

# TazeDirekt.com: Branding charm or operational basics?

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*Selcen Ozturkcan<sup>1</sup> and Deniz Tuncalp<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden, <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Management, Istanbul Technical University, Turkey

## 4.1 Introduction

In December 2015, Hasan Aslanoba, the founder of TazeDirekt, a loved online grocery e-tailer brand (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012), announced that plans for the year 2016 involved 700% growth in Turkey (Demirel, 2015). However, only a few months later, in February 2016, news broke of the sudden closure of the company (Kutsal, 2016), and subsequently of its acquisition by the Migros retail store chain in November 2017. This case study describes the rise and fall of TazeDirekt, analyzes the reasons for its failure, and explains how the scaling up of a venture is never enough. All start-ups, including e-tailers—and contrary to what many start-up entrepreneurs seem to believe—are dependent on favorable unit economics and require sound business practice for survival.

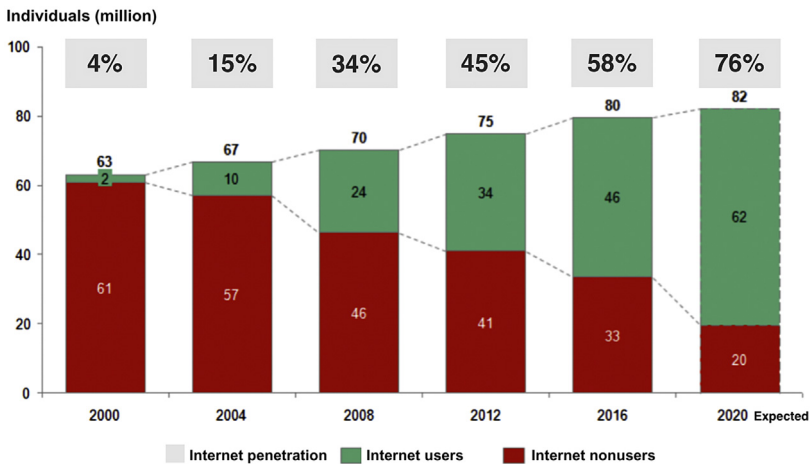
TazeDirekt had “cloned” aspects of US online retailer *FreshDirect.com*’s operations to Turkey, bearing a very similar name and faced with growing e-commerce demand from the Turkish market. Like FreshDirect, TazeDirekt were e-tailing organic, genetic-modification-free food from small, local producers, like Makarna Lütfen, Gündoğdu Peynirleri, and Tire Süt Kooperatifi, providing them directly to a medium-to-high income consumer segment, consisting of health-conscious and gourmet individuals in three big Turkish cities (Istanbul, Ankara, Bursa). Besides sourcing from local producers, TazeDirekt was also selling eggs, chickens, and other meat products from Mr. Aslanoba’s massive farm in Boğazköy, Bursa (Fig. 4.1). The ownership of the farm provided TazeDirekt with an excellent opportunity to better manage the quality of its meat products, as they were coming from the naturally grown and grass-fed animals of this farm. As e-commerce in Turkey grows, TazeDirekt’s business value had the potential to achieve significant growth as an early mover.

## 4.2 Online retailing in Turkey

Regarding internet penetration, Turkey was lagging behind the United States, where the penetration was around 80% among households as early as 2001. There were



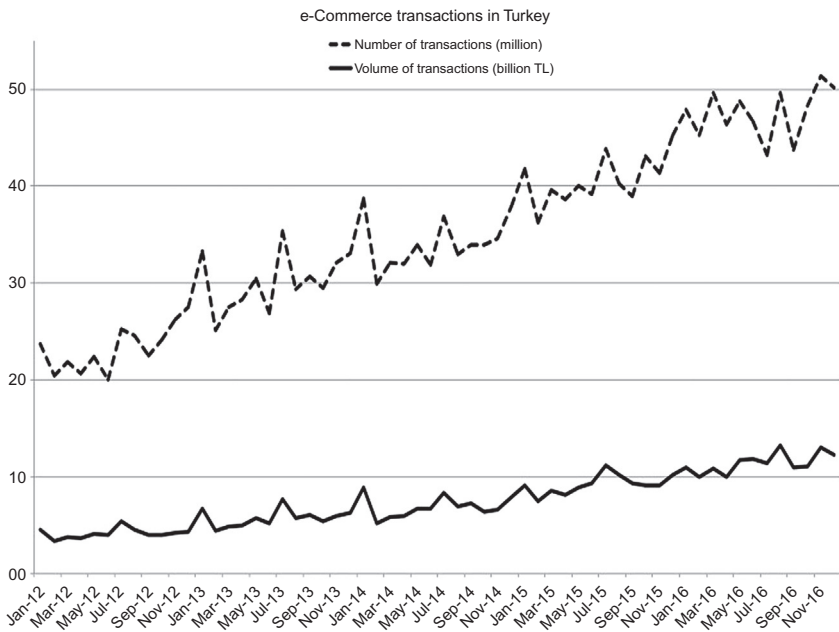
**Figure 4.1** Aslanoba Farm in Boğazköy, Bursa, Turkey.



