

***Long COVID hits service quality—assessing the public’s beliefs and sentiments towards
using the pandemic as an excuse for poor service quality***

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Abstract

COVID-19’s waves of change continue to be visible in today’s business practices, such that concerns have been raised about the potential misuse of the crisis as an excuse for poor service. This study builds on *Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)* and *Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Theory* to investigate public beliefs and sentiments regarding businesses that may be using COVID-19 as an excuse for offering bad levels of service quality. Using a big data approach, thematic, sentiment and emotion analyses were performed on 1,904 consumers’ comments scraped from YouTube videos discussing the phenomenon. Our results suggested that belief is a four-theme structure comprising of: *the COVID rules are illogical*; *2) companies taking advantage to reduce costs/effort*; *3) general incompetence and poor service*; and *4)*

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customers inconvenienced by COVID service reductions. Moreover, the majority of sentiments were negative, resembling emotions like helplessness, fear and frustration. Overall, the synthesis of thematic, sentiment, and emotion analyses presented a cohesive narrative of public dissatisfaction and distrust towards the handling of service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords. COVID-19, extreme contexts, crises, service quality, public beliefs and attitudes.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant disruption in the way businesses operate (Mahmoud et al., 2024). It has forced companies in various industries to revise their strategies to tackle new challenges (Yang et al., 2021). This period of uncertainty has compelled businesses to rethink their customer engagement approaches and operational frameworks (Margherita & Heikkilä, 2021). More importantly, it has highlighted the need for resilience and adaptability to ensure business continuity (Riglietti et al., 2022). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become more critical than ever during this time. Research (e.g. Mahmud et al., 2021) has emphasised the importance of businesses prioritising their employees' and customers' well-being and the broader community during the crisis. The pandemic has also accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in business practices. Scholars (e.g. Giantari et al., 2022; Tripathi, 2021) have investigated the critical role of digital innovation in building business resilience amidst the crisis times.

Consumer expectations and perceptions of service quality have undergone significant changes in recent times. These changes have been fuelled by strategic and operational shifts in businesses, as well as the pandemic's impact on consumer behaviour. Studies (e.g. Chuenyindee et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2023) have highlighted the importance of cleanliness, safety, and hygiene in various services, from public utilities to food delivery, emphasising the need for businesses to prioritise these factors. The hospitality sector has also adapted to the pandemic by implementing enhanced hygiene protocols and digital service models (e.g. Nguyen & Tran, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2024). This reflects the evolving landscape of consumer expectations in service quality. Grounded in Coombs's (2022) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Theory, our exploration of public beliefs regarding businesses that use COVID-

19 as an excuse for poor service is based on the complex interplay between business adaptability and consumer expectations.

To thoroughly investigate these dynamics, this study is guided by two primary research questions:

1. What themes emerge from the public's beliefs regarding businesses using COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service?
2. What emotions and sentiments are triggered among the public by businesses using COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service?

Addressing these questions is crucial for businesses to adapt and thrive in times of crisis or extreme contexts. Using SCCT to comprehend crisis communication strategies and SERVQUAL to evaluate service quality perceptions, we can gain insight into the wider implications of service quality on consumer trust and business reputation. This study is not just an academic exercise; it is a vital endeavour that aims to equip businesses with the knowledge to align their service offerings with the heightened expectations of today's consumers, hence more capable of navigating the complex post-pandemic world.

Literature review

Consumer perceptions and business ethics during the COVID-19 crisis

The analyses of consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards business practices during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal a complex landscape influenced by a variety of factors. Studies have indicated an increased reliance on single-use plastic food packaging, driven by heightened safety concerns (Kitz et al., 2021). Furthermore, preventive behaviours like frequent handwashing have been swayed by social norms and the behaviours of influential individuals

(Dwipayanti et al., 2021). Consumers' pandemic-related knowledge and practices have also varied by demographic factors such as age and education level, as well as their professional background in healthcare (Narayana et al., 2020). The pandemic's influence extends to consumer behaviour towards sustainability, especially within the hotel industry (Dwivedi et al., 2022), and has triggered changes in purchasing behaviour, as evidenced by the observed shifts among Greek consumers (Argyropoulou et al., 2023).

