

# From CEO's Communication Crisis to Corporate Reputation Damage: The Patiswiss Case

## CEO'nun İletişim Krizinden Kurumsal İtibar Hasarına: Patiswiss Vaka Çalışması

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### ABSTRACT

Crises, particularly when directly triggered by senior executives, pose existential threats to brands. This case study examines a communication crisis at Patiswiss, sparked by the former CEO's inappropriate response to a customer complaint on LinkedIn. The study aims to analyze the brand's crisis response strategies and their coverage in online media, within the scope of Coombs' three-stage crisis management model (pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis). Theoretical grounding is provided by corporate apologia and image restoration theories, which serve as frameworks for evaluating the brand's reputation management efforts. From an initial pool of 354 online news articles, a purposive sampling method was employed, and after eliminating duplicates, 244 articles were analyzed through thematic analysis using Nvivo14 software. Results show that the most frequently covered theme in the media was the resignation of the former CEO and the appointment of a new one, appearing in 28.69% of the coverage. This was followed by themes related to the Patiswiss incident itself, allegations of a fake diploma, the former CEO's background, and product withdrawals from store shelves, collectively accounting for 23.37% of the coverage. In contrast, themes such as the CEO's apology and expressions of remorse—key components of reputation management—received only 3.69% of media attention. Mentioned percentages indicate that the brand's post-crisis communication strategies achieved limited public visibility. The case study findings show that the CEO exhibited a controversial communication style before the crisis and that the brand tended to ignore user reactions on social media, setting the stage for the crisis. Moreover, the inconsistency between the CEO's aggressive and dismissive tone, and the company's formal apology and prolonged silence strategies, was hard to be unnoticed. Through highlighting the impact of leadership communication style in case of a crisis, and on public perception, this study contributes to the crisis communication literature and underscores the critical importance of consistent and empathetic messaging in crisis management.

**Keywords:** Crisis Communication, Patiswiss, Case Study, Leadership Communication, Corporate Apologia, Image Restoration Theory.

### ÖZ

Krizler, özellikle üst düzey yöneticiler tarafından doğrudan tetiklendiğinde, markalar için varoluşsal bir tehdit oluşturur. Bu vaka çalışması, Patiswiss markasında eski CEO'nun LinkedIn üzerinden bir müşteri şikâyetine verdiği uygunsuz yanıtla başlayan iletişim krizini incelemektedir. Çalışma, Coombs'un üç aşamalı kriz yönetimi modeli (kriz öncesi, kriz evresi ve kriz sonrası) çerçevesinde, markanın kriz müdahale stratejileri ile bu stratejilerin çevrimiçi medyadaki yansımalarını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Kurumsal özür ve imaj restorasyonu teorileri, markanın itibar yönetimi stratejilerini değerlendirmede kuramsal çerçeve olarak kullanılmıştır. 354 çevrimiçi haberden oluşan örneklem, amaçlı örneklem yöntemiyle seçilmiş; tekrarlayan içerikler elendikten sonra 244 haber, Nvivo14 yazılımı kullanılarak tematik analizle incelenmiştir. Tematik analiz sonuçlarına göre, medyada en çok öne çıkan tema, eski CEO'nun istifası ve yerine yeni bir CEO'nun atanmasıdır; bu tema, haberlerin % 28,69'unda yer almıştır. Bunu, Patiswiss olayı, sahte diploma iddiaları, eski CEO'nun geçmişi ve ürünlerin market raflarından kaldırılması gibi temalar izlemiş ve toplamda % 23,37 oranında işlenmiştir. Buna karşılık, CEO'nun özrü ve pişmanlık ifadeleri gibi olumlu imaj yönetimine yönelik temalar yalnızca % 3,69 oranında medyada yer bulmuştur. Bu durum, markanın kriz sonrası yürüttüğü iletişim stratejilerinin kamuoyunda sınırlı bir görünürlük kazandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Vaka analizi bulguları ise, CEO'nun kriz öncesinde de sorunlu bir iletişim tarzı sergilediğini ve markanın sosyal medyadaki bu kullanıcı tepkilerini görmezden gelerek krize zemin hazırladığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, CEO'nun tehditkâr ve küçümseyici üslubu ile markanın resmi özür ve uzun süreli sessizlik stratejisi arasında belirgin bir uyumsuzluk olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu çalışma, lider iletişim tarzının kriz sürecine ve kamuoyu algısına etkisini ortaya koyarak kriz iletişimi literatürüne katkı sunmakta; tutarlı ve empatik iletişimin kriz yönetiminde ne kadar hayati olduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kriz İletişimi, Patiswiss, Vaka Çalışması, Liderlik İletişimi, Kurumsal Özür Dileme, İmaj Restorasyon Teorisi.



## Introduction

Globalization, advancements in information and communication technologies, and the process of modernization have increasingly exposed individuals, institutions, and states to greater risks and crises than ever before. Although crises have persisted throughout history in societies of uncertainty, the influence of communication and technology in the 21st century has rendered these crises more visible and enhanced their potential to create rapid and destructive effects on stakeholders (Rodríguez et. al., 2007). In this context, the crises experienced by companies and brands today create an environment of significant uncertainty and threats, representing critical turning points for their survival. The statements of companies at such critical periods and their crisis management processes have become fundamental determinants of their potential to sustain themselves (Lagadec, 2005, pp. 1-3; Haase, 2017). Organizations that fail to develop effective crisis management and communication strategies or take necessary steps at the right time face severe image damage in the eyes of their target audiences, stakeholders, and the public, leading to long-term, nearly irreparable losses in reputation.

Previous studies have shown that the CEO's aggressive and flawed crisis management strategies caused significant damage to the Patiswiss brand (Ekmekçi, 2024; Koca, 2024). Research has emphasized that empathy, transparency, and timely responses are crucial in crisis management, highlighting the role of social media in the crisis's escalation and the CEO's communication style in shaping crisis dynamics (Armutlu, 2024). Açıkgöz (2025) analyzed user comments during the crisis and found that missteps in crisis communication heightened negative perceptions of Patiswiss's corporate reputation, leading to long-term adverse effects on brand loyalty and customer satisfaction.

On April 21, 2024, a social media response by the former CEO of the Patiswiss brand to a product complaint, with an inappropriate tone and language, triggered a significant public

backlash, consequently pushing the brand into a crisis. This study aims to analyze this situation—where the CEO herself acted as a catalyst for the crisis, stemming from a customer relationship management issue—through the case study method. Within the frames of corporate apology and image restoration theories, this research seeks to address the following questions: Which actors were involved in the crisis? On which platforms and under what themes was the crisis debated? What crisis response strategies were employed by the organization? Based on Coombs' (2010) three-stage crisis management model—pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases—the study will analyze the factors initiating the crisis, the factors escalating the crisis, and the long-term outcomes for the company in the post-crisis phase. This study makes a significant contribution to the crisis communication literature by highlighting the critical role of leadership and decision-making processes in crisis management. While existing approaches in the literature primarily examine the Patiswiss crisis through the lens of social media and digital communication (Armutlu, 2024; Ekmekçi, 2024; Koca, 2024; Özdemir, 2024), it is intended in this research to emphasize that crises are shaped not only on digital dynamics but also by the communication style and leaders' competence in decision-making. Additionally, the study will analyze online news media content related to Patiswiss using thematic analysis to reveal how the media responded to the brand's actions during the crisis.

## Conceptual Framework

Changing environmental conditions and increased competition have compelled organizations to establish effective communication with diverse target audiences, while societal transformations and developments have brought about uncertainty and risks beyond individuals' control. As a result of globalization and neoliberal economic policies, individuals consistently face increasing systematic risks and uncertainties (Beck, 1992, p. 24). However, for organizations, potential risks may not always escalate into crises if identified accurately and managed effectively.

Fearn-Banks (2016) defines a crisis as "a major event that has potentially negative consequences, affecting target audiences and institutional reputation (p.2)". Similarly, Coombs et al. (2004) conceptualize a crisis as a process of uncertainty and interventions aiming to regaining control (Coombs et al., 2004, p. 247).

Communication scholar Hermann (1963) asserts that in order to describe an event as a crisis, three conditions must simultaneously be met:

- The organization's reputation must be at stake.
- The time required to resolve the issue must be limited.
- The event must occur unexpectedly (Hermann, 1963, p. 64).

Coombs et al. (2016) further define a crisis as "*an unforeseen perception of an event that threatens stakeholders' critical expectations, severely impacting an organization's performance and potentially yielding negative outcomes*" (Coombs et al., 2016, p. 6).

For it to be considered as a crisis, the situation must be threatening the organization's goals, allowing only a limited amount of time for decision-making, and must have emerged unexpectedly. Keown-McMullan (1997) describes a crisis as a turning point that occurs during a period of imbalance or within normal processes, but resulting in distinct changes (Keown-McMullan, 1997, p. 4). All crisis definitions converge on the idea that a crisis disrupts the *normal* and necessitates urgent resolution. At such turning points, organizations must employ crisis management strategies and crisis communication plans to mitigate the destructive impact of the crisis.

### **Crisis Management and Crisis Communication**

Crisis management is a systematic process aiming to mitigate the impacts of a crisis and determine solutions. The process involves analyzing the origins of the crisis and the affected target

audiences, activating pre-established crisis plans, and informing the public through a spokesperson.

Crises, by definition, pose threats to the reputation of institutions and brands, and the severity of these threats plays a critical role in determining which communication strategies should be employed during crisis management (Coombs and Holladay, 2007, p. 243). Strategic management of a crisis process is essential for organizations to return to normalcy and minimize the damage caused by the crisis (Çınarlı, 2016, p. 36). Effective identification of strategies and tactics during this period is crucial for the success of the process. Rather than solely focusing on identifying and preventing potential issues or limiting their consequences beforehand, crisis management requires rapid and effective responses when problems arise. Fearn-Banks (2016) emphasizes that crisis communication should aim to minimize the damage inflicted on an organization's image (p. 2).

Crisis communication is one of the most critical components of the crisis management process, and involves collecting, processing, and publicising necessary information during crises. This type of communication focuses on the nature of the crisis and the responses to it, including the organization's statements and actions following the crisis (Coombs, 2010, p. 10).