**Figure 4.2** Penetration of the internet in Turkey.

Source: [BKM \(2017\)](#).

around 46 million internet users in Turkey in 2016, which amounted to only 58% penetration (Fig. 4.2), indicating considerable potential into the future. e-Commerce in Turkey reached USD4.96 billion [17.5 billion Turkish Lira (TL)] in 2016, growing 34% in the 3 years to this point (Fig. 4.3). However, the ratio of the online retailing remained only at 3.5% of the overall retail market, which fell behind the world average of 8.5%. By contrast, the 65% penetration of smartphones in Turkey exceeded the world average of 60%. Despite the high smartphone penetration, the share of mobile commerce lingered around 19%, while the world average was 44%. The major e-commerce verticals in the Turkish market included pure-play retailing,



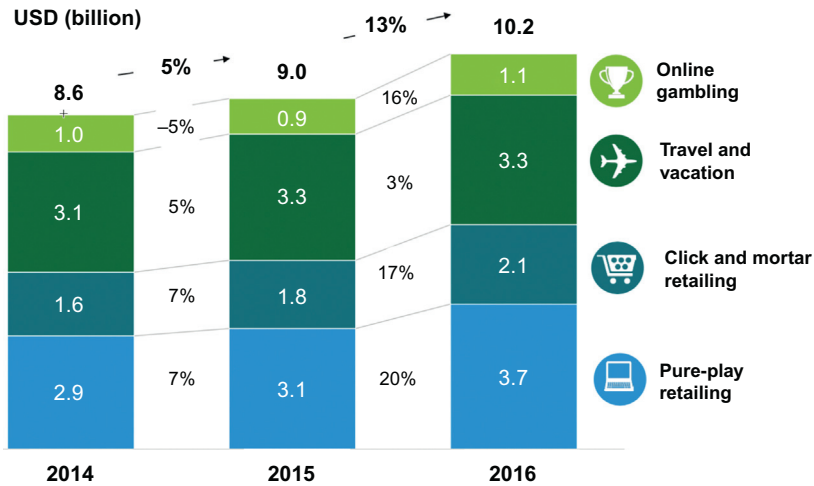
**Figure 4.3** e-Commerce transactions in Turkey.

Source: [BKM \(2017\)](#).

travel and vacation, clicks-and-mortar retailing, and online gambling, in their respective order of size (Fig. 4.4). Among these four sectors, pure-play retailing captured the highest annual growth of 7% and 20% in the years 2015 and 2016, respectively.

Shoppers across the globe value online-shopping due to its convenience; however, most Turkish consumers value online-shopping primarily and predominantly for the availability of lower prices. Only one out of every three Turkish consumers chose to complete her/his shopping online, while 25% of those online shoppers often complain about after-sales service ([Kantarçı, Özalp, Sezginsoy, Özaşkinli, & Cavlak, 2017](#)). The most common problems that shoppers encounter are prolonged delivery times and the delivery of damaged or wrong goods. When internet users are considered, again only one in every three internet users has shopped online in Turkey ([TUIK, 2016](#)). According to Interbank Card Center, 36% of online shoppers are between 25 and 34 years of age, which is followed by 32%, 24%, and 18% of online shoppers that are 18–24, 35–44, and 45–54 years of age, respectively [Canko \(2015\)](#). While lack of trust has been listed as a primary concern in choosing not to shop online ([Canko \(2015\)](#)), there is significant potential for growth for e-tailers, both food and non-food, if they can solve these problems in the eyes of their customers.