The sentiment towards localised production and short food supply chains has been another area of interest, emphasising the need to understand consumer preferences in the food industry (Mass et al., 2022). Moreover, the uncertainty of the pandemic has expedited the digital transformation of the agri-food sector, showcasing the need for businesses to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances (Musa et al., 2022). These insights are critical as they illustrate the pandemic's broad impact on consumer priorities, encompassing safety, sustainability, and a growing preference for digital solutions. Understanding these shifts is imperative for businesses aiming to align their practices and strategies with the evolving consumer landscape in a post-pandemic reality.

The importance of consumer trust and expectations towards businesses, especially during crises, is well-documented. Research has highlighted that factors like crisis management practices, brand trust, and corporate social responsibility significantly influence consumer trust (Jung & Lee, 2022; Liao et al., 2020; Wilson & Jessica, 2020). Effective response strategies, including transparency and ethical practices, are key in shaping consumer trust and purchase intentions (Jung & Lee, 2022; Liao et al., 2020). Trust also plays a critical role in customer loyalty and commitment, further emphasising its value in consumer-business relationships (Gong et al., 2022; Irshad & Ahmad, 2019). In particular, trust has been a focal point in the food industry, where consumer behaviour can be deeply affected by incidents such as food recalls (Hu et al., 2022). The unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified

the role of trust, with changes in consumer behaviour and increased digital reliance altering the business landscape (Wilson & Jessica, 2020). Companies that have adeptly managed the crisis and prioritised consumer safety have managed to sustain or even bolster consumer trust (Wilson & Jessica, 2020).

Transparency and effective communication are pivotal in shaping public opinion about business operations during a crisis. Transparent communication, which involves empathetic and fact-based approaches, is crucial for garnering public cooperation and managing expectations during crises (Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020; Kane et al., 2021). Additionally, the quality of crisis communication by leaders, characterised by empathy, transparency, and decisiveness, is integral to maintaining public approval and trust (Lee et al., 2021; Osawa et al., 2022). A lack of transparency and communication failures can result in public dissatisfaction and mistrust, as evidenced by the challenges in co-producing crisis responses across various sectors (Lee et al., 2021). Hence, clear and consistent communication is essential for reducing confusion and shaping public opinion and behaviour positively.

In summary, these interconnected dimensions of consumer behaviour, trust, and communication underpin the motivation for a study exploring public beliefs about businesses using COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service. The insights gained from such a study would be invaluable for businesses seeking to navigate the complexities of consumer expectations and trust in the ongoing post-pandemic recovery.

Theoretical underpinnings

Coombs's (2022) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Theory offer robust theoretical foundations for a study investigating public beliefs about businesses using COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which emphasises the

importance of timely, honest, and transparent communication during crises (Coombs, 2022), can explain how businesses' communication strategies during the pandemic might influence public perceptions (Brewer & Imes, 2023). This theory suggests that effective communication can mitigate negative perceptions and build trust, even in adverse situations (Coombs, 2022). In the context of COVID-19, where uncertainty and fear prevail, the way businesses communicate about their service challenges and solutions could significantly impact consumer trust and their beliefs about the legitimacy of using the pandemic as an excuse for service lapses.

On the other hand, the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Theory, which identifies five dimensions of service quality—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—provides a framework for assessing consumer expectations and perceptions of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988). During the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers' expectations regarding these dimensions may have shifted, with a heightened emphasis on aspects like empathy and assurance, reflecting businesses' understanding and assurances about service delivery in challenging times (e.g. Mahmoud et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). The combination of these two theories provides a comprehensive analysis of how businesses' communication efforts, coupled with the perceived quality of service during the pandemic, influence public attitudes about citing COVID-19 as a justification for substandard service. Studies have shown that crisis communication strategies based on SCCT can influence public sentiment and organizational reputation during crises (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019, 2023). Consequently, by applying SCCT, organisations can tailor their crisis response strategies to address public perceptions and maintain trust. Additionally, research has highlighted the importance of crisis communication management strategies in shaping public sentiment and organizational reputation during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Dominic et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2022).

