Master Thesis
in the master program
International Corporate Communication and Media Management
at University of Applied Sciences Neu-Ulm

CEO Communication and Visibility as Catalysts for Corporate Crises and Their Influence on the Company's Public Perception

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Topic received: 03.11.2025
Date of submission: 01.03.2026

Abstract

In contemporary media environments, chief executive officers (CEOs) have become highly visible symbolic representatives whose communication increasingly shapes stakeholder perceptions of organizational legitimacy. While crisis communication research traditionally conceptualizes crises as event-driven phenomena followed by organizational response strategies, this thesis advances a perception-centered perspective by examining how CEO communication itself can function as a catalyst for corporate crises.

Adopting an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, the study first conducts a qualitative content analysis of multiple high-profile CEO-centered crisis cases to identify recurring communicative patterns and escalation mechanisms. These insights inform the development of a scenario-based quantitative survey that systematically examines how CEO communication characteristics influence stakeholder evaluations and spill over to organizational perception.

The qualitative findings reveal five interrelated escalation mechanisms: emotional misalignment and moral attribution, responsibility framing and symbolic accountability, visibility-driven media amplification, value incongruence, and reputational consequences. Building on these mechanisms, the quantitative phase demonstrates that negative CEO evaluations significantly predict adverse perceptions of the company, confirming the presence of pronounced spillover effects from CEO perception to organizational reputation and legitimacy. Contrary to expectations derived from the qualitative phase, perceived CEO visibility and media framing do not exert significant moderating effects in the quantitative model.

By integrating leadership communication, attribution theory, legitimacy research, and social amplification perspectives, this thesis contributes a novel actor-centered framework to crisis communication scholarship. It shows that corporate crises may emerge not only from operational failures but from stakeholder interpretations of executive communication. Practically, the findings underscore the strategic importance of emotionally attuned and value-consistent CEO communication in highly visible environments, while highlighting the central role of CEO perception as the primary driver of reputational spillover.

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List of Abbreviations

CEO .... Chief Executive Officer
IRT .... Image Repair Theory
SARF .... Social Amplification of Risk Framework
SCCT .... Situational Crisis Communication Theory

1 Introduction

In contemporary mediated environments, chief executive officers (CEO) have increasingly become public figures whose communication is subject to continuous scrutiny and moral evaluation. Beyond their strategic and managerial responsibilities, CEOs now function as symbolic representatives of organizational values, credibility and legitimacy. Through personalized media coverage and platformized communication infrastructures, executive statements and visible conduct are rapidly disseminated, recontextualized, and interpreted by diverse stakeholder audiences. As a result, individual communicative acts by CEOs can generate reputational consequences that extend far beyond the immediate interactional context.

Traditional approaches to crisis communication largely conceptualize organizational crises as event-driven phenomena, in which reputational threats emerge from external incidents or operational failures and are subsequently managed through strategic organizational responses. Prominent frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory emphasize post-event response strategies aimed at restoring organizational reputation once stakeholders have assigned causal responsibility for the crisis to the organization (Coombs, 2007). Complementary attribution-based models similarly focus on how stakeholders assign blame following crisis events (Weiner, 1985). While these perspectives have generated substantial insights into crisis management effectiveness, they implicitly assume that crises originate externally and that organizational communication primarily operates reactively.

However, recent public controversies—such as Gary Pilnick's widely criticized remarks suggesting "cereal for dinner" in response to rising food prices, which triggered consumer backlash—suggest a shifting dynamic in which executive communication itself may constitute the initial catalyst of reputational crises. Statements perceived as emotionally or normatively misaligned with stakeholder expectations may provoke immediate moral evaluation and trigger organizational-level consequences, even in the absence of objective corporate wrongdoing. Leadership scholars have long argued that executive behavior reflects underlying cognitive and value orientations and serves as a powerful signal to external audiences (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). At the same time, research on legitimacy and reputation demonstrates that stakeholder judgments are deeply shaped by moral interpretation and symbolic meaning rather than by factual performance alone (Fombrun, 2004; Suchman, 1995). Media framing and social amplification further intensify these processes by transforming isolated communicative moments into collectively shared narratives (Entman, 1993; Kasperson et al., 1988; Snow et al., 2019).

Despite these developments, existing research in these domains remains fragmented. Crisis communication models prioritize organizational response strategies, leadership research examines executive influence primarily within organizational boundaries and legitimacy scholarship addresses stakeholder evaluation largely without integrating executive communication as a triggering mechanism. What remains insufficiently theorized is how CEO communication becomes crisis-relevant in the first place, how individual leadership signals are interpreted through moral and normative lenses and how these perceptions may translate into organizational consequences. In particular there is a lack of integrated empirical research that connects executive communication, stakeholder sensemaking, and differentiated spillover effects on company perception, legitimacy and relational outcomes.

Against this background, this thesis addresses the following research question: *How can CEO communication and visibility serve as catalysts for corporate crises and influence the company's public perception?* Rather than focusing on organizational crisis response, the study shifts analytical attention to perception-driven escalation processes that precede formal crisis management. It conceptualizes CEO communication not merely as informational messaging but as symbolic input that activates attributional, emotional, and moral evaluation mechanisms among stakeholders.

The central objective of this thesis is to develop a perception-centered understanding of CEO-induced crisis escalation. Specifically, it aims to explore recurring communicative patterns through which CEOs unintentionally trigger reputational disturbances to empirically examine how CEO-level evaluations spill over to organizational perception. By combining attribution theory, leadership communication, legitimacy research, and social amplification perspectives, the study seeks to complement existing crisis communication frameworks with an actor-centered approach that foregrounds executive visibility and moral interpretation.

The thesis follows an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. After outlining the research problem in Chapter 1 and developing the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 introduces the methodological logic guiding the study. The empirical investigation begins with a qualitative multiple-case analysis of high-profile CEO-centered crises, presented in Chapter 4. Through qualitative content analysis, recurring communication patterns and perception-relevant escalation logics are reconstructed.

Chapter 5 advances this analysis by abstracting the identified categories into higher-order mechanisms of CEO-induced crisis escalation. These interpretive insights form the conceptual foundation for the derivation of hypotheses and the construction of the quantitative research model, which therefore follows only after the qualitative interpretation phase.

Building on this mechanism-oriented understanding, Chapter 6 presents the results of a scenario-based quantitative survey designed to examine stakeholder perceptions under controlled conditions. This phase systematically tests how CEO communication characteristics influence CEO evaluations and how these perceptions translate into changes in organizational legitimacy, perception, and stakeholder support.

Chapter 7 integrates the findings from both empirical phases with the theoretical framework and develops a perception-centered reinterpretation of CEO-induced crisis dynamics. Finally, Chapter 8 synthesizes the central contributions of the study, reflects on methodological limitations, and outlines implications for future research and corporate communication practice.

By reconceptualizing CEOs as moralized public figures whose communication can actively constitute crisis conditions, this thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary reputational vulnerability. It suggests that organizational crises may emerge not only from external events but from how executive communication is perceived, evaluated, and symbolically amplified within highly visible media environments.

2 Theoretical Foundations

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework that underpins the study. Its purpose is to explain how CEO communication and visibility can function both as catalysts for corporate crises and as determinants of public perception. To do so, it integrates insights from leadership theory, communication studies, and organizational sociology into a multi-level conceptual model that connects individual cognition, communicative behavior, and collective legitimacy.

From an epistemological standpoint, this thesis adopts a social constructivist and interpretive perspective. This is the case, because it assumes that crises, legitimacy, and reputation are not merely objective states but are constituted and stabilized through interaction, interpretation, and discourse in public arenas. Within this view, CEOs are not merely decision-makers but meaning-makers whose language and behavior shape the social understanding of corporate purpose and responsibility. This stance allows for the integration of diverse theoretical traditions—psychological, rhetorical, and sociological—into a coherent communicative framework that treats visibility and perception as socially co-created phenomena. The theoretical framework is structured as follows: Upper Echelons Theory, Attribution Theory, and crisis response theories form the explanatory core of the framework by specifying key mechanism pathways through which executive communication becomes socially consequential. Framing and amplification theories provide contextual mechanisms, while legitimacy and reputation concepts capture perceptual outcomes.

The chapter is organized in four main sections. Section 2.1 introduces the micro-level perspective of CEO cognition and communication, outlining how individual sensemaking and communicative expression translate leadership identity into public meaning. Section 2.2 focuses on corporate crisis communication, explaining how misalignments between CEO discourse and stakeholder expectations can trigger reputational threats. Section 2.3 expands the analysis to visibility and amplification, examining how media and social dynamics magnify CEO messages and influence interpretive processes. Finally, Section 2.4 discusses stakeholder sensemaking, legitimacy, and perceptual outcomes, linking communicative exposure to the formation of trust and organizational reputation. Together, these foundations provide the conceptual architecture for understanding CEO communication as both a source of symbolic power and a potential origin of corporate vulnerability.

2.1 CEO Communication and Leadership Influence

In contemporary organizations, the role of the CEO extends far beyond administrative control or strategic decision-making. Top executives have evolved into highly visible communicative figures whose personal behavior and discourse shape not only organizational direction but also the symbolic meaning and moral legitimacy attributed to their organizations. Understanding this expanded role requires an integrated theoretical approach that links cognitive, behavioral, and communicative perspectives. The intersection of Upper Echelons Theory (UET), CEO branding, and research on executive communication provides a conceptual foundation for explaining how individual cognition and values become publicly expressed through leadership behavior and how these expressions influence corporate reputation and stakeholder perception. This section develops a coherent framework that situates CEO communication as the behavioral manifestation of executive cognition and as a symbolic interface through which organizational meaning is enacted. In doing so, it also highlights why this communicative visibility may transform CEOs into crisis catalysts when alignment between personal expression and stakeholder expectations breaks down.

2.1.1 Upper Echelons and Executive Behavior

The Upper Echelons Theory (UET), first articulated by Hambrick and Mason (1984), proposes that organizations are reflections of their top managers' experiences, values, and cognitive frames. Strategic decisions are therefore not purely rational choices but are filtered through individual interpretive schemas that shape what leaders perceive, prioritize, and enact. In this view, communication represents an externalization of executive cognition: it conveys how CEOs interpret uncertainty, assign meaning to environmental cues, and articulate collective purpose. Early applications of UET relied heavily on demographic proxies such as age, tenure, and education to infer psychological tendencies (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, pp. 198–203).

Subsequent research, however, has shifted attention toward observable behavioral indicators that capture the cognitive and motivational orientations of executives. Bandiera et al. (2017, pp. 2–3, 34) demonstrate that CEOs differ systematically in how they allocate attention and interact with stakeholders. Their distinction between outward-facing, relationally oriented "leader-type" CEOs and internally focused "manager-type" CEOs underscores that communication and stakeholder engagement are not peripheral to performance but constitute the behavioral channels through which cognition translates into outcomes (Bandiera et al., 2017, pp. 18–20). Within this behavioral-strategy lens, CEO communication functions as a cognitive signature, a tangible expression of how leaders perceive their role and environment.

As Abatecola and Cristofaro (2020, pp. 129–130) argue, executives operate within co-evolving systems in which judgments and behaviors are continuously reshaped through interaction and feedback. Communication, accordingly, forms the connective tissue linking individual sensemaking to collective interpretation, allowing personal cognition to become socially enacted. Yet this same process that facilitates alignment and coherence under stable conditions can render cognitive blind spots visible when executive interpretations are publicly expressed. When a CEO's framing deviates from stakeholder expectations, the externalization of cognition through communication may inadvertently produce cues of misalignment, such as perceived inconsistency or lack of stakeholder orientation, which can then become sources of reputational vulnerability.

2.1.2 CEO Branding and CEOs as Public Figures

The increasing personalization of corporate leadership has transformed CEOs into symbolic carriers of organizational meaning whose public identities directly shape perceptions of corporate credibility and value alignment. Research on CEO branding conceptualizes this process as the extension of a leader's personal identity into the public sphere, where it functions as a communicative embodiment of organizational values and legitimacy (Bendisch et al., 2013, pp. 596–597).

Bendisch et al. (2013, pp. 600, 608) describe this brand as a dynamic system in which personal identity, public reputation, and symbolic positioning emerge through ongoing interaction with multiple audiences. Brand identity reflects the leader's authentic self expression through values and behavioral patterns (Bendisch et al., 2013, pp. 601, 604), while brand reputation captures stakeholder evaluations of this expression. From a communicative perspective, CEO discourse serves as a narrative interface between personal and organizational storytelling, translating executive values into collective meaning.

Because CEOs increasingly personify the organization, credibility and moral alignment become central to this identity work. Credibility—comprising competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill—signals whether leadership communication is perceived as authentic and stakeholder-oriented (McCroskey & Teven, 1999, p. 90), with goodwill being particularly salient for distinguishing authentic engagement from self-promotion (McCroskey & Teven, 1999, p. 92). When CEOs communicate empathy and integrity, they project symbolic credibility and normative alignment (Suchman, 1995, p. 579). Conversely, misalignment between executive persona and organizational values can generate reputational dissonance, which negatively influences stakeholder's assessment of trustworthiness and legitimacy (Gaines-Ross, 2000, p. 368; Giovanna Confetto et al., 2018, p. 217).

This symbolic fusion of personal and corporate identity simultaneously strengthens reputational influence and heightens vulnerability: once executive communication contradicts established value narratives, symbolic credibility can unravel rapidly, transforming visibility into exposure.

2.1.3 CEO Communication

CEO communication constitutes a central mechanism through which executive cognition becomes visible and socially consequential. Beyond formal decision-making, CEOs influence organizational trajectories by publicly expressing values, priorities, and interpretations of unfolding events. Communication therefore functions as the primary interface between internal executive sensemaking and external stakeholder evaluation.

To illustrate how CEOs create meaning through communication, research on charismatic leadership offers a useful analytical entry point. Fanelli and Misangyi (2006, pp. 1050–1053) conceptualize charisma as a performative communicative act, arguing that leaders evoke legitimacy and emotional resonance by narratively constructing purpose in ways that align audiences with organizational goals. Similarly, Conger and Kanungo (1987, pp. 642–644) show that charismatic leadership emerges through diagnosing situational challenges, articulating a compelling vision, and conveying confidence in its attainability. Through such communicative practices, CEOs translate strategic intent into publicly accessible meaning.

Leadership research further specifies how this meaning is conveyed through distinct communicative orientations. Transformational communication manifests through inspirational and participatory messaging that aligns personal and organizational purpose, whereas transactional communication primarily provides operational clarity without fostering deeper identification (Men & Stacks, 2013, p. 174). Such transformational messaging is typically enacted through charismatic rhetorical techniques, including symbolic framing and emotionally vivid language, which elicit commitment and emotional resonance (Conger, 1991, p. 32). Authentic communication further reinforces this process by emphasizing relational transparency and consistency between words and deeds (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, pp. 317, 322, 326).

From an Upper Echelons perspective, these communicative patterns are not stylistic preferences but behavioral manifestations of executives' cognitive schemas and value systems (Conger, 1991, p. 32). CEO communication therefore does not merely transmit information; it externalizes executive interpretations of reality. Stakeholders interpret such communicative cues as signals of intent, empathy, and responsibility. When communicative style, tone, or framing fail to resonate with stakeholder expectations—particularly under conditions of uncertainty—leadership discourse loses its meaning-making function and becomes a source of ambiguity rather than alignment.

The effectiveness of CEO communication consequently depends on perceived credibility and authenticity. McCroskey and Teven (1999, p. 90) conceptualize credibility as comprising competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill, with goodwill indicating ethical orientation and concern for stakeholders. Empirical evidence shows that CEO credibility significantly shapes organizational evaluations (Men, 2012, p. 172), while transformational communication characterized by openness and dialogue strengthens identification (Men & Stacks, 2013, p. 183). These findings suggest that credibility emerges through sustained communicative performance rather than isolated statements.

Digital media intensify these dynamics by increasing visibility and reducing contextual control. Tsai and Men (2017, pp. 11–12) describe socially active executives as "social CEOs" whose responsiveness fosters parasocial bonds while simultaneously exposing leadership communication to rapid circulation and moral scrutiny. Executive statements are continuously reinterpreted across platforms, amplifying both alignment and misalignment effects.

Therefore, CEO communication operates as the behavioral conduit through which executive cognition becomes socially interpretable. It translates internal perspectives into public signals that shape stakeholder perceptions of responsibility and intent. When communicative alignment is maintained, leadership discourse provides orientation and coherence. When it falters, shared meaning destabilizes, creating the conditions for attributional processes and crisis escalation examined in the following section.

2.2 Corporate Crisis, Crisis Communication and Reputation Management

Crises represent moments of rupture in which organizational legitimacy and public trust are most severely tested. For CEOs, such moments expose the communicative boundary between leadership and the collective identity of the firm. This chapter conceptualizes corporate crises as communicatively constructed rather than merely operational failures. It begins by defining the nature of crises and their distinguishing features, before examining how crises unfold as rhetorical and relational events in which meaning, blame, and emotion are co-created through communication. Building on attributional approaches, the chapter then explores how stakeholder judgments of responsibility and intent form the cognitive core of crisis perception. Finally, theories of strategic response, specifically the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT), are introduced to explain how leaders attempt to manage these perceptions through discourse and framing. Together, the outlined sections establish crisis communication as the process through which CEOs both produce and repair organizational meaning under conditions of reputational threat.

2.2.1 Corporate Crisis

In organizational research, the concept of *crisis* has been interpreted in diverse ways, reflecting disciplinary differences in focus and methodology. Within communication and management studies, a corporate crisis is generally understood as an unexpected, high-stakes, and ambiguous event that threatens the organization's legitimacy and reputation. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2023, p. 9) define a crisis as "a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten an organization's high-priority goals." Similarly, Coombs (2007, p. 164) describes a crisis as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat." Both definitions emphasize the reputational and perceptual nature of corporate crises.

Recent integrative reviews highlight that crises are socially constructed phenomena emerging from the interaction between organizational actions and stakeholder perceptions (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 3). Crises thus arise when stakeholders perceive a misalignment between an organization's conduct and societal expectations of responsibility, transparency, or care. From this relational perspective, the loss of legitimacy and trust constitutes the central threat of a corporate crisis (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 2).

Crises are commonly distinguished from related concepts such as issues, incidents, or accidents. Issues refer to enduring societal concerns that emerge from conflicts over norms, values, and public policy and are negotiated in public arenas over time (Heath & Palenchar, 2008, pp. 21–22), whereas incidents involve isolated and localized disruptions that can usually be resolved without broader organizational consequences (Coombs, 2015, p. 4). Crises, by contrast, are characterized by immediacy and uncertainty and have the potential to disrupt the organization as a whole, threatening stakeholder expectations and organizational identity (Ulmer et al., 2023, p. 6).

Moreover, scholars stress the increasing visibility of corporate leaders during crises. Ulmer et al. (2023, pp. 124–125) argue that leadership communication plays a decisive role in shaping public meaning and moral evaluation in the aftermath of disruptive events. The CEO, as the organization's most visible spokesperson, embodies its values and becomes a focal point for stakeholder interpretation. Crisis communication research demonstrates that accommodative response strategies—particularly those expressing concern and corrective intent—can mitigate reputational damage, whereas defensive responses tend to intensify it (Coombs, 2007, pp. 171–172). Although Coombs (2007) conceptualizes these effects at the organizational level, this logic can be analytically extended to executive communication, as CEOs often function as primary spokespersons whose behavior and tone are interpreted as representative of the organization. When leadership communication is perceived as defensive, indifferent, or inconsistent, even relatively trivial issues may escalate into reputational crises.

For the purpose of this thesis, a corporate crisis is defined as a situation in which organizational actions or events generate substantial negative stakeholder reactions that threaten organizational legitimacy and reputation. Adopting a constructivist perspective, this study further conceptualizes corporate crises as socially constructed and communicatively enacted processes shaped through stakeholder interpretation and mediated meaning-making.

Within this framework, CEO-driven crises constitute a specific subset of corporate crises in which leaders' communicative actions—verbal statements, symbolic gestures, or silences—act as triggers or amplifiers of reputational risk. These crises often originate not in technical failures but in the interpretive and emotional reactions provoked by executive communication.

This conceptualization extends traditional views by framing crises as relational and discursive processes rather than discrete events. It positions communication—and particularly leadership communication—as both the mechanism through which crises are recognized and the medium through which they are potentially intensified. The following section therefore explores more closely how meaning, responsibility, and emotion are co-constructed through executive discourse during crises.

2.2.2 The Communicative Nature of Crises

Crises are not merely operational disruptions but fundamentally communicative events in which meaning, responsibility, and organizational identity are publicly negotiated. Ulmer et al. (2023, pp. 218–219) emphasize that crises function as rhetorical moments requiring organizations to engage stakeholders in constructing particular interpretations of what has occurred and what it signifies. Communication therefore plays a central role in shaping how crises are understood and how organizations are evaluated.

From this perspective, crisis communication extends beyond the technical transmission of information. Rather, it constitutes a sensemaking process through which stakeholders interpret ambiguous situations and infer organizational intent, values, and responsibility (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). How organizations communicate during crises directly influences stakeholder perceptions and reputational judgments, as communicative signals provide cues for evaluating whether organizational behavior aligns with socially shared norms.

Crises introduce uncertainty regarding responsibility and normative appropriateness, thereby threatening organizational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Communication becomes the primary arena in which ambiguity is negotiated, as stakeholders evaluate how organizations frame events, acknowledge responsibility, and position themselves relative to normative expectations (Coombs & Holladay, 2005, p. 25). Importantly, organizations are not judged solely for objective actions but also for how they frame events, acknowledge responsibility, and position themselves in relation to stakeholder expectations.

Positioning crises as communicative phenomena establishes the foundation for the theoretical framework developed in the following sections. In this thesis, crisis communication is understood not only as a response to existing disruptions but also as a process that can generate or intensify reputational risk. If crises are fundamentally shaped by meaning-making and perception, understanding crisis dynamics requires explaining how stakeholders assign responsibility and how communicative cues influence these judgments. The subsequent sections therefore focus on attribution and framing as central psychological and strategic mechanisms through which leadership communication is translated into organizational-level consequences.

2.2.3 The Attributional Core of Crises

Crises are shaped by how the public interprets events and assigns responsibility; they emerge through framing and attribution processes rather than from the event alone (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). Stakeholders make sense of disruptive situations by evaluating who is responsible, whether harm was intentional, and how preventable it was (Coombs, 2007, p. 166; Coombs & Holladay, 2005, pp. 264–265). These cognitive assessments form the attributional core of crisis perception, providing the basis for emotional responses such as anger or sympathy that subsequently shape behavioral intentions (Coombs, 2007, pp. 165–166; Weiner, 1985, pp. 559–562).

Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985) explains these processes through three causal dimensions: locus (internal versus external cause), stability (temporary versus enduring), and controllability (intentional versus accidental). Each dimension systematically influences emotional and evaluative responses (Weiner, 1985, pp. 551, 560). Events perceived as internally caused and controllable tend to elicit anger and blame, whereas externally caused or uncontrollable outcomes evoke sympathy and understanding (Coombs, 2007, pp. 165–166; Coombs & Holladay, 2005, pp. 274–275).

Because CEOs are typically construed as primary organizational agents in attribution processes, their communication is often situated at the internal and controllable end of this continuum.

Executive messages therefore carry heightened responsibility cues, making CEOs particularly vulnerable to attributional blame when communication misfires. Even minor communicative signals may acquire symbolic meaning and be interpreted as indicators of deeper value misalignment rather than as isolated errors (Fanelli & Misangyi, 2006, pp. 1052, 1056–1057). In such situations, stakeholder interpretation shifts from informational evaluation toward moral judgment, as communication is assessed for normative appropriateness rather than technical accuracy (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The stronger the perceived controllability and intentionality of executive conduct, the more likely audiences are to attribute moral blame, amplifying reputational risk (Coombs, 2007, pp. 165–167; Malle, 2021, pp. 299–300).

These attributional dynamics are intensified in digitally networked communication environments. Executive statements circulate rapidly across highly transparent public arenas, where stakeholders actively evaluate communicative cues and collectively negotiate meaning (Men & Tsai, 2016, pp. 3-4,7). Online crises can therefore "take dramatic turns and multiply more quickly" than offline events, as publics respond in real time before organizations can contextualize emerging interpretations (Coombs, 2008, as cited in Austin et al., 2012, p. 191). Emotional appraisals increasingly operate at the level of publics rather than isolated individuals, shaping collective sensemaking and response patterns (Jin et al., 2012, p. 268). In such environments, morally charged judgments diffuse rapidly and intensify reactions through heightened visibility and emotional contagion (Brady et al., 2017, pp. 7315–7316)

Together, these mechanisms explain how CEO communication can shift from routine discourse to crisis catalyst through responsibility attribution and moral evaluation. Crises thus emerge not solely from objective wrongdoing but from interpretive and emotional processes that assign blame, intentionality, and meaning to executive conduct (Coombs, 2007; Jin et al., 2012, p. 268; Weiner, 1985). Once blame has been socially constructed, organizations attempt to respond through strategic and rhetorical communication aimed at regaining control of the narrative. The following section therefore examines how theoretical models such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT) conceptualize these response mechanisms, thereby explaining how CEOs and organizations seek to manage—yet sometimes inadvertently reinforce—the crises their communication helped to create.

2.2.4 Strategic Response and Communicative Framing

Building on the attributional foundations of crisis perception, this section examines how organizations, through their leaders, respond once responsibility has been publicly defined. In crisis contexts, CEO communication constitutes both strategic action and symbolic performance and is typically evaluated for cues of control, accountability, and concern while simultaneously signaling moral orientation and value alignment. Whether such responses stabilize or further destabilize stakeholder perceptions depends on their situational fit and rhetorical enactment. Within this perspective, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT) provide complementary frameworks for analyzing how CEOs frame and deliver crisis responses and how these communicative choices shape public evaluations.

SCCT offers a situational logic linking attributed responsibility to appropriate response strategies (Coombs, 2007, p. 166; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, pp. 167–168). Rather than focusing on objective crisis characteristics, the theory assumes that reputational outcomes depend on the alignment between stakeholder attributions and organizational communicative behavior (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). While SCCT provides a useful situational logic, it implicitly assumes a degree of strategic rationality and message control that may not fully capture the spontaneous, emotionally charged nature of CEO communication in digitally mediated crisis contexts. It distinguishes three clusters of crisis types—victim, accidental, and preventable—that reflect ascending levels of perceived responsibility (Coombs, 2007, pp. 167–168; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 179). Correspondingly, SCCT differentiates overarching response orientations, including denial, diminish, and rebuild strategies, with bolstering as a supplementary approach (Coombs, 2007, pp. 170–172). These categories do not function as prescriptive rules but as analytical patterns that capture how organizations position themselves in relation to blame, responsibility, and stakeholder expectations. In this thesis, SCCT is applied as a classificatory framework for identifying the strategic orientation of CEO responses rather than as a normative guide for crisis management. It provides a structured lens for examining whether executive statements seek to reject responsibility, reduce perceived severity, or acknowledge fault and signal corrective intent. Importantly, this situational logic allows the analysis to assess misalignment between attributed responsibility and communicative posture—an issue that is particularly relevant for understanding why certain CEO responses intensify crises rather than mitigate them.

Where SCCT defines the strategic logic of response, IRT elucidates the rhetorical and linguistic mechanisms through which these strategies are enacted. Benoit (1997) conceptualizes crisis communication as a persuasive process aimed at repairing image through discourse, identifying response forms such as denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997, pp. 178–179, 183). While these categories overlap functionally with SCCT's strategic orientations, IRT operates at a finer-grained level by focusing on how meaning is constructed through wording, tone, and framing rather than on the strategic intent alone. At the same time, IRT focuses primarily on individual message construction, paying limited attention to how meanings are co-produced and transformed within networked public spheres.

From this perspective, image repair is not only a matter of selecting an appropriate strategy but also of its communicative realization. Expressions of apology, justification, or sympathy can signal varying degrees of agency, accountability, and affect, whereas technical or detached formulations may appear evasive or misaligned with stakeholder expectations (Benoit, 1997, pp. 178–179). Variations in linguistic features such as pronoun use, modality, or moral references therefore function as rhetorical cues that shape how responsibility and concern are perceived. These features are particularly salient in CEO communication, where audiences closely scrutinize executive discourse for signals of intent and moral orientation.

Table 1 summarizes the core response categories of SCCT and IRT and highlights their conceptual correspondence as well as their relevance for analyzing CEO discourse. While SCCT captures the strategic posture of a response in relation to attributed responsibility, IRT specifies the rhetorical forms through which this posture is enacted. The conceptual intersection identified in this thesis emphasizes communicative framing as the link between strategic intent and linguistic realization, allowing CEO statements to be examined as structured responses that simultaneously address responsibility, empathy, and normative expectations.

Table 1: Crisis Response Strategies in SCCT and IRT

Theoretical Framework	**Core Strategy / Category**	**Illustrative Subtypes / Linguistic Realizations**	**Intended Function in CEO Communication**
SCCT (Coombs, 2007)	**Deny**	Attack accuser, scapegoating	Reject responsibility, deflect blame
	Diminish	Excuse, justification	Reduce perceived intentionality or severity
	Rebuild	Apology, compensation	Accept responsibility, restore trust
	Bolster	Remind of past good deeds, praise stakeholders	Reinforce moral capital, offset damage
IRT (Benoit, 1997)	**Denial**	Simple denial, shift blame	Deny involvement or intent
	Evasion of Responsibility	Provocation, accident, good intentions	Minimize accountability
	Reducing Offensiveness	Bolstering, differentiation, minimization, transcendence	Reframe act as less negative or justified
	Corrective Action	Promise repair, implement reforms	Signal moral agency and problem-solving
	Mortification	Express remorse or apology	Restore moral legitimacy and empathy alignment
Conceptual Intersection (this thesis)	**Strategic Response ↔ Communicative Framing**	Verbal and nonverbal cues shaping responsibility, empathy, and legitimacy	Explain how CEO statements construct or disrupt moral alignment

As shown in *Table 1*, combining SCCT and IRT enables a multi-level analysis of crisis communication that moves beyond the question of whether a response is accommodative or defensive. Instead, it directs attention to how strategic orientation and rhetorical enactment interact—and how misalignment between situational expectations and communicative framing may undermine credibility or intensify attributional judgments. In this sense, crisis responses are not merely corrective tools but communicative interventions that can reinforce or destabilize meaning-making processes initiated during earlier attributional stages. Both frameworks rely on relatively static categorizations of response strategies, whereas contemporary crises unfold as dynamic processes in which attribution, emotion, and visibility continuously interact.

Methodologically, SCCT and IRT guide the empirical analysis by structuring the coding of CEO statements and corporate reaction according to strategic orientation and rhetorical features. CEO responses are categorized by primary strategy type (e.g., denial, diminish, rebuild) and examined with regard to linguistic indicators such as apology, justification, corrective promises, emotional tone, and value framing. This approach allows theoretical constructs to be systematically linked to observable communicative features, thereby clarifying how specific response patterns may contribute to crisis stabilization or escalation. It also provides a direct transition to the following chapter, which examines how these strategic signals are further shaped by processes of visibility and amplification in contemporary media environments.

2.3 Visibility and Amplification

In the contemporary media environment, the visibility of CEOs transforms individual expressions into public events. Communication no longer unfolds in closed organizational contexts but within networked arenas where messages are observed, reframed, and emotionally amplified. This chapter examines how visibility operates as both a strategic resource and a reputational risk by shaping the scale and intensity of stakeholder attention. Drawing on the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), Section 2.3.1 explains how communicative signals—such as CEO statements or symbolic acts—gain or lose significance as they circulate through media and social systems. Section 2.3.2 extends this view to the dynamics of traditional and social media, showing how journalistic framing, algorithmic visibility, and participatory engagement collectively construct the CEO's public persona. The chapter concludes that visibility functions as a multiplier within the crisis process: it expands interpretive reach, accelerates emotional contagion, and binds corporate reputation to the leader's personal communication.

2.3.1 The Framing of Crisis

Framing Theory provides a foundational analytical lens for explaining how media shape public interpretations of CEO communication during crises. According to Entman (1993, p. 52), framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in a communicative text to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. These framing functions structure how audiences interpret both the meaning and severity of crisis-related events.

Media do not merely reproduce organizational messages but actively transform them into culturally resonant narratives (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3,9; Reese, 2007, p. 150,152). In CEO-centered crises, this process is particularly consequential because chief executives serve as symbolic representatives of organizational identity (Fombrun, 2004, p. 235). Frames centered on CEO behavior therefore extend beyond the individual level and contribute to the construction of broader organizational narratives.

Because framing inherently involves the assignment of moral meaning (Entman, 1993, p. 52), media interpretations often activate intuitive judgments of right and wrong grounded in moral intuition processes (Haidt, 2001, pp. 1025–1028, 2002, pp. 853–857, 865–866). Moralized framing increases emotional engagement and accelerates judgment formation, thereby intensifying public reactions to executive communication (Brady et al., 2017, p. 7313; Haidt, 2002, pp. 856–866). In such contexts, ambiguously phrased or poorly contextualized CEO statements may be reframed as indicators of character or value violations rather than as isolated communicative missteps.

Framing research further highlights personalization processes that shift responsibility from institutional contexts to individual actors by privileging dramatized narratives over structural explanations (Bennett, 2012, pp. 42–43; Iyengar, 1994, pp. 13–14). In crisis situations, such individualized framing foregrounds CEOs as primary causal agents, intensifying moral evaluation and stakeholder perceptions of blame (Coombs, 2007, p. 171) and transforming organizational disruptions into narratives of leadership failure. Media also frequently employ conflict and scandal frames that emphasize controversy and deviation from normative expectations, thereby increasing newsworthiness and emotional resonance (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014, p. 48; Soroka et al., 2019, pp. 18888–18891).

Together, these framing mechanisms directly correspond to the key perceptual outcomes examined in this study. CEO communication becomes consequential not only because of what is said, but because of how media recontextualize, moralize, and circulate these statements, preparing the ground for broader amplification dynamics examined in the following section.

