



# Managing the Digital Image Restoration Amidts the Faith-Based Crisis: Semiotics and Ethical Decision Making Analysis

Kholifatul Fauziah<sup>1\*</sup>, Zainal Arifin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Institut Agama Islam Agus Salim Lampung, Indonesia

Address: Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Jalan Brawijaya, Tamantirto, Kasihan, Bantul, DIY

Author correspondence: [kholifatul.fauziah@umy.ac.id](mailto:kholifatul.fauziah@umy.ac.id)\*

**Abstract.** Faith-based crises pose significant challenges to global franchise brands, requiring strategic communication approaches to mitigate reputational risks. This study examines McDonald's Indonesia's crisis response amidst the boycott movement triggered by its alleged affiliation with McDonald's Israel during the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis and Parsons' Ethical Decision-Making (EDM) framework, this research analyzes the representation of messages and ethical considerations in McDonald's Indonesia's official press release on Instagram. Findings reveal that the company employs a neutrality and non-partisanship strategy, emphasizing its independent ownership structure, local employment contributions, and national identity to distance itself from the global franchise network. While this approach aligns with the EDM principles of veracity, non-maleficence, and beneficence, gaps in transparency and fairness remain potential challenges in public perception. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of digital image restoration in faith-based crises and offers practical insights for corporate crisis management in profit-oriented organizations. Future research should explore audience reception and public sentiment to provide a more comprehensive assessment of crisis communication effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Crisis communication, Digital image restoration, Ethical decision-making, Faith-based crisis, McDonald's Indonesia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Food is not merely a necessity for consumption; it is closely intertwined with aspects of faith, nationality, and even gender identity (Avieli & Markowitz, 2023). The way individuals produce, consume, and purchase food and beverage products is significantly influenced by various factors, including their faith background (Dalakas et al., 2022). When individuals perceive a threat to their faith, they or their communities may respond in various ways, including boycotting certain brands. A brand's response to such boycotts can either harm or enhance its reputation (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021).

A relevant case study is the market sentiment and resistance toward McDonald's following the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The brand was suspected of supporting Israel, prompting pro-Palestinian activists to participate in a boycott movement against its products and services (Naufal, n.d.). This situation is further complicated by the fact that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an external factor beyond the organization's managerial control. Additionally, public sentiment towards the brand is influenced by faith-based considerations, fostering militancy in the boycott movement.

In times of crisis, branding strategies through image restoration become crucial, particularly via social media. Social media serves as an effective communication channel for organizations to rebuild positive public sentiment (Jones et al., 2009). The case of McDonald's Indonesia is particularly urgent, as the crisis stems from external factors that are difficult for the organization to control. This poses a significant threat to the franchise, which has been operating in Indonesia for over 30 years (Indonesia, n.d.).

This research aims to map the dynamics of message representation and ethical quality in McDonald's press releases on its Instagram social media channel. As a PR product, these press releases serve as tools to communicate the brand's position amid the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Theoretically, this study contributes to the formulation of an ethical digital image restoration model amidst faith-based crises while also serving as a valuable lesson for PR practitioners. Accordingly, the key research question (RQ) is formulated as follows: 'How does McDonald's represent its message in press releases during a faith-based crisis, and how is ethical decision-making reflected in its digital image restoration strategy?'

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

As part of corporate communication strategies, press releases are public relations (PR) products that reflect an organization's decision-making process. Therefore, press releases must adhere to ethical standards. Parsons outlined five pillars of ethical decision-making (EDM): veracity (telling the truth), non-maleficence (doing no harm), beneficence (doing good), confidentiality (respecting privacy), and fairness (being fair and socially responsible) (Chiru & Buluc, 2023; O'Donnell, 2023; Olaoluwa, 2021).