Methods

We gathered data from YouTube posts made between January 2021 and August 2022, a period in which the media covered the dissatisfaction of customers with using COVID-19 as an excuse for bad service quality (e.g. Kirkman, 2022; Peachey, 2021). The keywords used in this study were carefully chosen based on their frequency and importance when identifying the videos. (e.g. covid as an excuse). To ensure relevance and wider impact, the videos were sorted based on their view count. We obtained an API from YouTube (Google) and scraped YouTube users' comments. Using Python coding, the comments (N= 3,574) underwent pre-processing and cleaning methods, including removing duplicate comments, filtering out non-English comments, and eliminating meaningless or incomprehensible statements (e.g. spam). As a result, our dataset was representative and free of noise. The dataset was narrowed down to 1,904 comments suitable for qualitative analysis through this process.

We utilised NVivo 12 software to generate initial codes and group them into overarching themes through a systematic process that included several labour-intensive stages. To ensure validity and reliability, we incorporated dual coding, multiple iterations, inter-coder reliability assessment, and third-party validation. We started by selecting a random subset of 300 comments for exploratory analysis to identify potential themes. Using emergent themes and relevant literature, we established a coding framework. We reached data saturation after analysing approximately 72% of the dataset, after which no substantial new themes emerged, thereby ensuring the comprehensiveness and validity of our analysis (Guest et al., 2012). After completing the open coding stage, we proceeded with axial coding to examine the connections between the initial codes. This allowed us to group the codes into more comprehensive and abstract categories. Lastly, we utilized selective coding to further develop these categories into broader themes that formed the central focus of our research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Moreover, the final Cohen's Kappa score of 0.714 showed substantial agreement between the

coders. Furthermore, a random sample of 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 to refine the coding framework and add an extra layer of rigor to the findings. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted in the context of existing literature, aligning the findings with theoretical frameworks and highlighting potential avenues for future research.

To analyse the refined dataset, we utilised the Sentiment Intensity Analyzer (SIA) based on the VADER lexicon (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014) from Python's Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) as our analytical framework. The VADER lexicon was chosen for its proven ability to capture sentiment in social media texts, making it an ideal fit for the public comments in our dataset. It is also adept at understanding sentiment conveyed through idioms and emoticons, which are commonly used on online platforms (Banik, 2023). Each comment was assigned a compound score, which served as an aggregated measure of its sentiment polarity. We then used the compound score to classify the comments into 'Positive,' 'Negative,' and 'Neutral' categories based on predefined thresholds (> 0.05 for Positive, < -0.05 for Negative, and between these ranges for Neutral).

For the emotion analysis, we employed a predefined list of emotion words grounded in seminal theories like Paul Ekman's basic emotions (Ekman, 1992) and Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions (Plutchik, 1980). The comments were tokenised, and each token was compared against this emotion lexicon. We then tabulated the frequencies of each emotion to assess the overall emotional tone of the public discussions on YouTube regarding public beliefs about businesses using COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service. Finally, we visualised the results using Matplotlib, generating a bar chart for emotion frequencies and a pie chart for sentiment distribution. Additionally, we produced a word cloud to provide a qualitative snapshot of the corpus.

Results:

Thematic analysis

Theme 1: The COVID rules are illogical

Many social media users expressed frustration over COVID-19 rules and restrictions that they felt were illogical or inconsistent. For example, one user from California critiqued the state's approach, saying, *"Seriously because of Covid makes me want to come unglued! California is terrible."* Several users pointed out oddities in mask policies, like having to wear masks when entering certain venues but then being allowed to remove them once inside. As one user described their recreation centre's policy: *"You have to wear a mask walking into the rec center but once you enter the pool you can take it off! Covid doesn't go in swimming pools!! (Indoor swimming pool FYI)."*

Along the same lines, multiple users questioned restrictions around not being able to use fitting rooms or touch merchandise in stores yet still being able to use public restrooms and shared sink areas. As one user put it regarding a Target policy: *"At Target, in the beginning, not only were the dressing rooms closed, but there were signs in the clothing section telling people not to touch the clothes unless they were going to purchase them."* Another user described their experience washing hands in a public restroom: *"Today I was in the bathroom and the area where you wash your hands had the clear wall separators, but yours hands go under the clear wall in another persons separator area to reach the water. So Im supposed to get my soap 6 feet apart but Im then supposed to wash it off with the water along with someone else?..... make it make sense."*

Beyond inconsistent policies, some users felt companies were using COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service or long wait times. As one commented about 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.” Along these lines, 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.”

