

# McDonald's Reputation Makeover: A Comprehensive Analysis of Image Repair Strategies

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses rhetorical strategies in press statements by McDonald's Malaysia in response to allegations that it has been supporting Israel during the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Following the conflict, people around the world have voiced out their thoughts regarding what has been happening and many have even taken the initiative to ban or boycott products or businesses that support the Israeli government. Most Malaysians believe McDonald's Malaysia to be one of those businesses which has led the company to release press statements to address the issue. Two press statements were analysed using Benoit's image repair theory to identify the rhetorical strategies that were employed to repair the company's image. Public responses towards these press statements on social media were measured using content analysis to categorise positive, negative and neutral statements. The analysis reveals how McDonald's Malaysia used strategies which include denial, shifting the blame as well as bolstering to address the issue as well as to restore its reputation and image during the critical situation. This article provides new insights into understanding how language works within rhetorical strategies of image repair

**Keywords:** image repair, McDonald's Malaysia, reputational risk, content analysis, public analysis

## INTRODUCTION

A boycott is a form of collective protest in which individuals or groups abstain from purchasing or using goods, services, or engaging with particular entities as a means of expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement with the actions, policies, or practices associated with those entities (Vlad Demzar et al., 2023). Living in the global economy, people often encounter a range of global conflicts, including those stemming from international political tensions and warfare. Boycotts can arise from various motivations, including ethical, political, social, or environmental concerns (Kim et al., 2022). This organized withdrawal of support aims to leverage economic impact, drawing attention to perceived injustices or issues and pressuring the targeted entity to address and rectify the identified problems.

In a world interconnected by global trade and communication, boycotts have become a significant force shaping corporate behavior and public perception. The emergence of social media has magnified the influence of boycotts, creating a space where individuals can articulate their concerns and rally support on a global scale (Saaida & Alhouseini, 2023). The speed at which information travels in the digital age ensures that the effects of a boycott can be swift and far-reaching, impacting not only the targeted entity but its stakeholders, partners, and even entire industries. As news of a boycott spreads, it catalyzes conversations around social responsibility, corporate ethics, and the broader socio-political landscape.

Within the fast-food industry's dynamic and highly competitive arena, McDonald's, a global fast-food giant, has encountered challenges that reverberate beyond conventional concerns related to food quality, public

health, and shifting consumer preferences. A recent and notable boycott, triggered by perceived affiliations with Israel, has cast a shadow over the company's reputation, necessitating a strategic image repair campaign. This controversy has sparked considerable public discourse, leading to a pressing need for McDonald's to implement image repair campaigns. As a multinational corporation operating in diverse markets, the context of image repair holds immense relevance, shedding light on the complexities of managing reputation in an age of heightened consumer activism and social media scrutiny.

McDonald's Malaysia has issued two media statements expressing support for Palestine in response to the controversy. However, consumers remain dissatisfied, citing questionable aspects and perceived inconsistencies in the company's explanation. This discontent reflects evolving consumer expectations, emphasizing a demand for transparency and a genuine commitment to ethical and social responsibility from corporations. It serves as a potent catalyst for change, illustrating that consumers are active participants in shaping the ethical standards of the business world. In this era, corporations face heightened scrutiny not only for product quality and affordability but also for the alignment of their values with a diverse consumer base.

Therefore, this study aims to look into these research objectives:

1) To identify the types of image repair strategies used by McDonald's Malaysia in their press statements to address the issue of their involvement with the Gaza-Israel conflict.

This objective focuses on dissecting McDonald's Malaysia's press statements to discern the specific image repair strategies employed. The aim is to identify the tactics used in addressing the controversy surrounding their perceived affiliations with Israel during the Gaza-Israel conflict.

2) To analyse public responses towards McDonald's Malaysia press statements on social media.

This objective delves into the realm of public sentiment on social media platforms, aiming to analyse and understand the responses evoked by McDonald's Malaysia's press statements. By scrutinizing social media interactions, this objective seeks to gauge the effectiveness of the company's communication strategies in mitigating public dissatisfaction and influencing public perception.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the contemporary business landscape, corporate image holds unparalleled significance, serving as a critical determinant of consumers' perception and organisational success. The concept of image repair has emerged as a pivotal area of study, offering insights into how entities navigate and respond to challenges that may compromise their public image. As organisations face an increasingly complex and interconnected landscape, the need to understand and strategically address reputational threats has become paramount. This review seeks to contextualize and critically assess the theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and empirical findings that have shaped the field of image repair analysis.

