The impact of the Qatar blockade on customer relationship management

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Abstract

The 2017 blockade imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt constituted a profound geopolitical crisis that reshaped the country's economic and social landscape. One of the most affected domains was customer relationship management (CRM) in service industries, which faced immediate disruptions to supply chains, reputational challenges, and uncertainty about customer trust. This research focuses on the impact the blockade on Qatar had on CRM within the aviation, healthcare, banking, oil and gas, and insurance industries. Following an interpretivist research paradigm, qualitative research was undertaken and semi-structured interviews with senior executives in the industries were used to capture the organisational responses. The study identifies and describes a range of adaptive CRM strategies the organisations implemented designed to help maintain and nurture customer loyalty, including supplier diversification, accelerated digital transformations, retraining employees, developing social CRM, and shifting to a more active multi-channel CRM. Embedding various digital and relational marketing tools also sustained and helped retain the focus of customers during the politically and economically destabilising period. This also helped bolster the long-term viability of the organisations. By detailing the improvisational CRM practices of service firms, this study adds to the literature on CRM and crisis management focusing on small economically and geopolitically important countries.

There is recognition of the need to strengthen digital infrastructure and public support for the stabilisation of the service sectors and CRM innovation for crisis preparedness. Future studies should examine comparative cases of CRM resilience regionally within the scope of political conflicts and globally, with crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a diplomatic and economic blockade on Qatar and severed air, sea, and land connections and diplomatic ties (Ulrichsen 2020; Kamrava 2019). For Qatar, a small but resource-rich economy which is fully integrated into global trade, the blockade fully tested the institutional resilience, corporate adaptability, and customer loyalty on an unprecedented scale. It also posed a profound disruptive shock to the geopolitical order that affected the systems of supply chain, mobility, and the seamless continuity of commerce across multiple Qatar's economic sectors.

The blockade impacted every sector of the economy, but the most affected were the service industries. Qatar's blockade and the pandemic's country lockdowns both posed unique situations of uncertainty and instability to the service industries, particularly for the airline sector, wherein service delivery became postponed, and the dependability of hardware became a curse. In such a situation, customer trust, the perception of continuity, and reassurance become critical. Under these conditions of extreme turbulence, this situation of a geopolitical blockade allows for unique insight into how a firm could forgo all the systems of conventional CRM and still maintain functional operational systems.

In an economy that is solely service-based, the integration of CRM systems as a competitive advantage allows the value chain of people, processes, and technologies of a firm to capture, maintain, and enhance the most vital economic resource of customer relationships (Payne and Frow 2017; Buttle and Maklan 2019). Under relatively stable conditions, the integration of advanced CRM systems enables a firm to provide higher levels of service personalization, enhance customer satisfaction, and engender loyalty toward the firm. CRM takes on a more tactical function during times of crisis. Scholars hold that when clients sense increased potential danger, firms must show their competence, openness, and ability to empathize to continue building a rapport of trust (He & Harris, 2020; Sigala, 2020). The movement of CRM away from a marketing function to a resilience tool demonstrates storms and disruptive environments underscore the value of CRM.

The blockade occurred alongside the world's rapid digitization and the use of social CRM. Companies in all sectors increased their use of digital tools, mobile apps, and online offerings. In Qatar, banks increased the scope of their mobile banking, healthcare providers introduced more telemedicine services, and retailers scaled up their e-commerce operations. The world over, during the COVID-19 lockdown, digital CRM tools became vital for engagement and the value of real-time connectedness (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021). The world over, CRM practices that integrate digital tools are common and for the most part, in crisis situations. The digital world is common to all sectors of our lives.

The majority of the research on CRM is limited to studies in developed countries which are in relatively stable environments. While the marketing literature on crises and services has discussed natural disasters, health crises, and economic downturns, geopolitical blockades have yet to be considered an archetype of crises (Coombs, 2015; Bundy et al., 2017). Such blockades are unique in that they present firms with a combination of operational problems and reputational risks. Firms face the challenge of operationally withstanding a blockade, while signalling reputational resilience to a broad set of stakeholders, including customers, and finding regulatory, governmental, and geopolitical partners. This study focuses on the CRM literature and the context of the Qatar blockade to fill this gap.