Some international perspectives were also shared, like the Canadian user who critiqued not being allowed to purchase clothing and shoes in stores as “non-essential” items. As they described: *“In Ontario, Canada right now, we can’t buy clothes or shoes in store because they aren’t “essential”. But we can order online...yay...”*

Finally, a few users highlighted extremely specific oddities, like one user who questioned the logic behind massage and facial policies: *“My favorite....Massage Envy you don’t have to wear a mask face down during your massage, but you have to wear it face up....add to it, you don’t have to wear a mask if you’re getting a facial. Me: I’ll take a facial. Please put the cream on my face quick and then rub my back.”*

In summary, these social media comments expressed a shared view that many COVID-19 restrictions, policies, and company approaches simply *“don’t make sense.”* As one user concluded: *“The ones in charge of this country are the dumbest people on the planet. Arent we so lucky!!??”*

Theme 2: Companies taking advantage to reduce costs/effort

Several users felt that companies were using COVID-19 as a convenient excuse to reduce costs, effort, and services. For example, one user speculated that playground closures were simply because businesses *“just don’t want to deal with kids (mine) in the playground.”* Another echoed this regarding closed fitting rooms: *“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.”*

Along the same lines, some users doubted the legitimacy of maintaining closed public restrooms for safety reasons. As one user described: *“It HAPPENS. Way to ruin a good workout. (I don’t live right next door to the gym; so I would have to walk or drive a block and two streets, and run up 3 flights of stairs to get to the restroom). Ridiculous. Because of COVID. Yeah right. You just don’t want to clean the bathroom.”* Another user agreed: *“Trust me, they’re not cleaning them since no one is coming in. It’d be fine if they clean them the first time and then just wanted to keep them clean. But no you can look in there and they’re still just nasty.”*

Reduced food and beverage services also raised scepticism from users who felt companies were cutting costs under the guise of safety. For example, one user remarked sarcastically: *“They should just say Were lazy now so were not gonna give you a soda.”* Another critiqued McDonald’s refill policy: *“McDonalds wont give you refills due to COVID-19. Theyll give you the drink initially but you cant walk up to the counter and ask for a refill.”*

Some users called out the hypocrisy they perceived between companies claiming safety concerns yet still expecting employees to take risks. As one user stated: *“We are puting ourselves at “risk” for your benefit. I dont agree with a lot of shit that happens but don’t take it out on associates who can’t do a damn thing about corporate decisions.”*

Finally, one user cynically summarized their view: *“Higher prices, less service. Businesses actually love it.”* This sentiment suggests a shared belief that companies are opportunistically leveraging COVID-19 to improve profits while diminishing services and blaming pandemic restrictions.

In summary, these comments reflect a perspective that many businesses are disingenuously citing COVID-19 to justify reductions in services, costs, effort and amenities when, in fact, other profit-driven motives may be prioritised over consumer interests or employee safety.

Theme 3: General incompetence and poor service

A common perspective expressed in the comments is that COVID-19 has exposed and, in some cases, amplified already existing poor service, incompetence and laziness across individuals, businesses and society. One user summarised: *"Covid has really showed what a lazy society we have now. Sad times."*

Some users critiqued the lack of personal accountability they've observed, with one stating: *"Every lazy person in America wants to blame covid for everything! At one point we need to stop blaming corona and ppl need to start getting their life in order."* Another jokingly admitted: *"I was honest: I told my parents that I would study longer because of Covid. In truth, I was just super lazy last year."*

Businesses also received blame for worsening service quality. As one user vented: *"More and more businesses, regardless of what type have been using the Covid scare as an excuse to justify piss* poor customer services, even over the simplest concerns. Ive literally had it with excuses."* Another agreed: *"It's just an excuse. They expect us to put up with it. I vote with my money. I can bring clothes back but cant try them on. No way."*

Government policies and performance elicited criticism as well, especially in California: *"I cant anymore... California is terrible."* The economic impacts also raised concerns, with one user stating: *"Unemployment has ruined people, and our country!"*

Some users expressed more general frustrations, like: *"Covid is dumb, ESPN is garbage, and John Crist is keeping it 100!!"* And: *"Thank you for speaking out on this so many in the Christian community are not speaking out or up right now."*

In summary, these comments reflect a view that COVID-19 has revealed and exacerbated already declining service quality, competence and work ethic across multiple sectors of society. Government, businesses and individuals receive blame for using the

pandemic as a convenient scapegoat to justify incompetence and lack of accountability. The impacts span economic, moral and spiritual spheres.

