Special Issue: Organizational Frontlines

Crisis-Induced Service Decline Rationalization (CISDR): Reconfiguring Organizational Frontlines in Extreme Contexts

Journal of Service Research
1–21

DOI: 10.1177/10946705261471935
journals.sagepub.com/home/jsr
Sage

Ali B. Mahmoud[1], V. Kumar[2,3], Leonora Fuxman[4], Suraksha Gupta[5], Alexander Berman[4], William D. Reisel[4], and Abraham Stefanidis[4]

Abstract

Service quality and crisis communication are central to how organizations navigate extreme contexts, yet crisis conditions often expose weaknesses in frontline delivery and messaging. We investigate how businesses rationalize service reductions during crises and how these decisions shape public perceptions of fairness, trust, and legitimacy, especially when reductions are viewed as opportunistic behavior rather than necessary operational adjustments. We introduce the concept of crisis-induced service decline rationalization, which refers to the use of crisis language to justify sustained reductions in service availability, quality, or transparency. We further examine consumer responses to this practice. Drawing on thematic, sentiment, and emotion analyses of public commentary on social media ($N = 2,371$), we identified four key themes: (1) *inconsistent frontline policies and communication*, (2) *perceived opportunism in frontline service reductions*, (3) *operational failures and declining frontline reliability*, and (4) *customer frustration with frontline access and experience constraints*. Grounded in situational crisis communication theory and supported by stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory, we identify four corresponding frontline mismatches (rule–coherence, motive, capability–promise, and access–fairness) that help explain how crisis enactments may be interpreted through specific consumer attributions and emotional responses. These micro-level mismatches may accumulate into macro-level risks to trust and legitimacy. We advance new, mechanism-based propositions on how specific frontline missteps are associated with motive, competence, and fairness attributions that shape stakeholder relationships, offering both theoretical extensions and practical guidance via actionable mitigation protocols and legitimacy-monitoring metrics for managing organizational frontlines during high-stress disruptions. The study responds to calls for crisis-driven service research that centers on consumer distrust, perceived opportunism, perceived injustice, and well-being to advance understanding of frontline service management in extreme contexts.

Keywords

CISDR, frontline service quality, crisis communication failures, trust erosion and legitimacy loss, and consumer well-being and perceived injustice in extreme contexts

Introduction

Extreme contexts, such as global health emergencies, natural disasters, and severe economic shocks, disrupt core business operations, challenge service delivery, and reshape how organizations engage with stakeholders (Mahmoud et al. 2026). These disruptions expose weaknesses at the frontline, particularly in how businesses maintain service execution and manage crisis communication during periods of uncertainty (Parkinson et al. 2021). Established models, such as situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs 2022), provide useful starting points for understanding these challenges (Azzari et al. 2021; Mende et al. 2023). SCCT outlines how organizations can communicate effectively to manage public attributions of responsibility during crises (Coombs 2022). Yet, extreme contexts often place frameworks under pressure, raising important questions about how businesses uphold service standards and trust when usual operations break down (Mahmoud, Reisel, et al. 2022). In this study, SCCT provides the central explanatory lens linking frontline decisions and messages to stakeholder attributions and emotions; stakeholder and legitimacy perspectives serve as secondary lenses to interpret relationship and reputation consequences of repeated frontline failures. In addition to trust and legitimacy risks, frontline missteps can harm consumer well-being where access to essential services is restricted, or

[1]Paris School of Business, Paris, France
[2]Goodman School of Business, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada
[3]HUST, Wuhan, China
[4]St. John's University, NY, USA
[5]Fashion Business School, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London, UK

Corresponding Author:
V Kumar, Goodman School of Business, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON L2S 3A1, Canada.
Emails: drvk44@gmail.com; vk@brocku.ca

recovery timelines repeatedly slip (e.g., delays in healthcare appointments or support).

Crises amplify trade-offs at the frontline, forcing organizations to balance cost pressures, safety requirements, and customer expectations (Corral de Zubielqui and Harris 2023; Yue et al. 2021). Scholars have called for a closer examination of these tensions, particularly how specific frontline crisis missteps shape stakeholder trust and organizational legitimacy during periods of disruption (Brammer et al. 2023). This focus complements work on leadership, contingency planning, and operational adaptability (Prayag et al. 2023) and recognizes heightened expectations for fairness and accountability when delivery is compromised (Subramony et al. 2021).

Recent shifts in consumer perceptions of service delivery illustrate how extreme events reshape stakeholder expectations. Studies (e.g., Parkinson et al. 2021) have shown heightened concern for fairness, safety, and transparency during periods of disruption. For instance, during COVID-19, businesses responded with digital engagement strategies, hygiene-focused service adaptations, and contingency policies intended to reassure consumers and maintain operational continuity (Berry et al. 2020). However, not all adjustments reflect a genuine concern for consumer needs. Some organizations may use crisis conditions as a justification to cut services, maintain high prices, or withdraw access to key offerings, or keep reductions in place after immediate constraints have eased, raising concerns about consumer distrust, perceived opportunism, and perceived injustice (Corral de Zubielqui and Harris 2023). This behavior appears especially problematic in settings where consumers demonstrate higher ethical awareness and expect fair treatment, even when disruption occurs (Trkman et al. 2021). Across public commentary, these patterns surface as discrete frontline crisis missteps (e.g., policy incoherence, opportunistic framing of cuts, capability shortfalls, access constraints) that are associated with negative attributions, erosion of trust, and well-being concerns.

This study examines these issues through the introduction of the concept of crisis-induced service decline rationalization (CISDR), where businesses use crisis situations as a rationale for reducing service quality or service availability in ways that may be perceived as avoidable, or self-serving. Rather than focusing on a single event, we examine broader patterns of public perceptions regarding service reduction rationalizations in extreme contexts, drawing on the COVID-19 pandemic as a key example. We examine the belief themes/missteps customers report, identify expressed emotions and sentiment toward CISDR, and consider implications for stakeholder relationships and legitimacy, as well as potential impacts on consumer well-being.

The research is guided by two questions:

1. What themes emerge from the public's beliefs (i.e., frontline crisis missteps) about CISDR?
2. What emotions and sentiments do consumers express toward CISDR, and are these associated with specific belief themes?

These questions address crisis gaps in existing research on service delivery and management by showing how frontline decisions shape consumer perceptions of fairness, perceived injustice, and well-being. Each theme identified through our analysis is set to reflect how frontline crisis missteps diverge from SCCT recommendations at the point of contact.

Specifically, we identify four recurrent frontline mismatch patterns and theorize four mechanisms for future testing (rule–coherence, motive, capability–promise, and access–fairness mismatches) that help theorize links between micro-level frontline failures and macro-level legitimacy loss. The attribution layer is inferred from coding memos and public commentary rather than measured as a separate variable; accordingly, the propositions are framed as theory-building claims for future causal testing. We argue that crisis messaging fails unless supported by aligned frontline action. Consequently, we introduce an operational playbook featuring specific mitigation protocols and legitimacy-monitoring metrics designed to correct these mismatches before they escalate into systemic distrust. These mismatch patterns, in turn, shape broader judgments about trust and legitimacy, extending insights from stakeholder theory (Freeman 2010 [1984]) and legitimacy theory (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975) as secondary lenses to explain reputational fallout.

Our study offers three key contributions. First, it applies SCCT to sudden, high-stress disruptions at the frontline, showing how service decline and poor communication co-occur with specific customer emotions and sentiments. Second, it clarifies how these failures relate to stakeholder and legitimacy outcomes, indicating risks to long-term support when missteps persist and when access limits threaten well-being. Third, we establish a targeted agenda for future scholarly inquiry. The agenda specifies research questions on how platform cultures shape perceived opportunism and how justice appraisals vary across global crises, providing a roadmap for extending organizational frontline research beyond Western-centric pandemic contexts. These contributions respond directly to calls for research that prioritize consumer distrust, perceived opportunism, and perceived injustice at the frontline (e.g., Bolton 2020; Voorhees et al. 2020) and support calls (e.g., Arnold et al. 2025; Singh et al. 2016) to rethink how organizations design and manage their frontlines in extreme contexts.

Literature Review

Extreme Contexts and Organizational Frontlines

Research into extreme contexts has become increasingly relevant across management, marketing, and international business. Scholars have examined how individuals and organizations operate under destabilizing conditions such as natural disasters, violent conflict, and pandemics (e.g., Hällgren et al. 2018; Johns 2018; Mahmoud et al. 2024). These studies have introduced various constructs, including *extreme operational* *environments* (Gerde and Michaelson 2016), *non-routine events* (Waller 1999), *unusual events* (Beck and Plowman 2009), and *adverse events* (van der Vegt et al. 2015), all of which share a common thread: they materially disrupt normal operations and decision-making (Mahmoud et al. 2022, 2024, 2026). To sharpen conceptual clarity, scholars distinguish between contexts involving sudden disruptions, such as pandemics, and those marked by persistent uncertainty, such as ongoing political instability (Bundy et al. 2016; Hällgren et al. 2018). This distinction matters because each setting demands different organizational strategies and behavioral responses (Mahmoud, et al. 2022). While enduring uncertainty may allow time for structural adaptation and stakeholder engagement, sudden disruptions constrain preparation and force reactive decision-making (Osburg et al. 2022; Vink and Koskela-Huotari 2021). For customer-facing interfaces, sudden disruptions also expose frontline crisis missteps; discrete execution and communication failures that shape how the public interprets motive, controllability, fairness, and the acceptability of access limits.

Building on this, most of the current work has centered on organizational resilience and strategic adaptation, while relatively little attention has been paid to how the public interprets service changes at the organizational frontline during sudden disruptions. Existing studies tend to focus on the experiences of employees and internal service adaptations, yet the customer-facing interface—where abrupt changes to access, capability, care, and communication occur—shapes how consumers form beliefs about organizational intent (Cardy et al. 2022; Good et al. 2023). This is particularly relevant in the context of CISDR, where the public may question whether service disruptions are genuinely unavoidable or strategically justified. Accordingly, this study shifts focus from internal adaptation to external perception, examining how the public evaluates organizations' crisis responses through the lens of frontline crisis missteps and service decline. The COVID-19 pandemic placed an exceptional strain on these points of contact (Berry et al. 2020). While some disruptions were unavoidable, customers increasingly questioned whether firms used the crisis as an excuse to reduce service offerings without clear justification (Peachey 2021). This study responds to calls for research that considers public interpretations of service degradation during crises and how these interpretations affect perceptions of legitimacy. In line with this agenda, our empirical scope identifies belief themes (i.e., frontline crisis missteps), measures expressed emotions and sentiment toward CISDR, and examines whether themes are associated with those affective responses and potential well-being implications when access constraints are salient.

Crisis-Induced Service Decline Rationalization

The current research introduces the concept of *CISDR*, which refers to *how organizations use the language of crisis to justify sustained reductions in service availability, quality, or transparency, especially where consumers perceive the reduction as avoidable, poorly explained, or self-serving*. During COVID-19, many firms eliminated key elements of the service experience (e.g., gym towels, hotel breakfasts, or in-person support) while continuing to charge full prices. These changes were often framed as temporary or safety-driven; yet, over time, customers perceived inconsistencies, contradictions, and a lack of explanation (Peachey 2021). This raised suspicion that cost-cutting, rather than public health, was the driving motive (Kirkman 2022). Previous literature (Ostrom et al. 2021) has shown that organizations adjust operations in response to extreme events. However, fewer studies have examined how firms communicate such changes, particularly at the frontline, or how those communications are received by the public (Schmidt et al. 2023). Positioning CISDR as a frontline enactment pattern focuses attention on message-plus-action bundle customers evaluate during disruption and on the missteps associated with attributions linked to distrust, perceived opportunism, and perceived injustice.

Existing evidence (e.g., Dom 2022) suggests that financial pressures played a central role in these decisions. Workforce reductions and operational cuts were often concentrated in customer-facing functions, including hospitality, food service, and retail (Rosemberg et al. 2021). These roles, viewed as costly and dispensable, were among the first to be eliminated or downsized. As a result, customers encountered slower response times, lower availability, and opaque rules, where such changes were frequently presented without apology or sufficient explanation (Edell 2017). Such patterns heighten the risk of legitimacy loss when reductions persist without clear time-bounds or offsets and when access to basic services is restricted.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Customer Attributions

Theoretical perspectives on service delivery and crisis communication offer useful starting points for understanding these dynamics. SCCT suggests that organizations should align their response strategy with the perceived responsibility and severity (Coombs 2022). Transparent, timely, and corrective communication is recommended in high-impact crises, particularly where customers are directly affected (Brewer and Imes 2023). In frontline settings, customers also judge what firms do alongside what they say; observable cues (e.g., contradictory rules, "because of the crisis" rationales for cuts, repeated delays, exclusionary access policies) inform attributions of controllability and motive, which channel into distinct emotions and intentions. Consistent with our research questions, we therefore treat the recurrent issues visible in public commentary as frontline crisis missteps and later test whether belief themes are associated with expressed emotions and sentiment.