Accordingly, the research problem of this paper can be stated as follows: despite the fact that CRM is perceived as a significant source of competitive advantage, there is a scarcity of research on how service firms in small, resource-rich economies implement CRM to maintain trust and loyalty in the face of geopolitical crises. The published research does discuss CRM and service recovery in the context of natural disasters, such as hurricanes, the banking sector during recessions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and health crises, and most recently, digital tools for CRM. Still, there has been a lack of attention to the specific context of political blockades in the literature, resulting in a gap in theory and practice.

This study also responds to the need for further qualitative, context-rich descriptions of research on managerial responses to crises. There is a large gap in understanding the sensemaking of managers and employees dealing with disruption, even in CRM literature that adopts a quantitative approach that measures customer satisfaction and loyalty. This study aimed to gather the lived experiences and sense-making even in the absence of quantitative data, from the decision-making and strategic shifts that executives in the service industries of Qatar made, by using a qualitative approach that is interpretive and employs semi-structured interviews.

This paper presents three major contributions. First, it initiates the study of CRM within the context of geopolitical crises, thus deepening the CRM literature by illustrating how CRM operates beyond the resilience marketing paradigm. Second, it advances the literature on services marketing by documenting the impact of certain relational marketing initiatives, including reassuring messages, loyalty program adjustments, and digital communication, on maintaining customers' trust during a period of crises. Third, it contributes to the general field of crisis management by demonstrating how resource-rich small economies under geopolitical pressure can strategically reconfigure their capabilities.

Lessons can be drawn from the study on a practical level as well. Managers of firms dealing with geopolitical challenges need to prioritize digital systems and infrastructure, empathetic communication training for frontline personnel, and flexible, shock-absorbing CRM routed in the core CRM paradigm. Here, policymakers also con contribute by providing innovation-encouraging ecosystems comprising

digital tools, infrastructure, regulatory relief, and a unified national blueprint. Qatar's situation highlights the impact of state resilience investments, like the Qatar National Vision 2030, alongside firm resilience on maintaining service availability and client focus. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, the literature relevant to CRM, crises management, and service resilience is reviewed.

The third section describes the methodology, including the rationale for the interpretivist qualitative approach and the methods of data collection. Section 4 focuses on the results of interviews carried out with senior executives from major service industries. The implications of these findings for theory and practice are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper with a recap of the key contributions, along with suggestions for managers, policymakers, and future research.

Literature Review

Foundations of CRM in Service-Dominant Contexts

For over three decades, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has been able to transcend a practice that is dictated by technology to a fully-fledged business strategy. Initially, CRM was regarded as a practice that involved a marketer building a database and employing various customer information systems. Currently, CRM is able to incorporate the various constituents of people, technology, and processes in order to create value and facilitate customer loyalty (Payne & Frow, 2017). The transformation was a result of the growth in relationship marketing that focuses on nurturing business relationships as opposed to one-off transactions (Buttle & Maklan, 2019).

The CRM system is also vital in the service-dominant contexts. The intangible, inseparable, heterogeneous, and perishable attributes of services expose customers to uncertainty and risk. This disparity necessitates stronger relational bonds to trust (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). The instance with healthcare illustrates this point. Patients consider the quality of a healthcare service by the outcome as well as the interpersonal dealings of the provider.

Likewise in financial services, reliability in advice and in service delivery overshadows even the most sophisticated product offerings.

The impact of CRM on customer equity is another pillar in understanding CRM (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). This is explained as firms' acquisition, retention, and development strategies. Firms whose CRM systems incorporate these principles are better placed to optimise customer lifetime value. Moreover, Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman (2015) emphasize the importance of omnichannel management. Customers anticipate uniformity in experiences in various interfaces such as branch offices, mobile apps, websites, call centers, and social platforms. Trust and loyalty are lost in fragmented journeys, and CRM has to be viewed as a complete and cross-functional capability, not just a support system or IT application.

