



Exploring boycott frames: A content analysis of Malaysian online news coverage on the 2023 McDonald's Malaysia boycott

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Malaysian online news organisations framed public calls to boycott McDonald's Malaysia following heightened sensitivities surrounding the 2023 Israel–Gaza conflict. Although boycotts are widely discussed in consumer behaviour research, limited attention has been given to how news media construct boycott narratives, particularly within geopolitically charged contexts. Using inductive qualitative content analysis, the study analysed 48 news articles published between October 2023 and April 2024 across four major outlets—*The Star*, *Berita Harian*, *Sin Chew Daily*, and *Malaysiakini*. Through open coding, categorisation, and intercoder reliability testing ($\kappa = 0.61–0.87$), the analysis identified five thematic clusters comprising 19 distinct frames. Findings demonstrate how media outlets emphasised conflict, economic consequences, moral concerns, and corporate responses, shaping public interpretations of the crisis. The study contributes to framing scholarship by developing a typology of boycott-related frames and offers practical insights for brands navigating crises in geopolitically sensitive, culturally diverse environments.

Keywords: **Brand boycott, news framing, inductive content analysis, online news, McDonald's Malaysia**

INTRODUCTION

Public boycotts of global brands often intensify during geopolitical conflicts, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts where political, religious, and humanitarian concerns intersect. In October 2023, McDonald's Israel announced its donation of meals to Israeli military personnel (Impelli, 2023), prompting renewed boycott calls across Muslim-majority countries, including Malaysia. Although similar boycotts occurred in 2014 (Avineshwaran, 2014; Ghazali et al., 2019), the 2023 movement gained unprecedented momentum due to heightened solidarity with Palestine and the rapid circulation of boycott narratives on digital platforms.

Despite publicly distancing itself from its Israeli counterpart, McDonald's Malaysia continued to face public scepticism, pressure from activist groups such as BDS Malaysia, and operational disruptions. The boycott reportedly resulted in RM6 million in losses (Zuhair, 2024) and affected over 21,000 employees, many from lower-income Malay Muslim communities (Busst, 2024; Focus Malaysia, 2023). Media reports also documented harassment directed at frontline staff and delivery riders (H. Hassan, 2023; M. S. Hassan, 2023).

Existing research has focused largely on consumer motivations (Delistavrou et al., 2020; Yunus et al., 2020) or political consumerism (Boström et al., 2018), with limited attention to how boycotts are constructed through news media. Prior studies rarely identify specific news frames or examine how moral, political, and socio-economic dimensions are layered across language outlets. Addressing these gaps, this study analysed news framing of the 2023 McDonald's Malaysia boycott across Malay-, English-, and Chinese-language media.

Although centred on a single national case, this boycott reflects broader patterns of geopolitical consumer activism. Guided by the framing theory, the study examines the intensity and tone of coverage, cited sources, and dominant frames in reporting by *The Star*, *Berita Harian*, *Sin Chew Daily*, and *Malaysiakini* between 13 October 2023 and 13 April 2024.

Theoretical framework: Framing theory

The framing theory explains how media construct meaning around contentious issues by selecting and emphasising particular aspects of reality (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Frames function as organising principles that guide moral evaluations, causal attributions, and emotional responses (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2022; Roslyng & Dindler, 2023). Through selection, exclusion, and emphasis, news media shape public understanding by structuring narratives around unfolding events (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Tankard et al., 1991).

While framing research has extensively examined issues such as climate change (e.g., Díaz-Pont, 2021; Feldman & Hart, 2021; Stoddart et al., 2023), health crises (e.g., Dhanani & Franz, 2021; Ogbodo et al., 2020), political communication (e.g., Araújo & Prior, 2021; Abdul Latif & Oh, 2020; Nisch, 2024), and cyberculture (e.g., Sun et al., 2025; Yang, 2020), boycotts remain underexplored. In this study, news framing is central to understanding how the public interprets the McDonald's boycott.

Boycotts are inherently moralised and interpretive acts, shaped by perceptions of corporate culpability, harm, and alignment with political or religious values. The framing theory is therefore well suited to explain how media emphasise moral judgments, conflict,

and responsibility, influencing whether a boycott is viewed as legitimate political action, misdirected outrage, or economic harm to local workers.