Several prior studies have investigated semiotics and its application in organizational communication. For example, governments have utilized visual branding elements consistently to convey messages (Fauziah & Aulia, 2024). Moreover, adherence to ethical standards has been shown to significantly impact the professionalism of organizational stakeholders (O'Donnell, 2023). EDM itself can be examined from multiple perspectives (Luca Casali & Perano, 2021). Studies on the relationship between faith and brand activism have also been conducted in the United Kingdom (Ijaz, 2024). However, a research gap remains in integrating analyses of PR products such as press releases in addressing brand crises resulting from faith-based conflicts, particularly in Indonesia.

As a part of corporate branding activities, semiotics serves as a valuable tool for analysis. It is the study of signs and sign systems, encompassing words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. The term originates from the Greek word *semeion*, meaning 'sign' (Fauziah & Aulia, 2024; Kalelioğlu, 2023). Semiotic studies explore how signs function within

a system and how individuals interpret the information they convey (Alisherovna, 2023; Yuniani, 2015). This approach enables the examination of various forms of communication, including thoughts, emotions, and other expressions transmitted through signs. Each narrative unit, such as words or sentences, plays a distinct role in the communication process (Fabbri et al., 2022).

In semiotic studies, Roland Barthes viewed signs as a system of meanings consisting of denotative meaning (literal meaning), connotative meaning (implied or intended meaning), and myth (interpretation based on a particular cultural background) (Utami & Sokowati, 2021). Barthes' semiotic analysis is applied in this study because it provides a comprehensive approach to understanding cultural phenomena. Furthermore, this method not only interprets communication messages but also explores myths and the cultural and ideological background underpinning such interpretations (Yuliyanti et al., 2017).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

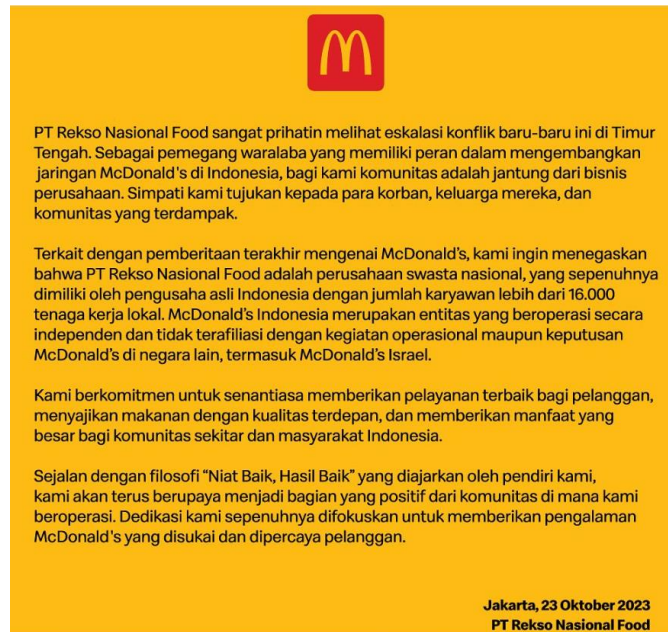
This study employs a qualitative research approach. The unit of analysis consists of words, phrases, and sentences found in press releases on McDonald's official Instagram account. The visual elements analyzed include typography, illustrations, and colors, with a specific focus on their role in responding to the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The data collection method involves the documentation of both primary and secondary data sources. The data analysis is conducted using a pattern-matching technique based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis framework and Parsons' ethical decision-making model. Through this approach, the collected data is categorized according to its alignment with theoretical patterns, enabling the researchers to interpret and conclude the representation of messages within the unit of analysis, as well as assess their ethical implications.

### **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Established in Indonesia since 1991, McDonald's has become a household name synonymous with quality fast food. Under the ownership of PT Rekso Nasional Food, a wholly-owned Indonesian company, McDonald's Indonesia has expanded its presence to over 300 locations, serving more than 10 million customers monthly (Indonesia, n.d.). Committed to its mission of creating delightful moments, the company has prioritized product quality, halal certification, and customer satisfaction. By employing a significant number of local Indonesian workers and fostering partnerships with local businesses, McDonald's has made substantial contributions to the Indonesian economy and society.