Theme 4: Customers inconvenienced by COVID service reductions

Many users expressed frustration over how COVID-19 restrictions and policies have significantly inconvenienced customers. For example, several users critiqued reduced amenities and services at hotels and other hospitality businesses. As one user described: *"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 agreed: *"Stayed in a hotel with no coffee pot as well and I was furious!"*

Retail experiences also left some customers feeling unwelcome or disrespected. One user explained: *"I left my basket and went to petsmart, where I am welcome to do both. I will not be using Petco in the future for this reason. Nothing but an excuse to provide less service and be rude to customers."* Another described hypocrisy around cash payments: *"As we're pulling out our card this guy cuts in front of us to tip that lady at the register with cash and she takes it.. my husband is like so you can't accept cash payment, but you'll take a cash tip?"*

The inability to access basic services like public restrooms and career counselling also raised complaints, with one user remarking sarcastically: *"No open public restrooms due to covid, now all of America has to wear depends."* Another questioned limits on one-on-one employment help: *"We cannot do 1 on 1 appointments for employment counselling, but I can walk into walmart with 400 other people?"*

Some comments suggest customers recognise the difficult balance businesses face between safety and service. One user stated: *"As a fiscal conservative and a social liberal, I feel we need to say that people should respect the feelings of others and respect that there may still be some discomfort, but we need focus on returning to normal, including economically."*

However, most feel businesses have gone too far in restrictions. As one concluded, *"It's been a competition of who can make the worst decision. Not a single person in authority was going to be outdone. Real life is the ultimate comedy."*

In summary, these comments demonstrate that many customers feel significant frustration, inconvenience and disrespect from COVID-19 limitations on amenities, payments, access and hospitality - often questioning the rationale behind policies meant to prioritise safety over customer service.

Sentiment and emotion analyses

The sentiment (Figure 1) and emotion (Figure 2) analyses derived from the public's textual data on businesses exploiting COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service offer insights into the societal pulse. A predominant 45.9% of the sentiments expressed are negative, indicating widespread dissatisfaction, while a significant portion, 37.5%, reflects positive sentiments, with a smaller 16.6% being neutral. This mix suggests a complex emotional response to the subject, with negativity at the forefront but not entirely defining the public discourse.