Coombs' three-stage crisis management model is one of the most widely adopted frames in crisis management (Coombs, 2010). In this model, a crisis is addressed in three phases: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. During the pre-crisis phase, the early warning signs of a crisis are identified, and preventive measures are taken. The crisis phase comprises of efforts aiming to keep the crisis under control. The post-crisis phase involves deriving lessons from mistakes and conducting image restoration activities, in order to be prepared for future crises (Coombs and Holladay, 2014, pp. 27-28).

Crisis communication fundamentally aims to explain a particular event, outline its possible consequences, and provide accurate, impartial,

prompt, and complete information to minimize the damage to affected parties (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005, p. 46). In this context, crisis communication refers to the dialogue between the organization and its stakeholders before, during, and after an adverse situation. Dialogue strategies and tactics are determined to minimize damage to the corporate image (Fearn-Banks, 2016, p. 7).

Crisis communication emphasizes the importance of establishing trustworthy relationships with the public before a crisis occurs. Crisis management bases on the elements of trust, transparency, and empathy. This also includes the capacity to explain the rationale behind decisions (Palttala et al., 2012, pp. 2-12). One of the most crucial elements of crisis communication is having a comprehensive and effective crisis communication plan, and this plan should be regarded as a recovery process. Effective implementation of a crisis communication plan depends on collaborative and coordinated efforts of team members. Although communication management is of great importance in times of crisis, many companies have not managed to take decent steps in this regard (Bowman, 2014, p. 99).

Peltekoğlu underlines a number of key steps for preparing an effective crisis communication plan, and outlines these steps as; identifying potential types of crises, analyzing various policies, developing strategies and tactics to overcome the crisis, determining the parties affected by the crisis, having a team that is well-trained for such scenarios and organizing it, and reviewing the plan (Peltekoğlu, 2009, p. 459). The spokesperson's critical role in implementing the plan significantly influences the success of the crisis communication.

### **Crisis Spokesperson and Leadership Communication**

In case of a crisis, it is of great significance to communicate with the media as soon as possible, to prevent the crisis from escalating further. The media should be informed quickly, and the developments on the matter should be updated frequently. Coordination of a crisis team and conveyance of information to the media through

a harmonized voice are also crucial for regaining trust and establishing a positive reputation (Çınarlı, 2016).

A crisis spokesperson is the individual responsible for communicating with the public during this process; therefore, it is essential to select and train the right person for the role. As a key member of the crisis team, the spokesperson is tasked with ensuring the accurate and prompt transmission of information to the media. Decisions on the issue should be conveyed through the crisis spokesperson. Ideally, this individual should be a senior executive or a CEO educated in communication and media relations (Coombs and Holladay, 2014). It should not be ignored that in such situations, the public expects senior executives to make the statements, in person, as figures considered to be good communicators, to have comprehensive knowledge of the issue, and to remain calm under pressure.

Adapting to the upheavals caused by a crisis, and conveying the right messages to the media regarding the issue, requires competence in communication. In that regard, a CEO, or a crisis spokesperson, who are skilled in communication, are undoubtedly going to cement the effectiveness of the process. However, in this case, the likeness of the roles, brings about the necessity to distinguish between the terms, a manager, and a leader (Çınarlı, 2016).

Although in general terms, a manager can be defined as an individual who possess power over organizational structures to carry out procedures to achieve the company goals, whereas a leader can be defined as a person who can influence others around them through interpersonal skills. (Uğur and Uğur, 2014, p. 12). Various researchers classify the distinction between a manager and a leader in a number of different ways. Koçel (1998) lists these distinctions as follows:

- Management is a professional position, while leadership is about influencing and mobilizing people.

- Management occurs within the formal structure of an organization, whereas leadership does not require such a structure.
- A manager's influence is derived from their positional authority and enforcement power, whereas a leader's influence stems from personal traits, behavior, vision, trust, and inspiration.
- Managers have certain job descriptions; leaders do not have fixed roles.
- Management focuses on achieving predetermined goals, while leadership seeks to create change and transformation.
- Managers concentrate on the internal structure and dynamics of an organization, while leaders focus on the dynamics of the external environment.
- A manager is someone who "always does things right," whereas a leader is someone who "does the right things" (Koçel, 1998, p. 573).

The importance of effective and respected leadership in crisis management is indisputable. During times of crisis, people need a strong, capable, confident, and approachable leader, who focuses on solving problems, and reflects these qualities to others around them (Luecke and Sarıkaya, 2009, p. 107). As well as maintaining composure in public, it is also expected of a leader to influence stakeholders, and wider audiences. Guiding stakeholders and ensuring that they see themselves as part of the solution, leaders contribute to fostering a positive perception of the organization (Canöz and Öndoğan, 2015, p. 17). At this point, it would be appropriate to discuss the theories of corporate apologia and image restoration, which hold a significant place in effective leadership communication.

### **Theoretical Frame: Theories of Corporate Apologia and Image Restoration**

The theory of Corporate Apologia initially focused on individual responses, but the scope was later expanded to also include an organizational

perspective, within. Corporate Apologia is a rhetorical concept utilized by organizations to defend themselves, primarily serving as a reputation protection strategy (Coombs, 2010, p. 30). Essentially, the discourse of corporate apologia is regarded as a form of self-defense, as part of which, the way organizations defend themselves in situations of a mistake or a crisis, is discussed. Apologia, in lexical meaning, denotes self-defense. Ware and Linkugel (1973) were the first to comprehensively define the term. Apologia begins with a direct attack on an individual's or an organization's character or, in other words, its reputation (Coombs, 2010, p. 339). However, in time, the scope of the concept was broadened to cover all methods employed to protect an organization following a crisis that are considered acts of corporate apologia (Coombs, 2010, p. 338).

Once every stakeholder affected is addressed through a corporate apologia, the process of reconstructing the organization's tarnished image begins. At this point, it is essential to discuss the Image Restoration Theory developed by Benoit (1995) in the literature. In this theory, it is sought to restore damaged reputation through efforts aiming to preserve and rebuild a positive image (Benoit, 1995). Through utilization of communication tools and methods, the theory aims to improve the organization's reputation.

The Image Restoration Theory focuses on the efforts organizations carry out to prevent reputation loss. The image restoration strategy is divided into five stages: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of the offensive act, corrective action, and apology (Benoit, 1997, p. 253). Benoit emphasizes that, in the final stage of rebuilding a positive image, it is essential to accept the mistake, express regret, and seek pardoning. Benoit also stresses that organizations aiming to repair their damaged reputations must primarily determine their target audience. A company may have to communicate with a wide range of addressees with non-identical expectations and that will react differently to apology messages. This theory underscores the use of communication as a fundamental means

for protecting reputation (Coombs, 2010, pp. 31-32). Focusing on the messages to be conveyed during the crisis process and finding an answer to the question, "What needs to be said?" are crucial elements in this approach.

## Methodology

Employing case study method, this study aims to analyze a situation in which a CEO herself—who is expected to act as both the spokesperson and the manager during a crisis—caused the crisis, through the Patiswiss incident, as well as, by this means, shedding light on the complexities of communication field. Within the frames of corporate apologia and image restoration theories, the study examines the company's primary corporate defense strategies and seeks to answer the following questions: Which actors were involved in the crisis? On which platforms and under what motives was the crisis debated? What were the organization's crisis response strategies? The case study is going to analyse the situation based on Coombs' (2010) three-stage model of crisis management: "pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis" phases (Coombs, 2010).

Coombs bases the three-stage model on the specific cyclical nature of crises, and for that reason, some scholars consider it arguable to apply for every single crisis (Drenan et al., 2014), however, the model actually provides a strategic, proactive, and process-oriented frame that comprehensively covers the crisis cycle (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016, pp. 69–70). Since Fink's (1986) four-stage model basing on a disease metaphor primarily focuses on breaking points of a crisis, and Mitroff's (1994) five-stage model, similarly, focuses more on crisis response strategies rather than on the crisis cycle, these models are not going to be employed in this study (Marker, 2023; Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). In contrary to the abovementioned, Coombs's model, seeking to explain the way and the reason why a crisis occurs, offers a systematic and structured approach to crisis management. By guiding organizations through the different stages of crisis communication—pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis—it enables a holistic understanding of

the correlations among these phases. The model also serves as a valuable means since it helps learn from mistakes through case studies (Abbas, 2023).

Furthermore, in order to comprehend online media reflections from the Patiswiss incident and therefore analyze the crisis management process more effectively, the thematic analysis method is employed in this study. The reason the thematic analysis method is adopted in the study is that it helps keeping up with the developments, as well as with the strategies pursued to overcome the crisis, and since it convenient for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2012, pp. 1-2). Programming of the structure also assists interpreting dataset, developing insights, and setting up a robust foundation for analysis (Terry et al., 2017). In other words, thematic analysis, rather than gathering words and numbers only, renders it possible to focus on interpreting the explicit and implicit notion within the qualitative data (Guest et al., 2012, pp. 9-10).

**Figure 1**  
Thematic Analysis Protocol



Source: Terry et al., 2017

**Figure 2**  
Data Search Criteria

| Database                            | Search Filters   |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Google Search Engine&Google Scholar | Keywords: "Patiswiss, Patiswiss Crisis, Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu, Moldy chocolate, Patiswiss Moldy chocolate" |
|                                     | Date Range: April 20 - October 20, 2024  |
|                                     | Languages: English, Turkish  |
|                                     | Exclusion Criteria: Repetitive news, news with the same headline and/or text                                   |
| Online News                         | Content Scope: Patiswiss Crisis and Related News   |
|                                     | Content Platforms: Digital News from Turkish Media, Marketing, and PR Websites                                 |
|                                     | Media Type: Multimedia (Written, Visual, Video Online News)  |

The thematic analysis protocol applied in this study consists of a six-stage process, as can be seen in Figure 1. This process was implemented within the frame of the search criteria outlined in Figure 2. In our study, online articles published in English and Turkish during the six-month period from April 20 to October 20, 2024, regarding the Patiswiss crisis were included based on predetermined keywords related to the crisis. The scope of online article sources covers news websites in the Turkish media, as well as sectoral websites in the fields of marketing and public relations. Repetitive news articles with identical headlines were excluded from the analysis to ensure data integrity and avoid redundancy.

