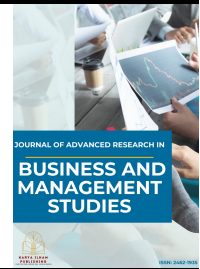




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Calming the Storm: How Crisis Response Strategy Defuse Halal Food Boycotts

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ABSTRACT

Crises related to Halal food pose significant challenges for businesses in Malaysia. Many organizations struggle with effective crisis management, particularly when Halal issues arise, which can lead to negative outcomes such as consumer boycotts. This research focuses on how crisis response strategies affect the relationship between crisis responsibility and consumer boycotting intentions during a Halal food crisis, with religion as a moderating factor. The research used an online experimental approach with a 3x4 between-subjects design, utilizing survey questionnaires for data collection. The experiment involved 180 respondents who were randomly assigned to four experimental treatment conditions, with 45 respondents in each condition. The findings indicate that organizations perceived to bear high crisis responsibility are at greater risk of facing consumer boycotts. Crisis response strategies were found to mediate the impact of crisis responsibility on boycotting intentions. Interestingly, no major differences were found between Muslims and non-Muslims in terms of how crisis response strategies influence boycotting behaviour at different levels of crisis responsibility. This study highlights the importance of implementing effective crisis response strategies to reduce the risk of consumer boycotts during Halal food crises.

1. Introduction

Crises are pivotal moments in the trajectory of organizations, often arising unexpectedly and proving difficult to resolve through routine management practices [1]. These events frequently catch organizations unprepared, leading to perceptions of stakeholder betrayal and producing severe consequences for both the organization and its publics [2]. Among the many types of crises, product-harm crises are particularly significant [3]. identify them as one of the most commonly reported categories, while Haas-Kotzegger and Schlegelmilch [4] highlight the universal vulnerability of

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companies to such crises. Food-related crises, in particular, tend to provoke the strongest public reactions.

In Muslim-majority contexts, the religious dimension adds further complexity to how product-harm crises are perceived and managed [5]. For Muslim consumers, the Halal status of food is central, intertwining issues of faith, safety, and health [6]. The concept of Halal, meaning permissible under Islamic law, ensures that food is prepared according to religious requirements, guaranteeing both safety and purity [7]. Bidin [8] stresses that Halal certification entails not only sourcing from permissible ingredients but also strict adherence to preparation and handling guidelines. According to the Halal Malaysia Official Portal (2023), Halal food must be free from prohibited elements, remain uncontaminated, and be prepared, processed, and stored using utensils and facilities in compliance with Islamic principles [9].

Although literature on product-harm crises is extensive, relatively little attention has been given to Halal-related crises. This gap is notable given the rapid global growth of the Halal sector [10]. The State of the Global Islamic Economy Report (2022) projects Muslim spending on food to increase from USD 1.19 trillion in 2021 to USD 1.67 trillion by 2025, with a compound annual growth rate of 7.1% [11]. Such growth highlights the global implications of Halal food crises, far beyond Muslim-majority societies. Malaysia, as a recognized leader in the global Halal food industry, faces unique challenges. Despite significant progress, the sector remains exposed to internal and external threats [12]. Instances of fraudulent Halal certification, reported by the Malaysian Ummah Halal Economy and Entrepreneurship Council, have eroded consumer confidence [13]. Several high-profile scandals demonstrate how a single Halal-related incident can escalate into an international crisis [14]. Religion intensifies these crises, making management especially challenging [15].

Recent scholarship indicates that issues surrounding Halal authenticity are becoming increasingly frequent and severe [14- 16]. Crises of credibility undermine consumer trust, weaken organizational equity, and destabilize stakeholder relationships [17-18]. The rapid dissemination of negative information through digital platforms further amplifies skepticism [19]. Because religious sensitivities often trigger consumer boycotts and activism, crisis responses must be carefully calibrated [20 - 21]. Religion has been shown to motivate behaviors such as protests, petitions, and long-term boycotts [22]. Moreover, religiosity strengthens consumer persistence in rejecting products perceived to contravene religious principles [23].

Crisis responsibility attribution plays a critical role in shaping reputational outcomes. When organizations are perceived as responsible for a crisis, reputational harm intensifies [24]. As Coombs and Holladay [25] argue, crisis response strategies—defined as actions and communications undertaken after a crisis [26]—influence how stakeholders interpret accountability and, ultimately, how the organization's image is preserved or damaged [27]. This is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where Halal-related crises consistently spark public concern. Studies confirm that consumer attitudes toward Halal products directly influence purchasing intentions [28] and that Halal certification, health, and safety remain central concerns [29]. For instance, Ibrahim et al. [30], show that Halal food awareness is shaped by packaging, certification logos, authoritative endorsement, and consumer attitudes.