Recent studies show that moral and high-intensity frames strongly influence boycott intentions (Bravo, 2020; Bravo & Chapa, 2024), while crisis communication research highlights the role of framing in shaping perceptions of corporate legitimacy and blame (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). By integrating these perspectives, this study conceptualises boycotts as a form of mediated crisis communication in which frames structure moral evaluation, corporate responsibility, and public sentiment, extending the framing theory to consumption-based activism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of boycotting

Consumer boycotts occur when individuals avoid purchasing from a company to achieve specific goals (Friedman, 1985). The term “boycott” originated from tenants ostracising British estate manager, Charles Cunningham Boycott in 1880 (Micheletti, 2003; Moran, 1985). Boycotts can be direct, targeting a company’s products or services, or indirect, targeting affiliated companies (Friedman, 1999). This section examines how politics, religion, and media influence boycott intentions.

Boycotts are often politically motivated (Yunus et al., 2020). Political consumerism allows consumers to use their purchasing power to promote social or ethical concerns, independent of formal political structures (Micheletti, 2003; Boström et al., 2018). Ideology shapes these movements, with liberal and neoliberal perspectives encouraging market-driven activism, particularly among young consumers (Ackermann & Gundelach, 2020; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Kyroglou & Henn, 2022). Conversely, cooperative (socialistic) economies may amplify boycotts more than free-market systems (Zorell, 2020). Political conflicts, such as the Israel-Gaza crisis, have also triggered boycotts like the McDonald’s Malaysia boycott.

Religious motivations also drive boycotts (Yunus et al., 2020). Religiosity influences consumption and boycott behaviour (Abdullah et al., 2021; Roswinanto & Suwanda, 2023; Šmakova & Piligrimienė, 2021). Religious animosity, particularly among Muslim communities in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, strongly affects boycotts targeting brands perceived as aligned with opposing interests (Faza et al., 2022; Mirza et al., 2020; Salma & Aji, 2023). Recent studies frame Muslim consumer boycotts against pro-Israel products as a contemporary form of Islamic Jihad (Samudra et al., 2024), reflecting movements like the McDonald’s boycott.

Media consumption also influences boycott intentions (Boulianne, 2022; Cheng et al., 2023; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Kam & Deichert, 2020). Further, negative information about a company, political discussion, and social media engagement also increases the likelihood of boycott (Boulianne, 2022; Cheng et al., 2023; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Kam & Deichert, 2020). However, news consumption alone does not always trigger boycotts; the type and framing of content are crucial (Kelm, 2023).

Brand activism and framing theory

Brand activism occurs when companies take a public stand on social, political, or ethical issues, positioning themselves as cultural actors whose values are judged by consumers

(Verlegh, 2023; Sussman et al., 2024). Public reactions range from support to boycotts, depending on perceived authenticity and alignment with audience values.

The framing theory helps explain how media and corporate messages shape these responses (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2022; Entman, 1993). Brand activism messages function as frames that guide moral judgments, responsibility attribution, and emotional reactions: emphasising ethics or social benefit can boost support, while highlighting controversy or hypocrisy may provoke backlash (Sussman et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2024).

In multilingual, segmented media environments like Malaysia, media frames interact with identity-based predispositions, amplifying or moderating reactions. The framing theory thus shows how corporate stances—intended or perceived—become part of mediated narratives shaping consumer interpretations, moral evaluations, and boycott behaviour.

Framing and ideology

Ideology refers to shared beliefs about who should address social issues and how (Voeten, 2021). It shapes consumer behaviour and provides a framework through which messages encourage particular actions (Schmitt et al., 2022; Webber et al., 2020). Attitudes and behaviours are typically guided by a small set of core beliefs (Kalmoe, 2020), and framing operates by introducing new beliefs, activating existing ones, or reinforcing their influence (Chong & Druckman, 2007), underscoring the close relationship between frames and ideology.

Framing functions as storytelling, a form of communication central to human experience because of its emotional and relational qualities (Muindi et al., 2020; Schmid, 2021). Research shows that narratives with a personal voice reduce negative perceptions compared to impersonal, purely logical information (Yang & Hobbs, 2020). In journalism, news frames guide audience interpretation, illustrating how narratives shape perceived reality (Aukes et al., 2020; Ren, 2021).

