These packages are offered with up to 2 to 3 million price difference.³⁰

In addition to regular Umrah packages, Umrah travel agents also provide exclusive Umrah packages. This exclusive Umrah package is designated for pilgrims who seek for Umrah pilgrimage at special times; the one during the month of Ramadan is the most wanted one by the jamaah. Another one is what is called as *Umrah Akbar* (the Great Umrah). Umrah during Ramadhan is very favorite due to commonly wide believe that the blessings and the rewards (pahala) will be multiplied. In fact, there is also a believe that Umroh during ramadhan can be regarded as noble as the hajj in terms of the rewards. Understandably, Umrah packages for the month of Ramadan are significantly more expensive than Umrah packages held outside of Ramadan.³¹

Meanwhile, *Umrah Akbar* is a highly exclusive Umrah package that is made available for a massive group and for special moment. Some Umrah travel agents have also designed this exclusive Umrah package with some attention-grabbing title, such as “Umrah Bareng Artists” or “Umrah Bareng Ustadz”.³² This package is designed to provide opportunities for pilgrims who want to conduct their pilgrimage with their idols. Another exclusive package that is widely offered and highly popular is the Umrah Plus Tour Package. This package combines umrah pilgrimage and a tour on some historical places in some Muslim majority countries such as Dubai, Cairo, Palestine, and Turkey are included in the package destination. A travel manager expressed his opinion related to the design of Umrah products:

³⁰ Interview with Manager of Arofahmina travel agency, June 11, 2021

³¹ <https://wartaekonomi.co.id/read139037/umrah-ramadan-tetap-diminati-meski-ongkosnya-lebih-mahal> accessed on April 2021

³² <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/hiburan/20170728214713-234-231136/rombongan-artis-langganan-ikon-jasa-umrah-ke-tanah-suci> accessed on April 2021

“Yes, we have designed Umrah packages with various schemes in order to provide various services for the pilgrims. Pilgrims can freely select the variations of packages that meet their preference and budget. In general, pilgrims may have different demands. Some pilgrims may require Super Hemat (highly affordable) and Hemat (affordable), while some pilgrims choice gold (exclusive). These packages, of course, offer different services and facilities. The gold package offers a convenient five-star hotel accommodation close to the Ka’ba. Pilgrims can immediately have a view of the Ka’ba before their eyes simply by opening the room window. What is more is that pilgrims can also perform congregational prayers on the hotel terrace, because the terrace is integrated with the courtyard of Masjidil Haram, and etc. In short, we can meet anything the pilgrims want based on their request” .³³

The variety of products in various packages as being explained above shows clearly that the business sectors positioned Umrah as a marketable product. These variations in umrah packages are triggered by the highly competitive pressure in market demanding the agents to seek new and creative ways in selling their product in order to entice customers.

In relation to the creativity, The different characteristics, identities, and social and economic status of the prospective pilgrims require the industry to innovate in the creation of new products. In fact, in terms of product marketing, innovation is a key element in supporting business success.³⁴ Product innovation is a obligation for a company to compete, survive, and develop sustainably.³⁵ Good innovation will let the customers taste a different and memorable experience.³⁶ Customer satisfaction will greatly affect customer loyalty.³⁷ In subsequent,

³³ Interview with Manager of Arofahmina travel agency, June 11, 2021.

³⁴ Neil Anderson, Kristina Potočnik, and Jing Zhou, “Innovation and Creativity in Organizations: A State-of-the-Science Review, Prospective Commentary, and Guiding Framework”, *Journal of management* 40, 5 (2014): pp. 1297–1333.

³⁵ Christina Öberg, “The Role of Business Networks for Innovation”, *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge* 4, 2 (2019): pp. 124–128.

³⁶ Philipp ‘Phil’ Klaus and Stan Maklan, “Towards a Better Measure of Customer Experience”, *International Journal of Market Research* 55, 2 (2013): pp. 227–246.