Yet, while these models point to long-term gains from high-quality communication and service continuity, empirical realities during COVID-19 often told a different story. In many sectors, firms focused on preserving liquidity and satisfying

Table 1. Summary of Stakeholder and Legitimacy theories.

Perspective	Core Question	Evaluative Standard	Proximal Violation Signal in CISDR	Predicted Outcome
Stakeholder theory	Who is owed what, and when	Fair treatment, engagement, value creation	Unexplained or prolonged cuts without offset; broken timelines; lack of alternatives	Erosion of trust and relational commitment
Legitimacy theory	What conduct is acceptable to society	Alignment with norms and expectations	Contradictory rules; opaque rationales; exclusionary access policies	Loss of legitimacy and social support

Note. CISDR = crisis-induced service decline rationalization.

immediate financial demands (Shahin 2023). Short-term savings were prioritized, frequently at the expense of customer-facing investments (Berry et al. 2020). This behavior was shaped by the expectations of investors, creditors, and other powerful financial stakeholders, who typically favor tangible, short-term results over reputational benefits (Liu et al. 2019). As a result, service cuts were often implemented without sufficient attention to the longer-term risks of customer dissatisfaction or reputational loss (Kar et al. 2022). The tension between SCCT-consistent messaging and cost-driven execution helps explain why customers report missteps and negative affect during crises and why well-being harms can occur when access is constrained.

Although studies have examined consumer loyalty and trust during crises (e.g., Coombs and Tachkova 2023), relatively few have questioned whether firms consistently apply these insights in practice. The assumption that organizations will act to preserve long-term consumer trust appears overstated in contexts of abrupt disruption, where decision-makers are often focused on survival rather than strategic brand equity (Larivière and Smit 2022). Furthermore, most existing research has not distinguished between temporary messaging strategies and structural service reductions that remain in place long after the initial crisis subsides (Tuominen et al. 2020). This gap in understanding is particularly pressing for sectors where legitimacy and trust are closely linked to customer-facing operations.

Stakeholders and Legitimacy under Extreme Contexts

To better understand the consequences of CISDR, this study adopts another dual theoretical framing based on stakeholder theory (Freeman 2010 [1984]) and legitimacy theory (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975). Stakeholder theory holds that organizations have obligations to multiple groups, not just shareholders (Freeman 2010 [1984]). These include employees, customers, suppliers, and communities. Under normal conditions, stakeholder interests are balanced through engagement, transparency, and shared value creation (Civera and Freeman 2019). During a crisis, however, some stakeholder priorities may be deprioritized, particularly those of customers whose concerns may be harder to quantify (Bansal et al. 2023). Recent work argues that failure to meet customer expectations during disruption erodes trust and weakens relational commitments (e.g., Davvetas et al. 2021; Maak et al. 2021; Myeza et al. 2024).

Legitimacy theory complements this view by suggesting that firms must conform to prevailing social norms and values to maintain societal support (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975). When customers notice that a company's actions do not align with what society expects, especially regarding fairness and openness, they may choose to withdraw their support or express their dissatisfaction (Aksoy et al. 2022).

The result is a legitimacy gap that can damage an organization's standing and reduce stakeholder goodwill (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975). Within this framing, frontline crisis missteps are treated as proximal triggers: repeated contradictions, opaque rationales, and exclusionary practices accumulate as perceived breaches of obligation, leading to attribution-consistent emotions and withdrawal of support. Stakeholder and legitimacy perspectives thus clarify the consequences of missteps, whereas SCCT explains how missteps generate those consequences (Table 1).

The distinction between inherently uncertain environments and sudden disruptions is important here. In environments characterized by persistent risk, firms are more likely to develop adaptive routines and stakeholder engagement processes (Roberts 1990). These settings allow time for planning, investment in communication, and gradual changes to service models (Linden 2021). In contrast, sudden disruptions place managers in a position of immediate constraint (Norris et al. 2020). Under such pressure, cost-reduction decisions may appear rational but still undermine customer trust (Singh et al. 2020). These trade-offs, while financially defensible, often widen the legitimacy gap and signal a breakdown of the firm's obligations to customers and communities (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2023).

Taken together, this review highlights a critical omission in existing research: how consumers interpret service declines when they are justified through crisis messaging, and how these interpretations affect trust and perceived legitimacy and, in some cases, consumer well-being. Although existing models recommend transparency, empathy, and assurance, the pandemic revealed a widespread pattern of opaque communication, persistent service cuts, and growing public frustration. The present study addresses this gap by introducing the CISDR concept and analyzing public beliefs and emotional responses during the COVID-19 crisis. It draws on multi-platform public commentary to capture how organizational justifications are received and what distrust, opportunism, and injustice concerns they raise. In doing so, it contributes to theories of crisis communication, stakeholder management, and organizational legitimacy while offering practical insights for firms operating under conditions of sudden disruption.

Methods

Data Collection

We used API-based retrieval and Python-assisted data processing to collect and curate unstructured public comments capturing frontline interaction experiences across sectors such as retail, hospitality, healthcare, utilities, logistics, banking, and call centers. Following this, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the data to uncover the public's belief system, emotions, and sentiments regarding CISDR through thematic, emotion, and sentiment analyses. Our research received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John's University after undergoing an ethical review. Since the online comments were publicly available, informed consent was not deemed necessary by the IRB. We also took additional measures to ensure ethical standards were upheld through de-identification, removal of usernames/handles, and redaction of incidentally shared personal information.

We selected Reddit and YouTube as our platforms due to their extensive and varied user base, offering access to a wide range of opinions and viewpoints (eMarketer 2021; Proferes et al. 2021; StatCounter 2024). The searches were carried out from within two major English-speaking nations, namely the United Kingdom and the United States, where YouTube and Reddit enjoy a significant user base (eMarketer 2021; StatCounter 2024; Statista 2024). These UK- and US-based search runs reduced dependence on a single location-based platform search context. The corpus should not be interpreted as a sample of UK and US consumers only, because commenter locations were not verified. Rather, the dataset consisted of English-language Reddit and YouTube comments retrieved through UK- and US-based search contexts.

We gathered data in the form of users' comments made on YouTube videos and Reddit posts that focused on CISDR between September 2020 and November 2023, a period in which the media covered customer sentiment regarding COVID-19 consequences on service quality (e.g., Kirkman 2022; Peachey 2021), hence, covering reactions to service cuts in crisis settings. The keywords used in this study were carefully chosen based on their frequency and importance when identifying the videos and posts. We conducted a preliminary content analysis of recent CISDR discussions, as well as extensive searches on YouTube and Reddit, to ensure that the data collected accurately represented current trends. The keywords included phrases such as "COVID as an excuse," "businesses using COVID," "service decline due to COVID," "COVID-related service issues," "pandemic as a scapegoat," and "COVID-19 service impact." The final de-duplicated corpus was produced through overlapping search runs that combined opportunism-oriented terms and broader service-change terms. Because comments could be retrieved through more than one query before deduplication, we did not assign each retained comment to a single seed term. We, therefore, interpreted the high prevalence of Theme 2 as within-corpus prominence rather than as a population estimate of how often consumers perceive crisis-related service reductions as opportunistic. To ensure the relevance of the collected data, the videos and posts were selected with consideration to their view count, engagement metrics, and overall visibility on their respective platforms. To reduce search-term bias, we alternated neutral comparators (e.g., "service changes during COVID"), executed UK/US runs, and captured near-duplicates with and without branded terms; final inclusion did not depend on post/video virality. Web Appendix 1 documents the data retrieval and curation pipeline. Access occurred through official APIs under their terms of use; only public comments were processed.

Using Python (v. 3.12) scripts (see Appendices 2, 3, and 4), we processed an initial corpus of 4,703 comments. To preserve micro-level linguistic tokens, such as brand names and colloquialisms, the scripts generated non-destructive diagnostic flags rather than overwriting the data. This approach ensured that all subsequent qualitative coding and large language model (LLM) analyses were executed on the raw, uncorrupted text. From the initial 4,703 comments, we removed 146 duplicates, excluded 107 non-English comments, and eliminated 429 spam or auto-messages. This left 4,021 comments before short-comment inspection.

To ensure no significant public discussion was missed, we isolated 1,759 comments shorter than fifty characters for manual re-inspection. Among these, 109 were retained after manual review, while 1,650 were excluded because they lacked enough substantive content for thematic coding. These comments, though very brief, often expressed strong views or emotional responses (e.g., "*All the restrooms are closed, and they arent sorry*," "*Even online companies are slacking.*"), and offered valuable insights when the substantive meaning was clear. This curation pipeline yielded a final dataset of 2,371 comments.

Unit of analysis was a single comment; threads were not merged. When inferable from the comment text, we tagged sector (e.g., "hotel," "gym," "bank," "utility") for descriptive context; tags were not used as inferential strata. Across sector mentions, Healthcare accounted for 44.3 percent of references, followed by Retail (15.6%), Logistics & Postal (9.7%), and Food & Beverage (6.0%). Smaller but notable shares appeared for Hospitality (Lodging) (4.7%), Utilities & Energy (3.8%), Banking & Finance (3.6%), and Tech Platforms & Marketplaces (3.3%); Transportation (2.9%), Insurance (2.8%), Telecom & Internet (2.5%), Education (1.8%), and Government & Public

Services (1.6%) were less frequent, while Real Estate & Housing, Entertainment & Media, Automotive Services, and Travel & Tourism each fell below 1 percent. This distribution indicates concentration around consumer-facing and essential services, with engagement extending to digital platforms. Because distrust-expressing content is more likely to be posted publicly, we anticipated a negative skew and retained all polarities rather than re-balancing.

Data Analysis. We utilized NVivo 12 software to generate initial codes and group them into overarching themes through a systematic process that included several labor-intensive stages. We incorporated dual coding, multiple iterations, inter-coder reliability assessment, and third-party validation to ensure validity and reliability (Mahmoud and Mahroof 2025). Indeed, two independent researchers with expertise in qualitative analysis conducted the coding to enhance reliability. Initial codes (see Table 2), such as "inconsistent mask mandates," "closure of amenities," and "public trust erosion in organizations and services," were generated and compiled into a codebook that was iteratively refined.

We initiated the assessment stage of the process by selecting a random subset of three-hundred comments for exploratory analysis to identify potential themes. The emergent codebook included content codes for frontline episodes and coding memos for attributional cues (responsibility/controllability, motive, competence, fairness) aligned with SCCT and with Stakeholder/Legitimacy consequence logic. Using emergent themes and related literature, we established a suitable coding framework. We reached data saturation after analyzing approximately 72 percent of the dataset. No substantial new themes emerged thereafter, thereby ensuring the coverage and soundness of our analysis. After completing the open coding stage, we proceeded to axial coding to examine the connections between the initial codes. This approach allowed us to group the codes into more broader categories. Finally, we utilized selective coding to further develop these categories into broader themes, forming the central focus of our research (Corbin and Strauss 2015). To distinguish CISDR from generic crisis talk and from SCCT's "diminish/excuse" messaging, coders applied an operational rule: label CISDR when a commenter attributes a service reduction or quality loss to crisis language without a concrete reinstatement trigger, offset, or coherent rationale; label non-CISDR when posts mention crisis without a reduction/rationalization. This rule positions CISDR as a frontline message–action mismatch. Following theme identification, we constructed a beliefs $\Rightarrow$ missteps $\Rightarrow$ mechanisms crosswalk to make the "why" explicit and to guide proposition development.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa coefficient to ensure consistency in the coding process (MacPhail et al. 2015). Cohen's Kappa (κ) was calculated using the formula $\kappa = (Po - Pe)/(1 - Pe)$, where Po represents the observed agreement, and Pe is the hypothetical probability of chance agreement. The final Cohen's Kappa score of .788, with the scores ranging between .734 and .897 across the themes (Web Appendix 6), showed a substantial agreement between the two coders (Landis and Koch 1977). Theme 2, the most prevalent theme, had the lowest theme-specific agreement ($\kappa = .7335$), though this remains within Landis and Koch's substantial-agreement range. Because Theme 2 is the most prevalent theme, we interpret its exact prevalence cautiously and treat it as within-corpus prominence rather than a population-level estimate. Furthermore, a random sample of the data was reviewed by a third coder to perform validation. The feedback received from the third coder was then integrated through a consensus meeting, which helped refine the coding framework and add an extra layer of rigor to the findings. The identified themes were ultimately interpreted by considering existing literature, connecting the findings with theoretical frameworks, and pointing out potential areas for future research (Mahmoud and Mahroof 2025). We adopted an abductive stance: inductive theme generation, followed by theory-guided axial/selective coding using SCCT constructs (attributions and message–action fit) and Stakeholder/Legitimacy consequences. Illustrative quotations were selected for typicality and boundary cases and anonymized.