Narratives play a central role in communicating ideology by translating abstract beliefs into compelling stories that mobilise public support (Lejano & Nero, 2020; Mollan & Geesin, 2020). Such ideological narratives can influence policy attitudes, as shown in studies linking political ideology to trust in science and vaccine acceptance (Kossowska et al., 2021). They may also drive behaviour by fulfilling psychological needs for certainty and meaning, at times encouraging extremist tendencies or justifying violence, particularly when reinforced by religious or political worldviews (Webber et al., 2020).

Framing boycott

Although some scholars have studied boycotts using framing, very few identified boycott frames in the news. For instance, Yan and Hyman (2020) explored nationalistic appeals and political framing to promote boycotts against foreign brands that have perceived affiliation with targeted countries; Frank (2020) examined the newspapers' identity frames and topic frames in reporting the boycott movement targeting a country; Ariffin and Hussain (2021) studied the positive and negative tone in reporting boycott incidents. Notably, knowledge of boycott frames and studies on framing consumer boycotts remain expandable.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed inductive qualitative content analysis to examine how online news framed the McDonald’s Malaysia boycott. An inductive approach uses a dataset to induce a more general set of propositions from the collected data, moving from a spectrum of specific focus to a general level of focus (DeCarlo, 2018). Inductive approaches are appropriate when existing theoretical categories are limited, enabling frames to emerge from the data rather than being imposed *a priori* (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Kyngäs, 2020). The qualitative content analysis uncovers the variety of viewpoints that various actors or groups may have regarding a particular issue, the subtle differences in interpretations given to phenomena, and the existing prevalent opinions within a setting (Preiser et al., 2022).

The dataset comprised 48 online news articles published between 13 October 2023 and 13 April 2024 across four major outlets: *The Star*, *Berita Harian*, *Sin Chew Daily*, and *Malaysiakini*. Articles were retrieved using the keywords “McDonald’s” and “boycott,” with only news and editorial pieces included, as this boycott case has no clear date or event to determine the ending of the movement.

This timeframe captures the initial escalation of boycott sentiment following McDonald’s Israel’s announcement; the peak intensity of domestic mobilisation and public responses; and the stabilisation phase, during which media narratives shifted toward corporate responses, economic impact, and political commentary.

Table 1. Number of articles retrieved from selected online news media

Outlet	Language	Articles
<i>The Star</i>	English	3
<i>Berita Harian</i>	Malay	6
<i>Sin Chew Daily</i>	Chinese	31
<i>Malaysiakini</i>	Alternative	8
Total		48

Inductive content analysis, a data-sensitive method that condenses and organises information through abstraction, allows researchers to identify concepts, categories, or themes relevant to the research questions (Kyngäs, 2020). First, open coding was applied through line-by-line reading to capture both explicit statements and implicit evaluative cues. Related codes, such as “job loss concerns” and “business slowdown,” were grouped into subcategories like economic consequences, which were further abstracted into higher-order categories reflecting patterns across news outlets. These were then synthesised into five overarching frame categories, forming the study’s analytical framework. The analysis followed Pan and Kosicki’s (1993) procedures, examining news discourse across empirically operationalizable dimensions.

Table 2. Example of coding process

Text Excerpt	Open Code	Frame	Frame Category
“Workers were unfairly targeted during the boycott.”	harassment; misdirected blame	Victimisation	Ethical actions

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Text Excerpt	Open Code	Frame	Frame Category
“McDonald’s clarified it has no ties to Israel’s operations.”	distancing; clarification	Corporate stance	Corporate response
“Food delivery riders are losing income.”	financial hardship; job loss	Negative economic consequence	Economic consequences

Two trained coders independently coded the dataset. Intercoder reliability was established using Cohen’s Kappa (κ), yielding values between 0.61 and 0.87, representing substantial to near-perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012; O’Connor & Joffe, 2020). The wider κ range reflects expected variation in inductive qualitative analysis: Higher κ scores (0.80–0.87) were associated with frames tied to observable facts (e.g., legal actions, economic consequences), where coding boundaries were clearer; lower κ scores (0.61–0.70) occurred in categories involving interpretive or moral nuance (e.g., morality, victimisation), which required subjective judgment in differentiating emotional from ethical tones. Discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussion, refining operational definitions until consensus was achieved. This procedure enhances analytical consistency and aligns with qualitative reliability standards.