Previous research indicated that the average food expense of consumers in Turkey was USD306 (TL555) per month in 2012. As the tendency to spend more



**Figure 4.4** Major e-commerce verticals in Turkey.  
 Source: TÜBİSAD (2017).

money on food has increased, the inclination to perceive e-retailing as a reliable option has also improved (Sayılı & Büyükoğlu, 2012), giving a positive outlook for an online grocery offer.

### 4.3 Scale up to survive?

In 2014, using funds from the 2006 sale of the successful bottled water production brand that his family created in the 1960s, Mr. Aslanoba established a new brand named TazeDirekt for online food retailing (Fig. 4.5). He had initiated organic farming, an online logistics auction and optimization infrastructure, and livestock production in the years 2008, 2011, and 2013, respectively. These preparations had provided the necessary steps toward TazeDirekt's launch in 2014.

Mr. Aslanoba hoped that his new e-tailing business could revolutionize the food retail and distribution industry in Turkey, delivering a wide variety of food products directly to consumers (Fig. 4.6) and offering personalization through the intensive use of technology. Previous research indicated that online grocery shopping could involve several advantages, such as: convenience, access to the broader product range, and price-based shopping—despite the fear of receiving inferior quality delivered goods from online grocery providers and a reduced leisure dimension of shopping that might be inherent in bricks-and-mortar retail alternatives (Ramus & Nielsen, 2005). In line with these research findings, TazeDirekt offered a comfortable online shopping experience with the promise of next day delivery of a wide variety of perfectly conditioned food products.



**Figure 4.5** TazeDirekt.

Source: <https://www.tazedirekt.com/>.



**Figure 4.6** A selection of TazeDirekt.com products.

Mr. Aslanoba began to undertake fully certified organic farming with plans to launch TazeDirekt in the next 3–4 years. Livestock production at the 15,000 m<sup>2</sup> Bursa facility and the gigantic warehouse and operations center in Mustafakemalpaşa (Bursa) were all planned steps toward realizing TazeDirekt. Last, but not least, a fully equipped cold logistics chain was built for TazeDirekt. All in all, Mr. Aslanoba had undertaken an investment of USD35 million to provide most integrated elements of the value chain in-house, which included breeding

farms as well as meat shredding and packaging facilities (Gökbayrak, 2016). Hence, TazeDirekt was not starting as a small start-up but as an investment-heavy venture that ensured high service levels and superior product quality from the start. Part of this effort went into preparing a fully automated and integrated order processing and fulfillment system based on SAP enterprise resource planning software, across various entities of its value chain.

TazeDirekt had aimed to remove all intermediaries and to become a vertically integrated online retailer, controlling the end-to-end value chain by bringing food products directly from its farms to its customers' kitchens (Descartes, 2014). In addition to food production and logistics, almost every function was handled in-house, including software design, search engine optimization, social media management, and call center operations. The company had more than 300 employees to handle deliveries every weekday. Around 40% of all orders were placed via TazeDirekt's mobile app. There were some 1,500 visitors to both its website and mobile application, and, on average, 5% of visitors had placed an order (Demirel, 2016). Most new customers came with a friend referral, making word-of-mouth crucial for TazeDirekt's customer base expansion. TazeDirekt had reached approximately 1,300 daily orders by around 1 year into its launch. It had reached monthly revenues of USD617,000 (TL1.8 million) by December 2015 and was growing 30% in revenue every month.

### **4.3.1 The magic or the curse**

Although growth is considered the ultimate ideal for many start-ups, the fast-growing operations of TazeDirekt were indeed its curse. There was long-term high growth for TazeDirekt, which may have attracted an endless venture capital (VC) investment in another start-up ecosystem like San Francisco, where scaling seems to be the ultimate objective. However, in Turkey, there was no such VC money. Mr. Aslanoba was the top "angel" with the highest number of investments in the country. An endless stream of entrepreneurs was trying to reach him to get an opportunity to pitch. Likewise, he required more than a hopeful story to continue investing in his venture.

The market demand for online grocery was rising, and it had to be fulfilled either by TazeDirekt or by its many competitors, like [tazemasa.com](http://tazemasa.com) or [memlekettengelsin.com](http://memlekettengelsin.com). Hence, TazeDirekt could not risk ignoring the fast-growing demand in the market. However, fast-scaling also brought higher costs to the company. For sustainable growth, TazeDirekt had to provide organic food certifications and enhance its cost structure by improving its product variety, geographical expansion, logistics, and digital marketing.

