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Global Brand Narratives Amidst Pro-Palestinian Boycotts: A Critical Discourse Analysis in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

The escalation of the Israel–Palestine conflict in October 2023 has intensified pro-Palestinian boycotts across Southeast Asia, challenging global brands like Starbucks, Coca-Cola, and Unilever. This study explores how these multinational companies adapt their brand narratives amid rising socio-political and religious sensitivities in Muslim-majority countries. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it examines corporate communication—ads, press releases, and social media—released between October 2023 and March 2025. This 18-month period offers a longitudinal view of shifting branding strategies in response to political and market dynamics. Findings reveal that neutral or apolitical messaging often fails to resonate with these audiences, who expect brands to take ethical stances reflecting cultural and communal values. Furthermore, ideological silence—strategic ambiguity in corporate responses—can be interpreted as passive complicity, further intensifying public skepticism. Brands that successfully align their narratives with local norms—emphasizing solidarity, inclusivity, and community empowerment—demonstrate stronger public trust, emotional engagement, and business resilience. This study contributes to the field of cross-cultural crisis communication by proposing a contextual model that underscores the importance of ethical storytelling and cultural responsiveness during geopolitical conflicts. The model serves as a practical guide for communication strategists navigating crises in diverse cultural settings, particularly in regions where consumer activism is driven by moral, religious, and ideological solidarity. By addressing the gap between global brand messaging and local audience expectations, this research also provides implications for future brand positioning and corporate social responsibility in ethically complex environments.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural communication, brand narrative, boycott movement, critical discourse analysis, Southeast Asia.*

INTRODUCTION

The boycott movement against products suspected of being affiliated with Israel has resurfaced in various countries, especially since the intensification of the Israel–Palestine conflict in October 2023. In Indonesia and a number of Southeast Asian countries with predominantly Muslim populations, calls to boycott global products such as Starbucks, McDonald's and Unilever have spread widely on social media and public spaces. This phenomenon shows how consumers not only view products from a utility perspective, but also from the perspective of values, ethics and political solidarity (Ali et al., 2023).

In today's digital age, social media undoubtedly has emerged as the most compelling tool for brands and businesses to reach and influence consumers, especially younger generations (Marklen, Tan, & Hassim, 2025). Within this dynamic, one of the key actors influencing consumer perceptions is the social media influencer (SMI). Social media

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influencers often play a pivotal role in shaping brand narratives, especially during moments of crisis such as boycotts (Sharipudin, Hassim, Toth, & Chan, 2023). As brands navigate increasingly complex socio-political landscapes—such as those involving calls to boycott products associated with Israel—the strategic role of SMIs becomes more pronounced. In regions like Southeast Asia, where socio-political issues such as the Palestinian conflict strongly resonate with public sentiment, SMIs exert significant influence on consumer behavior. The messages they deliver—particularly when aligned with themes of social justice, ethical responsibility, or political solidarity—can significantly shape public opinion and purchasing intentions (Taher, Zolkepli, & Sharipudin, 2022).

In the context of modern marketing, brands are not only economic entities, but also social entities that carry certain messages, values and ideological positions. When multinational brands face social pressures such as boycotts, their communication responses become crucial to maintaining reputation and business continuity. This is where brand narratives play a central role as a medium for explaining positions, responding to public opinion, or even diverting issues (Pulizzi, 2020).

Where there is strong sensitivity toward the Palestinian cause in the Southeast Asian region, a one-way or universal communication approach often fails to rebuild public trust. Instead of reassuring consumers, communications that are perceived as insincere or defensive actually reinforce negative sentiment and underscores the critical importance of authentic and culturally sensitive brand communication during times of crisis. When brands respond to a boycott or social pressure, their messaging needs to go beyond simply offering neutral statements or defending their stance. If communications appear defensive, they risk appearing disconnected from the genuine concerns of consumers, particularly in regions with strong cultural and political sensitivities.

For example, multinational brands like Starbucks and Coca-Cola often face scrutiny for their perceived lack of clear ethical positions from the pro-Palestinian boycott movements. By emphasising neutrality or offering generic apologies, these brands may inadvertently signal to consumers that they are prioritizing profit over social responsibility. Research shows that consumers, especially those in Muslim-majority countries, view such responses as disingenuous or evasive, which only strengthens the negative sentiments they initially had toward the brands. In Indonesia, for instance, despite Starbucks' attempt to maintain a neutral stance by emphasizing diversity and inclusion, public sentiment remained unfavorable. The brand's failure to directly address the perceived political implications of its actions led to a perceived detachment from local concerns (Gates, 2020).

Moreover, the backlash against defensive brand responses can be exacerbated when companies are perceived to be 'talking over' or dismissing the public's concerns. In these situations, the communication is seen not only as insincere but also as a sign of disconnection from the socio-political context in which the brand operates. Studies in consumer behavior suggest that when brands fail to engage with the cultural and political concerns of their audiences in an empathetic and authentic manner, it can lead to a long-term erosion of brand loyalty, particularly in markets sensitive to political and ethical issues (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Hence, the need for brands to adopt communication strategies that are perceived as sincere, transparent, and in alignment with local values becomes critical, as defensive or impersonal messaging only deepens the rift with consumers. This shows the importance of cultural sensitivity and a deep understanding of local values in brand communication strategies in the midst of a socio-political crisis (Hollensen & Kotler, 2022).

