

Mapping Moral Frames: A Qualitative Analysis of Malaysian Media Coverage of the McDonald's Boycott

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Malaysian news media morally framed the McDonald's boycott — sparked by McDonald's Israel's donations to the military — during the Israel-Palestine conflict in late 2023. Despite McDonald's Malaysia's clarifying its independence in the matter, consumer activism triggered notable reputational and economic losses. Drawing on Framing Theory and adopting a qualitative inductive content analysis of 48 online news articles between 13 October 2023 and 13 April 2024 from four Malaysian news outlets — Berita Harian, Sin Chew Daily, The Star, and Malaysiakini, the study identified six moral framing themes: victimizing workers, rational response to boycott triggers, effectiveness of boycott, selective boycotting, religious values, and freedom to boycott. Victimizing workers emerged as the dominant frame, highlighting the boycott's unintended harm to local employees. Additionally, selective boycott appeared exclusively in Sin Chew Daily, critiquing inconsistent consumer practices. Moreover, mainstream media emphasized victimizing workers and rational response to boycott triggers, whereas alternative media paired victimizing workers with freedom of boycott. The study highlights how different linguistic and ideological media deploy moral framing to navigate complex ethical narratives amid geopolitical events. By revealing the moral themes embedded in media discourse, the findings add to the literature on media framing of morality in multicultural societies.

Keywords: Consumer Boycott; Framing Theory; Inductive Content Analysis; Journalism; Moral Framing

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the moral framing in Malaysian media discourse on McDonald's boycott. The McDonald's Malaysia boycott was precipitated by the armed conflict between Israel and Gaza (Palestine) on 7 October 2023. In light of the warfare, McDonald's Israel publicly announced its donation to support the Israeli military. While this event quickly spread over social media, Malaysian consumers interpreted this action as corporate complicity in the Israeli war effort. Although McDonald's Malaysia immediately clarified its operation is independent of the Israeli franchise and emphasized its humanitarian contributions to Palestine, the brand received calls for a boycott. NGO body — Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) Malaysia — simultaneously circulated a boycott list, urging Malaysians to avoid the brands affiliated with Israel. This consumer activism consequently inflicted a tangible economic and social detriment on McDonald's Malaysia. The corporation reported an estimated RM6 million in aggregated losses, comprising RM3 million in revenue loss, RM1.5 million in employee layoff compensation, and RM1.5 million in material expiration cost (Zuhair, 2024). Beyond the financial damage, approximately 21,000 Malaysian employees — many of whom are from the lower-income group — faced condemnation for working at McDonald's (Focus Malaysia, 2023; M. S. Hassan, 2023). Simultaneously, the impact of the boycott also affected the food delivery riders (H. Hassan, 2023). Considering McDonald's Malaysia is a Muslim-owned company, the boycott raised by the Muslim community in Malaysia, in turn, distressed the Muslim employees (Busst, 2024).

Correspondingly, the media in Malaysia has observably demonstrated the moral evaluation of the McDonald's Malaysia (herein McDonald's) boycott. The moral framing of the McDonald's boycott centers on challenging the ethical basis of consumerism. Additionally, in the Malaysian context, public reactions to the boycott were often mediated by the interplay of religious identity (predominantly Islam), ethnic solidarity and rising nationalist sentiments, each of which shaped both popular outrage and media framing, reinforcing the boycott as not only an act of consumer activism but also a marker of communal values and political belonging (see Lim & Arif, 2024; Mulyono & Rolando, 2025; Nordin et al., 2024). The concept of moral (ethical) framing is a communication strategy that employs moral principles to influence attitudes and behavior, especially effective among individuals with high moral attributes (Mobayed & Sanders, 2022). The effect of moral framing occurs when “morally irrelevant differences in the way a scenario is presented affect people's moral intuitions regarding that scenario” (Demaree-Cotton, 2016: 1).