We then conducted sentiment and emotion analyses using a large language model (OpenAI GPT-4o). For each comment, the model returned a JSON object containing a sentiment label (i.e., negative/neutral/positive) and an emotion label from the eight-category Plutchik set (i.e., anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, trust).

To enhance interpretability and ensure sufficient statistical variance for subsequent analyses, we merged conceptually related primary emotions into higher-order categories grounded in Plutchik's psychoevolutionary model and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) framework. Specifically, anger and disgust were consolidated into "Contempt," reflecting hostility and moral indignation; sadness and fear were combined into "Distress," representing aversive, high-arousal negative affect; and joy and trust were grouped as "Optimism," capturing approach-oriented positive emotions such as hope and connectedness. The model returned six of the eight Plutchik labels in the final valid output: anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and trust. The remaining allowed labels—anticipation and surprise—and the neutral fallback did not occur; Web Appendix 7 reports the original label counts and aggregation rules. This aggregation was methodologically necessary to enable meaningful examination of associations between emotions and belief themes, as several low-frequency emotion categories lacked sufficient representation to detect reliable patterns of variance. The resulting taxonomy thus provided both a parsimonious and theoretically grounded framework for emotional analysis (Plutchik 1980; Russell 1980; Watson and Tellegen 1985).

Outputs were merged back to the coded dataset, enabling cross-tabulations of Belief Theme $\times$ Emotion and Belief Theme $\times$ Sentiment. Pearson's chi-square tests were run to test the association at the belief level. To assess human–model concordance in the algorithmic labels, we extracted a stratified subsample of two-hundred comments based on the intersection of

Table 2. Data Structure and Coding Scheme.

1. Initial Codes	2. Second-Level Codes	3. Final Themes
- Illogical COVID-19 rules and restrictions - Inconsistent mask mandates (e.g., masks required for entering venues but not once inside) - Restrictions on touching merchandise, but shared public spaces remain open - Oddities in specific policies (e.g., massage and facial mask rules) - Government mismanagement and overreach	- Perceived inconsistency and illogic in policies - Confusion over inconsistent safety measures - Questioning the logic behind selective restrictions - Highlighting contradictory regulations - Criticism of authorities' inconsistent policies	Theme 1: Inconsistent frontline policies and communication
- Closure of amenities (e.g., restrooms, fitting rooms, playgrounds) - Reduced food and beverage services - Employees feeling companies use safety as an excuse - Higher prices with less service - Using COVID-19 as an excuse for reduced services	- Companies reducing services under the guise of safety - Cutting costs by limiting offerings - Hypocrisy in corporate decisions affecting staff and customers - Businesses profiting while providing less - Exploitation of pandemic circumstances	Theme 2: Perceived opportunism in frontline service reductions
- Poor customer service experiences - Long wait times and inability to reach support - Working from home impacting efficiency - Lack of personal accountability and increased laziness - Businesses and individuals using COVID-19 as an excuse for incompetence - Public trust erosion in organizations and services	- Declining service quality across sectors - Inefficiencies and staffing issues - Workforce challenges due to remote work - COVID-19 exposing societal work ethic issues - Pandemic highlighting pre-existing poor service - Declining faith due to impaired service quality	Theme 3: Operational failures and declining frontline reliability
- Inconveniences due to service reductions - Feeling unwelcome or disrespected in retail environments - Inability to access basic services (e.g., restrooms, counselling) - Businesses going too far with restrictions - Impact on personal lives (e.g., cancelled graduations, delayed healthcare) - Desire for a return to normalcy	- Frustration with limited amenities and services - Negative customer experiences - Essential services being unavailable - Perception of overreach in safety measures - Significant personal inconvenience - Balancing safety and service expectations	Theme 4: Customer frustration with frontline access and experience constraints

the four belief themes and the three aggregated emotion categories. GPT-4o first assigned sentiment and emotion labels. Two human coders then inspected the comment text alongside the visible GPT-4o labels, so the coders were not blind to the model's outputs. After human review, a consensus human label was established for each comment and compared with the GPT-4o label. The human–model concordance score was $\kappa = .9631$, indicating high agreement between the consensus human label and the model output. To address platform and cultural limits, we restricted claims to English-language platform comments retrieved through UK- and US-based search contexts and documented platform demographics as a design limitation rather than a representativeness claim. Healthcare and public-service cases were included when present but not oversampled; sector tags aid interpretation without implying population weights.

Results

Thematic Analysis

Our analysis of the data identifies four belief themes (see Web Appendices 8 and 9) that define the public's belief structure regarding CISDR. For each belief, we infer the frontline misstep it implies and the attribution–emotion mechanism consistent with SCCT. Specifically, the data reveal that consumers find many crisis-related rules (both state-mandated and organization-specific) to be inconsistently applied at the frontline. They are also inconvenienced by the consequent service reductions and impaired service quality. Furthermore, consumers feel that organizations use extreme contextual conditions, such as COVID-19, to reduce costs and efforts, thus impairing the availability and quality of consumer services. Across 2,371 comments, belief distribution is: *perceived opportunism in frontline service reductions* 76.3% ($n = 1,810$), *customer frustration with frontline access and experience constraints* 8.4% ($n = 198$), *operational failures and declining frontline reliability* 8.2% ($n = 194$), and *inconsistent frontline policies and communication* 7.1% ($n = 169$). Across the four beliefs, the corresponding inferred missteps and mechanisms are detailed in Table 3: (Theme 1 ⇒ policy incoherence/mixed messages ⇒ avoidability attributions ⇒ contempt/distress); (Theme 2 ⇒ opportunistic crisis framing ⇒ profit-motive attributions ⇒ contempt); (Theme 3 ⇒ capability shortfalls ⇒ competence-loss attributions ⇒ distress alongside

Table 3. Beliefs ⇒ Missteps ⇒ Mechanisms Crosswalk for CISDR.

Belief Theme	Inferred Frontline Misstep (From Belief)	Mechanism (Attribution ⇒ Affect)
Theme 1: Inconsistent frontline policies and communication (7.1%, *n* = 169)	Policy incoherence/mixed messages across touchpoints and time	Rule–coherence ⇒ consumers infer avoidability/controllability and firm responsibility ⇒ contempt + distress (trust erosion)
Theme 2: Perceived opportunism in frontline service reductions (76.3%, *n* = 1,810)	Opportunistic crisis framing (sustained amenity cuts/full prices/thin justifications)	Motive attribution ⇒ consumers infer self-interest/profit-seeking ⇒ contempt (perceived opportunism ⇒ perceived injustice)
Theme 3: operational failures and declining frontline reliability (8.2%, *n* = 194)	Capability shortfalls (staffing gaps, backlogs, broken promises, vague timelines)	Capability–promise ⇒ consumers infer incompetence/low controllability at firm ⇒ distress + contempt (distrust)
Theme 4: Customer frustration with frontline access and experience constraints (8.4%, *n* = 198)	Access constraints (closures, cashless-only, restricted help, no alternatives)	Access–fairness ⇒ consumers infer unfair exclusion/ breach of social contract ⇒ distress + contempt (perceived injustice, legitimacy risk)

Note. CISDR = crisis-induced service decline rationalization.

contempt); (Theme 4 ⇒ access constraints ⇒ exclusion attributions ⇒ distress alongside contempt). These four themes reveal how service inconsistencies, perceived opportunism, and communication failures affect stakeholder perceptions in crisis settings. Web Appendices 10 and 11 present the sentiment-by-belief and emotion-by-belief distributions, respectively. Furthermore, calculated chi-square values show that belief and emotion are associated ($\chi^2 = 34.515$, df = 6, $p < .001$), whereas belief and sentiment are not ($\chi^2 = 3.588$, df = 6, $p = .732$).

Theme 1: Inconsistent Frontline Policies and Communication. The first theme, *inconsistent frontline policies and communication*, captures the frustration expressed by many social media users over frontline policies perceived as illogical, inconsistent, or lacking a clear rationale. Users shared examples across various contexts, from recreation centers to retail stores and hospitality services, highlighting policies that seemed to defy common sense or not be uniformly applied. The core mechanism is attribution of avoidability and responsibility when rules contradict across touchpoints, which is associated with stronger blame attributions. Such inconsistent and poorly justified rules can erode trust, as customers may perceive them as arbitrary or driven by motives other than safety (e.g., Bhargava and Velasquez 2021). From an SCCT perspective, they reflect poor alignment between crisis-response strategy and stakeholder expectations. In terms of implied frontline misstep, this belief points to policy incoherence and mixed messages. A frontline worker expresses contempt by stating that procedures are the "*bane of my existence.*" This highlights how excessive layers of approvals and ambiguous regulations create confusion, leading to mixed messages and inconsistent outcomes.

For instance, one user from California expressed their discontent with the state's overall response approach, stating, "*Seriously, because of Covid makes me want to come unglued! California is terrible.*" This sentiment reflects widespread dissatisfaction with crisis management. Several users highlighted the lack of logic in mask policies, such as the requirement to wear masks when entering certain venues but then being allowed to remove them once inside. As one user described the recreation center's policy: "*You have to wear a mask walking into the rec[reation] center but once you enter the pool you can take it off! Covid doesn't go in swimming pools!! (Indoor swimming pool FYI).*" The sarcastic tone here highlights the perceived absurdity of such rules. Inconsistent policies like these can make customers question the true intentions behind them and whether they are genuinely designed with public health in mind (e.g., Gretton et al. 2021).

Examples from hospitality services further illustrate illogical policies. One user noted, "*Some of them certainly are. For example, most hotels have stopped doing the daily housekeeping they used to do 'because of Covid'. But none of their staff wear masks, no social distancing, no hand sanitiser, no perspex screens, etc.*" Such contradictions highlight a lack of coherence and transparency in business responses to crises. These posts point to a practical fix: consistent rules with a short, checkable reason.

Another user pointed out inconsistencies in short-term rental policies: "*TBF that's not even a Covid thing, that's become a standard for a lot of these types of lets. Airbnb is notorious for their properties with bizarre rules about cleaning/curfews/ usage of the property and the sky-high fees for cleaning and management. Often you'll get one where they'll expect you to do a full house clean and then pay $600 cleaning fees for some reason.*" In other words, contradiction primes people to infer motives unrelated to safety.

In retail settings, users questioned policies that seemed illogical regarding cash payments. One user asked, "*Surely this is illegal as cash is legal tender?*" This reflects confusion over businesses refusing cash transactions under the pretext of safety, despite cash being a universally accepted form of payment. Such policies can appear random and lacking in legal basis, further eroding customer trust (e.g., Schijven et al. 2023).

Moreover, delays and inefficiencies attributed to COVID-19 were also perceived as illogical. A user shared their experience with vehicle purchase delays: "*I bought a 2016 used jeep from a dealership in Melbourne in June and I live in NSW. It needed a few things replaced on it following the red book inspection and it then needed a [RWC]. They didn't send it out for three weeks, blaming 'difficulties due to COVID' the entire time. . . then I found out the company is in Perth, changing my opinion on that a little.*" The user's skepticism about the delays being genuinely caused by COVID-19 reflects a broader distrust in how businesses explain service disruptions.

Beyond inconsistent policies, some users felt that companies were using COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service or long wait times. As one user commented regarding calling their bank, "*You call your bank and on the front of the call is a message because of Covid your call wait may be longer. Everyone knows you got a long wait Covid or no Covid.*" Similarly, another user remarked: "*I think everyone just does something, anything to make it look like they are complying. There is not one person or business that has any idea what the rules are or what they are doing or why.*" These comments suggest a belief that businesses exploited the pandemic to justify pre-existing service issues. In the affect results for this belief, contempt accounts for 64.5 percent, distress for 28.4 percent, and optimism for 7.1 percent; sentiment is 92.9 percent negative, 5.9 percent neutral, and 1.2 percent positive. This pattern is consistent with the quotes above, where visibly conflicting rules chiefly elicit contempt with a secondary layer of distress. That said, Theme 1 implies the misstep of policy incoherence/mixed messages.