2.3.2 Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF)

The Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding how CEO communication can escalate into public crises through processes of mediated interpretation and networked dissemination. Originally formulated by Kasperson et al. (1988) and later refined by Renn et al. (1992), the framework explains that risk-related signals are not transmitted linearly but are socially processed, reinterpreted, and magnified across interconnected media and institutional environments. SARF was developed to address why events with limited objective consequences may nevertheless provoke disproportionate social reactions (Kasperson et al., 1988, p. 177). It conceptualizes amplification as the outcome of interacting psychological, social, and institutional processes that increase the perceived relevance of a signal (Renn et al., 1992, p. 137).

At its conceptual core, SARF models communication as a signaling process comprising three elements: risk signals, amplification stations, and ripple effects (Kasperson et al., 1988, p. 183). Risk signals refer to initial communicative acts or symbolic events that attract attention. In the present study, these signals include CEO statements, social media posts, or visible gestures that carry reputational meaning. Amplification stations—such as journalists, analysts, regulators, and online publics—receive, filter, and retransmit these signals, adding or subtracting symbolic content according to institutional norms and cultural expectations (Kasperson et al., 1988, pp. 181, 185, 2022, p. 1368; Renn et al., 1992, p. 140). Ripple effects describe how these transformed interpretations circulate outward, expanding the scope and intensity of public attention (Kasperson et al., 1988, pp. 182–184).

Recent work by Kasperson (2022, pp. 1371–1372) adapts SARF to digitally networked environments, emphasizing that amplification increasingly unfolds through participatory and trust-sensitive communication systems. In such contexts, the visibility and perceived integrity of communicators shape whether messages resonate and proliferate. For CEOs, this means that public prominence and communicative tone directly influence how statements are taken up and recontextualized across digital ecosystems (Kasperson et al., 2022, pp. 1371–1373). Executive communication thus functions as a highly exposed signal whose interpretation is contingent on collective reception rather than managerial intent alone.

Applied to CEO visibility, SARF conceptualizes executive communication as a risk signal embedded within a dense network of amplification stations. The CEO operates as a central node in this communicative system, and heightened visibility increases the number of actors who reinterpret and circulate executive messages. Traditional media may frame remarks as indicators of broader organizational deficiencies, while online communities intensify engagement through sharing, commentary, and humor. As interpretations multiply, the perceived magnitude of reputational risk expands beyond the original communicative act. Visibility therefore operates as a multiplier: the wider the exposure of CEO discourse, the greater the potential for reframing and escalation (Kasperson et al., 1988, p. 182; Kasperson et al. 2022, p. 1373).

A further core feature of SARF is the presence of feedback loops through which amplified public reactions influence subsequent organizational communication (Kasperson et al., 1988, p. 182). Renn et al. (1992, p. 143) describe these recursive dynamics as processes in which social responses feed back into institutional behavior. For CEOs, this occurs when public criticism or media pressure prompts follow-up statements such as apologies, clarifications, or defensive responses. These secondary communications may attenuate or intensify amplification depending on their timing and perceived coherence (Renn et al., 1992, p. 143). In this recursive process, the CEO becomes both the originator and the target of amplification, as successive communicative interventions reshape the evolving crisis trajectory (Kasperson et al., 1988, p. 181).

Although SARF originates in risk sociology rather than corporate communication, its emphasis on signal transmission and amplification offers a valuable framework for analyzing how executive messages circulate and evolve in public discourse. However, because SARF primarily models informational spread, it requires adaptation to capture the symbolic and affective qualities of CEO communication in contemporary crises. Accordingly, amplification is conceptualized here not only as diffusion of information but as the social intensification of interpreted meaning.

For this thesis, SARF provides the structural mechanism linking CEO visibility to reputational vulnerability. As executive communication reaches heterogeneous audiences, interpretive pathways multiply and exposure increases, raising the likelihood that localized incidents develop into broader reputational disturbances. In this sense, modern corporate crises emerge less from information deficits than from amplified meaning-making across media ecosystems. SARF therefore complements crisis communication frameworks such as SCCT and IRT by shifting analytical attention from strategic message design to the social ecology of reception—how networks of actors collectively transform CEO communication into shared public narratives.

2.3.3 Media and Social Media Dynamics

In an era of media saturation and heightened visibility, some CEOs transcend their managerial roles to become public figures whose personal narratives dominate corporate discourse. Drawing on Rindova et al. (2006, p. 51) framework of *firm celebrity*, visibility can be understood as a socially constructed outcome of continuous interactions between organizations, media, and audiences rather than as an inherent personal attribute. Through dramatized media narratives that emphasize innovation, charisma, or moral leadership, firms—and by extension their CEOs—are transformed into symbolic protagonists that embody success or failure (Rindova et al., 2006, p. 56). While CEO branding often represents a deliberate, strategic alignment of personal and corporate image, CEO celebrity emerges largely from media dynamics that operate beyond organizational control.

Building on this perspective, Park and Berger (2004) demonstrate how the media have been instrumental in elevating CEOs to such symbolic prominence. Their longitudinal analysis of U.S. press coverage (1990–2000) shows that CEOs increasingly became personalized symbols of competence, morality, and vision, as reporting shifted toward positive, heroizing narratives (Park & Berger, 2004, pp. 93–94, 116). During this period, reporting shifted toward greater personalization and positivity, framing CEOs as visionary heroes whose leadership stories captured public imagination (Park & Berger, 2004, pp. 96, 116). The press thus evolved into an active producer of meaning, co-constructing the CEO's public persona through narratives of success, integrity, and charisma (Park & Berger, 2004, p. 97). This process blurred the boundary between individual and organization, positioning the CEO as a living symbol through which corporate identity and reputation are interpreted (Park & Berger, 2004, p. 96). With heightened attention and salience, such personalization can ultimately transform CEOs into “celebrities or media stars” (Park & Berger, 2004, p. 94).

Lovelace et al. (2018, p. 423) further illustrate how sustained media exposure and consistent self-presentation elevate CEOs to celebrity status by framing them into archetypical roles—such as savior, creator, or rebel—that resonate with cultural narratives of leadership. These archetypes generate powerful symbolic associations that amplify both personal visibility and the company’s public image (Lovelace et al., 2018, pp. 420, 425). However, once a CEO attains public-persona status, continuous visibility creates sociocognitive pressure to uphold this image (Lovelace et al., 2018, p. 425). Executives may begin to act according to external expectations rather than internal judgment, fostering overconfidence, role rigidity, and inflated self-belief (Lovelace et al., 2018, pp. 427–428). As Lovelace et al. (2018, p. 427) and Hayward et al. (2004, p. 647) suggest, celebrity leaders often persist in past behaviors despite changing conditions, turning visibility into liability.

Hayward et al. (2004) complement this view by explaining the external mechanisms that sustain such pressures. Media coverage simplifies complex organizational realities by over-attributing corporate outcomes to the CEO’s personal agency, reinforcing the fundamental attribution error (Hayward et al., 2004, p. 638). Through dispositional attribution, journalists construct compelling narratives that glorify leadership and exaggerate executive efficacy (Hayward et al., 2004, p. 647). As these stories are repeated and amplified, the CEO becomes symbolically fused with the organization, leading the public “to equate the CEO with the firm” (Hayward et al., 2004, p. 647). This external narrative intensifies the internal role pressure identified by Lovelace et al. (2018, p. 427), as CEOs feel compelled to maintain an image the media continually reproduce. This feedback loop fosters overconfidence and behavioral rigidity, increasing vulnerability to reputational shocks (Hayward et al., 2004, pp. 646–647; Lovelace et al., 2018, p. 436).

These dynamics exemplify what can be describes as a *visibility spiral*: increased exposure attracts further media attention, which in turn magnifies public salience and interpretive intensity. Once a CEO becomes symbolically fused with the organization, every subsequent communication or appearance reinforces this visibility loop, making disengagement from public scrutiny increasingly difficult.

Extending this logic to the digital sphere, Tsai and Men (2017, p. 2) show that social media platforms act as visibility amplifiers that expand a CEO’s symbolic presence beyond traditional media. By engaging directly with the public, “social CEOs” cultivate ongoing attention streams that blur the boundary between personal and corporate identity. Parasocial interactions humanize leadership while multiplying message reach, as followers reproduce the CEO’s communication across their own networks (Tsai & Men, 2017, p. 5). In this sense, authenticity and responsiveness function not only as relational strategies but as mechanisms of algorithmic amplification, transforming individual messages into sustained public exposure (Tsai & Men, 2017, p. 12). Such visibility can foster perceptions of relational closeness and credibility while also heightening communicative risk, as executive messages become more exposed to reframing and moral scrutiny and reverberate across media ecosystems.

From the perspective of this study's research question, CEO celebrity epitomizes the double-edged nature of visibility. High media exposure amplifies communicative reach, enabling CEOs to personify corporate values and shape stakeholder perceptions. Yet this same exposure magnifies the consequences of communicative missteps, as the CEO's words and actions become proxies for organizational ethics and culture. As Park and Berger (2004, p. 108) note, the press not only amplifies the CEO's voice but also constructs the interpretive frame through which audiences evaluate corporate legitimacy. Thus, CEO celebrity operates both as a reputational asset in times of success and as a potential crisis catalyst when public narratives turn critical.

Visibility amplifies CEO messages through media reframing and emotional reinterpretation. It can humanize leadership and strengthen legitimacy when messages align with moral expectations; it can also magnify minor missteps into moralized controversies when frames highlight arrogance, inconsistency, or harm. This duality motivates a closer look at how stakeholders actually make sense of amplified signals.

2.4 Stakeholder Perspectives and Legitimacy

Once CEO communication has entered the public sphere, its reputational consequences depend on how stakeholders interpret and evaluate it. This chapter therefore shifts focus from message production and media amplification to audience interpretation. It explores how stakeholders make sense of amplified information and transform it into judgments of appropriateness, morality, and trust. Section 2.4.1 introduces sensemaking theory as the cognitive and social process through which individuals and groups construct plausible narratives about corporate behavior. Section 2.4.2 then applies legitimacy theory to explain why certain interpretations lead to sustained acceptance or rejection, emphasizing the moral, pragmatic, and cognitive dimensions of organizational legitimacy. Finally, Section 2.4.3 links these evaluations to the perceptual constructs of credibility, trust, and reputation, which mediate between individual sensemaking and collective legitimacy. Collectively, this chapter positions stakeholder perception as the final mechanism in the theoretical model, translating CEO communication and visibility into enduring reputational and legitimacy outcomes.

2.4.1 Stakeholder Sensemaking and Interpretive Frames

As information about CEO communication circulates through media and social networks, it enters the interpretive domain of stakeholders who actively construct meaning from amplified signals. Stakeholders are not passive recipients of information but sensemakers who filter, evaluate, and reassemble communicative cues in light of their own experiences, values, and expectations. It is through these interpretive processes that the reputational significance of CEO communication begins to take shape.

Stakeholder theory conceptualizes these actors as heterogeneous yet interdependent groups that differ in salience, power, and legitimacy, but share the capacity to affect or be affected by organizational actions (Freeman, 1984, as cited in Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 856). Building on Freeman's (1984) and Freeman and McVea's (2001) perspective, stakeholder relationships encompass both instrumental and normative dimensions, as organizations depend on stakeholders not only for resources but also for social approval within broader value systems (Freeman & McVea, 2001, pp. 14, 16, 27–28). Mitchell et al. (1997, pp. 862–863) further emphasize that stakeholder salience is socially constructed and dynamically perceived, suggesting that stakeholder evaluations are shaped through ongoing interpretive processes rather than fixed criteria. In crisis contexts, this dual lens informs how stakeholders assess executive communication with regard to competence, integrity, and ethical orientation.

These interpretive dynamics can be understood through the concept of sensemaking. According to Weick (1995, pp. 61–61), sensemaking is an ongoing, retrospective, and social process through which individuals and groups construct plausible narratives to explain ambiguous or unexpected events. In CEO-triggered crises, stakeholders rely on fragmented and mediated information—such as executive statements, journalistic accounts, and social media commentary—to assemble coherent explanations of what has occurred and what it signifies. These narratives reduce ambiguity and restore cognitive coherence while simultaneously embedding evaluative judgments about organizational values and leadership conduct. As Weick et al. (1995, pp. 61–62; 2005, p. 414) note, sensemaking transforms circumstances into situations that are explicitly articulated and capable of guiding interpretation and response.

Interpretive frames play a central role in structuring this sensemaking process. Frames operate as cognitive schemata that direct attention to specific aspects of an event while backgrounding others. Therefore, enabling observers to determine what a situation 'means' and how it should be evaluated (Snow et al., 2019, p. 393). In CEO-triggered crises, such frames organize fragmented cues—such as tone, wording, and symbolic gestures—into coherent narratives about responsibility, intent, and value alignment. Through this focusing and organizing work, frames often transform seemingly isolated statements into indicators of broader inconsistency or impropriety, rendering executive conduct morally salient and inviting critical evaluation (Snow et al., 2019, p. 396). As Snow et al. (2019, p. 403) note, these framing processes can generate what they term "moral shocks": moments in which emotional responses intensify and the moral stakes of the situation become elevated. In this way, framing connects cognitive interpretation with affective engagement, shaping how stakeholders judge both CEO integrity and organizational character.

Value discrepancies are particularly consequential in this interpretive process. When stakeholders perceive incongruence between a CEO's public statements and the organization's espoused values, they are likely to interpret this mismatch through a moral frame. Such interpretations can give rise to perceptions of CEO hypocrisy—the judgment that a leader claims certain values while acting in ways that contradict them. Prior research identifies hypocrisy as a potent moral evaluation because it implies insincerity and intentional norm violation rather than mere error (Effron et al., 2018, pp. 5–6; Wagner et al., 2009, pp. 79–81). Within a sensemaking perspective, hypocrisy functions as an interpretive conclusion that resolves ambiguity by attributing negative moral meaning to executive behavior.

Media and social networks provide the social context in which these interpretations are exchanged, reinforced, and stabilized. As stakeholders encounter and circulate similar frames, certain narratives gain visibility and coherence, shaping how subsequent CEO communication is understood (Snow et al., 2019, p. 393). From a sensemaking perspective, it is this collectively constructed meaning—rather than the original communicative act alone—that becomes the reference point for evaluation, as stakeholders rely on socially validated interpretations to assess leadership conduct and organizational character (Weick, 1995, pp. 61–62; Weick et al., 2005, p. 414). Research on moral–emotional communication further suggests that interpretations containing moralized language tend to achieve heightened salience in digital environments, increasing their prominence within collective sensemaking processes (Brady et al., 2017, pp. 7315–7316).

Overall, stakeholder sensemaking constitutes the interpretive bridge between amplified CEO communication and broader evaluative processes. Through frames and narratives, stakeholders transform communicative signals into coherent assessments of leadership conduct and organizational character. These assessments do not yet determine specific outcomes but form the cognitive and normative groundwork on which judgments of legitimacy, credibility, and trust are subsequently built, as explored in the following sections.

2.4.2 Foundations of Legitimacy

Building on stakeholder sensemaking, legitimacy theory explains how interpretive meanings become translated into normative evaluations of organizational acceptability. While sensemaking accounts for how stakeholders construct explanations of ambiguous events, legitimacy theory clarifies why these interpretations lead to sustained approval or rejection. Legitimacy thus operates as an evaluative framework through which organizational behavior is judged against socially constructed expectations of appropriateness, morality, and rationality.

Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” Two features of this definition are central to the present study. First, legitimacy is perceptual rather than objective: it resides in stakeholder evaluations rather than in organizational performance itself. Second, it is socially constructed through ongoing interaction between organizations and their audiences. Communication therefore plays a constitutive role, as symbolic acts and leadership discourse provide cues through which stakeholders assess alignment with normative expectations. In crisis contexts, CEO statements become particularly salient inputs into these evaluative processes.

Suchman (1995, p. 577) distinguishes three forms of legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy is grounded in stakeholder self-interest and exchange relationships, reflecting judgments about whether organizational actions address practical concerns (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). Moral legitimacy rests on normative approval and depends on evaluations of whether behavior is perceived as ethically appropriate and consistent with shared values (Suchman, 1995, p. 579). Cognitive legitimacy refers to taken-for-grantedness, capturing the extent to which an organization's existence and conduct are viewed as natural or inevitable (Suchman, 1995, p. 582). These forms differ not only in content but also in temporal dynamics: pragmatic evaluations can shift rapidly, moral legitimacy requires sustained ethical consistency, and cognitive legitimacy develops gradually over time (Suchman, 1995, pp. 584–585).

In the context of CEO communication, moral and pragmatic legitimacy are particularly consequential. Stakeholders interpret executive discourse as moral performance, drawing inferences about empathy, accountability, and responsibility. Communicative cues such as acknowledgment of harm, expressions of concern, or references to corrective action are evaluated as indicators of normative alignment, while responsiveness and competence inform pragmatic assessments of whether organizational interests are being addressed. Legitimacy thus emerges through stakeholder interpretation of leadership communication rather than through the communicative act itself.

This evaluative process is further shaped by socially shared expectations of responsible leadership. Pless et al. (2022, pp. 317, 327, 331) argue that contemporary stakeholders increasingly assess leaders in terms of transparency, inclusiveness, and ethical orientation. Within this framework, CEO communication functions as a symbolic site where such expectations are activated, allowing stakeholders to judge whether executive conduct reflects broader societal values. Importantly, these judgments are not managerial outcomes but stakeholder constructions grounded in prevailing norms of corporate responsibility.

Bitektine and Haack (2015) extend Suchman's model by emphasizing the multilevel nature of legitimacy formation. They distinguish between micro-level individual evaluations and macro-level collective judgments, showing how dispersed stakeholder perceptions aggregate through media discourse, peer interaction, and institutional narratives into shared societal assessments (Bitektine & Haack, 2015, pp. 14–16). This perspective clarifies how legitimacy shifts from personal interpretation to collective orientation. Amplification processes described in Chapter 2.3 play a central role in this transition: visibility and mediated circulation determine which evaluations gain prominence and how rapidly they stabilize within public discourse.

Legitimacy can be understood as the normative filter through which stakeholders interpret CEO behavior. It integrates instrumental considerations with moral reasoning, linking individual sensemaking to collective reputation. Rather than functioning as a managerial resource, legitimacy operates here as an audience-centered evaluative structure. CEO communication supplies salient symbolic cues for legitimacy evaluation; however, legitimacy itself emerges through stakeholder interpretation and the aggregation of evaluations in public discourse. In crisis situations, leadership discourse becomes a focal point for these evaluations, translating communicative cues into judgments of appropriateness and organizational integrity.

2.4.3 Trust, Credibility, and Reputation as Perceptual Outcomes

CEO communication enters stakeholder evaluation through a set of interrelated perceptual constructs that mediate between momentary interpretation and more durable organizational judgments. Credibility, trust, and reputation do not operate as isolated outcomes but function as interconnected mechanisms through which communicative cues are filtered, stabilized, and socially aggregated. In crisis contexts, where uncertainty is heightened, these mechanisms become particularly salient as stakeholders draw on executive communication to assess responsibility, integrity, and organizational reliability.

At the immediate level of message reception, credibility serves as the primary interpretive filter. Source credibility is commonly conceptualized as comprising perceived competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill (McCroskey & Teven, 1999, pp. 90–91; Hovland et al., 1953, as cited in Ohanian, 1990, p. 41). Stakeholders infer these qualities from communicative cues such as tone, coherence, emotional expression, and clarity (McCroskey & Teven, 1999, p. 91). In crisis situations, where scrutiny intensifies, even subtle inconsistencies may become salient, shaping how executive statements are interpreted and how subsequent information is evaluated. Credibility thus operates less as a stable attribute than as a situational judgment continuously recalibrated through ongoing communication.

Trust reflects a more relational orientation toward leadership, commonly defined as a willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations regarding ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995, pp. 712, 717–719). Whereas credibility concerns the perceived plausibility of specific messages, trust captures stakeholders' broader readiness to rely on organizational representatives under conditions of uncertainty. Empirical research indicates that perceptions of CEO credibility inform organizational evaluations (Men, 2012, p. 172), while communicative openness and dialogue are associated with stronger identification and confidence (Men & Stacks, 2013, p. 183). Rather than constituting a direct consequence of individual statements, trust emerges through repeated interpretive encounters in which stakeholders assess whether executive communication consistently reflects competence, ethical intent, and concern.

Over time, these recurring credibility- and trust-related evaluations contribute to organizational reputation, understood as a collective assessment of performance, responsibility, and reliability (Fombrun, 2004, p. 243, 2008, pp. 143–144; Walker, 2010, pp. 369–370). From a communicative perspective, reputation represents the aggregation of dispersed stakeholder judgments shaped by both direct experience and symbolic representations of corporate conduct (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001, p. 29). In this sense, reputation functions as a form of social memory, consolidating ongoing perceptions into a relatively stable interpretive frame that influences how future actions and communications are received.

Crises introduce disruption into this perceptual ecology by calling into question authenticity and ethical consistency. While prior reputational standing may condition how new information is interpreted, executive communication remains a central source of cues through which stakeholders reassess organizational character. Rather than producing immediate reputational change, CEO discourse enters an ongoing evaluative process in which credibility judgments, relational trust orientations, and accumulated impressions interact across time and audiences.

Credibility, trust, and reputation can be understood as perceptual mechanisms that translate executive communication into broader legitimacy evaluations. Credibility shapes how messages are initially received, trust reflects stakeholders' evolving relational stance toward leadership, and reputation captures the socially aggregated residue of these judgments. These constructs link individual sensemaking and normative legitimacy assessment by providing the psychological pathways through which communicative signals become stabilized within collective perception. In doing so, they provide the conceptual link to the empirical analysis of this thesis, which examines how CEO-level communication is translated into differentiated organizational evaluations.

2.5 Integrated Conceptual Framework

While most crisis communication research conceptualizes crises as event-driven phenomena followed by organizational response strategies, this thesis adopts a person-centered perspective. It argues that CEOs function as primary moral signal generators whose public communication can initiate reputational crisis dynamics independently of objective organizational failure. This challenges the implicit assumption of prevailing crisis models that reputational crises primarily originate from external events rather than from leadership communication itself.

Accordingly, the integrated conceptual framework positions CEO communication not merely as reactive behavior but as a potential catalyst of crisis emergence. Rather than treating crises as exogenous shocks, the framework conceptualizes them as socially constructed breakdowns that arise when executive communication is perceived as misaligned with stakeholder expectations or moral norms. In this view, crises emerge when the symbolic relationship between CEO and public destabilizes—through perceived inconsistency, emotional misjudgment, or moral incongruence.

At its core, the framework conceptualizes CEO communication as a multilevel interpretive process linking individual expression to collective evaluation. It shifts attention away from strategic message design toward expressive behavior, recognizing that spontaneous or emotionally charged communicative acts—verbal and nonverbal—can become socially consequential once they enter public circulation. CEO communication is thus understood as a continuous stream of signals that are amplified, interpreted, and morally evaluated.

The process begins with CEO expression. Communicative behavior, encompassing both verbal content and paralinguistic cues such as tone, facial expression, and emotional display, is conceptualized as an outward manifestation of executive cognition, values, and affective states. Drawing on Upper Echelons Theory, these expressions are treated as behavioral indicators of how leaders perceive and frame unfolding situations. While often intended to convey competence or authenticity, such signals may unintentionally communicate detachment, defensiveness, or moral insensitivity, thereby providing the initial trigger for reputational disturbance.

Once expressed publicly, these cues enter a visibility and amplification system shaped by media logics. Through processes of repetition, emotional framing, and moralization, isolated moments—such as an offhand remark or a misplaced gesture—can be transformed into symbolic events. Amplification operates as a force multiplier, expanding both the reach and interpretive intensity of CEO communication and shaping the collective lens through which executive behavior is judged.

As amplified signals circulate, stakeholders engage in interpretive processes aimed at reconstructing what executive communication "means." Observers infer intent, responsibility, and moral character from communicative cues, drawing on attributional reasoning and normative expectations. When communication appears evasive, arrogant, or inconsistent, stakeholders attribute blame and question leadership integrity. Reputational crises thus materialize not solely because of objective wrongdoing but because meaning collapses in the interpretive space between communicator and audience.

These interpretations coalesce into perceptual outcomes of credibility, trust, and reputation, which collectively shape organizational legitimacy. A single communicative failure can trigger cascading evaluative dynamics in which credibility judgments, trust orientations, and reputational impressions interact and mutually reinforce one another, potentially culminating in weakened legitimacy evaluations. Conversely, stakeholder interpretations of cues such as empathy, accountability, and humility may attenuate negative evaluations by signaling normative alignment and responsiveness. CEO communication therefore functions simultaneously as symbolic risk and as potential mechanism of repair.

Importantly, the framework depicts this process as recursive. Public evaluation feeds back into subsequent CEO communication, as leaders commonly respond to emerging interpretations with follow-up statements that may recalibrate—or further destabilize—stakeholder evaluations. Crisis dynamics are thus conceptualized as cyclical rather than linear, characterized by ongoing interaction between executive expression, media amplification, and stakeholder interpretation.

Taken together, the integrated framework connects micro-level communicative acts with macro-level legitimacy outcomes. It does not claim to offer an empirically validated causal model but rather provides a theoretically grounded synthesis that structures the relationships examined in this study. Methodologically, it guides the empirical design: the qualitative phase identifies linguistic and nonverbal cues associated with perceived misalignment, while the survey phase examines how these cues shape stakeholder judgments of credibility, trust, and legitimacy.

Figure 1 synthesizes this conceptual logic by visualizing CEO communication as a recursive process linking executive expression, media amplification, stakeholder interpretation, and perceptual outcomes. Rather than depicting a linear causal chain, the figure illustrates how communicative signals circulate through visibility structures and attributional processes, producing shifting evaluations of credibility, trust, and legitimacy that feed back into subsequent leadership communication.

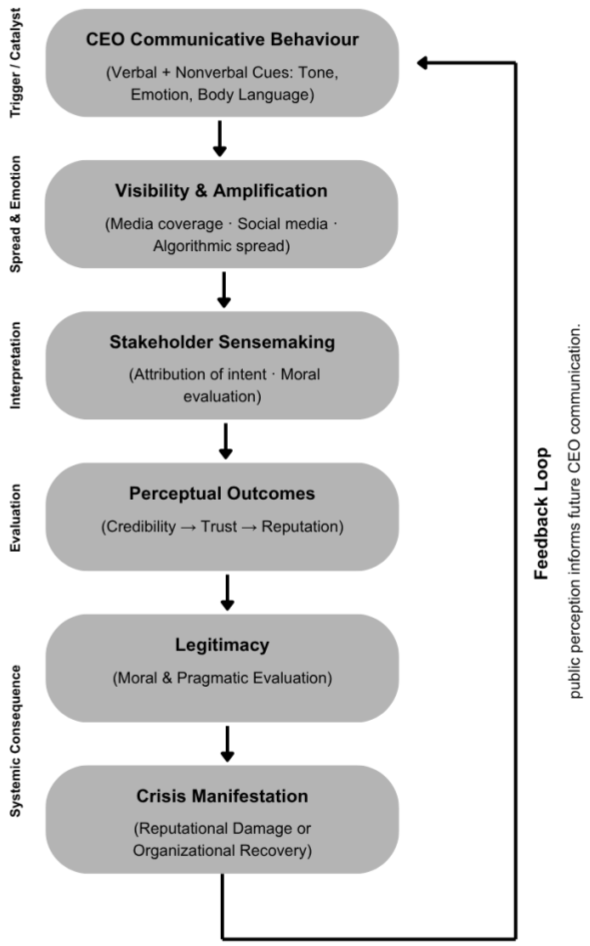

Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework, Own Illustration.

By conceptualizing crises as outcomes of communicative misalignment rather than solely as the consequence of external events, the framework establishes the analytical foundation for investigating how CEO communication can catalyze, escalate, or contain reputational crises. The following chapter operationalizes these dimensions and outlines the methodological approach used to empirically examine these processes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: Mixed-Methods

This thesis aims to answer the following research question:

How can CEO communication and visibility serve as catalysts for corporate crises and influence the company's public perception?

The research question of this thesis addresses both the interpretive mechanisms through which CEO communication becomes crisis-relevant and the perceptual effects that result from these mechanisms. Capturing these dimensions requires a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative depth with quantitative generalizability. While qualitative analysis allows for the identification of meaning-making and attribution processes, quantitative analysis is necessary to assess the robustness and directional relationships of key perceptual effects. The sequential design follows an exploratory logic. Given the limited theoretical understanding of CEO-induced crisis escalation mechanisms, the qualitative phase serves to identify and conceptualize relevant interpretive patterns. These insights then inform the construction of the survey scenario and hypotheses, ensuring that the quantitative phase is theoretically grounded rather than purely confirmatory. Accordingly, the study follows an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design combining a qualitative case analysis with a scenario-based survey.

In the first step, a qualitative multiple-case design is used to analyze real-world cases of CEO-centered crises. This qualitative phase focuses on situations in which CEOs, as highly visible public figures, became central drivers of reputational escalation through statements or publicly visible actions. Using a qualitative content analysis, the study reconstructs recurring communication patterns, such as responsibility attribution, emotional tone, moral and value signaling, and media amplification. The goal of this phase is not statistical generalization, but the identification of communicative mechanisms that illustrate how CEO communication and visibility can act as crisis catalysts.

The results of the qualitative analysis provide the basis for the second step of the study. In this quantitative phase, a scenario-based online survey is conducted to examine how stakeholders perceive communication patterns similar to those identified in the qualitative cases. Instead of focusing on specific real-world incidents, the survey presents a synthesized scenario that reflects recurring patterns of problematic CEO communication. This approach allows for systematic comparison across respondents while maintaining close alignment with the qualitative findings. The survey measures stakeholder evaluations of the CEO (e.g., credibility, responsibility attribution, emotional appropriateness) as well as spillover effects on corporate reputation, legitimacy, and stakeholder support.

Insights from the qualitative phase directly inform the construction of the survey scenario and the selection of quantitative constructs, ensuring coherence across both phases of the research design. An overview of the research process, including the sequence of qualitative analysis, hypothesis development, and quantitative testing, is illustrated in *Figure 2*, which presents the study's overall research design and workflow.

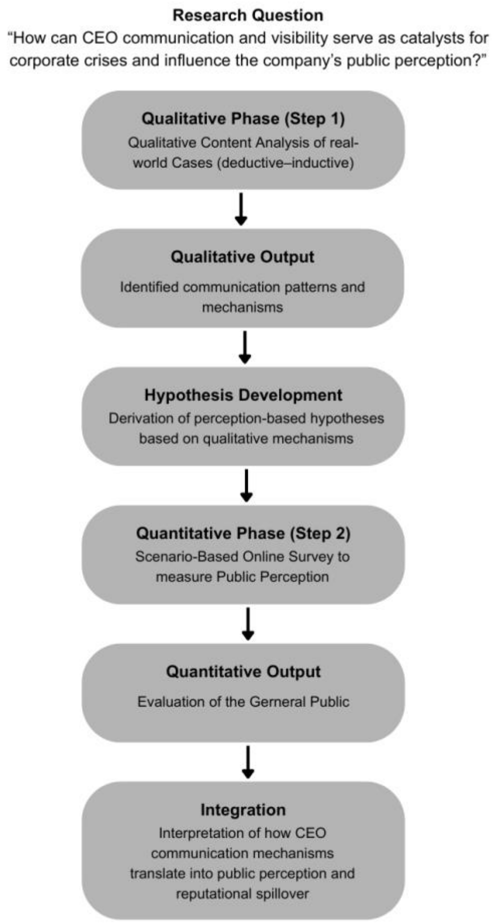

Figure 2: Overview of the Mixed-Methods Research Design, Own Illustration.

From a methodological perspective, this study follows an interpretive, mechanism-oriented research logic. Rather than aiming at statistical generalization, it seeks analytical generalization by reconstructing recurring communicative patterns and perception mechanisms across theoretically selected CEO-centered crisis cases. The qualitative phase is used to identify interpretive escalation mechanisms, while the subsequent quantitative phase examines relational associations between perceived CEO communication characteristics and stakeholder evaluations. This design reflects a constructivist understanding of crises as socially constituted through communication, attribution, and moral evaluation.

Overall, the mixed-methods approach is well suited to the research objective, as CEO-driven crises are complex communicative phenomena that involve observable actions, media interpretation, and stakeholder evaluation. By combining qualitative case analysis with a quantitative survey, the study provides a comprehensive answer to the research question and links CEO communication as a crisis catalyst to its perceived organizational consequences.

3.2 Qualitative Phase

This study employs a multiple-case design to examine how CEO communication and visibility can act as catalysts for corporate crises. The qualitative phase addresses the first part of the research question by analyzing CEO-centered crisis cases and identifying communicative mechanisms that contribute to perceptual outcomes. Case selection was purposeful and theory-informed, prioritizing analytical relevance over statistical representativeness. Drawing on the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, CEO communication is understood broadly as any publicly visible verbal or nonverbal act that is interpreted in public discourse as a signal of leadership, responsibility, or values. Accordingly, the analysis includes both direct CEO statements and symbolic or behavioral actions, insofar as they become publicly mediated and relevant for stakeholder interpretation. The qualitative phase therefore focuses on high-visibility CEO-centered crisis cases in order to identify communicative mechanisms through which CEO communication can trigger or escalate reputational dynamics.

Following a logic of theoretical replication and theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537), cases were selected to vary systematically along theoretically meaningful dimensions. Specifically, variation was sought with regard to (a) the form of communication, (b) the nature of the crisis trigger, and (c) the degree of visibility and media amplification. This deliberate heterogeneity enables comparison across different communicative constellations and supports analytical generalization.

