The Influence of Islamic symbols and element among Malaysia University logos

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Abstract

*A logo represents the vision, philosophy, and perhaps values of an enterprise or organization. The university logos in Malaysia best epitomize this notion by incorporating academic and Islamic symbols with abstract elements to highlight their aspires. There are different interpretations of what each sign of the logo means but one can easily infer that academic excellence, Islamic inspiration, and character uprightness might be popular elements used in the logo to symbolize the institution. So far, studies to incorporate Islamic design elements into university logos to convey these religious symbols among university logos are still limited. Therefore, this paper shares our observations of design features representing Islamic symbols among ten Malaysian Islamic-related university logos via a comparative semiotic analysis, focusing on applying graphic design principles. Such analysis is crucial because it will be a benchmark for a future logo design in the affiliated institution. Briefly, crescent, stars, geometric shapes, and Quran symbols on **rehal** were the common elements found in the selected logos. Almost all observed logos also contained Arabic and Roman text aligned either asymmetric or symmetric on top of the logo. The combination between the symbols and the text lifts the logo's design to represent the university.*

Through this experience, a greater sense of appreciation and deeper understanding of Islamic themes to enhance the quality of the university logo can be achieved.

Keywords: *Principle of graphic design, Islamic design fundamental, Islamic symbols and elements, geometrical shapes and patterns*

INTRODUCTION

The usage of unique symbols to represent an organization either in logo, brand name, or corporate image has long been applied. These symbols must be carefully chosen to suit the organization and later become symbolic, i.e., something to be honored. To select the ideal elements representing the logo, each designer will collect as much information about the organization before introducing a suitable concept to design these logos. The idea of relating logos with religious symbols has become very popular because of the strong religious influence inside the organization's atmosphere. Hence, the phenomena to represent the organization's logo with religious symbols such as Cross for Christianity, Crescent for Islam, Star of David for Judaism, or Om for Hindu have been widely used in logo creation. Since religious symbols are essential in logo presentation, it would be fascinating to explore the influence of religion in logo creation.

At the moment, people knew Malaysia as one of the leading Islamic countries that consistently progressed to become a well-developed country. One of the sectors that the government seriously looks at is the higher educational institution. When this paper was written, 597 higher education institutions were established in Malaysia, categorized into four institutions, namely public universities, polytechnic, community colleges, and private higher education institutions (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2021b). The establishment of higher education institutions that relate to Islam has been actively developed by the Malaysia Government since the last few decades (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2021a). Each of these institutions has come out with various logo designs to represent them. As Malaysia's official religion is Islam, most logos related to this religion have included common Islamic symbols such as the star, moon, domes, minarets, and towers (Brown, 2017) in the logo design. Similarly, this condition also appeared in most of the Islamic-based university logo designs. By linking the institution logos with the Islamic, the institution has not just celebrated humankind's intelligence but they are also attributing these to the oneness of the Creator and the guidance that comes from the two authentic sources, the divine Quran and the eminence Al-Hadith.

To date, we can find many forms of shapes, patterns, and colors in Malaysian Islamic-based university logos. However, as far as we are concerned, there is hardly any study on incorporating Islamic symbols and elements into the design of these logos as the norm is to infuse academic marks. The closest study related to Islamic logos is usually associated with the Halal logo, such as awareness of Halal logo and purchase intention (Aqdas & Amin, 2020) and attention toward

Halal Malaysia brand cue (Ismail, Othman, Rahman, Kamarulzaman, & Rahman, 2016). This gap has produced a significant motivation for us to conduct this study. Although there is no doubt that the current logo for Malaysian Islamic-based university has portrayed the Islamic influence, it is still crucial to explore how Islamic symbols are embedded into the logos to become a benchmark for future logo creation. Additionally, the study will strengthen our understanding of how designers interpret the Islamic influence of these logos. Thus, we can find out the dominant symbols used in these logos to characterize Islamic influence.