## Thematic Analysis Protocol Process

### Phase 1: Data Collection

During the data collection phase, a total of 354 news articles were systematically gathered from various digital platforms, including news websites, marketing and public relations sector websites, and social media-based news sources, using the predefined search criteria. Following an initial content examination and the removal of duplicate articles, a refined dataset of 244 unique news articles was obtained. This process helped ensuring that the collected data was original, consistent, and thematically relevant for a subsequent analysis.

### Phase 2: Data Refinement

In the data refinement phase, similar or repetitive content within the collected news articles was systematically identified and eliminated. This procedure enhanced the diversity and representativeness of the dataset, thereby improving the reliability and validity of the thematic analysis. Removing redundant content preserved a diverse range of media sources and perspectives for analysis.

### Phase 3: Data Coding

During the data coding phase, the headlines of the refined dataset were systematically coded. The coding process employed Nvivo software to systematically capture patterns, similarities, and narratives within the analyzed dataset. This step established the foundation for identifying thematic categories in the subsequent analysis.

### Phase 4: Theme Construction

In the theme construction phase, preliminary themes were identified from the coded data. An in-depth analysis of the coded data was conducted, grouping patterns, similarities, and narratives into meaningful thematic categories. This step aimed to identify key discussion points from media coverage related to the Patiswiss crisis. The formulation of themes provided a structured framework for presenting significant analytical findings.

### Phase 5: Theme Structuring and Review

During the theme structuring phase, preliminary themes were reviewed and refined further. To enhance internal consistency, thematic boundaries were clarified, ambiguities resolved, and a more coherent thematic framework was developed. Additionally, each theme's distinctive elements were clarified, reinforcing the internal coherence of the media analysis.

### Phase 6: Theme Finalization and Interpretation

The final phase, theme Finalization and interpretation, involved the definitive shaping and interpretation of the thematic analysis outcomes. In this phase, detailed analyses of how media content represented the Patiswiss crisis

were conducted through the identified themes. Qualitative analysis and visualization techniques were employed to provide a detailed evaluation of media narratives during the crisis. The final analysis comprehensively and holistically outlined the patterns and narratives reflected in media coverage of the Patiswiss crisis. This systematic approach facilitated a meticulous and in-depth understanding of Patiswiss crisis response strategies and their media reflections, ensuring robust interpretation and insights.

## The Patiswiss Crisis Case Study

### Patiswiss

Patiswiss is a company established in Ankara in 2004 as a boutique chocolate manufacturer. According to information on its corporate website, as of 2020, the company operates in two factories with a total production area of 8,500 square meters. Its production portfolio includes more than 140 product varieties across 12 main categories (Patiswiss, 2024). However, there are conflicting reports in various news outlets between 2022 and 2024 regarding the number of factories the company has established (Dünya Gazetesi, 2023a; Erçin, 2024).

In 2017, Patiswiss was acquired by Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu. Previously, Yıldız Tunaoğlu had opened a patisserie called "Karameli" in Ankara, and following the acquisition of Patiswiss, she led the company through rapid growth (Sol Haber, 2024a). According to 2023 media reports, Patiswiss exports to 35 countries, including the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom, and generates 10% of its total revenue from exports (Dünya Gazetesi, 2023a). Additionally, in 2022, Patiswiss was awarded the "Company with the Most Increased Female Employment" award by TOBB, and the former CEO, Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu, received the "Fastest Growing Woman Entrepreneur" award (Dünya Gazetesi, 2022). Patiswiss emphasizes in its mission and vision the principles of "prioritizing human health with a commitment to safe food, keeping up with global trends, and staying ahead of the times" (Patiswiss, 2024b). The company's

growth strategies for 2023 also included plans for an initial public offering (Dünya Gazetesi, 2022, 2023a).

### Former CEO: Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu

Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu is the founder and former CEO of the Patiswiss chocolate brand, established in Ankara. Born in Ankara, Yıldız Tunaoğlu began her career with an education in electronic engineering and pursued her master's degree in industrial engineering. Following her graduation, she worked as a production engineer at one of the leading factories in the defense industry (Yıldız Tunaoğlu, 2023). Driven by her interest and passion for production processes, she aimed to build a long-term career in this field but eventually turned her focus toward the chocolate and pastry sector, fulfilling her childhood dream by founding the Patiswiss brand. In her personal life, Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu is married to Sinan Tunaoğlu, a co-founder of Karel Elektronik and the current chairman of the Patiswiss board (CNN Türk, 2024; TEDx Talks, 2023).

### Pre-Crisis Phase: Mocking Rhetoric in Union Opposition

The pre-crisis phase refers to the stage when an organization or brand continues its normal operations before the event that triggers the crisis. During this stage, warning signals related to or indicative of the crisis may emerge, and measures for prevention and preparation can be undertaken (Timothy Coombs and Holladay, 2007, p. 5). These signals, also referred to as Prodromes in the medical literature, are vital for crisis communication management, as early detection is the best remedy for a crisis (Çınarlı, 2016, p. 37). For the Patiswiss brand, significant signals, problems, and risks related to the crisis had already surfaced during the pre-crisis phase.

In this context, following the dismissal of a unionized worker, it was alleged that workers at the factory were taken into a room by the General Manager, Chief Food Engineer, and Human Resources Manager of Patiswiss, where they were asked whether they were union members and

were pressured with statements like, "We gave you jobs during hard times, and now you're betraying us by joining a union." Additionally, it was claimed that the e-Government passwords of about 15 workers were taken, and they were forced to resign from the union (Tele1, 2024; Zülfigaroğlu, 2024). Öz Gıda-İş Union organized a protest in February 2024 on behalf of the dismissed workers (Öz Gıda-İş Union, 2024). The protest, held to advocate for the unrecognized union rights of these workers, lasted for over three weeks (Yıldırım, 2024).

Subsequently, the dismissal of unionized workers gained political attention. İskender Bayhan, a Member of Parliament from the Labor Party, commented on Patiswiss's poor working conditions and the dismissal of a unionized worker through his X account. Bayhan stated: "Workers at Patiswiss Chocolate are subjected to minimum wage with no social rights, constant pressure, and mistreatment. When they attempted to unionize under Öz Gıda-İş, the employer fired a worker. In the factory, where most employees are women and earthquake survivors, workers are told, 'We gave you jobs during hard times, and now you're going against us.' We salute the workers who continue their struggle despite threats and blackmail in the face of these anti-labor policies" (Bayhan, 2024).

During February 2024, workers dismissed by Patiswiss cited poor working conditions and environments that compromised food safety as their reasons for protest. A dismissed worker described the company as "exploiting people by making them work like slaves while saying, 'We're here for you; we're a family.' It takes advantage of people's hardships, hiring those in difficult situations by thinking, 'These people can't do anything, they're dependent on us.'" Another former worker alleged, "The depot entrance, where employees entered and exited, had a sign saying 'Goods Receiving' where they clocked in and out. The union argued that this did not comply with safety standards" (Yıldırım, 2024).

During this process, then-CEO of Patiswiss, Yıldız Tunaoğlu, made statements on her X account

regarding the protests and actions of unionizing workers that posed a risk of creating a crisis. On February 11, 2024, Yıldız Tunaoğlu used a casual, mocking, and problematic tone of communication, saying, as shown in Figure 1:

"You guys are so funny, honestly, what can I say? You must have a lot of free time; have fun. There isn't a single Patiswiss employee in that picture. :) Come on, make a video and say, 'I'm an employee.' :) Oh, wait, sorry, with so many lies, you'd say that too. :) :) Have fun; we have a lot of work to do with our 1000+ employees :)" (Sancar, 2024).

**Figure 3**

Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu's Sharing about the Union's Action



On the same date, Yıldız Tunaoğlu continued her posts, stating,

"First God, then the state, law, and the Republic are on the side of the worker and the righteous, thankfully. Moments when I say thank goodness we are not living in a banana republic. Because people are truly bad, honestly. There's no one left to say, 'If I lie, let it be upon my children,' but justice—both divine and legal—will prevail in this world, my dears. Have a happy Sunday. Oh, and share this while you're at it," and engaged in debates with numerous users who criticized her (Sancar, 2024).

In leadership communication, it is fundamentally expected that leaders exhibit an empathetic approach, expressing compassion and humane respect toward their employees (Mayfield, 2008, p. 10). During the pre-crisis phase, the former CEO of Patiswiss made statements that not only

posed significant risks to the brand's image and reputation but also violated several principles of leadership communication. These statements were problematic in terms of issue and risk management as well as employee relations. Specifically, her comments displayed a lack of respect and professionalism toward workers participating in the protests or union actions, evidenced by dismissive and mocking phrases such as “*You guys are so funny*” and “*You must have a lot of free time.*” The CEO's remark, “*Oh, wait, sorry, with so many lies, you'd say that too,*” is highly detrimental to reputation management during a crisis. While sincerity is critical in leadership communication, mocking language erodes trust and respect. Expressions like “*Have fun,*” used here, convey an impression that the concerns of the target audience are not being taken seriously.

Leadership communication serves as a powerful catalyst for establishing and maintaining trust with employees and forms the foundation of corporate trust (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2002, p. 90). However, the CEO's post, instead of reinforcing trust and loyalty with her employees, contained statements like “*we have a lot of work to do with our 1000+ employees,*” reducing workers to mere numbers. This commodifying rhetoric represents a significant problem in terms of leadership communication.

As Coombs (2020) notes, the primary goal during the pre-crisis phase is to mitigate risks that could harm the company and stakeholders, thereby preventing the escalation into a full-blown crisis. Every crisis presents a warning signal, which indicates that a risk is beginning to transform into a crisis (Coombs, 2020, p. 100). Approximately two months before the Patiswiss crisis, the company received a significant pre-crisis warning signal, as issues related to workers escalated into union action and gained limited media coverage. Notably, during this pre-crisis period, the problematic tone and approach of the former CEO's social media posts stand out. The lack of change in her communication style, approach, and tone during

this period played a key role in the company entering into a crisis.