Cases were selected based on four guiding criteria. First, each case had to be CEO-centered, meaning that reputational escalation was directly triggered or amplified by the CEO's communication or public behavior. Second, only cases with substantial public and media visibility were included to ensure traceability of communicative acts and interpretive framing. Third, sufficient primary and secondary materials had to be available, including CEO statements, corporate responses, and editorial media coverage. Finally, cases were selected to ensure theoretical variation across different types of communicative crises. Applying these criteria resulted in a final corpus of five high-profile CEO-centered crisis cases involving BP (Tony Hayward), Uber (Travis Kalanick), Kellogg's (Gary Pilnick), Astronomer (Andy Byron), and Tesla/X (Elon Musk). The selected cases span a time period from 2010 to 2025, as the analysis does not aim to compare media systems or crisis communication practices across time. An overview of the selected cases is provided in Appendix A2. Cases were sampled following a logic of theoretical replication until no substantively new escalation mechanisms emerged, indicating theoretical saturation rather than empirical exhaustiveness.

In this study, a case is defined as a discrete crisis episode in which the CEO's communicative behavior—verbal or nonverbal—serves as the primary trigger of reputational escalation. While all cases center on CEO visibility, they differ with respect to whether reputational disruption was initiated through explicit verbal communication or through symbolic, behavioral, or politically charged actions. This context-sensitive design reflects the analytical logic that although not all crises originate in communication, all crises involving CEO visibility are mediated and managed through communicative interpretation. Additional detail on trigger types and communication focus is provided in Appendix A1.

The empirical corpus for each case consists of three complementary data layers: direct CEO communication, corporate responses, and editorial media coverage. This combination allows for a multi-perspective reconstruction of each crisis episode by capturing both the CEO's communicative act and its public interpretation and amplification through journalistic discourse. Media sources were not used to quantify coverage, but to provide contextual insight into how CEO communication was framed and evaluated in the public sphere. Further documentation of the empirical materials is provided in Appendix A2 and D1.

Social media content was selectively included in the qualitative corpus. CEO statements published on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) were directly analyzed as primary sources of executive communication. In contrast, user-generated audience reactions on social media (e.g., comments, replies, or engagement metrics) were not systematically examined, as their inclusion would have substantially expanded the scope and complexity of the qualitative analysis. The qualitative phase therefore focuses on CEO communication itself and its recontextualization through editorial media coverage. Audience perceptions and emotional evaluations are not derived from social media data but are examined separately through a scenario-based quantitative survey. The role of social media as an amplification environment is addressed conceptually in the theoretical framework and acknowledged as a limitation of the empirical design.

The final qualitative sample comprises five CEO-centered crisis cases. To provide contextual background for the subsequent analysis, detailed descriptions of each case are reported in Appendix A3. While a qualitative content analysis does not require large-N sampling, it depends on conceptual variety and analytical depth. In line with Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2018), the selected cases provide a sufficient empirical basis for theoretical replication and cross-case comparison. The assembled corpus forms the empirical foundation for the qualitative content analysis described in Section 3.3, which systematically examines communicative patterns related to tone, framing, responsibility attribution, and moral signaling across cases.

3.2.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

This study employs a qualitative content analysis following Mayring (2022). The method is well suited to the present research objective, as it enables a systematic and theory-informed examination of communicative patterns while remaining sensitive to contextual meanings. In the context of CEO crisis communication, it allows for the analysis of both explicit message content and implicit symbolic cues in verbal and nonverbal communication. The qualitative analysis proceeded in three analytical steps. First, CEO statements and media materials were open-coded to identify salient communicative features. Second, codes were relationally clustered into higher-order categories such as responsibility framing, emotional tone, and moral signaling. Third, these categories were analytically integrated into recurrent escalation mechanisms, linking communicative cues to attributional and legitimacy-related outcomes. This stepwise abstraction enabled the transition from descriptive coding to theoretically informed mechanism reconstruction.

The qualitative analysis follows a deductive–inductive qualitative content analysis. An initial coding framework was developed deductively based on established theories of crisis communication, attribution, and CEO communication, providing a structured analytical lens and ensuring comparability across cases. At the same time, the analysis remained open to inductively emerging patterns that were not sufficiently captured by the initial framework. This combination allows for theoretical grounding while preserving sensitivity to case-specific dynamics. The final coding scheme integrates both theory-driven categories and empirically derived subcategories.

In accordance with Mayring's principle of unitizing (2022, p. 60), the material was segmented into content-analytical units defined *a priori* on the basis of formal and semantic criteria in order to ensure systematic, rule-guided analysis.

Two types of recording units were specified. First, primary CEO communication, including press statements, interview contributions, and other publicly visible communicative acts by the CEO. Second, secondary interpretive materials, comprising media articles and opinion pieces that explicitly referred to and evaluated the CEO's crisis communication. Each recording unit constituted an analytically independent case and resulted in one overall coding decision.

Within each recording unit, the material was further segmented into coding units, defined as thematically coherent meaning units at the level of phrases to sentences. Coding was applied at this level and focused on communicative aspects such as responsibility attribution, emotional expression, and value orientation.

The context unit encompassed the entire case, including background information on the crisis, organizational characteristics, and additional descriptive material. These contextual elements were consulted to support interpretation but were not subjected to coding.

To maintain analytical focus on the communicative crisis rather than underlying operational events, all materials were systematically reviewed prior to coding and differentiated into primary CEO communication, secondary media interpretations, and contextual background information. Only the first two categories made up the recording units and were coded.

Repeated CEO statements were coded only once unless they appeared in a different recording unit or in a distinct interpretive context that altered their communicative meaning. This rule was defined *a priori* to avoid artificial code inflation and to ensure analytical clarity and comparability across cases.

The analysis follows Mayring's (2022) structuring content analysis (strukturierende Inhaltsanalyse), which combines theory-guided category application with openness to empirically emerging insights. This approach enables the systematic identification of communicative patterns while maintaining a clear connection to the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2. Each case was first analyzed individually to reconstruct the communicative sequence and dominant tone, followed by a cross-case comparison to identify recurring mechanisms across different types of crises.

All coding was conducted using Atlas.ti and guided by a structured codebook containing category definitions as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria. A pilot coding phase was conducted to refine category definitions and improve clarity. Coding stability was assessed through an intra-coder reliability check, in which a subset of the material was re-coded after a time interval. Particular attention was paid to the consistent application of latent categories, which required iterative clarification of coding rules. The intra-coder reliability check indicated stable category application.

The qualitative analysis resulted in a set of analytical categories capturing the interplay between message design, emotional tone, and moral framing. These categories informed the development of the conceptual model and served as the basis for the derivation of hypotheses tested in the subsequent quantitative phase.

3.2.2 Codebook Development

The qualitative analysis was guided by a structured codebook developed in accordance with Mayring's (2022, pp. 96–103) procedure for deductive category application. The purpose of the codebook was to translate the theoretical constructs outlined in Chapter 2 into an analytically applicable framework that allows for the systematic examination of CEO crisis communication across cases.

The initial coding frame was developed deductively based on the central theoretical perspectives informing this study, including Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, Attribution Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and media framing approaches. These theories informed the derivation of core analytical dimensions capturing how CEOs communicate responsibility, express emotion, deploy crisis response strategies, signal moral and value alignment, and how these communicative acts are subsequently reframed and amplified by the media. The codebook follows a multi-level structuring logic in line with Mayring's (2022) qualitative content analysis. Categories capture (1) responsibility positioning and causal attribution (semantic level), (2) emotional-expressive cues (affective level), (3) strategic response intent (functional level), (4) mediated framing processes in journalistic discourse (secondary interpretation level), and (5) perceptual evaluations and consequences (outcome level). Because these levels may co-occur within the same segment, coding was conducted **non-exclusively**, allowing multiple codes per meaning unit when analytically justified. In line with the research focus, the codebook was designed to capture both strategic message content and symbolic aspects of CEO communication.

Following this deductive development, a pilot coding phase was conducted using two cases from the sample. This pilot analysis served to assess the empirical adequacy and clarity of the initial coding frame. Based on recurring patterns observed during pilot coding, the codebook was refined iteratively. Redundant categories were removed, category definitions were sharpened, and additional subcategories were inductively integrated where relevant communicative mechanisms were not sufficiently captured by the deductive framework. This refinement process ensured that the codebook remained theoretically grounded while being sensitive to empirically emergent phenomena.

The final codebook comprises six main categories reflecting key dimensions of CEO crisis communication: responsibility attribution, emotional tone and affect, communicative strategy, moral and value framing, media framing and amplification, and perceptual outcomes. Categories were defined at both manifest and latent levels to capture explicit message content as well as implicit communicative cues such as tone, symbolism, and moral positioning.

To ensure transparency and analytical consistency, all categories were specified through explicit coding rules, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and illustrative anchor examples. The complete codebook, including detailed category definitions and documentation of the refinement process, is provided in Appendix A4.

3.3 Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase of the study is designed as a scenario-based online survey that examines how stakeholders evaluate patterns of CEO communication identified in the qualitative analysis. In doing so, it addresses the second part of the research question, namely how CEO communication and visibility influence public perceptions of the company. By presenting all respondents with the same standardized scenario, the survey allows for systematic comparison of perceptions while maintaining close alignment with the qualitative findings.

Rather than testing reactions to specific real-world CEO crisis cases, the survey employs an abstracted scenario that synthesizes recurring communication patterns identified across cases. This approach increases comparability across respondents and reduces the influence of prior knowledge, attitudes toward specific CEOs, or brand-related biases. As a result, the survey focuses on stakeholder evaluations of communication characteristics rather than on reactions to individual personalities or companies.

Key constructs in the survey were measured using adapted items from established and validated scales in the fields of crisis communication, source credibility, and corporate reputation. Where necessary, items were slightly reworded to fit the scenario context while preserving their original meaning. Most constructs were assessed using the survey tool five-point Likert scales, as this format is well established in communication research and allows for reliable measurement while keeping cognitive demands manageable for respondents. The use of validated scales strengthens construct validity and supports comparability with prior research.

3.3.1 Derivation of the Survey Scenario Based on the Qualitative Results

The scenario used in the quantitative survey was derived directly from the findings of the qualitative phase of this study and represents a theory-driven and empirically informed stimulus. The qualitative analysis examined real-world cases of CEO communication during reputational crises and focused on how specific communicative patterns contributed to crisis escalation and negative stakeholder reactions. Rather than constructing a hypothetical or purely illustrative scenario, the survey stimulus was developed by abstracting and synthesizing recurring patterns identified across the qualitative material.

The qualitative findings indicated that crises intensified particularly when CEOs communicated in a manner that was perceived as emotionally detached or insufficiently empathetic in relation to socially sensitive issues. This insight informed the portrayal of the CEO's calm but dismissive tone in the interview scenario. Furthermore, the analysis showed that stakeholders reacted negatively when CEOs appeared to deny, minimize, or externalize responsibility, especially by shifting the burden onto individuals or contextual factors. These patterns were reflected in the CEO's statements in the scenario, which implicitly downplayed organizational responsibility and emphasized individual choice.

A further central insight from the qualitative analysis was the role of perceived value misalignment. Crises escalated when CEO statements were interpreted as contradicting the organization's publicly communicated values, such as empathy, fairness, or social responsibility. This qualitative finding informed the deliberate contrast in the scenario between the company's value-oriented positioning and the CEO's remarks, which appear inconsistent with these values. The qualitative material also demonstrated that CEO statements often gained disproportionate public attention once they were reframed by media coverage and social media discourse, frequently through moralizing and personalized narratives. This dynamic informed the inclusion of subsequent media reactions and public criticism in the scenario.

Importantly, the scenario does not replicate a single empirical case. Instead, it represents a generalized and synthesized stimulus that captures core communicative mechanisms identified across multiple qualitative cases. This abstraction reduces case-specific bias while preserving ecological validity, ensuring that the scenario reflects realistic and theoretically grounded crisis dynamics. The scenario was designed to isolate CEO communication as the primary crisis trigger and to activate the key mechanisms identified in the qualitative analysis, including emotional misalignment, responsibility attribution, value discrepancy, visibility, and media framing.

By grounding the scenario in qualitative findings, the study follows a sequential mixed-methods design in which qualitative insights inform the development of the quantitative instrument. This integration strengthens construct validity and ensures that stakeholder responses measured in the survey are reactions to empirically observed communication patterns rather than to hypothetical or artificially constructed assumptions.

3.3.2 Survey Design

The quantitative phase of this study was implemented through a structured online questionnaire administered via the online survey tool LimeSurvey. The survey followed a fixed and standardized sequence reflecting the logic of the experimental stimulus design. To ensure accessibility for a broad participant pool, including older respondents and individuals with limited English proficiency, the questionnaire was offered in both German and English. All items were translated using a meaning-preserving translation procedure to ensure conceptual equivalence across language versions. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Prior to the start of the questionnaire, participants were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that the study focused solely on their personal perceptions and opinions regarding the presented scenario. They were encouraged to respond as honestly and intuitively as possible

The selection and operationalization of survey constructs were guided by the hypotheses derived from the qualitative phase of the study. Although these hypotheses are formally introduced in a subsequent chapter, the questionnaire was explicitly designed to capture the theoretically grounded relationships identified through the qualitative analysis. This procedure follows the logic of a sequential mixed-methods design, in which qualitative findings inform the construction of quantitative instruments and enhance construct validity.

After providing informed consent, participants were introduced to a fictional company, *BetterFood*, described as a European producer of plant-based foods. The company description emphasized core values such as fairness, sustainability, empathy, affordability, and accessibility. This standardized introduction established a shared reference frame and served as the basis for a pre-crisis baseline assessment of organizational perceptions.

Prior to exposure to the crisis scenario, participants completed baseline measures of perceived organizational legitimacy and overall company perception. Legitimacy was measured using a five-item Likert scale adapted from Alexiou (2019, p. 480), while company perception was assessed using a semantic differential scale derived from Spears and Singh’s (2004, p. 60) brand attitude construct. These baseline measurements enabled the attribution of subsequent changes in organizational evaluation to the crisis stimulus rather than to pre-existing attitudes, thereby strengthening internal validity.

Participants were then exposed to the central experimental stimulus, depicting a live television interview in which the CEO of BetterFood displayed emotional detachment, shifted responsibility, and communicated in ways that conflicted with the organization’s stated values. The scenario was theory-driven rather than arbitrarily constructed and was informed by recurring communicative patterns identified in the qualitative phase, including emotional misalignment, responsibility denial, value incongruence, and the reputational consequences of CEO visibility. A minimum exposure time was implemented to ensure sufficient processing of the scenario.

Perceived emotional misalignment was assessed using theory-informed items derived from Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon, 1993), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), and the Emotions as Social Information model (Van Kleef, 2009), capturing deviations between the CEO's emotional expression and situationally expected responses. Responsibility denial was operationalized based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997), and Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), assessing perceived denial, minimization, and externalization of responsibility. Value incongruence was measured using items grounded in Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995), Stakeholder Theory (Freeman & McVea, 2001), and Moral Framing (Snow et al., 2019), capturing perceived discrepancies between the CEO's communication and the organization's publicly articulated values.

Following the scenario, participants evaluated the CEO using several constructs derived from the qualitative analysis, capturing immediate perceptions of the communicative behavior displayed in the crisis situation. These included emotional misalignment, responsibility denial, and perceived value misalignment. In addition, broader evaluative constructs were assessed, including moral condemnation based on Malle's (2021) framework of moral judgment, perceived CEO hypocrisy adapted from Wagner et al.'s (2009, p. 90) corporate hypocrisy construct, and a comprehensive CEO perception scale measuring professional, moral, and communicative qualities adapted from Stravinskienė et al. (2020, p. 248).

Subsequently, participants re-evaluated the company BetterFood using the same legitimacy and overall company perception measures administered at baseline, enabling direct pre–post comparisons of organizational evaluations. Stakeholder withdrawal intentions were then assessed to capture relational distancing, behavioral withdrawal, and loss of support following perceived misconduct. These intentions were measured using theory-informed items derived from Stakeholder Theory (Mitchell et al., 1997), crisis response and corporate misconduct research (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2007), and Moral Judgment Theory (Malle, 2021).

Two additional constructs captured contextual amplifiers of the crisis. Perceived CEO visibility was operationalized based on the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (Kasperson et al., 1988), complemented by research on CEO salience and visibility dynamics (Men & Tsai, 2016; Park & Berger, 2004; Rindova et al., 2006), assessing the perceived reach, public salience, unavoidability, and amplifying impact of the CEO's communication. Media framing perceptions were measured following exposure to a standardized news article and captured personalization, moralization, and scandalization processes. Items were grounded in Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) and personalization and scandal framing research (Bennett, 2012; Iyengar, 1994), assessing selective moralization, personalization of responsibility, and scandalization of the CEO's statements. An overview of all constructs, their theoretical foundations, item wordings, and the final survey instrument is provided in Appendix B.

With the exception of the semantic differential scale used for company perception, all constructs were measured using five-point Likert scales. This choice was made to balance measurement reliability with respondent accessibility. Five-point scales are widely established in communication and psychological research and are particularly suitable for attitudinal constructs. Methodological research suggests that the number of response categories influences task difficulty, as longer scales require respondents to differentiate among a greater number of options and engage in more complex judgment-to-scale mapping processes (Marsden, 2010, pp. 271–272). Increased task difficulty may, in turn, foster satisficing behavior, particularly in longer questionnaires or when respondent motivation and cognitive resources decline (Marsden, 2010, pp. 265–266). At the same time, empirical evidence indicates that reliability gains tend to level off beyond approximately seven response categories (Preston & Colman, 2000, p. 9), suggesting that moderately long scales represent a pragmatic balance between measurement differentiation and respondent burden. The use of a five-point format in the present study follows this logic and additionally preserves the response structure of the originally validated instruments, thereby supporting construct validity. The survey concluded with demographic variables (gender, age, nationality, education, employment status, income, and media consumption habits).

Prior to full data collection, the survey instrument and crisis scenario were pretested with a small convenience sample (n = 5) to assess clarity, linguistic accessibility, and stimulus effectiveness. The pretest revealed that the CEO's communicative misconduct was not sufficiently salient in the German version of the scenario. Consequently, the wording was adjusted to make the responsibility-shifting and emotional detachment more explicit. In addition, explanatory clarifications were added in the German version (e.g., explicitly defining "CEO" as "Geschäftsführer") to ensure comprehension among older participants and respondents with limited familiarity with English business terminology.

The pretest also served to assess completion time, which ranged between approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Based on these insights, minor refinements were made to improve clarity and accessibility without altering the theoretical structure of the scenario or the measured constructs.

3.3.3 Data Preparation and Preliminary Analyses

Before conducting the statistical analyses, the dataset was prepared to ensure data quality and suitability for hypothesis testing. The target population of the quantitative survey consisted of adults aged 18 years and older who are exposed to corporate and media communication in everyday contexts. Participants were recruited via social media, SurveyCircle, as well as personal and professional networks. Data was collected using an online questionnaire between December 11, 2025, and January 12, 2026. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The study aimed to collect between 150 and 200 valid responses to ensure sufficient statistical power. All survey data was

exported from LimeSurvey in SAV format and processed using the software IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29.0.2.0).
A total of 203 questionnaires were fully completed. The dataset was subsequently screened for data quality by identifying incomplete responses, straight-lining patterns, and implausible completion times (less than 10 minutes or more than 30 minutes). Based on these predefined criteria, 22 responses were excluded from further analysis, resulting in a final sample of 172 valid cases. Due to the use of mandatory items in the survey design, missing data occurred only in non-mandatory demographic variables and were handled using listwise deletion.
All constructs were measured using multi-item scales adapted from established measures. Prior to analysis, the internal consistency of all scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. All constructs demonstrated satisfactory to excellent reliability ($\alpha \geq .70$), justifying the aggregation of items into composite variables. Composite scores were calculated by computing mean values across the respective items. Prior to aggregation, items were checked for consistent scale direction, and negatively worded items were reverse-coded.
To examine changes in organizational evaluations rather than static post-crisis perceptions, pre- and post-crisis measures of company perception and perceived corporate legitimacy were collected. Difference scores (delta variables) were computed by subtracting pre-crisis evaluations from post-crisis evaluations. Negative values indicate a deterioration in perceptions, whereas positive values reflect an improvement over time. The use of difference scores allows for a direct assessment of perception changes attributable to the crisis event while controlling for baseline differences in respondents' prior evaluations. This approach is particularly suitable for spillover analyses focusing on reputational change resulting from CEO communication.
Prior to hypothesis testing, several preliminary analyses were conducted to assess the assumptions underlying linear regression and moderation analyses. Linearity between predictors and outcomes was examined through visual inspection of scatterplots, which indicated approximately linear relationships. Homoscedasticity was assessed by inspecting scatterplots of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values, revealing no systematic patterns or heteroscedasticity. The normality of residuals was evaluated using histograms, which indicated approximately normal distributions.
For moderation analyses conducted using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes & Little, 2022), bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was employed. Bootstrapping provides robust confidence intervals that do not rely on normality assumptions and is recommended for testing interaction effects. Overall, the preliminary analyses indicated that the data met the assumptions required for linear regression and moderation analyses, allowing the hypotheses to be tested with confidence.

4 Qualitative Results

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative content analysis across the five cases. The findings are structured along the main analytical categories derived from the coding frame and describe recurring patterns in CEO communication, media framing, and observed perceptual outcomes during crisis episodes. Each category is presented separately to ensure analytical clarity and transparency.

While the categories were analyzed separately for analytical clarity, the data indicates that several categories frequently co-occurred within the same cases and communicative episodes. These recurrent constellations informed the mechanism-based interpretation developed in Chapter 5.

4.1 Attribution of Responsibility

This section presents the results for the first main category, *Attribution of Responsibility*, which captures how CEOs explain, deny, or accept responsibility during crisis situations. As a core dimension of crisis communication, this category focuses on observable patterns in the rhetorical framing of causality, accountability, and blame across the analyzed cases.

The category was highly saturated, with at least one subcategory appearing in all five cases. Responsibility attribution occurred most frequently after the crisis had already unfolded and was particularly visible in official company responses and subsequent CEO interviews. Across cases, CEOs displayed different approaches to handling responsibility, ranging from explicit acceptance to various forms of diffusion or denial.

Three recurrent attribution strategies were identified: strategic denial or deflection (BP, Tesla, Astronomer, Uber), explicit acceptance (Uber, Astronomer) and external attribution (Kelloggs, Uber, BP). These strategies were not mutually exclusive; in several cases, CEOs employed different attribution frames at different moments or across communication channels.

The subcategory *Denial / Deflection* was observed in four of the five cases, with the exception of Kellogg’s. In these instances, CEOs rejected responsibility either through direct blame-shifting or by challenging the legitimacy of criticism. In the BP case, Hayward attributed operational failure to another contractor. Musk, in the Tesla case, used sarcasm and ridicule in public statements to contest critical media coverage. In the Astronomer case, denial appeared in an indirect form: rather than addressing public concerns related to the incident, the company’s FAQ and public communication focused on general information about products and mission statements, without reference to the crisis event, which denied responsibility indirectly.

Clear *Acceptance / Accountability* was observed in two cases, Uber and Astronomer. In the Uber case, Kalanick issued a public apology that included elements of self-reflection. In the Astronomer case, the CEO's resignation occurred without an accompanying verbal statement but represented a visible organizational response to the incident. In both cases, acceptance or accountability became observable at later stages of the crisis, when public scrutiny had intensified.

External attribution was particularly prominent in the Tesla case. Musk repeatedly framed criticism as the result of political bias, media distortion, or broader ideological conflicts, shifting attention away from personal responsibility. A comparable pattern was observed in the Kellogg's case, where CEO Pilnick responded to criticism of his "cereal for dinner" remarks by referring to historical and macroeconomic conditions, such as inflation, rather than directly addressing public outrage. In both cases, responsibility was framed in relation to broader structural or contextual factors.

Across all five cases, attribution of responsibility constituted a central element of CEO crisis communication. Explicit acceptance remained comparatively rare, while symbolic responses, such as resignation, were used to signal accountability in the absence of verbal ownership. External and shared responsibility frames appeared frequently, particularly in politically or economically charged contexts.

4.2 Emotional Tone and Affect

The main category *Emotional Tone and Affect* captures observable affective characteristics in CEO communication during crisis episodes. The analysis focuses on how emotional cues such as empathy, defensiveness, detachment, and related inductively derived subcodes appeared across the cases. Both deductive subcategories (e.g., empathy, defensiveness) and inductive additions (e.g., arrogance/entitlement, vulnerability) were applied.

The category was present in all five cases. Emotional cues varied not only between CEOs but also within individual cases, depending on communication context, audience, and timing.

Empathy was coded infrequently and appeared only in the BP case, primarily at later stages of the crisis. In this case, Hayward stated: "Those words don't represent how I feel about this tragedy, and certainly don't represent the hearts of the people of BP – many of whom live and work in the Gulf – who are doing everything they can to make things right, My first priority is doing all we can to restore the lives of the people of the Gulf region and their families – to restore their lives, not mine". In doing so, he showed compassion and emotional solidarity with affected communities and distanced himself from earlier controversial remarks.

Defensiveness was evident in multiple cases. In the Uber case, Kalanick adopted a confrontational tone during a recorded exchange with a driver, responding defensively and with irritation, as reflected in his statement: “Hold on a second, what have I changed about Black? What have I changed?” In the Tesla case, Elon Musk displayed defensiveness through dismissive language on social media, referring to critics as “NPCs” and ridiculing negative media coverage. Similarly, Hayward appeared defensive and irritated in his interactions with the media following the incident. These examples were coded as defensiveness due to their confrontational tone and their explicit rejection of criticism.

Emotional detachment was evident in four of the five cases. It was particularly visible in the case of BP as well as Kellogg’s. In BP, Hayward’s statement “I’d like my life back” was delivered without reference to the broader environmental and human consequences of the oil spill. In the Kellogg’s case, CEO Pilnick promoted cereal as a dinner option during a period of economic hardship, using an upbeat and promotional tone. In both cases, the absence of explicit emotional engagement with affected stakeholders was coded as emotional detachment.

The inductively derived subcode *Arrogance / Entitlement* appeared most clearly in the Uber and BP cases. In the case of Uber, Kalanick’s statement “That’s kind of how I roll. I make sure every year is a hard year” emphasized personal toughness and ambition. In BP, Hayward’s remark “There’s no one who wants this over more than I do” foregrounded his own situation. These statements were coded as arrogance or entitlement based on their self-referential framing and limited acknowledgment of stakeholder concerns.

The subcode *Humble Transition* was identified in both the Uber and BP cases. Following sustained public criticism, Kalanick (Uber) issued a statement expressing deep remorse, noting that “to say that I am ashamed is an extreme understatement,” which represented a clear shift in tone from his earlier communications. Similarly, Hayward (BP) offered an apology, acknowledging responsibility for his remarks by stating, “I made a hurtful and thoughtless comment on Sunday when I said that I wanted my life back.” In both cases, the individuals demonstrated fallibility, which justified coding these statements as a humble transition.

Explicit expressions of *Vulnerability* were also coded only in the Uber case. Kalanick stated, “I need leadership help and I intend to get it,” introducing a more self-reflective tone than in earlier interactions. Comparable expressions were not observed in other cases.

Across cases, emotional tone constituted a recurring dimension of CEO crisis communication. The results show variation in the presence, timing, and form of emotional cues, with different subcategories appearing at different stages and in different communicative contexts.

4.3 Communicative Strategy (Crisis Response)

This section presents the results for the third main category, *Communicative Strategy*, which captures observable rhetorical response patterns used by CEOs and organizations during crisis situations. The category was informed by concepts derived from Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT). The analyzed subcategories include *Diminishment*, *Justification*, *Rebuilding*, *Corrective Action*, *Bolstering*, and *Attack Accuser*.
Across all five cases, multiple communicative strategies were observed. CEOs and organizations employed different response patterns depending on the communication context and stage of the crisis. The following sections describe the occurrence of each subcategory across cases.

Diminishment was coded in the BP, Kellogg's, and Astronomer cases. In the BP case, Hayward described the environmental impact of the oil spill as "very modest." In the Kellogg's case, Pilnick downplayed criticism of his remarks about cereal as a dinner option by framing them as reflective of existing consumption trends and affordability considerations. In the Astronomer case, the company's FAQ following the kiss-cam incident did not reference the event and instead focused on general information about the organization's activities. In these instances, communicative responses minimized the perceived relevance or scope of the issue without denying its occurrence.

Justification was observed in the Kellogg's, Tesla, and Uber cases. In the Kellogg's case, Pilnick justified his remarks by referring to inflation, affordability, and consumption data, stating that a substantial share of cereal consumption occurred outside breakfast occasions. In the Tesla case, Musk framed his political positioning in relation to broader ideological values, such as meritocracy and freedom. In the Uber case, justification appeared during the exchange between Travis Kalanick and a driver, when Kalanick explained price reductions as a consequence of competitive market conditions. These statements were coded as justification due to their emphasis on contextual explanations for contested actions.

Rebuilding was coded in the Uber and BP cases. In Uber, Kalanick issued a public apology and later resigned from his position. In the BP case, Hayward issued a public apology and the company released multiple official statements addressing the crisis. These actions represented visible organizational attempts to restore trust through apology.

Corrective Action was identified in four cases. In the Uber case, Kalanick publicly acknowledged the need for leadership support. Astronomer initiated an internal investigation and announced the resignation of its CEO. In the Tesla case, Musk issued clarifying statements addressing reports about his political donations. In the BP case, the company communicated ongoing remediation efforts and provided regular updates alongside public apologies. All these served as concrete steps to address the crisis.

Bolstering appeared in several cases. In the Kellogg's case, Pilnick emphasized the long-standing affordability of cereal products. In the Astronomer case, the company highlighted its technological innovation and business mission in public communication following the incident. These responses redirected attention toward organizational values or achievements.
Attack accuser was coded in the Uber and Tesla cases. This code appeared when CEOs discredited those raising concerns. In Uber, Kalanick directly criticized the driver during their recorded exchange. In the Tesla case, Musk publicly dismissed critical media coverage, referring to journalists as "NPCs" and alleging biased reporting.

Across cases, CEOs and organizations employed multiple communicative strategies, sometimes in combination and across different communication channels. The occurrence of these strategies varied by case and context. Interpretation of their implications for crisis escalation and reputational outcomes is addressed in Chapter 5.

4.4 Visibility and Channel Dynamics

This section presents the results for the category *Visibility and Channel Dynamics*, which captures observable patterns related to the visibility of CEO communication and the channels through which it was disseminated. The category focuses on how CEO statements or behaviors appeared in different visibility contexts and how these were subsequently taken up and reframed in media coverage.
The subcategories applied in this section include *Symbolic Exposure* and *Mediated Recontextualization*. At least one of these dynamics was observed in all five cases. *Mediated Recontextualization* and *Symbolic Exposure* were the most frequently coded subcategories, particularly in cases involving viral content or extensive journalistic coverage.

Symbolic Exposure refers to instances in which CEOs became publicly visible through unplanned or symbolically charged moments. In the Uber case, symbolic exposure occurred through dashcam footage showing CEO Travis Kalanick during an argument with a driver. The video captured nonverbal cues such as posture, gestures, and tone. In the Astronomer case, symbolic exposure emerged through a stadium "kiss-cam" clip showing the CEO, Andy Byron, in an intimate situation with a senior executive during a Coldplay concert. The clip circulated widely across social media platforms and news outlets. In the Tesla case, symbolic exposure was more continuous and structurally embedded. Musk's high level of personal visibility, particularly through his social media activity, resulted in frequent public association between his personal statements and the Tesla brand.

Mediated Recontextualization was the most frequently observed dynamic in this category and appeared in four of the five cases. It describes instances where media outlets or commentators reframed CEO statements or behaviors by embedding them in broader narratives or culturally resonant references. In the Kellogg's case, Pilnick's remarks about cereal as a dinner option were recontextualized in media coverage through references to elitism and economic inequality, including headlines such as "Let them eat Corn Flakes." In the Tesla case, media coverage focused extensively on Musk's political statements and reported donation figures, sometimes emphasizing specific numerical values. In the Astronomer case, the kiss-cam footage was repeatedly reframed across outlets, with commentary extending beyond the original event to discussions about workplace relationships and public behavior. Moreover, the inclusion of Gwyneth Paltrow, ex-wife of Coldplay frontman Chris Martin, was interpreted as an ironic PR move, further reframing the scandal from a reputational issue into a culturally satirical event.

Across cases, visibility-related dynamics were closely linked to the format, circulation, and repetition of CEO communication. Visual recordings, viral dissemination, and journalistic reframing occurred across multiple platforms and contributed to sustained attention over time.

4.5 Moral and Value Framing

This section presents the results for the category *Moral and Value Framing*, which captures how CEO communication referenced, affirmed, contradicted, or repositioned moral and organizational values during reputational crises. The category focuses on the explicit and implicit normative cues observable in CEO statements and organizational responses. While the coding framework was informed by concepts from legitimacy, stakeholder, and moral framing literature, the following section describes the empirical patterns identified in the material without theoretical interpretation.
Across the five cases, *Moral and Value Framing* was coded the most, making it one of the more prominent analytical dimensions. Four subcategories were identified: *Value Discrepancy*, *Moral Signaling*, *Value Alignment*, and *Value Realignment*.

Value alignment refers to instances in which CEOs or organizations emphasized consistency between their actions and broadly accepted moral, social, or stakeholder-oriented norms. These statements typically referenced responsibility, ethical conduct, or societal contribution. It was coded in four out of five cases (Uber, Kellogg's, Astronomer, Tesla).
In the Kellogg's case, CEO Pilnick framed the company's actions as aligned with consumer interests, stating: "Retailers are in the business of making sure they do the right thing for their customers." In the Tesla case, Musk referenced national and technological values by stating: "Electric cars, I think are pretty good for the future. America is the leader in electric cars, buy American stuff," linking Tesla's mission to innovation and patriotism. At Uber, Kalanick invoked leadership responsibility

during the crisis aftermath, stating: “My job as your leader is to lead…and that starts with behaving in a way that makes us all proud.” Across cases, value alignment statements appeared primarily in moments of reputational pressure and were typically articulated through references to shared norms or organizational ideals.