³⁷ Hongwei Jiang and Yahua Zhang, “An Assessment of Passenger Experience at Melbourne Airport”, *Journal of Air Transport Management* 54 (2016): pp. 88–92.

customer loyalty will affect the sales and targeted outcome of a company.³⁸

Here, Umrah travel agents have designed some Umrah packages to meet the demand of prospective customers of various background. They have seeked some ways to satisfy those prospective pilgrims who have financial constraints by ensuring their needs of comfort, while at the same time they struggle to fulfill the dream of the die-hard fans who always wish to taste the sensation of walking along with their idols on a pilgrimage. They also find a creative strategy to meet the spiritual needs of those who are yearning for the pilgrimage in the month of Ramadan. Last but not the least, they take heed on the middle class craving for the unforgettable journey to some Islamic sites in some Muslim majority countries too. Hence, in such context, it can be argued that Umrah pilgrimage starts to loose its sacred position as a holy and religious pilgrimage as a way to get closer to God. This can be seen from the contrast between the sacred ritual that is supposed to put emphasize on simplicity and modesty with the recent trend that tend to show more accomodation towards tthe fulfilment of personal taste or desire and luxurious facilities. To give illustration, Arminareka Persada travel agent manager revealed as follows:

“On the whole, Umrah pilgrimage doesn’t require an abundance of time in terms of its implementation. One round of Umrah normally takes about 4 hours. Hence, to carry out two rounds of umrah pilgrimage will take about 8 hours. Two rounds of Umrah pilgrimage can actually be completed in one full day with some breaks. Nonetheless, performing two rounds of Umrah pilgrimage in one day will be too much exhausting for the pilgrims. Henceforth, we allocate 2 rounds of Umrah pilgrimage in every package that we offer..... all in all, the time allocated for Umrah pilgrimage, out of the total time of Umrah pilgrimage which normally takes 9 to 11 or even 15 days, in fact only takes about 2 days. However, we know that the pilgrims need to visit some well known Islamic historical sites right, such as Baqi’s tomb, the place for printing the Koran, the Quba Mosque, Mount Magnet, Mount Uhud, Jabal Rahmah, the place for Hajj pilgrimage, a visit to the samil palm garden to buy souvenirs, and they also need to shop... this is what we

³⁸ Mohammed Ismail El-Adly, “Modelling the Relationship between Hotel Perceived Value, Customer Satisfaction, and Customer Loyalty”, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 50 (2019): pp. 322–332.

offer in our package, which makes it more interesting. Focusing only on umrah and excluding other visit will only takes 2 days, plus a-2-day trip, and thus making a total of 4 days. Then, the pilgrims can straightly go home, but this scheme will definitely be less attractive...”.³⁹

According to Njoto-Feillard, the branding of Umrah in several packages reflects the inventiveness of an entrepreneur in reading the Islamic market.⁴⁰ Branding represents the uniqueness of the product to easily grab the attention of the public from the many available product choices. The way to brand products is principally part of the commodification of religion.⁴¹

Celebrity Endorsement

A noticeable recent marketing strategy that is getting more and more widely used by Umrah travel industry is celebrity endorsement. This strategy is accomplished by collaborating with popular public figures, including some notable figures from the entertainment industry (celebrity culture) and the leading figures in religious affairs (popular religious preachers), whom Fealy referred to as “Ustaz Seleb”.⁴² Celebrity endorsements are commonplace marketing strategy widely practiced by umrah travel agents belonging to some artists or entrepreneurs.

Celebrity endorsement is implemented by inviting celebrity culture through a platform design known as “Umrah bareng Artis” (Umrah pilgrimage with some Artists). To give illustration, before its license was revoked due to fraud, First travel often held an “Umrah bareng Artis” package by collaborating with Syahrini, a rising solo singer. Eddies Adelia, a photo model, actress, and a television host who was popular in the 2007s, was awarded as an Umrah ambassador in 2007 and 2011 at the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Tour and Travel owned by

³⁹ Interview with Manager of Arminareka Persada travel agency, December 3, 2020.

