Visual Ideology Of Sufi Islam: A Study Of Themes In Eid Milad And ‘Urs Ads In Pakistan

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Abstract
The purpose of the study was to find out and analyze themes and patterns in the ads of Islamic religious events like ‘Urs and Milad. We have applied semiotic visual analysis to the found images of the communication devices of these events. We collected the data for the study using a Google Images search as well as the posters on the walls of bazaars and religious places. We have identified some recurring themes in these ads, like the use of the domes of the mausoleums as symbols of the prophet and saints; the pictures of the religious personalities; and the use of techniques like imagery to establish the credibility of sponsors of these events. The symbols were used in a hierarchical order. The ads can further be divided into three categories: typographical, with dominant imagery supported by text, and text supported by imagery. This classification corresponds to the previous classifications found in the literature. Alternative psychology-based explanations are also discussed. However, like any classification efforts, these can turn out ridiculous.

Keywords: ‘Urs; Milad; religious advertisements; religious symbols; Sufi symbols; semiotic visual analysis; image classification.
Introduction
Sufism is considered by many as a sect of Islam that practices Islam in an esoteric and ritualistic manner (Sorgenfrei, 2018). It is manifested in some customs and celebrations of ‘Urs and Milad that are celebrated annually in Pakistan.
To attract and capture their target audience, these religious festivities are advertised using print media as well as social media. Spirituality and religiosity are the predominant themes used in these ads.

In this article, we analyse and discuss the various themes and ideologies incorporated into the religious ads in Pakistan. Images are never neutral; they embed the ideologies that are prevalent in the culture creating them (Aiello, 2006; Barthes, 1964; Rahat et al., 2021). In the same vein, the imagery of these ads conveys prevailing religious and social ideologies.

We first discuss how Milad and ‘Urs are celebrated, then we explain how marketing and advertising techniques are used to sell these events. And finally, we analyse these ads to classify different themes and ideologies. Barthes’ classification of text-image relationships was adopted to categorize these ads. We felt Barthes classification has its limitations so psychological explanations have also been given to better understand and classify these ads. In the end, the limitations of these approaches are discussed.

Celebrations of a Birth and Celebrating Deaths
The popular festival of Eid Milad un-Nabi is celebrated to commemorate the birthday of the prophet Muhammad (SAW). This is an occasion for Muslims to show their utmost love for the prophet. This is because the personality of Muhammad plays a symbolic role in the lives of Muslims: as an example, an intermediary, and a source of veneration to all Muslims (Schimmel, 1985). This love and devotion for the Prophet and his family are even more pronounced and ritualized in Sufi Islam all over the world (Allen, 2019; Hoffman-Ladd, 1992).

In South Asia, the death anniversaries of Sufi saints are celebrated with religious fervour. These anniversaries are called ‘Urs, which means a wedding or “wedding feast”-Sufis consider these death anniversaries as the birth anniversary of the saint who is called Pir (Geijbels, 1978). The ‘Urses are celebrated just like eastern wedding ceremonies and the devotees make pilgrimage to the graves of these saints (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014). It is because their devotees believe that these saints are the beloveds of God and by dying, they meet their beloved which is termed as Visaal or union with the beloved (Rekhta, 2020; Wikipedia, n.d.). Their fana (demise) leads to baqa-the everlasting existence, and oneness with God, the beloved (Nicholson, 1914).

Although frowned upon by the orthodox Muslims, and called by some western commentators an amalgamation of Islamic culture and the cult of local deities (Dale & Menon, 1978), ‘Urs is a widely celebrated event among the followers of Sufi Islam in the subcontinent.

Marketing of Religious Events
Among so many products, religion is one more product to be sold (Einstein, 2007). In religion-based ads, mostly religious symbolism is used to sell products to consumers by appealing to
Anatomy of religious ads

In order to understand how these ads are constructed, we have to see the content and design of these ads.