### Crisis Response Phase: From Arrogant Accusations to Forced Apology

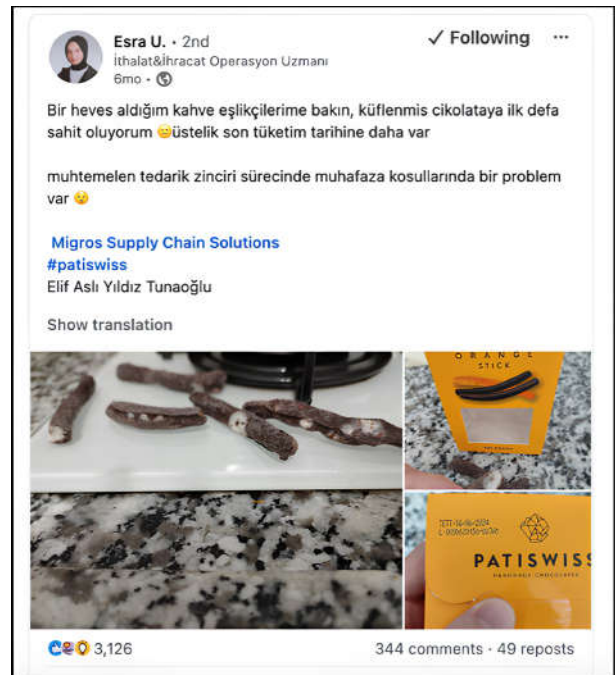
On April 20, 2024, a Patiswiss customer, Esra U., shared her disappointment about a purchased product on her LinkedIn account, as shown in Figure 3. Her post reads:

“Look at my coffee companions I eagerly purchased, witnessing moldy chocolate for the first time 😞 and the expiration date is still valid. There's probably an issue with storage conditions during the supply chain process.”

In her LinkedIn post, Esra U. also included a photo of the product and tagged both Migros Supply Chain and Patiswiss's former CEO, Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu.

Figure 4

Customer's First LinkedIn Post



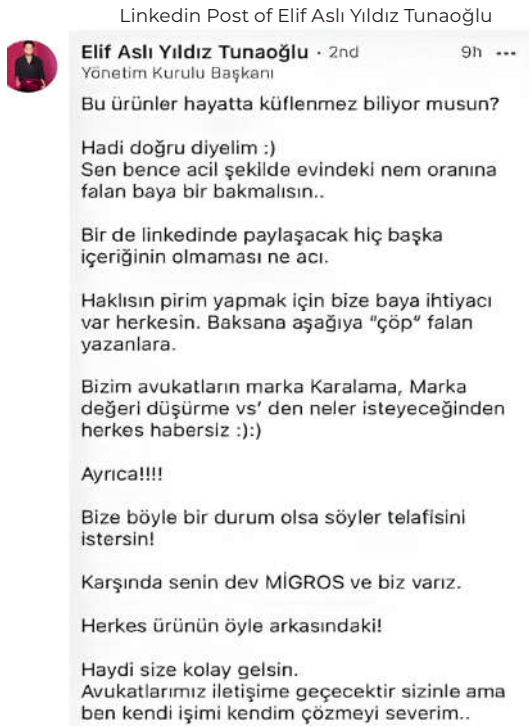
In response to the customer's post, which did not adopt a harsh tone toward the brand, Patiswiss's former CEO, Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu, replied with a threatening, mocking, dismissive, and arrogant tone, as shown in Figure 4. She stated:

“These products never mold, you know? Let's say they do 😊 You should urgently check the humidity level in your home. And how sad it is that you have no other content

to share on LinkedIn. You're right; everyone desperately needs us for clout. Look at the comments below saying 'trash' and such. Nobody realizes what our lawyers will demand in terms of brand defamation, reducing brand value, etc. 😊😊 Also! If there were such an issue with us, you'd let us know, and we'd compensate! You're dealing with the giant Migros and us. Everyone is behind their product! Anyway, good luck to you. Our lawyers will contact you, but I like to solve things myself."

This post by the former CEO was met with significant backlash from social media users and subsequently sparked widespread public and media criticism (CNN Türk, 2024; Cumhuriyet, 2024a; Dünya Gazetesi, 2024).

Figure 5



Following the widespread backlash on social media and in the public sphere, Yıldız Tunaoğlu deleted her post shown in Figure 5 and issued an initial apology filled with spelling and grammatical errors, which she later deleted shortly after. She stated:

"As someone who scored 45/45 on the 2004 ÖSS and as a person who constantly reads books, I deeply apologize for the spelling errors in my post, caused by living life at a fast pace 'out of necessity' (also because my iPhone's

English keyboard didn't give a warning:( ). I apologize to all my valued followers." (Sol Haber, 2024b).

Subsequently, on her Instagram account, Yıldız Tunaoğlu shared another post with a similar tone, stating:

"Oh, my beautiful countrymen... Oh, my dear competitors, who consider us rivals, even though we are quite small compared to them. Anyway, you're only focused on my spelling mistakes. I apologize to everyone; my adherence to grammar rules fell short in my posts due to my speed. Of course, my impulsiveness also played a role, to the point that I couldn't leave it to my social media experts. Let's admit it; we need to let the professionals handle these things. I'm neither that important nor is my use of our beautiful language on social media a reference for anything. It's just like the differences between writing and speaking in English. By the way, my phone has an English keyboard, and my eyes are extremely dry, so I can't see properly. If you wouldn't mind, could you please review and correct my writing and grammar errors? I would like to thank in advance those who will find and fix the mistakes in this sentence." (Tufan, 2024).

Shortly after deleting this post as well, Yıldız Tunaoğlu published a second apology on Instagram, as shown in Figure 6, claiming that her spelling and grammar errors caused a misunderstanding:

"Honestly, I don't know if this was a big misunderstanding or if I explained myself poorly. But I'm very sorry for occupying your time. I think you probably know me. All I wanted to say was that everyone stands behind the product, and if you sent it to us, we would have solved it. There was no need for a post that would harm the brand. But with my knowledge of grammar added to the mix, it seems like I came off differently. Anyway, our lawyers will probably also think of something for me. After all, we manage the company with the board. I'm fine; no problem. My only concern is providing the best product at the best price. I won't give up until my last breath, including my non-food brands and ventures. Best regards. In advance, I apologize for my spelling and grammar errors. I don't want to make my social media team work outside of their hours :( I'm sure they're

already very upset about what happened. I also thank those who will fix it and those who will provide me with unconditional and free training."

Figure 6

Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoglu's Second Apology Post

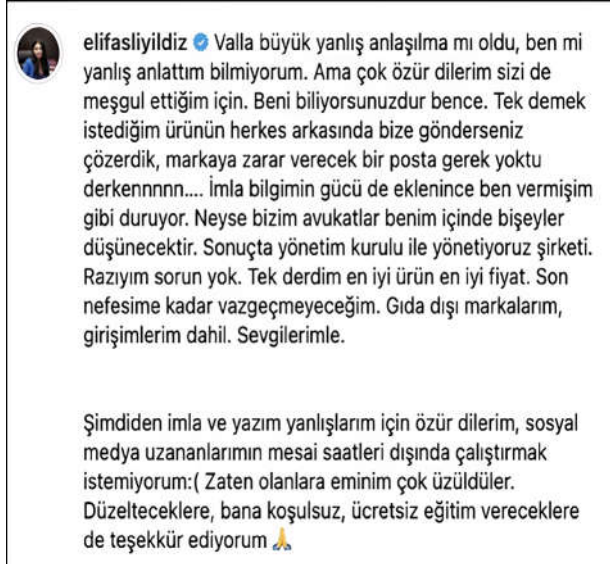
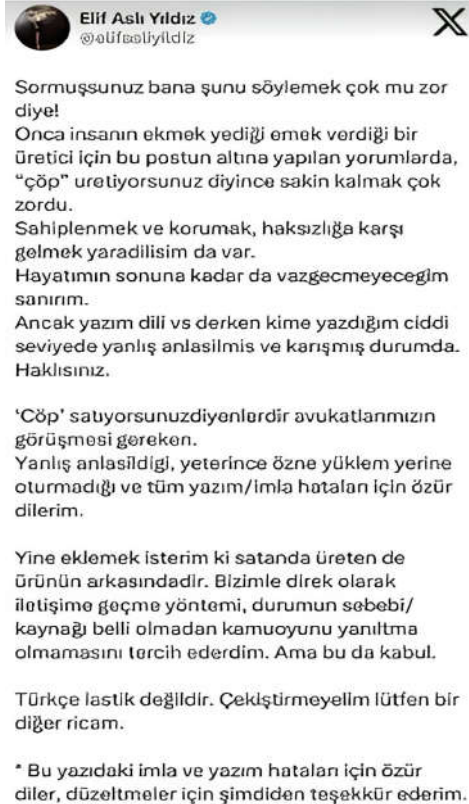


Figure 7

Yıldız Tunaoglu's X Post



Similarly, Yıldız Tunaoglu also apologized in a post on her X account for "all spelling/grammar mistakes" but responded to users' critical comments by stating, "It was very hard to stay calm when they said we produce trash," admitting

that she could not control her emotions. When companies face a crisis damaging their image and reputation, issuing an apology as part of corporate apologia rhetoric is one of the effective crisis response strategies. Apology serves as a rhetorical tool for self-defense and is strongly connected to improving crisis communication (Coombs et al., 2010, p. 337). However, as shown in Figures 6 and 7, none of the posts by Yıldız Tunaoglu directly addressed the original cause of the crisis—the "moldy chocolate" complaint. Instead of apologizing to the affected customer, she issued an apology for "causing inconvenience and making grammatical mistakes in her writing." Furthermore, in her X post shown in Figure 6, the former CEO continued to imply threats, stating that "those who say we produce trash should talk to our lawyers." This indicates that Yıldız Tunaoglu's crisis response strategy leaned toward denial.