Despite its application across disciplines, it contributed to the body of knowledge in marketing and consumer behavior. For instance, Cabano & Attari (2023) demonstrated the significant impact of moral framing on consumer decisions when the product messaging aligns with consumers' moral values. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2023) explored the different moral framings that influenced consumer willingness to pay for greenhouse gas emission reductions by affecting their perception of freedom and choice. The paradox of consumer choice is another area where moral framing plays a critical role. Weingarten et al. (2024) examined consumer preferences for "bad" options, suggesting that moral framing could influence perceptions of entertainment value and quality standards. In terms of boycott actions, Bravo and Chapa (2024) tested high moral intensity news framing's positive effect on consumer boycott intention towards misconducted brands, with the frame's influence moderated by moral awareness and partially mediated by perceived moral intensity and moral judgment. Conversely, Rehren and Sinnott-Armstrong (2021) confirmed that moral judgments are vulnerable to moral framing effects.

Theories surrounding moral framing often intersect with those of ethical communication and narrative framing, suggesting a complex interplay between media content and audience interpretation (Souders & Dillard, 2014). Prominently, the Moral Foundational Theory (MFT) is frequently incorporated in studies of moral framing. Yang et al. (2024) argued that MFT is relevant to the concept of moral framing. MFT identified five commonly accepted human values, noted as moral foundations: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Haidt, 2008). In the context of consumer behavior, MFT is employed to understand how moral framing strategies influence marketing and brand loyalty. Moral framing in marketing can influence consumer perceptions of product ethics, enhancing brand loyalty when aligning with consumers' moral values (Mobayed & Sanders, 2022). Besides, brands that incorporate moral framing in their messaging can enhance consumer loyalty by resonating with the moral foundations of their target audience. This approach is particularly effective when brands emphasize care and fairness, which are universally valued (Feinberg et al., 2020). Additionally, Göral and Hannum (2024) highlighted that moral framing strategies that appeal to foundational values such as loyalty and authority significantly influence consumer behavior towards brands, suggesting the potential for targeted marketing strategies to enhance brand perception.

While Moral Foundational Theory is a mainstream framework in the works on moral framing, this study anchors on the theoretical framework of framing theory, particularly the model of framing analysis by Pan and Kosicki (1993). The two scholars proposed the

constructivist method to anatomize how news text frames public issues by determining the syntax, script, themes and rhetorics. The thematic structure of a news article identifies the dominant topics and how issues are conceptually grouped. As of this study, the study moral framing of the McDonald's boycott emphasizes moral evaluation in the thematic structure, reflecting Malaysian media's ethical judgment towards this issue. Relating to the context of framing morality, Entman (1993) suggests that media framing highlights certain elements of perceived reality to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. Highlighting the moral evaluation characteristic, Brugman (2024) reviewed that moral framing experiments use evaluative terms to cue audiences' moral judgments, though the operationalized "moral" language varies widely, with some highlighting obligations and duties, others spotlighting moral violations, reflecting the emotionally charged language in giving cues in morality. On the other hand, Atikcan and Hand's (2024) qualitative study on the perspective difference in news reporting demonstrated how differential moral evaluations guide public persuasion.

While recent studies determined the moral framing in social movements (e.g., Wang et al., 2023) and warfare (e.g., Parmelee et al., 2024), which are the two components of the McDonald's boycott, there is a lack of studies on moral framing of consumer boycotts, especially in multicultural societies. Therefore, grounded on the Framing Theory of the constructionist philosophy, this paper offers a qualitative content analysis to examine the moral framing of the McDonald's boycott within Malaysian news coverage. In this context, the present study answers the following research questions: (1) What are the major themes discussed by Malaysian news media in reporting the McDonald's boycott?; (2) How do the media narratives in the news coverage portray the McDonald's boycott?. Moral framing plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and motivating certain behaviors across different domains. Experimental work demonstrates that news frames can shift moral attitudes in highly moralized contexts (see Bravo & Chapa, 2024; Marttila & Koivula, 2025). Therefore, this study sheds light on understanding how Malaysian news media reported the McDonald's boycott to construct the readers' moral frames.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present study employed qualitative inductive content analysis to examine the moral framing in Malaysian media regarding the McDonald's boycott discourse. The qualitative content analysis unravels diverse concerning a particular issue, the subtle differences in interpretations given to phenomena, and the existing prevalent opinions within a setting