⁴⁰ Gwenael Njoto-Feillard, “New Muslim Culturs of Capitalist Enterprise,” in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert W Hefner (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴¹ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*.

⁴² Fealy, “Consuming Islam.”

Habib Mahdi.⁴³ In addition, Irwansyah and Zaskiya Sungkar, a leading actor and actress couple, and Laudia Cintya Bella, who have starred in many soap operas and popular films, have also been endorsed by umrah travel agent Al-Muchtar Tour and Travel on the agent's eighth birthday for a special pilgrimage package entitled “Umrah Bareng the Artists”.⁴⁴ Similarly, Arofahmina Travel Agent once collaborated with the popular *dangdut koplo* singer, Via Vallen,⁴⁵ while Arminareka Perdana has also invited a comedian artist Daus Mini, Yadi Sembako, and Murfi Sembako for their special pilgrimage package.⁴⁶ Interestingly, there also travel agents owned by the celebrities themselves and it makes it easier for them to collaborate with their artists colleagues. The examples here are Irwansyah and Zaskia Sungkar who then presented some fellow artists in their travel package including Shireen Sungkar, Irfan Hakim, Prilly Latuconsina, Ricky Harun and Herfiza in their umrah package. Likewise, Teuku Wisnu, a soap opera artist who has now become a salafi cleric, also endorsed his fellow artists, Dude Herlino and Dimas Seto, for umrah pilgrimage package of his travel agent, Abu Adam Tour. The same strategy was also applied by AFI Tour, owned by Sahrul Gunawan, a formerly well-known artist with some notable works in soap operas and music industry.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, celebrity endorsements that present famous celebrity clerics (popular religious preachers) are generally designed by mentioning the name of the clerics. The brand of the package will be as follows; “Umrah Bareng Ustadz AA Gym, Yusuf Mansur, and so on”. Interestingly, female religious figure in Indonesia turn out to also have selling point and hence also become ambassadors for the umrah

⁴³ Desi Puspasari, “Dua Kali Diendorse Umrah Eddies Adelia Anggap Rezeki Menuju Tanah Suci”, <https://hot.detik.com/celeb/d-3627277/dua-kali-di-endorse-umrah-eddies-adelia-anggap-rezeki-menuju-tanah-suci>.

⁴⁴ Al-Muchtar, “Umroh Bersama Laudya Chintya Bella, Zaskia Sungkar, Dan Irwansyah”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzFsobJrT24>.

⁴⁵ Arofahmina, “Perjalanan Via Vallen Umroh Bersama Arofahmina Umroh Aman, Khushyuk, Dan Menyenangkan”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7b1lf7ErXuA>.

⁴⁶ Rasy Jannu, “Perjalanan Umroh 22 April 2018, Bareng Artis Daus Mini, Murfi Sembako Dan Yadi Sembako”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0B0GEIFcPmc>

⁴⁷ Puri Yuanita, “Deretan Agen Travel Umrah Punya Seleb-Seleb Indonesia”, <https://travel.dream.co.id/umroh/deretan-agen-travel-umroh-punya-seleb-seleb-indonesia-171004t.html>; “Intip Bisnis Travel Haji & Umrah Milik 7 Seleb, Termasuk Teuku Wisnu”, <https://www.brilio.net/selebritis/intip-bisnis-travel-haji-umrah-milik-7-seleb-termasuk-teuku-wisnu-190711p.html>.

package. Travel Alhijaz Indowisata has always collaborated with Mamah Dedeh, a well-known cleric with an Islamic proselytizing program on a private television titled “Mamah and Aa”.⁴⁸ Salma Tour Umrah & Hajj once invited Abdullah Gymnastiar (AA Gym).⁴⁹ Similarly, Travel Umrah Haji Labbaika Tour presented UAS atau Ustadz Abdus Shomad,⁵⁰ and many more examples. These clerics also generally have their own travel agents such as Daqu Travel that belongs to Yusuf Mansur, MQ Travel belongs to Aa Gym, and al-Qusyairi travel owned by Sholeh Mahmud (Solmed).