Following the public outcry, it was noted that Patiswiss products were removed from the shelves of several well-known retail chains (Tufan, 2024; Cumhuriyet, 2024; Artigerçek, 2024). Later, on April 21, 2024, Patiswiss issued an official apology via its corporate social media accounts, stating:

"As the Patiswiss brand, we strive to ensure that our products remain fresh and healthy throughout their shelf life. We view every piece of feedback as an opportunity to improve our products. We deeply apologize for the negative experience of our customer and respectfully inform the public that we will do our best to resolve the issue." (Sol Haber, 2024b).

When companies employ an apology narrative to protect their reputation, they can express it in different ways. A full apology involves acknowledging the occurrence of the crisis, taking responsibility, and asking for forgiveness. A partial apology, on the other hand, expresses simple regret or concern for the crisis victims (Coombs et al., 2010, p. 341). Unlike the former CEO's posts, Patiswiss' apology was balanced and professional. While the former CEO adopted denial as her crisis response strategy, the Patiswiss brand chose a full apology strategy directed toward the customer.

The communication disparity between Patiswiss and its CEO did not last long. On April 22, 2024, Yıldız Tunaoğlu announced her resignation via another social media post (Şenses, 2024a). In her resignation post, Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu stated:

"I hurt one of our consumers, who I prioritize above all else, with an inappropriate response. As someone committed to increasing female employment and advocating for equality in the workplace with every passing year, I am fully aware that there is no justification for my inappropriate response to a fellow woman. I accept that my actions were entirely wrong, and I sincerely apologize to her first and foremost, as well as to all our consumers and the esteemed public for this unfortunate incident. As a reflection of my genuine apology, I am stepping down from my position as Chair of the Board of Directors as of today. The board will announce the leadership change promptly."

In this post, the former CEO departed from her previous denial strategy and issued a full apology to both the customer and the public, indicating a shift toward corporate apology as a crisis response strategy. However, the CEO's rapid shift from threats and denial to an apology raised questions about her sincerity among the target audience, potentially creating an impression of a forced apology. Following Yıldız Tunaoğlu's resignation during the crisis phase, Ali Sinan Tunaoğlu became the new Chairman of Patiswiss's Board of Directors (Şenses, 2024b).

In the crisis response phase, not only the issue that triggered the crisis but also all of a company's previous risks and problems tend to come under public scrutiny. As Frandsen and Johansen (2007) noted, during a crisis, the rhetorical arena expands with various voices and actors, broadening the context and scope of the crisis (Frandsen and Johansen, 2007, p. 362). Hence, crises are discussed in multi-voiced environments, often extending beyond the institution or brand managing the crisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2014, p. 41). A similar scenario unfolded in the Patiswiss crisis. Beyond the company's statements, various actors became

involved in the crisis arena, broadening its scope by introducing discussions of related topics.

One notable actor involved in the discussions was Murat Ülker, Chairman of the Board of Yıldız Holding, which operates in the confectionery and chocolate sector. Ülker intervened in the debate through a LinkedIn post, saying, *"There's always something to learn at every position"* (Gazete Oksijen, 2024b). Another actor that emerged in this context was the Swiss-based company Patiswiss AG. During the Patiswiss crisis, it was revealed that there were trademark disputes between the Turkish-based Patiswiss and the Swiss company of the same name. At the time of the crisis, as shown in Figure 7, a press release by Patiswiss AG highlighted ongoing trademark litigation in various countries. The statement from the Swiss company noted, *"Patiswiss AG has initiated legal actions against Patiswiss Chocolate in the past under trademark law, given the multiple registrations of trademark protection violations in various countries,"* drawing attention to its legal disputes with the Turkish-based company.

Figure 8

Patiswiss AG Press Release

**patiswiss**  
IN NATURE'S FOOTSTEPS

Gunzgen, 23. April 2024

#### Statement hinsichtlich Patiswiss Türkei

Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren

Seit dieser Woche werden wir vermehrt hinsichtlich eines offensichtlichen Qualitätsfehlers der Firma Patiswiss Çikolata mit Sitz in Ankara von verschiedenen Parteien angesprochen und in Verbindung mit der türkischen Patiswiss gebracht. Folgendes stellen wir richtig:

- Die Patiswiss AG mit Sitz in Gunzgen, Schweiz, hat keinerlei geschäftliche Beziehungen mit der türkischen Patiswiss Çikolata;
- Es bestehen weder Geschäftsbeziehung bezüglich ähnlicher Warengruppen, noch stehen die beiden Unternehmen in einem anderen Kontext in irgendeiner Verbindung;
- Über den angeblichen Vorfall kann die Patiswiss AG keine Aussagen machen, da wir den Sachverhalt nicht kennen.

Die Patiswiss AG Schweiz ist in der Vergangenheit bereits mehrere Male markenrechtlich gegen die Firma Patiswiss Çikolata vorgegangen, da in mehreren Ländern hinsichtlich des Markenschutzes der Patiswiss AG Schweiz Übertretungen registriert worden sind.

Die Patiswiss AG Schweiz ist der Partner, wenn es um Nussverarbeitung geht. Unser einziger Produktionsstandort liegt in Gunzgen, Schweiz. Weiter steht die Unternehmung für Regeneration, Sicherheit und Genuss.

Bei Fragen stehen wir Ihnen gerne zur Verfügung.

Freundliche Grüsse

Patiswiss AG

Sandro Ott  
CEO

Markus Bucher  
CFO

Source: Patiswiss AG, 2024

During the crisis response phase, another issue that drew attention was the inconsistencies in the former CEO's graduate degree credentials. It was revealed that the information about Yıldız Tunaoğlu's graduate degree on LinkedIn was inaccurate, leading her to shut down her social media accounts. According to her LinkedIn profile, Yıldız completed her undergraduate studies in Electrical and Electronics Engineering at Başkent University between 2005-2009 and pursued a master's degree in industrial engineering at Hacettepe University between 2011-2013. However, information on Hacettepe University's website indicated that the program, which Yıldız claimed to have completed in 2013, actually started in 2012-2013. Following the revelation of this discrepancy, Dr. Erdi Daşdemir, a faculty member in the Industrial Engineering Department at Hacettepe University's Faculty of Engineering, stated:

"The information about Patiswiss CEO Elif Aslı Yıldız's 2011-2013 Industrial Engineering master's degree from Hacettepe on LinkedIn is incorrect. We have no such graduate. The program awarded its first graduates in 2015" (Gazete Oksijen, 2024a).

Another issue that emerged during the crisis phase for the Patiswiss brand was a tax scandal. Patiswiss's capital increased by 700% within 8.5 months. The company's capital, which was 28.75 million TL on April 18, 2023, rose to 200 million TL as of January 2, 2024. Of this 200 million TL, 160 million TL was allocated to Elif Aslı Yıldız, 20 million TL to her husband Ali Sinan Tunaoğlu, and 20 million TL to her brother Mustafa Nazif Yıldız. Despite achieving a revenue of \$250 million over three years, the company was revealed to have paid only 73,000 TL in taxes (Bölükbaş, 2024).

During the crisis phase, the primary cause of the crisis, along with prior company issues and risks, became the focus of additional discussions, significantly damaging the brand's reputation among stakeholders. All events and agendas arising during the crisis phase will play a decisive role in evaluating crisis management and

determining how the brand's reputation can be rebuilt in the post-crisis phase.

### Post-Crisis Phase and Evaluation of Crisis Management

The post-crisis phase encompasses the communication efforts undertaken after the resolution of the crisis is perceived. During this phase, the focus shifts from managing the crisis itself to managing its impacts. However, determining the exact end of a crisis is challenging. As Coombs (2010) points out, post-crisis communication involves both drawing lessons from the crisis and managing stakeholder responses. During this stage, although rebuilding reputation may take years, companies concentrate their communication efforts on restoring their reputation (Coombs, 2010, p. 10).

Although the Patiswiss crisis cannot be considered fully resolved, the Google Trends data provides clear evidence of a notable change in search interest patterns. Google Trends measures the relative popularity of a particular search term over time by analyzing a sample of web searches made by users over a given period. However, this data does not directly reflect the total search volume. Trend data is normalized for each region and period; the highest level of interest is taken as 100, and other values are presented on a scale from 0 to 100, proportional to this reference point. Therefore, the values in the graph represent the relative search interest over that period, not the absolute number of search terms. A decline in a term over time does not mean that the number of searches has decreased, but rather that the term has received less attention compared to other searches. This approach provides a valuable metric for analyzing relative changes in user interest over time. In this regard, Google Trends data in Figure 8 shows that Turkey-wide internet search interest in the keyword Patiswiss has decreased as of May 2, 2024. It shows that public interest in this crisis has been declining since May 2024 (Google News Initiative, 2025).

