




# Crisis Communication Strategy in the Face of Consumer Boycott: Exploring the Boycott Case of Israel-affiliated Companies and Brands

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**Abstract.** The Israel-Palestine conflict which has resulted in thousands of deaths gave birth to a social movement that encourages boycott, divestment, and sanctions against any companies and brands affiliated with Israel. The boycott, which is mainly spread around social media and organized by both humanitarian groups and individual internet users, has had real impacts on brands named and shamed as being in support or affiliated with Israel and its atrocities. The boycott has become its own kind of crisis faced by multiple companies and brands which, not only has caused actual impacts to sales, but also reputation and image. The purpose of this article is to discuss crisis communication strategy of dealing with consumer boycott amid the Israel-Palestine conflict by analyzing previous studies focusing on crisis communication and consumer boycott. A semi-systematic literature review is done to synthesize findings of multiple studies published within the last five years from various disciplines. This paper sums up that an appropriate crisis communication strategy needs to consider three main aspects: who the communicator is, how the message is framed, and what media is used to deliver it to the public. While communicators can be either the company itself or opinion leaders, the message needs to convey a sense of openness, honesty, and transparency. Furthermore, social media can serve as the main channel to deliver the messages as the current consumer boycott campaign is mainly active on social media.

**Keywords:** *communication crisis strategy, consumer boycott, israel-palestine conflict*

## 1 Introduction

The Israel-Palestine conflict is entering a new level of atrocity after the siege of Gaza where thousands of Palestinians were killed. The genocide has caused an uproar which kickstarted a movement against Israel as an act of solidarity and empathy with Palestine. Boycott campaigns are launched to protest the occupation of Gaza City by Israel and the genocide against Palestinians. This act of boycott is supported by many international communities, including the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia), which has released a fatwa condemning the aggression of Israel towards Palestine and urging Muslims to avoid buying and using products affiliated with Israel [1].

The widespread use of social media makes it easier for boycott campaigns against Israel-affiliated products to be shared around. This act of solidarity for the Palestinians has developed into a digital social movement with intense pressure to boycott any Israel-affiliated products and financial help for the Palestinians. According to Ulya Ayu [2], social media is currently the main channel to send boycott messages against Israel by humanitarian movements like BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions). Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have effectively aided in amplifying the movement online. The emergence of hashtags such as #BoycottIsrael and #FreePalestine become the manifestation of how global the movement is online, making social media a powerful tool for social advocacy through influencing public opinions and forming public decisions.

The boycott movement is especially impactful in affecting purchasing behavior. The price and quality are no longer the only aspects that influence a customer's decision to buy a product. The company or brand's stance on social, cultural, religious, or moral issues has also affected consumer behavior. Nowadays, consumers also look at online opinions before they purchase a product. Social media is no longer a space to interact with other people, but also a platform that fosters social movement, shifts public opinion, and significantly influences consumer behavior and attitude. The current boycott campaign against Israel-affiliated brands and companies shows a real impact on the national economy. According to a report by BBC, it is reported that the total number of retail product sales has decreased 40% and impacted various sectors from baby formula, food and beverages to cosmetics. This decrease may potentially increase the number of employment terminations [3].

The boycott also impacts million dollars private equity, such as General Atlantic and CVC, which has lowered their market share value and disturbed the American fast-food market in Indonesia. While many of these local franchise companies argue that their business has no direct relation to the global company, it has not stopped people from refusing to buy their products [3]. Among the companies impacted by the boycott are Unilever Indonesia and McDonald's Indonesia as their global brand is closely affiliated to Israel. Unilever Indonesia market share value reached its highest peak on October 25th, 2023. While there were several small increases in November 2023, it has since continued to drop from Rp. 3.620 in October 2023, Rp. 3.590 in November 2023, to Rp. 2.560 in May 2024 [4]. While Unilever Indonesia confirms that the decrease is due to the company's financial performance, it should not be neglected that the boycott has damaged the company's image [4]. A similar circumstance also affects McDonald's as its sales and market share value keep dwindling. McDonald's share value has significantly dropped to -3,36 points or 1,3% five days before any signs of trade and inventory downturn. McDonald's overall share value is USD 254,54 while its total market share value is only USD 257,24 [5]. Starbucks, one of the brands reported to have affiliation with Israel, is currently suffering from high sales losses of up to Rp. 155,02 billion [6].