Value discrepancy, referring to instances where CEO communication showed inconsistencies between stated organizational values and observed behavior, was the most frequently coded subcategory by coding times but only appeared in three of the five cases. These discrepancies were articulated either directly through executive statements or indirectly through journalistic interpretation.

In the Kellogg’s case, Pilnick’s comment promoting cereal as a dinner option during economic hardship was framed by media outlets as misaligned with the company’s family-oriented and empathetic brand identity. Headlines such as “Let them eat Corn Flakes” juxtaposed the company’s affordability narrative with perceptions of executive detachment. In the Tesla case, Musk’s public endorsement of Donald Trump was frequently framed in contrast to Tesla’s environmental mission. Media coverage and stakeholder reactions emphasized the perceived inconsistency between sustainability-oriented branding and political alignment with a climate-skeptical figure. One corporate client, the German retailer Rossmann, publicly cited this contradiction when suspending Tesla purchases. In the Uber case, Kalanick’s leadership style was described in media coverage as inconsistent with the company’s professed values. One report noted that he could be “empathetic when the mood strikes—or tyrannical when it doesn’t,” highlighting variability between internal experiences and public leadership expectations.

Across cases, value discrepancy codings frequently co-occurred with critical media coverage and stakeholder commentary.

Value realignment captures attempts by organizations or CEOs efforts to reframe or reassert values after criticism. This subcategory was observed infrequently in only two cases.

In the Astronomer case, the company emphasized continuity of its core mission by stating: “We are continuing to do what we do best: helping our customers with their toughest data and AI problems.” This statement shifted attention toward organizational purpose rather than addressing the scandal directly. In the BP case, value realignment appeared in Hayward’s apology, where he distanced himself from earlier remarks and emphasized the efforts of BP employees and the company’s commitment to affected Gulf communities. These statements redirected focus from individual leadership to collective responsibility and remediation.

Moral signaling describes the inductive subcode, that refers to communicative acts in which CEOs emphasized moral responsibility, ethical standards, or virtue-oriented commitments.

In BP's case, moral signaling was present in Hayward's apology, in which he stated: "I apologize, especially to the families of the 11 men who lost their lives in this tragic accident." This statement centered victims and acknowledged loss. Astronomer similarly referenced leadership standards in its official statements, reiterating expectations of accountability and conduct. In the Tesla case, Musk repeatedly emphasized values such as meritocracy and freedom when responding to political criticism. These references framed his actions within broader ideological principles rather than organizational performance considerations.

Across all five cases, moral and value framing constituted a recurring element of CEO communication during crises. Statements emphasizing value alignment and moral signaling were observed alongside frequent instances of value discrepancy. Value realignment appeared rarely and primarily in post-crisis communication. The results show that moral and value references were articulated through both executive statements and mediated framing, forming a consistent dimension of the observed crisis communication patterns.

4.6 Media Framing and Amplification

This section presents the results for the category *Media Framing and Amplification*, which captures how journalistic narratives and media practices framed, contextualized, and disseminated CEO communication during crisis episodes. The category focuses on observable framing patterns in media coverage and public commentary. While the analytical framework was informed by established concepts from framing and media research, the following section reports the empirical coding results without interpretive or evaluative conclusions.

Media Framing and Amplification was the most frequently coded category across all five cases. Six subcategories were identified: *Moralizing Frame*, *Irony / Mockery*, *Intensifying / Mitigating Frame*, *Personalization of Responsibility*, *Contradiction / Discrepancy Frame*, and *Repetition / Viralization*. All cases exhibited multiple forms of media framing activity.

Moralizing Frame was applied when media coverage evaluated CEO behavior using explicit moral or ethical criteria. These framings referenced norms related to leadership, responsibility, and conduct. In the Tesla case, media coverage highlighted Musk's endorsement of Donald Trump alongside prior statements regarding his transgender daughter, framing these elements within broader moral debates. In the Uber case, Kalanick's dismissive interaction with a driver was framed as indicative of leadership culture and executive conduct. Similarly, in the BP case, coverage frequently focused on Hayward's public remarks and described him as a liability for the company. In the Kellogg's case, moralizing framings were evident in public and media commentary criticizing Pilnick's statements about cereal consumption during economic hardship. User reactions on X included statements such as: "Advertising to hungry people that cereal might be good for dinner is not 'meeting people where they are.' It's exploiting the hungry for financial gain."

Across cases, moralizing frames frequently appeared in conjunction with evaluative language and ethical references.

The subcategory *Irony / Mockery* captured sarcastic, humorous, or culturally referential framings that portrayed CEO behavior as absurd, ironic, or worthy of ridicule. This framing pattern was present in all five cases.
In the Astronomer case, ironic framing dominated social media reactions and headlines, including phrases such as “Hard launch of a workplace relationship” and references to Gwyneth Paltrow as a “very temporary spokesperson.” In the Kellogg’s case, ironic framings included the recurring phrase “Let them eat Corn Flakes,” as well as satirical headlines and public commentary. Media coverage in the Uber case highlighted personal details, such as Kalanick’s comments about his Wii Tennis ranking, which were presented as illustrative of immaturity or detachment. In the Tesla case, ironic framing appeared in the form of memes and satirical commentary addressing Musk’s political positioning and public statements.
Irony and mockery were primarily articulated through headlines, social media posts, and quoted public reactions.

Intensifying / Mitigating Frame was applied to media coverage that either emphasized or downplayed the perceived severity of CEO statements or actions. This subcategory appeared in all cases, with intensifying frames occurring more frequently than mitigating ones.
In the BP case, coverage described Hayward’s remark “I want my life back” as part of a broader pattern of problematic communication.
In the Kellogg’s case, media narratives emphasized contrasts between executive wealth and rising consumer prices, including references to a reported 28% increase in cereal prices over four years.
In the Tesla case, reports highlighted the scale of Musk’s financial support for Donald Trump, with outlets emphasizing the amount and frequency of donations.
Instances of mitigating framing were comparatively rare. In the Tesla case, one of the analyzed articles suggested that Musk’s political positioning could broaden electric vehicle appeal among conservative consumers, quoting observers who questioned the relevance of CEO behavior for purchasing decisions.

Personalization of Responsibility was coded when media narratives positioned the CEO as the primary symbolic focus of the crisis rather than the organization as a collective actor. This pattern was observed across all five cases.
In the BP case, media coverage frequently foregrounded Hayward by naming him directly in headlines and framing leadership behavior as central to the crisis. A similar personalization dynamic was evident in Uber-related reporting, where Kalanick’s name and conduct dominated media narratives. In the Tesla case, personalization was particularly pronounced, as Musk was consistently

portrayed as the public embodiment of the organization, with his personal statements and actions closely associated with Tesla's corporate identity. Across cases, personalization manifested through headline construction, visual emphasis, and narrative focus, reinforcing the CEO's role as the central figure in crisis attribution.

The inductively derived subcategory *Contradiction / Discrepancy Frame* captured media emphasis on inconsistencies between CEO statements and observable facts or prior positions.
In the Kellogg's case, articles highlighted discrepancies between affordability rhetoric and reported price increases. In the Tesla case, coverage pointed to contrasts between Musk's previous political positions and his later endorsement of Trump. In the BP case, media juxtaposed Hayward's public assurances with statements acknowledging operational limitations.
These framings frequently relied on comparative references to past statements, financial data, or documented actions.

Repetition / Viralization captured instances in which media coverage intensified through repeated circulation, looping, or viral dissemination.
This was only coded in the Astronomer case, where the kiss-cam video from the Coldplay concert was repeatedly referenced across platforms and formats, including news articles, memes, and social media commentary. This repeated exposure sustained public attention over an extended period.

Across all five cases, media framing constituted a prominent and recurring dimension of crisis communication. The results show that CEO-related crises were accompanied by diverse framing patterns, including moral evaluation, irony, intensification, personalization, and repetition. These frames were articulated through journalistic coverage, headlines, and public commentary, forming a consistent empirical pattern across the analyzed cases.

4.7 Perceptual Outcomes

This section presents the results for the category *Perceptual Outcomes*, which captures observable responses of stakeholders and the public to CEO communication during crisis situations. The category focuses on how CEO-related communication was reflected in evaluations of reputation, legitimacy, credibility, and support. Across the five cases, *Perceptual Outcomes* was coded frequently. The most frequently applied subcategory was *Reputational Consequence*, followed by *Stakeholder Support Loss*, *Legitimacy Erosion* and *Credibility Indicators*.

Reputational Consequence captures explicit references in media and public discourse linking CEO communication to evaluations of the company's image or standing.

Reputational consequences were observed in all five cases. In the Uber case, Kalanick's recorded confrontation with a driver was followed by widespread negative commentary in media coverage. In the Kellogg's case, Pilnick's remarks about cereal consumption during economic hardship prompted extensive critical reactions, including public mockery and questioning of executive credibility. In the Astronomer case, the viral dissemination of the kiss-cam video involving Byron, the CEO, and HR executive generated sustained media attention and a high volume of critical responses on the company's social media channels, after which comment functions were disabled. In the Tesla case, Musk's political statements and endorsement of Donald Trump coincided with public expressions of dissatisfaction, including statements by consumers indicating an intention to avoid purchasing Tesla products. In the BP case, Hayward's public remarks were repeatedly referenced in media coverage discussing the company's reputational challenges following the oil spill.
Across cases, reputational consequences were articulated through headlines, opinion pieces, social media reactions, and public commentary.

The inductively derived subcategory *Stakeholder Support Loss* captures instances in which stakeholders explicitly withdrew support or distanced themselves from the company or CEO.
This pattern was particularly visible in the Tesla case, where consumers publicly stated that they would no longer purchase Tesla vehicles in response to Musk's political communication. Some individuals expressed this distancing through symbolic actions, such as selling anti-Musk merchandise. In the Uber case, expressions of disapproval by stakeholders were articulated directly during the recorded interaction between Kalanick and the driver, including statements questioning the CEO's future prospects. In the BP case, media commentators and analysts publicly called for Hayward's resignation, framing continued leadership as problematic. These instances indicate observable withdrawal or distancing behavior in response to CEO-related communication.

Legitimacy Erosion was coded when media or public discourse explicitly questioned the appropriateness, moral standing, or institutional suitability of the CEO or the organization. This code was observed in all five cases.
In the Tesla case, public commentary increasingly framed Musk's political alignment and dissemination of controversial content as incompatible with Tesla's stated mission and societal role, thereby questioning the appropriateness of his leadership for the organization. In the Kellogg's case, reactions to Pilnick's statements were frequently linked to references to executive compensation and rising product prices, with commentators questioning whether the company's leadership could credibly claim alignment with affordability and consumer concern. In the BP case, Hayward's public assurances were juxtaposed with acknowledgments of operational limitations, prompting media narratives that questioned his suitability to lead the organization during an ongoing crisis. In the Uber case, the circulation of dashcam footage showing Kalanick's interaction with a driver led to a public debate about whether his demeanor and conduct aligned with normative expectations of executive

leadership. In the Astronomer case, online commentary and prediction markets speculated about the CEO's job security and professional credibility, framing his continued leadership as institutionally inappropriate.
Across cases, legitimacy erosion manifested in discourse that challenged leadership fitness, moral alignment, or the organizational credibility of CEOs and their institutions.

Credibility Indicators capture explicit evaluations of the trustworthiness and integrity of CEO communication. Negative credibility assessments appeared in two of the five cases. In the BP case, Hayward's communication was frequently described as inconsistent, with media coverage contrasting public apologies with statements acknowledging limited preparedness. In the Uber case, Kalanick's statements during the dashcam interaction were directly challenged by the driver, highlighting perceived inconsistencies in his reasoning.

Across all five cases, perceptual outcomes were reflected in media coverage and public discourse through recurring references to reputational consequences, stakeholder distancing, legitimacy questioning, and credibility assessments. While the subcategories were analytically distinguished, multiple outcome types frequently appeared within the same cases and communicative episodes.

5 Qualitative Findings and Mechanism Reconstruction

This chapter interprets the qualitative findings presented in Chapter 4. Rather than reiterating category-specific results, its aim is to reconstruct empirically grounded communicative mechanisms through which CEO visibility and discourse contribute to the emergence, escalation, or partial containment of corporate crises. The focus therefore shifts from describing what was communicated to explaining how specific configurations of CEO expression, media amplification, and stakeholder interpretation translated into reputational and legitimacy-related outcomes.

In doing so, this chapter does not constitute a theoretical discussion or an evaluation of existing frameworks. While the interpretations are informed by the theoretical background developed in Chapter 2, explicit theoretical integration is deliberately reserved for the discussion chapter, where qualitative and quantitative findings are jointly interpreted. Chapter 5 thus functions as an analytical bridge between the qualitative analysis and the subsequent quantitative phase.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the six analytical categories derived from the coding frame are synthesized into higher-order mechanisms that capture recurring interaction patterns between CEO communication, mediated amplification, and stakeholder interpretation. Second, these mechanisms are consolidated into recurrent escalation logics that emerge across cases but manifest in different configurations. Third, the chapter outlines how these qualitative insights inform the integrative framework and provide a conceptual foundation for hypothesis development and the subsequent quantitative phase.

5.1 Analytical Abstraction: From Categories to Mechanisms

The qualitative content analysis distinguished between six main analytical dimensions: Attribution of Responsibility, Emotional Tone and Affect, Communicative Strategy, Visibility and Channel Dynamics, Moral and Value Framing, and Perceptual Outcomes. As reported in Chapter 4, these categories capture distinct yet interrelated aspects of CEO-led crisis communication, ranging from expressive cues and response strategies to mediated framing and evaluative consequences.

Considered in isolation, the categories describe *what* CEOs said or did, *how* their communication was amplified and reframed, and *which* perceptual outcomes were articulated in public and media discourse. Interpreted jointly, however, they reveal a dynamic process in which communicative acts, media practices, and stakeholder interpretations interact over time. Building on recurrent co-occurrences observed across cases—such as the frequent alignment of emotionally detached or defensive CEO expressions with moralizing media frames and critical responsibility attributions (see Chapters 4.1, 4.2, 4.6)— the analysis reconstructs a four-stage process underlying CEO-induced crises, reflecting established understandings of sensemaking and mediated amplification as socially structured processes of interpretation (Kasperson et al., 1988; Weick, 1995).

First, in the expressive stage, CEO communication and behavior constitute an initial signal. This includes affective cues (e.g., empathy, detachment, defensiveness), crisis response strategies (e.g., denial, justification, apology), and value positioning. As shown in Chapter 4, emotionally detached or self-referential expressions were common across cases, whereas explicit empathy or vulnerability appeared rarely and often only at later stages.

Second, the amplification stage captures how this initial signal is selectively magnified, reframed, or moralized through mediated processes. Media framing, symbolic exposure through visual material, and journalistic recontextualization play a central role at this stage. The results demonstrate that such amplification dynamics were present in all cases, with mediated recontextualization and personalization of responsibility emerging as particularly salient patterns (see Chapter 4.4 and 4.6).

Third, the sensemaking stage refers to how stakeholders interpret the amplified signal by attributing responsibility, evaluating moral alignment, and negotiating the meaning of the event. Sensemaking is not coded as a standalone category but is analytically reconstructed from recurring patterns in responsibility attribution (Chapter 4.1) as well as moral and value framing (Chapter 4.5), which precede and co-occur with evaluative judgments articulated in public discourse.

Finally, the outcome stage captures the crystallization of these interpretations into relatively stable evaluations, including reputational consequences, stakeholder support loss, and legitimacy erosion. As shown in Chapter 4.7, these outcomes were articulated through calls for leadership change, public distancing, and questioning of executive or organizational appropriateness.

Importantly, the qualitative results indicate that CEO-led crises did not arise from isolated verbal missteps or singular moments of visibility. Rather, they emerged from misaligned constellations across these stages. Emotionally detached or arrogant CEO expressions, when amplified through moralizing or ironic media frames, triggered personal responsibility attributions and perceptions of value discrepancy, which in turn solidified into reputational decline and legitimacy-related concerns. The following sections unpack these recurrent constellations as specific mechanisms of CEO-induced crisis escalation.

5.2 CEO-Induced Crisis Escalation Mechanisms

Building on the synthesis developed in Section 5.1, this section reconstructs central mechanisms through which CEO communication and visibility contribute to crisis escalation across cases.

5.2.1 Emotional Misalignment and Moral Attribution

A first central mechanism concerns the emotional misalignment between CEO communication and the normative expectations of affected publics. Across the analyzed cases, crises were rarely triggered by factual content alone. Instead, escalation was closely linked to the affective stance displayed by CEOs when addressing—or failing to address—situations involving harm, hardship, or controversy.

As shown in Chapter 4.2, explicit expressions of empathy were scarce and appeared predominantly at later stages of the crisis, most notably in the BP case. By contrast, defensiveness, emotional detachment, and the inductively derived subcode arrogance/entitlement were observed frequently across cases and often in early or highly visible communicative moments. In the BP and Kellogg's cases, unemotional, self-centered, or upbeat tones in contexts of environmental disaster or economic hardship were not interpreted as neutral stylistic choices but as violations of situational and moral expectations. Similarly, Kalanick's (Uber) defensive and aggressive interaction with a driver and Musk's (Tesla) mocking responses to critics framed their communicative stance as confrontational rather than accountable.

Interpreted through attribution and legitimacy perspectives, these patterns indicate a shift in evaluative focus. When CEOs employ affective cues that minimize others' suffering or foreground their own position, stakeholders move from assessing managerial competence to judging personal character. Emotional misalignment thus functions as a trigger for moral judgment, as affective cues activate intuitive evaluations of appropriateness and responsibility(Haidt, 2002, pp. 856–857; Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Rather than attributing crisis escalation solely to poor decision-making, observers infer deficits in empathy, humility, or integrity. As evidenced in the qualitative material, such character-based attributions frequently co-occurred with moralizing media frames and responsibility personalization (see Chapters 4.1 and 4.6), thereby intensifying reputational consequences.

This mechanism is further reinforced when emotionally detached or arrogant expressions contradict the organization's publicly articulated values. In these situations, affective misalignment is not considered an individual communicative shortcoming but is reinterpreted as a breach of moral obligation and leadership legitimacy. As a result, emotional cues become a central catalyst through which CEO visibility translates into broader reputational and legitimacy-related challenges.

5.2.2 Responsibility Framing and Symbolic Accountability

A second mechanism concerns how responsibility is constructed in CEO-led crises through what leaders say and what organizations do. Based on the category Attribution of Responsibility (Chapter 4.1), the qualitative results show a clear pattern: across cases, CEOs rarely accepted responsibility explicitly. Instead, early crisis communication was dominated by denial, blame shifting, or references to external circumstances.

At the same time, the analysis shows that responsibility was not communicated through words alone. In several cases, particularly Astronomer and Uber, accountability became visible only at later stages and primarily through symbolic actions, most notably leadership resignation. In these cases, CEOs did not publicly acknowledge wrongdoing. Nevertheless, their resignation was widely interpreted as a response to sustained criticism and growing doubts about leadership legitimacy.

This pattern points to an important distinction between discursive responsibility and symbolic responsibility. Discursive responsibility refers to how CEOs explain or justify a crisis in their communication. Symbolic responsibility refers to visible organizational consequences that signal accountability without explicit verbal ownership (Coombs, 2007, pp. 170–172;; Suchman, 1995, p. 579). Interpreted as a mechanism, this distinction reveals a sequential dynamic. When CEOs deflect

responsibility in their communication, public skepticism and moral pressure tends to grow over time. As criticism intensifies, questions about leadership suitability and organizational legitimacy become more prominent (see Chapter 4.7). Symbolic actions, when they occur, function as threshold responses. They rarely repair reputational damage, but they can interrupt escalating legitimacy disputes by acknowledging responsibility at an institutional level.
External attribution alters this dynamic in important ways. As shown in the Attribution of Responsibility category, framing criticism as politically motivated or systemically biased, as observed in the Tesla case, shifts attention away from personal accountability. Such framings can strengthen identification among value-aligned audiences. At the same time, the qualitative material suggests that they increase polarization and alienate stakeholders who expect clear responsibility. Responsibility framing therefore shapes not only perceptions of culpability but also the boundaries of support and opposition during a crisis.

5.2.3 Visibility and Media Amplification

The qualitative findings indicate that CEO-led crises unfold not simply because leaders make contested statements or engage in questionable behavior, but because such expressions occur under conditions of heightened visibility. Drawing on the categories Visibility and Channel Dynamics (Chapter 4.4) as well as Media Framing and Amplification (Chapter 4.6), the analysis demonstrates that visibility functions as a necessary enabling condition for crisis escalation rather than as a neutral backdrop.
Across cases, two interlinked dynamics consistently structured this process. First, symbolic exposure rendered CEO behavior immediately observable and emotionally legible to broad audiences. As shown in Chapter 4.4, visual recordings such as the Uber dashcam footage and the Astronomer kiss-cam clip transformed situational moments into durable public artifacts. Once detached from their original interactional context, these recordings invited interpretation not as isolated incidents but as symbolic representations of leadership style and organizational culture.
Second, mediated recontextualization translated visibility into meaning. As documented in Chapter 4.6, journalistic coverage and public commentary systematically embedded CEO expressions into culturally resonant frames. In the Kellogg's case, ironic and moralizing narratives such as "Let them eat Corn Flakes" reinterpreted a promotional statement as evidence of elite detachment and social insensitivity. In the Tesla case, selective emphasis on political donations and endorsements reframed CEO communication as ideological positioning incompatible with the company's professed mission. Through such framing practices, visibility was converted into normative evaluation.
Together, these dynamics form a cumulative amplification mechanism. Once CEO behavior becomes symbolically visible, mediated recontextualization almost inevitably follows, as media and publics seek interpretive coherence. In this process, isolated actions are lifted out of their situational meaning and re-inscribed as indicators of deeper moral, cultural, or institutional failure. The frequent co-occurrence of symbolic exposure, moralizing and ironic frames, and personalization of

responsibility across cases (Chapters 4.4 and 4.6) suggests that amplification is not accidental but structurally embedded in contemporary media environments.

Repetition and circulation further stabilize this mechanism. As observed most clearly in the Astronomer case, looping, memeification, and cross-platform repetition reinforced specific interpretations and sustained attention over time. Through these processes, the CEO becomes the personalized focal point of broader societal discontent—whether related to environmental harm, economic inequality, workplace culture, or political polarization. Crisis escalation, in this sense, does not emerge solely from what CEOs say or do, but from how visibility and mediated interpretation jointly transform individual expressions into symbolic evidence of organizational failure.

5.2.4 Value Incongruence and Organizational Legitimacy

The qualitative findings related to Moral and Value Framing indicate that value discrepancy constituted a central escalation dynamic across cases (Chapter 4.5). Crises intensified when CEO communication exposed visible gaps between publicly articulated organizational values and observable executive behavior. Under these conditions, CEO expressions were no longer evaluated as isolated misjudgments but as signals of inconsistency between words and actions.

Empirically, value discrepancies emerged where CEO expressions directly contradicted established organizational narratives. In the Tesla case, Musk's endorsement of a political figure associated with climate skepticism was repeatedly framed as incompatible with Tesla's sustainability-oriented identity. Media and stakeholder reactions emphasized not merely inconsistency but the betrayal of core values. In the Kellogg's case, promoting cereal as a dinner solution during economic hardship was interpreted as hypocritical when juxtaposed with executive compensation levels and corporate pricing practices. Similar patterns appeared in the Uber and BP cases, where leadership behavior was framed as contradicting to their stated commitments to responsibility, fairness, or care.

Importantly, the qualitative material suggests that the escalation potential of value discrepancy was further intensified when these or other inconsistencies were explicitly foregrounded through media framing. As captured by the category *Contradiction / Discrepancy Frame* (Chapter 4.6), media coverage frequently emphasized mismatches between CEO statements and observable facts, past positions, or parallel organizational practices. By repeatedly highlighting these discrepancies, media narratives rendered value discrepancies more salient, durable, and difficult to relativize.

Interpreted as a mechanism, value discrepancy becomes crisis-relevant when it invites interpretations of insincerity, double standards, or strategic value use. As long as inconsistencies can be framed as situational errors or communication failures, stakeholder criticism remains negotiable. Once discrepancies are read as indicative of a gap between proclaimed values and actual priorities, however, trust in the sincerity of organizational messaging erodes. At this stage, stakeholder reactions shift from demands for clarification or correction toward disengagement.

This interpretive shift has direct implications for stakeholder behavior. As shown in Chapter 4.7, interpretations emphasizing insincerity or double standards frequently co-occurred with patterns of stakeholder withdrawal, including expressions of distancing, support loss, and calls for disengagement. Rather than demanding correction or dialogue, stakeholders responded by withdrawing trust, attention, or economic support. Attempts at value alignment or moral signaling under these conditions often proved counterproductive, as they were interpreted as further evidence of symbolic value use rather than genuine commitment.

Value realignment efforts, observed only sporadically across the cases, struggled to counteract this dynamic once discrepancy-based interpretations had stabilized in public discourse. From this perspective, value consistency is not only a normative expectation but a precondition for stakeholder retention. When CEO communication undermines perceived sincerity, crises escalate not primarily through reputational damage, but through behavioral consequences as stakeholders disengage from the organization.

5.2.5 Reputational and Institutional Consequences

The findings summarized under the category Perceptual Outcomes (Chapter 4.7) document a range of observable evaluations and reactions to CEO-related crises, including reputational damage, legitimacy questioning, and stakeholder withdrawal. Building on these empirical patterns, this section interprets how such perceptual outcomes can be understood as the endpoint of the communicative mechanisms reconstructed in the preceding sections.

Across all cases, CEO-related crises were accompanied by reputational repercussions, such as negative media labeling, public mockery, and adverse brand associations. Importantly, the qualitative material indicates that these evaluations did not remain confined to symbolic image assessments. Rather, the inductively derived subcategory Stakeholder Support Loss captures instances in which negative perceptions were followed by concrete behavioral responses, including purchase avoidance, suspension of business relationships, and calls for leadership change.

Interpreted in light of the preceding mechanisms, these patterns suggest that CEO-induced crises escalate when negative evaluations stabilize beyond momentary criticism. A central interpretive mechanism underlying this escalation is a spillover from CEO perception to company perception. While Chapter 4 documents that CEOs were frequently personalized as focal points of criticism, the present analysis integrates these observations by conceptualizing CEOs as symbolic representatives through whom broader organizational evaluations are negotiated.

Under conditions of high visibility and personalization, deficits attributed to the CEO—such as perceived lack of empathy, accountability, or value alignment—can thus be generalized to the organization as a whole. This spillover does not emerge as a discrete empirical finding, but as an interpretive linkage that helps explain why stakeholder reactions increasingly targeted the company rather than remaining focused on individual leadership behavior.

This shift marks a transition from reputational evaluation to legitimacy-related judgment. Whereas reputational damage concerns changes in perceived attractiveness or image, legitimacy judgments address the perceived appropriateness of leadership and organizational conduct within a normative order. The cases suggest that once communicative misalignment was interpreted as indicative of deeper incompatibility with stakeholder expectations, corrective communication lost much of its effectiveness.

At this stage, stakeholder reactions moved beyond critique toward sanctions. Disengagement, withdrawal of support, and demands for leadership change can therefore be interpreted as behavioral responses to perceived organizational misalignment rather than as reactions to isolated communicative failures. In this sense, the qualitative findings support the interpretation that CEO-induced crises become organizational crises when negative CEO perceptions are generalized and stabilized at the company level, prompting stakeholders to withdraw trust, attention, or economic support. This interpretation does not claim empirical proof of spillover but offers a conceptual linkage to be tested in the quantitative phase.

5.3 Escalation Trajectories: A Mechanism-Based Synthesis

Building on the mechanisms reconstructed in Section 5.2, the following synthesis explores how these mechanisms tend to combine into recurrent escalation pathways within the analyzed cases. The aim of this section is not to introduce additional mechanisms or to propose a definitive typology of CEO-led crises. Rather, it offers an interpretative consolidation of observed patterns in order to clarify how different constellations of communicative expression, mediated amplification, and stakeholder interpretation may stabilize escalation in distinct ways.

Importantly, the pathways outlined below do not constitute causal explanations or generalizable crisis types. They represent heuristic reconstructions derived from a limited number of qualitative cases and should therefore be understood as plausible escalation logics suggested by the material, rather than as exhaustive or universally applicable models. Their primary function is to structure the qualitative findings and to prepare the conceptual ground for the subsequent quantitative examination of perceptual spillover effects.

5.3.1 Moralization Trajectories

One recurrent escalation trajectory observed in the material can be described as moralization-centered. In these cases, crisis dynamics appeared to intensify when CEO communication was interpreted through a moral lens, particularly in situations involving social harm, inequality, or vulnerability.

As suggested by the qualitative findings, this trajectory tends to emerge when emotionally misaligned communication and responsibility deflection co-occur with moralizing media frames (see Sections 5.2.1, 5.2.2, and 5.2.3). Under these conditions, CEO expressions were frequently evaluated not primarily in terms of managerial competence, but in relation to perceived ethical adequacy and character. Media narratives and public commentary often reinforced this shift by embedding executive behavior in broader moral discourses.

Within the analyzed cases, once such moralized interpretations stabilized, subsequent corrective communication appeared to have limited capacity to reframe the situation. While this does not imply inevitability, the material suggests that moralization may contribute to escalation by narrowing interpretive flexibility and by encouraging stakeholder responses that extend beyond critique toward distancing or withdrawal.

5.3.2 Personalization Trajectories

A second trajectory evident in the data can be characterized as personalization-centered. Here, escalation appeared to be structured around the fixation of responsibility and meaning onto the individual CEO, who became the primary symbolic reference point of the crisis.

This pathway was most visible in situations where emotionally charged interactions coincided with unplanned visibility and person-focused media framing (Sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.3). In such cases, CEO behavior was frequently interpreted as indicative of underlying leadership traits or organizational culture. The qualitative material suggests that once personalization had stabilized, subsequent apologies or expressions of vulnerability were sometimes acknowledged but rarely sufficient to fully dissolve the individualized framing.

Rather than suggesting a deterministic outcome, these observations indicate that personalization may function as a stabilizing interpretive frame, shaping how stakeholders assign responsibility and evaluate potential crisis responses, including calls for leadership change.

5.3.3 Legitimacy Trajectories

A third escalation trajectory observed across the cases is centered on legitimacy-related boundary judgments. In these instances, crisis escalation appeared to be linked less to explicit moral condemnation or competence assessments and more to questions of institutional appropriateness.

The qualitative material suggests that this trajectory may emerge when highly visible CEO behavior—often nonverbal and weakly contextualized—invites external interpretation, while organizational communication provides limited discursive guidance (Sections 5.2.3 and 5.2.5). Under such conditions, media and public commentary frequently shifted attention from evaluating specific actions to questioning whether continued leadership remained appropriate.

Within the analyzed cases, symbolic responses such as resignation appeared to function as mechanisms for restoring institutional order rather than as acknowledgments of proven wrongdoing. This trajectory highlights how escalation can occur even without explicit statements or articulated value claims, when legitimacy boundaries are perceived as blurred or violated.

5.3.4 Polarization Trajectories

A further escalation trajectory suggested by the qualitative findings can be described as polarization-centered**.** Unlike the other pathways, escalation here did not appear to stabilize around shared evaluations or uniform sanctions. Instead, CEO communication—particularly when ideologically explicit—was interpreted in divergent and often conflicting ways across stakeholder groups.

As indicated by the material, this trajectory tends to involve contradiction- and discrepancy-focused media framing combined with differential stakeholder alignment (Sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.4). Rather than converging toward reputational consensus, public discourse fragmented, with some audiences expressing support or identification while others disengaged or withdrew support.

This pathway suggests that escalation does not necessarily culminate in resolution or closure. Instead, polarization may sustain crisis dynamics over time by producing segmented reputational outcomes and uneven spillover effects at the organizational level.

5.3.5 Implications for Spillover and Stakeholder Response

Taken together, the escalation trajectories outlined above illustrate that CEO-induced crises may follow different stabilization paths, even when similar communicative mechanisms are involved. While Section 5.2 detailed how escalation can be triggered and amplified, the present synthesis highlights how escalation may consolidate around distinct interpretive focal points, such as moral judgment, personalization, legitimacy boundaries, or value polarization.

These trajectories suggest that spillover from CEO perception to organizational evaluation is neither automatic nor uniform but appears to depend on which interpretive frame becomes dominant within public discourse. By articulating these differences, the qualitative analysis provides a structured basis for the quantitative phase of the study, which will examine how specific perceptual dimensions relate to organizational evaluations and stakeholder withdrawal under controlled conditions.

5.4 Implications for Quantitative Operationalization

Finally, the mechanisms and types identified in this chapter provide a conceptual bridge to the quantitative survey phase. The analysis suggests several perceptual dimensions that are both theoretically grounded and empirically salient:

- **Perceived emotional alignment** (empathy vs. detachment; arrogance vs. humility)
- **Perceived responsibility** (acceptance vs. denial/externalization)
- **Perceived value congruence** (alignment vs. discrepancy between CEO behavior and organizational/ societal values)
- **Perceived media amplification and moralization** (degree of perceived exaggeration, moralizing, or ridicule)
- **Evaluative outcomes** (credibility, trust, reputation, legitimacy, and willingness to withdraw support)

These dimensions map directly onto the mechanisms reconstructed in this chapter and can be operationalized as survey constructs. Quantitative testing will allow examination of whether the patterns observed in the case studies generalize to broader stakeholder populations and under which conditions specific combinations of CEO expression and visibility exert particularly strong effects on public perception.

In sum, the qualitative interpretation shows that CEO communication and visibility act as crisis catalysts not in isolation, but through patterned interactions of emotional stance, responsibility framing, mediated amplification, and value (mis)alignment. These mechanisms provide a theoretically and empirically grounded foundation for the subsequent hypothesis development and survey design.

5.5 Hypotheses and Quantitative Research Model

The qualitative phase of this study revealed that CEO-induced corporate crises do not emerge randomly but follow a set of recurring communicative mechanisms that consistently shape stakeholder interpretation and escalation dynamics. These mechanisms informed the development of the hypotheses for the quantitative phase and serve as the conceptual foundation of the research model. By translating empirically observed patterns into testable relationships, the hypotheses bridge qualitative insights and quantitative validation.