Figure 9

Interest Over Time in Türkiye

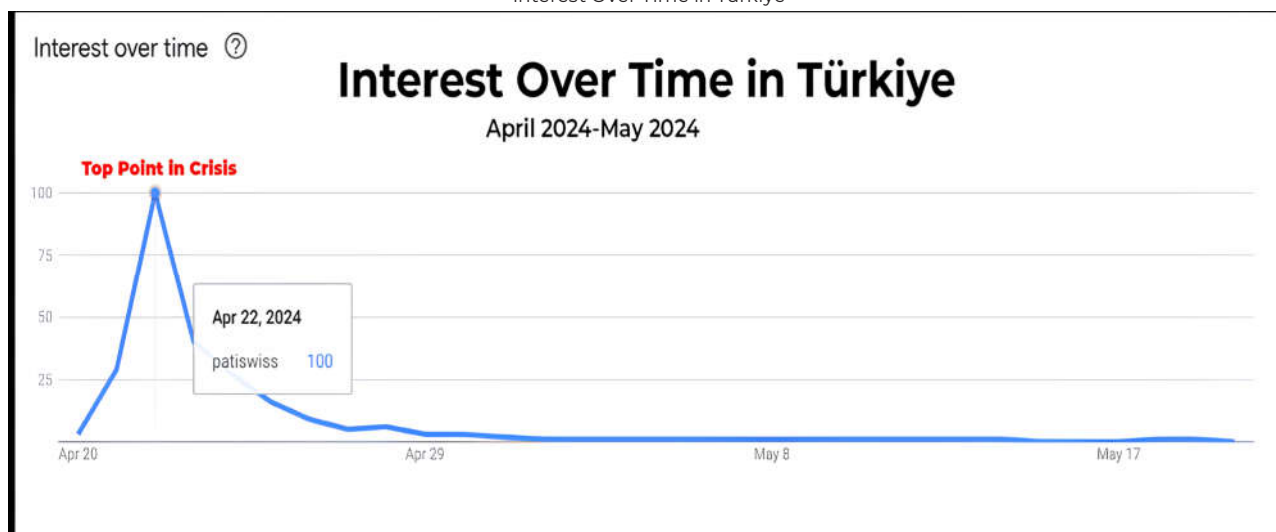
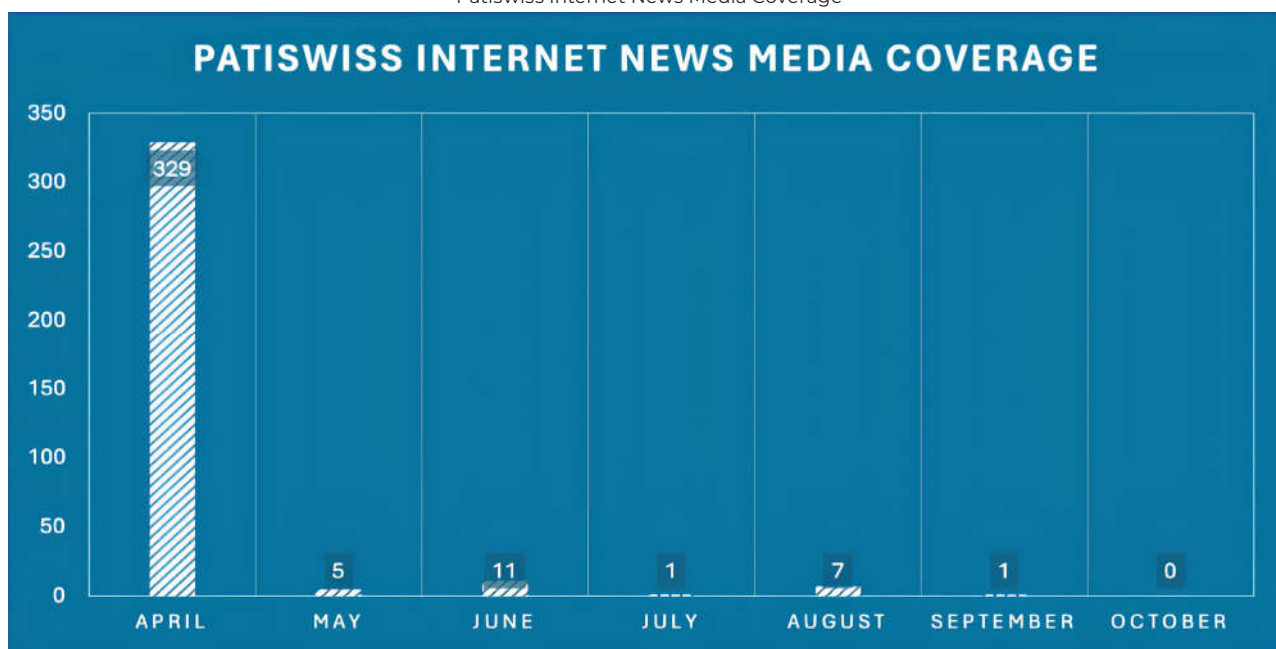


Figure 10

Patiswiss Internet News Media Coverage



Similarly, this study analyzed online news media coverage using the data search criteria outlined in Figure 2 and the thematic analysis protocol presented in Figure 3. The headlines and sources of the retrieved news items were examined, and those unrelated to the Patiswiss crisis were excluded from the analysis. As illustrated in Figure 10, 329 online news articles related to the Patiswiss crisis were published in April 2024, followed by 5 in May and 11 in June. From July to October, only nine relevant news items were identified in total. These findings indicate that the Patiswiss crisis had little to no continued presence in online news media after April 2024.

In the post-crisis period, in May 2024, allegations surfaced on social media claiming that Patiswiss had rebranded and relaunched its products. Patiswiss responded to these allegations by stating, “*The brands alleged to have replaced Patiswiss on some social media accounts are products that have been meticulously produced in Patiswiss facilities for over two years and have a very broad customer base in Turkey.*” (Patronlar Dünyası, 2024b). During this period, it was also reported that the former CEO had reactivated her social media accounts (Patronlar Dünyası, 2024a).

In June 2024, Patiswiss began employing regret and suffering strategies as part of its crisis response approach. In a public statement, Patiswiss expressed its remorse, stating:

"Welcoming those who apologize is also a virtue," while also portraying the brand as an unjust victim of external attacks, saying, "We are deeply saddened by the ongoing accusations against the Patiswiss brand, the excessive criticisms, and the relentless continuation of assaults based on misinformation." During the same period, Patiswiss's new chairman, the former CEO's husband Tunaoglu, described the crisis as a "communication mishap" (Munyar, 2024).

Meanwhile, media outlets in June 2024 interpreted Patiswiss's product discount campaigns as an image-building initiative (Halk TV, 2024).

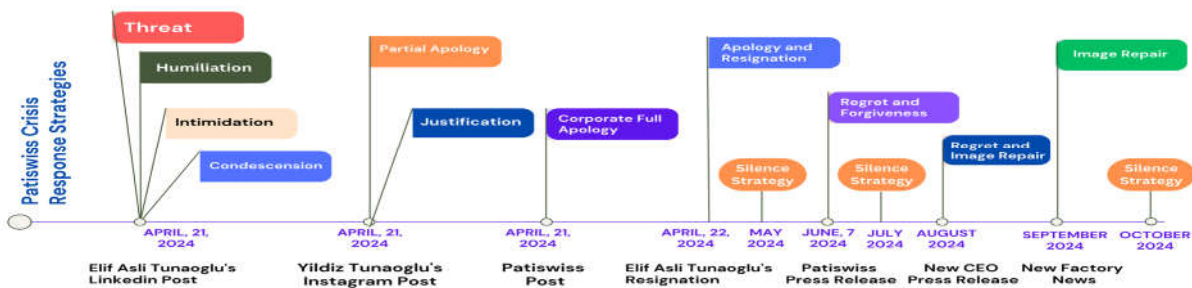
In July, Patiswiss did not make headlines with any new developments, but in August 2024, it began combining its regret strategy with efforts to rebuild its brand image. The new CEO of Patiswiss commented on the former CEO's controversial post, stating, "I said that the damage caused by the Patiswiss crisis cannot be measured in numbers. I expressed that the post should never have been made. I believed that a customer should not have been responded to in this way, and I wish the post

had never been published, and we had never experienced this process. The company already had a customer service unit; as the General Manager, I forwarded the issue to this unit directly when it came to me." Additionally, Patiswiss focused on PR campaigns aimed at repairing its brand image. Media outlets reported that Patiswiss was recovering from the crisis by opening its fourth factory and focusing on the U.S. market (Ekonomim, 2024; Erçin, 2024; S. Özdemir, 2024). However, earlier PR reports claiming that Patiswiss had opened its fifth factory in 2023 created discrepancies and inconsistencies about its facilities, risking further damage to the brand's image (Dünya Gazetesi, 2023a).

In September 2024, Patiswiss's exports and the opening of its fourth factory became the focus of media coverage. In an interview with Patiswiss, the former CEO Yıldız Tunaoglu expressed regret, saying, "*I expressed myself poorly. It was horrible. I caused incredible damage to the brand, and I am deeply sorry. The part about what to tell the employees was the worst. I never want to experience something like this again. I wish the company hadn't suffered so much damage. I have learned so many lessons...*" This period saw a continued focus on strategies of regret and image restoration.

Figure 11

Patiswiss Crisis Response Strategies April-October 2024



Effective evaluation of crisis management necessitates examining the crisis response strategies implemented by the Patiswiss brand during both the crisis and post-crisis phases. In this context, the study provides a detailed analysis of the changes in Patiswiss's crisis management strategies during and after the crisis, as illustrated in Figure 11. The crisis began on April 21, 2024, with a social media post containing threats, condescension, and intimidation. It was initially addressed with a partial apology and claims of misunderstanding, ultimately concluding with a full apology and the resignation of the CEO.

Between May and October 2024, internet media analyses of the Patiswiss brand revealed that the company exhibited limited regret and image repair efforts, instead primarily adopting a “great silence” strategy. As part of this strategy, all social media accounts of the brand remained closed to comments as of October 2024. Evaluating the media reflections and outcomes of these crisis response strategies provides a holistic and analytical perspective on the crisis. In alignment with this goal, the study also analyzed online news related to the Patiswiss brand.

To comprehensively analyze media reflections on the crisis, thematic analysis was conducted on 244 headlines and leads from online news, excluding

repetitive content, covering the crisis and post-crisis phases. Figure 12 illustrates the relative intensity of each news theme, while Figure 13 presents the frequency with which these themes appeared in the dataset. As shown in detail in both figures, the most frequently covered themes in online news media were the resignation of the CEO and the appointment of a new CEO. Specifically, 28.69% of the 244 news articles referenced these themes. Headlines such as “*Resignation following the moldy chocolate crisis*” (Dünya, 2024) and “*Patiswiss crisis leads to resignation*” (Tufan, 2024) emphasized that the resignation was a direct response to the crisis. Notably, many news articles also focused on the fact that the new CEO is the former CEO's spouse, with media coverage frequently delving into their personal lives.

Additionally, 23.37% of the 244 articles addressed themes related to the question “What is the Patiswiss incident?”, biographical information about former CEO Elif Aslı Yıldız Tunaoğlu, allegations of a fake diploma, and the product withdrawal reaction. This news not only explained the background of the Patiswiss crisis but also covered the diploma allegations in detail, including university statements and the subsequent decision by some retailers to remove the products from shelves as a form of public response.