Feelings like love and veneration are common elements in these ads. In a study of the posters of the Pentecostal Church, Chibueze et al., (2017) have observed that these posters are large, attractive, have colourful backgrounds, and use emotive language. Most of the ads for ‘Urs' in Pakistan are different in that they are small in size, mostly simple, and are black and white or a mono-colour background. They are similar to the church ads in that they too, like commercial ads, are an important source of communication. The posters for Eid Milad are more emotive than those of ‘Urs. This may be due to the utmost love of the Muslims for their prophet (Schimmel, 1985) as well as the position of the prophet, which is supposed to be above all the saints.

Another way to understand the anatomy of these ads is to study how they are designed.

The religious events are advertised widely and are attended by large numbers of devotees. The ads, however, are rarely designed by any professional advertising agencies or graphic designers. Usually, local printmakers are hired who may also be devotees. They usually do not have degrees in graphic design or marketing but they seem to know the psyche of their audiences and design the ads according to their audience. Since these ads are designed by naïve designers, they are thought to have no conscious patterns or schemes; nor are they supposed to be made according to some psychological theories. Since a large number of devotees are attracted to these ads and many of these ads are memorable, we hypothesize that even though not conscious, these ads should have some patterns which serve the purpose.

Methodology

The approach we have adopted in this study is qualitative and we have employed visual analysis methods which are predominant in arts and visual anthropology.

We have used both primary as well as secondary data tools. Among primary data, the tools used were the ads searched from the web, wall posters, newspaper ads, and billboard ads. The secondary data tools used were journal articles.

For carrying out analysis, we used purposive judgemental sampling to search ads and posters of ‘Urs celebrated in the subcontinent.

We collected our images(ads) through a web search of the terms Milad and ‘Urs. The search query ‘Urs Shareef returned more relevant search results than the query ‘Urs. the word Shareef
connotes noble. Another source of ads was the billboards and wall-posters displayed in different public spaces like mosques and bazaars.

These “found” ads could be analysed using two different types of visual analysis methods i.e. semiotic as well as discursive. In the first type, the image is questioned while in the later the audience is asked to interpret the image. In the semiotics, the constituent parts of the image are considered to signify something else, some other meaning which depends upon the context and visual culture of the time as well as its production method. In the discursive method, the participants are shown an image and the discussion takes place around that image (InVisio, 2018; Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Here we have relied on the semiotic approach as being teachers in visual communications, we were well versed in the study of images, culture, and advertising. The data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously as we immediately started analyzing the first images we collected and the later search was modified by what insights we got from the initial analysis of the images. This process corresponds to Glaser’s (1965) process of the constant-comparative method, wherein the analysis is started as soon as the first data is collected, and later data collection is adjusted according to the themes which emerge from the analysis of previous data.

The themes were later compared to the literature; the literature review was carried out during and after the analysis to match the themes derived from our analysis to the themes in the prior literature. This is similar to the formative literature review method used in grounded theory where the researcher is directed by the emergent themes to the relevant literature. (Goulding, 2005).

Analysis and Discussions

Here some ads for Eid Milad un Nabi and ‘urs are analyzed the main themes are discussed as given below:

One of the most celebrated ‘Urses is that of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jillani (R.A). Abdul Qadir Jillani was a descendent from the family of the prophet and among the Sufis, he is known as Peeran e Peer (i.e. the saint of the saints or guide of the saints). His Mausoleum is in Baghdad.

The ‘Urs ads are usually for informing about the date and venue of the event, but they contain much more written text and images used as symbols, than just the information. The ‘urs ads are almost exclusively through print media. Mostly the posters are pasted on the walls. Billboards and transit media (i.e. posters pasted over the moving vehicles, especially public transport) are also utilized. The posters can be either black and white or colour. Some common themes of these ads are given below:

Context and positioning of the symbols

Symbols are given in some context, and they are positioned alongside other symbols to convey a clear image. An example is a dome with a date tree in the Abdul Qadir Jilani ‘Urs ads. Date trees are symbolic of Arabia and the family of the prophet. They are seen so frequently in the images of Abdul Qadir Jilani’s ‘Urs that they have become associated with him.
The Positioning of the Symbols

The placement of different symbols seems like a very conscious effort to show the relative importance and relations of the symbols.