Despite the prominence of the Halal industry, existing research on food-harm crises has largely neglected the intersection of Halal issues and crisis response strategies [31-32]. Yet consumer responses in Halal contexts are shaped not only by organizational responsibility but also by religious identity and values [19]. Findings in this area remain mixed. Some studies suggest rising non-Muslim acceptance of Halal products [33], while others highlight persistent resistance [34]. Importantly, Halal crises differ from typical business crises, as Muslims are religiously obligated to boycott products seen as contravening Islamic principles [35]. If left unmanaged, such crises may escalate into global

boycotts [36]. Thus, this study seeks to address a critical research gap by examining how crisis response strategies influence the relationship between perceived crisis responsibility and consumer boycotting intentions during Halal food harm crises, with religion tested as a moderating factor..

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This research employed an experimental design using a 3×4 between-subjects factorial structure to investigate the combined effects of crisis responsibility attribution (low, moderate, high) and crisis response strategies on organizational image and boycotting intention. The study was conducted online using survey questionnaires as the primary data collection tool. Four conditions were tested: a control group (voluntary recall only), Treatment 1 (voluntary recall with diminish), Treatment 2 (voluntary recall with rebuild), and Treatment 3 (voluntary recall with bolstering). This design enabled a systematic examination of how different strategies interact with crisis responsibility perceptions.

Participants were recruited through a non-random convenience sampling approach, deemed appropriate for experimental treatments due to its practicality and prior evidence of validity [37]. The sample of bread consumers identified through convenience sampling were randomly assigned to one of the four treatment groups to strengthen internal validity [38, 39]. Based on recommendations of a minimum of 15 participants per cell [40, 41], a sample of 180 respondents was targeted, with 45 individuals per group.

The stimulus was developed around a Halal bread crisis, reflecting bread's role as a staple in Malaysian households [42, 43]. The crisis materials were designed as mock news articles modeled on The Star newspaper, consistent with prior research [44]. Each article resembled an authentic news screenshot and was paired with organizational background information formatted as a corporate website. The scenario was based on the real-life High 5 Bakery case in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, which faced allegations of poor hygiene, illegal employment, and withdrawal of Halal certification [45]. Fictitious follow-up news articles were then created to reflect the assigned response strategies. Content validity was established through expert review by two crisis communication specialists, along with evaluation by a journalist and a journalism lecturer. A pretest with 24 students confirmed that the manipulations were clear and realistic.

The survey instrument included six sections: demographics, pre-crisis organizational image [46], crisis responsibility [47-48], crisis response strategy [49], post-crisis organizational image [46-50], and boycotting intention [51-52]. Instrument validity was further ensured through expert review.

The experiment was administered via 17 existing WhatsApp groups managed by the researcher. Each group was randomly assigned to a treatment condition, and members received an invitation message containing a survey link specific to their assigned condition. After providing informed consent and entering an email address (to prevent duplicate responses), participants were directed to the survey. Section A covered demographic information, organization background, and pre-crisis image assessment. Section B introduced the Halal bread crisis through a news article, followed by questions on crisis responsibility. Section C presented the organization's response (according to the treatment group) and included items assessing perceptions of the response strategy, post-crisis organizational image, and boycotting intention. Respondents were thanked upon completion and submitted their responses electronically.

2.2 Manipulation Check Results

The manipulation check confirmed that the Halal food harm crisis was clearly communicated. Descriptive analysis revealed that participants strongly agreed Breadiva was experiencing a crisis ($M = 6.79$, $SD = 0.51$), was involved in a Halal issue ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 1.37$), and faced a product-harm crisis ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.89$). These findings validate that the scenario was realistic and effectively presented.

A series of one-way ANOVAs further tested the effectiveness of the response strategy manipulations. For the voluntary recall strategy, no significant differences were observed across conditions ($F(3,23) = 1.42$, $p = .268$), confirming that this baseline strategy was consistently recognized. Significant differences emerged for the diminish strategy ($F(3,13) = 9.35$, $p < .001$), with post-hoc tests showing that only respondents in Treatment 1 (voluntary recall with diminish) correctly identified this response, confirming its successful manipulation. Similarly, the rebuild strategy produced significant differences ($F(3,23) = 43.99$, $p < .001$), with only participants in Treatment 2 (voluntary recall with rebuild) recognizing the strategy. Finally, the bolstering strategy was also effective, with significant differences observed ($F(3,23) = 16.85$, $p < .001$) and recognition limited to participants in Treatment 3. Collectively, these findings confirm that participants within each treatment condition were significantly more likely to identify the intended response strategy compared to those in other groups, validating the success of the manipulations.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Analysis

A total of 180 respondents participated in the experiment and were randomly assigned to four groups (Control, Treatment 1, Treatment 2, Treatment 3). All participants completed the questionnaires, with no missing data. The majority of the respondents were between 20 and 30 years old (47.8%), followed by those aged 31–40 (35.0%), 41–50 (9.4%), and 51 years and above (7.8%). In terms of gender, most respondents were female (70.6%), while 29.4% were male.

