

Crisis Communication Strategy Of The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) In Responding To Negative Sentiments On Instagram

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Abstract: The issuance of Fatwa Number 83 of 2023 by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), which called for a boycott of products affiliated with Israeli aggression, triggered a significant communication crisis on social media. Public discourse was dominated by critical sentiments demanding implementation clarity and concrete solutions to socio-economic impacts, particularly concerns over mass layoffs. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework. Data were collected from ten official MUI Instagram posts and 108 top-liked comments (top engagement). Sentiment analysis was conducted to measure public sentiment proportions, while content analysis was applied to identify MUI's crisis response strategies. The findings reveal that public discourse was dominated by negative sentiment (62%). MUI responded using Justification and Clarification strategies, which effectively explained the fatwa's theological basis (haram li ghairihi) but failed to provide a practical roadmap, economic solutions, or empathy regarding layoff concerns and product list ambiguity. This strategic mismatch created a significant communication gap that tested the institution's credibility. This study fills a gap in crisis communication research within religious institutions by demonstrating that SCCT requires adaptation for organizations operating at the intersection of moral authority and practical implementation. The study recommends integrating more tangible, transparent, and empathetic corrective actions.

Keywords: Boycott; Crisis Communication; Credibility; MUI Fatwa; Public Sentiment

I. INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has sparked a massive wave of global solidarity, and in Indonesia, this response has manifested itself in religious policy. The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) responded by issuing Fatwa No. 83 of 2023, which explicitly affirms the obligation to support the Palestinian struggle and prohibits transactions with entities that explicitly support Israeli aggression and Zionist activities [1]. This fatwa, which aims as a syar'i guide, immediately changes the spiritual domain into a social and economic domain.. This fatwa, intended as sharia guidance, immediately transformed the spiritual domain into social and economic domain.

The publication of the fatwa on social media, particularly Instagram, immediately triggered a communications crisis. This crisis was marked by a wave of critical sentiment that not only questioned the legal basis of the fatwa but also demanded clarity on its implementation and concrete solutions to its socio-economic impacts. The phenomenon of boycotts triggered by ethical and moral issues (corporate social irresponsibility) has become a central topic in strategic communication in the digital era.(Shim et al., 2021;Feng et al., 2022). This boycott is not just an economic measure, but a manifestation of moral outrage spread through social media [4]. In Indonesia, the MUI fatwa provides a strong theological basis for justifying boycotts, transforming them from mere consumer activism into a religious obligation. This increases public pressure (stakeholder penalties) on companies

accused of being pro-Israel.[3], while also giving rise to criticism of the MUI itself when the implementation of the fatwa was deemed inconsistent or detrimental to domestic society..

The role of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) as a non-governmental religious institution in managing the crisis that intersects religious authority and the economic domain is a crucial focus of this research. The MUI's fatwa fundamentally transformed the realm of consumer activism in Indonesia into a form of political consumerism.(Kyroglou & Henn, 2022;Pruysers, 2025). This call for a boycott is based on binding ethical and moral considerations, making it an almost mandatory action [2]. This movement transformed into a Digital Social Movement, where social media platforms became the primary arena for mobilizing the masses quickly and in a decentralized manner [7].

This crisis shows that the MUI faces risks when the social identity of the community as devout Muslims collides with the failure of institutions to facilitate this obedience.[4]. Failure to respond to specific public demands creates ambiguity that challenges the principle of transparency [8] and information control [9]. This ambiguity, like the case of brand silence [10], actually undermines MUI's efforts to control the crisis narrative.

The MUI strategy of using justification for layoffs risks creating an empathy gap or trust erosion.[3]. In fact, studies on crisis communication (S. Sun et al., 2022;Jong & Goossen, 2025) always emphasizes the importance of a swift, accurate response accompanied by concrete corrective actions, especially for vulnerable stakeholders. This study adopts the view that global crises, such as the derivative impacts of this fatwa, are disasters spawning multiple crises.[13].