In the image in figure 1 below, the Roza of Abdul Qadir Jillani (R.A) is in the middle, while the Roza e Rasool (shrine of the Prophet) is to its right and the shrine of Ahmed Raza Brailvy is on the left. Remember that Urdu text is written from right to left so this ad is supposed to be read from right to left; in left-to-right languages and cultures, the directionality might be reversed. Applying Yuen’s (2004) generic structure model, the Rozas, being the most Salient one, acts as Lead: the middle one as Locus of Attention(LoA) and the other ones as Complement to LoA (Comp.LoA). Both the shrines on the left and right are a little behind the middle one. The Roza e Rasool is taller than the shrine of Sheikh Abdul Qadir, which is taller than the shrine of Ahmed Raza brailvy; this shows the relative statuses of the three personalities. In some other versions of this poster, the sizes of the domes, instead of their heights, are used to indicate the relative statuses. This use of different sizes or heights to indicate relative importance is called a hierarchical scale (Getlein, 2010).

The second most important ‘urs celebrated in Pakistan is that of Abdul Hasan Ali Hajveri, who is commonly known as Hazrat Data Ganj Baksh (the endower of the treasures), or Data Sahib among the common people. His era was around the 11th century. He is the author of the very famous book about Sufism, the Kashful Mahjoob (Unveiling of the Veiled). The book is still widely published and is used as a Sufi manual in the country. His shrine is one of the most visited places in Lahore. His ‘urs is celebrated by a large number of devotees in Lahore (Huda, 2007). A poster of his ‘urs is given below:

The green dome of the Data Sahib’s Mausoleum is shown large in the lower portion. Note the presence of white pigeons on the green dome and the open sky in the background of the dome.

Another important ‘urs is that of Imam Ahmed Raza Khan, known as Aala Hazrat, who is considered the founder of the Barelvi school of thought in Islam. His ‘urs is celebrated by the followers of the Barelvi school with religious zeal. The original colour and design of the dome are sometimes changed in ‘urs ads. But from the design and pattern, the dome can easily be identified.
Typographical ads (Text-Only or Text-dominant)

These ads consist of text only. The size and positioning of the text may correspond to the relative importance of the person or message in the text.

Text with pictures of sponsors

There is nothing specific in the Quran about representative art but injunctions against idolatry are very strict and many Muslims believe that representative art could lead to paganism. On the other hand, Hadith has a lot against such representations. Even within Islam, the Shias are much more open to the representation of religious persons than Sunnis and there is still a lot of controversy about the use of images in Islam (The Economist, 2015; Wade, 2006).

Figure 3 downloaded from:
https://www.facebook.com/Darbareaaliyabalawarashareef/photos/a.880213798669196.1073741829.871496286207614/1103170479706859/?type=3&theater

Some communication vehicles we studied contained the pictures of the sponsors or the organizers of the event. They are usually the Pirs (spiritual leaders) or Sajjada Nasheens (trustees or custodians of a shrine), or any spiritual or religious personality. The purpose of the human picture in proximity to religious messages or symbols may be to impart credibility and also to lend an aura of piousness to the personality.

Establishing credibility through imagery

In the imagery for ‘Urs, a chain (silsila) is often shown. It can either be the family tree of the Wali, which usually links back to the Prophet, or it can be a spiritual link. This is often shown visually. The order of images tells us something about the lineage or status of the sponsors. Figure 3 above shows the order of the five shrines that depicts a chain of spiritual lineage: the first is Khana e Kaaba; the second is Roza e Rasool; the third is the shrine of Imam Hussain; the fourth is the shrine of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jillani; and the fifth is the shrine of Mard E Darwaish, Wali E Kamil, Sufi E Basafa Shaykh Qibla Pir Musanjaf Ali Sarkar (R.E), the Founder of Darbar E Aaliya Balawara Shareef. The name with multiple titles has been taken from the Facebook page of BalawaraShareef. The use of these titles is another way to establish credibility with the masses.

The second class of images we analysed were those of Eid Milad un Nabi which are discussed below:
The colour green is predominantly used in these ads. Green symbolizes Islam as it is the colour of the dome of Muhammad’s grave in Masjid e Nabi in Madina. There are variations in colour and design. The design of the dome may differ from the original design in Masjid e Nabi, as this is meant to be a representation and not the correct depiction.