CRM in Times of Crisis and Environmental Turbulence

Crises alter customer expectations, perceptions regarding risk, and trust in institutions. Coombs (2015) highlights the need for empathetic and transparent communication to uphold stakeholder trust during crises. This fits within the framework of crisis communication, which emphasizes timeliness, accuracy, and compassion. According to Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, and Coombs (2017), there are three categories of organisational responses to crises - retrenchment, which involves cutting back and reducing exposure to risk; perseverance, where the organisation attempts to sustain its core activities; and innovation, where the organisation seeks to adjust to new opportunities. All three can be linked to CRM:

- Most retrenchment strategies involve cutting back on marketing initiatives, although customer loyalty strategies are still preserved.
- Perseverance calls for customer interactions within maintained or reduced levels of resources.
- Innovation refers to the use of new technologies that allow for automated digital marketing, personalised services, and proactive service recovery.

Kumar and Reinartz (2016) demonstrated that, in the 2008 crises, relationship-builders, as opposed to operational retrenchers, survived turbulence better. In the COVID-19 crises, customers' trust was based on perceived benevolence and perceived competence. He and Harris (2020) showed that empathy and

competence were related to loyalty retention, while Sigala (2020) showed that hospitality firms that used digital CRM systems suffered less churn during the pandemic.

Crises, therefore, act as tests for the systems in place for CRM, examining whether the systems are sufficiently agile and relationally focused to endure the disruption.

Digital Transformation and CRM

Social CRM and Customer Engagement

Social CRM is an expansion of previous frameworks to include data and interactions on social media. This allows firms to gauge sentiment, detect issues as they arise, and participate in dialogue with customers. According to Trainor et al. (2014), social CRM improves organisational performance by incorporating social interactions within knowledge management. Social CRM deepens loyalty by offering customers the role of value co-creation. This is a rephrased version of the Harrigan et al. (2020).

During a crisis, the value of social CRM becomes evident. As an example, during the pandemic, social CRM reach and capabilities of airlines and banks in several areas enabled the creation of reassuring campaigns on Twitter and Instagram. This allowed institutions to respond to customer concerns in real-time. The speed of social media improves customer perceptions of responsiveness and care.

AI, Big Data, and Predictive Analytics

The combination of artificial intelligence and big data analytics has created an adaptive, predictive capability for CRM. As noted by Chatterjee et al. (2021), CRM tools powered by AI predict customer churn, automate servicing through chatbots, and optimally tailor offerings. According to Dwivedi et al. (2021), AI adoption has surged during the pandemic and digital-first engagement has become the rule rather than the exception. AI technology increases resilience in crisis by allowing firms to predict vulnerable segments, understand needs, and provide customised offerings. Using predictive analytics helps banks recognise customers who may be at risk, allowing them to give help to customers at risk, and strengthening loyalty in otherwise precarious situations.

Privacy, Trust, and Ethical Dimensions

As digitalisation broadens the realm of possibility, it also raises a host of new ethical questions. Intrusively surveilling and using data in a non-transparent manner have the potential to breach trust and to do so in a politically unstable climate, as Marques and Ferreira (2020) state. Globally, the regulatory framework of GDPR has set new standards with regards to trust and transparency.

Unlike other regions, studies in the Middle East demonstrate how concerns with privacy influence the way customers view CRM systems (Al-Kwifi & Ahmed, 2015). Thus, the tension between personalisation and ethical data practice is evident. Trust is not a mere technological byproduct; data collection, transmission, and storage practices define it.

Customer Experience and Service Recovery

Customer experience (CX) has become inseparable from CRM. In crises, the ability to recover from service failures with empathy is critical. Wenzel, Stanske, and Lieberman (2020) note that resilient firms treat crises as opportunities for service recovery and innovation. Quick, empathetic responses to failures enhance perceptions of fairness and care, reinforcing loyalty even in adversity.

CRM and Customer Well-being

An emerging strand of CRM literature emphasises the link between customer relationship practices and well-being outcomes. Scholars argue that in volatile environments, firms are not only expected to deliver products and services but also to support customers' emotional security and sense of stability (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this expectation, with firms in healthcare, retail, and telecommunications adapting CRM systems to provide reassurance and guidance rather than purely transactional communication (Aksoy, 2022).