Organisations face a myriad of threats that can potentially impact their stability, reputation, and overall success. These threats can arise from various internal and external factors, and they may manifest in different forms. In response to perceived threats, companies, as highlighted by Sabila and Purworini (2022), proactively engage in providing explanations or justifications to uphold a positive image, recognising that a robust reputation is essential for cultivating trust among stakeholders, thereby emphasizing the critical need to assess a company's crisis response strategies. This highlights the essential requirement, as highlighted in Pang, Ho, and Malik's (2012) study, to employ defensive strategies when an accused party encounters substantial criticism and when responsibility is uncertain or can be shifted, especially in crisis scenarios where responsibility is ambiguous and the organisation operates with a relatively low profile. However, the

study emphasises that the necessity for organisations to meticulously contemplate the persuasiveness and appropriateness of image repair strategies, as these depend on various factors. A noteworthy aspect of the study is its advocacy for the use of all available communication channels. This recommendation aligns with the evolving landscape of communication, where diverse channels play a pivotal role in disseminating messages during crises.

In the aviation industry crisis, Othman and Yusoff (2020) were interested in researching the insights of crisis management strategies employed by Malaysia Airlines in times of the disappearance of flight MH370. The study concludes that Malaysia Airlines' crisis communication management, although displaying some initial shortcomings in handling the tragedy, proved reasonably effective. Despite falling short of meeting the theoretical definition of success and facing criticism for dispelling myths and rumors rather than providing concrete information, the airline successfully navigated the crisis. Notably, Malaysia Airlines excelled in managing the care of the affected families. The company's comprehensive support program, initiated from the onset of the crisis, forged a robust connection with the families by offering continuous support, counseling, and care. Additionally, the company fulfilled its responsibility by providing financial aid to the families of the victims. Another study by Warsihantari and Putra (2018), attempted to compare strategies used by Malaysia Airlines and AirAsia in their respective aircraft accidents in 2014. The study revealed that both companies exhibit prompt crisis response, employing distinct strategies. AirAsia places a notable emphasis on issuing apologies while concurrently addressing compensation, whereas Malaysia Airlines prioritizes compensation without overlooking the crucial element of offering apologies.

Numerous studies have explored the field of image repair strategies, particularly in the context of leadership. Benoit (2018) observed that the 2016 American presidential primary and general debates faced intense scrutiny and criticism, leading candidates to employ diverse image repair strategies to protect their reputations. Examination of the data reveals four primary image repair strategies: attacking the accuser, simple denial, differentiation, and transcendence. The strategy most commonly employed was accusing the accuser, mirroring the deeply polarized landscape of American politics. Simple denial, viewed as the most apparent strategy to enact, was also prevalent due to its minimal defensive effort. Differentiation and transcendence were recognized as effective alternatives when denial was impractical, given the nature of the criticism. Another study by Koa (2022) aimed to analyse and assess the primary image repair strategies employed by the president of Real Madrid in addressing the controversy surrounding leaked audio clips wherein he criticized historical legends of the club. The results indicated that the president, Pérez, adeptly utilized strategies aimed at reducing offensiveness. More precisely, Pérez employed minimization, transcendence, and attacking the accuser, aligning with strategies deemed effective in prior image-repair studies. In his official statement on the Real Madrid website, Pérez initiated his response by directing criticism at the accuser.

Public response to organisational actions and decisions plays an essential role in shaping the overall image and reputation of the organisations. This dynamic relationship between the public and organisations often necessitates deliberate image repair strategies when faced with challenges, controversies, or crises. There is a significant association between image repair strategies and public sentiment. Less frequently used strategies like denial and proactive corrective actions received more positive sentiments from the public, suggesting that these approaches resonated more positively than the predominant strategy of mitigating offensiveness (Masngut & Mohamad, 2021). Along similar lines, Naslund (2020), observed that in the event that an organisation possesses a positive pre-crisis reputation and consistently generates high-quality news content, it is imperative to proactively evoke public recollection of the organisation's positive history. This proactive approach serves to diminish the negative impact of the crisis.