Several studies have shown that neutrality in brand communication during socio-political conflicts is increasingly perceived as avoidance or complicity, especially among morally engaged consumers. While global brands may intend to depoliticize their messaging by focusing on universal values such as "peace" or "humanity," such narratives are often read as superficial or evasive in contexts where the public demands moral clarity. In the case of Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia, neutrality can appear tone-deaf in light of strong public sentiments rooted in religious and humanitarian solidarity with Palestine (Sarkar & Kotler, 2022). According to a survey by the Pew Research Center (2023), over 72% of Indonesians expressed disapproval of Western brands perceived to be associated with or silent on Israel's actions. This indicates that silence or vague appeals to shared values may no longer suffice in markets where socio-political consciousness shapes purchasing behavior.

Emerging research in the field of ethical consumerism confirms that value-driven purchasing decisions are gaining momentum, particularly among younger, digitally active Muslim consumers in Southeast Asia. A study by Nasr and Ahmad (2023) finds that Gen Z consumers in Indonesia actively seek out brands whose actions and values align with their socio-religious beliefs. These consumers are quick to mobilize online campaigns and boycotts against brands that fail to show ethical solidarity with humanitarian causes, such as the Palestinian struggle. Brands that remain non-committal risk alienating this demographic, who interpret ethical ambiguity as a lack of moral courage. Hence, for brands operating in Indonesia, a culturally sensitive and ethically explicit communication strategy is not just desirable—it is essential for reputation management and long-term consumer trust.

From a brand crisis management perspective, pressures such as boycotts create complex reputational dilemmas. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) emphasises the importance of response strategies that are tailored to the type and perception of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2020). In the context of a pro-Palestinian boycott, public perception of a brand's involvement in the conflict is a determining factor in whether an “indifference,” “clarification,” or “compensation” strategy will be effective. Consumers no longer tolerate a neutral attitude that is considered passive and opportunistic. They demand active brand involvement in social and political issues, including showing support for human rights (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, brand activism that is not authentic actually risks causing backlash, especially if the audience feels that the involvement is only cosmetic and does not reflect the values of the organization as a whole.

Cross-cultural marketing communication is also a challenge for global brands. Messages that are effective in one country may not be well received in another country. The global narrative shaped by corporate headquarters often clashes with social, religious, and ideological norms in developing countries. In Southeast Asia, brand narratives that ignore local nuances can potentially be seen as arrogant, uncaring, and even neo-colonialistic (de Mooij, 2021).

In this context, a critical discourse analysis approach is important to explore how global brands frame their narratives when facing boycott pressure. Through this approach, researchers can uncover power structures, hidden ideologies, and rhetorical strategies used in brand communications, both in official statements, advertisements, and social media activities (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2020).

This research is significant because it discusses the intersection between global marketing ethics, cross-cultural communication, and the increasingly critical shift in Muslim consumer values. By analysing global brand communication practices in the face of a

reputation crisis related to pro-Palestinian boycotts in Southeast Asia, this study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of an ethical and contextual cross-cultural crisis communication model.

In addition, this research also opens up space for reflection for marketing communications practitioners to develop strategies that not only focus on mitigating business risks, but also building brand narratives that are rooted in social justice, cultural honesty and ethical responsibility. In the midst of geopolitical polarization and increasing consumer awareness, brands can no longer simply be bystanders, but must become moral actors who are aware of and responsive to the social context in which they operate.

Despite the growing literature on brand activism and crisis communication, few studies have critically examined how multinational brands construct their narratives through discourse strategies in response to boycott movements in Southeast Asia. This study seeks to address that gap by asking: How do global brands construct their communication narratives in response to the pro-Palestinian boycott, and what ideological frameworks underlie these narratives?

Thus, this study aims to critically examine how global brands construct their communication narratives in response to pro-Palestinian boycott movements in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia. By employing a critical discourse analysis approach, the research seeks to uncover the ideological frameworks, rhetorical strategies, and cultural assumptions embedded in brand communications across various platforms. In doing so, the study intends to contribute to the development of an ethically grounded, culturally sensitive model of cross-cultural crisis communication that aligns with the evolving values of Muslim consumers and the broader expectations of brand activism in the Global South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-Cultural Brand Communication and Activism

Cross-cultural marketing communication is an essential strategic approach for multinational companies seeking to engage consumers in diverse cultural environments. According to Zhang, Zhang, and Yang (2024), companies need to understand public psychology and adopt communication methods that are culturally appropriate to create deeper connections between brands and consumers. This highlights the importance of adapting brand messages to align with local cultural values and norms.

Brand activism has become a strategy adopted by companies to demonstrate their commitment to social and political causes. However, research by Fan, Zou, and He (2025) indicates that the form of brand activism—whether financial or non-financial—can impact consumers' psychological contract perceptions, which may lead to boycotting intentions. Therefore, companies must consider the potential effects of each form of brand activism they undertake, as it can either reinforce or damage consumer loyalty.

Branding Theories in Times of Crisis

Two significant theories guide the analysis of how brands manage crises, particularly those involving political and social pressures: Image Repair Theory and Value-Driven Branding. Benoit's (2015) Image Repair Theory provides a framework for understanding how brands manage reputational threats and focuses on strategies that brands employ to restore their reputation during crises. These strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, justification, and apology. These strategies are crucial for mitigating the negative impact of a crisis on a brand's image. In this article, the theory serves as a lens to examine the rhetorical

techniques used by brands to deflect blame or reaffirm legitimacy when targeted by boycott movements. It is particularly useful for identifying how corporate messages aim to restore public trust and mitigate reputational damage.