Recent studies show that when firms demonstrate care, empathy, and social responsibility through CRM interactions, customers report higher satisfaction and loyalty, even when service disruptions occur (He et al., 2021). This underscores a broader shift from CRM as a tool for profit maximisation toward CRM as a platform for customer-centric well-being and social value creation. In crisis-prone environments like the Gulf, where political and economic shocks intersect with daily life, CRM that prioritises well-being can serve as a differentiator.

CRM and Services Marketing in the GCC and Middle East

CRM in Key GCC Service Sectors

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) plays a strategic role across the Gulf's major service sectors, particularly banking, aviation, hospitality and healthcare. In Islamic and conventional banking, CRM fosters transparency and trust through Shariah compliance and social responsibility (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015; Kuppusamy et al., 2010). Aviation and hospitality firms such as Qatar Airways and Emirates leverage digital CRM platforms and loyalty programs, such as Privilege Club and Skywards, to strengthen customer relationships and enhance customer retention, especially during crises (Rahman, 2014).

Healthcare and public service organisations have also adopted CRM-enabled digital platforms to enhance communication and citizen engagement (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Initiatives aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030 demonstrate how CRM supports innovation and public trust by embedding digital inclusion and real-time feedback mechanisms.

Cross-Cultural CRM in the GCC

The GCC's multicultural environment introduces unique CRM challenges. Cultural sensitivity and bilingual communication are crucial for maintaining customer trust and loyalty among diverse populations (Al-Kwifi & Ahmed, 2015). Failure to address linguistic and cultural diversity risks alienating expatriate communities that represent the majority in Qatar and the UAE. Consequently, CRM strategies in the Gulf must integrate both cultural adaptation and technological personalisation to ensure inclusivity and service quality.

Integration Of CRM and Crisis Management Theory

The intersection between Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and crisis management theory highlights CRM's strategic role beyond customer retention; it becomes a mechanism for organisational recovery and trust restoration. While crisis management focuses on anticipating, responding to and learning from disruptive events (Coombs, 2015), CRM provides the relational infrastructure through which firms communicate reassurance, empathy and reliability during such disruptions.

In service industries, CRM systems facilitate real-time feedback, transparent messaging and personalised support that align with the "response" and "recovery" phases of crisis management frameworks (Bundy et al., 2017). This integration positions CRM as both a preventive and adaptive tool. Preventive, by cultivating strong emotional bonds that buffer against reputational shocks and Adaptive, by enabling rapid information exchange and service continuity during crises.

Consequently, conceptualising CRM within the logic of crisis management theory enables a deeper understanding of how firms sustain customer confidence amid uncertainty —an essential dimension for analysing the Qatari blockade case.

CRM under the Qatar Blockade

The 2017 blockade imposed by neighbouring states on Qatar presented an unprecedented test of Qatar's service industries' resilience (Ulrichsen, 2020; Kamrava, 2019). Unlike typical economic or health crises, the blockade combined political, logistical and reputational disruptions, creating complex CRM challenges. Organisations across sectors adopted reassurance campaigns that emphasised trust, solidarity, and national unity. For instance, banks introduced fee waivers and flexible repayment options, while airlines adjusted loyalty programs to retain customers despite travel restrictions.

These relational initiatives align with trust-based marketing theories that highlight benevolence and reciprocity as foundations for customer loyalty (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Digital CRM also accelerated, with mobile banking, telemedicine and e-commerce platforms mitigating service gaps and reinforcing continuity. Frontline employees were trained to demonstrate empathy and to proactively engage in service recovery (He & Harris, 2020). Collectively, these measures positioned CRM as a strategic resilience mechanism, enabling firms to sustain customer trust and loyalty under geopolitical pressure.

Global and Systemic Perspectives on CRM Resilience

Research across global contexts highlights that Customer Relationship Management (CRM) functions as a resilience mechanism across financial, health, environmental and geopolitical crises. Despite differences in origin, such crises share common consequences: trust erosion, service disruption and the urgent need for transparent communication.

