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Corporate Reputation and Religious Fatwas: An Examination of Unilever Indonesia's Public Statements

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ABSTRACT

The reputational crisis facing multinational corporations in Indonesia following MUI Fatwa No. 83 of 2023 represents a complex ideological challenge. This research analyzes the significant boycott pressures experienced by PT Unilever Indonesia Tbk, triggered by perceived geopolitical affiliations regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict. Utilizing qualitative content analysis grounded in Image Restoration Theory, this study examines how defensive narratives were constructed in official press releases to sustain brand resilience. The findings indicate that Unilever implemented strategic communication patterns centered on localization, specifically emphasizing local ownership, domestic operations, and halal certification. Furthermore, the company utilized transcendence strategies by highlighting its commitment to humanitarian aid in Gaza through official agencies. Theoretically, crisis communication effectiveness in religious markets depends heavily on aligning corporate narratives with the legitimacy of local religious authorities. This article serves as a practical guide for Public Relations practitioners in navigating sociopolitical crises while maintaining corporate legitimacy.

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Introduction

The escalation of the reputational crisis encountered by multinational business entities in Indonesia is inextricably linked to the issuance of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) Fatwa Number 83 of 2023 concerning the Law on Support for the Palestinian Struggle. This decree by the religious authority is perceived as a unique catalyst through which international geopolitical issues were transformed into a moral and religious obligation binding for the majority of Muslim consumers [1]. Through this fatwa, all forms of support for the aggression in Gaza were explicitly categorized as actions contravening Sharia principles; simultaneously, the avoidance of products perceived to be affiliated with supporters of said aggression was recommended [2]. Consequently, market dynamics are no longer driven merely by political solidarity but are situated within a framework of spiritual conviction, in which consumption activities are linked to an individual's integrity of faith [3].

Under these socio-religious conditions, PT Unilever Indonesia Tbk has been placed in a profound identity dilemma, where a severe clash is identified between global corporate structures and domestic value expectations. Although the national management has repeatedly affirmed operational independence and a focus on the local market, collective public perception remains anchored in a symbolic attachment to the corporate policies of the central entity at the international level [4]. The tangible impact on the domestic trade ecosystem has been reported through a drastic decline in net profit and revenue, which is concluded to be a direct result of the massive collapse of consumer loyalty [5, 6]. This reality provides evidence that the legitimacy of multinational corporations in the Indonesian market is highly dependent on the success of synchronizing brand identity with local moral norms.

A gap in the current crisis communication literature is identified through the dominance of studies fixated on technical-functional failures, such as production defects or operational service deficits [7, 8]. Conversely, investigations into ideology-based crises escalated by the mandates of religious institutions are still categorized as rare within the discipline of Public Relations [9]. This research is designed to close that gap by analyzing the construction of defensive narratives through a library research approach as an instrument for maintaining brand resilience. Through the classification of the applied message patterns, the process of narrative transition from the realm of global political contention toward the realms of humanitarian contribution and alignment with local values is systematically mapped to formulate an adaptive crisis communication framework [10, 11].

Literature Review

A. Situational Crisis Communication Theory

In the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the severity of a reputational threat is found to be contingent upon the attribution of responsibility assigned by

stakeholders. Crises are categorized into specific clusters to evaluate the extent of an organization's perceived culpability in a given event [7]. In scenarios triggered by external factors such as geopolitical rumors or ideological challenges, organizations are typically positioned within the Victim Cluster. In this cluster, crisis responsibility is deemed minimal as the events are perceived to be beyond the organization's direct control [8].

Effective communication management within this theory is analyzed not merely as a technical procedure, but as a strategic effort to shape public perception. Defensive messaging is utilized to mitigate the link between reputational threats and negative stakeholder emotions. Consequently, the selection of defensive narratives in SCCT is centered on articulating the organization's status as an innocent party impacted by external informational disruptions rather than internal failures [12].

B. Image Restoration Theory

The recovery of corporate image following a crisis is examined through the typology of strategies within Image Restoration Theory (IRT). This theory posits that communication is deliberately employed by organizational actors to reconstruct threatened legitimacy [13]. A primary strategy, Bolstering, is implemented to highlight the organization's positive attributes or past achievements, such as localized ownership and ethical certifications, to counterbalance current negative perceptions.