On the other hand, Value-Driven Branding (Holt, 2022 a) emphasises the importance of creating brand narratives rooted in social and cultural values. This approach positions brands are not just economic entities but also social actors that embody values that resonate with consumers on a deeper level. In this study, this theory is applied to explore how brand narratives incorporate—or fail to incorporate—values such as justice, solidarity, and cultural sensitivity that are important to Muslim consumers in Southeast Asia. This theoretical perspective helps to reveal the ideological frameworks embedded in brand communication and how they attempt to construct moral authority during socio-political crises. These theories provide a complementary perspective on how brands navigate ethical dilemmas and socio-political pressures during crises, demonstrating the necessity of aligning brand narratives with consumer values to maintain brand integrity.

Together, these theories offer an integrated lens for exploring both the discursive strategies brands use to repair their image and the underlying value systems they invoke to sustain consumer trust. They guide the analysis of how brand narratives are ideologically framed and how they respond to ethical expectations in culturally charged environments.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a valuable lens for understanding how global brands construct, negotiate, and defend their narratives in times of socio-political crisis. Rooted in the works of Fairclough (2015) and van Dijk (2021), CDA emphasises the interplay between language, power, and ideology—making it particularly relevant for analysing brand responses to controversial issues such as the pro-Palestinian boycott. Unlike traditional branding theories that focus primarily on reputation or consumer engagement, CDA enables researchers to uncover the hidden power structures and ideological positions embedded in brand messages. When integrated with Holt's (2022 b) theory of value-driven branding, CDA provides a more nuanced framework to examine how brands articulate moral positioning and cultural values amid global political tensions. Therefore, CDA not only fills a theoretical gap in the study of brand communication in crisis, but also enriches our understanding of how narratives operate as ideological tools in contested public discourse.

Southeast Asia's Response to Geopolitical Conflicts: The Case of Boycotts

In Southeast Asia, geopolitical conflicts—such as the Israel-Hamas war—have spurred boycotts against multinational brands perceived to support one side of the conflict. According to Retail Asia (2024), consumers in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia, have actively participated in boycotts of global brands deemed pro-Israel. In Indonesia, Reuters (2025) reported that Unilever faced a significant decline in market share, with many consumers switching to local brands perceived to be more ethically aligned with their values. This situation shows how political perceptions can shape consumer purchasing decisions and influence the market performance of multinational companies.

The boycott movement has also created an opening for local brands in Southeast Asia to capture market share. As highlighted by The Halal Times (2024), local brands like Almaz Fried Chicken in Indonesia and Malaysia have taken advantage of this opportunity to appeal to consumers seeking alternatives to boycotted international brands. This shows how political

dynamics can enable local brands to strengthen their market presence by aligning their messaging with local consumer values.

Crisis Communication Strategies: The Importance of Cultural Sensitivity

In the wake of a boycott and reputational crisis, companies must develop a crisis communication strategy that is culturally sensitive and ethically responsible. Coombs and Holladay (2020), in The Handbook of Crisis Communication, emphasize the importance of tailoring response strategies to the type and public perception of the crisis. This approach suggests that effective crisis communication must not only address the crisis itself but also consider the cultural and social context in which the brand operates.

The use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as outlined by Van Dijk (2020) in his work Discourse and Knowledge: A Sociocognitive Approach, allows researchers to explore how brands frame their narratives in response to socio-political crises. By analyzing brand communications through CDA, researchers can uncover hidden ideologies, power structures, and rhetorical strategies that brands use to shape public perception and manage their reputation.

Moreover, de Mooij (2021), in Global Marketing and Advertising: Understanding Cultural Paradoxes, stresses the importance of cultural sensitivity in global brand communications. Messages that resonate in one country may be misunderstood or even rejected in another, especially when cultural norms and values differ. Therefore, brands must adapt their communication strategies to local expectations, avoiding mistakes that could exacerbate reputational damage and further alienate consumers.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is to analyse content published by multinational brands to examine how they manage their brand narratives during and after calls for boycotts, as well as how they strive to remain relevant to local cultural values (Silverman, 2020). Hence, this research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze global brand narratives in the context of the pro-Palestinian boycott movement in Southeast Asia. Qualitative research investigates how people feel or think about a particular topic or institution (Yao, Tugiman, & Sharipudin, 2024) and produce a narrative, descriptive description of a place or activity (Ancheta, 2025) is valuable and allows for a detailed description and analysis of the research topic without limiting the scope of the study (Sharipudin, Md. Rejab, Tugiman, Indiyati, & Andriani, 2024). This approach was chosen as it enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political phenomena influencing brand communication.

The data sources in this research consist of secondary which includes documents that have been published and are publicly available. Secondary data sources may include documents, archives, notes, and pictured res regarding health communication (Andriani, 2022), or advertisements, press releases, social media posts, and company annual reports for marketing communication materials (Babbie, 2021). In addition, secondary data also includes news articles, analyst reports, and publications that discuss public reactions to brands involved in boycotts. These data are analysed to identify key themes in the brand narrative relating to boycotts and protests.

The validity and reliability of the data are maintained using data triangulation. By comparing different types of data sources—such as marketing materials, media reports and related articles—data triangulation ensures that the data used is rich and representative and

allows researchers to ensure that the analysis carried out is systematic and transparent to avoid bias in data interpretation (Flick, 2020).