This paper discusses features of Islamic symbols within logos for ten selected Malaysian Islamic-based university to explore the influence of Islamic elements in logo design. Throughout the article, we are going to explore several subjects. Section II will discuss the Islamic design fundamentals, while Section III presents the typical elements for Islamic logo presentation. We portray our method to compare the selected Malaysian Islamic-based universities logos in Section IV and present the discussion and opinion based on the comparison result in Section V. Finally; we conclude our discussion in Section VI.

Islamic Design Fundamental

Conventionally, Islamic symbols and elements take on the form of Arabic calligraphy known as *khat*, geometric designs and patterns, floral-inspired intertwined ornamental design patterns known as arabesque, polygons such as squares, pentagons and octagons, crescent and star, domes and minarets, arches, and the colors green and white (Ghasemzadeh, Atefeh Fathebaghali, & Tarvirdinassab, 2013; Marni, Hamzah, & Marni, 2019; Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan, 2019; Rahim, Ujang, & Said, 2018; Shafiq, 2014). These symbols can easily be seen in Islamic-related documents and designs such as the Holy Quran page, mosque mural, and logos. For instance, Figure 1 shows the mihrab (a semicircular niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the qibla; direction of the Kaaba in Mecca and hence the direction that Muslims should face when praying) for Putra Mosque in Putrajaya, Malaysia. In most mosques, the mihrab has become one of the most decorated areas where at this corner, many Islamic symbols such as decorative shapes, *khat,* and colorful arches are presented.

Figure 1: *The mihrab of Putra Mosque, Putrajaya, Malaysia*

Unlike the non-Islamic traditions, the Islamic context and perspective towards the arts, sciences, lifestyles, governance, and otherworldly matters are integral and intimately connected to the fundamental religious belief of Islam. While secularism, embraced by non-Islamic cultures, posits that religion and worldly affairs must be kept apart and are unrelated to one another (Clark, 2011). On the other hand, Islam propounds the belief that the earthly life is a stepping-stone to the more profound eternal life of the hereafter. It emphasizes the need to keep within the guidelines set by Islamic principles, one of which is the cardinal concept of ***tawhid*** or divine unity, which means that there is no god but Allah (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011). As a result, the implication of ***tawhid*** to the Islamic art form is that there shall not be any depiction of images (animals or human beings) or idols that could potentially be associated with Allah or prevent humankind from remembering Allah. This concept of ***tawhid*** is so critical that only Islamic symbols and elements such as *khat*, various geometrical shapes and patterns, arabesque, crescent and star, domes and minarets are permissible due to the outright prohibition of any form of the depiction of Allah, humans, and animals (Kuiper, 2010; Saoud, 2010). This prohibition was clearly highlighted in the saying of the Prophet Muhammad (May Allah have blessings on him) that his companion Ibn' Umar (May Allah be pleased with him) once reported the Messenger of Allah (May Allah have blessings on him) having said, "Those who draw pictures (images of men and animals) would be punished on the Day of Resurrection; and it would be said to them: "Breath soul into what you have created" (Rahim et al., 2018).

Islamic symbols and elements are arguably aligned to the concept of ***tawhid*** even though some Muslim scholars questioned the need to have a distinct Islamic identity, similar to Judaism's "star of David" and Christian's "cross", in the form of symbols. Herein lies the hypothesis of this paper, which is to what extent the Islamic symbols and elements found in the university logos in Malaysia contribute to high-end graphic design.

Common Symbols For Islamic Logo Representation

The common Islamic symbols to present graphic content such as logos are the crescent and star, geometrical shapes, patterns, *khat*, mosque domes, and ***rehal*** (book rest)*.* Most of the Islamic-based design contain a mix of images and text. Figure 2 depicts the Kolej Universiti Islam Melaka (Islamic University College of Malacca) logo, one of Malaysia's Islamic-based higher education institutions.