McDonald's Indonesia faced boycott movements following the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on October 7, 2023. This backlash emerged after reports surfaced that McDonald's Israel had donated thousands of meals to Israeli soldiers (Naufal, n.d.). In response, McDonald's Indonesia issued a press release via its official Instagram account on October 23, 2023.



**Figure 1.** McDonald's Indonesia Press Release on Instagram

The press release visually adheres to the corporate identity color of the organization, featuring McDonald's signature turmeric yellow and incorporating the company logo prominently at the top. The black font is used for the textual narrative, which consists of four paragraphs. This visual composition signifies that the press release is an official communication product issued by McDonald's Indonesia to engage with the public. The absence of any illustrations further underscores the organization's seriousness in addressing the issue through this communication medium.

### **Non-Partisanship, Independence**

The first paragraph of the press release expresses concerns over the conflict that erupted on October 7, 2023, in the Middle East without explicitly mentioning the two conflicting parties, namely Palestine and Israel. Instead of directly referring to the McDonald's brand, the organization emphasizes that in Indonesia, the brand is managed by PT Rekso Nasional Food, a company name that reflects local identity and nationalism. Connotatively, this approach conveys McDonald's Indonesia's neutrality regarding the ongoing conflict. The press release notably omits terms such as "Palestine," "Muslim," and "boycott," which have significant correlations with the challenges faced by the brand. In other words, the profound emotional

aspects that have driven the boycott movement among Muslims as a form of redemption for their concern for Palestinians, who predominantly share the same faith background, are not highlighted.

Furthermore, the second paragraph of the communication product asserts that McDonald's Indonesia operates independently and is not affiliated with the decisions or actions of McDonald's Israel. Implicitly, McDonald's Indonesia aims to distance itself from the activities of McDonald's Israel, which had reportedly donated thousands of meals to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Consequently, McDonald's Indonesia subtly conveys that boycotting its products is misdirected. The omission of sensitive terms combined with an emphasis on local identity and nationalism serves to legitimize the claim that McDonald's Indonesia has no ties with McDonald's Israel, the root cause of the boycott movement.

### **Nationalism, Local Based**

The second paragraph further reinforces McDonald's Indonesia's local and national identity, as evidenced by the statement that "PT Rekso Nasional Food is a privately owned national company, fully owned by Indonesian entrepreneurs, employing more than 16,000 local workers." The remaining two paragraphs of the press release highlight McDonald's Indonesia's commitment to providing the best service to customers and contributing positively to the local community and Indonesian society at large.

The emphasis on nationalism and local-based branding is further strengthened by the inclusion of the company's guiding philosophy, "Good Intentions, Good Results." This narrative strategically conceals any reference to the brand's alignment with global partnerships, which is an inherent aspect of operating as an international franchise.

### **Ethical Decisions in Crisis: Between Corporate Responsibility and Business Priorities**

As an organizational communication product, McDonald's Indonesia's press release in response to a faith-based crisis can be analyzed through the lens of the five pillars of Ethical Decision Making (EDM) as proposed by Parsons. From the perspective of veracity (tell the truth), McDonald's Indonesia asserts its status as an independent business entity separate from McDonald's Global, particularly McDonald's Israel. However, the extent of its franchise relationship with the global network is not entirely transparent in the press release. This lack of clarity may raise concerns among the public regarding whether this claim of independence is factual or merely a strategic communication effort to mitigate the boycott movement.

Meanwhile, from the standpoint of non-maleficence (do no harm), McDonald's Indonesia deliberately avoids explicitly mentioning the parties involved in the Palestine-Israel conflict. This approach may be interpreted as an effort to prevent further escalation and shield

the brand from potential negative consequences. However, certain segments of the public may perceive this stance as an attempt to evade moral responsibility in a faith-based crisis.