Regarding educational background, more than half of the respondents held a Master's degree (67.8%), followed by SPM/STPM holders (13.9%), PhD holders (8.3%), diploma holders (5.6%), and others (4.4%). For marital status, 51.1% were single and 47.8% were married, with a small proportion classified as others (1.1%).

In terms of ethnicity, Malays constituted the majority (67.8%), followed by Chinese (24.4%), Indians (6.7%), and others (1.1%). With respect to religion, 67.2% of respondents were Muslims and 32.8% were non-Muslims.

3.1 Moderated Mediation Analysis

A mediated moderation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro version 4.1, following the procedures proposed by Hayes [53] and Hayes and Rockwood [54]. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval was applied to assess: (i) the mediating role of crisis response strategies in the relationship between crisis responsibility attribution and boycotting intention, and (ii) the moderating effect of religion on the link between crisis responsibility attribution and the effectiveness of crisis response strategies in reducing boycotting intention.

A moderated mediation model (Model 7) was estimated with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Crisis responsibility was treated as the independent variable (X), boycotting intention as the dependent variable (Y), crisis response strategy as the mediator (M), and religion as the moderator (W).

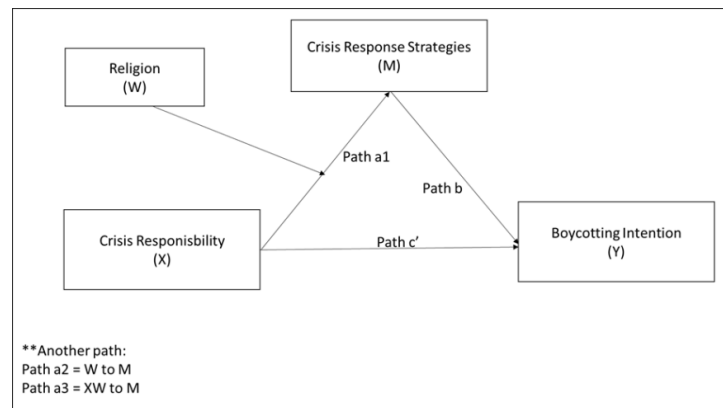


Fig. 1. A moderated mediation model

The results showed that higher attribution of crisis responsibility was associated with more effective crisis response strategies [$F(3, 176) = 10.4317$, $b = 0.6541$, $t = 2.4393$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = 0.1249 to 1.1832], as reflected in the positive path a. Moreover, effective crisis response strategies were negatively associated with boycotting intention [$F(2, 177) = 18.5899$, $b = -0.2705$, $t = -3.0105$, $p = 0.0030$, 95% CI = -0.4479 to -0.0932], consistent with the negative direction of path b. The statistical significance of both paths was confirmed by confidence intervals that excluded zero.

The conditional indirect effect analysis across religious groups (Muslims vs. non-Muslims) revealed negative indirect effects in both groups. For Muslims ($W = 1.0000$), the effect was -0.1456 , while for non-Muslims ($W = 2.0000$), the effect was -0.1143 . This indicates that attribution of crisis responsibility reduces boycotting intention through the effectiveness of crisis response strategies, with a stronger effect observed among Muslims. Both effects were statistically significant, as their 95% confidence intervals excluded zero [Muslims: -0.2637 to -0.0429 ; non-Muslims: -0.2587 to -0.0033].

Further analysis of conditional effects at low (-1 SD), moderate (mean), and high ($+1$ SD) levels of crisis responsibility showed that, for both Muslims and non-Muslims, higher responsibility attribution consistently corresponded to more effective crisis response strategies. These results confirm that perceived levels of organizational responsibility strongly shape the perceived effectiveness of crisis management in mitigating boycotting intention.

The direct effect (path c') of crisis responsibility on boycotting intention, controlling for crisis response strategy, was also significant [$F(2, 177) = 18.5899$, $b = 0.692$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.4666 to 0.9181]. The positive coefficient (0.692) suggests that greater attribution of responsibility leads to higher boycotting intention. These finding highlights that in Halal food harm crises, when organizations are perceived as responsible, consumers show stronger intentions to boycott unless effective crisis response strategies are in place.