Across all qualitative cases, crises intensified when CEOs displayed emotional cues that conflicted with stakeholder expectations, such as defensiveness, detachment, or arrogance in situations that called for empathy and accountability. These emotional signals were not interpreted as stylistic variations but as indicators of character and leadership qualities. Stakeholders inferred negative personal traits from emotionally incongruent communication, leading to unfavorable evaluations of the CEO.

Based on this mechanism, emotional tone functions as a primary crisis catalyst by shaping immediate judgments about the leader. Accordingly, the first hypothesis proposes that perceived emotional misalignment negatively affects CEO evaluation.

H1a: *Emotional misalignment leads to negative CEO perception.*

A second central pattern observed in the qualitative analysis concerns responsibility framing. In most cases, CEOs avoided explicit responsibility, minimized their role, or externalized blame. Such denial strategies consistently triggered moral condemnation, as they violated stakeholder expectations of accountability and moral responsibility. Rather than neutralizing the crisis, responsibility denial was interpreted as a moral failure that intensified outrage and criticism. This mechanism motivates the second hypothesis, which posits a direct relationship between responsibility denial and moral condemnation of the CEO.

H2a: *Responsibility denial increases moral condemnation of the CEO.*

The qualitative findings further show that crises escalated when CEO behavior was perceived as inconsistent with the organization's publicly communicated values. Examples included contradictions between sustainability claims and political endorsements or between affordability narratives and dismissive messaging. Stakeholders interpreted such inconsistencies as hypocrisy rather than isolated mistakes, undermining the CEO's credibility and trustworthiness. This pattern directly informs the third hypothesis, proposing that perceived value discrepancy increases perceptions of CEO hypocrisy.

H3a: *Perceived value discrepancy between CEO behavior and espoused organizational values increases perceptions of* CEO *hypocrisy.*

Beyond individual-level judgments, the qualitative data reveals a consistent spillover effect from CEO perception to organizational outcomes. Negative evaluations of the CEO translated into negative perceptions of the company, erosion of corporate legitimacy, and behavioral withdrawal intentions. This spillover represents the core mechanism through which individual CEO visibility escalates into a full organizational crisis.
Negative CEO perception was found to influence general company perception, while moral condemnation of the CEO undermined the organization's legitimacy. Similarly, perceptions of CEO hypocrisy triggered stakeholder withdrawal responses, such as distancing, reduced support, or boycott intentions. These observations motivate the following hypotheses.

H1b: *Negative CEO perception leads to negative company perception.*

H2b: *CEO moral condemnation increases perceived corporate legitimacy erosion.*

H3b: *Perceived CEO hypocrisy increases stakeholder withdrawal intentions.*

Finally, the qualitative analysis highlights amplification mechanisms that transform individual CEO behavior into symbolic evidence of organizational failure. CEO statements gained crisis relevance not solely because of their content but because of their visibility and subsequent recontextualization through media framing. High visibility increased interpretive reach and emotional intensity, while moralizing and personalized media frames amplified stakeholder reactions.
Importantly, visibility and media framing did not merely transmit CEO communication but actively intensified spillover effects by framing individual behavior as representative of organizational values and competence. These dynamics motivate the final set of hypotheses, which conceptualize visibility and media framing as moderators that strengthen crisis spillover effects.

H4: *The perceived visibility of CEO communication strengthens the spillover effect from negative CEO perception to negative company perception.*

H5: *Media framing moderates the spillover effect from CEO perception to company perception.*

These hypotheses form an integrated research model (see Figure 3) that conceptualizes CEO communication and visibility as catalysts of corporate crises. Emotional misalignment, responsibility denial, and value discrepancy function as primary triggers shaping CEO evaluations. These evaluations spill over to organizational outcomes, including company perception, legitimacy, and stakeholder behavior. Visibility and media framing operate as amplification mechanisms that intensify these effects by increasing interpretive reach and moralization.

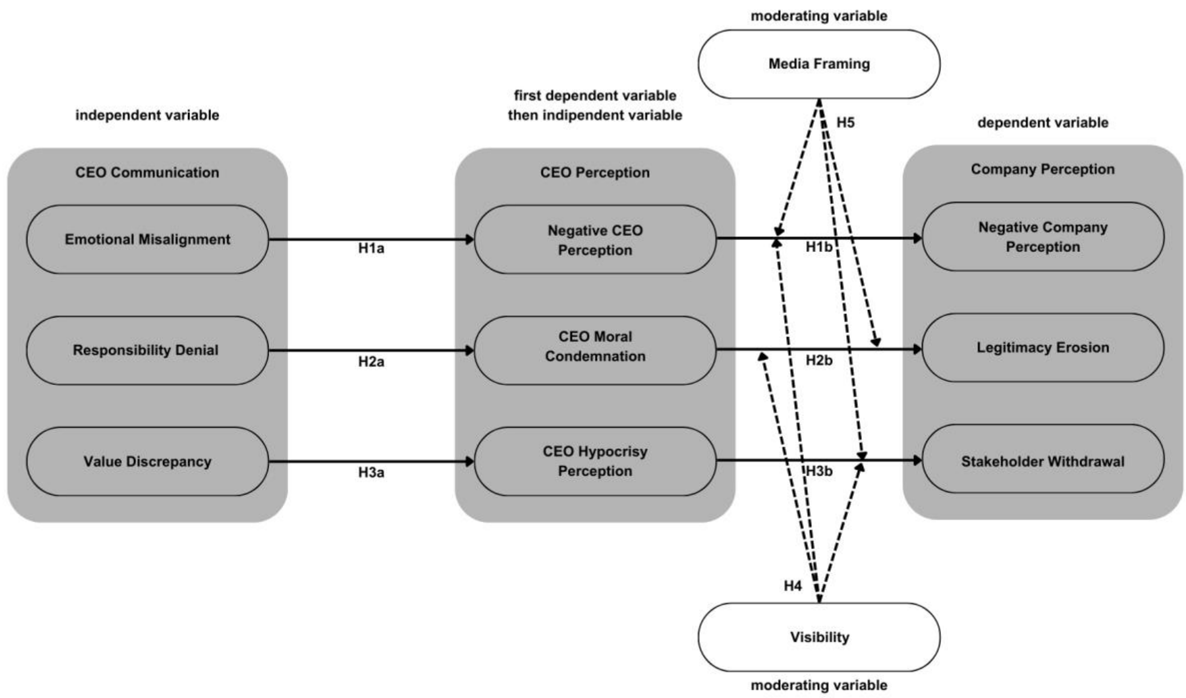

Figure 3: Research model, Own Illustration.

By empirically testing these relationships, the quantitative phase assesses how CEO expression, visibility, and media framing interact to shape public perception and escalate corporate crises, thereby addressing the study's research question.

6 Quantitative Results

6.1 Sample Characteristics

The sample consisted of 172 participants. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 65 years, with the largest proportion being between 25 and 34 years (39.5%, n = 68), followed by those aged 18–24 years (30.8%, n = 53). Further age groups included 35–44 years (15.1%, n = 26), 45–54 years (6.4%, n = 11), 55–64 years (6.4%, n = 11), and 65 years or older (1.7%, n = 3).

Regarding gender, 56.4% of participants identified as female (n = 97), 41.3% as male (n = 71), 0.6% as non-binary (n = 1), and 1.7% preferred not to disclose their gender (n = 3).

Most participants reported having completed a Bachelor's degree (44.2%, n = 76), followed by a Master's degree (15.1%, n = 26). Additionally, 21.5% (n = 37) reported a high school diploma or upper secondary education, and 12.8% (n = 22) had completed vocational training or an apprenticeship. Smaller proportions reported secondary school (lower level) (1.2%, n = 2), no formal education (0.6%, n = 1), or a doctoral degree (1.7%, n = 3). The remaining participants selected other educational qualifications (2.9%, n = 5).

With respect to employment status, 45.3% of the sample were students (n = 78), 40.7% were employed (n = 70), and 8.1% were self-employed or freelancers (n = 14). Smaller groups reported being unemployed (2.3%, n = 4), not in the labor force (e.g., parental leave or homemaker; 2.3%, n = 4), or retired (1.2%, n = 2).

Monthly income varied across participants. The largest group reported an income between €1,000 and €1,999 (27.3%, n = 47), followed by under €1,000 (21.5%, n = 37) and €2,000–€2,999 (16.3%, n = 28). Further income categories included €3,000–€3,999 (11.0%, n = 19), €4,000–€4,999 (3.5%, n = 6), and €5,000 or more (7.0%, n = 12). 13.4% of participants (n = 23) preferred not to disclose their income.

In terms of nationality, the majority of participants were German (n = 139; 80.8%). Other nationalities included Austrian (n = 11; 6.4%), Italian (n = 4; 2.3%), British (n = 3; 1.7%), Swiss (n = 3; 1.7%), and Russian (n = 2; 1.2%). Colombian, Czech, and Indian nationalities were each reported by one participant (0.6% each). Seven participants (4.1%) did not report their nationality.

Given the focus of the present study on media interpretation, participants' media use characteristics were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).

Participants reported frequent use of social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook), with a mean score of M = 4.25 (*SD* = 1.15). More than half of the sample indicated using social media very often (several times per day) (57.6%, n = 99), while 26.2% (n = 45) reported using social media once per day.

Regarding news consumption via television, online news, radio, or newspapers, participants reported moderate to frequent use (*M* = 3.41, *SD* = 1.12). The largest proportion of participants reported consuming news once per day (40.1%, n = 69), followed by very frequent use (several times per day; 15.7%, n = 27). Smaller proportions indicated rare (22.7%, *n* = 39) or no news consumption (4.1%, n = 7).

Overall, the characteristics of the sample indicate a good fit with the defined target population. All participants were adults aged 18 years and older and reported regular media use, suggesting frequent exposure to media and corporate communication in everyday contexts. The demographic composition of the sample therefore provides an appropriate basis for examining processes of media interpretation within an adult population.

6.2 Internal Consistency Analysis

The internal consistency of all multi-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Overall, the results indicate satisfactory to excellent reliability across all scales, suggesting that the items consistently measured their intended constructs.

The CEO communication constructs demonstrated high internal consistency. Emotional misalignment showed very good reliability (α = .893), while responsibility denial (α = .913) and value discrepancy (α = .942) exhibited excellent reliability. Although alpha values above .90 indicate strong internal consistency, such high coefficients may also point to a degree of item redundancy.

Regarding CEO-related perceptions, moral condemnation of the CEO showed excellent reliability (α = .956), and CEO hypocrisy demonstrated very good internal consistency after reverse coding (α = .843). The overall CEO perception scale also yielded excellent reliability (α = .908). As with other constructs exceeding .90, these values suggest highly consistent measurement but may also reflect some overlap in item content.

For company-related outcomes, internal consistency was assessed separately for pre- and post-crisis measures. Company perception showed very good reliability both before (α = .878) and after the crisis (α = .922), while corporate legitimacy demonstrated good reliability prior to the crisis (α = .787) and very good reliability following the crisis (α = .888). Assessing pre- and post-crisis measures separately accounts for potential contextual differences in evaluations.

Stakeholder withdrawal intentions exhibited excellent internal consistency (α = .961), again indicating reliable measurement alongside potential item redundancy. The moderator variables also demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with visibility showing very good internal consistency (α = .889) and media framing showing acceptable to good reliability (α = .768).

Overall, all constructs exceeded the recommended minimum threshold of α = .70, indicating adequate internal consistency and supporting their use in subsequent hypothesis testing. A summary of Cronbach's alpha coefficients and descriptive statistics for all constructs is provided in Appendix C.

6.3 Effects of CEO Communication on CEO Perception

To test H1a, the relationship between emotional misalignment and CEO perception was examined using linear regression analysis. The results indicate that emotional misalignment exerted a strong and highly significant negative effect on CEO perception. An increase of one unit in emotional misalignment corresponded to a decrease of approximately 0.55 points in CEO perception on the five-point scale ($B = -0.549$). Consistent with this finding, higher levels of emotional misalignment were associated with markedly less favorable evaluations of the CEO ($\beta = -0.676$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, the model accounted for 45.3% of the variance in CEO perception (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.453$). Thus, H1a was supported. The regression results are summarized in *Table 2.*

Table 2: Results of linear regression for H1a

Variable	**b**	**β**	**Adjusted R²**	**p**
Emotional Misalignment	-.549	.676	.453	<.001

H2a proposed that denying responsibility would intensify moral condemnation of the CEO. The regression results provide strong support for this assumption. Responsibility denial emerged as a highly significant positive predictor of moral condemnation ($\beta = 0.561$, $p < 0.001$). Substantively, a one-unit increase in responsibility denial was associated with an increase of approximately 0.73 points in moral condemnation on the five-point scale ($B = 0.734$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern indicates that CEOs who deflect responsibility face substantially stronger moral reproaches. The model explained 31.1% of the variance in moral condemnation (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.311$). Hence, H2a was supported. Detailed results are reported in *Table 3.*

Table 3: Results of linear regression for H2a

Variable	**b**	**β**	**Adjusted R²**	**p**
Responsibility denial	0.734	0.561	0.311	<0.001

To examine H3a, a regression analysis was conducted assessing the effect of perceived value discrepancy on CEO hypocrisy. The analysis revealed a pronounced and highly significant association between the two constructs. Specifically, greater discrepancies between espoused values and perceived behavior were linked to stronger perceptions of CEO hypocrisy ($\beta = 0.631$, $p < 0.001$). The unstandardized coefficient shows that a one-unit increase in value discrepancy resulted in an average increase of 0.61 points in perceived hypocrisy ($B = 0.614$, $p < 0.001$). The model demonstrated substantial explanatory power, accounting for 39.5% of the variance in CEO hypocrisy (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.395$). Accordingly, H3a was supported. The full regression output is presented in *Table 4.*

Table 4: Results of linear regression for H3a

Variable	b	β	Adjusted R²	p
Value discrepancy	0.614	0.631	0.395	<0.001

6.4 Spillover Effects from CEO Perception to Company Perception

H1b examined whether evaluations of the CEO spill over to changes in company perception. The regression analysis confirms a strong and highly significant spillover effect. CEO perception significantly predicted changes in company perception ($\beta = 0.631$, $p < 0.001$). In substantive terms, a one-unit decrease in CEO perception was associated with a deterioration of approximately 1.05 points in company perception change scores ($B = 1.052$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, more negative evaluations of the CEO translated into more negative shifts in perceptions of the company. The model explained 39.4% of the variance in changes in company perception (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.394$). These findings, reported in *Table 5,* provide clear support for H1b.

Table 5: Results of linear regression for H1b

Variable	b	β	Adjusted R²	p
CEO Perception	0.614	0.631	0.395	<0.001

H2b addressed the impact of CEO moral condemnation on perceived corporate legitimacy. The regression results indicate a strong negative relationship between these variables. Higher levels of moral condemnation were associated with more pronounced declines in perceived corporate legitimacy ($\beta = -0.673$, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, an increase of one unit in moral condemnation led to an average decrease of approximately 0.67 points in legitimacy change scores ($B = -.666$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting substantial legitimacy erosion. The model accounted for 45.0% of the variance in legitimacy change (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.450$). The results are summarized in *Table 6.* Consequently, H2b was supported.

Table 6: Results of linear regression for H2b

Variable	b	β	Adjusted R²	p
CEO moral condemnation	−0.666	−0.673	0.450	<0.001

Finally, H3b investigated whether perceptions of CEO hypocrisy translate into stakeholder withdrawal intentions. The regression analysis revealed that CEO hypocrisy was a highly significant and positive predictor of withdrawal intentions ($\beta = 0.613$, $p < 0.001$). A one-unit increase in perceived hypocrisy corresponded to an increase of approximately 0.78 points in withdrawal intentions on the five-point scale ($B = 0.780$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that stakeholders are substantially more inclined to disengage when CEOs are perceived as hypocritical. The model explained 37.2% of the variance in withdrawal intentions (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.372$). The full results are presented in *Table 7*, supporting H3b.

Table 7: Results of linear regression for H3b

Variable	**b**	**β**	**Adjusted R²**	**p**
Perceived CEO hypocrisy	0.780	0.613	0.372	<0.001

6.5 Moderating effects on spillover effect

6.5.1 Effects of Perceived Visibility on Spillover Effects

To examine whether perceived visibility moderates spillover effects from CEO-related evaluations to organizational outcomes (H4), a series of moderation analyses was conducted using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes & Little, 2022).

First, the moderating role of perceived visibility was tested for the spillover from CEO perception to changes in company perception. The overall model explained a substantial proportion of variance in changes in company perception ($R^2 = .414$) and was statistically significant, $F(3,168) = 39.62$, $p < .001$. However, the interaction between CEO perception and perceived visibility was not statistically significant ($b = -0.072$, $SE = 0.122$, $p = .558$) and did not account for additional explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .001$, $p = .558$). Bootstrap analyses confirmed this result, as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the interaction term included zero (BootCI [−0.323; 0.118]). These findings indicate that perceived visibility did not moderate the spillover effect from CEO perception to changes in company perception.

Second, the moderating effect of perceived visibility was examined for the spillover from CEO moral condemnation to changes in perceived corporate legitimacy. The overall model accounted for a large proportion of variance in legitimacy change ($R^2 = .520$) and was statistically significant, $F(3,168) = 60.54$, $p < .001$. Nevertheless, the interaction between CEO moral condemnation and perceived visibility was not statistically significant ($b = -0.071$, $SE = 0.066$, $p = .283$) and did not explain additional variance in the outcome ($\Delta R^2 = .003$, $p = .283$). Bootstrap analyses corroborated this finding, as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the interaction term included zero (BootCI [−0.185; 0.030]). Thus, perceived visibility did not moderate the effect of CEO moral condemnation on corporate legitimacy erosion.

Finally, the moderating role of perceived visibility was tested for the spillover from perceived CEO hypocrisy to stakeholder withdrawal intentions. The overall model explained a substantial proportion of variance in withdrawal intentions ($R^2 = .384$) and was statistically significant, $F(3,168) = 34.86$, p

< .001. However, the interaction between CEO hypocrisy and perceived visibility was not statistically significant ($b = 0.037$, $SE = 0.103$, $p = .719$) and did not contribute to an increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .001$, $p = .719$). Bootstrap analyses supported this conclusion, as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the interaction included zero (BootCI [−0.151; 0.290]). Accordingly, perceived visibility did not moderate the effect of CEO hypocrisy on stakeholder withdrawal intentions.

Taken together, the results consistently indicate that perceived visibility did not strengthen spillover effects across any of the examined relationships. Therefore, H4 was rejected.

6.5.2 Effects of Media Framing on Spillover Effect

To examine H5, a series of moderation analyses was conducted using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes & Little, 2022) to assess whether media framing moderates the spillover effects of CEO-related evaluations on organizational outcomes.

First, the moderation model predicting changes in company perception explained a substantial proportion of variance ($R^2 = .413$) and was statistically significant, $F(3,168) = 39.41$, $p < .001$. However, the interaction between CEO perception and media framing was not statistically significant ($b = 0.189$, $SE = 0.170$, $p = .268$) and did not account for a meaningful increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .004$, $p = .268$). Bootstrap analyses supported this conclusion, as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the interaction effect included zero (BootCI [−0.068; 0.500]).

Second, the moderation analysis examining the spillover from CEO moral condemnation to changes in perceived corporate legitimacy yielded a significant overall model, explaining 49.2% of the variance in legitimacy change ($R^2 = .492$), $F(3,168) = 54.17$, $p < .001$. Nevertheless, the interaction between CEO moral condemnation and media framing was not statistically significant ($b = −0.041$, $SE = 0.095$, $p = .663$) and did not contribute additional explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = .001$, $p = .663$). This result was further corroborated by bootstrap analyses, with the 95% bootstrap confidence interval again including zero (BootCI [−0.205; 0.099]).

Finally, the moderation model predicting stakeholder withdrawal intentions also demonstrated a significant overall fit, explaining 38.1% of the variance in withdrawal intentions ($R^2 = .381$), $F(3,168) = 34.40$, $p < .001$. However, the interaction between perceived CEO hypocrisy and media framing was not statistically significant ($b = 0.082$, $SE = 0.127$, $p = .520$) and did not explain additional variance in the outcome ($\Delta R^2 = .002$, $p = .520$). Bootstrap analyses confirmed the absence of a moderation effect, as the corresponding confidence interval included zero (BootCI [−0.112; 0.295]).

Taken together, the results consistently indicate that media framing did not moderate any of the examined spillover relationships. Accordingly, H5 was rejected.

7 Discussion

In the following chapter, the findings are discussed in light of the theoretical foundations developed in Chapter 2. The discussion systematically integrates the qualitative and quantitative results in order to assess how the empirically reconstructed mechanisms relate to existing crisis communication, attributional, and legitimacy frameworks. By revisiting the integrated conceptual model, this chapter evaluates the extent to which CEO communication functions as a catalyst, amplifier, or stabilizer of perception-driven crisis dynamics.

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This thesis examined how CEOs as highly visible public figures can become crisis catalysts for their companies through communicative misalignment and subsequent stakeholder interpretation. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combined a qualitative content analysis to identify recurrent escalation mechanisms with a quantitative scenario-based survey to test perception and spillover effects under varying conditions of visibility and media framing.

The qualitative findings indicate that CEO-induced crisis escalation follows a set of recurrent interpretive mechanisms. Most prominently, stakeholders interpreted emotionally misaligned communication as a signal of moral disregard, which triggered moral judgment and intensified responsibility attributions. In addition, perceived value discrepancies and hypocrisy undermined organizational narratives, while mediated recontextualization transformed communicative cues into broader reputational concerns. In this sense, visibility and media framing shaped the interpretive environment in which CEO communication was evaluated, amplifying its symbolic relevance in public discourse.

The quantitative results corroborate the central role of CEO communication for stakeholder perception. All direct effects hypothesized in H1–H3 were statistically supported, indicating that negative CEO evaluations, moral condemnation, and perceived hypocrisy each exerted significant effects on distinct company-level outcomes. In contrast, the moderation hypotheses (H4 and H5) were not supported, as none of the tested interaction terms reached statistical significance. CEO communicative behavior significantly shaped perceptions of the CEO, including evaluative and moral judgments. These perceptions systematically spilled over to the company level. Negative CEO perception translated into more negative company perception, erosion of moral legitimacy, and increased stakeholder withdrawal intentions. These findings support that CEO-centered evaluations function as a core mechanism through which individual leadership behavior escalates into organizational-level consequences.

However, contrary to expectations derived from the qualitative analysis, perceived visibility and media framing did not statistically moderate the spillover effects from CEO perception to company-level outcomes. While the direct effects hypothesized in the model were largely supported, the moderation hypotheses were not supported. This suggests that the identified escalation mechanisms operate primarily through direct perceptual pathways rather than through linear amplification effects captured by moderation models.

Overall, the findings suggest that CEO-induced crises emerge through the interaction of micro-level interpretive judgments—such as emotional evaluation, responsibility attribution, and value alignment—and broader communicative contexts that shape how such judgments are formed and stabilized. While visibility and framing are qualitatively central to crisis construction, their role appears to be more processual and contextual than incrementally strengthening spillover effects in a quantitative sense.

7.2 CEO Communication and Visibility as Crisis Catalysts

This section addresses the first part of the research question by examining how CEO communication and visibility operate as catalysts in the emergence of corporate crises. The findings indicate that CEO communication does not necessarily constitute the objective origin of disruptive events. Rather, it becomes crisis-relevant through its capacity to activate or intensify stakeholder responses under conditions of heightened visibility. In this sense, CEO communication functions less as a causal trigger than as a symbolic catalyst, shaping how situations are interpreted and how existing issues acquire crisis salience. The following sections unpack this dynamic by examining the underlying interpretive mechanisms and their escalation effects.

7.2.1 Mechanisms of CEO-Induced Crisis Escalation

The mechanisms identified in Chapter 5 indicate that CEO-induced crisis escalation is not primarily driven by informational failure or causal attribution, but by normative interpretation. This section therefore discusses why the qualitatively identified mechanisms (emotional misalignment, responsibility denial, and value discrepancy) possess escalatory potential and what they reveal about the way stakeholders interpret CEO communication. Rather than reiterating the mechanisms themselves, the discussion focuses on their shared interpretive logic and their implications for existing theoretical assumptions.

A first central insight concerns emotional misalignment. Existing crisis and attribution frameworks implicitly treat emotional tone as a secondary or stylistic dimension of communication, subordinate to factual content or responsibility assessment (Coombs, 2007, pp. 165–167; Weiner, 1985, pp. 551, 559–562, 560). The qualitative findings challenge this assumption. Emotional cues were interpreted as immediate signals of moral orientation rather than as communicative embellishments. Emotional distance or perceived lack of empathy was read as indifference toward affected stakeholders, thereby triggering moral evaluation before any substantive interpretation of the situation occurred. From a sensemaking perspective, emotion functions as an interpretive shortcut that helps stakeholders rapidly define “what kind of situation this is” (Weick, 1995, pp. 61–62). The escalatory potential of emotional misalignment thus lies in its normative coding: it violates expectations of situational appropriateness attached to the CEO role. The quantitative results corroborate this logic by suggesting that emotional misalignment systematically leads to negative CEO perception, indicating that this interpretive mechanism is not limited to individual cases but operates as a general perceptual pattern.

A similar normative logic underlies the second mechanism, responsibility denial. Attribution theory conceptualizes responsibility as the outcome of causal analysis, assuming that observers first assess controllability and intent before assigning blame (Weiner, 1985, pp. 551, 560). The qualitative findings contradict this sequencing. Responsibility was not treated as a conclusion drawn from factual assessment but as a role-based expectation imposed on the CEO. Attempts to deflect, relativize, or externalize responsibility were interpreted as moral failure, irrespective of factual culpability. This suggests that responsibility operates less as an analytical category and more as a normative demand in CEO-centered crises. Stakeholders do not primarily ask whether the CEO caused the problem, but whether the CEO behaves in accordance with expectations of leadership and accountability (Suchman, 1995, pp. 574, 579; Ulmer et al., 2023, pp. 124–125). The escalation triggered by responsibility denial therefore stems from a perceived refusal to inhabit the moral obligations of the role. The quantitative finding that responsibility denial increases moral condemnation of the CEO supports this interpretation, suggesting that moral evaluation follows normative expectation rather than causal reasoning.

The third mechanism, value discrepancy, further illustrates how CEO communication is interpreted through a normative lens. When CEO behavior contradicts the organization's publicly articulated values, stakeholders do not perceive this as inconsistency alone but as hypocrisy. This interpretation reflects the symbolic role of the CEO as a personified representative of organizational values (Bendisch et al., 2013, pp. 596–597, 601, 604). Rather than separating individual behavior from organizational identity, stakeholders conflate the two, reading value misalignment as evidence of moral incoherence. From a legitimacy perspective, this directly undermines moral legitimacy, which rests on perceived congruence between actions and normative commitments (Suchman, 1995, pp. 574, 579). The qualitative findings suggest that value discrepancy transforms communicative missteps into character judgments, thereby escalating the situation beyond the initial statement. The quantitative results reinforce this mechanism by demonstrating that perceived value discrepancy increases perceptions of CEO hypocrisy, indicating that such symbolic interpretations systematically shape CEO evaluation.

Looking at these mechanisms, they reveal a common interpretive structure. Emotional misalignment, responsibility denial, and value discrepancy differ in their surface manifestations but converge in their normative implications. All three signal a violation of role-based expectations attached to the CEO position. Stakeholders do not process CEO communication primarily as information to be evaluated for accuracy, but as evidence of character, integrity, and moral orientation. Crisis escalation emerges when communication is interpreted as incompatible with these expectations. In this sense, CEO communication becomes crisis-catalyzing not because it conveys incorrect information, but because it disrupts the moral order through which leadership behavior is evaluated. This interpretation challenges the adequacy of attribution-centered crisis models as primary explanatory frameworks for CEO-induced crises. While attribution processes may follow initial reactions, the findings suggest that escalation is already set in motion through pre-attributional moral judgment. The mechanisms identified in Chapter 5 therefore point to a normatively driven escalation logic in which perception and evaluation precede causal reasoning. The quantitative results support this conclusion by suggesting direct effects of the identified mechanisms on CEO perception without the necessity of complex mediating chains.

Overall the mechanisms discussed in this section suggest that CEO-induced crisis escalation follows a perception-driven logic in which communicative acts acquire relevance through moral evaluation and legitimacy judgments. While the following sections elaborate this logic in greater detail, the key implication at this stage is that escalation emerges from the interaction of perception, attribution, and visibility rather than from isolated communicative errors.

7.2.2 The Role of Visibility, Media Amplification and Media Framing

While the preceding section explained *why* CEO communication becomes crisis-catalyzing, this section examines the communicative conditions under which these mechanisms gain reach, intensity, and persistence. Importantly, visibility, media amplification, and media framing are analytically distinct. They do not constitute escalation mechanisms themselves but condition how interpretive processes unfold and stabilize in the public sphere.

Visibility represents the most basic condition of escalation. Qualitative findings indicate that CEO communication becomes crisis-relevant once it enters a public arena in which it can be collectively observed and evaluated. Visibility determines whether communicative behavior is socially consequential at all. However, visibility does not operate as a linear amplifier that incrementally strengthens escalation effects. Instead, it functions as a structural prerequisite. This interpretation is consistent with research on CEOs as branded public figures whose visibility is largely inherent rather than situational (Bendisch et al., 2013, pp. 596–597, 600). Under such conditions, visibility enables escalation processes without necessarily differentiating cases in a way that produces measurable moderation effects. This helps explain why perceived visibility did not moderate spillover effects in the quantitative analysis (H4), despite its central role in the qualitative material. In the quantitative analysis, none of the interaction terms between CEO perception and perceived visibility reached statistical significance. The same applied to media framing (H5), where no significant moderation effects were detected across the tested outcome variables.

Media amplification forms a second, analytically separate layer. Drawing on the Social Amplification of Risk Framework, amplification refers to processes of repetition, circulation, emotionalization, and decontextualization that increase the salience and persistence of communicative cues (Kasperson et al., 1988, pp. 181–185; Renn et al., 1992, pp. 137, 140). The qualitative findings suggest that

CEO statements were repeatedly reproduced across media environments, often detached from their original situational context. Importantly, amplification did not fundamentally alter the meaning of the communication but intensified its presence and emotional charge. In this sense, amplification explains *how strongly* and *how long* CEO communication remains salient, rather than *how* it is interpreted.

Media framing operates at a different analytical level. Framing concerns the interpretive organization of meaning through selective emphasis, moral evaluation, and personalization (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The qualitative analysis indicates that media coverage foregrounded emotional tone, responsibility cues, and character implications while backgrounding organizational or structural explanations. In line with Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 3,9), CEO communication was embedded into coherent narrative packages that stabilized moral interpretations over time. Framing thus functions as the key interpretive process through which amplified communication is rendered morally meaningful. Crucially, framing does not operate as an independent statistical moderator. Rather, it is the mechanism through which amplification translates visibility into stable moral interpretation. This processual role helps explain why media framing did not emerge as a significant moderator in the quantitative model (H5), despite its qualitative salience.

Taken together, these findings clarify why linear moderation assumptions are ill-suited for capturing escalation dynamics in CEO-induced crises. Visibility enables collective observation, amplification intensifies salience, and framing stabilizes meaning. These processes unfold sequentially and recursively rather than incrementally. As a result, they do not necessarily strengthen spillover relationships in a measurable interaction-based manner, particularly in cross-sectional survey designs. The absence of moderation effects should therefore be interpreted as a theoretical insight rather than as a null finding.

The qualitative analysis further indicates that amplification in CEO-centered crises is strongly actor-focused. Media narratives repeatedly positioned the CEO as the primary interpretive anchor, even when the underlying issue remained ambiguous. This observation refines the Social Amplification of Risk Framework by suggesting that amplification processes can be centered on individual actors rather than on abstract risks. Amplification increases the symbolic weight of the CEO, intensifying CEO-level escalation without uniformly translating into organizational-level consequences.

CEO branding reinforces these dynamics. As discussed in Section 2.1.2, CEOs function as public figures whose identities operate as brands, facilitating personalization and emotional engagement (Bendisch et al., 2013, pp. 596–597, 600, 608). Although celebrity status was not directly measured, the qualitative material suggests that highly visible CEOs were more likely to become focal points of personalized framing. Prior research on celebrity CEOs supports the notion that heightened visibility amplifies moral expectations and emotional involvement (Rindova et al., 2006, pp. 51, 56). However, the present findings indicate that such branding primarily deepens narrative embedding at the CEO level rather than strengthening linear spillover effects at the organizational level.

Social media dynamics further intensify these patterns. As documented in Section 5.2.3, CEO statements circulated rapidly, were repeatedly reframed, and often lost contextual grounding. Within the theoretical framework of social amplification, social media functions as an informal amplification channels that accelerate circulation and emotionalization (Kasperson et al., 2022, pp. 1371–1373; Renn et al., 1992, pp. 137, 140). While these dynamics were not operationalized quantitatively, they help explain why strong qualitative escalation at the CEO level does not necessarily translate into statistically detectable moderation effects. Rather than strengthening spillover relationships, social media amplification reinforces CEO-centered interpretive escalation.

7.2.3 Perception as an Escalation Mechanism

This chapter argues that societal perception of CEO communication constitutes a primary driver of corporate crises rather than merely reacting to communicative missteps. The findings indicate that crises do not emerge solely from objective events or managerial failures but are socially constructed through collective processes of meaning-making. CEO communication becomes crisis-defining when it is interpreted, evaluated, and morally charged by stakeholders. In this sense, perception is not an outcome of escalation but a constitutive mechanism through which escalation unfolds.