FINDINGS

News coverage

A total of 48 online news articles on the McDonald’s Malaysia boycott were collected from *The Star* (English), *Berita Harian* (Malay), *Sin Chew Daily* (Chinese) and *Malaysiakini* (Alternative) websites. The majority of the coverage is in the form of straight news (70.83%), followed by column articles (12.50%) and opinions (12.50%), while the least are reader’s comments (4.17%). Notably, all the column articles and opinions are from *Sin Chew Daily* and all reader’s comments are from *Malaysiakini*.

Table 3. Type of news retrieved from selected online news media

Type of News	<i>Berita Harian</i> (N=6)		<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (N=31)		<i>The Star</i> (N=3)		<i>Malaysiakini</i> (N=8)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Straight news	6	100.00	19	61.29	3	100.00	6	75.00	34	70.83
Column article	0	0.00	6	19.35	0	0.00	0	0.00	6	12.50
Opinions	0	0.00	6	19.35	0	0.00	0	0.00	6	12.50
Readers’ comments	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	25.00	2	4.17
Total	6	12.50	31	64.58	3	6.25	8	16.67	48	100.00

Tone

The overall reporting of the McDonald’s Malaysia boycott is skewed towards a neutral tone (52.08%), followed by a critical tone (27.08%), a mixed tone (12.50%) and an optimistic tone (8.33%).

Precisely, the main reporting tone for *The Star*, *Berita Harian* and *Sin Chew Daily* is neutral (100.00%; 66.67%; 51.61%) and *Malaysiakini* is mixed (37.50%). On a relevant note, *The Star* reports only in neutral tone.

Table 4. Reporting tone in news articles

Tone	<i>Berita Harian</i> (N=6)		<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (N=31)		<i>The Star</i> (N=3)		<i>Malaysiakini</i> (N=8)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Neutral	4	66.67	16	51.61	3	100.00	2	25.00	25	52.08
Critical	1	16.67	10	32.26	0	0.00	2	25.00	13	27.08
Optimistic	1	16.67	2	6.45	0	0.00	1	12.50	4	8.33
Mixed	0	0.00	3	9.68	0	0.00	3	37.50	6	12.50

Source cited

McDonald’s (36.07%) is the most cited source when reporting the boycott incident. Notably, the general public (27.87%) is the second most cited source, with *Sin Chew Daily* contributing most of the articles. Subsequently, BDS Malaysia (19.67%) comes in third in the overall source cited when reporting the boycott, followed by public figure (9.84%), and political figure (6.56%) as the least cited source. It is noteworthy that only *Sin Chew Daily* cited political figure in reporting the McDonald’s Malaysia boycott.

Table 5. Sources cited in the news articles

Type of News	<i>Berita Harian</i> (N=6)		<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (N=31)		<i>The Star</i> (N=3)		<i>Malaysiakini</i> (N=8)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
McDonald’s	3	42.86	11	35.48	2	50.00	6	50.00	22	36.07
BDS Malaysia	2	28.57	4	10.53	2	50.00	4	33.33	12	19.67
Political figure	0	0.00	4	10.53	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	6.56
Public figure	1	14.29	5	13.16	0	0.00	0	0.00	6	9.84
General public	1	14.29	14	36.84	0	0.00	2	16.67	17	27.87

News frames

After an inductive content analysis, a total of 19 news frames emerged. Subsequently, the frames were categorised into five themes, namely (1) corporate response, (2) economic consequences, (3) ethical actions, (4) political implication, and (5) societal implication. The findings reveal the distinct trend in how these media outlets highlight particular themes (see Table 6).

The main frames employed by *The Star* are legal (100.00%), clarification (66.67%), negative economic consequences (66.67%) and conflict (66.67%). Notably, *The Star* did not apply any frames from political implications. It also did not include any positive economic consequences.

On the other hand, *Malaysiakini* also mainly used legal (75.00%), clarification (62.50%) and negative economic consequences (62.50%). For *Berita Harian*, it mostly used conflict (100.00%) and negative economic consequences (83.33%).