Figure 4 source:
http://www.minhaj.net/images-db8/Milaad-un-Nabi-Mubarak-fb-poster_eng_20140103.jpg

Sometimes colours other than green are also used but in almost all of them, there is either some portion that is green or the green dome of the masjid e nabi is shown. One possible explanation for the many variations of these posters is the reason that these images when they reached the subcontinent, were not only produced and reproduced by Muslim artists and publishers but also by Hindu artists and publishers and as such, were influenced by the local Hindu poster art (Bhakal, 2012). This influence is more predominant in ‘Urs ads than in milad ads.

**Spiritual experiences and the cult of personality**

Sometimes, these events and the related imagery are used by political and religious groups to create a cult-like following. In the image above (figure 4), the green dome and white minaret are used by Dr. Tahir ul Qadri, the famous politico-religious leader in Pakistan, to congratulate the Muslims around the world on the occasion of the advent of the holy month of Rabi-ul-Awwal, which is the birth month of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The website of the organization and social media handles are also given. At the middle top of the ad is written, Ao keh sab huzoor(SAW) se ahd-e-Wafa karain (let’s all promise loyalty to Hazoor (SAW). (Huzoor (SAW) referring to Muhammad).

In the image on the left, the international Milad conference is advertised using the green dome and white minaret. Along with the event information, the personality of the famous cleric, Dr. Tahir ul Qadri, is also being promoted as being the one who has taken up the cause of the prophet (PBUH). Tahir ul Qadri is shown at the bottom left of the ad delivering a speech or lecture. He is wearing a white shalwar-kameez and his signature white headgear. On the upper right side, behind the green dome, a moon is visible among clouds; but when one looks deeply, it’s the name Muhammad in Arabic in the shape of a light cloud. In the upper
portion, the middle left side shows a red frame in which the sentence, “huzoor aap aye to dil jagmagaye” (huzoor when you come, our hearts shine). The large font on the left side balances the dome and minaret on the right. Followers of Tahir ul Qadri’s Minhaj organization claim that the word “Muhammad” in the clouds around the moon was seen by the gathering at a Milad conference right at the moment when Qadri was explaining the word, Muhammad. This is presented as a miracle. The video of that Miracle is available on YouTube (Khan, 2007).

In the YouTube video (Khan, 2007) a scene shows the word “Muhammad” formed by cloud formation around the moon during Tahir ul Qadri’s Milad Conference. A few moments before showing this scene, Dr. Tahir ul Qadri seems amazed at the scene when another person near his podium points him toward the miraculous scene in the sky. This is similar to the spiritual experiences reported by the followers of all religions. Such experiences are awe-inspiring and overwhelming for the ones experiencing them and the ad is an effective use of dramatization as an executonal framework. An example of such an experience can be spotted in Michelangelo’s The Conversion of Saul (Little, 2016). In the video, Tahir ul Qadri is shown in such a state.

**Classification of the ads**

Many scholars have worked on the subject of text-image classification (see for example Sarapik, 2009; Varga, 1989). Similarly, Barthes, (1966) was the pioneer in this regard and he proposed a framework to study this relationship (Bateman, 2014; Martinec & Salway, 2005). Our attempt to classify the ads of these events roughly matches Barthes Classification of Text-image relations. According to Barthes classification, the text and image can be related in ways that are either equal or unequal. Those which are related unequally can further be divided into whether the text amplifies the image and tells us what the image is (anchorage), or whether the image tells us what the text is (illustration). The classification is given below:
Figure 6: Barthes’ classification of text-image relationship. Adapted from John A. Bateman 2014.