This perspective aligns with sensemaking theory, which conceptualizes crises as socially constructed interpretations of ambiguous situations rather than objective states (Weick, 1995, pp. 61–62). Sensemaking emphasizes that actors seek coherence and meaning when faced with uncertainty, particularly under conditions of ambiguity and disruption (Weick, 1995, pp. 61–62). The qualitative findings support this view by suggesting that escalation began not with factual developments but with interpretive reactions to CEO communication. Statements were not assessed primarily for informational accuracy but for what they were perceived to signal about intent, values, and character. Crisis dynamics therefore emerged through interpretation rather than evidence-based evaluation.

Stakeholder expectations play a central role in this process. Stakeholder theory emphasizes that organizational actors are evaluated against normative expectations regarding appropriate behavior, responsibility, and value alignment (Mitchell et al., 1997, pp. 856, 862–863). The qualitative mechanisms identified in Chapter 5—emotional misalignment, responsibility signaling, and value discrepancies—indicate that escalation was triggered when CEO communication was perceived as violating these expectations. Importantly, it was not the content of the message alone but its perceived social appropriateness that generated crisis dynamics. This finding supports the view that crises are constituted when communication deviates from collectively shared role expectations.

Moral evaluation emerged as a particularly powerful driver of escalation. The quantitative results suggest strong effects of CEO communication on moral evaluation, indicating that stakeholders rapidly formed normative judgments in response to CEO statements. Prior research on legitimacy distinguishes moral legitimacy from pragmatic and cognitive forms, emphasizing its normative and value-based foundation (Suchman, 1995, pp. 574, 579). The qualitative findings further indicate that

once moral evaluations were activated, they dominated subsequent interpretation. Contextual explanations and factual clarifications lost relevance. Moral judgments thus functioned not as reflective outcomes but as organizing principles that structured escalation processes.
Media framing plays a crucial but secondary role in this dynamic. Framing theory conceptualizes frames as interpretive schemata that shape how issues are understood by emphasizing certain aspects over others (Entman, 1993, p. 52; Snow et al., 2019, pp. 393, 396). The findings indicate that media framing did not initiate crisis perception but stabilized and amplified existing interpretations. Media coverage reproduced and reinforced moral frames that had already emerged through societal perception. This supports research suggesting that framing operates as a mechanism of meaning stabilization rather than primary sense creation (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, pp. 3, 9).
The blurring of person and role further amplifies perception-based crises. Research on CEOs as public figures highlights that leadership roles increasingly involve symbolic representation beyond formal organizational boundaries (Bendisch et al., 2013, pp. 596–597, 600). The findings suggest that stakeholders rarely distinguished between the CEO as an individual and the CEO as a role occupant. CEO communication was interpreted as a direct indicator of character, values, and moral orientation. Prior work on celebrity CEOs suggests that heightened visibility intensifies personalization and moral scrutiny (Rindova et al., 2006, pp. 51, 56). This personalization accelerates escalation because perceived shortcomings are attributed to enduring traits rather than situational factors.

Taken together, these findings indicate that societal perception is not a downstream effect of crisis escalation but its central mechanism. CEO communication becomes crisis-defining when it is interpreted as morally inappropriate, expectation-violating, and representative of deeper value conflicts. Media framing stabilizes these interpretations, while amplification processes extend their reach (Kasperson et al., 2022, pp. 1371–1373; Snow et al., 2019, pp. 393, 396, 403). In relation to the research question, the findings suggest that CEO communication serves as a crisis catalyst because societal perception transforms communicative acts into morally charged signals that constitute and sustain crisis dynamics. Crisis escalation thus originates less in what CEOs say than in how their communication is socially perceived and collectively interpreted.

7.3 Impact on Company Perception

This section examines how CEO-level evaluations translate into organizational outcomes based on the quantitative findings of this study. Rather than indicating a uniform reputational transfer, the results reveal differentiated perception pathways through which executive communication affects company-level evaluations. Specifically, changes in general company perception, erosion of moral legitimacy, and stakeholder withdrawal intentions emerge as distinct outcomes linked to qualitatively different CEO-level judgments. Together, these findings demonstrate that CEO-induced crises unfold through multiple, judgment-specific spillover mechanisms rather than through a single reputational cascade.

Across all quantitative spillover relationships, a common interpretive logic becomes visible. Stakeholders do not evaluate organizations solely based on objective wrongdoing or material consequences. Instead, the results suggest that organizational judgments are shaped by normative inferences drawn from the continued symbolic representation of the company by a CEO who has displayed norm-violating communication. Such spillover thus appears to be driven less by causal responsibility attribution and more by perceptions of organizational tolerance, endorsement, or failure to intervene. From a stakeholder perspective, the CEO functions as a symbolic representative of organizational values, making leadership behavior a salient cue for evaluating the organization itself (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 856).

The spillover from negative CEO perception to negative company perception (H1b) reflects an evaluative generalization process. The regression analysis revealed a significant direct effect of overall CEO evaluation on change in company perception, independent of moral condemnation and perceived hypocrisy. This indicates that stakeholders extend their global assessment of the CEO to the organization without necessarily invoking moral condemnation or relational disengagement. While attribution theory helps explain how evaluations of salient actors are generalized to associated entities (Weiner, 1985, pp. 559–562), the present findings suggest that this evaluative spillover is embedded within a broader normative context. Organizations are not judged merely because CEOs perform poorly, but because of the inference stakeholders draw from leadership behavior about organizational standards and representation.

A qualitatively different spillover pathway emerges for moral condemnation. The quantitative results show that moral condemnation of the CEO uniquely predicts erosion of perceived corporate moral legitimacy (H2b). Importantly, legitimacy was operationalized exclusively as moral legitimacy, capturing judgments of normative appropriateness rather than effectiveness or comprehensibility. In line with Suchman's (1995, pp. 577–579) conceptualization of moral legitimacy, these findings indicate that when CEO behavior is morally condemned, stakeholders begin to question whether the organization itself remains normatively acceptable—even in the absence of organizational misconduct. The organization is thus evaluated not for what it has done, but for whom it allows to speak and act on its behalf.

This pattern refines legitimacy theory in two important ways. First, it demonstrates empirically that moral legitimacy erosion can be triggered by symbolic leadership behavior rather than by organizational actions. Second, it indicates that legitimacy erosion is selective rather than comprehensive. Because pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy were not measured in this research, no claims can be made regarding their short-term stability. It is plausible that these dimensions remain relatively intact during acute CEO-induced crises, thereby providing a stabilizing counterweight while moral legitimacy becomes vulnerable. This differentiation helps explain why CEO-centered controversies do not automatically result in full organizational delegitimization.

A third spillover mechanism concerns perceived CEO hypocrisy and stakeholder withdrawal (H3b). The quantitative findings indicate that perceived hypocrisy predicts stakeholder withdrawal intentions while remaining unrelated to changes in moral legitimacy. Unlike moral condemnation, hypocrisy does not translate into legitimacy erosion but instead triggers relational distancing. This result aligns with research on corporate hypocrisy, which conceptualizes hypocrisy as a violation of perceived integrity that undermines willingness to maintain relationships rather than prompting broader moral judgments (Wagner et al., 2009, pp. 79–81). Stakeholders respond by withdrawing support, reducing engagement, or disengaging altogether. This distinction is theoretically significant, as it demonstrates empirically that moral evaluation and relational response constitute separate pathways of crisis escalation.

Comparing these three spillover mechanisms reveals a central quantitative insight of this study. Negative CEO perception affects general company perception through evaluative generalization. Moral condemnation challenges organizational moral legitimacy by activating normative judgments. Perceived hypocrisy undermines relational bonds and motivates withdrawal without necessarily invoking legitimacy concerns. These differentiated pathways indicate that spillover effects are not driven by intensity alone but by the qualitative nature of CEO-level judgments. Rather than forming a single reputational cascade, CEO-induced crises unfold through judgment-specific perception mechanisms.

The absence of significant moderation effects for visibility and media framing (H4 and H5) further underscores this selectivity. While qualitative findings highlight the importance of visibility and framing for meaning construction, the quantitative results indicate that these factors do not linearly strengthen the spillover from CEO perception to organizational outcomes. This does not contradict framing theory or the Social Amplification of Risk Framework—both emphasizing dynamic and recursive meaning-making processes (Entman, 1993, p. 52; Kasperson et al., 1988, pp. 182–184). Instead, the findings suggest a boundary condition of the quantitative model: whereas process-oriented theories describe how meaning circulates over time, moderation analyses capture static interaction effects. Visibility thus appears to function less as a linear amplifier and more as a structural condition enabling moralized perception.

Taken together, the quantitative findings position changes in company perception, moral legitimacy erosion, and stakeholder withdrawal as interconnected yet distinct dimensions of company public perception. Company perception reflects evaluative assessment, moral legitimacy erosion captures normative judgment, and stakeholder withdrawal represents relational consequence. While constructs such as trust, credibility, and reputation were not directly measured in this thesis, these outcomes can be understood as moments of perceptual vulnerability that destabilize the normative and relational foundations upon which longer-term organizational evaluations depend.

In relation to the research question, the quantitative results demonstrate that CEO-induced crises affect company public perception through differentiated spillover mechanisms grounded in stakeholder inference. Organizations are not judged simply because their CEOs perform poorly, but because stakeholders interpret leadership behavior as indicative of organizational values, responsibility, and integrity. By empirically disentangling evaluative, moral, and relational spillover pathways, this study advances attributional, stakeholder-based, and legitimacy perspectives and underscores the need for more differentiated models of crisis escalation that account for the symbolic and normative role of CEOs in shaping organizational perception.

7.4 Discussion of the Integrated Framework

This chapter critically reassesses the integrated framework developed in Chapter 2.5 in light of the empirical findings. Rather than proposing a new model, the discussion explains why the original process-oriented structure requires reinterpretation and why a perception-centered reading better captures the dynamics of CEO-induced crisis escalation observed in this study.

The integrated framework was originally designed as a process model to synthesize insights from crisis communication, attribution theory, and legitimacy research. These literatures commonly conceptualize crises as sequences in which triggering events are followed by interpretation, evaluation, and organizational consequences (Coombs, 2007, pp. 165–167; Suchman, 1995, pp. 574, 577; Weiner, 1985, pp. 551, 560). Within this logic, CEO communication was positioned as a catalyst that initiates sensemaking processes, which then shape perceptions and subsequent escalation. From a theoretical standpoint, this structure was coherent and well aligned with established models that emphasize temporal ordering and escalation stages.

The empirical findings largely validate the core components of the framework. Both qualitative and quantitative results support the central role of CEO communication, the importance of stakeholder sensemaking, and the relevance of moral evaluation for crisis escalation. Emotional misalignment, responsibility denial, and value discrepancy emerged as consistent mechanisms through which CEO behavior triggered negative evaluations. At the organizational level, differentiated spillover effects on company perception, moral legitimacy, and stakeholder withdrawal further support the framework's assumption that individual-level judgments can translate into broader organizational consequences. These results indicate that the building blocks of the integrated framework are empirically robust.

At the same time, the findings reveal a tension with the framework's implicit linear escalation logic. The data suggests that perception does not emerge as a downstream outcome that follows interpretation and evaluation. Instead, perception operates at the very core of escalation. Stakeholders do not first neutrally process CEO communication and then form judgments; rather, communication is immediately interpreted through moral and normative lenses. Moral condemnation and evaluative judgments arise at the moment of reception, not at the end of a sequential process. This challenges linear assumptions that separate communication, perception, and crisis as temporally distinct stages.

This tension becomes particularly evident when considering the feedback loop included in the original framework. Conceptually, the loop reflected the idea that crisis dynamics may be self-reinforcing, as heightened attention and altered expectations shape future interpretations. However, the present study does not provide empirical evidence for recursive feedback dynamics in a strict sense. The design captures acute reactions to a single communicative episode rather than iterative communication cycles or changing expectations over time. There are no longitudinal data, repeated exposures, or measurements of expectation shifts that would allow for strong claims about feedback processes. As such, emphasizing a feedback loop would exceed what the data can support.

Rather than supporting a recursive or linear escalation model, the findings point toward a perception-centered logic of crisis escalation. Perception is not simply influenced by communication; it constitutes the crisis itself. CEO communication becomes crisis-relevant only insofar as it is interpreted as normatively problematic, emotionally inappropriate, or value-incongruent. Stakeholder sensemaking, attribution of intent, and moral evaluation are not intermediate steps but the mechanisms through which escalation unfolds. This interpretation aligns with sensemaking perspectives that conceptualize crises as socially constructed through shared interpretations rather than as objective sequences of events (Weick, 1995, pp. 61–62).

From this perspective, visibility and media amplification require reinterpretation within the framework. The original model conceptualized these elements as moderators expected to intensify escalation dynamics. Empirically, however, none of the interaction effects hypothesized in H4 and H5 reached statistical significance, indicating that visibility and media framing did not strengthen the spillover relationships in a linear manner. At the same time, the quantitative analysis revealed consistently strong direct perception pathways. Together, these findings suggest that crisis escalation unfolds primarily through perception-centered mechanisms rather than through staged amplification processes captured by moderation logic. Visibility therefore appears less as a variable that increases effect strength and more as a structural condition that renders perception socially consequential. This interpretation aligns with framing theory and the Social Amplification of Risk Framework, which emphasize meaning transformation and symbolic loading rather than additive causal intensification (Entman, 1993, p. 52; Kasperson et al., 1988, pp. 181–183).

These insights justify a reinterpretation of the integrated framework toward a perception-centered structure. In this reading, stakeholder perception and sensemaking occupy the analytical core. CEO communication feeds into this core as symbolic input, while visibility and amplification shape the interpretive environment. Organizational outcomes such as moral legitimacy erosion, negative company perception, and stakeholder withdrawal emerge as differentiated consequences of how communication is perceived and evaluated. This does not alter the framework's elements but reorders their analytical importance.

Figure 4 illustrates this perception-centered interpretation. CEO communicative behavior is conceptualized as a communicative signal that feeds into stakeholder perception and sensemaking, which constitute the core of crisis construction. Visibility and amplification frame this process as contextual conditions shaping interpretation rather than as linear moderators. Negative company perception, moral legitimacy erosion, and stakeholder withdrawal emerge as differentiated evaluative, normative, and relational consequences of perceptual sensemaking.

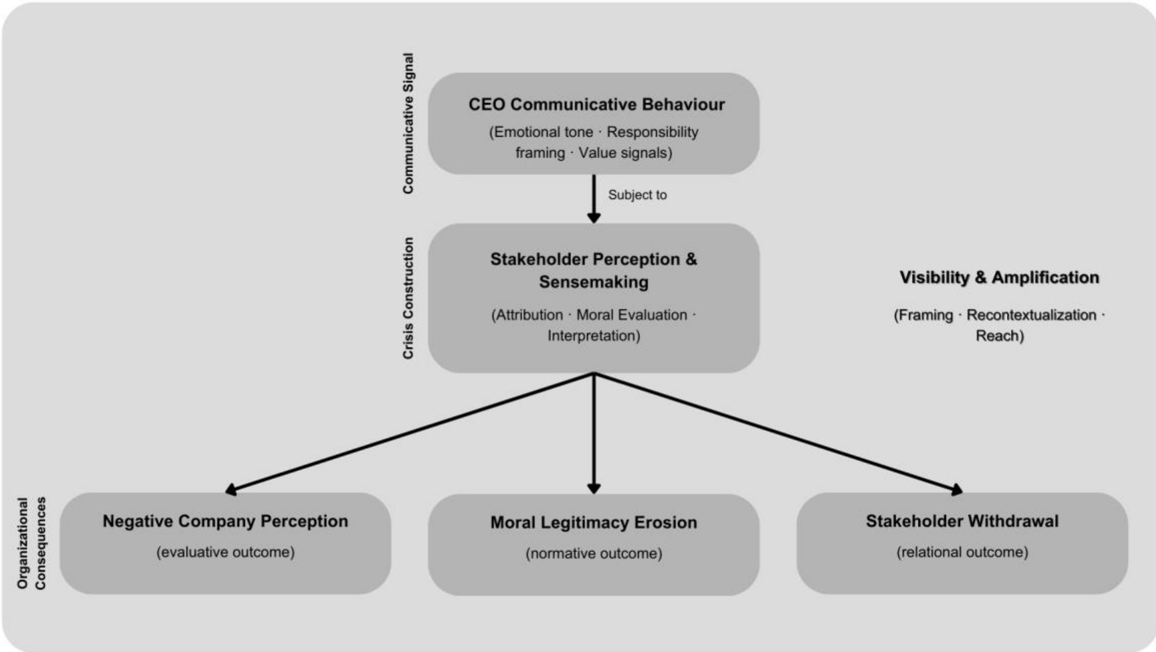

Figure 4: Perception-Centered Interpretation of the Integrated Framework, Own Illustration.

Importantly, this reinterpretation also clarifies the scope of the framework. It explains acute escalation dynamics in CEO-induced crises, particularly those driven by symbolic leadership behavior and moral evaluation. It does not claim to account for long-term reputation development, organizational learning, or governance responses.

In sum, the integrated framework remains valid in its foundational logic but requires a shift away from linear or feedback-based interpretations. CEO-induced crises emerge when communication is perceived as normatively problematic within a visible and amplified interpretive context. By making this shift explicit, the framework better reflects the empirical dynamics observed in this study and offers a more precise conceptualization of how CEO communication can catalyze organizational crises.

The central theoretical contribution of this thesis lies in reconceptualizing CEO-induced crises as moral legitimacy breakdowns rather than primarily as failures of strategic crisis communication. By integrating leadership communication, attribution theory, legitimacy research, and social amplification perspectives, this study clearly demonstrates how executive visibility transforms CEOs into symbolic moral agents whose communicative expressions function as high-salience signals within public meaning-making processes. The findings suggest that reputational escalation emerges less from informational deficits than from perceived misalignment between executive expression and stakeholder value expectations. In this sense, CEO communication operates not merely as a managerial tool but as a constitutive element of organizational legitimacy. This perception-centered perspective extends existing crisis communication frameworks by foregrounding expressive leadership behavior and moral interpretation as primary drivers of crisis emergence and organizational spillover.

7.6 Practical Implications

The findings of this study imply that executive communication must be treated as a structurally sensitive component of reputation management rather than as an operational extension of organizational messaging. For corporate communication practice, this necessitates a shift from predominantly reactive crisis response strategies toward a proactive, perception-oriented approach. More precisely, communication departments should systematically assess emotional tone, symbolic alignment with corporate values, and potential attribution effects prior to CEO appearances or public statements, recognizing that executive communication operates within morally charged interpretive environments.

Crisis preparedness should therefore encompass scenario-based risk evaluations that explicitly consider how executive visibility and moral interpretation may amplify reputational consequences. This requires close coordination between communication professionals and executive leadership, particularly in ambiguous or emotionally charged situations. Moreover, organizations should establish clear internal protocols for executive messaging in high-exposure contexts, acknowledging that even minor communicative deviations can trigger disproportionate reputational effects once reframed through media narratives.

At the executive level, the results underscore that CEOs are rarely evaluated solely on informational performance. Instead, stakeholders interpret executive communication as an indicator of values, integrity, and responsibility. CEOs should therefore approach public communication with heightened reflexivity regarding emotional expression and contextual sensitivity, as perceived detachment or lack of empathy can rapidly shift stakeholder evaluation toward moral judgment and accelerate reputational escalation.

High-visibility executives must also recognize that responsibility attribution tends to personalize organizational crises. Statements are likely to be interpreted as reflections of leadership character rather than isolated communicative acts, making strategic restraint and alignment with organizational values critical components of effective executive communication. Importantly, spontaneous or uncoordinated communication in digitally saturated environments should be avoided. CEOs should treat communication professionals as strategic partners and integrate communicative risk awareness into leadership decision-making processes, acknowledging their role as central symbolic actors whose communication actively shapes organizational legitimacy.

7.7 Limitations and Future Research

The study's limitations largely stem from intentional design choices aimed at isolating CEO-induced, perception-driven mechanisms of crisis escalation. For one, the findings primarily apply to symbolically driven crises in which executive communication triggers moral evaluation and reputational dynamics, rather than to event-driven crises involving material harm or operational failure. Future research could compare these crisis types to examine whether perception-centered escalation mechanisms operate similarly when tangible consequences are more salient.

The quantitative phase employed a vignette-based, cross-sectional survey design using a single synthesized crisis scenario. While this approach ensured high internal validity and enabled isolation of key perception mechanisms, it necessarily abstracts from the complexity of real-world crisis environments, including competing media narratives, organizational counter-communication, and evolving stakeholder reactions. Longitudinal and multi-scenario experimental designs would allow future studies to capture temporal dynamics, recursive feedback processes, and recovery trajectories more comprehensively.

The sample was predominantly German and skewed toward younger participants, which may influence normative expectations regarding leadership behavior, emotional expression, and responsibility. Although this does not undermine the identified mechanisms, it may affect their relative intensity. Cross-cultural and age-comparative research could assess the broader generalizability of perception-centered escalation dynamics.

Methodologically, the use of a fictitious CEO and organization represents both a limitation and a strength. While it excludes the influence of prior reputation and familiarity, it enables controlled examination of perception processes without confounding effects. Future research could explicitly incorporate pre-existing attitudes by comparing fictitious and real organizations or manipulating CEO familiarity and reputational history.

The quantitative analysis focused selectively on moral legitimacy, while pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy, as well as trust and reputation, were treated as theoretically relevant background constructs rather than direct empirical outcomes. Subsequent studies could therefore adopt multidimensional legitimacy frameworks and integrate trust and reputation measures to examine longer-term organizational consequences.

The qualitative cases exclusively involved large, highly visible corporations, where CEO communication is embedded in dense media ecosystems and characterized by strong symbolic CEO–organization coupling. Consequently, the identified mechanisms primarily reflect escalation processes under conditions of high executive visibility. Future research could extend this perspective to smaller or less publicly exposed organizations, where leadership communication may unfold through different channels and amplification dynamics may be less pronounced.

Although visibility and media framing emerged as central qualitative mechanisms, they did not function as linear moderators in the quantitative model, suggesting that amplification processes may operate in non-linear or context-dependent ways that are difficult to capture in cross-sectional surveys. Combining experimental designs with media content analysis or computational approaches may provide deeper insight into these dynamics.

Another limitation of the qualitative design lies in the selective inclusion of social media content. While CEO statements published on platforms such as X were analyzed as primary communication acts, user-generated audience reactions were not systematically examined. This analytical focus enhances conceptual clarity but restricts insights into interactive meaning-making processes and platform-specific amplification dynamics. Consequently, conclusions regarding social media escalation mechanisms remain theoretically informed rather than empirically grounded.

Finally, this study adopts a social constructivist perspective that conceptualizes crises and legitimacy as outcomes of collective interpretation rather than objective organizational states. The quantitative findings therefore represent patterned associations in stakeholder perception rather than causal effects. Moreover, the framework reflects predominantly Western normative assumptions regarding executive accountability, transparency, and moral responsibility, which may limit transferability to alternative cultural and institutional contexts. Future research could extend this perspective through cross-cultural comparative designs. Examining the framework in contexts with differing leadership norms, such as varying levels of individualism or power distance, would clarify whether the identified perception-centered escalation mechanisms are culturally universal or context-dependent. Applying the model in non-Western settings may further reveal how culturally embedded expectations of authority, emotional expression, and responsibility shape stakeholder evaluations of CEO communication.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a focused and theoretically grounded contribution by isolating perception as a constitutive mechanism of CEO-induced crisis escalation. By clarifying how executive communication becomes morally salient and spills over into organizational evaluation, the findings provide a foundation for future research on leadership visibility, legitimacy formation, and contemporary crisis dynamics.

8 Conclusion

This thesis aims to address the research question of how CEO communication and visibility can serve as catalysts for corporate crises and influence a company's public perception. By integrating a qualitative case analysis with a scenario-based quantitative study, the findings demonstrate that executive communication becomes crisis-relevant when it is publicly interpreted through moral, emotional, and symbolic lenses. Rather than functioning solely as a strategic response to crises or information transmission, CEO communication and visibility actively shape attribution processes and legitimacy judgments, thereby influencing how corporate crises emerge, escalate, and affect organizational reputation in highly mediated environments.

The central contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of CEOs as moralized public figures whose communication is evaluated not only in informational terms but through normative and affective lenses. By combining attribution theory, moral evaluation, and social amplification dynamics, this research advances a perception-centered understanding of crisis escalation that complements existing organizational crisis communication models. Rather than treating crises as predefined events, the findings suggest that crises may be communicatively constituted through the interaction of executive visibility, moral judgment, and mediated amplification. This perspective shifts analytical attention from crisis response effectiveness to the communicative conditions under which crises are socially constructed.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results challenge the temporal logic of established crisis communication frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which primarily focus on response strategies after responsibility has been attributed. The present findings indicate that attribution and moral evaluation can be shaped prior to any deliberate crisis response, particularly when executive communication is perceived as emotionally incongruent or symbolically misaligned with stakeholder expectations. By foregrounding leadership communication and perception dynamics, this thesis contributes to a more actor-centered and process-oriented understanding of crisis escalation in contemporary corporate communication research.

Beyond theoretical implications, the findings also carry important practical relevance. They highlight that CEO communication cannot be regarded as a neutral extension of organizational messaging, especially in contexts characterized by heightened visibility and media saturation. Executive statements are subject to moral interpretation and amplification, rendering emotional tone, symbolic alignment, and contextual sensitivity critical factors in crisis prevention. Organizations are therefore advised to recognize that reputational risk does not originate solely from external events but may emerge from how executive communication is perceived and recontextualized within public discourse.

Despite these theoretical and practical contributions, the study is subject to limitations that open avenues for future research. While CEO statements published on social media platforms were included as primary sources of executive communication, user-generated audience discourse on social media was not systematically analyzed. Audience perceptions were instead examined through a controlled, scenario-based survey design. Future research could extend the present findings by incorporating large-scale analyses of naturally occurring social media interactions or longitudinal designs that capture crisis dynamics in real time. Such approaches would further enhance understanding of how executive communication interacts with evolving public perceptions in digitally saturated communication environments.

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Appendix

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Qualitative Phase

Appendix A1: Overview of CEO Crisis Cases

This appendix provides an overview of the five CEO-centered crisis cases included in the qualitative analysis. Some cases were triggered by explicit verbal communication in which CEOs directly addressed organizational issues, crisis situations, or stakeholder relations. In these instances, the analytical focus lies on verbal message design, emotional tone, framing, and responsibility attribution.

Other cases were initiated through nonverbal, symbolic, or behavior-based actions rather than explicit verbal statements. In these cases, reputational escalation was driven by the CEO's visibility itself, while meaning was subsequently constructed through media discourse and organizational responses. The analytical focus therefore shifts toward symbolic signaling, perceived value alignment, and media-driven interpretation.

By including both verbally and symbolically triggered crises, the study captures CEO communication as both intentional messaging and symbolic action, enabling analytical comparison across different crisis constellations.

Table A1: Overview of CEO-Centered Crisis Cases

Case	Year	Trigger Type	Primary Analytical Focus
BP – Tony Hayward	2010	Verbal misstep during environmental disaster	Emotional tone, empathy, crisis rhetoric
Uber – Travis Kalanick	2017	Behavioral outburst (viral confrontation)	Nonverbal communication, emotional control
Kellogg's – Gary Pilnick	2024	Insensitive public comment	Framing, elitism, empathy
Astronomer – Andy Byron	2025	Nonverbal symbolic act ("Kiss-Cam")	Symbolic visibility, organizational legitimacy
Tesla/X – Elon Musk	2024–2025	Political endorsement	Value alignment, CEO celebrity, polarization

Appendix A2: Empirical Material Overview

For each case, the empirical corpus consists of:

1. Direct CEO communication

2. Corporate responses
3. Editorial media coverage

For each case, two editorial media articles were selected based on:

- publication by high-circulation outlets
- temporal proximity to the communicative act
- explicit interpretive engagement with CEO behavior

Media articles serve an interpretive documentation function.

Due to the high volume of Elon Musk's communication on X (formerly Twitter), a focused event-sampling approach was applied. Three key tweets surrounding the public endorsement of Donald Trump were selected, representing the trigger, escalation, and justification phases. These tweets were triangulated with two editorial media articles.

The analysis focuses exclusively on the initial endorsement episode in late 2024. Later statements were excluded to maintain analytical comparability across cases.

Table A2: Overview of Empirical Materials by Case

	Trigger	**Primary CEO Communication**	**Corporate Communication**	**Media / Newspaper Artikel**
Uber – Travis Kalanick (2017)	Viral video of argument with driver	Video transcript (YouTube) apology (Business Insider)	No Company reaction	1. The Guardian 2. Bloomberg
Astronomer – Andy Byron (2025)	Kiss-Cam scandal (nonverbal action)	No direct CEO statement	Astronomer's X posts (1, 2, 3); Q&A video (link)	1. New York Times 2. Business Insider
Kellogg's – Gary Pilnick (2024)	"Cereal for dinner" remark on CNBC	CNBC interview (link)	No Company reaction after outrage	1. The Guardian 2. CNN
BP – Tony Hayward (2010)	"I want my life back" remark during oil spill	BBC interview (link); later apologies (Business Insider)	BP press apology (Reuters); Facebook apology	1. The Guardian 2. New York Times

Elon Musk – Trump Endorsement (2024–25)	Political endorsement of Trump	Endorsment Tweet Backlash Reaction Endorment Justification	No Company reaction after outrage	1. CNN 2. The Washington Post

Appendix A3: Case Descriptions

This appendix provides concise descriptive accounts of the selected cases to contextualize the qualitative analysis. The descriptions outline core events and communicative dynamics without preempting interpretive categories.

Uber – Travis Kalanick (2017)

The crisis emerged when a dashcam video surfaced showing Uber CEO Travis Kalanick in a heated argument with his own driver, during which he dismissed the driver's financial concerns and displayed aggressive behavior. The video quickly went viral and was widely reported as a display of arrogance and emotional volatility. Kalanick issued a brief apology the next day, admitting he needed to "grow up" and show leadership. However, the damage to his personal image and the company's reputation was immediate. The media framed the incident as emblematic of a toxic corporate culture, contributing to broader scrutiny of Uber's leadership. The crisis ultimately accelerated internal pressure that led to Kalanick's resignation later that year.

BP – Tony Hayward (2010)

During the Deepwater Horizon oil spill—the largest marine oil disaster in history—BP CEO Tony Hayward became a lightning rod for public anger after making several tone-deaf statements. Most infamously, he remarked "I'd like my life back," during a press interaction, which was perceived as trivializing the environmental catastrophe and human suffering. Though he later apologized, the comment dominated headlines and became a symbol of executive detachment. Media coverage heavily moralized Hayward's behavior, framing him as emotionally indifferent and unfit for crisis leadership. The reputational fallout was significant: BP's share price plunged, and Hayward was replaced as CEO within months.

Tesla – Elon Musk (2024–2025)

This case centers on Elon Musk's public endorsement of Donald Trump during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Delivered via a tweet and reinforced through follow-up posts and media appearances, the endorsement triggered polarized reactions. While it resonated with some conservative demographics, it alienated many progressive Tesla customers. Major media outlets highlighted the contradiction between Musk's political stance and Tesla's environmental mission, with some corporate clients distancing themselves from the brand. Surveys and market data indicated a measurable decline in public trust and reputation, particularly among left-leaning consumers. The media framed the incident as a personal branding crisis with spillover effects for the company.

Kellogg's – Gary Pilnick (2024)

In an interview on CNBC, Kellogg's CEO Gary Pilnick promoted the idea of "cereal for dinner" as a solution to rising grocery costs. His tone, perceived as elitist and dismissive of economic hardship, quickly drew backlash. Social media users criticized Pilnick for making millions while suggesting a regressive dietary solution to inflation. The media amplified this framing, portraying him as tone-deaf and out of touch with ordinary consumers. Despite the backlash, the company issued no formal apology. The event sparked reputational damage and memes mocking the campaign.

Astronomer – Andy Byron (2025)

At a Coldplay concert, a kiss-cam captured CEO Andy Byron in an intimate embrace with the company's head of HR—neither of whom was single. The footage went viral, and media outlets quickly identified the individuals. Though no verbal statement was made during the incident, the visibility of the moment and its perceived moral implications led to intense online criticism. Astronomer responded by launching an internal investigation, and both executives resigned within days. The company's silence and delayed response fueled media moralization, framing the event as both a personal and professional ethics failure. The crisis demonstrates how nonverbal CEO behavior, when amplified via symbolic visibility, can destabilize organizational legitimacy.

Appendix A4: Codebook Development and Coding Framework

Codebook Version 1.0 represents the **initial deductive coding framework**, developed **prior to full data analysis**. It was constructed exclusively on the basis of the theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and served as the analytical instrument for pilot coding of the first two cases (BP and Uber).

Codebook Version 1.0 was developed deductively following Mayring's (2015, 2022) procedure for theory-driven category formation. Based on the conceptual framework established in Chapter 2, central theoretical perspectives were translated into analytically distinct but interrelated coding dimensions.

Attribution-related categories were derived from Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), and Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995), capturing how responsibility is assigned, accepted, or deflected in CEO crisis discourse.

Affective and expressive dimensions of CEO communication were operationalized based on leadership communication research and affective leadership theory (Fanelli & Misangyi, 2006; Men & Stacks, 2013), reflecting how emotional tone shapes perceptions of credibility and moral character.

Strategic response categories draw on SCCT and Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997), which conceptualize crisis communication as a set of recognizable response postures such as denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and corrective action.

Moral and value-related framing was informed by Legitimacy Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and moral framing research (Suchman, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Snow & Benford, 1988), reflecting how CEOs and media negotiate ethical alignment and value congruence.

Media-related categories integrate Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) and the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (Renn et al., 1992), accounting for how CEO communication is reinterpreted and intensified through journalistic and digital mediation.

Finally, perceptual outcome categories were derived from reputation, trust, and legitimacy research (Fombrun et al., 2000; Mayer et al., 1995; Suchman, 1995), capturing how communicative processes translate into evaluations of credibility, trust, and legitimacy.

The resulting deductive category system is fully documented in Codebook Version 1.0 (Appendix AX). The purpose of this step is to document the theoretical logic of category construction rather than to duplicate the category definitions provided in the codebook tables.