Figure 2: *The logo for Islamic University College of Malacca*

This logo represents several Islamic symbols such as the khat, **rehal** (frequently to indicate educational institution), and geometrical shapes like the star and the mosque dome. By combining both elements, it strengthens the Islamic features of the logo to represent the institution.

Khat is easily one of the earliest recognizable Islamic art forms and is widely used in the Islamic world. Besides symbols, Islamic logos also use the conventional Latin or Roman alphabets and Arabic letters to become the standard script to symbolize the Islamic content. In khat usage, it usually involves the harmonious formation of elegant lines and strokes when illustrating verses of the Holy Quran or merely Arabic phrases. Such sequences are transformed through lengthening, shortening, uprighting, rounding, curving, slanting, transcending, etc. (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2015). The beauty of *khat* transcends beyond the complex script as it fills and illuminates the space that it is on with all its colors and grandeur.

Another interesting fact in the Islamic logos is that it also contains geometrical shapes and designs closely associated with Islamic symbols such as square, spiral, regular octagon, and eight-pointed star as shown in Figure 3 (Dabbour, 2012).
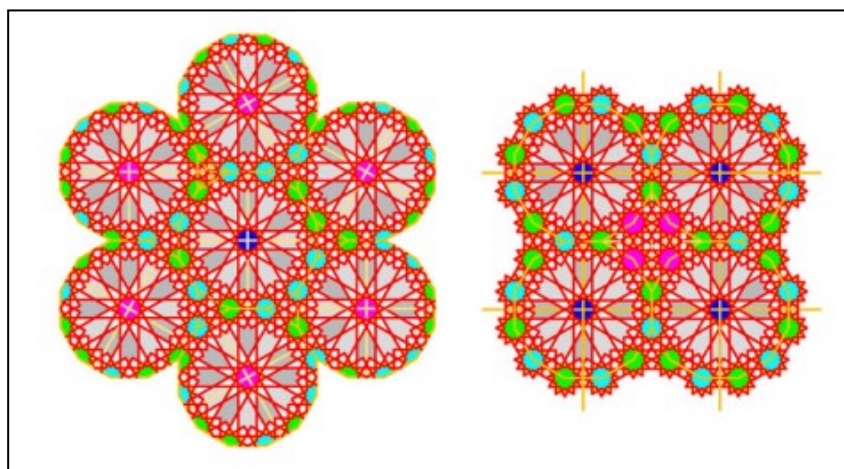
Figure 3: *Islamic symbols based on geometrical shapes*

The usage of geometrical shape is mainly because these elements produce many corners or vertices (Clark, 2011; Dabbour, 2012; Heilbron, 2010) that provide essential meaning in Islamic principles such as justice and balance (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011). On top of it, with the precise calculation of geometric shapes, the designer can create many potential design choices, which accounts for the significant number of design variations. Meanwhile, a regular polygon synonymous with symmetrical polygon means that each side is equal, and each interior angle is congruent (Gouvea & Q., 2004). The geometrical designs and patterns depict order and harmony based on uncanny symmetry, unity in different forms, shapes and sizes, and symbolic crystal shape or crystalline found in the natural world.

An exciting aspect of standard symbols for Islamic logos is the presence of crescent and star, which are prominently featured in Muslim society in the form of national flags of Muslim-dominated countries, architecture, mosques, minarets, stamps, coins, and currency notes (Ismail et al., 2016). The crescent and star typically represent the creation of heavenly bodies, with the five-pointed star being the five pillars of Islam. Ironically, the crescent and star do not have their origins in Islam. There is nowhere in the Holy Quran and authentic Hadiths which state categorically that the crescent and star are symbols of Islam. Neither the Prophet nor the first generation of his companions adopted the crescent and star as symbols in their daily lives. They have their origins from the Sumerian, Greek, and Byzantine influences before the Ottoman empire designated them in its official flag and administrative letters (Kuiper, 2010). Later, this notion etched the minds and imagination connected to Islam and has become the symbols of Islam. Kattani (2013), in his book, confirmed this and even went a step further by claiming that attempts to put the crescent on the minaret are a new form of a concoction of religion *bid'ah*, while emulating the Roman castles during the Byzantium era. Some contemporary Muslim scholars have permitted its use based on the *'urf*, accepted and decided custom. It does not contradict the religion while agreeing on the concept of permissible *bid'ah* (Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan, 2019). Furthermore, any attempt to use the crescent and star to pursue a specific non-Islamic agenda is considered suspicion and distrust. The crescent and star are widely accepted nowadays as the symbols of Islam.