This study is important for filling the gap in research on crisis communication strategies within religious institutions. By applying the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework, this study aims to identify MUI's crisis communication strategies, analyze their effectiveness in mitigating negative sentiments, and assess the extent to which MUI succeeded in maintaining its credibility in the public eye (Coombs, 2007). Practically, this study provides recommendations for MUI to refine its communication strategies to respond to crises more empathetically, transparently, and in accordance with the practical demands of the community.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Attribution of Responsibility

SCCT is the primary theoretical framework developed by W. Timothy Coombs. This theory is based on Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), which states that individuals instinctively seek causes for unexpected events (crises). The public's attribution of responsibility to an organization determines the reputational threat faced and guides the selection of the most effective response strategies. Coombs classifies crisis response strategies into four main clusters, ranging from defensive to accommodative: (1) Defensive (Denial): Denying the crisis, blaming others (scapegoating); (2) Diminish: Justifying actions or claiming the crisis is not as severe as perceived; (3) Rebuild: Accepting responsibility, apologizing, or providing compensation (corrective action); (4) Bolstering: Reminding the public of past positive performance (as a supporting strategy) (Coombs, 2007). Strategy selection must align with crisis attribution. For preventable crises, Rebuild strategies (apology and corrective action) are most recommended to restore trust. Although MUI was not the cause of the geopolitical crisis (Israeli aggression), it is considered to have responsibility for the impact of layoffs (secondary crisis), which within the SCCT framework requires empathetic Rebuild responses [15].

The concept of crisis predictability [16] is highly relevant. If a crisis consequence (e.g., layoffs) is perceived by the public as predictable, the attribution of responsibility to the organization (MUI) for mitigation failures will increase sharply. MUI should have anticipated and responded to layoffs, as this secondary crisis was within MUI's control to mitigate.[17]. Therefore, the MUI Justification strategy is considered inappropriate (strategic mismatch) and perpetuates the attribution of public responsibility

2.2 Political Consumerism, Morality, and Digital Social Movement

The MUI fatwa transformed consumption into politically mobilized religious action. This is driven by moral outrage [2]: (1) Moral Foundation: Boycott intentions are driven by moral foundations, where MUI successfully mobilized harm/care (Palestinian solidarity), but was tested by fairness/justice (justice for domestic workers), creating a moral dilemma; (2) Personality Role: Individual involvement in boycotts is associated with certain personality traits. Pruyzers found that individuals with openness and narcissism are more likely to engage in political consumerism, indicating that digital activism attracts individuals with expressive tendencies seeking social recognition [6]. Boycott actions on social media are classified as digital social movements [7]. These movements are decentralized and rapid in mobilization, using hashtags as primary weapons [18].

2.3 Trust Erosion and Spillover Effect in Digital Crises

The digital arena presents severe challenges in managing reputation and trust. Failure to respond quickly, accurately, and consistently leads to trust erosion and loss of narrative control. Defensive strategies such as Justification or Bolstering without genuine Rebuild can worsen crises. The Bud Light case [11] demonstrated that weak Bolstering leads to loss of trust and control. Zimand-sheiner et al. [12] noted that crises in one company can trigger negative spillover effects extending to other stakeholders (e.g., blaming the government or MUI). MUI needs to manage this spillover effect so that criticism does not expand into attacks on domestic economic stability.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to provide an in-depth and detailed description of the crisis communication phenomenon. This method was chosen because it can capture nuances in MUI's narratives and holistically analyze the complex sentiments in public comments. The research was conducted on content and interactions on MUI's official Instagram account (@muipusat) during the period following the issuance of Fatwa Number 83 of 2023.

3.1 Research Subjects and Objects

The subjects and objects of this study are: (1) MUI's official narratives, consisting of ten posts (video reels and carousels) explaining the fatwa; and (2) public sentiment, represented by top comments (10 with the most likes) from each post. These comments were selected as representations of the most prominent public discourse validated by other users' engagement.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques included documenting MUI's official content and scraping comment data, which were then grouped into sentiment categories. The ten analyzed posts spanned from November 8, 2023, to November 8, 2024.