Parallel to this, the strategy of Transcendence is applied by reframing the crisis within a broader, higher-order humanitarian context. Furthermore, Differentiation is often employed to distinguish local operational entities from the controversial policies of global parent corporations [14]. Through these systematic strategies, a reality distorted by crisis is reconstructed via official discourses to restore public trust and institutional credibility [15].

C. Brand Resilience and Localization in Global Sociopolitical Crises

Brand resilience is defined as a brand's capacity to maintain its market position and recover from severe external shocks. In the dynamics of global sociopolitics, resilience is derived from the perceived consistency of brand values and the ability to adapt to local sentiments [16]. The emotional bond between brand identity and personal consumer values is scrutinized during ideological conflicts, forcing a critical re-evaluation of brand loyalty.

Establishing a reputational "shield" against ideological boycotts is often achieved through localization strategies, which emphasize domestic identity and sustainable social contributions. Ultimately, brand resilience is identified as the outcome of adaptive communication strategies that preserve emotional connections with stakeholders amidst value polarization [17]. Resilience is thus understood as the result of successful synchronization between corporate actions and effectively communicated value perceptions [18].

Material and Methods

A qualitative descriptive approach is applied in this research by utilizing the library research method as the primary instrument for data collection. Various credible information sources are systematically gathered, encompassing textbook literature, reputable academic journals, industry reports, and other digital references that maintain relevance to the dynamics of crisis communication [19]. The primary data in this study are focused on official documents in the form of press releases from the digital newsroom of PT Unilever Indonesia Tbk, while secondary data are obtained through the analysis of various journal articles and online mass media coverage documenting the phenomenon of ideological boycotts from 2023 to 2024.

The data analysis process is conducted by integrating qualitative content analysis techniques to explore narrative patterns within corporate diplomatic texts. The research stages are initiated with the reduction of data from the various literature sources gathered, followed by the categorization of themes based on theoretically established crisis communication strategies. An in-depth interpretation is performed on text units to understand how the framing of reality is constructed by the organization to confront sociopolitical pressures and religious mandates. The validity of the findings is guaranteed through the triangulation of data sources, allowing for a comprehensive synthesis between corporate policies, religious authority mandates, and market reactions within the volatile economic landscape of Indonesia. To enhance methodological transparency, the following table summarizes the data sources, number of sources, and key findings derived from each category of data utilized in this study.

Table 1. Summary of Sources and Key Findings [2], [5]-[7], [13], [19]-[21]

No.	Data Source	Number of Sources	Key Findings / Description
1	Official Press Releases – PT Unilever Indonesia Tbk Newsroom (2023–2024)	6 press releases	Identified three dominant narrative strategies: localization (bolstering), Halal compliance (diminishment), and humanitarian aid (transcendence) as crisis response instruments.
2	Peer-reviewed academic journals (Scopus / WoS indexed, 2020–2024)	22 journal articles	Provided theoretical grounding in SCCT, IRT, brand resilience, halal legitimacy, and boycott behavior in Muslim-majority markets.
3	Books and academic monographs on crisis communication and corporate PR	5 books	Underpinned the theoretical framework of SCCT (Coombs), IRT (Benoit), and corporate communication strategy (Cornelissen).
4	MUI official fatwa documents and annual reports	3 documents	Established the socio-religious crisis context; confirmed financial impact (10.5% net profit decline) and recovery trends in 2024.
5	Reputable digital media reports (CNBC Indonesia, CNN Indonesia, industry analyses)	4 news sources	Triangulated corporate data with public market reactions, stock performance, and media framing of the boycott phenomenon.

Results and Discussions

A. Integrative Analysis: Unilever's Crisis Response within the SCCT Framework

In navigating the public backlash following the issuance of MUI Fatwa No. 83 of 2023, Unilever Indonesia strategically leveraged SCCT by framing the crisis within the "Victim Cluster." The company proactively engaged in reputational capital building through a bolstering strategy, as evidenced by their official stance:

> *"As an entity that has been part of Indonesia's daily life for over 90 years, we wish to reaffirm that our operations in Indonesia are managed independently by a local workforce"* [20].