In practice, data triangulation was applied by systematically collecting and comparing corporate press releases, official brand social media content, and independent media coverage related to the boycott events across Southeast Asia. For example, Starbucks' official statement on its Indonesian website was cross-referenced with consumer responses captured in media articles (e.g., *Populix*, 2023) and sentiment analyses from social media platforms. Similarly, Coca-Cola's CSR campaigns were evaluated by examining both company-issued documents and third-party reports on consumer reactions in different cultural contexts, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. This multi-perspective analysis ensured that brand messaging was not interpreted in isolation, but rather understood within the broader socio-political discourse and public reception. Through this triangulated approach, the study confirms that the interpretations drawn from Critical Discourse Analysis are grounded in diverse and corroborated data sources, enhancing both analytical rigor and contextual validity.

This study uses techniques of content analysis and document analysis for the data collection. Content analysis is used to identify and analyze messages conveyed by brands through various communication channels, such as television advertising, digital advertising and social media. Document analysis is carried out on written documents published by companies and the media, including press releases related to the boycott, as well as company annual reports which include sections related to responses to this socio-political issue (Neuendorf, 2017).

The selection of data for analysis is based on criteria purposive sampling, namely selecting sources that are relevant to the research objectives. Data selection criteria included: (1) marketing communications materials published by brands involved in the boycott, (2) media reports and publications that discuss the impact of the boycott on the brand, and (3) materials that provide insight into the brand's response to the boycott. The selected data covers a certain time period, namely from the beginning of the call for a boycott to the latest developments in the company's marketing campaign (Creswell, 2014). The data analyzed in this section spans the period between October 2023 and March 2025. This timeframe was purposively selected to capture the evolution of brand narratives across 18 months of socio-political developments following the outbreak of the Israel–Palestine conflict. It enables the observation of longitudinal changes in corporate communication strategies, especially in response to intensified boycott movements and public sentiment shifts in Southeast Asia.

After data collection, data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis to identify emerging themes in the brand narrative. The thematic analysis process includes data coding, searching for significant patterns, and identifying themes related to brand image management, crisis communication, and cultural values. Braun and Clarke's (2021) step-by-step guide is referred to in the analysis process, namely familiarisation with data, coding, identification of themes, and synthesis of identified themes, to conclude implications for global brand communications.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) plays a central role in this study to uncover ideologies, power structures, and social contexts embedded in global brand communications amid the pro-Palestinian boycott movement. CDA allows researchers to reveal how multinational companies construct their brand messages by considering sensitive socio-political issues. The analysis follows Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional framework:

1. Textual Analysis: examines the language, metaphors, and symbols used by brands to identify how language choices reflect ideologies and influence public perception.
2. Discursive Practice: investigates how brand narratives are produced and distributed through channels like social media, advertising, or press releases, and how brands manage public opinion and reputational risks.
3. Social Practice: explores broader ideological and social contexts, including power relations and how brands respond to pressure from pro-Palestinian consumers.

Using CDA, this study aims to reveal the hidden ideologies and power dynamics within brand communications when addressing sensitive issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict (Fairclough, 2015). In the context of boycotts, CDA is used to assess how brands respond to criticism by manipulating language and symbols to maintain their positive image and respond to pressure from consumers who support Palestine (van Dijk, 2021).

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Table 1: Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional framework construct brand messages

CDA Dimension	Analytical Focus	Example from Brand Communication	Source/Reference
Textual Analysis	Examines the language, metaphors, and symbols used by brands to identify how word choices reflect ideologies and influence public perception.	Starbucks uses phrases like *"diversity"*, *"inclusion"*, and *"peace"* to maintain neutrality.	Starbucks Indonesia (2023); Gates (2020)
Discursive Practice	Investigates how brand narratives are produced and distributed through social media, advertisements, press releases, and how they shape reputational discourse.	Coca-Cola amplifies community support via local CSR campaigns in Malaysia and the Philippines.	The Coca-Cola Company (2021); Tan & Lim (2019)
Social Practice	Explores broader ideological and social contexts, including power relations and public expectations of ethical clarity.	Unilever's sustainability messaging avoids direct reference to Palestine but emphasizes global values.	Unilever Indonesia (2023)

Through this framework, CDA reveals how language and narrative structure serve as tools for brands to manage public opinion while navigating socio-political tension. In this context, corporate silence, selective messaging, and generalized appeals to universal values are interpreted as rhetorical strategies to preserve brand legitimacy and market presence (van Dijk, 2021).

By incorporating document analysis alongside content analysis, this CDA approach enables a systematic comparison of brand discourse across different Southeast Asian markets, linking linguistic patterns to ideological functions and cultural reception.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of a critical discourse analysis of Starbucks, Coca-Cola, and Unilever in responding to the pro-Palestinian boycott in Southeast Asia. To ensure analytical depth and methodological rigor, this study employed both content analysis and document analysis as complementary techniques to examine brand communication during the pro-Palestinian boycott movement. Content analysis was used to systematically code and interpret explicit messages, keywords, and symbolic language embedded in social media posts, corporate press releases, and advertisements. This method enabled the identification of recurring rhetorical patterns, such as themes of neutrality, diversity, and solidarity, which were prevalent across brand communications. Document analysis, on the other hand, was used to evaluate written materials such as corporate sustainability reports, public statements, and third-party publications, including news articles and industry reports. The integration of these two techniques followed established qualitative research procedures (Neuendorf, 2017; Babbie, 2021), ensuring that interpretations were grounded in verifiable textual sources rather than anecdotal or narrative assumptions.