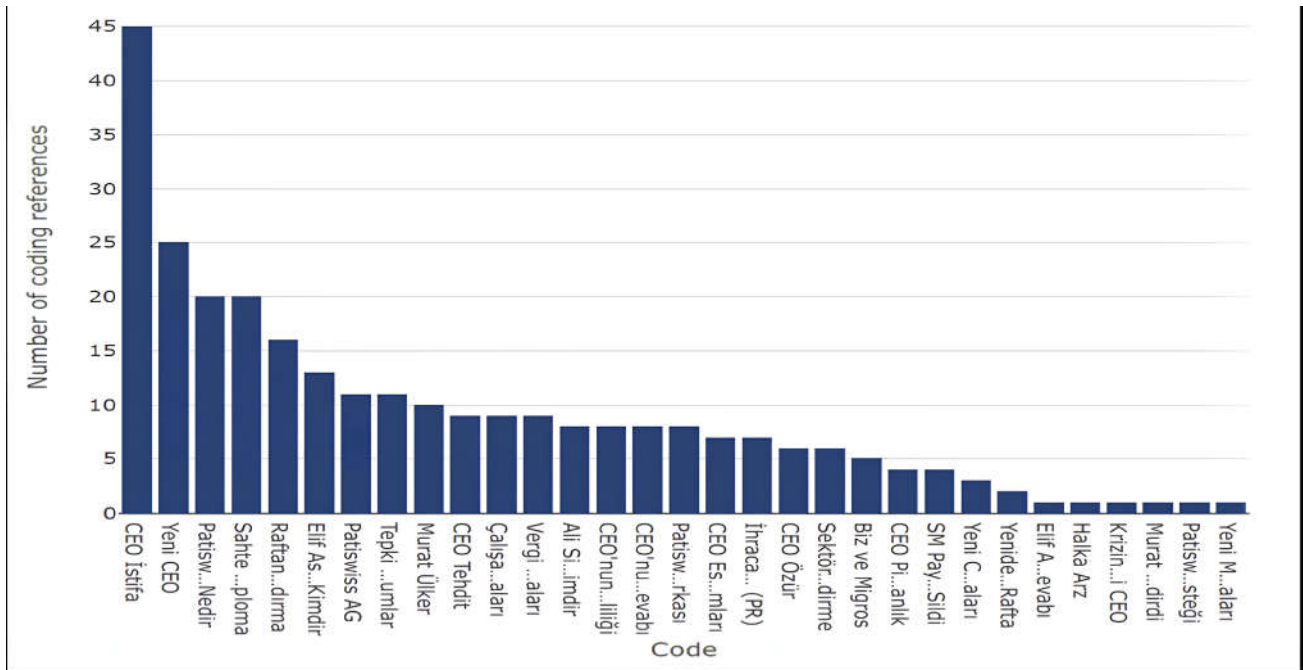
Figure 12

Patiswiss Internet Media News Density Map by Themes



Figure 13

Patiswiss's Numerical Distribution of Themes in Internet News Headline



In the thematic analysis, Other prominent news themes identified in the thematic analysis included the statement by the CEO of the rival company, the trademark lawsuit clarification by the similarly named Patiswiss AG in Switzerland, and allegations of employee mistreatment. In this context, the rival CEO highlighted the importance of learning at every level by stating, “There are always things to learn in every position,” while Patiswiss AG’s statement that “we have no relationship” was also reported. On the other hand, as shown in Figure 12, themes such as the CEO’s apology, brand reputation, and expressions of remorse appeared in only 3.69% of the 244 news items, indicating a very limited level of coverage. This suggests that the apology, regret, and image repair themes identified in Figure 10 did not receive sufficient attention in online media, and the visibility necessary for effective positive image management was not achieved.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that crisis management becomes a much more complex and multi-layered process when a CEO is the direct trigger of a crisis. The Patiswiss case illustrates the vital importance of leadership communication in crisis situations and the risks of an inconsistent communication strategy between the brand and

its spokesperson. Our study comprehensively analyzes the Patiswiss crisis within the framework of Coombs’ three-stage crisis management model, which is widely used in crisis communication literature. Specifically focusing on pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis communication strategies, the study evaluates the organization’s crisis management performance. In existing literature, the Patiswiss crisis has primarily been examined through the lens of digital communication and social media (Armutlu, 2024; Ekmekçi, 2024; Koca, 2024; Özdemir, 2024). However, this study asserts that the root cause of the crisis lies not in social media itself but in the CEO’s poor decision-making and flawed communication approach.

Many crises that unfold on social media originate from customer relations issues (Institute for PR, 2014). As Warner and Yeomans (2012) note, numerous misstatements and gaffes made on social media can rapidly plunge brands into crisis situations (Warner and Yeomans). Brands that respond appropriately to audience reactions are often able to overcome crises more swiftly (Genel & Erdem, 2021, p. 5). Similarly, the triggering factor in the Patiswiss crisis was the CEO’s unnecessary intervention in a customer service process that was not within their direct responsibility, as well as the flawed messaging and communication strategy

adopted during this intervention. While LinkedIn—the platform where the crisis emerged—was certainly significant, the core issue lay in the poor communication approach demonstrated by the company's top executive. This case once again highlights how critical communication skills are for leaders in effective crisis management.

The most effective way to handle a crisis is to prevent it (Coombs, 2020, p.100). The findings reveal significant warning signs from the CEO in the pre-crisis stage, yet the company failed to address these signals or take proactive measures against evident risks and problems, ultimately leading to the crisis. In the pre-crisis phase, allegations of threats and dismissals of employees due to their union activities posed substantial risks for escalating into a crisis. The actual crisis, however, stemmed from the CEO's problematic communication style, which turned a standard customer relations issue into a full-blown crisis. A straightforward apology from the customer relations department (CRM), coupled with corrective actions like product returns and compensation, could have prevented the crisis and enhanced customer satisfaction instead.

Reputational risk during crises often stems from the dissemination of inappropriate content that can severely damage the image of the individual or brand responsible for the communication. Regardless of whether the content is factually accurate or not, the more offensive or outrageous it is, the more rapidly it spreads and the greater its potential to harm reputations. Each year, numerous business and political leaders are forced to resign after posting content on social media that is perceived as offensive, insincere, or absurd (Baccarella et al., 2018, p. 434). In a similar vein, the CEO of Patiswiss resigned shortly after posting a scandalous message that drew widespread backlash.

The crisis communication literature includes numerous cases in which crises were triggered by the statements made by CEOs or corporate representatives. For instance, in the aftermath

of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, BP CEO Tony Hayward's Facebook statement — “We're sorry for the disruption that's caused the loss of lives. Nobody wants this over more than I do. I'd like my life back.” — was widely criticized for its lack of empathy and led to a public apology. Similarly, following the Van earthquake, Onur Air launched a conditional donation campaign that drew significant public criticism. The company's response — “We apologize to our followers who did not misunderstand us” — was seen as passive-aggressive and further fueled the crisis (Çınarlı, 2016, pp. 48–49).

Effective crisis management requires that the CEO take responsibility, offer a sincere apology, and clearly communicate that measures have been taken to prevent recurrence (Mcbride, 2017). When an organization initially denies responsibility and is later found to be at fault, the damage to its reputation and stakeholder trust is exacerbated. Furthermore, delayed acknowledgment of guilt can significantly lower reputation scores (Coombs et al., 2016, p. 381). As highlighted in Duğan's (2018) comprehensive study, in many social media crises in Turkey triggered by CEOs, brands have either accepted responsibility and issued apologies or employed corrective action strategies (pp. 303–304).

However, the literature is replete with examples to the contrary. In the case of the Carnival disaster, where many lives were lost, the CEO waited four days to issue a statement and failed to include an apology (Red Banyan, 2024; Michelson, 2014). Former pharmaceutical executive Martin Shkreli also made headlines after his X (formerly Twitter) account was suspended for posting content that harassed a woman (BBC News, 2017). Another example is Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who responded to a fatal accident involving the company's self-driving technology by saying, “We also don't know what happened,” a statement criticized for evading responsibility (TRT Haber, 2018). In a similar fashion, during the Patiswiss crisis, the CEO initially refused to accept responsibility, claimed to have been misunderstood, and adopted a tone perceived

as arrogant and dismissive toward customers. This response intensified public outrage on social media and significantly escalated the crisis.

Furthermore, both the pre-crisis and crisis phases highlight the CEO's problematic communication style and tone, emphasizing the interconnectedness between these stages. During the crisis, the CEO's response strategies, characterized by threats, intimidation, and belittling remarks, followed by partial and conditional apologies, drew criticism for a lack of sincerity from media and the public. Conversely, the brand management adopted a more conciliatory approach by issuing a full apology, expressing regret, and implementing a long-term strategy of silence with sporadic image restoration efforts.

Crises often bring additional related issues and actors into the crisis arena. During the crisis, the media spotlight extended beyond the primary issue to cover the former CEO's personal life, allegations of a fake diploma, trademark disputes with a similarly named Swiss brand, Patiswiss AG, and tax evasion claims. These developments further deepened the crisis and amplified its destructive impact.

The thematic analysis of online media coverage revealed that among Patiswiss' crisis response strategies, silence emerged as a dominant tactic. However, the findings indicate that initiatives involving apology, regret, and image restoration received limited visibility in the media, suggesting that these strategies had a restricted impact. To rebuild its image and strengthen its connection with stakeholders, Patiswiss must abandon the silence strategy and adopt transparent, sincere, and effective actions.

This study has some limitations. First, the research was conducted only through media coverage and corporate statements, and direct data did not support public perception or consumer reactions. In future studies, user reactions will also help measure the outcomes of the crisis. In addition, the study focused on a single case study. In future studies, in-depth findings on crisis management

can be obtained with multiple comparative case studies from similar sectors. Future research could take a comparative approach to examine the repercussions of CEO-driven crises in different sectors and cultures. In addition, research involving social media sentiment analysis or direct stakeholder interviews could contribute to a deeper understanding of crisis management and reputation repair processes.