During financial crises, such as Lebanon's 2019 collapse, failures in transparency accelerated customer distrust (Makarem & Jae, 2016), whereas Turkish banks leveraged digital CRM platforms to restore confidence (Arasli et al., 2019). Similarly, during the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics, CRM systems played a vital role in sustaining loyalty through empathetic communication and digital adaptability (Sigala, 2020; He et al., 2021). Environmental and energy disruptions — from floods in Pakistan to energy shortages in Europe —further demonstrated CRM's value in coordinating real-time updates and managing customer expectations (Khan et al., 2023).

Across all contexts, three consistent CRM mechanisms emerge:

1. Transparent reassurance and communication are critical in financial and geopolitical crises (Makarem & Jae, 2016; Ulrichsen, 2020).
2. Empathy-driven digital acceleration is central to health and environmental crises (Sigala, 2020; Khan et al., 2023).
3. Governmental and institutional support, which enhances CRM resilience in emerging economies like Qatar (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Collectively, these insights establish CRM not merely as a marketing instrument but as a multidimensional resilience capability, enabling organisations to adapt, reassure and sustain customer trust amid uncertainty.

Conceptual Gaps and Research Agenda

Despite these insights, several conceptual gaps remain in the literature:

1. Underexplored geopolitical blockades. Most CRM-crisis studies focus on natural disasters or pandemics. Political blockades, which combine logistical, reputational and relational challenges, are rarely examined in depth. The Qatar blockade thus provides a novel case to extend crisis management and CRM theory.
2. Limited theorisation of state–firm interaction. In small, resource-rich economies, governments play an outsized role in shaping resilience. Yet few studies examine how state-level support (e.g., subsidies, infrastructure investment, regulatory relief) interacts with firm-level CRM strategies. This gap is particularly salient in Qatar, where national visions emphasise digitalisation and resilience.
3. Insufficient qualitative insight into managerial sensemaking. Much of the literature emphasises customer outcomes (satisfaction, loyalty), while fewer studies explore how managers interpret crises, reconfigure CRM, and empower frontline employees. Qualitative, context-rich research can reveal the processes by which firms adapt CRM under stress.
4. Neglect of cross-crisis comparisons. CRM responses to different crisis archetypes (financial, health, environmental, geopolitical) are often studied in isolation. Comparative analyses could uncover universal mechanisms, such as reassurance, digital acceleration, and empathy, that transcend contexts.

By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to three streams of literature:

- CRM and services marketing by contextualising relational strategies in crises.

- Crisis management by expanding the theoretical understanding of blockades.
- Geopolitical risk research by showing how firms in small economies navigate macro-level shocks.

Research Methodology

Research Philosophy and Paradigm

This study is anchored in the interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is co-created through interactions between the researcher and participants. Interpretivism contrasts with positivism, which seeks objective, measurable truths. Instead, interpretivism recognises the multiplicity of perspectives and prioritises understanding meanings, contexts, and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In the context of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) during the Qatar blockade, the interpretivist stance is particularly relevant. CRM adaptation is not merely a technical or structural phenomenon; it involves managerial sensemaking, employee-customer interactions, and cultural influences. By focusing on lived experiences, interpretivism allows the researcher to capture nuanced insights into how managers perceived, interpreted, and responded to the challenges posed by geopolitical turbulence.

The adoption of interpretivism also aligns with crisis management literature, which increasingly emphasises qualitative understanding of organisational resilience and adaptive strategies (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). By exploring managers' narratives, this approach illuminates the socially constructed nature of resilience and the embeddedness of CRM practices within cultural and institutional contexts.

Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative, exploratory design based on semi-structured interviews with senior executives in Qatari service industries. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for investigating complex, underexplored phenomena such as CRM adaptation under blockade conditions (Yin, 2018). Whereas quantitative surveys measure variables, qualitative methods reveal how and why processes unfold.