(Preiser et al., 2022). The inductive content analysis was implemented due to scarce previous studies that drew on the framing themes of consumer boycott under the moral foundation (see Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This study gathered online news articles from four reputable news media in Malaysia, three from the mainstream media — *Berita Harian* (Malay), *Sin Chew Daily* (Chinese), *The Star* (English), and one from the reputable alternative media — *Malaysiakini* (English). These media were selected for the high ranking of their reach and brand trust within their category of mainstream and alternative media (Nain, 2024). The different linguistic mainstream news media represented the three major linguistic communities in Malaysia, while the alternative news media added perspectives of the independent media.

The articles were collected through a purposive sampling with two criteria: (1) keywords and (2) timeframe. Aligning with the criteria, the articles were identified through the search engine in the official website of the respective news media, using the keywords “McDonald’s” and “boycott”. Subsequently, the results were filtered to ensure that the news coverage is reporting the McDonald’s boycott incident in Malaysia only. The articles on McDonald’s boycott in Malaysia from 13 October 2023 to 3 April 2024 were then selected for it comprised the beginning of McDonald’s Israel’s donation announcement and the subsequent fermentation of the incident. This six-month period was decided as no determining incident defined the end of the consumer boycott. Correspondingly, 48 online news articles were retrieved from the four news media portals. Each article in the corpus served as a unit of analysis and was coded to identify the moral framing present in coverage of the McDonald’s boycott. Using an inductive content analysis approach, the study examined the narratives and language employed across four selected news media outlets to uncover the underlying ethical considerations and moral values. Notably, a single article could contain multiple moral framing themes. These moral framing themes were synthesized through the content analysis, guided by Pan and Kosicki’s (1993) framing analysis framework. The findings were then interpreted within the context of Framing Theory. To prevent researcher bias, the present analysis practiced an inter-coder reliability test using Cohen’s Kappa Coefficient. Observing the intercoder reliability coding process suggested by O’Connor and Joffe (2020), the coding frame (i.e., a list of codes with respective definitions) was developed and applied to the data systematically. The intercoder agreement was represented by “0” and “1”, with “0” indicating disagree and “1” indicating agree. Cohen’s Kappa coefficient of the intercoder agreement of the codes derived from the present analysis read 0.81, which is interpreted as “almost perfect” based on the guide by Landis and Koch (1977).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

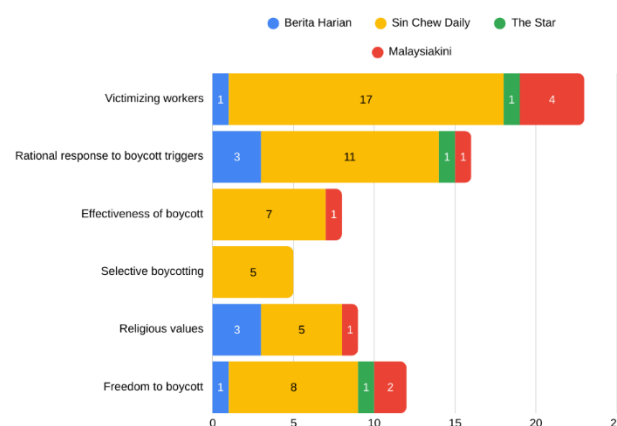
The inductive analysis of the 48 online news articles identified six moral framing themes: (1) victimizing workers, (2) rational response to boycott triggers, (3) effectiveness of boycott, (4) selective boycotting, (5) religious values, and (6) freedom to boycott.

Table 1. Moral Framing Themes for McDonald's Boycott.