Artist involvement becomes an important part for the development of the company. It becomes the company’s strategy not only in the company’s relationship with its customers, Business to Consumer (B2C), but also in the context of the company with other companies, Business to Business (B2B). In the US, managers of small and large companies establish business relationships by including celebrity in their advertising systems. These managers commonly take more heed on a product advertisement that presents a celebrity’s image than an advertisement presenting non celebrity image or advertisements without any image of a person.⁵¹ In China, the strategy to market products by partnering with celebrity was conducted. Companies in China not only endorse celebrity of a national scale in China but also hire internationally reputable celebrity from overseas (commonly, the West). This strategy has made chinese customers respond the product advertisement in a different way. The Chinese tend to pay more attention to the functional dimension of the product when the product is advertised by a Chinese artist, while they will take more heed on the symbolic aspect when the product is advertised by Western artists⁵². This condition indicates that people are inclined to consume advertised

⁴⁸ Alhijaz, “Biaya Umrah Bareng Ustadzah Mamah Dedeh Jakarta”, <https://www.travelumrohalthijaz.com/biaya-umroh-bareng-ustadzah-mamah-dedeh-jakarta/>.

⁴⁹ Salmatour, “Umroh Ramadhan Bersama AA Gym”, <http://www.salmatour.com/tag/umroh-ramadhan-bersama-aa-gym>.

⁵⁰ Labbaika, “Umrah Bersama UAS”, <https://labbaikatour.com/umroh-bersama-uas>.

⁵¹ Jodie L. Ferguson and Mayoor Mohan, “Use of Celebrity and Non-Celebrity Persons in B2B Advertisements: Effects on Attention, Recall, and Hedonic and Utilitarian Attitudes”, *Industrial Marketing Management* (2019): pp. 1–11.

⁵² Xiajing Zhu and Lefa Teng, “Using Self-Congruence Theory to Explain the Interaction Effects of Brand Type and Celebrity Type on Consumer Attitude Formation”, *Journal of Business Research* 103 (2019): pp. 301–309.

products that present artists who meet their personal value standards. The presence of artists in product advertisements can give consumers the freedom to adjust their values to the products offered. The presence of artists in product advertisements can increase sales volume.⁵³

In relation to the Umrah travel industry, this strategy becomes more influential because the artists are not only presented in the form of images in advertising brochures, but are directly involved in a real long pilgrimage. The involvement of artists gives the impression that a product is expensive and classy.⁵⁴ The involvement of these public figures also eliminates the distance between idols and their fans, which Marshall termed as new public intimacy. The make-belief details of idols who have long been present in an imaginary world through the media will be felt in their real form.⁵⁵ The celebrity endorsement model in an umrah travel agent illustrates the practice of religious commodification. The lure of public figures is a way to promote the travel agents and increase the sales of their Umrah products. This way, Umrah pilgrimage has turned into a pilgrimage for fun. In this context, a testimony from an Umrah guide from East Java who happened to see a group of artists and their pilgrims in the holy land becomes a relevant description. He said: “I often saw them huddled together before and after worshiping at the mosque, and they always took group photos and selfies, while shouting slogans about the virtues and excellence of the travel agents who took them”⁵⁶

⁵³ Laure Ambroise and Noël Albert, “Celebrity Endorsement: Conceptual Clarifications, Critical Review, and Future Research Perspectives”, *Recherche et Applications en Marketing (English Edition)* 35, 2 (2020): pp. 97–122; H Chan, A Lee, and C Wong, “Celebrity Endorsement in Advertisement on Destination Choice among Generation Y in Hong Kong”, *International Journal of Marketing Studies* 10, 2 (2018): pp. 16–27; Xu Xu and Stephen Pratt, “Social Media Influencers as Endorsers to Promote Travel Destinations: An Application of Self-Congruence Theory to the Chinese Generation Y”, *Journal of travel & tourism marketing* 35, 7 (2018): pp. 958–972.