Appendix A4.1: Deductive Category System (Version 1.0)

Table A4.1: Codebook Version 1.0

Main Category	**Subcategory**	**Definition (theory-based)**	**Coding Rule (Inclusion & Exclusion)**	**Theoretical Basis**
1. Attribution of Responsibility	**1.1 Denial / Deflection**	The CEO rejects responsibility for the crisis or redirects blame to external actors.	**Include** when responsibility is explicitly denied or shifted to others. **Exclude** apologies or acknowledgments of fault.	SCCT (Coombs, 2007); Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985)

	1.2 Acceptance / Accountability	The CEO acknowledges personal or organizational responsibility and accepts moral or operational fault.	**Include** explicit apologies or responsibility acceptance. **Exclude** strategic justifications without admission of fault.	SCCT – Rebuild cluster; Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995)
	1.3 External Attribution	Responsibility is attributed to uncontrollable, situational, or systemic factors.	**Include** references to regulators, systems, or external conditions. **Exclude** denial of crisis existence.	Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985)
2. Emotional Tone and Affect	**2.1 Empathy**	Expression of compassion, concern, or emotional solidarity with affected stakeholders.	**Include** emotional resonance or concern for victims. **Exclude** purely factual statements.	Crisis Empathy (Coombs & Holladay, 2012); Affective Leadership (Fanelli & Misangyi, 2006)
	2.2 Defensiveness	Tone marked by irritation, justification, or protection of ego or status.	**Include** defensive verbal or nonverbal cues. **Exclude** calm explanations without ego-protective intent.	CEO Communication (Men & Stacks, 2013)
	2.3 Emotional Detachment	Absence or suppression of affect, creating distance or indifference.	**Include** emotionally flat or cold tone in crisis context. **Exclude** neutral factual reporting outside evaluative contexts.	Affective Leadership Theory

3. Communicative Strategy (Crisis Response)	**3.1 Denial**	Complete rejection of the existence or relevance of wrongdoing.	**Include** statements asserting innocence or illegitimacy of accusations.	SCCT – Deny Strategy
	3.2 Diminishment	Downplaying the severity or impact of the crisis.	**Include** minimization or trivialization. **Exclude** factual scale descriptions without evaluative framing.	SCCT – Diminish Cluster
	3.3 Rebuilding	Attempts to restore trust through apology, reform, or compensation.	**Include** trust-restorative rhetoric or commitments.	SCCT – Rebuild; Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997)
	3.4 Bolstering	Emphasis on past achievements or moral standing to offset criticism.	**Include** references to prior good deeds or values.	SCCT; Image Repair Theory
	3.5 Corrective Action	Description of concrete steps taken to address the crisis.	**Include** specific remedial actions. **Exclude** vague intentions without action.	IRT – Corrective Action; SCCT
	3.6 Justification	Rational explanation of behavior to reduce perceived blame.	**Include** contextual or necessity-based explanations.	IRT – Justification
4. Moral and Value Framing	**4.1 Value Alignment**	Discourse emphasizing alignment with	**Include** explicit moral positioning or shared values.	Legitimacy Theory (Suchman,

		moral or societal norms.		1995); Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984)
	4.2 Value Discrepancy	Highlighting contradictions between stated values and observed behavior.	**Include** explicit or implicit inconsistency claims.	Moral Framing (Snow & Benford, 1988); Hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009; Effron et al., 2018)
	4.3 Value Realignment	Efforts to reframe or reassert values after criticism.	**Include** moral learning or ethical repositioning.	Legitimacy Repair (Suchman, 1995)
5. Media Framing and Amplification	**5.1 Intensifying / Mitigating Frame**	Media framing that escalates or softens perceived severity.	**Include** moral intensification or attenuation.	Framing Theory (Entman, 1993); SARF (Renn et al., 1992)
	5.2 Moralizing Frame	Media assigns moral blame or praise.	**Include** explicit moral evaluation.	Moral Framing (Snow & Benford, 1988)
	5.3 Personalization of Responsibility	Media centers the CEO as symbolic locus of wrongdoing.	**Include** CEO-as-figurehead framing.	Media Logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979); Legitimacy Theory
6. Visibility and Channel Dynamics	**6.1 Channel Type**	Medium through which CEO communication occurs.	**Include** when medium affects interpretation.	SARF (Renn et al., 1992)
	6.2 Format	Communicative format shaping	**Include** when live/recorded/written format matters.	CEO Branding (Bendisch et al., 2013)

		authenticity perceptions.		
	6.3 Audience Reach	Scope of dissemination influencing reputational impact.	**Include** explicit scale references.	Visibility & Celebrity (Lovelace et al., 2018)
	6.4 Symbolic Exposure	Unplanned or symbolic visibility moments.	**Include** involuntary or performative exposure.	Leadership Symbolism; Media Visibility
	6.5 Mediated Recontextualization	Meaning shifts through media editing or reframing.	**Include** altered interpretation via mediation.	SARF; Framing Theory
7. Perceptual Outcomes	**7.1 Credibility Indicators**	Judgments of trustworthiness or integrity.	**Include** explicit credibility evaluation.	Source Credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999).
	7.2 Trust Cues	Signals fostering or undermining trust.	**Include** relational trust references.	Mayer et al. (1995)
	7.3 Reputational Consequence	Public or media perception outcomes.	**Include** explicit reputational effects.	Corporate Reputation (Fombrun, 2000)
	7.4 Legitimacy Erosion	Sustained questioning of moral or institutional appropriateness.	**Include** long-term delegitimization cues.	Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995)

- Codebook Version 1.0 represents a **purely deductive category system** derived from theory.

- Categories were developed directly from the theoretical constructs elaborated in Chapter 2 and are not intended to exhaustively reproduce each theory, but to operationalize **textually observable communicative dimensions**.
- **Attribution vs. Strategy Rule**:
- Attribution codes capture **causal responsibility judgments**.
- Strategy codes capture **intended crisis response posture**.
- When both are present, **dual coding is permitted**.
- Categories marked as inductive in later stages **do not appear** in Version 1.0.
- Coding followed Mayring's principles of rule-based interpretation, transparency, and intersubjective traceability.

Appendix A4.2: Pilot Coding and Refinement

A pilot coding phase involving two cases (BP and Uber) was conducted to assess the empirical adequacy, clarity, and codability of Codebook Version 1.0. The pilot analysis confirmed that the majority of communicative phenomena were well captured by the deductive framework derived from SCCT, Image Repair Theory, Attribution Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and Framing Theory.
However, the pilot phase also revealed:

- partial overlap between certain categories,
- categories that functioned as **contextual descriptors rather than text-immanent phenomena**, and
- recurring communicative patterns not fully represented in the deductive framework.

In accordance with Mayring's iterative logic, the codebook was therefore refined to improve conceptual precision, reduce redundancy, and enhance empirical sensitivity.
Several categories from Codebook Version 1.0 were removed during pilot refinement. This decision followed Mayring's principle that categories must demonstrate **empirical relevance, conceptual clarity, and consistent codability**.

Communicative Strategy: Denial
This category was removed due to substantial conceptual overlap with *Attribution of Responsibility – Denial / Deflection*. Empirically, denial consistently manifested as responsibility attribution rather than as an independent response strategy. Retaining both categories resulted in redundant coding without analytical gain.

Trust Cues
This category was excluded because trust did not appear as a **directly articulated or recurring textual element**. Trust effects emerged primarily as inferred outcomes rather than observable

communicative acts and are therefore captured indirectly through *Credibility Indicators*, *Reputational Consequence*, and *Legitimacy Erosion*.

Visibility and Channel Dynamics: Channel Type, Format, Audience Reach

Although theoretically grounded, these subcategories functioned as **contextual case characteristics** rather than text-immanent phenomena. During pilot coding, they were not negotiated or problematized within the communicative material itself and therefore lacked sufficient analytical variability.

Importantly, their removal does **not** indicate theoretical irrelevance. Visibility effects are instead operationalized through textually observable mechanisms such as *Media Framing*, *Mediated Recontextualisation*, and *Symbolic Exposure*.

Based on pilot findings, several inductive subcategories were added to capture recurring communicative mechanisms not fully anticipated by theory (e.g., *Humble Transition*, *Irony / Mockery*, *Stakeholder Support Loss*). All inductive additions met two criteria:

- recurrence across cases, and
- conceptual compatibility with the overarching theoretical framework.

Codebook Version 2.0 therefore represents a **deductive–inductive synthesis**, not a conceptual departure from Version 1.0.

Appendix A4.3: Final Codebook (Version 2.0)

Codebook Version 2.0 comprises **six main categories and 18 subcategories**. Differences in wording relative to Version 1.0 reflect **intentional operational refinement**, not theoretical change. Core conceptual definitions were retained, while coding rules were sharpened to improve empirical clarity.

Anchor examples are reproduced verbatim from the empirical material.

Table A4.3: Final Codebook

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Coding Rule	Anchor Example
1. Attribution of Responsibility	1.1 Denial / Deflection	The CEO rejects responsibility for the crisis or redirects blame to external	Include when responsibility is explicitly denied or shifted to others. Exclude apologies	"This was not our accident… it was Transocean's rig." (BP)

		actors, emphasizing external causality.	or acknowledgments of fault.	
	1.2 Acceptance / Accountability	The CEO acknowledges personal or organizational responsibility and accepts moral or operational fault.	Include explicit apologies or responsibility acceptance. Exclude strategic justifications without admission of fault.	"I apologize for my behavior – it was wrong." (Uber)
	1.3 External Attribution	Responsibility is attributed to uncontrollable, situational, or systemic factors.	Include references to regulators, systems, or external conditions. Exclude denial of crisis existence.	"The regulators failed to detect the leak." (BP)
2. Emotional Tone and Affect	2.1 Empathy	Expression of compassion, concern, or emotional solidarity with affected stakeholders.	Include emotional resonance or concern for victims. Exclude purely factual statements.	"To restore their lives, not mine." (BP)
	2.2 Defensiveness	Tone marked by irritation, justification, or protection of ego or status.	Include defensive verbal or nonverbal cues. Exclude calm explanations without ego-protective intent.	"I make sure every year is a hard year." (Uber)
	2.3 Emotional Detachment	Absence or suppression of affect, creating distance or indifference.	Include emotionally flat or cold tone in crisis context. Exclude neutral factual	"There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I'd

			reporting outside evaluative contexts.	like my life back.” (BP)
	2.4 Arrogance / Entitlement [I]	Tone suggests superiority, entitlement, or disregard.	Code when speaker elevates self-importance or dismisses criticism.	“That’s kind of how I roll.” (Uber)
	2.5 Humble Transition [I]	Shift from ego-focus to humility.	Code when leader expresses personal growth or fallibility.	“This is the first time I’ve been willing to admit that I need leadership help…” (Uber)
	2.6 Vulnerability [I]	Expression of personal fragility or openness.	Code when struggle, need for help, or emotional exposure is articulated.	“I need leadership help and I intend to get it.” (Uber)
3. Communicative Strategy	3.1 Diminishment	Downplaying the severity or impact of the crisis.	Include minimization or trivialization. Exclude factual scale descriptions without evaluative framing.	“The Gulf is a very big ocean.” (BP)
	3.2 Rebuilding	Attempts to restore trust through apology, reform, or compensation (i.e., to rebuild moral standing).	Include trust-restorative rhetoric or commitments.	“My first priority is doing all we can to restore the lives of the people of the Gulf region…” (BP)
	3.3 Bolstering	Emphasis on past achievements or moral standing to offset criticism.	Include references to prior good deeds or values.	“In fact, it's landing really well right now, Carl…” (Kellogg’s)

	3.4 Corrective Action	Description of concrete steps taken to address the crisis.	Include specific remedial actions. Exclude vague intentions without action.	“We have launched an internal investigation.” (Astronomer)
	3.5 Justification	Rational explanation of behavior to reduce perceived blame.	Include contextual or necessity-based explanations.	“We have to act like this because of competitors.” (Uber)
	3.6 Attack Accuser [I]	Discrediting those raising concerns.	Code when critics are attacked or delegitimized.	“Some people don’t like to take responsibility for their own shit.” (Uber)
4. Moral and Value Framing	4.1 Value Alignment	Discourse emphasizing alignment with moral or societal norms (shared values).	Include explicit moral positioning or shared values.	“Astronomer is committed to the values and culture that have guided us since our founding.”
	4.2 Value Discrepancy	Highlighting contradictions between stated values and observed behavior.	Include explicit or implicit inconsistency claims.	“They note that boxes of popular cereals now cost more than $7…” (Kellogg’s)
	4.3 Value Realignment	Efforts to reframe or reassert values after criticism (ethical repositioning).	Include moral learning or ethical repositioning.	“We’re continuing to do what we do best…” (Astronomer)
	4.4 Moral Signaling [I]	Emphasizing moral identity or virtue.	Code when moral standing is explicitly foregrounded.	“Still, ‘a hard launch of a workplace romantic

				relationship…'" (Astronomer)
5. Media Framing and Amplification	5.1 Intensifying / Mitigating Frame	Media framing that escalates or softens perceived severity.	Include moral intensification or attenuation; code when journalistic language escalates or neutralizes judgment.	"A clumsy response threatens to make it worse." (Guardian on BP)
	5.2 Moralizing Frame	Media assigns moral blame or praise.	Include explicit moral evaluation.	"Kellogg's CEO seems out of touch with hungry Americans."
	5.3 Personalization of Responsibility	Media centers the CEO as symbolic locus of wrongdoing.	Include CEO-as-figurehead framing.	"BP… now finds itself with one more problem: Tony Hayward."
	5.4 Contradiction / Discrepancy Frame [I]	Emphasis on hypocrisy or inconsistency.	Code when contradictions are made visible.	"Kellogg's raised prices while pushing affordability."
	5.5 Irony / Mockery [I]	Use of sarcasm or ridicule.	Code when journalistic tone mocks the CEO.	"Let them eat Corn Flakes."
	5.6 Repetition / Viralization [I]	Amplification through looping or memes.	Code when content becomes viral spectacle.	"The moment proceeded to be shared, and joked about…" (Astronomer)
6. Visibility and Channel Dynamics	6.1 Mediated Recontextualisation	Meaning of CEO messages changes through media redistribution (altered	Include altered interpretation via mediation or framing shifts across platforms/outlets.	"Compared to the 'let them eat cake' phrase…" (Kellogg's)

		interpretation via mediation).		
	6.2 Symbolic Exposure	Unplanned or symbolic CEO visibility.	Include involuntary or performative exposure.	"Given the pair's reaction — mortified looks…" (Astronomer)
7. Perceptual Outcomes	7.1 Credibility Indicators	Judgments of trustworthiness or integrity (credibility evaluation).	Include explicit credibility evaluation.	"With each failure to stem the flow, BP's credibility has taken another blow."
	7.2 Reputational Consequence	Public or media perception outcomes.	Include explicit reputational effects.	"Further scrutiny of the chief executive…" (Uber)
	7.3 Legitimacy Erosion	Sustained questioning of moral or institutional appropriateness.	Include long-term delegitimization cues.	Polymarket bets on CEO resignation (Astronomer)
	7.4 Stakeholder Support Loss [I]	Withdrawal of stakeholder support.	Code when consumers or partners disengage.	Tesla purchase abandonment (Musk)

- Codebook Version 1.0 documents the **theoretical starting point** of the analysis.
- Codebook Version 2.0 documents the **empirically calibrated analytical instrument** used for the full cross-case analysis.
- Differences between versions reflect **Mayring-compliant refinement**, not conceptual inconsistency.
- Together, both versions ensure **theoretical transparency, methodological rigor, and analytical traceability**.

Appendix B: Quantitative Instrument

Appendix B1: Full Questionnaire (English)

Welcome Text

Welcome to my survey!
Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study.This survey is part of a research project at University of applied science Neu-Ulm conducted for my Master's thesis.

Note: This survey is available in German and English. Please choose the language you feel most comfortable answering in.

Purpose of the study:This research investigates perceptions of CEO communication, media coverage, and stakeholder reactions. You will read a short scenario and then answer several questions about it.

Voluntary participation and anonymity:
Your participation is completely voluntary.
You may withdraw at any time without providing a reason.
All responses are anonymous and will be used for research purposes only.
No personal data will be collected that could identify you.

Estimated duration:The survey will take approximately 12-17 minutes.

Contact information:If you have any questions about the study or your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact me: viola.steierwald@student.hnu.de

Note: There are no right or wrong answers in this survey. We are only interested in your personal perception and opinion regarding the presented scenario. Please answer all questions as honestly and intuitively as possible.

By clicking Next, you confirm that you have read the information above and that you voluntarily agree to participate.

Thank you for your support!

Company Description

The Next button will be enabled in 10 seconds. Please read the following description carefully.

BetterFood is a well-known European producer of plant-based foods. The company positions itself around sustainability, fairness, and social responsibility. Its marketing campaigns frequently emphasize empathy, affordability, and accessibility, promoting the idea that healthy plant-based nutrition should be available to everyone — regardless of income or lifestyle.

Company Perception

After reading about the company please indicate how much you agree that the following statements describe the company. (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

The general public would approve of this company actions and behaviour.
Most people would consider this companys practices to be moral.
The way this company operates promotes the common good.
This company is concerned with meeting acceptable standards for ethical behavior in their field.
This companys actions seem appropriate

Based on the company description you have read, please rate how you perceive the company. Please rate your impression by choosing a position on the scale between the two opposite terms.The further left or right you select, the stronger your evaluation

Unappealing | Appealing
Bad | Good
Unpleasant | Pleasant
Unfavorable | Favorable
Unlikable | Likable

Scenario

The Next button will be enabled in 30 seconds. Please read the following description carefully.

A few days after a positive media report highlighting BetterFood’s commitment to sustainability, fairness, and social responsibility, the company’s CEO, Daniel Verhoeven, appeared in a live interview on the European business channel EuroFinance.
During the conversation, the host addressed the sharp rise in food prices and reminded Verhoeven that BetterFood frequently promotes its mission of providing “affordable plant-based nutrition for everyone.” She also pointed out that BetterFood had recently increased the prices of several of its products. She then asked how the company intended to support consumers during this financially challenging period.

Verhoeven responded calmly but with noticeable detachment: “Our products are priced very fairly. If people claim they can’t afford healthy food, that often has more to do with personal priorities than with the prices themselves.”

When the host pointed out that BetterFood actively advertises “affordability for all,” he replied briefly: “We cannot take responsibility for every individual life circumstance. If someone says they can’t afford a healthy dinner, they might want to take a closer look at what they spend their money on.”

Asked whether BetterFood had a responsibility toward financially vulnerable households, Verhoeven gave a slight smile:
“Nutrition is a personal choice. We offer enough low-cost options — there is only so much more we can do.”
His tone remained composed but dismissive; he did not acknowledge the financial strain many families are facing, nor did he reflect on BetterFood’s role in addressing rising food prices. Within hours, clips of the interview spread across X and TikTok.

Users described his comments as “elitist,” “out of touch,” and “completely detached,” pointing out his multimillion-euro salary. Many contrasted his remarks with BetterFood’s public messaging and called the CEO “hypocritical” and “unrealistic.” Several news outlets picked up the story, framing the interview as an example of a corporate leader who has lost touch with everyday realities. Journalists questioned whether Verhoeven’s stance aligned with BetterFood’s values of empathy and accessibility.

The next day, BetterFood released a brief written statement claiming that the CEO’s comments had been “taken out of context” and that food prices were “largely driven by external factors.” Verhoeven himself did not issue an apology or a personal clarification.

CEO Communication

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about the CEO described in the szenario. (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

Emotional tone

The CEO’s emotional tone does not match what I would expect in this situation.
The emotions expressed by the CEO feel inappropriate for the severity of the crisis.
There is a clear mismatch between the CEO’s emotional reaction and what stakeholders would reasonably expect.
The CEO’s emotional response feels inconsistent with the situation.
The CEO’s emotional tone seems out of place given the crisis.

The CEO’s emotional expressions do not align with what I consider an adequate reaction.
The CEO’s emotional tone feels insincere or not genuine.
The CEO appears emotionally detached from the crisis.

CEO Responsibility
The CEO denies personal responsibility for the situation described.
The CEO avoids acknowledging any role he may have played in the issue.
The CEO shifts responsibility away from himself.
The CEO minimizes his own involvement in causing or contributing to the issue.
The CEO frames the situation in a way that excuses himself from responsibility.
The CEO distances himself from being accountable for the consequences of his remarks.
The CEO seems unwilling to admit any fault in how he communicated.
The CEO’s explanation appears aimed at deflecting responsibility from himself.

Value fit
The CEO’s statements do not align with the values the organization publicly promotes.
The CEO’s behavior appears inconsistent with the organization’s espoused values.
The CEO’s comments diverge from the values the organization emphasizes.
The CEO’s response does not reflect the values the organization claims to stand for.
The CEO’s expressed attitudes seem misaligned with the organization’s value commitments.
There is a noticeable discrepancy between the CEO’s behavior and the organization’s stated values.

CEO Perception

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about the CEO described in the szenario. (1 =Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

CEO Moral Condemnation
The CEO’s behavior in the scenario was morally wrong.
The CEO's actions clearly violated important moral norms.
The CEO behaved in a morally inappropriate way.
The CEO deserves to be held morally responsible for this behavior.
The CEO is morally to blame for what happened.
The CEO deserves moral criticism for their actions.
I feel morally outraged by the CEO’s behavior.
The CEO’s actions make me feel angry.
I feel morally disgusted by what the CEO did.

In my opinion …

The CEO acts hypocritically
What the CEO says and does are two different things
The CEO pretends to be something that he is not
The CEO does exactly what it says
The CEO keeps his promises
The CEO puts his words into action

CEO Perception

The CEO creates added value for the company.
The CEO is capable of attracting investors.
The CEO enables the company to compete successfully.
The CEO inspires others.
The CEO is influential and authoritative.
The CEO is a well-known and visible public figure.
The CEO demonstrates strong self-discipline.
The CEO is able to accept criticism.
The CEO shows high levels of self-control in public.
The CEO behaves morally.
The CEO acts ethically.
The CEO shows empathy toward others.
The CEO is flexible when facing challenges.
The CEO is open-minded.
The CEO is honest.
The CEO is socially responsible.

Company Perception

Based on the CEO's statement you have read, please rate how you perceive the company.
Please rate your impression by choosing a position on the scale between the two opposite terms.
The further left or right you select, the stronger your evaluation.

Unappealing | Appealing
Bad | Good
Unpleasant | Pleasant
Unfavorable | Favorable
Unlikable | Likable

After reading the CEO's statement, please indicate how much you agree that the following statements describe the company. (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

The general public would approve of this company actions and behaviour.
Most people would consider this companys practices to be moral.
The way this company operates promotes the common good.
This company is concerned with meeting acceptable standards for ethical behavior in their field.
This companys actions seem appropriate

Stakeholder

For the next questions, please imagine that you have a personal relationship with this company (for example, because you work with it, buy from it, invest in it, supply it with goods or services, or are otherwise affected by its decisions).
Keeping this in mind, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

I would distance myself from this company after this incident.
I would reduce my involvement or connection with this company.
I would prefer not to be associated with this company anymore.
I would consider ending my relationship with this company.
I would stop engaging in activities that support this company.
I would actively avoid future interactions with this company.
I would not give this company any further support.
I would no longer trust this company to act responsibly.
I would discourage other people from supporting this company.

Visibility

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the visibility of the CEO's comments in the scenario.
(1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

The CEO's comments would be seen by a large number of people across media.
The interview is highly visible and difficult for the public to ignore.
The CEO's statements are likely to spread widely through news and social media.
Many audiences would repeatedly encounter this clip or quotes from it.
The CEO's comments would attract significant public attention.
The visibility of these remarks increases their impact on how people interpret the situation.

Stimulus (Media Article)

BetterFood CEO Sparks Outrage with Dismissive Remarks — Critics Point to Deep Leadership Failures

BetterFood CEO Daniel Verhoeven is facing intense public backlash after a television interview in which he downplayed concerns about rising food prices and suggested that people should “rethink their priorities” if they could not afford healthy food.

His comment — delivered with a calm tone and a faint smile — struck many viewers as a modern version of “Let them eat cake.”

The historical phrase is widely seen as a symbol of elite ignorance: Marie Antoinette allegedly suggested that the poor should eat cake if they had no bread. Whether she actually said it is historically disputed — but the expression remains shorthand for the disconnect of the powerful. Many viewers interpreted Verhoeven’s remark in exactly that way.

Adding to the controversy, BetterFood recently raised the prices of several of its products, despite continuing to advertise “affordability for everyone.”

Several economists also pointed out that a home-cooked dinner is often cheaper than BetterFood’s instant meals, especially amid soaring prices for basic groceries. Against this backdrop, Verhoeven’s suggestion that consumers should “take a closer look at what they spend their money on” appeared particularly insensitive.

Moreover, Verhoeven is considered one of the highest-paid CEOs in Europe, with industry estimates placing his personal wealth in the multimillion-euro range — a detail frequently highlighted on social media. One user wrote on X:

“Easy to say when you make in a week what most families spend on food in a year.”

Another commented:

“Telling people who can barely get by that their problem is ‘wrong priorities’ — this level of disconnect is unbelievable.”

The contrast with BetterFood’s long-standing brand messaging was especially striking. The company has promoted values like fairness, empathy, and accessibility for years — values that many felt were entirely absent from Verhoeven’s statements. Numerous journalists interpreted his remark that the company could not “take responsibility for every individual life circumstance” as a sign that leadership has lost touch with the daily realities of consumers.

Consumer advocates also voiced criticism:

“This isn’t just lacking empathy — it points to a leadership failure,” said one industry insider.

“When a multimillionaire CEO lectures struggling households on how to save money, it speaks volumes about the company culture.”

Editorials in several newspapers have already speculated whether the incident could cause long-term harm to the brand’s credibility. One columnist wrote:

“BetterFood sells empathy in its advertising, but its CEO sells blame.”

BetterFood released a brief statement claiming the CEO's comments had been "taken out of context," though Verhoeven himself has offered neither an explanation nor an apology.
As the clip continues to circulate — often accompanied by sarcastic captions — the debate shows no signs of fading. For many observers, this moment may mark a turning point in how BetterFood's leadership is perceived going forward.

Media Framing

You have just read a media article about the CEO's comments. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about how the article frames the CEO and the situation. (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

The article presents the CEO's comments in a negative or critical way.
The article frames the CEO's statements as morally inappropriate or insensitive.
The article suggests that the CEO is responsible for causing or escalating the situation.
The article portrays the CEO's remarks as evidence of deeper problems in leadership or organizational values."
The article emphasizes controversy, conflict, or scandal surrounding the CEO's comments.
The article focuses on the CEO as the main source of the problem rather than broader contextual factors.

Demographics

What is your age? (Male; Female; Nonbinary; Prefer not to say)

What is your gender?

What is your nationality?

What is the highest level of education you have completed? (No formal education; Secondary school (lower level); High school diploma / upper secondary; Vocational training / apprenticeship; Bachelor's degree; Master's degree; Doctoral degree (PhD / equivalent); Other)

What is your current employment status? (Employed; Self-Employed/Freelance; Unemployed/ currently not working; Student; Retired; Not in the labor force (e.g. parental leave, homemaker))

What is your monthly income? (Under 1.000 €; 1.000-1.999€; 2.000-2.999€; 3.000-3.999€; 4.000-4.999€; 5.000€ or more; Prefer not to say)

Media Usage

How often do you use social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook)? (1 = never, 5 = several times per day)

How often do you consume news through TV, online news, radio, or newspapers?
(1 = never … 5 = several times per day)

End Text:
Thank you very much for your participation!

You have successfully completed the survey.Your responses have been recorded and will contribute meaningfully to the research conducted as part of my Master's thesis.

All data will remain anonymous and will be used for scientific purposes only.
If you have any questions about the study or would like additional information, please feel free to contact me: viola.steierwald@student.hnu.de

Thank you again for your time and support!

Appendix B2: Full Questionnaire (German)

Willkommenstext:
Willkommen zu meiner Umfrage!
Vielen Dank, dass Sie sich bereit erklären, an dieser Studie teilzunehmen.
Die Umfrage ist Teil eines Forschungsprojekts an der Hochschule Neu-Ulm im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit.
Hinweis: Diese Umfrage ist in Deutsch und Englisch verfügbar. Bitte wählen Sie die Sprache, in der Sie die Fragen am liebsten beantworten möchten.

Zweck der Studie: Diese Untersuchung beschäftigt sich mit Wahrnehmungen von CEO-Kommunikation, Medienberichterstattung und Reaktionen von Stakeholdern. Sie werden ein kurzes Szenario lesen und anschließend einige Fragen dazu beantworten.

Freiwilligkeit und Anonymität:
Die Teilnahme ist vollkommen freiwillig.
Sie können die Teilnahme jederzeit ohne Angabe von Gründen abbrechen.
Alle Angaben werden anonym und ausschließlich zu Forschungszwecken verarbeitet.
Es werden keine personenbezogenen Daten erhoben, die Rückschlüsse auf Ihre Identität ermöglichen.

Dauer: Die Bearbeitung dauert ca. 12–17 Minuten.

Kontakt bei Fragen: Falls Sie Fragen zur Studie oder zu Ihren Rechten als Teilnehmende haben, können Sie mich jederzeit kontaktieren: viola.steierwald@student.hnu.de

Mit dem Klick auf *Weiter* bestätigen Sie, dass Sie die Informationen gelesen haben und freiwillig an der Studie teilnehmen möchten.

Hinweis: In dieser Umfrage gibt es keine richtigen oder falschen Antworten. Uns interessiert ausschließlich Ihre persönliche Wahrnehmung und Meinung zu dem dargestellten Szenario. Bitte beantworten Sie alle Fragen so ehrlich und intuitiv wie möglich.
Vielen Dank für Ihre Unterstützung!

Unternehmensbeschreibung
Der Weiter-Button wird in 10 Sekunden freigeschaltet. Bitte lesen Sie die folgende Beschreibung aufmerksam.

BetterFood ist ein bekanntes europäisches Unternehmen, das pflanzenbasierte Lebensmittel herstellt. Das Unternehmen positioniert sich klar in den Bereichen Nachhaltigkeit, Fairness und soziale Verantwortung. In seinen Marketingkampagnen betont BetterFood häufig Empathie, Erschwinglichkeit und Zugänglichkeit und vermittelt die Idee, dass gesunde pflanzenbasierte Ernährung für alle Menschen verfügbar sein sollte — unabhängig von Einkommen oder Lebensstil.

Unternehmenswahrnehmung

Nachdem Sie die Unternehmensbeschreibung gelesen haben, geben Sie bitte an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen über das Unternehmen zustimmen.
(1 = stimme überhaupt nicht zu, 5 = stimme voll zu)

Die breite Öffentlichkeit würde die Handlungen und das Verhalten dieses Unternehmens gutheißen.
Die meisten Menschen würden die Geschäftspraktiken dieses Unternehmens als moralisch betrachten.
Die Arbeitsweise dieses Unternehmens fördert das Gemeinwohl.
Dieses Unternehmen ist bemüht, akzeptable Standards für ethisches Verhalten in seiner Branche einzuhalten.
Die Handlungen dieses Unternehmens erscheinen angemessen.

Auf Grundlage der Unternehmensbeschreibung: Wie nehmen Sie das Unternehmen wahr?

Bitte bewerten Sie das Unternehmen, indem Sie auf der folgenden Skala zwischen den beiden gegensätzlichen Begriffen wählen. Je weiter links oder rechts Sie klicken, desto stärker entspricht die Aussage Ihrer Einschätzung.

unattraktiv / attraktiv
schlecht / gut
unangenehm / angenehm
ungünstig / günstig
unsympathisch / sympathisch

Szenario

Einige Tage nach einem Medienbericht über BetterFoods Engagement für Nachhaltigkeit, Fairness und soziale Verantwortung trat CEO **Daniel Verhoeven** in einem Live-Interview auf dem Wirtschaftssender EuroFinance auf.
Die Moderatorin sprach die stark gestiegenen Lebensmittelpreise an und erinnerte daran, dass BetterFoods Kampagnen häufig betonen, „erschwingliche pflanzenbasierte Ernährung für alle“ zu ermöglichen. Zusätzlich wies sie darauf hin, dass BetterFood *erst vor wenigen Wochen die Preise für mehrere Produkte erhöht* habe. Sie fragte, wie das Unternehmen Verbraucher in dieser finanziell angespannten Zeit unterstützen wolle.
Verhoeven reagierte ruhig, aber distanziert:
„Unsere Produkte sind preislich absolut fair. Wenn Menschen sagen, sie könnten sich gesunde Ernährung nicht leisten, dann liegt das oft eher an persönlichen Prioritäten als an den Preisen.“
Als die Moderatorin darauf hinwies, dass BetterFood genau mit „Erschwinglichkeit für alle“ wirbt, antwortete er knapp:
„Wir können nicht für jede individuelle Lebenssituation Verantwortung übernehmen. Wer sich ein gesundes Abendessen nicht leisten kann, sollte vielleicht genauer hinschauen, wofür er sonst Geld ausgibt.“
Auf die Frage nach der Verantwortung gegenüber sozial schwächeren Haushalten lächelte Verhoeven leicht:
„Ernährung ist eine persönliche Entscheidung. Wir bieten genug günstige Optionen – mehr können wir nicht tun.“
Sein Ton wirkte beherrscht, aber abweisend; er zeigte weder Empathie noch Verständnis für die finanziellen Belastungen vieler Familien.
Innerhalb weniger Stunden verbreiteten sich Ausschnitte des Interviews auf X und TikTok. Nutzer bezeichneten Verhoevens Aussagen als „elitär“, „realitätsfern“ und „abgehoben“ und verwiesen auf sein Millionengehalt. Viele stellten seine Kommentare den sozialen Versprechen von BetterFood gegenüber und bezeichneten ihn als „heuchlerisch“.