From the perspective of beneficence (do good), McDonald's Indonesia highlights its positive contributions to society, particularly by generating employment opportunities for over 16,000 local workers. This statement underscores the company's efforts to provide economic benefits to the community. However, within the context of a faith-driven crisis, merely emphasizing economic contributions may not be sufficient to reassure consumer groups that prioritize moral and ethical considerations in their purchasing decisions.

Additionally, regarding confidentiality (respect privacy), while the press release does not violate individual or group privacy, the transparency of McDonald's Indonesia's relationship with the global network remains a subject of scrutiny. The omission of relevant information may influence public perceptions regarding the brand's credibility and ethical stance.

Finally, from the perspective of fairness (to be fair and socially responsible), McDonald's Indonesia seeks to maintain neutrality in the ongoing conflict. However, this neutrality is debatable within the framework of fairness, particularly if the public perceives disparities in the allocation of resources or support within McDonald's global network. In a faith-based crisis, fairness is not solely concerned with equitable treatment of consumers but also with the alignment of corporate actions with the ethical and moral values upheld by a significant portion of its customer base. Consequently, the communication approach adopted by McDonald's Indonesia in addressing this crisis may have long-term implications for its brand reputation and consumer loyalty.

### **Digital Image Restoration in Faith-Based Crises: A Theoretical and Practical Perspective**

In crisis communication, particularly in faith-based crises, digital platforms serve as a critical space for organizations to restore their corporate image. McDonald's Indonesia's response demonstrates a strategic approach to image restoration through controlled messaging, aiming to maintain neutrality and de-escalate tensions while leveraging its brand identity. The placement of the logo and the use of corporate colors are essential in ensuring brand recognition and legitimacy, preventing the message from being perceived as unauthenticated (Park et al., 2013). Similar strategies are also utilized by government organizations through official social media channels (Fauziah & Aulia, 2024).

From the perspective of Ethical Decision Making (EDM), McDonald's Indonesia employs veracity (tell the truth) by asserting its independence from McDonald's Global, particularly McDonald's Israel. However, non-maleficence (do no harm) is also evident in its

non-partisanship strategy, which avoids explicitly addressing the Palestine-Israel conflict. While this approach helps the company avoid pressure from conflicting parties, it also subtly legitimizes its stance and suggests that the boycott may be misdirected. The beneficence (do good) pillar is reflected in its emphasis on job creation for over 16,000 local employees. However, in a faith-based crisis, economic contributions alone may be insufficient to satisfy ethically driven consumer expectations.

The concept of non-partisanship operates across various social dimensions, not merely as an indicator of value-free communication (Geiger, 2021). However, within the global franchise partnership, brands inevitably engage in resource-sharing and capability integration, influencing their business operations (Alon et al., 2020). This creates a strategic dilemma for businesses in the food and beverage industry, as they must balance local identity with global capacity (Wood et al., 2023). Nationality and local-based branding thus become essential in fostering stakeholder relationships, particularly during global crises (Amato et al., 2023).

In this case, McDonald's Indonesia's crisis response highlights a crucial tension in digital image restoration: balancing global neutrality with local relevance. Faced with public pressure due to its Israeli counterpart's actions, McDonald's Indonesia issued a neutral statement emphasizing peace and humanitarian aid to Palestine. This "safe play" strategy aimed to minimize reputational risks amidst strong pro-Palestine sentiment in Indonesia, a context where consumer nationalism significantly impacts multinational corporations' reputations (Achmad & Nasution, n.d.; Wang, 2005). By simultaneously emphasizing nationalism and local identity, the company aimed to bolster consumer trust, especially in a market where ethical and moral considerations heavily influence purchasing behavior. This approach aligns with studies suggesting that a "local-customer-first" image and social responsibility can enhance consumer purchase intent in ethnocentric markets (Teng, 2019).