Sin Chew Daily’s dominant frames are conflict (58.06%), negative economic consequences (51.61%) and rational actions (35.48%) when reporting the McDonald’s Malaysia boycott. Notably, *Sin Chew Daily* is the only media that employed the double standard frame.

Generally, the most frequent category was ethical actions (29.67%), while the most common frame employed by all media outlets was conflict (12.20%), followed closely by negative economic consequences (11.38%), and victimisation (9.25%).

Table 6. News frames

Frames	<i>Berita Harian</i> (N=6)		<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (N=31)		<i>The Star</i> (N=3)		<i>Malaysiakini</i> (N=8)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Corporate Response										
Clarification	3	50.00	10	32.26	2	66.67	5	62.50	20	8.13
Consumer Benefits	2	33.33	5	16.13	0	0.00	0	0.00	7	2.85
CSR	3	50.00	7	22.58	1	33.33	4	50.00	15	6.10
Legal	3	50.00	6	19.35	3	100.00	6	75.00	18	7.32
Total									60	24.39
Economic Consequences										
Economic Consequences (-)	5	83.33	16	51.61	2	66.67	5	62.50	28	11.38
Economic Consequences (+)	1	16.67	3	9.68	0	0.00	1	12.50	5	2.03
Total									33	13.41
Ethical Actions										
Double Standard	0	0.00	5	16.13	0	0.00	0	0.00	5	2.03
Effectiveness	0	0.00	7	22.58	0	0.00	1	12.50	8	3.25
Freedom of Choice	1	16.67	8	25.81	1	33.33	2	25.00	12	4.88
Rational Actions	3	50.00	11	35.48	1	33.33	1	12.50	16	6.50
36	3	50.00	5	16.13	0	0.00	1	12.50	9	3.66
Victimisation	1	33.33	1	16.67	17	54.84	4	50.00	23	9.25
Total									73	29.67
Political Implication										
National Interest	0	0.00	7	22.58	0	0.00	0	0.00	7	2.85
Political	0	0.00	4	12.90	0	0.00	2	25.00	4	1.62
Responsibility	3	50.00	6	19.35	0	0.00	2	25.00	11	4.47
Total									22	8.94
Societal Implication										
Conflict	6	100.00	18	58.06	2	66.67	4	50.00	30	12.20
Human Interest	0	0.00	14	45.16	0	0.00	2	25.00	16	6.50
Social Cohesion	0	0.00	2	6.45	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	0.81
Social Pressure	0	0.00	9	29.03	0	0.00	1	12.50	10	4.07
Total									58	23.58
Total									246	100.00

DISCUSSION

The present study analysed online news articles from three mainstream linguistic news media outlets—*The Star*, *Berita Harian*, *Sin Chew Daily*—and one alternative outlet—*Malaysiakini*. The findings reveal not only differences in format, tone, sources and frames across outlets, but also how these differences are embedded within broader ideological and identity-based media ecosystems in Malaysia.

News coverage and format

Analysis of the corpus shows that 70.83% of McDonald's Malaysia boycott coverage was straight news, likely reflecting the broadsheet conventions and editorial routines of the outlets and the relative scarcity of interpretive intervention by journalists. *Sin Chew Daily's* heavier use of columns and opinion pieces (38.70% of its coverage) provided greater interpretive depth and evaluative commentary, while *Malaysiakini's* use of readers' comments (25.00% of its coverage) foregrounded participatory public voices. These divergent formats are not merely stylistic choices; they reflect different editorial models and audience expectations within Malaysia's segmented media ecology — where linguistic and ideological audiences look to different outlets for distinct kinds of information and interpretation. This pattern is consistent with studies showing that Malaysian digital media are structured along linguistic, religious and ideological lines, producing differentiated information ecosystems that shape both content and audience engagement (Hamzah et al., 2023).