Other symbols used in Islamic-based logos are the domes and minarets, which originate from the Byzantium era. These are now closely associated with Islamic designs. Universally, the book rest or open book symbolizes the quest for knowledge. By extension, the Qur'an *rehal* also signifies the pursuit of knowledge and maybe assimilated into the Islamic culture. Similarly, colors such as green and white are pretty predominantly evident in some logos because they are deemed Islamic colors.

Most of the Islamic symbols and elements vary from one logo to another. With the great idea from the illustrator and the graphic designer, these symbols are intelligently blended to present an aesthetically harmonious logo and as one that is effectively functional in projecting the Islamic institution's ideals.

Method of Logo Comparison

This paper addresses two key questions: how Islamic belief influences Islamic art and design and whether the use of Islamic symbols and elements in the university logos in Malaysia can produce high-end graphic design. These questions would facilitate better insights understanding and perspectives on how high-end logos critically reflect Malaysian universities' vision, philosophy, and values.

This paper involves a comparative study of ten Malaysian Islamic-based university logos. We analyzed secondary data to investigate the feasibility of infusing the seven graphic design principles, namely balance, alignment, hierarchy, contrast, rhythm, proximity, and color/space during the design process (Hayward-Cole, 2019). These principles serve as guidelines on how to produce quality high-end graphic designs. Table 1 shows the matrix of comparison results for the ten selected logos based on seven design principles: roman text, khat, geographic shape, rehal, crescent and star, mosque dome, and color (white and green). A checked symbol will be marked in the column if the logo contains relevant design principles set earlier. We also provide weblinks to each university website to ease navigation if readers want to see the actual logo design.

Table 1: Selected university logos comparison based in seven design principles

No.	Logo	Roman Text	Khat	Geometric Shape	Rehal / Qur'an	Crescent / Star	Mosque dome	Green/ White
1	Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (https://www.iium.edu.my/v2/)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
2	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (https://www.usim.edu.my)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
3	Universiti Islam Malaysia (https://www.uim.edu.my/v4/)	✓	✓	✓				
4	Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (https://www.unisza.edu.my/index.php?lang=ms)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
5	Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah / Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah International Islamic University	✓	✓	✓	✓			

Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (https://unishams.edu.my/portal/en)

No.	Logo	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	Kolej Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (KIAS)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
7	Kolej Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (http://www.kias.edu.my)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
8	Kolej Universiti Islam Melaka (https://kuim.edu.my/v3/index.php/ms/)	✓	✓	✓			✓	
9	Kolej Universiti Islam Perlis (https://kuips.edu.my/v4/)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
10	Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (http://www.kuis.edu.my)	✓	✓	✓	✓			

Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah (http://www.usas.edu.my/index.php/bm/)

Discussion

In Table 1, we can notice that it is clear that each university logo has its unique Islamic features in the form of symbols and elements that reflect its vision, philosophy, and values. By looking at the selected logo, one could note that most have adhered to graphic design principles. These logos are designed based on relevant Islamic elements such as crescents, stars, geometric shapes and Qur'an on *rehal.* At the same time, the logo also has blocks of texts layout either in the form of asymmetric or symmetrical arrangement. These arrangements are equally divided to provide a sense of drive and flamboyance to the user's eyes.