According to Coombs [7], this is a critical maneuver for crises with low-level attribution of responsibility, as it allows the firm to lean on its "reputational equity" to dampen negative sentiment before it hardens into a permanent consumer boycott.

Furthermore, the company reinforced its defensive position through a diminishing strategy, emphasizing its adherence to domestic norms:

> *"Our products in Indonesia have obtained Halal certification from the authorized body, and we consistently operate in compliance with the values and regulations prevailing in Indonesia"* [20].

By invoking the authority of a third party (MUI), Unilever effectively utilized an excusing tactic to decouple its local operations from its global parent company's geopolitical associations. From an SCCT perspective, this successfully pivoted the discourse from an emotionally charged "global ideological conflict" to a rationalized "operational and normative compliance" framework, thereby protecting the brand's integrity through institutional legitimacy.

A deeper examination through the SCCT framework reveals that Unilever Indonesia's communication strategy was not merely reactive but constituted a sophisticated multi-layered response aligned with what Coombs [23] describes as protective crisis communication, wherein organizations operating in victim-cluster crises must simultaneously manage both emotional and cognitive dimensions of stakeholder perception. The theory explicitly posits that in crises where organizational responsibility is perceived as low, such as those triggered by external ideological forces rather than internal operational failures, the most effective response combines bolstering with adjusting information to demonstrate institutional empathy [7]. Unilever's repeated affirmation of local employment, domestic tax contributions, and compliance with national regulatory frameworks directly addresses this prescriptive dimension of SCCT, constructing a credibility architecture that operates independently of global parent-company controversies [22].

This case also demonstrates the intersection of SCCT with what Claeys and Opgenhaffen [12] identify as practitioner-driven adaptation, whereby crisis managers strategically modify theoretical prescriptions to fit culturally specific stakeholder expectations. In Indonesia's

socio-religious context, where moral authority resides partly within institutions such as MUI, the discursive alignment between corporate communication and religious institutional legitimacy becomes a critical variable absent from the original SCCT model. Research by Dominic et al. [24] confirms that the credibility of the information source, particularly when aligned with socially revered institutions, significantly moderates the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. Unilever's deliberate citation of MUI halal certification in its press releases therefore served not only as a technical compliance statement, but as a symbolic act of institutional deference that resonated with the deeply held values of Muslim consumers in Indonesia [3].

Furthermore, the role of consumer boycotts as a mechanism of value-driven market behavior adds a distinctive layer of complexity to the SCCT analytical framework. Games and Sari [25] demonstrate that young Indonesian Muslim consumers are primarily motivated by religiously internalized moral obligations rather than purely political sentiments when engaging in boycott behavior. This finding suggests that Unilever's SCCT-aligned communication, while effective in addressing surface-level reputational threats, also needed to penetrate the deeper motivational architecture of religious consumerism. The company's emphasis on halal certification and its longstanding contribution to Indonesia's national economic fabric effectively addressed this dimension, reframing the boycott dilemma from a question of global corporate affiliation to one of domestic partnership and shared spiritual values [20], [26].

The integrative synthesis of SCCT and culturally contextual stakeholder management aligns with findings by Hirschfeld and Thielsch [27], who demonstrate that the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies is significantly moderated by the cultural and institutional context within which they are deployed. In the Indonesian case, the fatwa-driven crisis created a unique communicative environment where conventional SCCT prescriptions required adaptation to accommodate the authority of religious jurisprudence as a stakeholder influence mechanism. Pradhipta et al. [9] similarly confirm that crisis communication strategies in markets with strong religious consumer identities must explicitly acknowledge and validate the moral framework of the target audience to achieve reputational recovery. The systemic and culturally sensitive press release strategy deployed by Unilever thus represents a notable practical elaboration of SCCT principles in a non-Western socio-religious market context [28].