In practice, the researchers collected and analyzed over 40 documents, including Starbucks Indonesia's official statement on Gaza (2023), Coca-Cola's corporate values page (The Coca-Cola Company, 2021), Unilever's 2022/2023 Sustainability Report, and media coverage from Reuters (2025) and Populix (2023). Each brand's communication materials were reviewed longitudinally from October 2023 to March 2025 to capture temporal shifts in tone, emphasis, and strategic framing. For example, content analysis of Starbucks' social media posts revealed consistent use of inclusive language ("diversity," "peace," "shared humanity"), which was juxtaposed with document analysis of consumer reactions and boycott calls in Indonesian and Malaysian news outlets. This methodological triangulation enabled the validation of discourse interpretations within broader socio-political and cultural contexts, reinforcing the empirical credibility of the study's findings.

It examines how each brand shapes its narrative amid Muslim-majority socio-political sensitivities, focusing on the messages conveyed and the underlying ideological meanings.

The Starbucks Brand Narrative in the Midst of the Pro-Palestinian Boycott Movement

Starbucks has encountered sustained boycotts in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, due to perceived affiliations with Israel. These tensions intensified following viral social media posts alleging past support by former CEO Howard Schultz for Israeli causes. In response, Starbucks issued a statement on its official Indonesian website clarifying: "Neither Starbucks nor its former CEO, Howard Schultz, provides financial support to the Israeli government or military in any way" (Starbucks Indonesia, 2023). The brand reiterated its position as a non-political organization and emphasized its commitment to ethical sourcing, diversity, and inclusion.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, such phrasing reflects strategic ambiguity—a discursive practice that maintains brand image while avoiding explicit ethical positions (van Dijk, 2021). The use of universalist language such as "diversity" and "peace" allows Starbucks to signal social responsibility while deflecting politically charged demands.

This linguistic neutrality, however, may be read by politically conscious consumers as a form of ideological silence—an intentional avoidance of moral clarity amid humanitarian crises.

In the Indonesian context, this strategy faced significant backlash. A Populix survey conducted in November 2023 found that 65 % of Muslim respondents supported the Indonesian Ulema Council's fatwa urging a boycott of Israel affiliated products (Populix, 2023). This indicates that audiences in politically sensitized regions may interpret brand silence as passive complicity, expecting stronger moral alignment rather than neutral messaging.

Table 2 presents a comparative overview of Starbucks' brand communication strategies, public reactions, and their impacts on business performance in five Southeast Asian countries amidst the pro-Palestinian boycott movement. It highlights how varying degrees of political neutrality and cultural inclusivity influence consumer behavior and business stability in Muslim-majority and diverse markets.

In Indonesia, Starbucks faced strong backlash due to its perceived alignment with Israel, despite its neutral stance. The country's majority-Muslim population fueled ongoing boycotts. The brand's CSR efforts, including campaigns on diversity and support for local businesses, have not fully mitigated the negative perception. Many consumers shifted to local alternatives (Sudirman, 2020; Putra, 2021).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, public response was moderately strong. Some groups supported the boycott, while others remained loyal. Starbucks adapted by emphasizing cultural diversity and conducting inclusive campaigns. These efforts were more positively received than in Indonesia, though customer numbers have declined at some outlets (Gates, 2020; Putra, 2021).

In Brunei, reactions were milder. The public discourse around the boycott was less intense, allowing Starbucks to maintain operations with minimal disruption. The brand focused on non-political CSR efforts centered on education and diversity (Sudirman, 2020).

Beyond these three countries, Singapore and the Philippines presented more tolerant markets. In Singapore, a multicultural and globalised society, the boycott had minimal impact. Starbucks' international image remained strong, with business continuing steadily (Tan & Lim, 2018). In the Philippines, the brand's values of diversity and inclusivity resonated with consumers, enabling Starbucks to maintain growth despite political criticism (Gonzales, 2019).

Strategically, Starbucks applies image building theory and value-based communication to reinforce a politically neutral yet socially inclusive identity (Kotler & Keller, 2016). The brand consistently projects itself as supportive of universal values like peace and diversity to appeal across cultural boundaries.

However, from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, this language of neutrality masks ideological silence (van Dijk, 2020). Rather than confronting public moral concerns directly, Starbucks deploys depoliticized discourse to safeguard its global market presence. These strategies reflect dominant capitalist ideologies that privilege brand stability over ethical clarity. Starbucks' use of non-confrontational messaging amid political controversy illustrates how global corporations can instrumentalize inclusive rhetoric to absorb dissent without altering their position. Despite CSR efforts, boycotts—particularly in politically sensitive regions—highlight the limits of symbolic communication when ethical positioning is demanded.

Table 2: Starbucks' strategic responses and business impacts in selected Southeast Asian countries

Country	Respons Starbucks	Market Response	Impact on Business Growth
Indonesia	Affirm political neutrality and commitment to diversity	Widespread boycott of Muslim consumers, especially among certain communities	Sales decline among Muslim consumers, but there are still loyal Starbucks fans from non-Muslim groups (Gates, 2020)
Malaysia	Adapt messages of cultural diversity and inclusivity to local values	Protests were moderate, but not as large as in Indonesia	The impact is milder compared to Indonesia, there is still customer loyalty and the success of CSR campaigns among consumers from various backgrounds (Kassim & Zain, 2019)
Brunei	Focus on cultural diversity and inclusivity, trying to maintain a positive image	The backlash to the boycott was smaller, but there remained tensions within some communities	Business growth is relatively stable, with support from more moderate and diverse consumers (Al-Mashaqbah & Al-Badi, 2021)
Singapore	Focus on the values of inclusivity and diversity, committed to global CSR	Boycott reactions are less pronounced, consumers are more supportive of diversity	Business growth is steady, with many consumers from international backgrounds supporting Starbucks (Tan & Lim, 2018)
Philippines	Emphasizing political neutrality and diversity as part of CSR	Despite criticism, society generally supports diversity	Stable growth with little negative impact, many consumers like the Starbucks brand (Gonzales, 2019)