Mehrere Medien griffen das Thema auf und warfen Verhoeven vor, den Bezug zum Alltag verloren zu haben. Journalistinnen und Journalisten stellten infrage, ob seine Haltung mit den Werten von Empathie und Zugänglichkeit vereinbar sei.
Am nächsten Tag veröffentlichte BetterFood eine kurze Stellungnahme, in der es hieß, die Aussagen des CEOs seien „aus dem Kontext gerissen" worden. Verhoeven selbst gab weder eine Entschuldigung noch eine persönliche Klarstellung ab.

CEO Kommunikation

Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen über den im Szenario beschriebenen CEO zustimmen. (1 = Stimme überhaupt nicht zu, 5 = Stimme voll und ganz zu)

Emotionaler Tonfall (CEO = Geschäftsführer des Unternehmens)

Der emotionale Ton des CEOs entspricht nicht dem, was ich in dieser Situation erwarten würde.
Die vom CEO gezeigten Emotionen wirken unangemessen in Bezug auf die Schwere der Situation.
Es besteht eine klare Diskrepanz zwischen der emotionalen Reaktion des CEOs und dem, was Interessensgruppen vernünftigerweise erwarten würden.
Die emotionale Reaktion des CEOs wirkt unpassend für die Situation.
Der emotionale Ausdruck des CEOs erscheint unangebracht angesichts der Krise.
Die emotionalen Signale des CEOs stimmen nicht mit dem überein, was ich als angemessene Reaktion betrachten würde.
Der emotionale Ton des CEOs wirkt nicht aufrichtig oder unecht.
Der CEO wirkt emotional distanziert von der Situation.

Verantwortung des CEO (CEO = Geschäftsführer des Unternehmens)

Der CEO weist persönliche Verantwortung für die beschriebene Situation zurück.
Der CEO vermeidet es, irgendeine Rolle anzuerkennen, die er bei dem Problem gespielt haben könnte.
Der CEO schiebt die Verantwortung von sich weg.
Der CEO spielt seine eigene Beteiligung herunter.
Der CEO stellt die Situation so dar, dass er selbst entschuldigt erscheint.
Der CEO distanziert sich davon, für die Folgen seiner Aussagen verantwortlich zu sein.
Der CEO scheint nicht bereit, irgendeine Schuld in seinem Kommunikationsverhalten einzugestehen.
Die Erklärung des CEOs wirkt so, als wolle er Verantwortung von sich ablenken.

Wertanpassung (CEO = Geschäftsführer des Unternehmens)

Die Aussagen des CEOs stehen nicht im Einklang mit den Werten, die das Unternehmen öffentlich kommuniziert.

Das Verhalten des CEOs wirkt unvereinbar mit den Werten, die das Unternehmen vertritt.
Die Kommentare des CEOs weichen von den Werten ab, die das Unternehmen betont.
Die Reaktion des CEOs spiegelt die Werte, für die das Unternehmen steht, nicht wider.
Die geäußerten Einstellungen des CEOs passen nicht zu den Wertversprechen des Unternehmens.
Es besteht eine deutliche Diskrepanz zwischen dem Verhalten des CEOs und den kommunizierten Werten des Unternehmens.

Wahrnehmung des CEOs

Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen über den im Szenario beschriebenen CEO zustimmen. (1 = Stimme überhaupt nicht zu, 5 = Stimme voll und ganz zu)

Moralische Verurteilung des CEO (CEO = Geschäftsführer des Unternehmens)
Das Verhalten des CEOs in diesem Szenario war moralisch falsch.
Die Handlungen des CEOs verletzten eindeutig wichtige moralische Normen.
Der CEO verhielt sich moralisch unangemessen.
Der CEO sollte moralisch für dieses Verhalten verantwortlich gemacht werden.
Der CEO trägt moralische Schuld an dem, was passiert ist.
Der CEO verdient moralische Kritik für sein Verhalten.
Das Verhalten des CEOs löst moralische Empörung bei mir aus.
Die Handlungen des CEOs machen mich wütend.
Ich fühle moralischen Ekel über das, was der CEO getan hat.

Meiner Meinung nach...
Der CEO verhält sich heuchlerisch.
Was der CEO sagt und was er tut, sind zwei unterschiedliche Dinge.
Der CEO gibt vor, jemand zu sein, der er nicht ist.
Der CEO tut genau das, was er sagt.
Der CEO hält seine Versprechen.
Der CEO setzt seine Worte in Taten um.

Wahrnehmung des CEOs (CEO = Geschäftsführer des Unternehmens)
Der CEO schafft einen Mehrwert für das Unternehmen.
Der CEO ist in der Lage, Investoren anzuziehen.
Der CEO ermöglicht es dem Unternehmen, erfolgreich zu konkurrieren.
Der CEO inspiriert andere.
Der CEO ist einflussreich und autoritativ.
Der CEO ist eine bekannte und sichtbare Persönlichkeit.
Der CEO zeigt starke Selbstdisziplin.

Der CEO ist in der Lage, Kritik anzunehmen.
Der CEO zeigt ein hohes Maß an Selbstkontrolle in der Öffentlichkeit.
Der CEO verhält sich moralisch.
Der CEO handelt ethisch.
Der CEO zeigt Empathie.
Der CEO ist flexibel im Umgang mit Herausforderungen.
Der CEO ist aufgeschlossen.
Der CEO ist ehrlich.
Der CEO handelt gesellschaftlich verantwortungsvoll.

Unternehmenswahrnehmung

Auf Grundlage des Szenarios: Wie nehmen Sie das Unternehmen wahr?
Bitte bewerten Sie das Unternehmen, indem Sie auf der folgenden Skala zwischen den beiden gegensätzlichen Begriffen wählen. Je weiter links oder rechts Sie klicken, desto stärker entspricht die Aussage Ihrer Einschätzung.

unattraktiv / attraktiv
schlecht / gut
unangenehm / angenehm
ungünstig / günstig
unsympathisch / sympathisch

Nachdem Sie das Szenario gelesen haben, geben Sie bitte an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen über das Unternehmen zustimmen.
(1 = stimme überhaupt nicht zu, 5 = stimme voll zu)

Die breite Öffentlichkeit würde die Handlungen und das Verhalten dieses Unternehmens gutheißen.
Die meisten Menschen würden die Geschäftspraktiken dieses Unternehmens als moralisch betrachten.
Die Arbeitsweise dieses Unternehmens fördert das Gemeinwohl.
Dieses Unternehmen ist bemüht, akzeptable Standards für ethisches Verhalten in seiner Branche einzuhalten.
Die Handlungen dieses Unternehmens erscheinen angemessen.

Stakeholder

Stellen Sie sich vor, Sie hätten eine persönliche Beziehung zu diesem Unternehmen (z. B. als Kund*in, Mitarbeiter*in, Investor*in, Zulieferer oder Betroffene*r). Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen zustimmen:

Ich würde mich nach diesem Vorfall von diesem Unternehmen distanzieren.
Ich würde mein Engagement oder meine Verbindung zu diesem Unternehmen reduzieren.
Ich wäre lieber nicht mehr mit diesem Unternehmen in Verbindung gebracht.
Ich würde in Betracht ziehen, meine Beziehung zu diesem Unternehmen zu beenden.
Ich würde Aktivitäten einstellen, die dieses Unternehmen unterstützen.
Ich würde zukünftige Interaktionen mit diesem Unternehmen vermeiden.
Ich würde diesem Unternehmen keine weitere Unterstützung gewähren.
Ich würde diesem Unternehmen nicht mehr zutrauen, verantwortungsvoll zu handeln.
Ich würde andere Personen davon abhalten, dieses Unternehmen zu unterstützen.

Sichtbarkeit

Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen zur Sichtbarkeit der Kommentare des CEO in diesem Szenario zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen. (1 = stimme überhaupt nicht zu, 5 = stimme voll und ganz zu)

Die Kommentare des CEOs würden von einer großen Anzahl von Menschen in den Medien gesehen werden.
Das Interview ist sehr sichtbar und schwer zu ignorieren.
Die Aussagen des CEOs würden sich vermutlich weit über Nachrichten und soziale Medien verbreiten.
Viele Menschen würden diesen Clip oder Zitate daraus wiederholt sehen.
Die Kommentare des CEOs würden erhebliche öffentliche Aufmerksamkeit auf sich ziehen.
Die Sichtbarkeit dieser Aussagen verstärkt ihre Wirkung darauf, wie Menschen die Situation interpretieren.

Medianartikel

BetterFood-CEO sorgt mit abfälligen Aussagen für Empörung — Kritiker sprechen von tiefgreifenden Führungsproblemen
BetterFood-CEO Daniel Verhoeven steht unter massivem öffentlichen Druck, nachdem er in einem Fernsehinterview die Sorgen über steigende Lebensmittelpreise herunterspielte und erklärte, Menschen müssten „ihre Prioritäten überdenken“, wenn sie sich gesunde Ernährung nicht leisten könnten.
Die Aussage — begleitet von einem ruhigen Tonfall und einem kurzen Lächeln — wirkte für viele wie eine moderne Variante von „Sollen sie doch Kuchen essen“.
Der historische Ausdruck gilt als Symbol elitärer Unwissenheit: Marie Antoinette soll angeblich vorgeschlagen haben, arme Menschen sollten Kuchen essen, wenn sie kein Brot hätten. Ob das

Zitat stimmt, ist historisch umstritten — doch es steht bis heute für Realitätsferne der Mächtigen. Genauso empfanden viele Verhoevens Kommentar.
Besonders brisant: BetterFood hat erst kürzlich die Preise für mehrere Produkte erhöht, obwohl das Unternehmen weiterhin „Erschwinglichkeit für alle“ bewirbt.
Mehrere Ökonominnen und Ökonomen wiesen zudem darauf hin, dass ein selbstgekochtes Abendessen häufig günstiger ist als BetterFoods Instant-Produkte, vor allem in Zeiten hoher Grundnahrungsmittelpreise. Vor diesem Hintergrund wirkte Verhoevens Hinweis, Verbraucher sollten „näher hinschauen, wofür sie ihr Geld ausgeben“, auf viele Beobachter besonders unsensibel.
Hinzu kommt, dass Verhoeven laut branchenüblichen Schätzungen seit Jahren zu den bestverdienenden CEOs Europas zählt und ein privates Vermögen in Millionenhöhe besitz — ein Detail, das in sozialen Medien immer wieder erwähnt wurde. Ein Nutzer kommentierte auf X: „Leicht gesagt, wenn man in einer Woche mehr verdient als viele Familien im ganzen Jahr für Lebensmittel.“ Ein anderer schrieb: „Menschen, die kaum über die Runden kommen, zu sagen, ihr Problem seien ‚falsche Prioritäten‘ — diese Realitätsferne ist unglaublich.“
Der Kontrast zu BetterFoods Markenversprechen fiel besonders negativ auf. Das Unternehmen wirbt seit Jahren für Fairness, Empathie und Zugänglichkeit — Werte, die in Verhoevens Aussagen kaum wiederzuerkennen waren. Viele Journalistinnen und Journalisten interpretierten seine Bemerkung, man könne nicht „für jede individuelle Lebenssituation Verantwortung übernehmen“, als Zeichen einer Führung, die den Bezug zur Lebensrealität der Verbraucher verloren hat.
Auch Verbraucherschützer äußerten deutliche Kritik: „Das ist nicht nur empathielos — das zeigt ein Führungsproblem“, sagte ein Brancheninsider. „Wenn ein CEO mit Millionengehalt denen, die kämpfen müssen, erklärt, wie sie sparen sollen, spricht das Bände über die Unternehmenskultur.“
In mehreren Leitartikeln wurde bereits spekuliert, ob der Vorfall langfristig die Glaubwürdigkeit der Marke beschädigen könnte. Eine Kolumnistin schrieb: „BetterFood verkauft Empathie in der Werbung, aber sein CEO verkauft Schuldzuweisungen.“
BetterFood veröffentlichte eine kurze Stellungnahme und erklärte, die Aussagen seien „aus dem Kontext gerissen“ worden. Verhoeven selbst äußerte sich bislang weder erklärend noch entschuldigend.
Während der Clip weiterhin kursiert — oft mit sarkastischen Untertiteln versehen — zeigt die Debatte keine Anzeichen des Abflauens. Für viele Beobachter könnte dieser Moment zu einem Wendepunkt werden, an dem BetterFoods Führung grundlegend neu bewertet wird.

Mediale Darstellung

Sie haben soeben einen Medienartikel über die Aussagen des CEOs gelesen. Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen darüber zustimmen, wie der Artikel den CEO und die Situation darstellt. (1 = stimme überhaupt nicht zu, 5 = stimme voll zu)

Der Artikel stellt die Aussagen des CEOs negativ oder kritisch dar.

Der Artikel rahmt die Aussagen des CEOs als moralisch unangemessen oder unsensibel.
Der Artikel legt nahe, dass der CEO für die Entstehung oder Verschärfung der Situation verantwortlich ist.
Der Artikel stellt die Bemerkungen des CEOs als Hinweis auf tiefere Probleme in der Führung oder in den Werten des Unternehmens dar.
Der Artikel betont Kontroversen, Konflikte oder Skandalaspekte im Zusammenhang mit den Aussagen des CEOs.
Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf den CEO als Hauptursache des Problems und nicht auf breitere Kontextfaktoren.

Demografie

Was ist Ihr Geschlecht? (Männlich; Weiblich; Nichtbinär; Keine Angabe)

Wie alt sind Sie?

Was ist ihre Nationalität?

Was ist ihr höchster Bildungsabschluss? *(Kein Schulabschluss; Hauptschulabschluss / Mittlere Reife; Abitur / Fachhochschulreife; Berufsausbildung / Lehre; Bachelorabschluss; Masterabschluss; Promotionsabschluss (PhD / Dr.; Sonstiges))*

Wie ist Ihr aktueller Beschäftigungsstatus? *(Angestellte/r; Selbstständig / Freiberuflich; Arbeitssuchend / derzeit ohne Beschäftigung; Schüler:in / Student:in; Rentner:in / Pensioniert; Nichterwerbstätig (z. B. Elternzeit, Hausarbeit))*

Wie hoch ist Ihr monatliches Nettoeinkommen? *(Unter 1.000 €; 1.000–1.999 €; 2.000–2.999 €; 3.000–3.999 €; 4.000–4.999 €; 5.000 € oder mehr; Möchte ich nicht angeben)*

Wie oft nutzen Sie soziale Medien (Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook)? (1 = nie … 5 = mehrmals täglich)

Wie häufig konsumieren Sie Nachrichten (TV, Online-News, Radio, Zeitung)? (1 = nie … 5 = mehrmals täglich)

Endtext:

Vielen Dank für Ihre Teilnahme!
Sie haben die Umfrage erfolgreich abgeschlossen.

Ihre Antworten wurden gespeichert und tragen wertvoll zur Forschung im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit bei.
Alle Daten bleiben selbstverständlich anonym und werden ausschließlich zu wissenschaftlichen Zwecken verwendet.
Falls Sie Fragen zur Studie haben oder weitere Informationen wünschen, können Sie mich jederzeit kontaktieren: viola.steierwald@student.hnu.de

Vielen Dank nochmals für Ihre Unterstützung und Ihre Zeit!

Appendix B3: Overview and Derivation of Constructs

Table B3: Overview and Derivation of Constructs

Construct	Construct Definition	Theoretical Origin	Original Scale / Concept	Adaptation Logic (What was done and why)	Final Measurement Focus
Perceived Emotional Misalignment	Stakeholders' perception that the CEO's emotional tone does not match situational expectations regarding appropriateness and severity during a crisis.	SCCT (Coombs, 2007); Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon, 1993); EASI Model (Van Kleef, 2009)	Emotional appropriateness and expectancy violation	Items were developed based on an integrated application of **Expectancy Violations Theory** (Burgoon, 1993), **Situational Crisis Communication Theory** (Coombs, 2007), and the **Emotions as Social Information (EASI) model** (Van Kleef, 2009). Expectancy Violations Theory posits that individuals hold clear expectations regarding appropriate emotional behavior of social actors, particularly leaders, and that deviations from these expectations trigger negative evaluations (Burgoon, 1993). Accordingly, several items assess whether the CEO's emotional tone deviates from what stakeholders would reasonably expect in a crisis situation. Situational Crisis Communication Theory emphasizes that crisis communication must be perceived as appropriate to protect organizational trust and reputation; emotionally inappropriate responses signal that the organization does not fully understand or take the crisis seriously (Coombs, 2007). Items reflecting emotional inappropriateness, inconsistency, and lack of situational fit were therefore included.	Perceived mismatch between CEO emotional tone and situational expectations

				The EASI model conceptualizes emotions as social information that observers use to infer seriousness, intentions, and moral stance of the communicator (Van Kleef, 2009). Based on this logic, additional items capture interpretations of emotional inconsistency, insincerity, or emotional detachment as cognitive consequences of perceived emotional misalignment. Together, the items operationalize **perceived emotional misalignment** as stakeholders' perception of a discrepancy between the CEO's expressed emotions and situationally expected emotional responses in a corporate crisis.	
Perceived CEO Responsibility Denial	Stakeholders' perception that the CEO avoids, minimizes, or deflects personal responsibility for the situation through communicative framing.	Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1986); SCCT (Coombs, 2007); Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995)	Responsibility attribution and denial strategies	Items were derived by integrating **Situational Crisis Communication Theory** (SCCT; Coombs, 2007), **Image Repair Theory** (IRT; Benoit, 1995), and **Attribution Theory** (Weiner, 1986). SCCT conceptualizes *denial strategies* as communicative responses in which responsibility is rejected, minimized, or shifted away from the organization or its representatives (Coombs, 2007). Accordingly, several items capture explicit denial of responsibility and avoidance of role acknowledgment, as well as perceived minimization of involvement and accountability. Image Repair Theory further distinguishes between **direct denial** and **indirect responsibility shifting**, emphasizing that audience perceptions of these strategies are central to reputational outcomes	Attribution of responsibility avoidance to the CEO

				(Benoit, 1995). Items were therefore included to measure both direct rejection of responsibility and indirect blame-shifting or self-excusing interpretations of the CEO's statements. Attribution Theory explains how stakeholders evaluate whether an actor is personally responsible or externalizes blame, which directly influences moral judgment and reputational assessments (Weiner, 1986). Items capturing responsibility shifting, deflection, and externalization reflect this attributional evaluation process. Together, the items operationalize **perceived CEO responsibility denial** as stakeholders' perception that the CEO denies, minimizes, distances himself from, or externalizes responsibility through crisis communication.	
Perceived Value Discrepancy	Perceived inconsistency between the CEO's statements and the organization's publicly communicated values.	Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995); Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984)	Value congruence / value fit	Items were developed based on **Legitimacy Theory** (Suchman, 1995), **Stakeholder Theory** (Freeman, 2001), and **Moral Framing** (Snow, 2019). Legitimacy Theory posits that organizations maintain legitimacy when their actions are perceived as consistent with publicly communicated values and norms (Suchman, 1995). Accordingly, several items capture perceived misalignment between the CEO's statements and the organization's espoused values, reflecting stakeholders' evaluations of value consistency.	Perceived misalignment between CEO communication and organizational values

				Stakeholder Theory emphasizes that organizational leaders are expected to embody and represent organizational values in their public communication (Freeman, 1984). Items therefore assess whether stakeholders perceive a violation of these expectations through divergence between CEO behavior and the values the organization claims to uphold. Moral Framing theory explains how values function as interpretive frames that guide stakeholders' moral interpretation of statements and actions (Snow & Benford, 1988). Items capturing divergence from emphasized values and misalignment with value commitments operationalize this deviation from the dominant moral frame. Legitimacy repair perspectives further suggest that perceived value discrepancies constitute a core trigger of legitimacy challenges, as they signal a breakdown between communicated ideals and observed behavior (Suchman, 1995). Items assessing noticeable discrepancies reflect this legitimacy-relevant gap. Together, the items operationalize **perceived value discrepancy** as stakeholders' perception that the CEO's communication fails to reflect the organization's publicly communicated values, without attributing moral intent or responsibility.	

CEO Moral Condemnation	Stakeholders' moral judgment that the CEO violated moral norms and deserves blame, accompanied by moral emotions such as anger or outrage.	Moral Judgment Theory (Malle, 2021);	Moral blame and moral emotions	Items were developed based on **Moral Judgment Theory** as articulated by **Malle (2021)**, who conceptualizes moral condemnation as comprising two core forms of moral judgment: **wrongness judgments** and **blame judgments**. According to Malle (2021), *wrongness judgments* evaluate whether a behavior constitutes an intentional violation of moral norms and serve to flag norm violations as morally impermissible. Several items therefore assess whether stakeholders perceive the CEO's conduct as morally wrong or norm-violating. *Moral blame judgments*, in contrast, evaluate whether the agent deserves moral responsibility, criticism, and social sanction. Malle emphasizes that blame judgments focus on the person rather than the act and fulfill a regulatory social function by assigning responsibility and justifying moral criticism. Accordingly, additional items capture perceptions that the CEO deserves blame, criticism, or moral responsibility for the situation. Because moral condemnation involves both judging an action as wrong and holding the actor morally responsible, the construct is operationalized by integrating both judgment types. Finally, emotional response items capture moral emotions such as anger, outrage, or disgust, which are commonly associated with moral blame and align with the affective and relational regulation functions of blame described by Malle (2021).	Moral evaluation and emotional condemnation of the CEO

				Together, the items operationalize **CEO moral condemnation** as a multidimensional construct encompassing moral wrongness, moral blame, and associated moral emotions directed toward the CEO.	
Perceived CEO Hypocrisy	Stakeholders' belief that the CEO's statements and actions are inconsistent or contradictory.	Corporate Hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009)	Say–do inconsistency	Items were adapted from the concept of **corporate hypocrisy** as developed by **Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz (2009)** and transferred to the level of individual CEO behavior. Wagner et al. (2009) conceptualize corporate hypocrisy as the perceived inconsistency between an organization's publicly communicated claims and its actual behavior, commonly described as a *say–do gap*. In this study, the underlying logic of hypocrisy was retained, but the analytical focus was shifted from the organization to the **CEO as the central communicative actor**. Accordingly, items were reworded by replacing references to the corporation with references to the CEO, allowing respondents to assess whether the CEO's statements and behavior are perceived as inconsistent, deceptive, or misaligned. This adaptation reflects the increasing personalization of corporate communication, where CEOs are perceived	Perceived inconsistency between CEO statements and behavior

				as representatives and embodiments of organizational values. The adapted items therefore operationalize **perceived CEO hypocrisy** as stakeholders' perception of a say–do inconsistency at the level of the CEO, consistent with the original theoretical framework proposed by Wagner et al. (2009).	
Negative CEO Perception	Overall unfavorable evaluation of the CEO's character, integrity, and moral conduct.	CEO Image & Leadership Perception (Stravinskienė et al., 2020)	CEO competence, integrity, and morality	Items were adapted from the **CEO Image** construct developed by **Stravinskienė et al. (2020)**, which is conceptually closely related to public perception and stakeholder evaluations of corporate leaders. The transfer of this measurement approach to **negative CEO perception** is theoretically appropriate, as both constructs focus on how stakeholders cognitively and evaluatively assess CEOs. The selected items cover central dimensions of CEO perception identified in the literature, including perceived leadership capability, moral integrity, empathy, self-control, and communicative behavior. The scale primarily integrates psychological, moral, and communicative characteristics, which research suggests are especially influential in shaping stakeholder judgments of CEOs during periods of heightened scrutiny. Items related to physical appearance or purely aesthetic attributes were deliberately excluded, as they are neither theoretically	Negative evaluation of CEO character and integrity

				relevant nor validly assessable within the present crisis scenario. All items were formulated in a neutral manner to avoid suggestive wording and response bias. Although the construct models negative CEO perception analytically, neutral item phrasing ensures an unbiased assessment of CEO evaluation and enhances the internal validity of the measurement.	
Corporate Legitimacy Erosion	Stakeholders' perception that the organization has lost moral appropriateness, normative approval, and societal acceptance following CEO communication.	Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995); Moral Legitimacy (Alexiou, 2019)	Moral legitimacy judgments	The operationalization of corporate legitimacy in this study is grounded in **Legitimacy Theory** as conceptualized by **Suchman (1995)**. Consistent with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, the measurement focuses exclusively on **moral legitimacy**, which refers to normative evaluations of whether organizational actions are perceived as morally appropriate and aligned with societal values. Measurement items were adapted from **Alexiou (2019)**, who builds directly on Suchman's (1995) legitimacy framework and provides an empirical operationalization of legitimacy judgments. Item wording was slightly adapted to fit the specific context of CEO-driven crisis communication examined in this study. **Cognitive legitimacy** was deliberately excluded, as it refers to taken-for-grantedness and comprehensibility rather than evaluative judgments, and is therefore not theoretically relevant for assessing legitimacy erosion triggered by controversial CEO communication.	Perceived erosion of corporate moral legitimacy

				Pragmatic legitimacy, although initially considered, was excluded during instrument refinement because it primarily concerns self-interested stakeholder evaluations of organizational utility, which are less central in the context of moral crisis triggers and CEO communication misalignment. Accordingly, the items operationalize **corporate legitimacy erosion** as stakeholders' perception of a loss of moral appropriateness and normative approval following the CEO's communication, consistent with the study's theoretical focus.	
Company Perception	Stakeholders' overall affective evaluation of the company following exposure to CEO communication.	Brand Attitude Framework (Spears & Singh, 2004)	Affective brand evaluation	The construct **company perception** was adapted from the **Brand Attitude** framework developed by **Spears and Singh (2004)**. Brand attitude captures individuals' overall evaluative judgment of a brand; analogously, company perception measures stakeholders' overall evaluative judgment of the organization as a whole. The original semantic differential items were retained in their conceptual meaning but linguistically adapted to the corporate context by replacing references to the "brand" with references to the "company." This ensures conceptual equivalence while maintaining the validity of the original measurement approach. Items related to **purchase intention**were deliberately excluded, as they capture behavioral intentions rather than evaluative perceptions and are therefore not part of the company perception construct.	Overall affective evaluation of the company

				To capture changes in company perception resulting from the crisis trigger, the items were measured **twice**: once immediately after the company introduction and once after exposure to the crisis scenario. This **pre–post measurement design** establishes a baseline level of company perception, allowing for a direct comparison between perceptions before and after the crisis. Without such a baseline, only post-crisis evaluations could be assessed, preventing conclusions about actual perceptual change attributable to the CEO's communication. Accordingly, the items operationalize **company perception** as stakeholders' overall evaluative judgment of the company and enable the empirical assessment of crisis-induced changes in this evaluation.	
Stakeholder Withdrawal Intentions	Stakeholders' intentions to distance themselves from, disengage from, or withdraw support from the organization.	Stakeholder Theory (Mitchell et al., 1997); SCCT (Coombs, 2007)	Behavioral disengagement intentions	Items were developed by integrating **Stakeholder Theory** (Mitchell etal. 1997), **crisis response and corporate misconduct research** (Coombs, 2007; Bundy et al., 2017), and **Moral Judgment Theory** (Malle, 2021). Stakeholder Theory posits that stakeholders maintain relationships with organizations as long as these relationships are perceived as legitimate, trustworthy, and aligned with their interests (Mitchell et al., 1997). Corporate crises or scandals undermine perceived legitimacy and typically trigger tendencies toward relational withdrawal. Accordingly, several items capture intentions to distance oneself from	Intentions to disengage from and withdraw support from the company

				the company or reduce relational involvement. Research on crisis response and corporate misconduct demonstrates that stakeholder reactions to perceived wrongdoing frequently include behavioral responses such as avoidance, exit, and withdrawal of support (Coombs, 2007; Bundy et al., 2017). Items were therefore included to measure concrete withdrawal intentions, such as avoiding future interactions or considering the termination of the relationship with the organization. Moral Judgment Theory further suggests that moral condemnation leads to trust erosion, social rejection, and disengagement from the condemned actor or organization (Malle, 2021). Items capturing loss of trust and withdrawal of support reflect this moral–relational consequence of perceived misconduct. Together, the items operationalize **stakeholder withdrawal intentions** as a multidimensional withdrawal process comprising **relational withdrawal** (distancing from the relationship), **behavioral withdrawal** (avoidance and exit intentions), and **support withdrawal** (loss of trust and refusal to provide support). A role-independent instruction ("Imagine you have a relationship with this company…") was used to elicit a generalized stakeholder perspective, allowing all participants to respond to the same measurement instrument.	

Perceived CEO Visibility	Stakeholders' perception of the extent to which the CEO's statements are publicly salient, widely disseminated, and repeatedly encountered.	Social Amplification of Risk Framework (Kasperson et al.); CEO Visibility (Rindova et al., 2006)	Media visibility and amplification	Items were developed based on the **Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF)**, complemented by research on **CEO visibility and public salience** (Rindova et al., 2006; Park & Berger, 2004) and the **visibility spiral in strategic communication** (Tsai & Men, 2016). The Social Amplification of Risk Framework conceptualizes visibility as a **multiplier** that increases the interpretive reach and emotional impact of communicative events by involving multiple amplification stations such as media outlets and social networks. Accordingly, several items capture the perceived reach and diffusion of the CEO's statements, reflecting their likelihood of being widely seen and repeatedly encountered. Research on visibility and celebrity CEOs highlights that high visibility generates **public salience**, meaning that statements attract disproportionate attention and become focal points of public interpretation (Rindova et al., 2006; Park & Berger, 2004). Items assessing significant public attention operationalize this salience effect. The visibility spiral further suggests that highly visible CEO communication becomes difficult to ignore, as repeated exposure across platforms increases perceived importance and interpretive pressure (Tsai & Men, 2016). This logic is reflected in items measuring the perceived unavoidability of the CEO's remarks. Finally, SARF emphasizes that increased visibility amplifies the **impact** of	Perceived salience and amplification of CEO communication

				communication by expanding the number of interpretive and emotional amplification processes. An additional item therefore captures the perceived strengthening of interpretive impact resulting from heightened visibility. Together, the items operationalize **perceived CEO visibility** as the extent to which the CEO's communication is widely disseminated, publicly salient, difficult to ignore, and amplified in its interpretive and emotional impact.	
Perceived Media Framing	Stakeholders' perception that media coverage frames the CEO and the situation in a critical, moralizing, and personalized manner.	Framing Theory (Entman, 1993); Media Personalization (Iyengar, 1991)	Media framing and personalization	Items were developed based on **Framing Theory** (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) and research on **media personalization and scandal framing** (Iyengar, 1991; Bennett, 2012). Media coverage in crisis contexts selectively emphasizes individual actors, moralizes statements, and frames CEO behavior as indicative of broader organizational problems. Items capture the extent to which the article personalizes responsibility, frames the CEO's statements in moral terms, portrays the remarks as symbolic evidence of organizational failure, and emphasizes controversy or scandal. Consistent with the **Social Amplification of Risk Framework** (Kasperson et al., 1988), the items reflect how media framing amplifies and recontextualizes CEO communication before it is perceived by stakeholders. Together, the items operationalize **perceived media framing** as stakeholders' perception of selective, moralizing, and	Perceived moralizing and personalized media framing

				personalized media coverage that intensifies interpretation of the CEO's statements.	

Appendix C: Quantitative Results Documentation

Appendix C1: Reliability Statistics

Table C1: Reliability Statistics

Construct	Cronbach’s Alpha
Emotional misalignment	.893
Responsibility denial	.913
Value discrepancy	.942
Moral condemnation of the CEO	.956
CEO hypocrisy	.843
CEO perception	.908
Company perception (pre)	.878
Company perception (post)	.922
Corporate legitimacy (pre)	.787
Corporate legitimacy (post)	.888
Stakeholder withdrawal intentions	.961
Perceived Visibility	.889
Media framing	.768

Appendix C2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Table C2: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional misalignment	172	1,00	5,00	3,9186	,75698
Responsibility denial	172	1,38	5,00	3,9513	,78645
Value discrepancy	172	1,83	5,00	4,1609	,80202
Moral condemnation of the CEO	172	1,00	5,00	3,3798	1,02787
CEO hypocrisy	172	1,17	5,00	3,4787	,78020
CEO perception	172	1,13	4,25	2,4400	,61529
Company perception (pre)	172	1,00	5,00	4,2616	,68819
Company perception (post)	172	1,00	5,00	2,5105	,89057
Corporate legitimacy (pre)	172	1,60	5,00	4,2326	,51491
Corporate legitimacy (post)	172	1,00	5,00	2,4047	,81333
Stakeholder withdrawal intentions	172	1,00	5,00	3,3256	,99305

Perceived Visibility	172	1,83	5,00	4,0097	,72541
Media framing	172	2,00	5,00	4,1609	,56336
Valid N (listwise)	172				

Appendix D: Digital Supplementary Materials (ZIP Archive)

The following materials are provided in a separate ZIP archive submitted together with this thesis:

Appendix D1: Case materials (not coded)

PDF files documenting the five CEO-centered crisis cases (Astronomer – Andy Byron; BP – Tony Hayward; Kellogg's – Gary Pilnick; Tesla – Elon Musk; Uber – Travis Kalanick).

Appendix D2: Qualitative analysis project file

ATLAS.ti project file (Master_Thesis_VS.atlasti) containing coded qualitative materials.

Appendix D3: Quantitative dataset and analysis files (SPSS)

Contains cleaned dataset (Dataset_Cleaned.sav), regression and moderation result files (Results_without_moderation.spv; Results_Moderation_Visibility.spv; Results_Moderation_MediaFraming.spv), and analysis syntax (Syntax_Thesis.sps).

Appendix D4: Literature with highlights

Contains the annotated literature files used during the research process.

All files are organized in clearly labeled folders to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the analyses.

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that I have composed the present thesis independently and without the use of any sources or aids other than those properly cited. Sentences or parts of sentences quoted verbatim are clearly marked as such; all other references regarding statements and scope are fully indicated by complete bibliographic details.

In the preparation of this thesis, I made limited use of AI-based tools for language refinement, structural suggestions, and phrasing support. The conceptual development, research design, analysis, interpretation of results, and overall argumentation are entirely my own.

This thesis has not been submitted in the same or similar form to any examination body and has not been published. It has not, even in part, been used in another examination or as part of any course requirement.

Karlsruhe, 01.03.2026

Place, Date

Signature