This study offers the following practical implications in the context of crisis management:

- Empathetic, timely, and consistent communication by the CEO during crises is indispensable for success in crisis management.
- Although social media is often seen as the medium that triggers the crisis, the CEO/leader's decisions and tone of communication determine the magnitude of the crisis. This situation reveals the necessity for organizations to train people in leadership positions on crisis communication, stakeholder relations, and risk management.
- The Patiswiss crisis is a clear example of how a CEO's communication approach can damage a brand. This case serves as a warning to other brands, emphasizing the need for leadership communication to be transparent and aligned with crisis communication strategies and reminding them of the importance of sincere and proactive approaches in protecting reputation.
- As in Patiswiss, the CEO should not be involved in customer service management, which is not within the CEO's remit, and should not micromanage.
- After causing a crisis, the CEO should accept responsibility, make a full apology, and be sincere and empathetic. Delayed responsibility acceptance causes the crisis to escalate.

The Patiswiss crisis serves as a significant example of how a CEO's communication approach can critically influence and potentially harm brands and organizations. This case highlights the need for other brands to reassess their leadership

communication, organizational planning, and customer relations management practices. Additionally, it underscores the necessity of evaluating CEOs' competencies in crisis and risk communication, as well as relationship management, and implementing relevant training programs.

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## Genişletilmiş Özet

Günümüz modern dünyasında bireyler kadar şirket ve markalar da daha fazla risk ve krizlerle karşılaşmaktadır. Kurumu, hedef kitle ve paydaşlarını etkileyen büyük bir olay olan krizler (Fearn-Banks, 2016, s. 2), belirsizlik yaratmakta ve kontrol gerektirmektedir (Coombs vd., 2004, s. 247). Krizler, tarihsel olarak her dönemde etkili olmuşsa da 21.yüzyılda bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerinin de etkisiyle krizlerin görünürlüğü ve yıkıcı etkisi artmıştır. Yine dijital çağda krizler, şirket ve markaları varoluşsal seviyede etkileyerek

belirsizlikler yaratmakta, paydaşları ciddi düzeyde etkilemektedir. Bu sebeple, şirket ve markalar için hayati bir dönüm noktası olan krizlere karşı geliştirilecek tepki stratejileri ve yönetim biçimleri krizin atlatılmasına ya da krizin yıkıcı etkilerine maruz kalınmasına neden olmaktadır. Bu açıdan, zamanında ve etkili kriz yönetimi ve iletişim stratejileri oluşturamayan şirket ve markaların imajları önemli ölçüde zarar görmekte ve itibarları zedelenmektedir.

Kurumun itibarını, kısa bir sürede beklenmedik bir şekilde sarsan (Hermann, 1963, s. 64) krizlere karşı temelde şirket ya da markanın bu itibar tehdidinde karşı kriz yönetimi ve iletişimdeki etkin ve doğru tepki stratejileri belirlemesi, krizin atlatılmasında kritik bir rol oynamaktadır (Timothy Coombs and Holladay, 2007, s. 243). Bu aşamada krizin doğasına uygun kriz planı kapsamında strateji ve taktiklerin belirlenmesi büyük önem taşımaktadır. Öte yandan krizin başarıya ulaşmasında diğer bir belirleyici faktör de kriz sözcüsünün başarılı kriz yönetimidir. Şirket ya da markanın en üst düzey yöneticisi ya da CEO'su olan kriz sözcüsünün temel görevi, kriz iletişimi yönetiminde kamuoyu, medya ve paydaşlara kriz ile ilgili anında, hızlı, doğru ve şeffaf bilgiyi vererek kriz ortamındaki belirsizliği gidermek ve krizin potansiyel risklerini azaltmaktır. Öte yandan, kriz sözcüsü rolünde olan ve krizi yönetmesi beklenen CEO'nun kriz yarattığı bir durumda ise krizin yönetimi çok daha karmaşık, zorlu ve belirsiz bir süreci beraberinde getirmektedir. Bu çalışma, bir müşteri ilişkileri yönetimi sorunu üzerinden CEO'nun bizzat krizi tetikleyici bir aktör olarak rol oynadığı bu durumu vaka analizi yöntemiyle ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Kurumsal özür ve imajın yeniden inşası kuramları çerçevesinde çalışmada, krizde hangi aktörlerin rol aldığı, krizin hangi platformlarda ve hangi temalar çerçevesinde tartışıldığı ve kuruluşun kriz tepki stratejilerinin neler olduğu sorularına yanıt aranmıştır. Çalışmada, krizi tetikleyen veya kriz öncesinde gözlemlenen ön belirtiler ele alınmış ve kriz sonrası dönemde şirketin uzun vadeli çıktıları irdelenmiştir. Bunun yanı sıra, çalışmada Patiswiss ile ilgili internet haber medyasındaki içerikler

tematik analiz yöntemiyle incelenerek markanın verdiği tepkilere medyanın nasıl yanıt verdiği ortaya konulmuştur.

Çalışmada krizin tüm boyutlarıyla incelenebilmesi için çoklu yöntem kullanılmıştır. Vaka analizi yöntemiyle incelenen kriz çalışması, Coombs'un (2010) "kriz öncesi, kriz evresi ve kriz sonrası" olmak üzere üç aşamalı modeli temel alınarak analiz edilmiştir (Coombs, 2010). Bununla birlikte çalışmada, kriz yönetiminin etkin bir şekilde analiz edilmesi amacıyla kriz evresi ve sonrası dönemde internet haber medyasındaki Patiswiss haber yansımalarını değerlendirmek ve krizle ilgili gündem ve müdahale stratejilerini ele almak amacıyla tematik analiz gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışmada tematik analiz, altı aşamalı analiz protokolüyle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu sistematik yaklaşım, Patiswiss ile ilgili kriz tepki stratejileri ve medyayansımalarının derinlemesine anlaşılmasına olanak tanımıştır.

Araştırma sonucunda, kriz öncesi evrede CEO'nun benzer şekilde sorunlu iletişim üslubunun olduğunu ve krizin bu risklerin devamında gerçekleştiği tespit edilmiştir. Eski CEO, kriz öncesi evrede sendikaya üye olmak isteyen işçilerin eylem ve protestolarına ilişkin kriz yaratabilecek riskte X hesabından açıklamalarda bulunmuştur. Yıldız Tunaoglu, söz konusu olayla ilgili *"Çok komiksiniz valla ne diyeyim; boş vaktiniz çoktur sizin siz eğlenin. Şu resimde bir tane Patiswiss çalışanı yok:) hadi video çekin ben çalışanım desin :) gerçi pardon bu kadar yalana dolana onu da söylersiniz siz:)) iyi eğlenceler bizim 1000+ çalışanımızla çok işimiz var:"* şeklinde gayri ciddi, müstehzi ve sorunlu bir iletişim dili kullanmıştır (Sancar, 2024).

Bulgular, CEO'nun kriz yönetimi yaklaşımının marka kriz iletişimi stratejisiyle uyumlu olmadığını göstermektedir. Eski CEO, tehdit, saldırı ve küçümseyici bir üslup içeren kısmi bir özür dilemiş ve krizin etkisiyle istifa etmiştir. Marka ise krizi kontrol altına almak amacıyla tam özür dileme, pişmanlık stratejilerinin yanında uzun bir dönem sessizlik stratejisi uygulamış ve imaj tamir adımları atmıştır. Öte yandan, bu kriz tepki

stratejilerinin medya ve kamuoyu yansımalarında yetersiz kaldığı belirlenmiş, pişmanlık ve imaj tamir adımları, internet medyasında yoğun bir karşılık bulmamıştır.

Çalışmadaki tematik analiz bulguları, internet haber medyasında en fazla haber olan temaların, CEO'nun istifası ve yeni CEO'nun olduğunu göstermektedir. Özellikle yeni CEO'nun eski CEO'nun eşi olması ve özel hayatları internet medyası tarafından yoğun bir şekilde incelenirken eski CEO Yıldız Tunaoglu'na ait sahte mezuniyet iddiaları ve Patiswiss markasının birkaç zincir marketin rafından kaldırılması da ciddi bir şekilde internet medyasında dikkat çekmiştir. Öte yandan, markanın imajlarını yeniden inşa etmeye yönelik adımları internet medyasında yeterli karşılık bulmamıştır. CEO'nun özrü, marka ve CEO'nun pişmanlığını ifade eden haberler çok sınırlı düzeyde kalmıştır. Bu durum olumlu imaj yönetimi için gerekli medya görünürlüğünün kazanılmadığını göstermektedir.

Patiswiss krizi literatürde dijital iletişim ve sosyal medya ekseninde ele alınmıştır (Armutlu, 2024; Ekmekçi, 2024; Koca, 2024; Özdemir, 2024). Ancak bu çalışma, krizin esas kaynağının sosyal medya mecrası değil, CEO'nun hatalı kararları ve yanlış iletişim yaklaşımı olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bu sebeple krizin tetikleyici unsuru ve kaynağı, CEO'nun sorumluluğu dahilinde olmayan bir müşteri ilişkileri sürecine müdahalede bulunması ve bu süreçte sergilediği hatalı iletişim yaklaşımıdır.

Çalışmada, kriz öncesi evrede, CEO kaynaklı önemli kritik işaretlerin belirttiği ancak markanın bu uyarı işaretlerine, ciddi sorun ve risklere karşı bir adım atmaması sonucunda CEO kaynaklı bu krizin ortaya çıktığı tespit edilmiştir. Bunun yanında CEO ve markanın kriz evresinde krizin sorumluluğunun kabul etmek yerine reddetmeleri, kamuoyunun tepkisini çekerek krizin derinleşmesine neden olmuştur. Patiswiss krizi, bir CEO'nun iletişim yaklaşımının marka ve kurumlar üzerindeki kritik rolünü ve potansiyel zararlarını göstermesi bakımından önemli bir kriz örneğidir. Çalışma, lider iletişim yetkinliğinin ve kriz yönetiminde lider figürlerin tutarlı ve empatik bir

iletişim sergilemesinin önemini vurgulamakta ve itibarı koruma açısından uyumlu bir kriz iletişim stratejisinin gerekliliğini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, diğer şirketler için CEO'ların kriz ve risk iletişimi, iletişim ve ilişki yönetimi alanlarında yeterliliklerinin değerlendirilmesi ve ilgili eğitim programlarına ihtiyaç duyulduğunu gerektiğini göstermektedir.

#### Yazar Bilgileri

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