At present, various entities, including McDonald's Malaysia, widely employ image repair theory in addressing allegations that they have been supporting Israel during the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

These incidents had a notable effect on customers’ perceptions and the overall image of these brands, ultimately leading to a decline in sales (Alrawabdeh et al., 2020). Therefore, this study seeks to employ Benoit’s image repair theory to examine the strategies McDonald’s Malaysia utilised in their press statements to address their alleged involvement in the Gaza-Israel conflict, while also analysing public reactions to McDonald’s press releases on social media.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach in order to analyse the content in relevant texts. This approach condenses raw data into categories or themes based on the researchers’ careful examination, inference as well as interpretation. For this study, two media statements released by McDonald’s Malaysia were retrieved and subsequently analysed using this method. The two statements entitled “Statement from Gerbang Alaf Restaurants Sdn Bhd- McDonald’s Malaysia” and “McDonald’s Malaysia Confirms Contribution to Palestine Humanitarian Fund” were released on 15th October 2023 and 17th October 2023 respectively. These statements were chosen as they were released following the accusations of Malaysians towards McDonald’s Malaysia in their involvement of the most recent conflict happening between Gaza and Israel. The texts were then analysed for the strategies used by McDonald’s Malaysia to address the issue of its involvement in the Gaza-Israel conflict. For this purpose, the image repair theory introduced by Benoit in 1995 was applied. The public responses towards the statements were also analysed using the qualitative content analysis approach. The responses were retrieved from McDonald’s Malaysia Facebook page and subsequently analysed and grouped into three categories which are positive, negative and neutral responses.

## RESULTS

The image repair theory by Benoit emphasises on five major strategies namely denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action and mortification. These main strategies are further expanded into sub-strategies as shown in table 1.

TABLE I Image repair strategies and key characteristics

Strategy	Key Characteristics
<b>Denial</b>	
i. Simple denial	-Did not perform act
ii. Shift the blame	- Act performed by another
<b>Evasion of Responsibility</b>	
i. Provocation	-Responded to act of another
ii. Defeasibility	-Lack of information or ability
iii. Accident	-Act was a mishap
iv. Good intentions	-Meant well in act
<b>Reducing Offensiveness of Event</b>	
i. Bolstering	-Stress good traits
ii. Minimisation	-Act not serious
iii. Differentiation	-Act less offensive than similar acts
iv. Transcendence	-More important values
v. Attack accuser	-Reduce credibility of accuser
vi. Compensation	-Reimburse victim
<b>Corrective Action</b>	Plan to solve/ prevent recurrence of problem
<b>Mortification</b>	Apologise

Source: Benoit (1997)

The denial strategy states that the person or organisation in question could either deny that the incident in question ever occurred or deny the fact that they are responsible for it. Evidence, alibi or important information may also be presented to strengthen their say. The passing of blame is another variant of denial where the person or organisation in question shifts the blame to another person or organisation for the said incident. When denial of a certain action is not viable, evading responsibility becomes the next viable option. The accused party might assert that they were provoked into their actions by another wrongful act. This somehow justifies their actions and reduces their own responsibility towards the wrong act. Defeasibility occurs when the accused party state that they did not have sufficient information or control to handle a particular situation effectively. Attributing the event in question to good intentions is the final variation of evasion of responsibility strategy. Another image repair strategy proposed by Benoit is reducing offensiveness. There are six variants that fall under this strategy. The bolstering method attempts to increase positive sentiments towards the accused by emphasising positive past actions or positive attributes. On the other hand, minimisation aims at convincing the audience that the incident in question is not as negative or damaging as it has been made out to be. Differentiation has a similar aim as minimisation but it compares event in question with similar yet more disgraceful acts. Another variation of the reducing offensiveness strategy is attacking the accuser in which the accused will allege that the accusers deserved what happened whereas the final variation which is compensation is where the accused party offers some kind of reimbursement to reduce the negative sentiments towards the said action. The next image repair strategy is corrective action in which the accused party promise to fix the problem. This is carried out by either promising to work for things to be back to their original state or assuring to prevent similar negative actions from occurring in the future. The final image restoration strategy is mortification where it involves the accused admits responsibility for the actions in questions and seeks forgiveness for those actions. Benoit also stated that this particular strategy couples effectively with corrective action.

In the press statement entitled “Statement from Gerbang Alaf Restaurants Sdn Bhd- McDonald’s Malaysia” which was released on 15th October 2023, there are several image repair strategies found to be used by McDonald’s Malaysia to defend itself amidst the critical situation. Table 2 shows the strategies as well as the examples from the press statement to illustrate the strategies.