3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using two complementary techniques: First, sentiment analysis was employed to measure the proportion of negative sentiment from top comments on each post, providing empirical evidence regarding sentiment evolution [13]. Critically toned comments or requests for solutions were deliberately emphasized as they reflect the practical demands of the community, which constitute the core of MUI's communication crisis. Second, qualitative content analysis was applied to MUI's official narratives to identify message development, communication style, and crisis response strategies based on the SCCT framework [5]. This analysis also integrated findings from other research on corporate social advocacy [14] and brand silence to understand the implications of MUI's decision not to release a product list [15].

3.4 Data Validity

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, comparing MUI's official narratives with critical public responses to identify communication gaps. This process ensured that findings were based on validated data, where criticism was supported by recurring patterns across multiple posts.

3.5 Research Limitations

This study is limited to Instagram platform data and top comments with the highest engagement, which may not fully represent overall public sentiment. Additionally, the qualitative nature of this research prioritizes depth over generalizability.

IV. RESULTS

A total of 108 comments from ten MUI Instagram posts were analyzed. Negative comments dominated with 67 comments (62%), followed by positive comments with 25 comments (25%). Neutral comments numbered 4 (3.7%), and off-topic comments numbered 10 (9.3%). This indicates that public sentiment regarding MUI Fatwa Number 83 of 2023 was predominantly negative.

The ten posts analyzed spanned from November 11, 2023, to August 8, 2024, with formats alternating between video reels and carousels. Detailed distribution of comment categories across each post is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Public Sentiment on Fatwa No. 83 of 2023

Format	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Off-Topic
Video Reels	4	5	1	0
Video Reels	8	2	0	0
Video Reels	9	1	0	0
Video Reels	5	5	0	0
Carousel	6	3	0	1
Carousel	12	1	3	0
Carousel	6	4	0	0
Carousel	7	3	0	0
Carousel	8	2	0	0
Carousel	2	1	0	9
Total	67	27	4	10

Source: Research Results, 2025

V. DISCUSSION

5.1. Dominance of Critical Sentiment and Failure to Manage Empathy Gaps

The main finding (62% negative sentiment) indicates that MUI, despite possessing sharia authority, faces a communication crisis in the realm of practical implementation. This crisis is characterized by an imbalance between MUI's authoritative messages and the public's pragmatic demands.

MUI applied Justification strategies (Posts 8-9) that firmly shifted responsibility for layoffs from the fatwa to multinational company policies [3]. Unfortunately, the public perceived this strategy as demonstrating an empathy gap [16]. Public emotions, triggered by the proximate social crisis (layoff impacts), activated the moral foundation of fairness/justice [2]. MUI's failure to provide concrete and empathetic solutions (such as organizing job fairs or emergency relief funds) perpetuated negative public attribution of responsibility. This failure was reinforced by the public perception that the layoff crisis was predictable [17], thus demanding more accommodative Rebuild responses rather than Justification [7].

5.2. Transparency Crisis: Fatwa Inconsistency and Credibility Tests

Two central issues tested MUI's credibility: (1) refusal to release a product list and (2) inconsistency in digital action. MUI's refusal to release a product list, although based on fiqh and practical reasons (avoiding lawsuits), created an information vacuum. The Clarification strategy (Posts 4-7) proved ineffective. The information vacuum was instead filled by hoax lists that triggered trade wars (black campaigns) and negative spillover damaging the reputation of unaffiliated companies [12]. MUI, as official

media, failed to direct public attention fairly [18]. MUI became trapped in an ethical dilemma: fearing legal risk on one hand, but losing practical-sharia credibility on the other.