⁵⁴ Maria Teresa Cuomo et al., “Celebrity Endorsement and the Attitude towards Luxury Brands for Sustainable Consumption”, *Sustainability* 11, 23 (2019), p. 6791; Mwendwa Mildred Zipporah and Hellen K Mberia, “The Effects of Celebrity Endorsement in Advertisements,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Economics and Management Sciences* 3, 5 (2014), p. 178.

⁵⁵ P David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁵⁶ Interview with Guide of Satria Persada Mandiri, January 12, 2020.

Distribution Line

In addition to branding or packaging products, another umrah travel agents market their products by choosing the right partners. Collaborating with partners to market their products in terms of marketing science is called trade promotion. The partners to collaborate can be individuals or socio-religious organizations, such as the Yasin congregation, women's study groups, and so on. The collaboration between travel agents and socio-religious organizations can be done by providing food supplies to support the group's activity. This sponsorship strategy allows the travel agent to get the opportunity to present their Umrah products before the congregation. Sometimes, the travel agents can simply ask the management of the organization to invite their congregation to take Umrah products.

Some socio-religious institutions that have established partnership in this collaboration are the Hajj and Umrah Worship Guidance Group (KBIHU). Although its main function is to guide the members and prospective Hajj or Umrah pilgrims, KBIHU is also a forum for the previous Hajj or Umrah pilgrims. As a forum for alumni of pilgrims, KBIHU also serves to maintain friendship with fellow former pilgrims and also retain the spirit of ritual worship after the Hajj pilgrimage. Such association was established based on the religious stipulation that the *mabrur* pilgrimage (a pilgrimage that is accepted by God) is the one that is able to improve the religious and social behavior of its performer. The position of KBIHU is very important for the community, especially in matters related to the pilgrimage and umrah.

KBIHU as a forum for former pilgrims or alumni has conducted regular activities, ranging from regular Islamic forum for once a month, activities in welcoming Islamic holidays, halal bihalal gathering, and so on. In fact, these activities are carried out based on the batch of Hajj departure. These former pilgrims retain their own spiritual nostalgia that is imprinted in their hearts, which can be revived by performing umrah. Umrah can be a way to treat their spiritual longing for pilgrimage or to be means for recharging their diligence in daily religious practices that may have started to slacken. It is this aspect of longing that is captured by Umrah travel agents to market their packages by cooperating with KBIHU. The congregation's trust in KBIHU is also the main aspect that can give rise to the emerging yearn to perform Umrah through this institution again. The former pilgrims is an entity that is mentally, personally, and spiritually well established.

Therefore, they generally have the same frequency level which results in a strong mutual relation between each other. This condition makes it easier for travel agents to influence them massively.

The cooperation between travel agents and external institutions is a tangible indicator that Umrah is not much different from other commodities that constantly persuades the public not only by the design of the product, but also through the way the product is distributed in the market. Cooperation with KBIHU or other religious organizations is the rational way to increase sales of a product. This way is known as trickle down, two-step flow and multistage interaction.⁵⁷ The trickle down strategy is the way to motivate people who have not matched the behavior of the reference group to follow the standard reference, so that they can have the same perception or level in interaction and association. Two-step flow refers to the situation when the reference group works to influence some figures who can exert influence on a passive group of people, while multistage interaction refers to the condition when the reference group affects everyone, not limited to the group influencer or the passive one, all of whom are equally targeted as recipients of influence.

Travel agents opted to cooperate with KBIHU in distributing their products based on some certain and thorough business considerations. KBIHU is seen as a market segmentation that has its own distinctive characteristics in the form of: association of former pilgrims having the same social status in regard to their hajj titles and the same level of religious piety. In fact, they are culturally bound to always be in the same boat and share the same feeling. This market segmentation model positions KBIHU management as the key agent in product marketing. Therefore, collaborating with KBIHU administrators as distributors will make it easier for the travel agents to condition the former pilgrims to take the offered Umrah products. The successful massive Umrah pilgrimage of one batch of alumni of pilgrims will easily seeps and trickle down to other batches of former hajj pilgrims.