Framing Theme	Berita Harian (N=6)		Sin Chew Daily (N=31)		The Star (N=3)		Malaysiakini (N=8)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Victimizing workers	1	16.67%	17	54.84%	1	33.33%	4	50.00%	23	47.92%
Rational response to boycott triggers	3	50.00%	11	35.48%	1	33.33%	1	12.50%	15	31.25%
Effectiveness of boycott	0	0.00%	7	22.58%	0	0.00%	1	12.50%	8	16.67%
Selective boycotting	0	0.00%	5	16.13%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	5	10.42%
Religious values	3	50.00%	5	16.13%	0	0.00%	1	12.50%	9	18.75%
Freedom to boycott	1	16.67%	8	25.81%	1	33.33%	2	25.00%	12	25.00%

Table 1 presents the analysis results across the four selected news media and reveals distinct patterns in the portrayal of morality in the McDonald's boycott coverage. In *Berita Harian* (N=6), the dominant moral framing was religious values and rational response to boycott triggers, each appearing in 50% (3 articles) of its coverage. *Sin Chew Daily* contributed the largest number of articles (N=31), has most frequently employed the moral framing of victimizing workers (54.84%, 17 articles), followed by rational response to boycott triggers (35.48%, 11 articles) and freedom to boycott (25.81%, 8 articles). *The Star* (N=3) presented a more balanced distribution across rational response to boycott triggers, freedom to boycott, and victimizing workers, with each theme appearing in 33.33% of its articles. Lastly, *Malaysiakini* (N=8) emphasized victimizing workers (50%) and freedom to boycott (25%).

Figure 1. Stacked Row Chart of Moral Framing in McDonald's Boycott



Source: Researcher Data, 2025

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of each moral framing theme. Across the coded instances of moral framing, victimizing workers emerged as the most common theme (47.92%, 23 articles), with nearly half of the coverage foregrounding the harm done to McDonald's and its employees in Malaysia. The next most common theme is Rational response to boycott triggers (31.25%, 15 articles), in which articles explained the careful evaluation of the actions and consequences of boycott. Freedom to boycott (25.00%, 12 articles), religious values (18.75%, 9 articles), effectiveness of boycott (16.67%, 8 articles) and selective boycotting (10.42%, 5 articles) were the less discussed themes.

Table 2. Comparison between Mainstream and Alternative News Media.

Framing Theme	Mainstream (N=40)		Alternative (N=8)	
	n	%	n	%
Victimizing workers	19	47.50%	4	50.00%
Rational response to boycott triggers	15	37.50%	1	12.50%
Effectiveness of boycott	7	17.50%	1	12.50%
Selective boycotting	5	12.50%	0	0.00%
Religious values	8	20.00%	1	12.50%
Freedom to boycott	10	25.00%	2	25.00%

Source: Researcher Data, 2025

Table 2 presents the comparison of moral framing between mainstream media (i.e., *Berita Harian*, *Sin Chew Daily*, *The Star*) and alternative media (i.e., *Malaysiakini*). Based on the analysis, both media showcased different ideological positioning in framing the morality of the issue. In terms of the framing focus, mainstream media emphasized victimizing workers (47.50%, 19 articles) and rational response to boycott triggers (37.50%, 15 articles), and alternative media highlighted victimizing workers (25.00%, 4 articles) and freedom to boycott (25.00%, 2 articles). While both media prioritized victimizing workers theme, the framing choices of alternative media focus on promoting labor rights and civil liberties, in contrast, mainstream media reflected a more cautious and institutionally-aligned approach to the issues. Ultimately, there are two notable findings: (1) victimizing workers emerged as the prevalent moral framing theme; (2) only *Sin Chew Daily* incorporated the selective boycotting theme.

DISCUSSION

Victimizing Workers

The victimizing workers theme focuses on portraying an entity as a victim of specific actions or incidents, aiming to elicit sympathy or understanding from the audience. In framing the McDonald's boycott, the news media in Malaysia primarily depict McDonald's and its workers as unjust casualties of the boycott's spillover effects. By framing McDonald's as a

victim, media outlets highlighted the adverse consequences of the boycott on entities whom not directly involved in the geopolitical issue at hand. For instance, *Sin Chew Daily* repeatedly emphasized how McDonald's Malaysia operates as a localized franchised business with no direct affiliation to the policies of its global headquarters, not to mention any involvement in the conflict in Palestine. This distinction was central to reports that sought to counter the allegation against the brand.