Criticism of MUI's inconsistency peaked with the use of the Meta Group platform (pro-Israel) to call for boycotts. This phenomenon triggered accusations of hypocrisy and damaged the fatwa's legitimacy in the eyes of digital activists [10]. MUI's strategy appeared less effective, employing Bolstering strategies (affirming moral positions) and Justification, but failing to meet Rebuild demands (consistent corrective action, such as revoking Halal certification). This failure, as in the Bud Light case [11], resulted in trust erosion and loss of narrative control. The public felt that MUI did not respect their social identity as Muslims seriously implementing the fatwa.

5.3. Analysis of SCCT Adaptation Needs and Strategic Recommendations

This crisis demonstrates that the SCCT model must be adapted for religious institutions operating amid disaster spawning multiple crises [19]. MUI is required to integrate dual solutions: religious and socio-economic. MUI must shift from defensive strategies (Justification) to empathetic Rebuild strategies.

MUI needs to explicitly acknowledge the difficulties experienced by workers (managing public anger and moral outrage). Using more grounded language or even appropriate humor can reduce negative emotions [20]. This can serve as a short-term corrective action. Long-term corrective actions can also be implemented by MUI. The national product criteria strategy (Phase III) is an appropriate Corrective Action step [14]. However, this must be accompanied by transparent layoff mitigation and credibility rebuilding, including advocating for Halal certification revocation for products affiliated with Israel.

The appropriate strategy is to adopt a Strategic Crisis Communication model that combines radical transparency with empathetic solutions. MUI must replace ambiguous Clarification strategies with firm guidance and openly coordinate with authorities (e.g., the Ministry of Manpower) for layoff mitigation. This will meet Rebuild demands and restore trust [21]. MUI must use its influence [10] to channel Digital Social Movement energy into constructive Political Consumerism efforts by promoting quality local products [8, 14].

VI. CONCLUSION

MUI's crisis communication demonstrates that the boycott fatwa, while a strong moral and religious affirmation, triggered a credibility crisis in the implementation realm—a recurring phenomenon in contemporary crisis communication. Negative sentiment dominating public discourse (62%) serves as a primary indicator that MUI failed to balance sharia authority with demands for practical solutions [22]. MUI's communication succeeded in maintaining consistency of the fatwa's core message through Justification and Clarification strategies but did not fully succeed in overcoming the credibility crisis due to the lack of rapid and empathetic corrective actions.

MUI applied Justification strategies to respond to layoff concerns, shifting responsibility to companies. This defensive strategy, while intended to protect institutional reputation, theoretically failed in managing the public's empathy gap, which perceived MUI as indifferent to vulnerable stakeholders. Public criticism was rooted in the moral foundation of fairness. MUI's failure to include compensation elements or rapid solutions (as recommended in SCCT's Rebuild phase) was exacerbated by the fact that the layoff crisis was perceived as predictable [17]. In the SCCT context, preventable crises demand accommodative (Rebuild) responses, not Justification. Thus, a strategic mismatch occurred that perpetuated negative public attribution of responsibility toward MUI.

Criticism of MUI's inconsistency—particularly the use of Meta Group and confusion over Halal certification status—represents the most significant communication weakness. MUI's ambiguity in releasing product lists created an information vacuum filled by hoaxes and negative spillover, paradoxically damaging the fatwa's authority in the eyes of the community demanding clear guidance. The use of Bolstering strategies (affirming moral positions) unsupported by consistent action represents a classic recipe for crisis communication failure. This left the community as political consumers feeling a loss of control and trust erosion toward the institution.

This study contributes theoretically by demonstrating that the SCCT model for religious entities is tested by dimensions of morality and practical implementation. MUI must shift from authoritative top-down communication to a Strategic Crisis Communication model focused on radical empathy and transparent action. Recommended strategies for MUI include radical transparency, rebuilding with empathy, and controlling social movements. Failure to adopt these tangible and empathetic rebuilding steps will trap MUI in a cycle of credibility crises, where fatwa authority will continually be questioned by the rational-pragmatic demands of domestic stakeholders.

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