A crucial practical takeaway from this case is the need for narrative coherence in crisis communication. McDonald's Indonesia heavily emphasized its lack of affiliation with McDonald's Israel, yet it did not sufficiently clarify how, as part of a global franchise network, it operates independently from other branches under the same brand umbrella. This ambiguity risks skepticism and undermines public trust. Recent research affirms that coherent and on-topic narratives are vital in crisis communication, as they reduce public blame, improve attitudes toward the company, and strengthen corporate image. Conversely, ambiguous or evasive narratives increase attribution of responsibility and public skepticism, underscoring that clear narratives help the public understand the organization's stance and mitigate resistance to crisis messages (Clementson & Beatty, 2021; Yan, n.d.).

From a policy and managerial perspective, this case study underscores several key lessons for corporate crisis management in faith-based contexts. *First*, transparency and veracity are crucial. Clear and accessible information regarding corporate structures and affiliations is necessary to mitigate skepticism. The absence of transparency may lead to heightened public scrutiny and skepticism in digital discourse. In faith-based crises, transparency also serves as an initial step towards reconciliation and moral recovery; by acknowledging issues and demonstrating a commitment to improvement, organizations can rebuild lost trust and strengthen spiritual ties with their communities, simultaneously enhancing perceived credibility and reducing public doubt about their intentions and integrity (O'Brien, 2020; Wisselink & de Jong, n.d.).

*Second*, faith-based sensitivity in crisis management is crucial. Ethical considerations in socioreligious contexts demand that corporations align their crisis responses with prevailing moral and cultural expectations. A generic corporate response often falls short in addressing faith-driven consumer concerns, highlighting the importance of tailoring communication to resonate with religious and social values to build corporate legitimacy and enhance public trust during crises involving moral and cultural issues (Scherer et al., 2013).

*Third*, an integrated digital communication strategy is essential. A well-executed multichannel digital approach, incorporating social media engagement, interactive content, and real-time responsiveness, can enhance corporate credibility and facilitate constructive two-way dialogue with consumers (Wright & Hinson, 2009).

*Fourth*, a long-term ethical commitment is paramount. Beyond immediate crisis management, companies must demonstrate sustained ethical behavior through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, transparent governance, and inclusive stakeholder engagement to maintain brand resilience and consumer loyalty. CSR plays a significant role in enhancing corporate resilience during crises, including global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, by strengthening consumer trust and loyalty through continuous social responsibility (Bahari, 2023). Furthermore, effective CSR communication can reinforce a brand's responsible and proactive personality, contributing to an ethical and trustworthy brand image in the long run (Tarabashkina et al., 2020). By integrating these strategic and ethical considerations, businesses can develop robust digital image restoration models that enable them to navigate faith-based crises effectively, ensuring long-term brand sustainability in an increasingly values-driven market.



## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded that McDonald's Indonesia's crisis communication strategy, as reflected in its official statement, emphasizes neutrality, non-partisanship, and a national and local-based approach. This is evident in the absence of explicit references to conflicting parties and the deliberate avoidance of expressed support for any side. Additionally, the company reinforces its independent ownership structure and local employment figures, positioning itself as separate from the global franchise network affected by the boycott movement. These elements align with the Ethical Decision-Making (EDM) framework, particularly in terms of veracity (tell the truth), non-maleficence (do no harm), and beneficence (do good), although gaps in transparency and fairness remain potential challenges in public perception.

This study primarily examines message construction and framing in McDonald's Indonesia's crisis response, focusing on how corporate discourse legitimizes non-partisanship and neutrality. However, public perception and audience reception were not analyzed, presenting a potential avenue for future research. The findings contribute to theoretical advancements in digital image restoration models, particularly in the context of faith-based crises in profit-oriented organizations. Practically, this study underscores the importance of narrative coherence, transparency, and stakeholder alignment in digital crisis communication. Companies navigating similar crises should integrate ethical considerations, localized branding strategies, and clear corporate positioning to sustain long-term brand credibility and consumer trust.

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