### **4.3.2 Organic food certifications: costs and benefits**

Most Turkish consumers assumed that buying food directly from a producer was the best way possible to ensure good quality, which often included significant assumptions about organic farming. Perception-wise, buying from remotely located



producers, or if not from the weekly producer markets in the nearby neighborhoods, was considered the best alternative one could have for accessing organic and healthy food products traditionally. The tradition brought several challenges for organic producers including TazeDirekt. The certification process for organic produce was costly. Organic food certification had to be explained to consumers in detail, to address their misconceptions and misinterpretations of organic food. TazeDirekt, on the other hand, had a minimalist design for its private-label product packages which opted for brief product descriptions that limited any efforts in conveying information about the certifications obtained. Therefore, even though certification-related costs were already incurred, the associated benefits were mostly underutilized, particularly in justifying the marginally higher price tags. Small product labels that include little information could not include details of certifications. Labeling with certification information could have proved particularly important for encouraging hesitant first-time shoppers to purchase the product. On some online customer communities, some of the customers started questioning whether the products on TazeDirekt were organic, with valid certification, despite their high prices (SikayetVar, 2015b). The company was at first reluctant to respond to these issues, but in the end they provided detailed accounts of audit reports and organic certificates, particularly when the complaints grew and the company started to receive more extensive attention.

### **4.3.3 Product variety**

TazeDirekt began its operation by offering fresh vegetables, fruits, and dairy and meat products. All these products were produced, sold, and delivered by TazeDirekt. To expand its product variety, TazeDirekt also began selling other products that were not necessarily organic. For example, they added local producers' selected products and vegetable dishes to the product range, which did not directly contradict the value proposition. However, to be able to offer full service, like competing supermarkets, they also added regular products that could have been found in any supermarket, potentially weakening their market position.

Increasing product variety with third-party products had also brought numerous managerial difficulties, further increasing the costs of quality control, service, and supply-chain management. It also put the company in a comparable position with supermarket chains like Macro Center (part of the Migros group), Gourmet Garage, Eataly, and also the medium-to-high segment Migros chain. Availability of select third-party products on TazeDirekt made price comparisons more accessible for consumers; and TazeDirekt were 20%–30% more expensive, due to the company's smaller size, higher cost structure, and affluent positioning.

### **4.3.4 Geographical expansion and logistics**

Many grocery e-tail start-ups have been faced with “the last mile” problem, which refers to difficulties transporting goods to their ultimate destination. This has



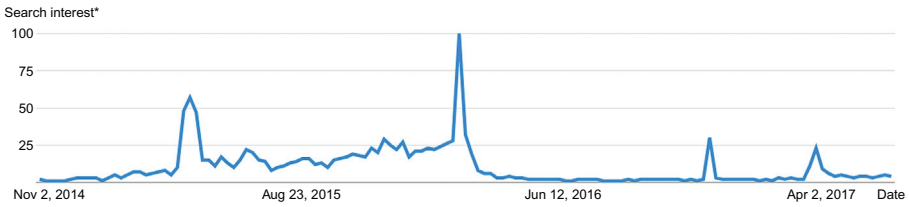


As the fourth largest city in Turkey with 3 million people, Bursa seemed to provide an available market opportunity, where the proximity of delivery addresses to production sites enabled better logistics operations, especially for perishable products. However, nearby Istanbul also represented an outstanding opportunity with 15 million residents, hosting nearly 20% of the Turkish population. TazeDirekt's management decided to expand its operations not only to Istanbul, but also to Ankara, Izmir, and Balıkesir; cities with populations of 5.3 million, 4.2 million, and 1.2 million, respectively.