Consumer boycott not only impacts the financial aspect of a company or a brand, but also may directly damage its image and reputation. Companies affected by the boycott are facing a tough challenge to rehabilitate their image and rebuild their reputations. Thus, an appropriate crisis communication strategy is a must. Communication crisis

strategy is defined as a series of communication approaches employed to handle a crisis that may damage the image and reputation of a company. Identifying and understanding the root cause of the crisis is crucial in designing the most effective communication strategy and response. A fast and open reaction may allow the company to handle the flow of information and keep the narrative from going out of control. Messages shall be delivered comprehensively and appropriately to the consumer transparently and honestly [7].

The purpose of this article is to explore the crisis communication strategy that can be implemented by companies affected by the Israel-affiliated boycott. The various negative impacts received by companies that are considered Pro-Israel in Indonesia make researchers want to know how the crisis communication strategies carried out by these companies in dealing with the boycott issue that is currently floating. This research is important because it provides insight into how the boycott product companies can survive and minimize and overcome the negative impacts that arise during the boycott issue. Numerous previous studies have explored consumer's motivation in getting involved with a boycott movement and how companies deal with the negative impact of being the target of a boycott. Through a literature review of studies conducted in the last five years, this article will hopefully provide insight into how a company can minimize and overcome the impact that arises amid a consumer boycott.

## 2 Method

This article is a conceptual paper about communication crisis strategy in facing consumer boycott. Literature review is chosen as the methodology as this article aims to understand previous research regarding communication crisis and consumer boycott by collecting, interpreting, explaining, and combining existing literature [8]. This article is a semi-systematic review, which is a literature review approach used for a topic that includes previous multidisciplinary studies to find themes, theoretical perspectives, and similarities in a problem [9]. As studies related to crisis communication strategy and boycott are abundant, this article only uses previous research conducted within the last five years to make sure the studies are still relevant to current issues.

Snyder [9] summarizes the process of doing a literature review into four main stages: (1) designing the literature review; (2) conducting the literature review; (3) analyzing the literature review, and; (4) writing the literature review. The initial stage is initiated by determining the literature review design while considering the research question and contribution. Communication crisis strategy in the face of consumer boycott for Israel-affiliated brands is chosen as the problem as it is relevant to the current ongoing solidarity movement for the Palestinian people under Israel's regime. Search terms and databases are determined to find previous studies most appropriate to the problem. Two keywords used for this literature review are 'crisis communication strategy' and

'consumer boycott'. As this article uses a semi-systematic review, studies from various disciplines are used as the foundation. Scientific journals aggregator sites, such as Google Scholar, Science Direct, and Garuda, were used as the databases.

The second stage of the literature review began by reading abstracts of previous studies relevant to crisis communication strategy and consumer boycotts. Several titles were eliminated as they were deemed irrelevant to the problem. The next step is to analyze selected studies by reading the full article. A descriptive table consisting of the author's name, journal publications, published year, and research findings is created to help the reading process. The literature review process is finalized by writing the review. It contains a synthesis of various past studies' findings about crisis communication strategy as a response to consumer boycott campaign.

### 3 Result and Discussion

Coombs defines a crisis as an event or events that occur unexpectedly and affect the organization negatively [10]. Handling crisis is important as it will potentially impact public perception of the company or brand. Furthermore, it hinges on the company's survival as the crisis impact will threaten and bring about losses. A crisis could ruin the reputation and image of a company or brand. Therefore, it is important to understand how to analyze and design a crisis strategy to avoid further damage.