TABLE II Image repair strategies in “Statement from Gerbang Alaf Restaurants Sdn Bhd- McDonald’s Malaysia” press statement

Strategy	Examples from Text
<b>Simple denial</b>	It is crucial to clarify that the actions being referred to are those of an independent market and do not reflect the values or practices of McDonald’s Malaysia.
<b>Defeasibility</b>	... a unilateral decision made by an individual franchisee should not be considered a global action, company policy, or an official political stance taken by McDonald’s globally.
<b>Shift the blame</b>	The actions of the McDonald’s operator in Israel serve as an example of such individual actions; They were not global decisions and were not approved by any other local operators.
<b>Bolstering</b>	Since then, McDonald’s has contributed over RM12 million in Zakat payments to 14 states across Malaysia, supporting underprivileged communities.
<b>Bolstering</b>	We are committed in our efforts in serving and giving back to the communities.

Analyses from both press statements show that the restorative strategies employed by McDonald’s Malaysia are simple denial, defeasibility, shift the blame and bolstering. The fact that McDonald’s Malaysia firmly denied its involvement in supporting Israel shows its stand in the issue. According to Cruz and Alejandra (2019), denial can be successful if there is evidence or explanations that absolve the accused of the offensive act. McDonald’s Malaysia did this by directly shifting the blame solely to McDonald’s Israel for the despicable action and continued emphasising that the action was unique to one individual franchisee only, namely McDonald’s Israel. It can be said that the defeasibility strategy was applied here as McDonald’s Malaysia was seen to not know and to not have any say or power over other franchisees’ actions. This strategy was used in an attempt to further convince the public that the organisation was not responsible for any action related to the conflict that was taking place.

Bolstering as an image repair strategy was used extensively in the press statements. Benoit (1997) stated a corporation may use bolstering to strengthen the audience’s positive feelings towards itself in order to offset the negative feelings connected with the wrongful act. To do this, businesses may describe positive characteristics they have or positive acts they have done in the past which was exactly what McDonald’s Malaysia did in its press releases. The organisation was seen to emphasise on certain values or actions, such as being committed to help those in need and giving donations, to win back audiences’ trust towards itself.

To address the second research question on the public responses towards the press releases, the comments filtered as ‘most relevant’ posted under the two press releases on McDonald’s Malaysia’s Facebook page were selected and analysed. Convenience sampling was applied and the comments were then categorised into positive, negative and neutral comments. Table 4 shows the kinds of responses that the public had towards the press statements released by McDonald’s Malaysia.

TABLE III public responses towards McDonald’s Malaysia press statements

<b>Positive</b>	<p>i. Takpa McD. Takperlu kenyataan. Anda brand international. X mungkin terjejas</p> <p><i>Translated version: It’s okay McD. No need for a statement. You’re an international brand. You won’t be affected.</i></p>
	<p>ii. Peminat Mcflurry masih setia.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Mcflurry’s fan is still loyal.</i></p>
	<p>iii. Apa kata kita beli burger sambil derma. Best juga.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Why don’t we buy the burgers and donate at the same time. That’d be good too.</i></p>
	<p>iv. Kesian. Nak sokong sampai affect local people.</p> <p><i>Translated version: What a shame. Being supportive up to the point that it’s affecting local people.</i></p>
	<p>v. Tak ikut trend, tetap akan membeli.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Not following the trend. Will keep on buying.</i></p>

	<p>vi. 2017-2023= 12 juta zakat. Terbaik McD!</p> <p><i>Translated version: 2017-2023= 12 millions of zakat. Way to go McD!</i></p>
	<p>vii. Alhamdulillah, ini makin syg McDonalds.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Praise to God, this is what makes me love McD more.</i></p>
	<p>viii. Terbaik McDonalds' Msia! Always support McD Malaysia.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Way to go McDonald's Malaysia! Always support McD Malaysia.</i></p>
	<p>ix. Ok dah boleh sambung drive thru McD semula.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Okay can go back to McD drive thru.</i></p>
	<p>x. Tahniah McD!</p> <p><i>Translated version: Congrats McD!</i></p>
<b>Negative</b>	<p>i. Francais fee tetap bayar kan?</p> <p><i>Translated version: You're still paying the franchise fee right?</i></p>
	<p>ii. Mmg dah bertahun aku haramkan duit beli McD.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Haven't bought from McD for years.</i></p>
	<p>iii. Jarang aku nak order McD.</p> <p><i>Translated version: I rarely order from McD.</i></p>
	<p>iv. Baik beli RAMLY</p> <p><i>Translated version: Better to buy RAMLY. (*Ramly is a local brand.)</i></p>
	<p>v. Serta la dgn bukti, jgn ckp kosong.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Show us the evidence. Don't talk without substance.</i></p>
	<p>vi. Mcm tak nampak bayaran zakat kat Sabah tu, kerana masih banyak surau2 yg daif.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Can't really see the zakat payments in Sabah. There are still plenty of old and run-down mosques here.</i></p>
	<p>vii. Mmg la tak donate but whatever profits go to the main McDonalds.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Sure you're not donating (to Israel) but the profits still go to McDonalds HQ.</i></p>