Figure 1: Sentiment analysis

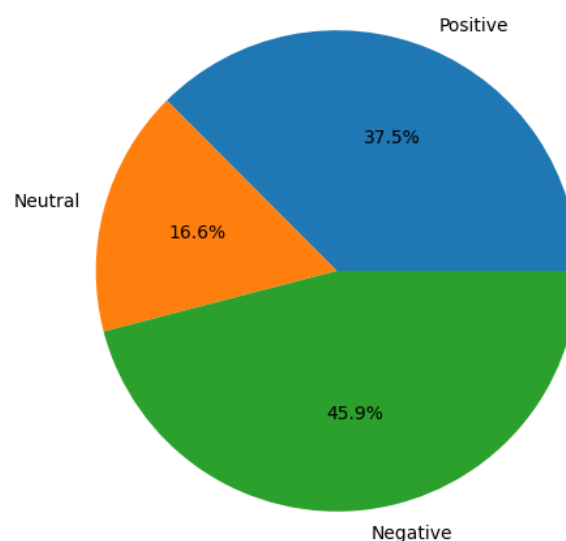
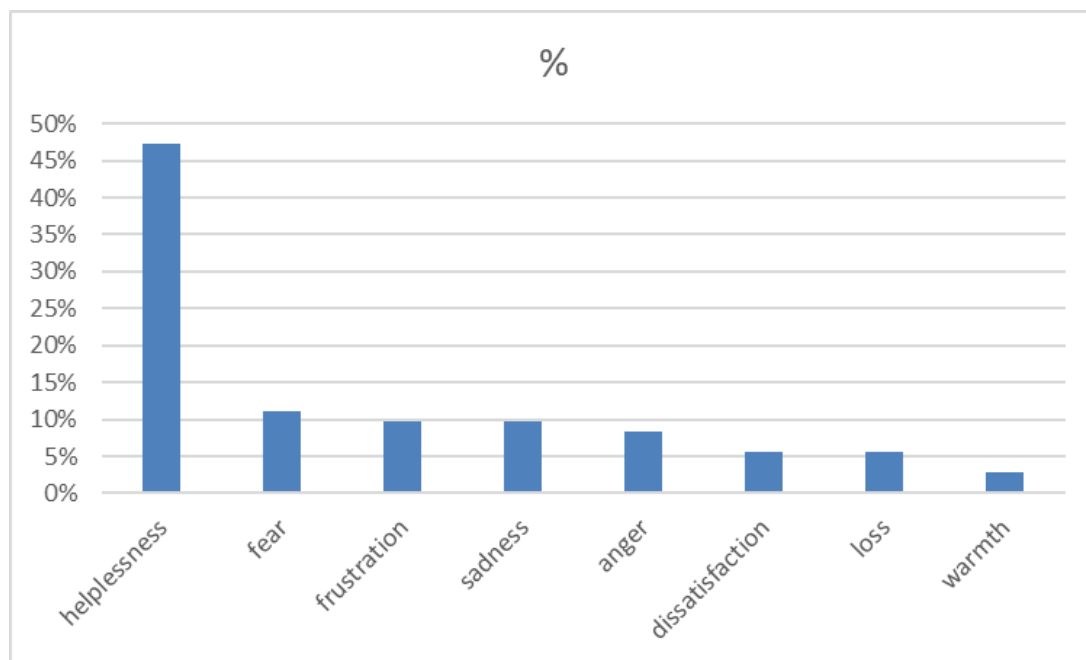


Figure 2: Emotion analysis



The narrative is reinforced by the distribution of emotions, with an astounding 40% of responses expressing helplessness, which is the dominant emotion. Fear and frustration also emerge prominently, albeit to a lesser extent, while warmth sits at the lower end, barely visible. These percentages highlight the predominant emotional landscape shaped by the pandemic's intersection with service expectations and bolster the sentiment analysis findings.

Integrating these findings with the thematic analysis of social media commentary, several prominent themes align with the negative sentiments and emotions of helplessness and frustration. There was a pervasive sense that COVID-19 rules and restrictions were illogical or inconsistently applied, creating confusion and further feeding into the sentiment of helplessness, the most prominent emotion at over 40%. Moreover, comments suggested that businesses were seizing the opportunity to reduce services and increase prices, exploiting the pandemic as a convenient excuse—a direct reflection of the negative sentiment expressed by nearly half of the sample. The public's frustration with perceived general incompetence and

incompetence and poor service, and the inconvenience to customers due to reduced services. This thematic structure provided a comprehensive view of the public's stance on service quality during the pandemic, highlighting a significant level of distrust and dissatisfaction.

The results revealed a predominant negative sentiment among the public, characterised by feelings of helplessness, fear, and frustration. In the context of SCCT, this indicates a need for businesses to adopt more effective crisis communication strategies that are transparent and empathetic, directly addressing consumer concerns and clarifying any misperceptions about service changes during the pandemic. The thematic, sentiment, and emotion analyses together painted a vivid picture of widespread public discontent regarding how businesses managed service delivery amidst the pandemic. The research findings align with existing literature on consumer expectations and service quality, reinforcing the notion that crises like the COVID-19 pandemic intensify public scrutiny of business practices (e.g. Kim et al., 2023; Teangsompong et al., 2024), calling for genuine CSR activities (e.g. Asante Antwi et al., 2021; Younas & Md Kassim, 2022). The negative sentiments and emotions identified, such as helplessness, fear, and frustration, underscore the critical role of transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct in maintaining consumer trust during challenging times (e.g. Chen et al., 2021; Habbal et al., 2024; Honora et al., 2022; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014).