However, this geographic expansion involved numerous challenges for TazeDirekt. First of all, while these cities are big, their populations have been dispersed across a more extensive geographical area, unlike New York City. For example, Istanbul's urban area holds 15 million people in 1,539 km<sup>2</sup>, whereas New York City has some 8.5 million people in just 789 km<sup>2</sup>. Sometimes, finding an address becomes a daunting and time-consuming task (SikayetVar, 2016). Second, while Balıkesir is relatively close, Ankara and Istanbul are far away from the main operation center of TazeDirekt in Bursa. Therefore, to expand into these cities, the company had to incur the costs and other burdens of long-haul logistics. The distance between these cities not only increased operational costs and lowered delivery speed but also limited the shelf life of freshly prepared products (SikayetVar, 2015a). Thirdly, there is also intense competition for attracting organic food demand. In general, many consumers choose to connect directly with rural farmers from different parts of the country. Some farmers and producers were also running online websites that shipped fresh produce to consumers by post to big cities weekly. Especially in Ankara and Istanbul, gourmet supermarkets with organic food options and organic produce shops have been located in many neighborhoods. Most of these supermarket chains and produce shops also provide home delivery for their customers. Furthermore, farmers' markets and organic food markets were available in many different urban locations periodically. Therefore, attracting demand was not an easy task.

### **4.3.5 Digital marketing**

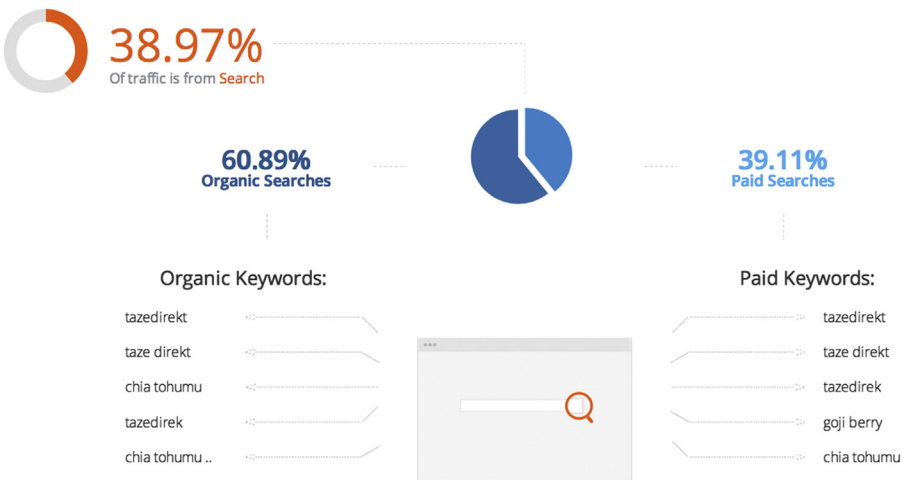
As a pure-play online retailer, TazeDirekt heavily relied on digital marketing practices to reach its target customers. It was crucial to appear—if possible with a high ranking—on the listed results of the search engine inquiries involving specific keywords that were related to TazeDirekt's offers. Google Trend analysis of the keyword "TazeDirekt" suggests that steady growth was captured in internet searches from Turkey (Fig. 4.8). As of February 25, 2016, a few days after the shutdown of business, Tazedirekt.com ranked 87,209 globally and 2,945 nationally on Alexa.com, a popular website ranking service. In the last 3 months, it had 445,000 total visitors that had spent around 3.05 minutes on the site to view 3.9 pages, on average. Among these visitors, 98% of them were from Turkey. Most desktop visitors landed on TazeDirekt's homepage through a search engine (Fig. 4.9) (39%) or directly (36.6%). Traffic due to referrals and social media were 12.9% and 9.1%, respectively. Facebook



\* Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. Likewise a score of 0 means the term was less than 1% as popular as the peak.

**Figure 4.8** Tazedirekt keyword search on Google Trends.

Source: Compiled by the authors via <https://trends.google.com/>.



**Figure 4.9** Tazedirekt internet search breakdown.

Source: Compiled by the authors via <https://trends.google.com/>.

(88.3%) drove the majority of TazeDirekt's social media traffic, while Twitter (9.9%), YouTube (1.1%), Google Plus (0.6%), and Pinterest (0.1%) only marginally contributed.

## 4.4 An abrupt closure

FreshDirect.com had been a successful business in its home market in the New York metropolitan area. Details of its business model had been widely discussed and shared within business circles (Bruno, 2010; Cruz, 2013; Forbes, 2006; Laseter et al., 2003). Previously, cloning and translating working business models from the United States to Turkey had proven to be successful for many others, such as

Trendyol.com's adaptation of private shopping site Gilt.com (BusinessInsider, 2011) since 2010, or Gittigidiyor.com's cloning of the peer-to-peer marketplace Ebay.com (Rao, 2011) since 2000. However, the economics were not working out for TazeDirekt. The company's prices were, of course, higher than the market average, as the products were of higher quality. However, the price markup was not enough to cover the additional cost of providing superior quality products and prime customer service. They tried to increase the prices of some of the items further to compensate for overheads and other indirect costs. However, this had limited success.