This theme reflects how unclear or contradictory crisis-related rules are, particularly when communicated at the service interface, generate significant confusion and erode trust. To maintain legitimacy during extreme contexts, organizations must coordinate consistent messaging across frontline touchpoints, ensuring that policies are not only rational but clearly conveyed.

Theme 2: Perceived Opportunism in Frontline Service Reductions. The second theme highlights users' perception that companies used the COVID-19 crisis as a pretext to reduce costs, curtail services, and diminish amenities while attributing these changes to pandemic-related necessities. Users expressed skepticism about the true motives behind service reductions, suspecting that businesses were driven by financial concerns rather than safety or logistical constraints. Unlike Theme 1, which focuses on illogical rules, this theme emphasizes perceived intentional cost-cutting strategies disguised as crisis response. In SCCT terms, failure to transparently justify service changes reflects a diminish or excuse strategy, which risks backfiring if not paired with corrective action. The implied misstep is opportunistic crisis framing, with profit-motive attributions that intensify with repeated exposure and are associated with contempt. Consistent with this, the discourse includes the forward-looking warning to "*watch for 'due to the cost-of-living crisis' to be next*," signaling that audiences generalize the tactic beyond the pandemic.

Several users felt that companies were using COVID-19 as an excuse to reduce costs and effort and to curtail services. For example, one user speculated that playground closures were implemented simply because businesses "*just don't want to deal with kids (mine) in the playground.*" Another echoed this sentiment by commenting regarding fitting room closures: "*I think they just don't want to deal with them. But what's the difference? They have somebody that's supposed to work the dressing room area and they're never around when you need them LOL.*" These comments imply a belief that companies used the pandemic as a cover to avoid the hassle and expense of maintaining certain facilities.

Additional comments reinforce this perception. One user stated, "*Companies are profiting with a skeleton crew, no need for them to change things.*" Another observed, "*I think a lot of companies quite liked the changes they had to make because of the pandemic and have decided to keep them.*" When cuts persist without a time limit or offset, contempt climbs.

Specific examples highlight how companies continue to limit amenities under the guise of safety. A user mentioned, "*Yes. Nuffield health still won't open the sauna or jacuzzis in any of their gyms. Firstly, the virus can't survive sauna level heat so it's arguably among the safest place to be. It's just them cost-cutting.*" This comment indicates doubt about the stated reasons for keeping certain facilities closed, suspecting financial motives instead.

Reduced food and beverage services also raised skepticism from users who felt that companies were cutting costs under the guise of safety. For example, one user stipulated the following: "*They should just say We're lazy now so we're not gonna give you a soda.*" Another critiqued McDonald's refill policy: "*McDonald's won't give you refills due to COVID-19. They'll give you the drink initially, but you can't walk up to the counter and ask for a refill.*" These examples imply that users saw through superficial explanations and attributed service cutbacks to corporate penny-pinching rather than genuine safety concerns. In the affect results for this belief, contempt is 76.6 percent, distress is 18.2 percent, and optimism is 5.2 percent; sentiment is 95.1 percent negative, 3.9 percent neutral, and 1.0 percent positive. This concentration of contempt fits the mechanism above: when people attribute reductions to profit, contempt, reflecting moralized negative affect, dominates. That said, Theme 2 implies the misstep of opportunistic crisis framing (price–value conflict and amenity cuts).

This theme shows a clear path from service cuts to profit-motive attributions and contempt. This differs from Theme 1's emphasis on inconsistent policies by highlighting what commenters perceive as self-serving corporate strategies under the guise of crisis management. Time-bounded cuts with visible offsets are seen as fairer.

Theme 3: Operational Failures and Declining Frontline Reliability. The third theme revolves around the perception that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated underlying issues of incompetence, staffing challenges, and poor service across various sectors of society. Users expressed frustration with what they saw as a general decline in accountability and quality, with individuals and institutions struggling to maintain service standards amid the crisis. Unlike Themes 1 and 2, which address illogical rules and perceived intentional cost-cutting, this theme highlights systemic operational issues that predate the pandemic but were amplified by it. This theme reflects, from an SCCT standpoint, the risks of using a diminish strategy without correcting internal inefficiencies. The mechanism is a competence-loss attribution when broken promises and backlogs repeat over time. The implied misstep of capability shortfalls (staffing, delays, reliability); honest timelines and kept promises moderate this reaction.

A common perspective expressed in the comments is that the COVID-19 fallout has exposed and, in some cases, amplified poor service, incompetence, and staffing issues among businesses. One user summarized this perspective by claiming: "*Once the first lockdown happened, customers in general were a lot more abusive to staff members, result of that was people quitting or being re-assigned to different departments due to mental health.*" Prior studies indicate that job demands and insecurity among frontline employees can suppress genuine customer-oriented behaviors, resulting in more surface acting and diminished service quality during crises (Yoo and Arnold 2015).

Another user highlighted the reliance on inexperienced temporary staff: "*Temps are only taking the customer service jobs at my company; we then get complaints about poor service because all the people with experience don't want to do the job anymore.*" This indicates how staff shortages and reliance on less trained personnel can lead to capacity erosion, which may be associated with competence attributions that are hard to reverse without visible recovery, especially when recovery timelines are vague.

Service backlogs and delays were also a source of frustration. A user described: "*We've got backlogs with appointments. . . so our appointments aren't being booked in quickly enough because the engineers are working for two different companies, so the backlog for appointments is still there.*" Transparent timelines with delivery dates are thus suggested to reduce distress in lieu of more generic updates.

In the healthcare context, users recognized systemic issues exacerbated by the crisis. One user stated: "*When it comes to healthcare context I feel like your choice to use the word 'excuse' rather than 'reason' suggests you believe the good service is simply being withheld. Rather than the actual truth that there's been years of underfunding, appalling staff retention because they're so stressed and poorly paid, and that there are tens of thousands of vacancies within the health service. No one is choosing to provide poor care other than the government.*" Such posts separate systemic constraints from local choices and help explain neutral sentiment when staff are candid about limits. They also show that the same surface complaint may produce different attributions across sectors, especially where service decline is tied to public funding, workforce shortages, policy constraints, or crisis triage rather than firm-level discretion.

Additionally, call center experiences highlighted the strain on employees. A user shared: "*I work in a call centre myself but I wouldn't last 2 weeks working for SSE. I think it's actually a health and safety issue; a job like that would shred my mental health to ribbons.*" These patterns show that even in the absence of deliberate cost-cutting, repeated delivery breakdowns diminish perceived organizational competence. In the affect results for this belief, contempt is 67.0 percent, distress is 27.3 percent, and optimism is 5.7 percent; sentiment is 93.3 percent negative, 5.7 percent neutral, and 1.0 percent positive. This balance of distress and contempt is consistent with a competence explanation rather than a profit one. Overall, Theme 3 implies the misstep of capability shortfalls.

Theme 4: Customer Frustration with Frontline Access and Experience Constraints. The fourth theme sheds light on the frustration and inconvenience experienced by customers due to COVID-19-related service reductions and policy changes. Unlike the previous themes, which focus on illogical rules, perceived cost-cutting strategies, and general incompetence, this theme emphasizes the direct impact on customer experiences. Users shared stories of feeling disrespected, unwelcome, or unable to access basic amenities, often questioning the necessity and proportionality of the limitations they encountered. The mechanism is perceived exclusion when access rules and amenity closures signal that convenience is valued over inclusion; clear exception paths and workable alternatives moderate this reaction. The implied misstep is access constraints (closures, cashless-only, restricted help). The narrative captures this sentiment succinctly: "*What happened to being able to see your local GP*," a shorthand for perceived withdrawal of basic services without workable alternatives. Many users expressed frustration over how COVID-19 restrictions and policies have significantly inconvenienced their customer experiences. For example, several users critiqued closed amenities and reduced services at hotels and other hospitality businesses. One user remarked: "*I was at a hotel in March and the hotel cut back on basically all of the amenities (like no breakfast and no room service) for covid lol.*" Another user echoed this sentiment: "*Stayed in a hotel with no coffee pot as well and I was furious!*" When customers feel that restrictions are excessive or unjustified, it undermines confidence and harms the relationship between the customer and the business (e.g., Bardosh et al. 2022).

Customers also experienced inconvenience in everyday services. One user humorously commented: "*Thank you for contacting /r/AskUK, unfortunately all our redditors are busy because of Covid. Please hold as your question is very important to us.*" This satirical remark reflects the pervasive nature of COVID-19-related delays across various services. In restaurants, simple amenities were withdrawn: "*Restaurants: we no longer give coloring pencils and sheets for kids because COVID.*" Gyms also reduced services: "*Gyms: we no longer give towels because COVID.*" These examples highlight the ethical need for businesses to carefully evaluate whether service reductions are genuinely necessary for safety or if they unnecessarily inconvenience customers under the guise of crisis management. A failure to provide basic services while still charging the same fees may lead to accusations of profiteering or neglecting customer welfare (e.g., Nazifi et al. 2021).

Financial transactions were also affected, with users noting changes in payment policies. One user stated, "*I travel quite often for work and have noticed a lot of places now only accept card payments. They put signs up saying 'we're a cashless venue' post-Covid.*" While businesses may adopt cashless transactions for safety reasons, several comments questioned exclusion when no alternative was offered. Limiting payment options, especially without clear communication, can lead to exclusion and frustration, signaling a disregard for customer needs. Evidence from the UK Access to Cash Review also indicates that cashless-only policies risk excluding unbanked, elderly, and vulnerable consumers, which heightens perceived injustice when no workable alternative is provided (Access to Cash Review 2019).

The inability to access basic services, such as public restrooms and career counseling, also raised complaints. One user remarked, "*No open public restrooms due to covid, now all of America has to wear depends.*" Another user questioned the imposed limits regarding one-on-one employment-related guidance: "*We cannot do 1 on 1 appointments for employment counselling, but I can walk into Walmart with 400 other people?*" In the affect results for this belief, contempt is 63.1 percent, distress is 31.3 percent, and optimism is 5.6 percent; sentiment is 96.0 percent negative, 3.5 percent neutral, and 0.5 percent positive. This comparatively higher distress aligns with perceived exclusion and lost dignity rather than cost-cutting alone. Thus, Theme 4 implies the misstep of access constraints.

Sentiment and Emotion Analyses. The emotion (Web Appendix 12) and sentiment (Web Appendix 13) analyses indicate that public reactions to crisis-induced service decline were strongly negative (94.9% of all comments were negative, 4.1% neutral, and 1.0% positive). Belief-level negative rates range from 92.9 percent (inconsistent policies) to 96.0 percent (access and experience constraints) and do not differ significantly across beliefs ($\chi^2=3.588$, df=6, $p=.732$). Emotion is concentrated: contempt accounts for 73.9 percent of all labeled emotions, distress for 20.8 percent, and optimism for 5.4 percent; belief and emotion are associated ($\chi^2=34.515$, df=6, $p<.001$). Web Appendix 7 reports the original GPT-4o emotion labels and aggregation rules. Perceived Opportunism shows the highest contempt (76.6%) and the lowest distress (18.2%), while Access and Experience Constraints show relatively more distress (31.3%) alongside 63.1% contempt; Inconsistent Policies and Operational Failures sit between these endpoints with contempt of 64.5 percent and 67.0 percent, respectively, and optimism between 5.6 percent and 7.1 percent. Web Appendices 10 and 11 visualize these distributions.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the public's beliefs, emotions, and sentiments regarding businesses using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse for curtailed or poor service, a phenomenon we term CISDR. Specifically, we sought to identify the themes that emerge from the public's beliefs about CISDR and to understand the emotions and sentiments prompted by this phenomenon. To address these research questions, we conducted a qualitative analysis of user comments from YouTube and Reddit, employing thematic, sentiment, and emotion analyses.

Our findings reveal a four-theme structure of the public's belief system about CISDR. First, *inconsistent frontline policies and communication* captures frustrations over uneven and poorly explained rules at the customer–firm interface. Second, *perceived opportunism in frontline service reductions* reflects suspicion that firms used crisis conditions to cut costs and services. Third, *operational failures and declining frontline reliability* highlight systemic breakdowns in staffing and processes that undermine service delivery. Fourth, *customer frustration with frontline access and experience constraints* emphasizes how abrupt and disproportionate reductions in amenities left customers feeling neglected. Additionally, our sentiment and emotion analyses revealed a concentration of contempt with distress secondary, indicating moralized negative affect at perceived unfairness alongside disillusionment. Repeated backlogs and broken promises were interpreted as competence deficits rather than temporary turbulence.