Besides, the victimizing workers theme extended the portrayal of McDonald's employees, many of whom are Malaysians dependent on their jobs for livelihood. Coverage such as *Sin Chew Daily's* “杯葛麦当劳对巴勒斯坦有何帮助? 戴子豪: 受苦的是大马人 (literal translation; How did boycott McDonald's help Palestine? Tai Zee How: It is the Malaysians who suffer)” and *Malaysiakini's* “*YOURSAY | Think of workers before boycotting any company*” foreground the economic hardships faced by the McDonald's workers due to declining sales and reputational damage resulted from the boycott movement. By presenting the employees as ordinary Malaysians who suffered disproportionately for a cause they have no control over, the reporting created a human figure with whom the readers could resonate.

The victimizing workers theme inherently seeks to evoke an emotional response from readers, encouraging them to sympathize with the workers who were portrayed as unjustly treated. By presenting McDonald's Malaysia and its workers as victims, news media effectively redirected the focus of the boycott's narrative from consumer activism to workers' economic welfare. This strategy aligns with Goffman's (1974) framing theory, which suggests that media frames organize experience and guide interpretations. This approach alerts the boycott participants and shifts their focus from the distant multinational activism of the Palestinian cause to the local workers' hardship induced by the boycott. Hence, the boycotters would reconsider their methods of expressing their solidarity with the Palestinians while preserving the local employees' welfare. In this case, the victimization of workers shifts the focus away from the mainstream boycott calls and toward their action's collateral damage, thus discouraging the boycott action, and illustrating a news media stance against the movement.

Notably, victimizing workers emerged as a prominent frame in the moral framing of the issue. This reflects the media's spotlight on the grass-roots of society to evoke sympathy. In Malaysia, it is commonly known that the workers from fast-food franchises often live on a low income. Consequently, by highlighting the reputational damage and lost sales that translated into reduced hours and potential layoffs for the workers, the news media tapped into the widespread anxieties about job security and financial welfare. Correspondingly, the media

positioned the workers as the victims and made the abstract geopolitical dispute into relatable news stories for Malaysian readers at a personal level.

Rational response to boycott triggers

The rational response to boycott triggers emphasizes logic, practicality, and evidence-based reasoning, portraying actions as sensible responses to a given situation. In the McDonald's boycott coverage, this framing of rationality was primarily used to assess the practical implications and outcomes of the boycott. In Kant's (1985/2008) "Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals", the famous philosopher proposed that morality is rooted in rational principles for determining moral duties. Likewise, the moral framing in Malaysian media utilized the rational response to boycott triggers theme to counteract the public's blinded sentiment to boycott McDonald's in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza.

The news media employed this theme to illustrate the boycott situation in Malaysia, constantly highlighting that McDonald's Malaysia operates independently of McDonald's Israel, suggesting that the boycott target was set wrongly in the first place. For example, the rational response to boycott triggers in *The Star's* "*McDonalds Malaysia says pursuing legal action against BDS for defamation*" and *Malaysiakini's* "*YOURSAY | Think of workers before boycotting any company*" incorporated the statements by McDonald's spokesperson and the general public to justify the local ownership of McDonald's. Notably, *Malaysiakini's* readers' comments article quoted the general public's statement, reflecting how a fraction of the public acknowledged McDonald's as a Malaysian-owned and -operated brand.

Additionally, the media coverage underscored the importance of responding to the boycott call based on reasoning rather than mere passion for the solidarity of the Palestinians. *Sin Chew Daily*, for instance, constantly incorporated the rational response to boycott triggers in its reporting through opinion-based articles. The writers of *Sin Chew Daily* have dedicatedly analyzed the situation of the entire socio-economic crisis, informing the readers in regards to the consequences of the boycott movement on social welfare. The prime focus of the coverage of *Sin Chew Daily* revolves around the antecedents and consequences of participating in the boycott call. *Sin Chew Daily* presented a joint effort of its opinion-based articles in interpreting the issue and suggesting not to participate in this brand boycott without acknowledging the negative effects of the action.