	<p>viii. Logo dan guna nama free ke? Kalau bayar korang faham2 sendiri lah kpd siapa duit tu sampai ye.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Are you using the logo and name for free? If not, then you can figure out where the money goes.</i></p>
	<p>ix. Baca boleh percaya jangan.</p> <p><i>Translated version: We can read but we still don't trust you.</i></p>
	<p>x. The royalties still bayar ke sana.</p> <p><i>Translated version: You're still paying royalties to McD HQ.</i></p>
<b>Neutral</b>	<p>i. Thank you McD atas kenyataan anda.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Thank you for your statement McD.</i></p>
	<p>ii. Jangan panik McD</p> <p><i>Translated version: Don't panic McD.</i></p>
	<p>iii. Terima kasih McD.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Thank you McD.</i></p>
	<p>iv. Boleh tunjukkan bukti tak bantuan diberi.</p> <p><i>Translated version: Can you show us evidence of the help that has been given.</i></p>

It can be seen that the public had their own ways of responding to the press statements released by McDonald's Malaysia. Some of them reacted positively especially towards the good actions or values that McDonald's Malaysia had highlighted in the statements such as its contributions in zakat and humanitarian funds. A few even suggested to keep on buying from McDonald's Malaysia as a way to donate to these contributions too. This discovery aligns with the research of Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018) where positive remarks regarding one's reputation can give rise to impressions of authenticity, and these impressions of authenticity, in turn, may result in forgiveness as evident in comment sections. This shows that the bolstering strategy used may have had positive effects on the public. Nair et al. (2019) stated the presence of bolstering as a rhetorical strategy is evidence of an organisation using crisis as a chance to display a narrative of optimism in difficult times which could turn the otherwise negative situation into an opportunity to boost its image and reputation.

Other than that, the public also gave negative feedback towards the statements released by McDonald's Malaysia. Despite the organisation's denial of any direct involvement in the conflict, the public questioned its indirect involvement which was about the franchise fees or royalties that McDonald's Malaysia had to pay to McDonald's HQ. Due to this, some members of the public were adamant on their decision to continue boycotting McDonald's products as they felt that money are still being channelled to the opposition side during the conflict. Last but not least, there were also neutral comments where people were



mostly just thanking and acknowledging McDonald's Malaysia press statements without taking any sides on whether to continue supporting or boycotting the organisation.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the analysis has shown several strategies employed by a huge organisation in dealing with a crisis in its communications. Releasing these statements is essential in an attempt to restore its image to the public. It is interesting to see that both press statements did not include any indications of corrective action or mortification strategies as according to Stamato (2008), an apology can serve as an instrument of reconciliation and is considered as the most effective image repair strategy in the eyes of western scholars. Instead, McDonald's Malaysia denied any involvement and shifted the blame to McDonald's Israel which shows McDonald's Malaysia firm stand on the issue. The organisation did not feel the need to apologise or express any forms of corrective action in the future probably because it felt that it was not at fault in the first place. Other than that, bolstering as an image repair strategy was noticeably used throughout the statements to display the organisation's good qualities and actions which could redirect the public's focus from an initially negative situation to a more favourable one. Bolstering proposes a new belief of desirable traits which may mitigate the negative effect of wrong doing in response (Sayed & Muhammad, 2022) and this strategy was able to gain some positive feedback from the public as they were seen to respond positively to the actions stated by McDonald's Malaysia in its statements. However, some people were still not convinced by the organisation's explanation on the issue which led them to respond negatively towards the statements. These findings show that image repair strategies do play an important role when an organisation wants to improve public perception during a crisis.

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