Regarding business reputation, the findings resonate with previous research (e.g. Habib & Hamadneh, 2021; Tomašević et al., 2023), highlighting the lasting impact of public perceptions formed during crises, underscoring the necessity for businesses to address public concerns proactively to safeguard and potentially enhance their reputation amid adversity (e.g. Chen et al., 2022; Zhao, 2021). The thematic analysis revealing public discontent with perceived service reductions and incompetence suggests that businesses need to be more conscientious in their crisis communication and service delivery to avoid long-term reputational damage (e.g. Miguel et al., 2022; Mtengwa & Muchenje, 2023). According to

SERVQUAL theory, this gap highlights the importance of responsiveness and assurance in service quality. Businesses must ensure that their communication and actions reflect an understanding of consumer needs and a commitment to maintaining service standards, even in challenging circumstances.

In terms of consumer behaviour, the study provides insights that align with the stance on how public beliefs about businesses exploiting the pandemic can influence consumer responses and behaviour (e.g. Campbell et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2020). The identified themes of illogical COVID rules, opportunistic business practices, and general incompetence mirror changing consumer expectations and highlight the importance of businesses adapting their strategies to meet these evolving demands (e.g. Chanyasak et al., 2022; Klein & Todesco, 2021). This aligns with the SERVQUAL dimension of empathy, indicating that businesses need to demonstrate greater sensitivity and understanding towards consumer concerns during the pandemic.

The research further contributes to the discourse on service quality (e.g. Dubbelink et al., 2021; Matta et al., 2022) by identifying specific areas for improvement. The public's negative sentiments reflect a perceived decline in service quality, emphasising the need for businesses to align their service offerings more closely with consumer expectations to enhance satisfaction and loyalty.

Lastly, the study's findings on crisis management strategies offer insights into effective communication and reputation management, supporting the views of Coombs (2022). The negative public sentiment towards businesses' handling of service delivery during the pandemic highlights the importance of transparent, empathetic, and decisive communication in maintaining public trust and approval during crises. SCCT suggests that organisations should frame their communication to highlight efforts to address and mitigate the crisis, emphasising

how they are working to maintain service quality and consumer well-being. This can help in reshaping public perceptions and rebuilding trust.

Practical implications

The study highlights the critical need for businesses to maintain transparency, accountability, and adaptability in their service offerings. The public's perception of businesses using the pandemic as an excuse for poor service has led to widespread dissatisfaction, which can have long-lasting impacts on brand loyalty and consumer trust. To mitigate these effects, businesses must ensure that any changes in service delivery are clearly communicated and justified, with an emphasis on the safety and well-being of both customers and employees. Furthermore, businesses should actively seek feedback from consumers to understand their concerns and expectations, using this feedback to adapt and improve service quality continually.

The frustration and confusion expressed by the public regarding inconsistent policies and perceived illogical rules highlight the need for clear, consistent, and rational guidelines during crises. Policymakers should work closely with health experts, businesses, and consumer representatives to develop guidelines that balance safety with practicality and public acceptability. Transparent communication of the rationale behind policies can help in reducing public scepticism and enhancing compliance. Additionally, there should be mechanisms in place for regularly reviewing and adjusting policies based on evolving scientific evidence and public feedback to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

The study reflects a broader societal challenge in responding to crises, emphasising the importance of collective responsibility, empathy, and adaptability. Public understanding and cooperation are crucial in navigating the challenges posed by pandemics or similar crises. This requires fostering a culture of resilience, where individuals and communities are prepared to

adapt to changing circumstances while supporting each other. Education and public awareness campaigns can play a significant role in building this resilience, emphasising the importance of solidarity, empathy, and the collective good in overcoming crises.

Research limitations and implications

The study's reliance on consumer comments from social media platforms, particularly YouTube, to gauge public sentiment and beliefs about businesses using COVID-19 as an excuse for poor service quality might present a limitation in terms of representativeness and bias. The nature of social media discourse, which can be polarised and influenced by extremes, may not fully capture the views of the wider population. Additionally, the thematic analysis, while comprehensive, is subject to the interpretative lens of the researchers, which could introduce subjective bias into the categorisation and analysis of sentiments and emotions.

These inferred limitations suggest avenues for future research. Expanding the scope of data sources to include other social media platforms, customer service feedback channels, and direct surveys could provide a more balanced and representative view of consumer sentiments. Employing mixed methods, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data, could enhance the robustness of the findings. Furthermore, longitudinal studies that track changes in consumer sentiment over time, particularly as businesses and societies adapt to post-pandemic realities, could offer valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of consumer trust, service quality perceptions, and business reputation management.

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