Effectiveness of Boycott

The effectiveness of a boycott emphasizes the outcome of an action or event, evaluating the success or failure of an initiative. In the case of the McDonald's boycott, it was employed to

question the effectiveness of the boycott movement in improving the welfare of the Palestinians. The effectiveness of the boycott theme was mainly used in the coverage of *Sin Chew Daily* and *Malaysiakini*. The news media highlighted the skepticism of the meaningfulness of the boycott to influence the Palestinian cause. In *Sin Chew Daily*, articles frequently examined the logistical and economic limitations of boycotting a single multinational corporation in achieving distant geopolitical goals. For instance, “杯葛麦当劳对巴勒斯坦有何帮助? 戴子豪: 受苦的是大马人 (literal translation: How did McDonald's help Palestine? Tai Zee How: It's Malaysians who suffer)” and “梁佩仪 | 杯葛就能停止战争吗? (literal translation: Leung Pui Yee | Will boycotting stop the war?)” questioned whether stop consuming McDonald's products in Malaysia could realistically pressure the company or its stakeholders to alter policies related to Palestine, noting that the brand's revenue from Malaysia constitutes a negligible fraction of its global earnings. Similarly, *Malaysiakini* provided a platform for voices that raised critical questions about the boycott's actual outcomes. In its readers' comments article “*YOURSAY | Think of workers before boycotting any company*”, the general public discussed that the boycott has left no effect on the warfare and humanitarian rights in Palestine, conversely, inducing a negative impact on the employees in the local McDonald's.

With the emphasis of the news media on the consequences that the workers faced, the framing of the effectiveness of the boycott towards the advocacy of Palestinians' rights thus demonstrated a negative narrative in portraying the boycott. This moral framing provokes a reassessment of the methods of supporting the Palestinian cause in a more direct manner. Correspondingly, this framing theme tames down the boycott narratives, directing the consumers from boycotting the local franchise to exploring solutions that preserve the efficacy and sentiment for the Palestinian cause.

Selective Boycotting

The selective boycotting that emerged from analyzed news articles underscores the perceived inconsistencies or contradictions in actions or principles, particularly in the treatment of different entities. In light of the present context, it highlighted how certain individuals who proclaim their full support in boycotting Israel/Jewish-affiliated brands and products to show solidarity for the situation in Palestine, yet still use certain Jewish-affiliated products. Correspondingly, the keyword for this frame genre is “selective”. It is notable that the use of selective boycotting only appeared in the coverage by *Sin Chew Daily*. One instance that *Sin Chew Daily* incorporated this news theme was in the article “杯葛麦当劳对巴勒斯坦有何帮

助? 戴子豪: 受苦的是大马人 (literal translation: How did McDonald's help Palestine? Tai Zee How: It's Malaysians who suffer)". In this report, *Sin Chew Daily* quoted a practicing lawyer who is also a current affairs commentator, questioning the rationale of such selective actions:

我不喜欢选择性的杯葛, 就像买麦当劳汉堡就被指是支持以色列, 但花几千令吉买苹果产品、玩脸书让脸书从广告中获利, 却没有说要杯葛。(literal translation: I don't like selective boycotting, like buying a McDonald's burger and being accused of supporting Israel, but spending thousands of Ringgits on Apple products and playing Facebook to make Facebook profit from advertising without saying that it wants to boycott.)
(*Sin Chew Daily*)

This statement sheds light on the inconsistencies in the boycott movement, where participants convincingly oppose some Israel-affiliated companies while still supporting others through their consumption patterns. This selective behavior weakens the moral high ground that boycotters claim to uphold, creating room for critiques about their sincerity and commitment to standing for Palestinian rights. Such framing aligns with Rim and Ferguson (2020) analysis of how highlighting double standards in activism can weaken its legitimacy by exposing internal contradictions.