The Coca-Cola Brand Narrative in the Midst of the Pro-Palestinian Boycott Movement

The pro-Palestinian boycott against multinational brands such as Coca-Cola has challenged corporate communication strategies, particularly in Muslim-majority regions. While Coca-Cola has attempted to maintain a neutral stance by emphasizing values of diversity and social responsibility (The Coca-Cola Company, 2021), evidence from Southeast Asia suggests that such a narrative yields varied results depending on local sensitivities. As Benoit (2015) argues in his Image Repair Theory, neutrality alone may fail when public sentiment is driven by identity politics and humanitarian solidarity.

In Indonesia, public response to Coca-Cola's neutrality was largely negative. Despite launching campaigns that promote social solidarity, many consumers perceived the company as indirectly supporting Western political agendas. This perception led to declining sales in several provinces, showing that value-based branding is not always effective when confronting religiously charged emotions (Putra, 2021).

In Malaysia, however, Coca-Cola adopted a more localized narrative. The brand emphasized support for small businesses and community cohesion, which helped maintain consumer trust. As Tan and Lim (2019) found, local embeddedness in branding—highlighting shared cultural and social values—can soften resistance during politically sensitive times.

The Brunei market presented a different dynamic. The response to the boycott was relatively limited, in part due to Coca-Cola's CSR programs focusing on sustainability and education. Sudirman (2020) notes that such apolitical, community-oriented initiatives were

instrumental in preserving brand trust, particularly in a conservative society where overt political messaging is avoided.

In Singapore and the Philippines, Coca-Cola leveraged its progressive identity through messaging centered on inclusivity, pluralism, and empowerment. In Singapore, consumers responded positively to sustainability-focused campaigns, reinforcing emotional loyalty to the brand (Wong & Lee, 2018). In the Philippines, Coca-Cola's emphasis on educational and grassroots CSR initiatives was perceived as genuine and empathetic, counteracting boycott sentiment (Salazar, 2020).

These country-level findings demonstrate that contextualized, value-driven communication strategies are more effective than a universal narrative of neutrality. As Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasize, brand communication must align with cultural expectations and emotional realities to retain consumer loyalty during crises. Coca-Cola's experience in Southeast Asia reflects the broader necessity for multinational brands to localize their brand narratives not only in form, but also in emotional substance. The following Table 3 summarises Coca-Cola's response to the pro-Palestinian boycott movement in various Southeast Asian countries and its impact on business growth:

Table 3: Coca-Cola's communication strategies and market impact in Southeast Asia

Country	Coca-Cola responds	Impact on Business Growth
Indonesia	Affirm neutrality and focus on CSR campaigns with the theme of diversity and solidarity.	**Sales decline in several regions, especially among Muslim consumers who feel resistance to brand neutrality.**
Malaysia	Develop narratives that are more tailored to local values such as social togetherness and support for small businesses.	**Successfully maintained market stability and reduced negative sentiment by demonstrating sustainability and concern for local communities.**
Brunei	Focus on CSR programs that emphasize sustainability and education without highlighting political narratives.	**Reaction to the boycott was relatively smaller, and Coca-Cola's image as a social partner supporting the development of local communities remained intact.**
Singapore	Using a narrative of diversity, inclusivity and social responsibility in a progressive brand identity.	**Build loyalty through campaigns that align with social values and a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Positive impact on brand image.**
Philippines	Launch a CSR program targeting education and community empowerment.	**Gain public sympathy by launching programs that show empathy and attention to social needs, which strengthens the brand image.**

Table 3 clearly illustrates that Coca-Cola's context-specific CSR responses influenced brand stability in Southeast Asia. In markets like Malaysia and the Philippines, where CSR initiatives aligned with local values and community empowerment, brand loyalty remained intact or even improved (Tan & Lim, 2019; Salazar, 2020). Conversely, in Indonesia, the general narrative of neutrality and diversity failed to resonate with public emotion, especially among Muslim consumers, resulting in a tangible decline in regional sales (Putra, 2021). This suggests that uniform branding strategies fall short under emotionally charged geopolitical issues.

The Unilever Brand Narrative in the Midst of the Pro-Palestinian Boycott Movement

The boycott movement against multinational products, including Unilever, sparked by solidarity with Palestine, presents significant communication challenges for these brands in Southeast Asia (Al-Harahsheh et al., 2024). As a global company that markets a variety of consumer products, including food, personal care and household products, Unilever is faced with different social and political dynamics in each country. In the midst of this boycott movement, Unilever chose to maintain its brand narrative by emphasising its commitment to sustainability, diversity and inclusivity, while still avoiding direct involvement in international political conflicts (Kim & Sung, 2023).

In the context of Southeast Asia, which consists of countries with diverse political and cultural sensitivities, Unilever's response to the Palestine boycott reflects the company's efforts to maintain its image as a brand that cares about social issues without getting caught up in political controversies that could be detrimental (Sulaiman & Azmi, 2023). Most countries in the region have Muslim-majority populations, with great attention to the Palestinian issue. Therefore, Unilever's communication approach in this region is expected to be more responsive to local values and political sensitivities (Hidayat & Rahman, 2024).