B. Image Restoration through IRT

Once the situational positioning was established, Unilever transitioned to IRT to undertake substantive image restoration. The company implemented a corrective action tactic, articulated as:

> *"We are deeply concerned and saddened by the conflict in the Middle East, and as a tangible form of our commitment, we have provided humanitarian aid to those affected in Gaza"* [20].

As Benoit [13] argues, corrective action is the cornerstone of IRT, it requires the organization to move beyond mere rhetoric and perform material deeds to address the underlying grievance.

This humanitarian effort served as empirical evidence of the company's moral alignment with the aspirations of the Indonesian public [14]. Beyond corrective measures, the company employed a transcendence strategy, reframing the Gaza relief efforts within the broader context of universal humanitarian values. By linking the brand's local existence to its capacity to support these global humanitarian missions, Unilever fostered a strong emotional resonance, suggesting that supporting the brand is indirectly linked to supporting those in need [15]. Through this blend of localized empowerment and tangible international aid, the firm demonstrated a comprehensive remedial effort that effectively rebuilt legitimacy among a public highly sensitive to issues of solidarity.

A critical theoretical insight from IRT is that the perceived sincerity of corrective action is a stronger determinant of image recovery than the scale of the action itself. Benoit [13] emphasizes that audiences evaluate not merely what an organization does, but the authenticity with which it presents its remedial efforts, particularly when the crisis has activated deeply personal or morally-charged stakeholder sentiments. In Unilever Indonesia's case, the company's partnership with *Lembaga Amil Zakat Nasional* (LAZNAS) for channeling humanitarian aid to Gaza operationalized this principle effectively, as the selection of a domestically trusted, religiously recognized institution to administer relief funds served as a third-party validation mechanism that amplified the perceived sincerity of the corrective action. Amani [29] confirms that in Islamic market contexts, the mediation of credible religious institutions in corporate social initiatives substantially strengthens the perception of brand ethical integrity among Muslim consumers.

The differentiation strategy within IRT also merits deeper analytical attention in this case. Benoit and Pang [14] observe that differentiation is most effective when organizations can draw unambiguous distinctions between themselves and the entity or action being criticized. Unilever Indonesia's press communications systematically positioned the Indonesian subsidiary as an operationally autonomous entity with distinct local governance, a locally listed public company (Tbk) with Indonesian shareholders, and a workforce composed predominantly of Indonesian nationals. This communicative construction of distinction served to interrupt the psychological association between the Indonesian brand and the perceived geopolitical controversies of the multinational's global parent. Such an approach is substantiated by findings from Cornelissen [22], who argues that effective corporate

communication during crisis conditions requires the deliberate management of stakeholder mental models regarding corporate identity boundaries.

The intersection of IRT with halal brand legitimacy theory further illuminates the strategic sophistication of Unilever's approach. Kartasasmita and Kurniawati [30] establish that in the Indonesian halal cosmetics and consumer goods market, perceived brand ethical behavior is the primary driver of brand legitimacy among Muslim consumers, with Halal certification functioning as the most salient institutional signal of ethical alignment. Unilever's systematic incorporation of halal certification references across multiple press releases thus functioned simultaneously as an IRT bolstering strategy and as a brand legitimacy reinforcement mechanism, creating a synergistic communicative effect that exceeded what either framework alone would predict. This dual-function use of certification disclosure represents an innovative application of IRT principles to the specific institutional dynamics of religiously regulated consumer markets [25], [29].

Taken together, the IRT analysis of Unilever Indonesia's crisis communication reveals a company that not only applied image restoration strategies with technical competence but also demonstrated a sophisticated cultural calibration of those strategies to the specific moral ecology of Indonesia's Muslim consumer market. The scholarly synthesis of image repair discourse with halal brand legitimacy theory and religious consumer behavior research, as evidenced in this case, advances the academic understanding of how IRT operates in ideologically charged, non-Western market environments. These insights carry direct implications for public relations practitioners operating in similar socio-religious contexts, where conventional crisis management templates must be adapted to respect the authority of religious institutions as co-constructors of corporate legitimacy [28], [15].