Sin Chew Daily has also taken the opportunity to review the behaviors and stances of the political actors in Malaysia. Along with the discourse on selective boycotts, another topic that repeatedly appeared was the Mercedes-Benz cars purchased by the Kelantan state government. While the Malaysian government has officially announced its stance in supporting the rights of Palestinians, some political figures went a step ahead in urging Malaysians, especially Muslims, to stand firm in pursuing the rights of their compatriots in Palestine by boycotting Israel-associated goods. However, as the news regarding the purchase of Mercedes-Benz cars by the Kelantan state government was released, *Sin Chew Daily* published a few news articles that incorporated this event as a counter-argument for the pro-boycott voices. Articles such as “彭学良: 须先照顾国民 为巴勒斯坦人民祈祷 (literal translation: Peng Xueliang: We must take care of our people first and pray for the Palestinians)” and “陈珮敏 | 杯葛的意义何在? (literal translation: Chen Peimin | What's the point of boycotting?)” implied the perceived hypocrisy in advocating for boycotts while engaging in actions that contradict such stances. Thus, this framing theme questioned the consistency of the behavior with the values advocated by boycott proponents, reinforcing the notion that selective boycotting behavior lacks credibility.

Sin Chew Daily's unique approach to moral framing serves as a forum for more perspectival discussion of policy and ethics. Contrasted with other news media, *Sin Chew Daily* dwells on strategic contradiction, highlighting a distinct phenomenon by criticizing the double standard of the boycotters in this consumer activism. As a Chinese-language media, even though it may not reach the boycotters, it demonstrated an ethical interpretation to caution the readers on this logical fallacy, hence overthrowing the boycotters' standpoint to be in solidarity with the Palestinians.

Religious Values

The religious values theme describes the moral or ethical justification of actions, focusing on the alignment of actions with societal values and principles, often guided by religious teachings (Entman, 1993; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). In the McDonald's boycott coverage, religious values were applied to frame the boycott actions as a moral issue that should be given guidance.

In Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim country, religion often intersects with morality in news reporting. Since Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country, the topic of religion is often presented in the news media, positioning religious teaching as a subset of the morality framing. In the present boycott movement, religion has emerged as a unique cut-through point for the Malaysian news media in reporting the McDonald's boycott. For instance, the coverage by *Berita Harian* — “*Umat Islam wajib bantu Palestin, tapi perlu hati-hati boikot jangan aniaya...* (literal translation: Muslims are obliged to help Palestine, but must be careful to boycott and not persecute...)” and “*Syor perkenal garis panduan kepenggunaan Islam dalam isu boikot* (literal translation: Recommendation to introduce Islamic consumerism guidelines in the boycott issue)” — underscored the proper manners in responding to the boycott call in regards to Islamic teachings. As *Berita Harian* is a Malay language news media, the reporting of religious guidance was directly targeted at the boycotters from the Malay-Islam community. Besides, the term “Muslim” is constantly mentioned across the coverage, especially to clarify the ownership of McDonald's in Malaysia. This reiteration suggests that, while clarifying its ownership, it reminds the public (especially the boycotters of the Muslim community) that they are sabotaging their community through this consumer activism. Notably, *Malaysiakini* also quoted the spokesperson of McDonald's on “responsibility as Muslims” when discussing the conflicts in Palestine, drawing on the sentimental connections for the humanitarian effort in Gaza, exerting the same intention as the repeated emphasis of the term “Muslim”.

Moral concerns often serve as the “guiding force underlying the storyline” (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). In the present context, religious values not only highlight ethical considerations

but also suggest actionable steps for resolving moral dilemmas. By invoking moral principles, media outlets shape the public's responses to the boycott, encouraging actions that are consistent with the emphasized moral concerns (Rehren & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2021). Furthermore, religious teachings contribute significantly to shaping moral ideologies. As Elsayed et al. (2023) argue, religion provides a framework for navigating moral questions, making it a powerful tool in moral framing. In the case of the McDonald's boycott, this is particularly evident in how Islamic teachings were invoked to guide boycotters toward ethically sound practices.

Freedom to Boycott

The framing of freedom to boycott underscores the individual rights and autonomy to boycott a company. When employed in framing the McDonald's boycott, the freedom to boycott theme indicates that the consumers have the right to boycott the company based on their free will. It is a common theme incorporated by all the news media in the present study. The framing of freedom to boycott in the news media posits the boycott movement as a legitimate consumer action, observing the democratic values in Malaysia. However, the news media incorporated other values, besides the freedom of choice, in framing the McDonald's boycott. This framing was presented in two ways.