TazeDirekt had tried to scale up with aggressive marketing promotions for customer acquisition and retention. For example, the company was providing a USD20 (TL50) welcome promotion for all new registrants on the website and sending large rebate coupons with every order. It was also offering free shipping together with unusual gifts like small pots of strawberry plants or lemongrass for returning customers in order to increase satisfaction and "stickiness." The drop experienced in operational unit costs was not enough to satisfy Mr. Aslanoba, and there were no signs of near-term improvement in sight (Kara, 2016). The maintenance and opportunity cost of the vast Boğazköy farm of the founder, as well as the production and logistics costs of farming produce, were not decreasing significantly with the scale of operations. The costs of aggregating local producers, imposing quality controls, and delivering them to customers' doors in three major cities as early as the next day was not a simple business. The revenues were increasing approximately 30% monthly in the last 5 months of trading (Hürriyet, 2016), but costs were also increasing almost as fast, leading to an unsustainable financial bottom line. As Mr. Aslanoba stated:

*If I saw we could make our monthly USD2.84 million (TL10 million) revenue target for December 2016 without burning too much money, I would continue. However, there was a great difference between our budgeted and realized loss, and it is not getting any smaller. Especially in our order processing, especially for grocery preparation, we had high levels of grocery waste, eating up our margins. To achieve manageable unit costs for distribution, we needed to be 7–8 times larger scale (Kara, 2016).*

Hence, TazeDirekt suddenly announced the closure of the business at 12:31 p.m. on February 18, 2016, declaring a significant failure of the business model. This was followed almost immediately by closure of the e-tailer website at 1:10 p.m., ceasing its operations overnight (Kutsal, 2016). The statement released to news agencies read:

*We launched TazeDirekt in December 2014 as we followed our dream of providing access to healthy food for everyone. Since that first day, we believed in what we have worked out. We became a large family with you and the TazeDirekt team. We held each other. We grew, learned as we grew, and shared as we learned.*

*Our belief and heartfelt love for TazeDirekt grew every day. We want to be sincere with you in sharing a recent decision. Today we are going to close TazeDirekt due to market conditions and operational balances. We are deeply saddened as we end pursuing our dream, and get to leave you. We thank you for sharing our dreams, holding our hands. We wish to meet somewhere again. Always stay fresh. Thank you so much for keeping us on this path! Hope to meet somewhere again. Always stay fresh. Sincerely, TazeDirekt Family (Akgün, 2016).*

## 4.5 Reopening: a revival or a masquerade?

In November 2016, Migros, one of the largest multibrand bricks-and-mortar retail store chains in Turkey officially announced that they had purchased the TazeDirekt brand and its online assets. It was big news, as Migros was one of the most important brands in organized retailing in Turkey, with 1,527 “Migros” supermarket stores in 73 cities and 39 “Macro” gourmet supermarket stores in 5 cities, as of December 2016. It had been selected as a “lovemark” (Roberts, 2006) nine times in the supermarket category in 2016 by Ipsos and the Quality Association of Turkey, and was reported as having the highest customer loyalty in its category (Migros, 2016). The Migros ownership also meant strong financial backing, as it belonged to the Anadolu Group, a prominent Turkish industrial conglomerate with operations in 80 companies, across 19 countries, and with 61 production facilities and more than 50,000 employees (AnadoluGroup, 2017).

With this acquisition, Migros was able to complement its existing online retail presence on [sanalmarket.com.tr](http://sanalmarket.com.tr) (established in 1997) and [online.macrocenter.com.tr](http://online.macrocenter.com.tr) (established in 2005) with TazeDirekt (Migros, 2016). Migros ownership could mean an essential logistics advantage to TazeDirekt. For example, the Migros online brand, [sanalmarket.com](http://sanalmarket.com), had been serving 24 cities integrated with 102 of the Migros stores (Migros, 2016). The same strategy could also apply to TazeDirekt for Macro and Migros stores. The relaunched TazeDirekt was expected to limit its product range to items sold in the Migros and Macro supermarkets, significantly decreasing the logistics variability and production costs that formerly pushed TazeDirekt out of business. Macro had been selling some organic and gourmet products as well, but it was not its sole offering.