C. Strategic Implications and Brand Resilience

The defensive narrative strategy orchestrated by Unilever Indonesia following the issuance of MUI Fatwa No. 83 of 2023 was not merely a reactive measure, but a calculated recalibration of the brand's public identity. Analysis of the company's official communications reveals a sophisticated pivot toward "Local Contextualization." Rather than engaging in the polarizing geopolitical debate, the narrative was steered toward Unilever's deep-rooted history in the Indonesian social fabric, emphasizing its 90-year presence and its status as a publicly-listed entity (Tbk) primarily driven by local talent and domestic shareholders [21]. This strategic "decoupling" of the local subsidiary from its global parent's perceived political affiliations served as a rhetorical shield, effectively insulating the brand from external ideological shocks [22].

The resilience of the brand became empirically evident as the company navigated the fiscal turbulence of late 2023. While the boycott's immediate impact was reflected in a 10.5%

contraction in full-year net profit totaling Rp4.8 trillion, the underlying strength of the operation remained intact, with gross profit margins stabilizing at a robust 49.7% [5]. This recovery trend in early 2024 suggests that the defensive narrative succeeded in bridging the gap between corporate operations and the moral expectations of the consumer base. The restoration of sales volume in core categories coincided precisely with a heightened frequency of press releases focusing on Sharia compliance (Halal certification) and transparent humanitarian contributions to Gaza through reputable domestic channels.

Ultimately, the impact of these communicative efforts extended beyond consumer trust, manifesting in the stabilization of the company's valuation on the Indonesia Stock Exchange (IDX). After a period of heightened volatility and sell-offs in the final months of 2023, the authoritative tone of the official press releases provided a necessary "anchor" for investor confidence [6]. By repositioning the brand from a "global multinational" to a "national asset," Unilever Indonesia demonstrated that brand resilience in a polarized era is not just about financial performance, but about the strategic management of legitimacy. This case confirms that in high-stakes ideological crises, the press release remains a potent tool for narrative control, allowing a corporation to reclaim its identity and ensure long-term business continuity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Unilever Indonesia's success in maintaining brand resilience amidst the intense boycott pressure following the 2023 MUI Fatwa No. 83 lies primarily in its strategic use of press releases as a defensive instrument. By integrating SCCT and IRT, the company effectively constructed a narrative that did more than merely issue denials; it proactively redefined its corporate identity, shifting from a controversial global conglomerate to an empathetic local partner deeply rooted in domestic compliance. Through these carefully curated press releases, Unilever established a necessary "reputational buffer." By amplifying its 90-year history of local operations (bolstering) alongside tangible corrective actions, such as humanitarian aid for Gaza (corrective action), the company successfully navigated a volatile environment and neutralized much of the initial public animosity.

This research also demonstrates that an organization's ability to align its defensive narratives with the moral values and aspirations of the local community is a defining factor in its long-term survival. The effectiveness of this crisis communication strategy is evidenced by the relative stability of Unilever's market penetration in the general trade sector and its ability to weather the financial storm despite the pervasive boycott sentiment. Ultimately, this research highlights that in an era of hyper-sensitive geopolitics, press releases are far more than mere information channels. When crafted with strategic intent, they serve as vital communication tools capable of mitigating reputational erosion, protecting brand equity, and

ensuring that a company's growth remains sustainable even when faced with significant ideological opposition.

Limitation and Suggestions

This study is primarily constrained by its focus on the textual analysis of official press releases, meaning it does not capture the real-time, decentralized discourse occurring across broader social media platforms or independent public opinion. Furthermore, as a qualitative study utilizing library research, the analysis relies solely on secondary documentation rather than primary data collection, such as interviews with corporate communication teams or direct public sentiment surveys, which could offer deeper insights into the internal decision-making processes and the immediate psychological impact on consumers.

To address these limitations, future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach that integrates textual analysis with sentiment analysis of public digital discourse to better map the correlation between narrative strategies and actual stakeholder reception. Additionally, it is highly recommended that future scholars conduct in-depth interviews with communication practitioners to understand the strategic intent behind narrative framing, as well as pursue longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of these press release strategies in sustaining brand equity far beyond the initial crisis period.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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