Timothy L Sellnow and Matthew W Seeger also explained that a crisis is a special event that usually requires immediate action or response from an organization or group to limit damages [11]. The negative impact of a crisis means that companies or brands are required to act swiftly and appropriately in handling it, contain the damage before it spreads further, and eventually return to normal. While a crisis is not necessarily always catastrophic, it will leave reputational, financial, and operational damages if it is not dealt with as soon as possible [11].

Technological advancement and social media have created a new landscape in the context of crisis and organization. The vast and widespread nature of social media makes it a double-edged sword as information can flow everywhere. It is especially obvious in Indonesia where social media has become ubiquitous, making it easier to communicate with anyone from anywhere at any time. Based on the data from Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, the number of internet users in Indonesia have reached 63 million people with 95% of them mainly use it to access social media.

Lucinda and Jinn explain that social media in relation to crisis communication can create opportunities and challenges different from the previous era [12]. Related to this change, the crisis communication landscape is related to two important things. Apart from being able to build reputation, the presence of social media can also adversely affect company's reputation [10]. Several studies explain how social media has a negative effect on reputation. Wright and Hinson explain that the presence of social media can make communication fast and effective, which then gives room for negative communication to take place quickly [13]. Thus, the presence of social media allows crises to emerge and spread faster than before.

The advantages of social media as a platform capable of disseminating information can basically be used by companies or brands to handle crises and straighten out circulating information. However, in some situations, negative information circulates massively and is received by the public in a short time. This then creates a potential crisis where the information circulating can have an impact on the image and reputation [14].

Meanwhile, other studies explain that social media influences radical changes that shift the communication process between companies and the public. With social media, the public can express themselves, influence opinions, and even pressure decision makers. Even social media has a very strong influence in various protests in the world. The intense interaction process of social media users will multiply the effect of a potential crisis that occurs [15].

#### 3.1 The Importance of Communicator in Crisis Communication Strategy in Facing Consumer Boycott

Communicators are a crucial aspect in crisis communication strategies, especially on the issue of consumer boycotts related to humanitarian reasons, such as the genocide committed by Israel against the Palestinian population. Consumer boycotts in this context focus on whether the position and vision of companies and brands are in accordance with the moral foundations of their consumers [16], [17], [18]. One of the efforts that companies must make as communicators is to minimize the impact of the boycott crisis by taking over the stage before the crisis gets worse. In this case the company must be able to understand how the public interprets the situation. Companies are also expected to have valid arguments against the public perception that triggered the boycott [19].

In other words, communicators must be able to detect signs of crisis quickly, determine which channel the crisis first appears in, and control the narrative [20]. The principle of open communication must always be held to ensure that the narrative is not only well controlled, but the company as a communicator continues to connect in two directions with stakeholders [21]. This open communication implies that in crisis management the company can pay attention to the public. This shows how the company uses its public engagement and loyalty strategy in maintaining the company's reputation [22]. The crisis may cause various effects. In relation to the boycott, it has impacted how the media covered the company with negative publicity. Therefore, it is important for the company to be able to manage the company's reputation proactively. This proactive action can be in the form of communication transparency as an effort to rebuild public trust [23].

One of the things that companies can do in building public trust is to fulfill the social responsibility expected from the public for the company. This can provide benefits for companies in maintaining the company's reputation by carrying out various CSR activities such as improving public policy, making donations, or taking responsibility for various losses incurred [24]. What the company does through CSR activities is expected to provide an understanding for the public about the company's positive values.

In cases where the company is proven to have made a mistake and caused a crisis to occur, the company is required to take a firm stance. After the crisis is identified, the company through its spokesperson is expected to be able to take moral responsibility by apologizing in a timely manner with sincerity. This is being done as a first step in rebuilding the company's positive image and value. In addition, this apology also makes it clear that the company is responsible for the crisis and can take practical action to overcome negative perceptions from the public [25].

Although previous research found that opinion leaders have no direct influence on consumer's boycott intention, they may indirectly influence them through consumer ethnocentrism which pushes for a boycott action [26]. Thus, the communicator in the case of consumer boycott can not only be held by the company affected, but also given to opinion leaders. Utilizing resources from opinion leaders can be an option for communicators in designing crisis communication strategies to deal with consumer boycotts, such as influencers, religious leaders, and public figures [10], [21].