Tone and ideological positioning

Overall, the news tone was predominantly neutral (52.08%), but a substantial minority of articles (27.08%) adopted a critical stance. *Sin Chew Daily's* comparatively higher critical proportion (linked to its opinion pieces) illustrates how outlet genre can amplify ideological or evaluative positions. In a politically charged context such as the Israel–Gaza conflict, framing choices can activate existing ideological predispositions: when news anchors ethical or victimisation frames, they resonate with pre-existing normative schema among audiences, reinforcing ideological interpretations of events. This dynamic aligns with literature that connects media framing to the activation of ideological commitments and identity-based reasoning in publics (Pooi, 2021).

Sources and identity politics

McDonald's Malaysia (Gerbang Alaf Restaurants Sdn Bhd) was the most cited source (36.07%), followed by the general public and activist group BDS Malaysia. The distribution of sources across outlets exposes how identity politics shape sourcing decisions: *Berita Harian's* frequent morality framing (targeting Malay-Muslim readers) and *Sin Chew Daily's* reliance on public voices and occasional political figures indicate that editors select sources that will resonate with their perceived audience identity and ideological orientations. This selective sourcing is meaningful in a media system where identity politics — often framed along ethno-religious lines — are central to public debate, and where political actors and civil society groups strategically target specific linguistic communities. Empirical work on Malaysia's mediatized politics shows how digital and

legacy media reproduce and amplify identity politics, making sourcing an act intertwined with audience segmentation and ideological positioning (Mangiarotti, 2024; Pooi, 2021).

Framing, ideology and ethno-religious media ecosystems

The inductive analysis identified six thematic clusters and 24 frames (collapsed in the earlier tables). Across outlets, conflict and negative economic consequences dominated. These frames operate within and help reproduce ideological narratives about national interest, moral duty and economic stability. In Malaysia's ethno-religious media ecosystems, framing choices do more than communicate facts: they participate in identity construction by signalling which values (religious duty, economic prudence, civic order) matter for particular audiences. Recent analyses of Malaysian digital media show that religious and ethnic language are routinely mobilised in political messaging and news discourse, sharpening identity cleavages and affecting how audiences interpret events that have both geopolitical and local cultural valence (Hu et al., 2024).

Outlet-level framing strategies and identity audiences

The Star's emphasis on legal, clarification, and conflict frames can be read as an editorial strategy to manage potentially polarising identity claims by reframing the dispute as procedural and juridical. This mitigates identity-based escalation in its readership. Conversely, *Sin Chew Daily's* ethical-action, public-response and victimisation frames (often in opinion pieces) signal an orientation toward evaluative interpretation and civic critique that resonates with its readership's expectations for commentary and public deliberation. *Berita Harian's* morality and economic-harm frames foreground Islamic ethical discourse and livelihood concerns that align with Malay-Muslim audience priorities. *Malaysiakini's* foregrounding of readers' voices displays a participatory model that amplifies public sentiment but, as previous work suggests, can also complicate credibility perceptions since comment sections often carry highly affective, identity-anchored responses (Hu et al., 2024).

Implications for identity politics and mobilisation

As boycotts function as political consumerism — a form of identity-inflected collective action — media frames that emphasise moral duty or national or religious solidarity will likely increase the salience of identity-based mobilisation among target audiences. At the same time, frames emphasising economic harm and victimisation may constrain mobilisation by highlighting collateral costs to co-religionists or co-ethnics (for example, Muslim employees). Thus, framing can both mobilise and demobilise, depending on which identity repertoires are activated—a dynamic frequently observed in Malaysia's politically mediated identity landscape. Scholarly work on “*Malaysia's 15th General Election and digital mediatization*” explains how identity appeals and ethno-religious rhetoric travel across platforms, amplifying mobilisation when frames align with audience identities (Hamzah et al., 2023; Pooi, 2021).

Long-term reputational trajectories, memory and interpretive schemas

The existing findings show that persistent exposure to conflict, victimisation and economic consequences frames can seed long-term negative brand associations, that are reinforced when ideology and identity politics are considered. Frames that repeatedly link a brand