The ads for Eid Milad un Nabi can easily be classified as a case of the relay in that the text and image contribute equally and if we remove either, the meaning of the whole will collapse (observe images, 4 and 5). In the case of the ‘Urs ads, the text is used to amplify the image (see for example Figure 1 ‘Urs Ghos ul Azam), so it can be classified as an example of anchorage. Similarly, in one ad for the ‘Urs of Ahmad Raza Khan, who is considered a Mujaddad, the ad announces the ‘urs of Mujaddad e Azam. In this case, Mujaddad e Azam (the great Mujaddad) can be any Mujaddad, but the zebra-patterned dome in the background tells us which Mujaddad is meant. That is an example of ‘illustration’. These classifications, however, can overlap as also observed by (Stöckl, 1997) who stated that anchorage in some form may always be present (Bateman, 2014)

**Explanations based on psychology**

Although we tried to explain these ads based on cultural and visual semiotic analysis, the field of psychology, especially the Attitude Model can be useful in explaining these ads more simply. According to the Attitude Model, there are three components of attitude i.e. Affective Component, the Behavioural Component, and the Cognitive component (Ajzen, 1989; Jain, 2014).

The cognitive component is related to the knowledge, understanding, and rational appeal part of the attitude. In the case of ‘Urs and Milad, there is little use of rational appeals. Rather the affective or liking component is focused more on showing the domes of the mausoleums of the saints or the prophet to evoke positive feelings. The Affective approach evokes feelings through the use of religious symbols (as anchors) as well as portrayals of the sponsors/organizers in a positive light to make them more likable. The Behavioural approach entails urging the audience to take immediate action.

Usually, the ads which use behavioural strategies i.e. which ask consumers to take immediate action, like the ones announcing a promotional scheme like a price off are more cluttered than the ones where other strategies are employed. The ads we studied are broadly based on Affective strategies but their Executional Framework is more like those of behavioural ads. This is probably because the product sold here is a cultural event and the sponsors want the audience to take immediate action i.e. attend the event. Another important observation is that ads showing celebrations are almost always cluttered and colourful. One exception is the use of dramatization as an executional framework employed in the Tahir ul Qadri ads and the related YouTube video.

**Limitations**

Symbols can be interpreted in a bizarre, speculative, and nonsensical way by the common audience. Advertisers should strive to minimize this by studying the meaning of symbols employed in their unique context (Akpan, Akpan, & Obukoadata, 2013). We have read deep into these images. One objection can be that these were the observations of a trained eye and that the ordinary audience does not see so deeply into the images. The answer to this can be given through the
Elaboration model (MacInnis and Price, 1987) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which suggest that a viewer can take two routes while processing a communication vehicle: one is the peripheral route where the viewer focuses on the peripheral elements like colour, scenery, model, and music, etc.; another is the central route where the audience processes the central message or content of the ad. Which route the viewer takes depends upon the motivation and ability of the audience. Since the target audience of these ads is generally the devotees of these Saints, they are more likely to be motivated and initiated into the symbolism and the philosophies these ads communicate. Tilson (2000, 2009) used the term “devotional–promotional communication” for such communications and has described such communications as fostering devotion to a religion or a religious personality (Sufi saints in South Asia). These communications inspire allegiance among the devotees. As a result, there is a high likelihood that the devotees have developed such a faith that they hardly give any rational thought to such messages (Tilson & Chao, 2009; Tilson, 2000).

As there is no agreed-upon conceptual framework for classifying these ads, any attempt will carry the risks of being absurd, incomplete, and arbitrary like the Chinese’ use of the celestial emporium of benevolent knowledge mentioned by Borges (Perneger, 2006).

This, however, should not stop us from trying to attempt such classifications as even one step forward in the right direction is still progress. Future researchers might be able to improve it in a few more steps. The use of machine learning and AI can also be helpful in the classification schemes as these techniques are proving more and more helpful in the classification area.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that the way images of ‘Urs and Milad are produced has some themes and patterns. These patterns can be discerned through visual analysis. The recurring themes in these communication devices are the use of religious symbols like domes of the shrines; the use of the pictures of the living religious personalities while avoiding the pictures of the prophet or his companions, imams, and saints; the use of typography, and establishing the credibility of the sponsors by employing a visual or textual link to the prophet and his family. We have found that these ads can easily be classified into three categories i.e. one, where the image is dominant, second, where text is dominant, and third where text and image are equally represented. This conforms to the previous classification attempts of word-and-image relationships starting with Barthes (1977).

All these ads are information-dense with some effort to establish the credibility of the sponsors. This is achieved through the use of symbolism and imagery which establish a link with the sacred.

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