The presence of opinion leaders as one of the crisis communication strategies is carried out as an effort to effectively gain public support regarding the boycott that occurred. Companies can use opinion leaders from various circles, such as celebrities. Trustworthy celebrities are then expected to be able to create a social situation that supports the company. That way the presence of celebrities as opinion leaders can minimize the crisis that occurs due to public boycotts [27]. Apart from celebrities, religious figures are also the choice of many affected companies in conveying the company's positive message amid the issue of boycotting Israeli products. Religious figures are considered capable of overcoming the negative sentiment of the Muslim community towards pro-Israel products. Religious figures provide major changes to society's conditions and guide the public's action [28].

### **3.2 Sending the Right Message as A Crisis Communication Strategy in Facing Consumer Boycott**

The consumer boycott movement of brands and companies affiliated with Israel is, at its core, based on the conflicting views between consumers and companies or brands regarding ethics and morality [16], [17]. This clashing point-of-view can be driven by consumer's solidarity with groups or places perceived to be disadvantaged in a socio-political conflict [29], [30]. Additionally, consumers may also assume that brands or companies are not taking the conflict seriously [17].

A collective pressure from consumers will be put on them if their stance is not clarified immediately, which exacerbates the crisis [16]. In facing a crisis due to boycotts, companies and brands need to be prepared with the most appropriate plans. Enough information regarding the root cause of the boycott needs to be fully understood before making the right decision, which may further minimize the impact of the boycott [19]. Messages delivered in response to a crisis caused by a consumer boycott movement must be designed to prevent further damage to the company or brand. The company needs to clarify and strengthen its position on a socio-political issue that is the source of the boycott [21]. Messages that clarify the position of the companies or brands need to be done first as an official statement to consumers, as done by McDonald's Indonesia and Unilever [4], [7].

The message needs to be framed with a point of view that upholds inclusiveness, diversity, and has a positive tone [17] without neglecting honesty, truth, and openness [5], [20]. In addition, companies also need to carefully package the messages conveyed to the public regarding the crisis that occurred due to the boycott. The message must be ensured that it is not related or overlapping with other issues happening in the social environment such as political issues [25]. This is because the company's position when a crisis occurs becomes the center of attention for the public at large.

Companies and brands can implement an ethical organizational culture as a form of corporate responsibility in response to a boycott. In this case, companies can carry out sales promotions such as discounts, free product delivery, and refunds to be a possible effective strategy in maintaining customer loyalty and as an effort to reduce company losses [24]. However, in the case of boycotts of Israeli-affiliated companies, it is not caused by negative public experiences or poor product quality. The crisis occurred

because the public was dissatisfied with the company's ideology and position on controversial social issues.

Therefore, in formulating messages, companies need to clearly understand how the public views the issue and what shapes the public's perspective on the boycott. If the message conveyed is appropriate, it will benefit the company in shifting public perception. This way, consumers will feel recognized and remain loyal to them [27]. Highlighting the actions that the brand or company has taken as a form of support for the position taken will make the message easier for consumers to accept. It can be done effectively by sending a message that highlights corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices to the public[24], [31] involvement in humanitarian assistance, and donations to trusted agencies [7].

### **3.3 The Role of Media in Crisis Communication Strategy in Facing Consumer Boycott**

In an era where social media has become one of the main communication channels, companies and brands need to understand how stakeholders use social media in the context of a crisis. The speed of information dissemination on social media makes it easier for certain parties to lead opinions, especially in the context of consumer boycott issues related to Israel's genocide against the Palestinian population [32]. The BDS Movement's campaign utilizes social media to spread boycott messages, call for divestment and sanctions against Israel, and encourage digital vigilantism against individuals, companies and brands that still support Israel [18].

A deep understanding of how information spreads quickly on social media will help minimize the negative impact of the crisis and provide opportunities for companies and brands affected by the crisis to control the narrative well [20]. Efforts to control the narrative can be made by creating content on social media platforms from where the source of the crisis originated. McDonald's Indonesia, one of the brands affected by the crisis from the consumer boycott, used Instagram to clarify their stance and express their concern of the Israel-Palestine conflict through social media content [7].