to moral breach or to threats against a community become lodged in identity-shaped public memory and are more readily retrieved when audiences face future cues. In divided media ecosystems, competing interpretive schemas — one outlet emphasising corporate clarification and CSR, another emphasising victimisation — can produce segmented reputational trajectories among different identity groups, in which a brand's reputation may recover for some audiences while remain tarnished for others. This mechanism echoes work showing that segmented information environments in Malaysia produce divergent public realities across linguistic and identity communities (Hu et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex relationship between media framing and public perception during a brand boycott, providing a preliminary discussion on boycott frames. In Malaysia, where socio-political and religious factors are deeply intertwined, the media portrayal of the McDonald's boycott implies public opinion, corporate responses and the broader brand management of the F&B industry. The research demonstrates the need for brands to adopt transparent and culturally sensitive approaches when navigating crises regarding the unstable geopolitical environment. Although the sample size of the corpus in the current research is relatively small, the inductive content analysis provided insights centred around the boycott activism of McDonald's Malaysia. The study further reveals distinct framing strategies employed by each media outlet, with notable differences in tone, sources cited, and the frames used to report the boycott.

Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the study extends the framing theory by situating boycott frames within identity-based media ecosystems and linking them to processes of ideological activation and memory retrieval. Integrating scholarship on mediatized identity politics and segmented information environments can thus enrich analyses of framing in geopolitically sensitive brand crises (Yang et al., 2024). The development of the codebook from this study can be utilised for deductive research on how media framing influences public perception and consumer behaviour. This study also contributes to the growing body of literature on media coverage of consumer activism, particularly in a multicultural society like Malaysia, where media outlets cater to distinct linguistic and cultural audiences. Although the framing theory provides the foundation for understanding how news outlets construct meaning around the McDonald's boycott, the findings of this study reveal patterns that align with agenda-setting and media dependency processes.

For instance, the prominence of conflict, victimisation, and economic consequence frames across outlets suggests an agenda-setting function that media salience may shape which aspects of the boycott become cognitively accessible to the public. Likewise, the reliance on specific linguistic news ecosystems (Malay, English, Chinese, and alternative media) indicates varying levels of audience dependency on particular outlets to interpret complex geopolitical crises. By surfacing these theoretical linkages, this study not only expands the framing literature on brand boycotts but also opens pathways for integrating agenda-setting and media dependency perspectives in future research to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how media ecosystems influence public cognition during brand crises.

Practical implications

Practically, these findings underscore why crisis managers must tailor communication to ethno-religious fault lines in multi-ethnic societies. Generic clarification may fail to resonate with identity-anchored audiences; targeted engagement with religious leaders and community interlocutors — combined with demonstrable CSR actions — can help counter identity-based frames. The findings suggest that framing could impact how the public perceives issues. Brand managers operating in geopolitically volatile environments should prioritise culturally sensitive communication that resonates with local moral frameworks. In Muslim-majority contexts like Malaysia, proactive engagement with religious leaders, transparent CSR efforts, and community dialogue can mitigate reputational damage during boycotts. These culturally grounded strategies are essential for restoring consumer confidence and sustaining brand equity. Therefore, the brand crisis portrayal of McDonald's serves as a guideline for navigating public relations challenges and responding effectively to boycotts or similar forms of public dissent.

Limitations and future directions

This study provides valuable insights into how Malaysian online news media framed the McDonald's Malaysia boycott across different linguistic outlets, yet several limitations point to avenues for future research. While the qualitative design allows for a rich understanding of framing patterns and underlying ideologies, it does not directly capture how audiences respond to these frames. Future research could therefore adopt mixed-method approaches, such as surveys, to examine how factors like identity affiliation, religious orientation, and media consumption shape audience interpretations and behavioural intentions.

Moreover, this study focused on news content without accounting for audience reception. In today's interactive media landscape, reader comments and social media responses play a critical role in how frames are interpreted, contested, or reinforced within identity-based publics. Analysing these responses would provide a more complete picture of the interplay between media framing and public meaning-making, particularly in ethno-religiously segmented contexts.

Although the findings are grounded in Malaysia, the framework developed here has broader applicability. Comparative research in other cultural or geopolitical settings could help test the generalisability of these insights and reveal how socio-political contexts influence both media framing and consumer activism.

Finally, as boycott discourse increasingly circulates across digital platforms, combining qualitative framing analysis with computational or machine-learning methods could enable large-scale and longitudinal studies. Such approaches would allow researchers to track the persistence and evolution of media frames over time, shedding light on their influence on consumer attitudes and brand reputation recovery in politically and culturally sensitive contexts.

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