On the other hand, commodification can also be seen in terms of the existing spiritual sentiments of Hajj. The alumni or former hajj pilgrims generally still retain unforgettable memories of their holy pilgrimage. This memory is generally used to attract the attention of the former pilgrims to trigger more yearning to return to the holy land.

⁵⁷ Blackwell Engel, R Blackwell, and Kollat, *Consumer Behavior* (London: Dryden Press, 1978).

Umrah can provide new experiences that the former hajj pilgrims may not have felt. Umrah is projected to bring more peace and solemnity inside the heart than the Hajj pilgrimage which is full of activities and crammed with millions of pilgrims.

The image and the nostalgia of peaceful pilgrimage are being massively exposed in order to entice them to be tempted to purchase Umrah products. There have been some efforts to bring back the old spiritual sentiments that have been inherent in the memories of former pilgrims through symbols of serenity and solemnity of pilgrimage offered by Umrah products. All these efforts are aimed at no other than urging the former hajj pilgrims to take the Umrah products offer, which serves as part of the commodification of religion.⁵⁸

The Bonus Award

Another aspect of umrah business industry that shows how umroh has been largely marketed as commodity is the bonus award practice. Given the involvement of external institutions in marketing Umrah packages, it is quite common for Umrah travel agents to provide a number of bonuses for them. This bonus is granted to both individuals and institutions who have successfully encouraged people to buy their products. Bonuses are given in the form of cash, discount of Umrah ticket, vouchers, and even free Umrah.

Bonuses are awarded with three models; reference results, passive results, and support systems. Bonuses with reference models are bonuses given to marketing agents who can invite other people to join travel agents. A bonus with a passive outcome model is awarded when a recruited pilgrim invites his wife/husband, children, or other relatives. Meanwhile, a bonus with a support system model is granted when the agent can guarantee the smooth payment of the pilgrims until all the bill is paid off. Bonuses can also be given through coupon packages. This coupon package consists of 30 coupons, 60 coupons or 90 coupons. Each coupon costs IDR 3.5 million. The bonus giving model as above is now starting to be abandoned because it is too calculative. Travel agents have now simplified the provision of bonuses in the form of free Umrah portions. One free portion of this Umrah is given to people who can bring 5 or up to 10 pilgrims. The standard numbers

⁵⁸ Lukens-Bull, “*Commodification of Religion.*”

of 5 or up to 10 to obtain the bonus are determined by the policy of the travel agent in calculating all costs incurred.

In its vision and mission, Arminareka Persada explains explicitly about the bonus or discount. Bonuses in the form of free Umrah or discounted fees are offered in a Partnership Business Program. The agent stated that someone who can invite his family and group to take an Umrah and or Hajj plus package will get a discounted fee, in addition to the reward. The Congregational Welfare Program and the Congregational Guidance Program also offer additional income if one person succeeds in helping another person to go for a pilgrimage to the holy land. Every pilgrim who has become a member automatically is entitled with the right to refer the agent to family, friends, and other people to take umrah packages and become a prospective pilgrim of the Arminareka Perdana, which allows the prospective pilgrim to have an additional source of income.⁵⁹ The model of giving bonuses in the form of discounted Umrah tickets and free Umrah tickets has emphasized the practice of commodifying religion. In marketing science, giving bonuses is categorized as a customer loyalty program. Giving bonuses to customers can increase the possibility of these customers to become regular customers⁶⁰ and make repetitive purchases.⁶¹ Moreover, giving bonuses can be a strategy of product promotion because customers who receive the bonuses will recount their experience to their friends or family.⁶²

The practice of giving bonuses is created on a business logic that the harder a person works to achieve a definite business target, the higher the pay for that person. In terms of bonuses, the more business targets achieved, the more bonuses received. The Paying bonus is an internally and externally applicable strategy. As part of an internal strategy it aims to increase loyalty of members, while as an external

⁵⁹ Arminareka, "Visi Dan Misi PT Arminareka Perdana," last modified 2021, <https://www.arminarekaperdana.co.id/about-us/visi-dan-misi/>.