On one hand, McDonald's statement was cited to demonstrate the framing of freedom to boycott in the coverage of the legal conflict between McDonald's and BDS Malaysia. It stated: *"While we understand and respect that the act of boycotting is an individual decision, we believe that it should be based on true facts and not false allegations"* (The Star). From the statement, while McDonald's acknowledges consumers' freedom of choice, it emphasizes that boycott actions should be grounded on evident reasoning, implicitly urging the public to stop the boycott movement. On the other hand, the columnists and opinion writers from *Sin Chew Daily* also discussed the freedom to boycott when presenting the counter-narratives for framing the McDonald's boycott. Similar to the narratives of McDonald's statement during the legal dispute, the opinion-based articles from *Sin Chew Daily* repeatedly iterated the importance of evidence and rationality in performing their rights to boycott the brand to show solidarity with Palestine. The freedom to boycott theme neutralized the counter-narrative by respecting the boycott's rights of consumerism. This echoes Peterson and Leonhardt's (2015) argument, where empathizing and respecting how one's feelings enhance the effectiveness of the persuasion, thus introducing the news media's counter-narrative in a more acceptable manner. Accordingly, the news media altogether, emphasized the importance of rational actions,

meanwhile respecting the individual consumer rights in demonstrating their attitude towards the brand.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper examines the moral framing of the McDonald's boycott in Malaysia in 2023 grounded on six themes, namely religious values, rational response to boycott triggers, selective boycotting, effectiveness of boycott, freedom to boycott, and victimizing workers. These themes jointly reflected Malaysian media's moral evaluation of the brand boycott, echoing Entman (1993). The media's emphasis on McDonald's participation in the local community highlights the concern that targeting the local franchise may unjustly harm Malaysian workers and businesses. This morally anchored reporting attempts to balance the dominant boycott narrative with local socio-economic sensitivities amid a socio-politically charged brand crisis. The Malaysian McDonald's boycott case offers valuable insight into how media in multicultural countries navigate the ethical tensions between global consumer activism and local realities. It highlights the role of media not only as narrators of the consumer protest but also as ethical gatekeepers who shape the public discourse to mediate between international political sentiments and domestic socio-economic concerns. Therefore, Malaysia's media landscape contributes to a conversation on media ethics and the complex moral terrain of consumer boycotts in a multicultural context.

Theoretical Implications

By identifying the six distinct moral framing themes, this study extends moral framing literature into a multicultural setting like Malaysia. The predominance of the "victimizing workers" theme underscores how moral frames can generate counter-mobilization by diverting sympathy away from the intended cause of the boycott. This finding adds depth to the framing of societal issues by showing that high-intensity moral appeals may backfire when the media spotlight collateral damage rather than the original ethical protest. The findings demonstrate the interaction of moral principles with the consumer boycott sentiment amid brand crisis, and simultaneously shed light on media, cultural and public relations studies, suggesting the interdisciplinary of the study in consumer activism.

Managerial Implications

For the MNC's brand managers and public relations officers, the present study offers insights into the moral framing of brand crisis in a culturally and religious sensitive market. This research study inspires a crisis response strategy for MNC franchises under localized management to curate communications that resonate with local moral values, especially in

countries that emphasize beliefs. Brands operating in culturally and religiously diverse markets (e.g., Malaysia) could collaborate with a cultural specialist to ensure their public relations materials are seen as ethically sound and community-oriented. Accordingly, managers should monitor the emerging moral frames and respond swiftly with clear and evidence-based messages to mitigate misdirected boycotts.

Future Research

The present research examined the moral framing of the McDonald's boycott across Malaysian news media. The online news articles were analyzed in a constructionist manner, where all findings were corpus-driven. The present findings subsequently raised a question concerning the effect of a high moral intensity frame on a misdirected entity or implied in the news coverage in Malaysia, a misunderstood brand. Therefore, future studies can explore how framing with intense moral principles influences the consumer attitude and behavior in boycotting a misdirected through a quantitative experimental approach to test the effectiveness of such moral framing in constructing the readers' — especially the boycotter's — attitude towards the targeted brand.

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