The text arrangement is interesting as this element is designed with several types of justification to present multiple language text. Interestingly, almost all the universities proudly display their respective full names in their logos (albeit in English, Malay, or Arabic) instead of using acronyms, which Malaysians are obsessed with using in their daily communication. This inclination probably reinforces their respective desire to be correctly identified amid all the other universities instead of second-guessing what a particular acronym might mean.

Through the balance principle, the logos appear to be more captivating. The Kolej Universiti Islam Perlis logo is unique because it is asymmetrical. The two sides of a mosque dome and two minarets differ but form a pleasant outline of the logo image. Meanwhile, the Universiti Islam

Malaysia logo, for reasons only known to them, prefers to have an uneven logo, one that is devoid of symmetry or asymmetry.

It is clear that most of the illustrated logos, except for one (Kolej Universiti Islam Melaka), create a visual relationship and connection between the images and blocks of texts. The two elements are either aligned proportionately side-by-side between the image and blocks of text horizontally or vertically. This visual connection forms the alignment principle, which potentially has a significant impact on the users. The logo of Kolej Universiti Islam Melaka is unique. The university's name dons the perimeter of the image logo with the Malay version forming a U-shape hugging onto the image, and the Arabic equivalent prevails at its top.

Upon analysis, at least four university logos emphasize some aspects over others, known as a hierarchy in the design principle. It helps universities convey their message to the user by focusing on a particular part of the design. Examples of logos with standout elements like the eight-pointed star or dome are from Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah, and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin. The remaining university logos do not adhere to hierarchy shape, particularly in projecting Islamic symbols and elements.

Contrast is also essential in the design principle. For this principle, it appears that Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia has successfully designed a logo of the light dome and minarets against a dark blue background, hence enhancing the logo's overall clarity. Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia has a thick outline of the central square representing the Kaabah and a mixture of thin and thick lines for the eight inner and outer domes, representing the different branches of knowledge. Upon scrutiny, the logos of Universiti Islam Perlis and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin have different shades of golden color and black shield to bring out the three-dimensional perspective of the image. The contrast on the other logos is not quite apparent as the design elements are not opposed to the layout.

For the design principle known as rhythm, the use of laurels on the design logos from Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah and Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah help to accentuate and perpetuate a more organized and consistent look which makes these logos easily recognizable.

The proximity principle by definition, helps in decluttering the overall design by creating a relationship between related symbols and elements. It emphasizes integrating appropriate color, font, type and size, ensuring that the layout is not cluttered. It enables the user to have a nice overview of what they are looking at, thereby offering a good user experience. It is noteworthy to claim that all but one of the illustrated university logos satisfy this principle. Kolej Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (KIAS) tried to incorporate certain Islamic and state symbols and elements, such as crescent and star, Quran on ***rehal***, green color and *khat* in its logo. There is nothing wrong with those, but yellow and green stripes give the appearance of clutter.

Most of the university logos use the appropriate foreground and background colors and space. The Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor, on the other hand, has a combination of four colors, namely, green and yellow against a white background, surrounded by a blue frame, which

does not seem to match. The positive point of this logo is that it embraces simplicity with Islamic symbols and elements. A point to note is that despite green and white being the colors of Islam, not all the universities adopt those colors as many are more inclined to use their respective corporate colors.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to contextualize and analyze the Islamic symbols and elements infused in the university logos in Malaysia, emphasizing the application of the principles of graphic design. Some university logos fulfill quite a number of the design principles, while some don't when presenting Islamic symbols and elements in their respective logos. While in most cases, the image of the logo supported by blocks of texts would lend greater credence in the quest for effective identity. It is even more significant to have Islamic symbols and elements embedded inside the logo, especially if that institution claims to promote and embrace Islamic vision, philosophy, and values. This paper intends not to criticize the influence of Islamic symbols and elements in the respective university logos but rather to appreciate and gain a better insight into what constitutes a quality high-end graphic design in the context of promoting some Islamic genre.

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