The site was relaunched to customers on March 21, 2017. The renewed TazeDirekt would not be able to focus on organic food and superior meat products strictly. Hence it would necessarily lose its original value proposition. The Boğazköy farm’s products would no longer be available on the site, but instead, the brands of global producers would be offered, as the product range needed to match the existing Macro offer. The distribution would be scaled down to cover only Istanbul, and shipping would no longer be free for orders below USD55 (TL200). Despite the limited relaunch of TazeDirekt, Macro already had excellent accessibility to the consumer grocery market, especially in wealthy neighborhoods with its 40 stores in the 5 most prominent cities of Turkey, together with its online e-tail

operations. Since Macro Online would continue its existing operations, TazeDirekt's relaunch would primarily be an additional sales channel.

As the value chain of Macro would assume operational costs, TazeDirekt may become sustainable with favorable bottom line results this time around. However, some questions remain:

- What will customers make of the revised value proposition?
- Will the quality and the experience of Macro suffice to fulfill the previously pampered TazeDirekt customers?
- How many previous TazeDirekt customers will return to the relaunched site?
- To what extent will Macro Center Online and TazeDirekt cannibalize each other?
- When earlier TazeDirekt customers, who were fully aware of the relaunch story and the difference between the old site and the new site, are considered, will they order from the relaunched TazeDirekt instead of preferring the online or physical stores of Macro or Migros?

## 4.6 Conclusion

The causes, factors, and people to blame for such failures have long been subject to scrutiny (Pal, Medway, & Byrom, 2011; Shaver, 1985). When did TazeDirekt management know of the forthcoming failure? How could TazeDirekt interpret the weak financials and the high-cost figures during the scale-up execution? To what extent did TazeDirekt's location selection and expansion strategy lead to the failure? Could this failure have been identified earlier with specific online retail key performance indicators (KPIs) and have been avoided with different policies?

TazeDirekt's closure in 2016 has been a monumental failure for the food retailing and distribution industry and the start-up ecosystem of Turkey. It proved that food e-tailers are also prone to the basic rules of economics and sound business practice. Creating a "lovemark" of superior quality that has differentiated marketing and a "high-touch" consumer experience would not be enough for sustained performance, without creating a supportive operational infrastructure and a matching business model. Cloning a successful start-up would never be enough to ensure success. A business model and a retail marketing strategy that are successful in one specific context may not be readily transferable to other locations.

TazeDirekt served as a "poster child" for issues involved with the get-big-fast philosophy. This case has aimed to show how establishing sound business processes is critical for start-ups in the medium-to-long run. Effective and efficient logistics and other vital business processes are crucial in realizing an intended value proposition. For food e-tailing, logistics, quality management, the warehousing of perishables, and the analytics of product range, delivery routes and scheduling, are all critical for success. Optimization of these factors and their mutual fit to company policies during the execution phase is essential if problems like "the last mile" are to be avoided and the relevant costs of growth and customer service are to be managed.

Tanskanen, Yryola, and Holmstron (2002) argue that e-grocery should be a complementary channel for supermarkets, rather than a pure-play substitute. TazeDirekt's acquisition by Migros evolved parallel to this recommendation. Naturally, when two business models are combined, store-based order fulfillment becomes feasible, and the e-tailer can avoid investing in new logistical and operational facilities near customers, which can help retailers to utilize their existing resources better enabling them to expand quickly to larger geographies (Fernie, Fernie, & Kinnon, 2014). However, the long-term sustainability of this model is also questionable, as the priorities of the two channels and two consumer groups conflict, especially in order picking and fulfillment.

At the stage of final delivery to the home, significant challenges continue that require both pure and hybrid e-tailers to find a balance between convenience and cost. For example, Amazon plans to deliver purchases to consumers inside their homes even when they are away, whereas Walmart even plans to put groceries inside customers' fridges (Harris, 2017), thereby providing superior value and looking to overcome part of the last mile problem. Besides these home access alternatives, there are now widespread examples of delivery to reception boxes and collection points across the world (Fernie et al., 2014). As e-tailers are providing new technological innovations and optimized business processes, and whilst the next generation of internet-native consumers are entering the market, pure online e-grocery retailing may become widespread in different parts of the world.

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