Finally, the moderated mediation analysis yielded an index of $a3b = 0.0313$, with a 95% CI of -0.0804 to 0.177 . As the confidence interval includes zero, religion was not found to significantly moderate the relationship between crisis responsibility attribution and the effectiveness of crisis response strategies in influencing boycotting intention. Thus, while attribution of responsibility impacts boycotting intention through crisis response strategies, this process appears consistent across both Muslim and non-Muslim consumers.

4. Conclusions

This study investigated the complex interrelationships between crisis responsibility attribution, organizational crisis response strategies, and consumer boycott intentions within the specific context of a Halal food harm crisis. The empirical findings yield two paramount theoretical contributions: the confirmed mediating role of crisis response strategies and the surprisingly non-significant moderating role of religious identity.

First, the analysis substantiates that crisis response strategies function as a critical mediating mechanism between the level of responsibility attributed to an organization and the subsequent intention of consumers to engage in a boycott [56]. The results confirm a direct pathway whereby heightened perceptions of organizational culpability predict stronger boycott intentions, aligning with established literature positing that ethical transgressions are a primary catalyst for consumer activism [55, 3]. The pivotal contribution of this research, however, lies in demonstrating that this pathway is significantly influenced by the organization's communicative actions. When stakeholders perceive a high degree of organizational fault, their evaluation of the crisis response becomes a decisive factor. Effective strategies, characterized by transparency, accountability, and timely action, were shown to mitigate negative outcomes by protecting corporate reputation and assuaging consumer anger. Conversely, inadequate or evasive responses exacerbated the situation, leading to a direct escalation of boycott intentions. This underscores the theoretical arguments of Coombs and Holladay on the protective value of communication and is reinforced by contemporary studies [57, 58], confirming that response strategy is not merely a reactive measure but a central variable through which attributions of responsibility are processed and translated into behavioural intent.

Second, this study examined the potential moderating influence of religious identity on the aforementioned relationships. Contrary to initial hypotheses and certain prior studies [59, 60, 61], the results indicate that religion did not produce a statistically significant moderating effect. Both Muslim and non-Muslim consumer cohorts exhibited remarkably similar patterns: the efficacy of the crisis response was the dominant factor in reducing boycott intention, irrespective of religious background. This unanticipated finding can be interpreted through the lens of Malaysia's unique socio-cultural landscape, where the Halal certification has evolved beyond a religious mandate into a globally recognized benchmark for quality, safety, and hygiene. Non-Muslim consumers have developed a significant trust in and reliance on the Halal standard, a trend documented in recent market research [29, 62, 33]. This has led to a convergence in consumer expectations and reactions, where a violation of Halal integrity is perceived as a breach of universal trust and product safety rather than solely a religious issue. Consequently, this study challenges the prevailing assumption that Halal crises are exclusively a Muslim concern [63], proposing instead that in multicultural markets, such events universally impact all consumers who value the Halal guarantee.

For practitioners and organizational leaders, these findings carry profound implications that should directly inform crisis management policy and strategic communication planning. The most immediate practical implication is the empirical evidence against developing religiously segmented crisis communication plans. This insight allows organizations to achieve greater operational efficiency and consistency by allocating resources toward a single, robust, and universally applicable crisis response framework rather than crafting distinct messages for different religious demographics, thereby eliminating the potential for mixed messages and simplifying team training. Furthermore, the demonstrated mediating power of response strategies highlights the critical need for proactive investment in pre-crisis preparation. Organizations must move beyond simple crisis manuals and engage in regular simulation training for their crisis management teams to ensure that when a crisis strikes, the execution of communication is not only timely but also proficient and aligned with best

practices. This study also reinforces that effective communication is fundamentally rooted in the principle of transparency. Organizations should therefore focus on building long-term relational capital with their stakeholders through ongoing engagement and ethical practices, as this pre-existing reservoir of goodwill can make stakeholders more receptive to an organization's response during a crisis. From a strategic perspective, for risk managers, this study quantifies the value of communication as a reputational asset; the potential financial impact of a boycott can be directly mitigated by the quality of the crisis response, meaning crisis communication should be integrated into the core of corporate crisis management and governance strategies.

In summary, this research demonstrates that in navigating a Halal food harm crisis, the strategic deployment of effective crisis response is the most powerful tool for managing consumer reactions and mitigating boycott intentions. The moderating influence of religion is diminished in a market where Halal represents a universal standard of quality. Therefore, organizational leadership must prioritize the development of transparent, accountable, and swift communication strategies that resonate across the entire consumer base, safeguarding both reputation and market share.

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