In Indonesia, calls for a boycott of Western products, including Unilever, are getting stronger along with increasing solidarity with Palestine (Ainiyah, 2024). Unilever adopts a communication strategy based on social values, such as diversity and inclusion, without directly touching on political issues. This company emphasises the importance of sustainability in every product and corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaign it carries out (Unilever Indonesia, 2023). However, the boycott of global brands continues to influence sales declines in several market segments, especially among Muslim consumers (Al-Qurtuby, 2023).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, Unilever introduced a communications strategy tailored to local social and political needs. This brand focuses on sustainability and contribution to local communities by implementing various CSR programmes (Unilever Indonesia, 2023). This allows Unilever to build an image as a brand that cares about the country's social and economic future without getting caught up in political conflicts. The public response in Malaysia is relatively positive because Unilever has succeeded in positioning itself as an entity that not only cares about the environment, but also local socio-economic conditions (Chong & Liew, 2024).

As a country with a cosmopolitan population, Singapore provides a more open response to the narrative of diversity and social responsibility. Unilever utilises cultural diversity as an opportunity to promote inclusivity in its brand communications (Lee, 2024). Their CSR programme focuses on education and poverty reduction, as well as developing environmentally friendly products, which has succeeded in strengthening consumer loyalty and reducing the negative impact of boycotts.

In the Philippines, the concern is on community empowerment. Unilever launched various CSR initiatives that focus on community empowerment and education (Torres & De Guzman, 2024). Although boycotts of global brands also occur, Unilever's real concern for local communities has strengthened their brand image as a socially responsible entity.

In Thailand and Vietnam, Unilever is taking a similar approach—emphasizing sustainability and positive impacts on society and the environment. Even though there is no major boycott, this value-based approach is still relevant in managing consumer perceptions

(Nguyen & Suksomboon, 2023). By avoiding political confrontation, Unilever is able to maintain its position in the market.

Unilever's communication strategy in addressing the boycott can be understood through Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 2015) and the Value-Driven Branding approach (Holt, 2022 a). By emphasising narratives of sustainability and social values, Unilever attempts to uphold its brand image while avoiding political entanglements that could jeopardize legitimacy in the Southeast Asian market. Cultural sensitivity and alignment with local values—especially in nations deeply concerned about the Palestinian issue—become essential for sustaining consumer trust (Zhou et al., 2024).

The broader boycott against multinational brands like Unilever highlights the necessity for adaptive and context-aware communication. While Unilever positions itself through rhetoric of diversity and responsibility, effectiveness depends on consistency between message and practice (Kaur & Tan, 2023). This aligns with what de Mooij (2021) refers to as globalized localization: using global themes such as inclusivity and sustainability, localized with cultural cues to foster resonance. However, many Muslim consumers remain skeptical when such narratives lack explicit ethical solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

The Brand Narrative Model in Facing Pro-Palestinian Boycotts in Southeast Asia

The responses of Starbucks, Coca-Cola, and Unilever to the pro-Palestinian boycott in Southeast Asia reflect key principles from Image Repair Theory and Value-Driven Branding. Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 2015) explains how brands seek to restore their reputation during crises by employing strategies such as emphasizing neutrality, promoting diversity, and highlighting CSR initiatives. Starbucks and Coca-Cola notably avoided taking sides in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, instead reinforcing messages of inclusivity. However, this neutrality is often perceived as insincere, especially among Muslim consumers who expect a clearer moral stance from global brands.

Meanwhile, Value-Driven Branding offers insight into how brands incorporate social values—such as sustainability, empowerment, and diversity—into their communication to stay relevant in politically sensitive contexts. Unilever exemplifies this by aligning its messaging with local values in markets like the Philippines and Malaysia. Yet, both frameworks reveal limitations in highly politicized environments. In countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, where humanitarian concerns are closely tied to religious and political identity, brands that avoid explicit ethical positioning risk alienating consumers. Starbucks' continued backlash, despite its CSR efforts, underscores that in such contexts, neutrality may not be enough.

As seen in Table 4, the responses of Starbucks, Coca-Cola, and Unilever to pro-Palestinian boycotts reveal a deliberate use of neutral and inclusive language to avoid political entanglements. While their statements emphasise values like "diversity" and "non-alignment," they sidestep the ethical demands of consumers seeking moral clarity. This strategy reflects not active mediation, but strategic avoidance—portraying an ethical image without addressing the core humanitarian issue at hand.

From a Faircloughian lens, such discourse functions as a hegemonic tool that maintains ideological dominance through sanitised, "safe" language. Rather than confronting polarizing topics, brands deploy neutral rhetoric to diffuse dissent and preserve legitimacy. In the digital age, this becomes a way to control the narrative, muting public resistance while maintaining a façade of ethical responsibility.

These discursive practices are rooted in the logic of global capitalism, where brand narratives are carefully curated to appeal to multiple audiences without risking market loss. The use of inclusive rhetoric serves as an ideological shield, concealing the prioritization of profit over justice. Viewed through critical discourse analysis, these responses are not just PR strategies, but mechanisms for sustaining corporate power amid growing socio-political unrest.

