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Muslim Consumers: How Do Global Brands Become “Infidels”?

Among Islamists, certain global brands can be considered threats to Muslim identity, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“‘Infidel! Infidel!’ cries the six-year-old boy upon hearing his mother mention Nestlé during our interview,” writes author Elif Izberk-Bilgin (University of Michigan-Dearborn). “Why would a six-year-old call Nestlé infidel? How do global brands like Coca-Cola and Disney get tangled in a complex web of sociopolitical dynamics and become targets of religiously charged consumer activism?”

In describing a phenomenon she calls “consumer jihad,” Izberk-Bilgin explores consumer boycotts of brands associated with Western influences and policies. The author conducted an ethnographic study of low-income Muslim consumers in Turkey. Her informants were shantytown dwellers who had migrated to Istanbul for employment. Many of her interviewees had traditional upbringings and faced economic hardships and culture shock when they arrived in Istanbul’s urban setting. “These informants embraced Islam not just as a matter of faith and a normative system, but also as a political and social model,” the author writes. “As a result, this Islamist view reflected on their consumption choices.”

Although study participants named Western multinational corporations as examples of infidel brands, some informants also named reputable Turkish brands as infidels. “This suggests that what fosters the infidel critique is not simply an anti-Western sentiment. Rather, it is the complex interplay of many socio-historical factors such as the informants’ discontent with uneven economic globalization, the growing influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in domestic policies, the elite-led modernization project in Turkey, and the stigmatized ‘backward’ social position of Islamists that fuel the infidel critique,” Izberk-Bilgin writes.

Instead of merely rejecting Western values or modern market systems, Islamists engage in consumer activism as a way to “moralize the market” and embrace products (like gender-segregated resorts and alcohol-free perfumes) that reflect their values, Izberk-Bilgin concludes.

Elif Izberk-Bilgin. “Infidel Brands: Unveiling Alternative Meanings of Global Brands at the Nexus of Globalization, Consumer Culture, and Islamism.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2012. For more information, contact Elif Izberk-Bilgin (ebilgin@umd.umich.edu) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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