Building on a corpus that is itself *native to the web*, comprising thousands of Reddit discussions and YouTube comments captured between September 2020 and November 2023, we identify recurrent frontline missteps associated with public backlash. The corpus also makes clear that perceived opportunism is not a universal reading of crisis-related declines in service. Healthcare accounted for 44.3 percent of sectors mentions, and several comments treated poor service in healthcare as a result of underfunding, workforce shortages, policy constraints, or crisis triage rather than deliberate withholding of service. This sector concentration clarifies the boundary of CISDR. The construct is most applicable where consumers can reasonably attribute service reductions to organizational discretion, weak explanation, prolonged non-reinstatement, price–value mismatch, or lack of workable alternatives. It is less direct where reductions are more clearly tied to public funding, workforce depletion, or externally imposed crisis constraints.

While our corpus predominantly captures consumer attributions, comments from frontline employees (FLEs) indicate they experience CISDR as a dual burden. Employees report absorbing customer abuse stemming from systemic capability shortfalls they cannot control. Comparing how FLEs and consumers differentially attribute blame and express emotion regarding service cuts represents a critical priority for future research. Thus, while the *distal* trigger may lie upstream, the *proximal* moment of truth occurs at the service interface. Resilience, therefore, requires an end-to-end stance that would combine supply-side redundancy with empowered, well-informed frontline teams, so that inevitable shocks are absorbed before they reach the customer.

In terms of organizational learning, Beck and Plowman (2009) emphasized the role of middle managers in guiding interpretation during rare events. Consistent with that view, our findings suggest that attribution formation hinges on whether shifting rules are enacted coherently and justified consistently at the frontline; incoherence is associated with blame attributions and fuels consumer distrust.

Additionally, previous research (e.g., Sajko et al. 2020) emphasized the negative consumer perceptions linked to corporate governance issues during crises, particularly around executive compensation. While our study did not directly address governance, commentary in our corpus anchored judgments in frontline enactments, policy contradictions, perceived opportunism, capability shortfalls, and access constraints, underscoring that concrete on-the-ground actions outweigh distant board-level cues in motive inference.

Bigley and Roberts (2001) discussed high-reliability organizations that rely on structured, bureaucratic approaches. Our results align with that contrast by showing that message-only responses are insufficient unless routines also secure rule coherence, credible timelines, and workable access.

Christianson et al. (2009) suggested that rare events expose organizational vulnerabilities, leading to learning and adaptation. Our study converges with that lens by showing limited evidence of double-loop learning at the frontline; recurrent contradictions and unkept promises were rationalized rather than remedied, amplifying consumer distrust and perceived injustice.

Theoretical Contributions

Our findings contribute to established service and crisis communication theories by demonstrating that their core frameworks retain partial applicability in extreme contexts. SCCT (Coombs 2022) continues to offer useful conceptual guidance during crisis-induced service declines. However, our analysis clarifies where message strategies are insufficient without aligned frontline actions. This contribution identifies the mechanisms (rule–coherence, motive, capability–promise, and access–fairness mismatches) that help explain how frontline enactments may be interpreted through specific attributions and emotional responses. These mechanisms are subsequently linked to outcomes such as distrust, perceptions of opportunism, perceived injustice, and legitimacy risks.

First, we extend SCCT by showing that *rule–coherence* is a necessary moderator of message effectiveness: even clear statements fail when frontline enactment contradicts them; contradiction increases perceived controllability and blame. Second, we specify how *motive cues* embedded in sustained amenity cuts at constant prices are associated with profit-seeking attributions; the message–action bundle, not the message alone, governs contempt responses. Third, we detail a *capability–promise* pathway: repeated delays and missed timelines are read as incompetence unless firms provide specific, kept commitments; vague updates amplify distress. Finally, we add an *access–fairness* pathway: closures, cashless-only policies, or restricted help without alternatives are experienced as exclusion and breach of the social contract, producing perceived injustice alongside distrust. Overall, these SCCT-consistent mechanisms illuminate consequences through Stakeholder Theory (Freeman 2010 [1984]) and Legitimacy Theory (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975): mismatches accumulate as perceived unfairness, prompting voice/exit and legitimacy loss. Because attributional cues were inferred from coding memos and public commentary rather than measured as separate variables, the propositions below are framed as theory-building claims for future causal testing. Based on these integrated insights, we offer four propositions that are grounded in the identified mismatches and align with our associative tests as follows.

When policies conflict across touchpoints, consumers treat inconsistency as avoidable, which raises controllability attributions and sharpens negative affect. This logic specifies how enactment coherence moderates message effectiveness under SCCT. Hence, we propose:

> **P1:** Perceived inconsistency in frontline rules is associated with higher attributions of controllability and increased contempt/distress.

Sustained amenity cuts at unchanged prices act as motive cues; generic crisis rationales are read as self-serving, which intensifies contempt and perceived opportunism. Therefore, we propose the following:

> **P2:** Perceived use of crisis language to justify sustained reductions without offsets is associated with contempt-dominant responses and perceived opportunism.

Vague or shifting timelines impede recovery credibility; repeated missed commitments yield competence inferences and distress unless specific, kept promises are made.

P3**:** Repeated delays and missed timelines are associated with distress alongside contempt (perceived incompetence), whereas specific, kept timelines attenuate these emotions.

Restrictions that lack alternatives disproportionately burden some consumers, producing perceived exclusion and injustice and elevating legitimacy risk.

P4**:** Access restrictions without workable alternatives are associated with perceived injustice, higher distress, and lower sentiment, increasing likelihood of voice/exit.

These propositions offer a focused agenda for future research examining organizational frontlines during extreme contexts. Specifically, they prioritize enactment coherence, motive cues, promise-keeping, and fair access as testable levers for mitigating distrust and legitimacy risk.

Figure 1 consolidates the process model as follows: extreme context ⇒ frontline decisions ⇒ four mismatches (rule–coherence; motive; capability–promise; access–fairness) ⇒ attributions (responsibility, controllability, motive) ⇒ emotions (contempt, distress) ⇒ outcomes. The framework proposes four outcome domains: consumer distrust, perceived injustice and breach of social contract, legitimacy risk, and voice/exit. This structure visually demonstrates how extreme contexts destabilize traditional service models and communication frameworks, reinforcing the need for integrated theoretical approaches. Although developed in a pandemic, the same mismatches are likely to arise in natural disasters and severe economic shocks and in labor disputes such as transit strikes, where schedule cuts without time bounds or alternatives prompt avoidability and fairness attributions. For example, during a regional winter storm that disrupts supply routes and staffing for a grocery chain, corporate assurances of normal hours paired with shortened access and no alternatives lead customers to attribute avoidability and perceive opportunism, elevating contempt despite the external shock.

Managerial Relevance

This study offers clear guidance for managers, policymakers, educators, and consumers, directly addressing scholarly calls to improve frontline services during crises. The findings emphasize that stakeholders quickly lose trust and legitimacy when businesses deliver confusing policies, are perceived as using crises opportunistically, or fail to maintain service standards. Practical strategies addressing these points can improve outcomes for both businesses and stakeholders. In particular, focusing on rule coherence, motive transparency, capability and promise keeping, and access fairness, while applying straightforward legitimacy-monitoring metrics, can help prevent CISDR from developing into consumer distrust, perceived opportunism, or perceived injustice.

To prevent CISDR from escalating into consumer distrust, perceived opportunism, and perceived injustice, managers should target the specific mechanisms surfaced in our results rather than rely on message-only fixes. In SCCT terms, the message–action fit must be engineered at the frontline: rule coherence (so statements and enactments do not contradict), motive transparency (so reductions are time-bounded and offset), promise-keeping (so timelines are specific and kept), and access fairness (so restrictions include workable alternatives and exception paths). The protocol, demonstrated in Table 4, translates each mechanism into concrete frontline actions, a one-line script, and legitimacy-monitoring metrics that allow leaders to see slippage early.

Time is central to how CISDR becomes morally charged. A service reduction that appears reasonable at the height of a crisis may be read differently when it persists after the immediate constraint has eased. The longer an amenity cut, access restriction, or staffing reduction remains in place without a reinstatement trigger, price adjustment, or substitute benefit, the more likely consumers are to interpret it as opportunistic rather than necessary. For managers, this means that each reduction needs an end date, a reinstatement trigger, and a visible offset. The Crisis Reduction Ledger in Table 4 turns this into an operating discipline rather than a communication promise.

Crisis communication teams must ensure that the firm's official messaging matches customer experiences across every channel. SCCT suggests tailoring messages to crisis types, but our findings add urgency to consistent frontline delivery. Teams should craft one clear crisis response statement and train frontline staff to communicate it consistently, avoiding contradictory explanations. A utility company managing service disruptions might announce, "Our technicians are quarantined; normal service resumes by Friday," rather than vague statements like, "delays due to the pandemic." Weekly updates, not quarterly summaries, should be the norm to sustain trust and align message and enactment at the frontline. Aligning clear, factual messages with actual service delivery prevents negative public attributions and legitimacy gaps.

Designers of frontline interfaces, such as digital support systems and in-store communications, should eliminate contradictions and ensure rule clarity across all touchpoints. Our research showed consumer frustration rises sharply when service rules differ between physical locations and digital platforms. For example, a retailer's mobile app, website, and in-store signage should uniformly explain mask mandates or return policies. Conducting a quick "consistency audit" can identify and eliminate issues like requiring masks upon entry but not once inside the facility. Such alignment enhances perceived fairness and customer satisfaction, preventing unnecessary frustration. Tracking the policy contradiction rate (per site/week) provides a simple audit signal and links directly to the rule–coherence mechanism.

To ensure that these practices remain credible and measurable, organizations should regularly monitor four key legitimacy indicators, each tied to a specific corrective action. These

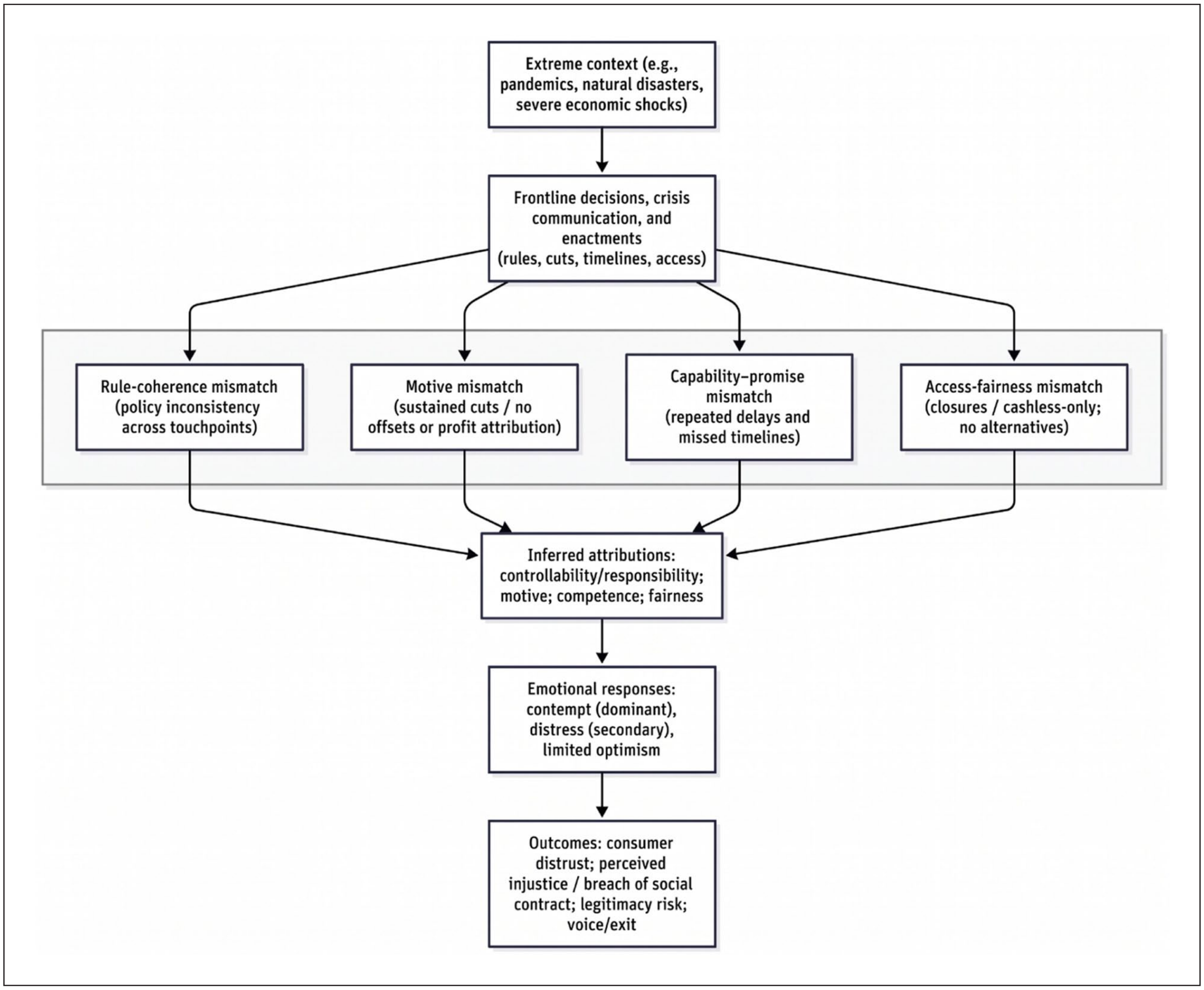

Figure 1. CISDR integrated theoretical framework.
Note. CISDR = crisis-induced service decline rationalization.