Table 4: Critical discourse analysis of brand narratives amid pro-Palestinian boycotts

Brand	Text (Linguistic/Discourse Level)	Discursive Practice (Production, Distribution, Consumption of Discourse)	Social Practice (Ideology & Power Structures)
Starbucks	"Starbucks does not take a position on any geopolitical conflicts."	This official statement is produced to calm public pressure and boycott virality. It is disseminated via social media and the brand's official website.	**Reflects the corporate strategy of neutrality aligned with the ideology of global capitalism, where profit outweighs moral responsibility.**
Coca-Cola	"We are committed to diversity and our global communities."	Delivered through CSR messaging in response to boycott discussions. This discourse is consumed by audiences in politically sensitive regions.	**Reproduces the ideology of superficial corporate harmony, concealing passive complicity in global injustices.**
Unilever	No direct statement; some sub-brands like Ben & Jerry's have expressed pro-Palestinian views.	A contradiction in discursive practice emerges: the parent company remains silent, while some sub-brands speak out, creating a complex brand identity dynamic.	**Represents the hybrid corporate ideology, maintaining markets while allowing "controlled activism" to appeal to younger and progressive consumers.**

In the aftermath of the 2023 Israel–Palestine conflict, pro-Palestinian boycotts in Southeast Asia exposed the limitations of neutrality for global brands. The Brand Narrative Model introduced in this study, as seen in Figure 1, argues that in Muslim-majority markets, moral ambiguity and generic messaging deepen consumer distrust. Brands like Starbucks, Coca-Cola, and Unilever discovered that apolitical stances fail to resonate where cultural empathy and ethical clarity are expected. The model emphasises that narrative power now lies in messages rooted in local values, collective pain, and solidarity ethics.

Reframing brand communication as a form of socio-political engagement, the model advocates for ethical storytelling that reflects authenticity, justice, and respect for cultural identity. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals that ideological silence or reliance on abstract global values risks alienation in emotionally charged markets. Instead of crisis-driven apologies, brands must adopt culturally embedded narratives to rebuild trust. In politically sensitive regions like Southeast Asia, brand resilience now depends on moving from neutrality to moral engagement, and from symbolic inclusion to authentic, value-aligned solidarity.

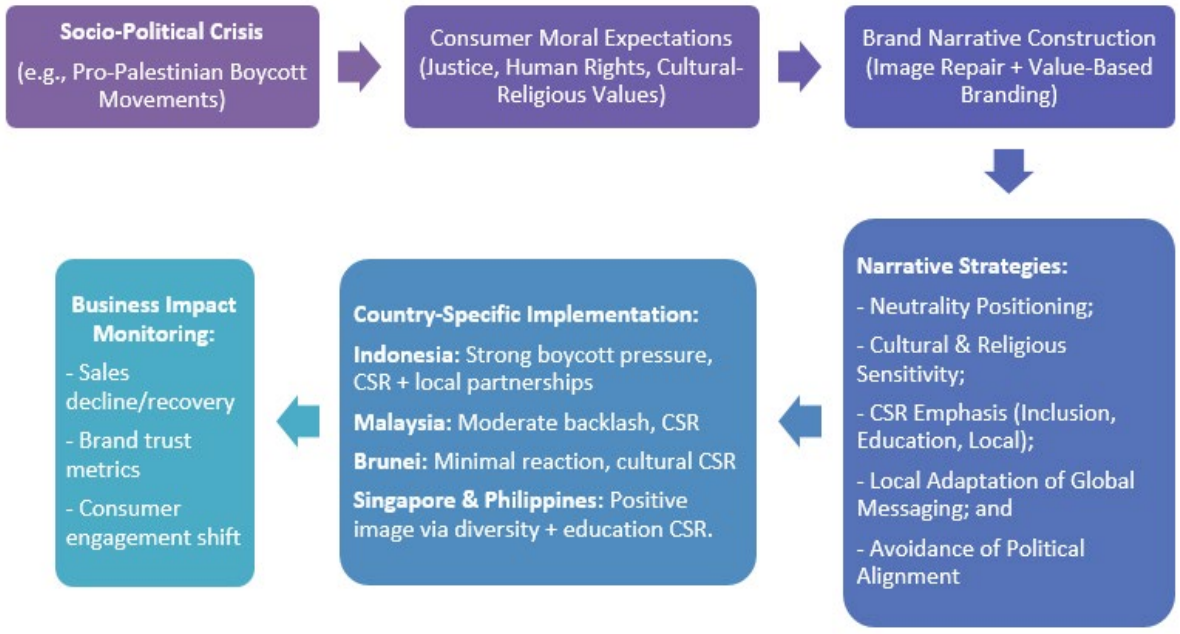


Figure 1: Brand Narrative Model in Pro-Palestinian Boycotts in Southeast Asia
Source: Author's data processing (2025)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study critically examines how global brands, specifically Starbucks, Coca-Cola, and Unilever, navigate their communication narratives in response to pro-Palestinian boycott movements in five Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and the Philippines. By employing critical discourse analysis, the research uncovers the ideological frameworks, rhetorical strategies, and cultural assumptions embedded in brand communications. The findings highlight the challenges the three global brands face in balancing political neutrality with the evolving values of Muslim consumers, and the broader expectations of ethical brand activism. Through analysis of language, symbolism, and silence, the study reveals how these narratives align—or clash—with public expectations of ethical clarity and cultural relevance.

This study has several limitations that need to be noted. First, because it only uses secondary data, the results of this research may not cover all aspects of brand communication involved in the boycott issue. Second, although content analysis provides an in-depth picture of marketing strategy, this research will not be able to reveal internal views from the company, such as managerial decisions taken regarding brand communications. Nonetheless, this study still makes a valuable contribution to understanding how brands navigate the boycott crisis and society's response to the narratives conveyed, and ultimately contributes to the development of a culturally sensitive and ethically grounded model of cross-cultural crisis communication that aligns with the socio-political sensibilities of the Global South.

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