In the case of the Unilever crisis, the company's website and social media were used as messaging channels to maintain the brand image amid consumer boycotts [4]. The speed and timeliness of using social media channels also requires careful planning, such as the timing of using hashtag campaigns and the timing of uploading informative social media content about the position and views of the company or brand [21], [33]. In addition, companies can also utilize e-Word of Mouth (WOM) in handling crises on social media. The rapid spread of information by word of mouth via the internet can be utilized as a strategy in disseminating information to the public. However, companies also need to pay attention to the source, quantity and quality of e-WOM so that the strategy carried out is in accordance with the conditions of the crisis that occurred [25]. Overall, the crisis communication strategy in dealing with consumer boycott amid social issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict can be summed up into this table below:



**Table 1.** Crisis Communication Strategy in Facing Consumer Boycott

Communication Aspect	Implementation	Strategy
Communicator	Company Brand Opinion Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detecting signs of crisis to control the narrative</li> <li>• Allowing two-way communication with the consumer and the public</li> <li>• Representing the company's committed action to social advocacy and responsibility</li> </ul>
Message	Clarification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The message should firmly, clearly, and concisely express the company's stance on the current social issues and where they position themselves</li> </ul>
	Statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The message should convey a sense of understanding and empathy towards individuals and groups affected by the social issues</li> </ul>
	Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The message should highlight what actions the company has taken to represent their stance on social issues.</li> </ul>
Media	Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding how information is spread around on social media and who is the main actor in disseminating the information.</li> <li>• Controlling the narrative by responding fast and clearly.</li> <li>• Using hashtag campaigns and timing to properly address the issue at the right moment.</li> <li>• Utilizing social media platforms (Instagram, Twitter, etc.) and company websites to deliver official statements.</li> </ul>

Source: Literature Review Analysis

## 4 Conclusion

Consumer boycotts of Israeli-affiliated brands and companies are essentially about the conflicting views of consumers and companies or brands on ethics and morality. In response, the public widely boycotted several companies in Indonesia. This boycott action is increasingly echoed along with the issuance of the MUI Fatwa which supports boycotts through social media. This has certainly caused losses for several Indonesian companies as the boycott action takes place. Behind the economic impact received, the company is also dealing with the image and reputation that is at stake. In this case, social media can make communication fast and effective, which gives space to negative communication which also takes place quickly. Social media that allows the process of intense interaction from its users then has a multiplier effect on the potential crisis that occurs in companies affected by boycotts.

In overcoming the crisis that occurred due to the boycott, there were several communication strategies carried out by the company to minimize the impact of the crisis at large. In this regard, communicators, message content, and media become an important part in developing crisis communication strategies. Communicators are an important part of the crisis communication strategy formulated by the company regarding the boycott. One thing that needs to be done is how the company as a communicator can minimize the impact of the crisis on the boycott action carried out by responding to issues that develop quickly before it develops worse. In this case the company must be able to understand how the public interprets the situation that is happening. The company is also expected to be able to have valid arguments to explain the public's interpretation of the boycott. In this regard, open communication is one of the keys that needs to be observed by the company to ensure that the message is conveyed properly, but also the company as a communicator can establish two-way communication with stakeholders.

Meanwhile, regarding the messages conveyed in crisis communication, companies need to plan messages in such a way as to prevent the crisis from developing more widely. In this case, the company must also be able to clarify its position on a socio-political issue that is the source of boycott actions. In addition, the messages conveyed also need to be framed in a perspective that emphasizes inclusiveness, diversity, and positive tendencies while still paying attention to honesty and openness. Regarding the media used in the company's communication strategy, it must be able to have a thorough understanding of the characteristics of social media. In this case, social media is an effective medium in helping to reduce the negative impact of the crisis that occurred to then provide benefits for the company in controlling and overcoming the crisis that occurred.

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