indicators include the policy contradiction rate (Theme 1), the share (%) of time-boxed cuts and give-back coverage (Theme 2), the on-time (%) recovery (Theme 3), and the access-exception approval rate (Theme 4). Each measure should appear in a weekly dashboard that automatically alerts managers whenever performance falls below target. When alerts occur, the response sequence should be clear and immediate: synchronize signage for contradictory rules, reinstate paused services according to their stated timelines, adjust staffing or capacity to keep recovery promises, and promptly grant reasonable exceptions to prevent exclusion. This continuous monitoring process anchors accountability in daily operations and reinforces the organization's legitimacy in the eyes of consumers.

Policymakers and regulators play a crucial role in preventing perceived opportunistic behavior during crises. Clear, actionable regulations can reduce customer frustration and improve organizational legitimacy. Policymakers can develop crisis-response guidelines specifying what service reductions are acceptable and how they must be communicated. For instance, consumer protection agencies could publish a public scorecard highlighting firms that maintain service quality versus those that are perceived as exploiting the crisis to maintain high prices despite significant service cuts. Additionally, establishing specific penalties, such as fines or compulsory refunds, creates strong incentives for businesses to act ethically. Redirecting penalty revenues into customer relief funds further reinforces ethical business practices and demonstrates the government's commitment to protecting public interests. Public reporting on timeboxing, give-back coverage, on-time recovery, access-exception approval, and

Table 4. Operational playbook to prevent CISDR mismatches.

Mechanism (From **Results)**	**Concrete** Frontline Action	**One-Line** Script **(**for Staff**)**	**Legitimacy-** Monitoring Metrics
Rule–coherence mismatch (policy inconsistency)	Maintain a single "rule-of-record" across web/app/store; attach a checkable rationale and expiry/review date; run a contradiction check before publishing; add an alternative path where relevant.	"Because [specific reason], [policy] applies until [date/time]; if this creates a hardship, [alternative] is available."	Policy contradiction rate (per site/week).
Motive mismatch (sustained cuts with full price)	Time-box any reduction; publish a Crisis Reduction Ledger (cut, start/end, trigger to reinstate); pair with a visible offset (credit/points/substitute); ban vague "for your safety" phrasing.	"From [date] to [date], [amenity] is paused; we are providing [offset] and it returns when [trigger] is met."	Share of time-boxed cuts; give-back coverage %.
Capability–promise mismatch (delays, missed timelines)	Replace vague updates with dated delivery windows; publish a promise-keeping SLA; auto-trigger recovery if a promise lapses; route complex cases to empowered specialists; show a simple backlog dashboard.	"Your [service/order] is due by [date]. If we miss that, we will [automatic recovery]."	On-time-recovery %.
Access–fairness mismatch (closures, cashless-only, restricted help)	Provide a workable alternative (e.g., limited-hours amenity, cash-enabled kiosk, staffed phone path); publish a clear exceptions pathway (eligibility + decision times) for vulnerable customers.	"If [restriction] is a barrier, use [alternative] or request an exception via [channel]; we decide within [timeframe]."	Access-exception approval rate.

Note. CISDR = crisis-induced service decline rationalization.

contradiction rates would further incentivize transparency and rapid correction.

Research Limitations and Implications

This study sheds light on consumer distrust, perceived opportunism, and perceived injustice within CISDR, but some limitations remain. First, the analysis used only comments from Reddit and YouTube. These platforms are popular, but their distinct user demographics and cultures introduce bias, limiting how generalizable the findings are (Proferes et al. 2021). Future work could include platforms like Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, building on the present study. This wider reach would better represent public views and reduce platform-specific biases. Specifically, future inquiries must address how platform cultures shape perceived opportunism and perceived injustice in CISDR discourse.

Second, we analyzed only English comments on YouTube videos and Reddit posts found through searches from UK and US IPs, which limits cultural and linguistic scope. Commenter location was not verified, so the dataset should be read as English-language platform discourse retrieved through UK- and US-based search contexts rather than as a verified UK/US consumer sample. This approach likely overlooks differences in perceptions of fairness, motive, and access across regions, languages, and cultures (Mahmoud 2025). Researchers could expand data collection to non-English platforms and regions, using bilingual netnography and local focus groups. Doing so would reveal whether perceptions of illogical rules and opportunistic service cuts differ culturally, enriching global perspectives on consumer distrust and perceived injustice.

Third, the data included comments posted between September 2020 and November 2023, which may not completely reflect changes in public sentiment before or after the pandemic. Extending the observation period would make it easier to assess whether trust and legitimacy are rebuilt, or remain lacking, after policies become stable. These types of studies can monitor how quickly stakeholder perspectives recover, as well as whether policy improvements such as consistent rules, compensation, fulfilled promises, and accessible solutions influence people's emotional responses and perceptions. Furthermore, longitudinal social listening could determine how distrust and legitimacy recover over longer horizons post-crisis. Future work should also examine non-reinstatement over time, because consumers may interpret a service cut differently once the immediate crisis has passed. A cut that begins as a safety or capacity response may later be read as opportunistic if it persists without a clear reinstatement trigger, price adjustment, or substitute benefit.

Another limitation was analyzing comments without context from the original posts or videos. Comments are often closely tied to specific content, shaping user sentiments (Thelwall et al. 2012). Future studies should incorporate original posts or video contexts directly into the thematic coding process. This method would clarify whether user criticisms of operational failures relate closely to broader crisis narratives. Researchers should also employ context-aware coding to evaluate how source framing conditions crisis attributions.

Relying on keyword-based data collection likely excluded discussions that use different wording, resulting in an incomplete representation of CISDR discourse (Bastos and Mercea 2018). The seed-term mix also shapes what is included. Our final deduplicated corpus came from overlapping search runs that combined opportunism-oriented terms and broader service-change terms. Because comments could be retrieved through more than one query before deduplication, we did not assign each retained comment to a single seed term. Theme 2 should therefore be interpreted as within-corpus prominence rather than as a population-level estimate of how often consumers perceive crisis-related service reductions as opportunistic. More inclusive sampling methods, such as machine-learning-driven topic models, would capture a broader range of conversations about service reductions. This would uncover overlooked terms or emerging phrases that stakeholders use to describe opportunistic frontline reductions.

Sector representation is another limitation. Healthcare accounted for 44.3 percent of sector mentions. This concentration is analytically useful because essential services make issues of access and well-being visible, but it also requires caution. In healthcare and public services, the same surface complaint may reflect workforce shortages, underfunding, policy restrictions, or crisis triage rather than firm-level discretion. Future research should test whether the four mismatches operate differently across essential, regulated, public, and discretionary services.

Methodological limitations also arise from pre-trained sentiment and emotion analysis models, which struggle with subtle language features like sarcasm, irony, or cultural references (Zimbra et al. 2018). Tailored analytical tools, such as fine-tuned language models combined with human verification, could improve accuracy. Future work could test whether finer-grained or domain-trained emotion models improve the classification of sarcasm, irony, and moral affect in CISDR discourse. It could also compare aggregated and discrete emotion labels to assess whether the three-category taxonomy predicts trust and legitimacy outcomes as well as, or better than, the original labels.

Furthermore, focusing solely on online comments excludes offline complaints, such as in-store feedback or phone calls, potentially missing essential information about *tangible* service issues. Future research could compare online sentiment data with offline complaint records to examine how the absence of physical service elements (e.g., towels, in-person staff) affects customer perceptions.

Focusing exclusively on the COVID-19 pandemic context also limits findings. The pandemic is unique due to its global scale, novelty, and prolonged duration, possibly influencing fairness and trust perceptions differently from crises such as natural disasters or recessions (Mahmoud and Mahroof 2025; Mahmoud et al. 2024). Future studies should explore CISDR across various extreme events. This approach can test whether similar themes (like operational failures and excessive service cuts) emerge consistently, improving crisis management strategies. Researchers could specifically apply the SCCT framework to non-pandemic events, such as floods or economic crises, to examine theoretical generalizability.

Our analysis primarily drew from stakeholder theory (Freeman 2010 [1984]) and legitimacy theory (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975), potentially constraining theoretical breadth. These frameworks effectively address organizational behavior during crises but may miss additional insights into trust dynamics and decision-making, or crisis communication. Future research could integrate additional perspectives, such as corporate social responsibility (Carroll 1991), trust theory in business ethics (Hosmer 1995), and justice and fairness theories (Rawls 1999). Using multi-theory case studies would yield richer insights into consumer distrust, perceived opportunism, and perceived injustice during crises.

Methodologically diverse research designs could further improve findings. Researchers should consider multi-method approaches, such as combining netnography, surveys, interviews, and complaint logs, to determine whether sentiments expressed online are consistent with those experienced offline.

Action research involving practitioners could directly test practical strategies for managing service declines without triggering distrust or perceived injustice. Longitudinal studies can also assess long-term shifts in stakeholder perceptions. Interdisciplinary collaborations involving sociologists, psychologists, and legal scholars can further enhance understanding of frontline enactments in extreme contexts.

The propositions and research questions define two linked parts of the future research agenda. The propositions identify testable mechanism-level expectations: rule coherence, motive cues, promise keeping, and access fairness. Table 5 extends this agenda by asking where, when, and for whom CISDR operates, with attention to platform cultures, language and region, time, source context, keyword bias, model limits, negativity skew, sector representation, emotion aggregation, crisis type, theory integration, and methods beyond chi-square tests. This set of questions is especially important because the present study is based on English-language platform discourse, a pandemic-era setting, and an aggregated emotion taxonomy.

Conclusion

This study examines consumer distrust, perceived opportunism, and perceived injustice in CISDR during the COVID-19 pandemic, showing how businesses use the crisis to justify service cuts widely perceived as unfair, opportunistic, or poorly communicated. Thematic, sentiment, and emotion analyses of Reddit and YouTube comments identify four core themes:

Table 5. Research Questions for Future Scholarly Work.