⁶⁰ Sima Ghaleb Magatef and Elham Fakhri Tomalieh, "The Impact of Customer Loyalty Programs on Customer Retention", *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 6, 8 (2015): pp. 78–93.

⁶¹ Viswanathan Kumar And Denish Shah, "Building And Sustaining Profitable Customer Loyalty For The 21st Century", *Journal of Retailing* 80, 4 (2004): pp. 317–329.

⁶² Thomas Brashear-Alejandro, Jun Kang, and Mark D Groza, "Leveraging Loyalty Programs to Build Customer–Company Identification", *Journal of Business Research* 69, 3 (2016): pp. 1190–1198.

strategy it is directed to turn the customers's experience into the word of the mouth. In an increasingly competitive market situation, this bonus strategy is an essential way to ensure that both directions work well. A person who can exceed the sales of Umrah packages within a certain target can perform Umrah for free.

In this regards, Einstein who considers religion as a product, argues that it is also no exemption from experiencing adjustments or changes when exposed to marketed amidst the increasingly competitive market. Such changes cover not only the quality but also the quantity. Changes in quality require the redesign of the product to meet the market demand, while changes in quantity urge a continuous survey of the availability of the same good in the market. In the context of Umrah travel agents, changes and adjustments due to the market situation have positioned the Umrah pilgrimage as a commodity. As a matter of fact, the religious stipulation is something fixed and always remain the same, but over time, that is not always the case with the religious practices. When religious practices are turned into a product, they will gradually lose their religious substances as a way to adjust to the demand of time. In this case, religion has been designed to meet the demands, situations, and levels of market competition.⁶³

Conclusion

This article delineates that the popularity of Umrah in Indonesia is inseparable from the role of Umrah travel agents in marketing Umrah products to the public using predetermined business strategies that have been widely practice by the industry. On the one hand, Umrah travel agents internally design these Umrah products into several varied packages by offering various facilities and services that have been adapted to the personal tastes and abilities of prospective pilgrims. In addition, travel agents also design these Umrah packages by establishing collaborative networking with top artists to increase the prestige of these products. On the other hand, the travel agents market these umrah packages externally through widely extended distribution channels by collaborating with external parties. KBIHU is the most appropriate distribution partner in marketing Umrah products, because it is an institution that accommodates prospective Umrah or Hajj

⁶³ Ibid.

pilgrims as well associates the former hajj pilgrims. Giving bonuses is a mere consequence of such cooperation.

Another noteworthy point lies on the fact that the massive offering of Umrah packages by the travel agents for a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina with celebrities has led to a gradual shift of meaning from the highly sacred religious rituals to a profane tourism activity. This shift of meaning is particularly resulted from the sentiments of popular culture that are attached to celebrity images and turn the whole journey of Umrah pilgrimage as a “chic” and “trendy” pilgrimage.

This finding certainly confirms the heavily discussed issues among the sociologists and anthropologists that the commodification of religion is identical to the commercialization of religion. The commercialization of religion in the context of the Umrah pilgrimage can be seen from the overall impression that arises from the way the travel agents invite and market their products to the public. “No pay no pray”. In other words, those who cannot afford to pay will not be able to perform the pilgrimage as a form of worship. This slogan implies that Umrah is a form of worship that is financially costly and there is no Umrah pilgrimage provided for free. Another tagline, “The more you pay the more you enjoy”, indicates that the more the pilgrims can afford to pay, the more pleasure they can get. This tagline is a clear indication of travel agents’ offering regarding the different facilities and services provided in various Umrah packages. The more money paid, the more luxurious the services and facilities provided. “No pain no gain” is also another accurate description of the bonuses received by marketing partners. In this tagline, it is obvious that the more number of prospective Umrah pilgrims that the marketing partners can invite, the more bonuses they can get.[]

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