Limitation/Implication	Research Question	Suggested Methodology	Key Variables/Factors	Potential Interdisciplinary Links
Platform-specific bias (Reddit/YouTube cultures)	How do platform cultures shape perceived opportunism, perceived injustice, and distrust in CISDR discourse?	Comparative multi-platform netnography; matched sampling; GENLIN/multilevel models with platform fixed effects; domain-adapted LLM classification	Platform norms; moderation intensity; affordances; crisis type	Media studies; computational social science
Restricted cultural/linguistic scope English-language comments retrieved through UK- and US-based search contexts)	Do justice and distrust appraisals vary across languages and regions during non-pandemic crises?	Bilingual netnography; back-translation and measurement invariance; cross-national surveys; multi-group GENLIN	Cultural values; authority trust; crisis proximity; policy strictness	Cross-cultural psychology; international business
Time-frame constraints (September 2020–November 2023)	How do distrust and legitimacy recover (or persist) over longer horizons post-crisis?	Longitudinal social listening + panel surveys; interrupted time-series; event study	Trajectories of contempt/distress/optimism; trust repair; policy stabilization	Crisis management; sociology of time
Lack of original-post (OP) context	How does source context (OP content, frame, credibility) condition crisis attributions (avoidability, responsibility) and perceived injustice?	Context-aware coding; content-plus-comment linkage; causal inference with text (CIT); IVs via exogenous OP features	Frame valence; blame cues; evidence claims; source credibility	Communication studies; discourse analysis
Keyword sampling risk	Which additional terms and frames capture CISDR beyond current queries and how do they shift attributions and emotions?	Topic modeling + active learning; query-expansion with LLMs; human-in-the-loop audit	Emergent lexicon; euphemisms; sectoral jargon	Computational linguistics; marketing analytics
Sentiment/emotion model limits (sarcasm, irony)	Can domain-tuned models reduce misclassification of sarcasm and moral emotion in CISDR?	Fine-tuned LLMs with sarcasm corpora; adjudicated labels; adversarial validation; error analysis	Sarcasm markers; moral language; figurative speech	Computer science; sociolinguistics
Negativity skew in social-media data	How robust are CISDR inferences after correcting for negativity bias and self-selection?	Propensity weighting; Heckman selection; sensitivity analysis; triangulation with complaint logs	Posting propensity; complaint severity; offline vs online channels	Survey methodology; behavioral economics
Sector representation skew (healthcare 44.3%)	Are mechanisms (policy incoherence, opportunistic framing, capability shortfalls, access constraints) sector-specific or general?	Stratified analyses; multi-sector case-comparisons; GENLIN with sector interactions	Sector; essential vs discretionary; regulation intensity	Public policy; health services research
Emotion aggregation (contempt/distress/optimism)	Does the collapsed taxonomy improve predictive validity for trust/legitimacy outcomes vs. fine-grained emotions?	Out-of-sample prediction tests; nested models comparing aggregated vs. discrete labels; cross-validation	Emotion class; trust; legitimacy; advocacy intent	Affective science; psychometrics
Generalizability beyond pandemics	Does CISDR occur in disasters, economic shocks, or supply-chain failures, and do mismatches differ?	Cross-event netnography; crisis-type comparative studies; scenario experiments	Crisis type; duration; blame ambiguity; compensations	Disaster studies; operations management
Theory integration (trust/justice/corporate social responsibility (CSR) with SCCT)	How do procedural/distributive justice and trust mediate the path from missteps to distrust and legitimacy loss?	Structural models; preregistered experiments; mixed-methods field studies	Justice perceptions; trust; responsibility attributions; apology/remedy	Business ethics; organizational psychology
Method extensions beyond χ^2	Which belief–emotion associations persist under richer specifications?	GENLIN (multinomial/ordinal), mixed models; causal forests; robustness checks	Belief theme; contempt/distress/optimism; demographics; sector	Statistics; data science

CISDR, crisis-induced service decline rationalization; LLM, large language model; SCCT, situational crisis communication theory.

(1) *inconsistent frontline policies and communication*, (2) *perceived opportunism in frontline service reductions*, (3) *operational failures and declining frontline reliability*, and (4) *customer frustration with frontline access and experience constraints*. Framed through SCCT (mechanisms) with stakeholder and legitimacy perspectives (consequences), the study identifies how policy incoherence, opportunistic framings, capability shortfalls, and access constraints map onto rule–coherence, motive, capability–promise, and access–fairness mismatches that are associated with distrust, perceived injustice, and legitimacy loss. New mechanism-based propositions (P1–P4) outline a program for testing these dynamics across crises and sectors, while suggesting that integrating CSR, trust theory, and justice/fairness could deepen understanding of crisis-era service reductions. The research questions further specify where this agenda should move next, especially across platforms, languages, sectors, crisis types, and time horizons. Ultimately, the study shows that how organizations manage their frontlines during crises plays a critical role in sustaining trust and legitimacy, with long-term consequences for stakeholder engagement and reputational resilience.

Author Note

We thank the Guest Editor, the AE, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions during the revision of the manuscript. We thank Renu for copyediting the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

We thank several colleagues in the discipline for their valuable feedback. We thank Renu for copyediting the manuscript.

ORCID iDs

Ali B. Mahmoud https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3790-1107
V. Kumar https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6603-310X
Alexander Berman https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6249-5657
Abraham Stefanidis https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7677-1720

Ethical Considerations

All methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations, and as such, the study received IRB approval from St. John's University, USA.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

Access to Cash Review. 2019. "The Access to Cash Review final report of March 2019." Retrieved October 20, 2019, from https://www.accesstocash.org.uk/media/1087/final-report-final-web.pdf

Aksoy, Lerzan, Alexander Buoye, Maja Fors, Timothy Lee Keiningham, and Sara Rosengren. 2022. "Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Metrics Do Not Serve Services Customers: A missing Link Between Sustainability Metrics and Customer Perceptions of Social Innovation." *Journal of Service Management* 33, no. (4/5): 565–77.

Arnold, Todd, Michael Brady, Tom Brown, and Jagdip Singh. 2025. "Call-for-Papers for the. . . 10th Anniversary Organizational Frontlines Special Issue of Journal of Service Research." Sage, Retrieved March 31, 2024, from https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/JSR/JSR%20Special%20Issue%2010OF%20CFP-V9-1724173895.pdf

Azzari, Courtney Nations, Laurel Anderson, Martin Mende, Josephine Go Jefferies, Hilary Downey, Amy L. Ostrom, and Jelena Spanjol. 2021. "Consumers on the Job: Contextualization Crafting in Expert Services." *Journal of Service Research* 24, no. (4): 520–41.

Bansal, Sanchita, Isha Garg, and Shifali Singh. 2023. "Corporate Social Responsibility: Insights From COVID-19 and Stakeholder Theory." *Global Business and Organizational Excellence* 42, no. (6): 154–69.

Bardosh, Kevin, Alex de Figueiredo, Rachel Gur-Arie, Euzebiusz Jamrozik, James Doidge, Trudo Lemmens, Salmaan Keshavjee, Janice E. Graham, and Stefan Baral. 2022. "The Unintended Consequences of COVID-19 Vaccine Policy: Why Mandates, Passports and Restrictions May Cause More Harm Than Good." *BMJ Global Health* 7, no. (5): e008684.

Bastos, Marco, and Dan Mercea. 2018. "The Public Accountability of Social Platforms: Lessons From a Study on Bots and Trolls in the Brexit Campaign." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 376, no. (2128).

Beck, Tammy E. and Donde Ashmos Plowman. 2009. "Experiencing Rare and Unusual Events Richly: The Role of Middle Managers in Animating and Guiding Organizational Interpretation." *Organization Science* 20, no. (5): 909–24.

Berry, Leonard L., Tracey S. Danaher, Lerzan Aksoy, and Timothy L. Keiningham. 2020. "Service Safety in the Pandemic Age." *Journal of Service Research* 23, no. (4): 391–95.

Bhargava, Vikram R., and Manuel Velasquez. 2021. "Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 31, no. (3): 321–59.

Bigley, Gregory A., and Karlene H. Roberts. 2001. "The Incident Command System: High-Reliability Organizing for Complex and Volatile Task Environments." *Academy of Management Journal* 44, no. (6): 1281–99.

Bolton, Ruth N. 2020. "Commentary: Future Directions of the Service Discipline." *Journal of Services Marketing* 34, no. (3): 279–89.

Brammer, Stephen, Layla Branicki, and Martina Linnenluecke. 2023. "Disrupting Management Research? Critical Reflections on British Journal of Management COVID-19 Research and an Agenda for the Future." *British Journal of Management* 34, no. (1): 3–15.

Brewer, Steven, and Rebecca Imes. 2023. "Pandemic Messaging To Connect Or To Sell? B2B Messaging Strategies on LinkedIn

Regarding COVID-19." *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 28, no. (5): 692–706.

Bundy, Jonathan, Michael D. Pfarrer, Cole E. Short, and W. Timothy Coombs. 2016. "Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development." *Journal of Management* 43, no. (6): 1661–92.

Cardy, Claire, Nawar N. Chaker, and Michael Ahearne. 2022. "Customer–Salesperson Price Negotiations During Exceptional Demand Contractions." *Journal of Service Research* 26, no. (3): 351–70.

Carroll, Archie B. 1991. "The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility: Toward the Moral Management of Organizational Stakeholders." *Business Horizons* 34, no. (4): 39–48.

Christianson, Marlys K., Maria T. Farkas, and David A. Sutcliffe. 2009. "Learning through Rare Events: Significant Interruptions at the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum." *Organization Science* 20, no. (5): 846–60.

Civera, Chiara, and R. Edward Freeman. 2019. "Stakeholder Relationships and Responsibilities: A New Perspective." *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management*, no. (1): 40–58.

Coombs, W. Timothy. 2022. "Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)." In *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed., edited by W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, 193–204. Wiley.

Coombs, W. Timothy, and Elina R. Tachkova. 2023. "Integrating Moral Outrage in Situational Crisis Communication Theory: A Triadic Appraisal Model for Crises." *Management Communication Quarterly* 37, no. (4): 798–820.

Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss. 2015. *Basics of Qualitative Research*, *Core Textbook*. Sage Publications.

Corral de Zubielqui, G., and H. Harris. 2023. "Why the COVID-19 Crisis Is an Ethical Issue for Business: Evidence from the Australian JobKeeper Initiative." *Journal of Business Ethics* 190, no. (1): 1–14.

Davvetas, Vasileios, Aulona Ulqinaku, and Gülen Sarial Abi. 2021. "Local Impact of Global Crises, Institutional Trust, and Consumer Well-Being: Evidence from the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of International Marketing* 30, no. (2): 73–101.

Dom, Bernard Kofi. 2022. "Managing the Twin Pressures in Welsh Local Authorities During the Austerity Era." *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://ssrn.com/abstract=4231191

Dowling, John, and Jeffrey Pfeffer. 1975. "Organizational Legitimacy: Social Values and Organizational Behavior." *Pacific Sociological Review* 18, no. (1): 122–36.

Edell, Julie A. 2017. "Consumers' Responses to Service Failures and Recoveries." In *Serviceology for Services*, 2017, edited by Yoshinori Hara and Dimitris Karagiannis. Springer.

eMarketer. 2021. "Number of Logged-in Reddit Users in the United States From 2017 to 2025 (in millions) [Graph]." Retrieved August 05, 2021, from https://www-statista-com.jerome.stjohns.edu/statistics/1018997/number-of-reddit-users-usa/

Freeman, R. E.,no. (2010 [1984]), *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, *Pitman Series in Business and Public Policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Gerde, Virginia W., and Christopher Michaelson. 2016. "Institutional Constraints and Enablers." *Business & Society* 55, no. (7): 927–33.

Good, Valerie, Amy Greiner Fehl, and Mary Jo Bitneret al. 2023. "Cultivating Resilience in Organizational Frontline Employees." *Journal of Service Research* 26, no. (3): 405–21.

Gretton, Jeremy D., Ethan A. Meyers, Alexander C. Walker, Jonathan A. Fugelsang, and Derek J. Koehler. 2021. "A Brief Forewarning Intervention Overcomes Negative Effects of Salient Changes in COVID-19 Guidance." *Judgment and Decision Making* 16, no. (6): 1549–74.

Hällgren, Markus, Linda Rouleau, and Mark de Rond. 2018. "A Matter of Life or Death: How Extreme Context Research Matters for Management and Organization Studies." *Academy of Management Annals* 12, no. (1): 111–53.

Hosmer, Larue Tone. 1995. "Trust: The Connecting Link between Organizational Theory and Philosophical Ethics." *The Academy of Management Review* 20, no. (2): 379–403.

Johns, Gary. 2018. "Advances in the Treatment of Context in Organizational Research." *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 5, no. (1): 21–46.

Kar, Armita, Andre L. Carrel, and Brian D. Taylor. 2022. "Public Transit Cuts During COVID-19 Compound Social Vulnerability in 22 US Cities." *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment* 110: 103435.

Kirkman, K. 2022. "COVID Can No Longer Be An Excuse For Shoddy Customer Service." *Telegraph Media Group Limited*, Retrieved February 29, 2022, from https://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/consumer-affairs/covid-can-no-longer-excuse-shoddy-customer-service/

Landis, J. R., and G. G. Koch. 1977. "The Measurement of Observer Agreement for Categorical Data." *Biometrics* 33, no. (1): 159–74.

Larivière, Bart, and Edith G. Smit. 2022. "People–Planet–Profits for a Sustainable World: Integrating the Triple-P Idea in the Marketing Strategy, Implementation and Evaluation of Service Firms." *Journal of Service Management* 33, no. (4/5): 507–19.

Linden, Erik. 2021. "Long-Term Planning of Organizations in Industries with High Uncertainty Environments." In *Aviation Systems: Management of the Integrated Aviation Value Chain*, edited by Andreas Wittmer, Thomas Bieger and Roland Müller, 423–446. Springer International Publishing.

Liu, Xiaotao, Xiaoxia Liu, and Colin D. Reid. 2019. "Stakeholder Orientations and Cost Management." *Contemporary Accounting Research* 36, no. (1): 486–512.

Maak, Thomas, Nicola M. Pless, and Franz Wohlgezogen. 2021. "The Fault Lines of Leadership: Lessons from the Global COVID-19 Crisis." *Journal of Change Management* 21, no. (1): 66–86.

MacPhail, Catherine, Nomhle Khoza, Craig Abler, and Jillian Ranganathan. 2015. "Process Guidelines for Establishing Intercoder Reliability in Qualitative Studies." *Qualitative Research* 16, no. (2): 198–212.

Mahmoud, Ali B. 2025. "Eliciting Public Beliefs about Metaverse Esports." *Internet Research* 35, no. (5): 1867–88.

Mahmoud, Ali B., Nicholas Grigoriou, William D. Reisel, and Vignesh Yoganathan. 2022. "A Generational Study of Employees' Customer Orientation: A Motivational Viewpoint in Pandemic Time." *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 30, no. (8): 746–63.

Mahmoud, Ali B., Dimitrios N. Koufopoulos, Yousra Asaad, Bidit L. Dey, and Leonora Fuxman. 2026. "Eco-Friendly Travel During

The Cost-of-Living Crisis: Beliefs, Emotions, and Sentiments in Digital Discourse." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*: 1–29.
Mahmoud, Ali B., and Kamran Mahroof. 2025. "The Proof is in the Pudding: Public Beliefs, Emotions and Sentiments on Drone Deliveries in Extreme Contexts." *European Journal of Marketing* (Online). https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-08-2024-0631
Mahmoud, Ali B., William D. Reisel, and Ali M. Mohr. 2024. "War vs Pandemic—Investigating the Type of Extreme Context as a Moderator of Extreme-context Perception Effects on Work Alienation and its Organisational Outcomes." *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 35, no. (20): 3415–50.
Mahmoud, Ali B., William D. Reisel, Hassan H. F. Fuxman, and Ali M. Mohr 2022. "Locus of Control as a Moderator of the Effects of COVID-19 Perceptions on Job Insecurity, Psychosocial, Organisational, and Job Outcomes for MENA Region Hospitality Employees." *European Management Review* 19, no. (2): 313–32.
Mende, Martin, Maura L. Scott, and Mary Jo Bitner. 2023. "Personalized Communication as a Platform for Service Inclusion? Initial Insights Into Interpersonal and AI-Based Personalization for Stigmatized Consumers." *Journal of Service Research* 27, no. (1): 28–48.
Miller, Danny, and Isabelle Le Breton-Miller. 2023. "The Best of Firms, the Worst of Firms: Ethical Bifurcation in Family Businesses During Crises." *Academy of Management Proceedings* 2023, no. (1): 15864.
Myeza, Lindani, Marianne Kok, and Elize Strydom. 2024. "Stakeholder Engagement During the COVID-19 Crisis: Perspectives From South Africa." *Social Responsibility Journal* 20, no. (5): 919–38.
Nazifi, Amin, Holger Roschk, and Janine H. H. M. Pesonen. 2021. "Bad Intentions: Customers' Negative Reactions to Intentional Failures and Mitigating Conditions." *Journal of Travel Research* 61, no. (8): 1808–27.
Norris, J. Ian, Mario P. Casa de Calvo, and Robert D. Mather. 2020. "Managing an Existential Threat: How a Global Crisis Contaminates Organizational Decision-making." *Management Decision* 58, no. (10): 2117–38.
Osburg, Victoria-Sophie, Vignesh Yoganathan, Linda L. Price, and R. Venkatesh. 2022. "Can (A)I Give You a Ride? Development and Validation of the CRUISE Framework for Autonomous Vehicle Services." *Journal of Service Research* 25, no. (4): 630–48.
Ostrom, Amy L., Joy M. Field, and J. Joseph Cronin, et al. 2021. "Service Research Priorities: Managing and Delivering Service in Turbulent Times." *Journal of Service Research* 24, no. (3): 329–53.
Parkinson, Joy, Lisa Schuster, and Rory Mulcahy. 2021. "Online Third Places: Supporting Well-Being Through Identifying and Managing Unintended Consequences." *Journal of Service Research* 25, no. (1): 108–25.
Peachey, K. 2021. "Customers Fed Up With Covid Excuse For Bad Service." *BBC*. Retrieved 29 Februrary, 2021, from https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-57734808
Plutchik, Robert. 1980. "A General Psychoevolutionary Theory of Emotion." In *Theories of Emotion*, edited by Robert Plutchik and Henry Kellerman, 3–33. Academic Press.
Prayag, Girish, Birgit Muskat, and Chaminda Dassanayake. 2023. "Leading for Resilience: Fostering Employee and Organizational Resilience in Tourism Firms." *Journal of Travel Research* 63, no. (3): 659–80.
Proferes, Nicholas, Naiyan Jones, Sarah Gilbert, Casey Fiesler, and Michael Zimmer. 2021. "Studying Reddit: A Systematic Overview of Disciplines, Approaches, Methods, and Ethics." *Social Media + Society* 7, no. (2): 20563051211019004.
Rawls, John. 1999. *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Harvard University Press.
Roberts, Karlene H. 1990. "Some Characteristics of One Type of High Reliability Organization." *Organization Science* 1, no. (2): 160–76.
Rosemberg, Marie-Anne S., Mackenzie Adams, Carri Polick, Wei V. Li, Jenny Dang, Jenny Hsin-Chun Tsai. 2021. "COVID-19 and Mental Health of Food Retail, Food Service, and Hospitality Workers." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene* 18, no. (4–5): 169–79.
Russell, James A. 1980. "A Circumplex Model of Affect." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39, no. (6): 1161–78.
Sajko, Miha, Christophe Boone, and Tine Buyl. 2020. "CEO Greed, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Organizational Resilience to Systemic Shocks." *Journal of Management* 47, no. (4): 957–92.
Schijven, Jack F., Mark Wind, Daniel Todt, John Howes, Barbora Tamele, and Eike Steinmann. 2023. "Risk Assessment of Banknotes as a Fomite of SARS-CoV-2 in Cash Payment Transactions." *Risk Analysis* 43, no. (4): 700–8.
Schmidt, Christoph G., David A. Wuttke, H. Sebastian Heese, and Stephan M. Wagner. 2023. "Antecedents of Public Reactions to Supply Chain Glitches." *International Journal of Production Economics* 259: 108834.
Shahin, Ahmad E. 2023. "Growing During a Global Crisis." *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://ssrn.com/abstract=4439737
Singh, Jagdip, Michael Brady, Todd Arnold, and Tom Brown. 2016. "The Emergent Field of Organizational Frontlines." *Journal of Service Research* 20, no. (1): 3–11.
Singh, Jaywant, Benedetta Crisafulli, La Toya Quamina, and Melanie Tao Xue. 2020. "'To Trust or Not to Trust': The Impact of Social Media Influencers on the Reputation of Corporate Brands in Crisis." *Journal of Business Research* 119: 464–80.
StatCounter. 2024. "Social Network Web Visit Share Held by Reddit in the United Kingdom (UK) from July 2021 to March 2024 [Graph]." Retrieved 5 August, from https://www-statista-com.jerome.stjohns.edu/statistics/280312/social-network-market-share-held-by-reddit-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/
Statista. 2024. "Most Popular Social Networks Worldwide as of April 2024, by Number of Monthly Active Users (in millions) [Graph]." Retrieved August 7, 2024, from https://lnk.alresearch.net/ieee7
Subramony, Mahesh, Markus Groth, Xinyu "Judy" Hu, and Yu Wu. "Four Decades of Frontline Service Employee Research: An Integrative Bibliometric Review." *Journal of Service Research* 24, no. (2): 230–48.
Thelwall, Mike, Kevan Buckley, and Georgios Paltoglou. 2012. "Sentiment Strength Detection for the Social Web." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 63, no. (1): 163–73.
Trkman, Marina, Aleš Popovič, and Peter Trkman. 2021. "The Impact of Perceived Crisis Severity on Intention to Use Voluntary Proximity Tracing Applications." *International Journal of Information Management* 61: 102395.

Tuominen, Tiina, Bo Edvardsson, and Javier Reynoso. 2020. "Institutional Change and Routine Dynamics in Service Ecosystems." *Journal of Services Marketing* 34, no. (4): 575–86.
van der Vegt, Gerben S., Peter Essens, Margareta Wahlström, and Gerard George. 2015. "Managing Risk and Resilience." *Academy of Management Journal* 58, no. (4): 971–80.
Vink, Josina, and Kaisa Koskela-Huotari. 2021. "Building Reflexivity Using Service Design Methods." *Journal of Service Research* 25, no. (3): 371–89.
Voorhees, Clay M., Paul W. Fombelle, and Sterling A. Bone. 2020. "Don't Forget About the Frontline Employee During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Preliminary Insights and a Research Agenda on Market Shocks." *Journal of Service Research* 23, no. (4): 396–400.
Waller, Mary J. 1999. "The Timing of Adaptive Group Responses to Nonroutine Events." *Academy of Management Journal* 42, no. (2): 127–37.
Watson, D., and A. Tellegen. 1985. "Toward a Consensual Structure of Mood." *Psychol Bull* 98, no. (2): 219–35.
Yoo, Jaewon, and Todd J. Arnold. 2015. "Frontline Employee Customer-Oriented Attitude in the Presence of Job Demands and Resources: The Influence Upon Deep and Surface Acting." *Journal of Service Research* 19, no. (1): 102–17.
Yue, Yumeng, Karyn L. Wang, and Markus Groth. 2021. "It Went Downhill From There: The Spillover Effect From Previous Customer Mistreatment on Frontline Employees' Service Delivery." *Journal of Service Research* 25, no. (3): 478–93.
Zimbra, David, Ahmed Abbasi, Daniel Zeng, and Hsinchun Chen. 2018. "The State-of-the-Art in Twitter Sentiment Analysis." *ACM Transactions on Management Information Systems* 9, no. (2): 1–29.

Author Biographies

Ali B. Mahmoud is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Prais School of Business (France), a Full Professor of Marketing and Chief Researcher at ISM University of Management and Economics (Lithuania), a Visiting Professor of Management at St. John's University (USA) and an Adjunct Professor of Marketing at the University of London (UK). Dr Mahmoud has published over one-hundred publications, including books, book chapters, and journal articles featured in international journals like European Management Review, Industrial Marketing Management, Technovation, Journal of Service Research, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, European Journal of Marketing, IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, and the International Journal of Human Resource Management, among others.

V. Kumar (VK) is the Professor of Marketing and the Goodman Academic-Industry Partnership Professor, Goodman School of Business, Brock University, ON, Canada; and Chang Jiang Scholar, HUST, Wuhan, China. VK has also been honoured as a Legend in Marketing through the 10-Volume Legends in Marketing series originally published by Sage Publications with commentaries from scholars worldwide. Dr. Kumar has published over 350 papers in scholarly journals, and over 35 books, received 25 Lifetime Achievement Awards and over 25 Research and Teaching Excellence Awards.

Leonora Fuxman is a Professor of Management at St. John's University, New York. She earned a PhD in Operations Management and an MA in Decision Sciences from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, and a bachelor's degree in Mathematics from Kyiv State University.

Suraksha Gupta is a Professor of Marketing at Fashion Business School, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. Her work is positioned in marketing and international marketing, with interests that include sustainability, artificial intelligence, sustainable development goals, branding, and responsible fashion. Before joining Fashion Business School, she spent more than seven years at Newcastle University, where she held research leadership roles and received recognition for her research profile.

Alexander Berman is an Associate Professor of Management at St. John's University, New York. He holds a BS from Cornell University, an MBA from Boston University, and a PhD from Temple University. Before joining academia, he spent more than ten years in financial services, including portfolio management roles at Goldman Sachs and Barings. His research interests cover entrepreneurship, innovation, strategy, and international business.

William D. Reisel is a Professor of Management at St. John's University, New York. His St. John's profile describes him as a full professor of management at the Tobin College of Business and assistant chairperson of the management department. His scholarly work centers on employee job insecurity, attitudes, and strategy. He earned his Ph.D. in management and strategy from the City University of New York.

Abraham Stefanidis is a Professor at the Peter J. Tobin College of Business, St. John's University. His teaching interests include international management, human resource management, organizational behavior, and strategic management. His research interests include international management, business ethics, learning, academic achievement, artificial intelligence, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and disability.