The study is framed as a single-country case study of Qatar, which provides a bounded context for analysis. Case study design enables an in-depth investigation of CRM strategies within the unique institutional, cultural, and geopolitical context of the blockade (Stake, 1995). While findings are not statistically generalisable, they are analytically generalisable, offering transferable lessons for other small, resource-rich economies facing political shocks.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method because they balance structure with flexibility. The structured component ensures consistency across participants, while the open-ended questions allow respondents to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. This method is beneficial for exploring sensitive topics such as trust, resilience, and strategic adaptation, where respondents may need space to express context-specific nuances (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Sampling Strategy

Population and Sampling Frame

The population of interest includes senior managers and executives in Qatari service industries, specifically banking, aviation, healthcare, hospitality, and retail. These industries were chosen because they are highly customer-facing, rely heavily on CRM systems, and were disproportionately affected by the blockade.

Sampling Approach

The study employs purposive sampling, a non-probability technique that selects participants based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research question (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Purposive sampling ensures that participants can provide rich, detailed accounts of CRM adaptation strategies.

To maximise variation, the sample included executives from different sectors, firm sizes, and ownership structures (state-owned enterprises, private firms, and joint ventures). This heterogeneity provides a broader spectrum of perspectives, enhancing the study's analytical depth.

Sample Size and Saturation

A total of 20–25 interviews were planned, consistent with qualitative research norms for studies seeking depth rather than breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection followed the principle of thematic saturation—interviews continued until no substantially new themes emerged. Saturation was reached after approximately 22 interviews, though three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of findings.

Participant Profiles

Participants included:

- Senior managers in Qatari banks (customer experience directors, CRM heads).
- Executives in aviation (Qatar Airways managers, loyalty program designers).
- Healthcare administrators oversee patient engagement systems.
- Hospitality directors managing guest loyalty and digital booking platforms.
- Retail managers from both luxury and mass-market segments.

This distribution reflects the diversity of CRM applications across sectors, providing a holistic view of adaptation strategies under the blockade.

Data Collection Procedures

Development of the Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on three themes derived from the literature review:

1. CRM adaptation and innovation during the blockade (e.g., digital platforms, loyalty programs, reassurance campaigns).
2. Customer trust and loyalty under uncertainty (e.g., perceptions of benevolence, competence, integrity).
3. Strategic responses and resilience mechanisms (e.g., employee empowerment, service recovery, cultural framing).

The protocol included open-ended questions, such as:

- "How did your organisation adapt CRM practices during the blockade?"
- "What role did digital platforms play in sustaining customer engagement?"
- "Can you describe how customers' expectations or trust changed during this period?"
- "What internal strategies supported your ability to maintain relationships with customers?"

Probing questions were used to encourage elaboration, clarify ambiguities, and explore emerging themes.

Pilot Testing

The interview guide was pilot-tested with two managers from the banking and hospitality sectors. Feedback helped refine the wording, sequence, and clarity of the question. The pilot confirmed that the protocol elicited rich, context-specific insights without being overly time-consuming.

Conducting the Interviews

Interviews were conducted between September and November 2020, spanning approximately 10 weeks. Due to travel restrictions and pandemic precautions, most interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing platforms (Zoom, Microsoft Teams). A few interviews were conducted in person at participants' workplaces.

Each interview lasted 45–70 minutes. Participants were given the choice of language (Arabic or English), and when Arabic was used, transcripts were translated into English for analysis. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim.

Documentation and Data Management

All transcripts were anonymised, with personal and organisational identifiers replaced by codes (e.g., P1–P25). Digital files were stored securely with password protection, and only the researcher had access. Field notes were taken during and immediately after interviews to capture contextual observations and initial analytic impressions.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns within the interview data. Thematic analysis was chosen because it offers flexibility, is well-suited to interpretivist research, and enables the construction of rich, detailed, and complex accounts of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analytical Framework

The six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed:

1. Familiarisation: Transcripts were read repeatedly, and notes were taken to capture initial impressions.
2. Generating initial codes: Open coding was conducted line by line, identifying meaningful segments related to CRM adaptation, trust, digital innovation, and resilience.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were clustered into broader categories (e.g., "digital acceleration," "reassurance campaigns," "employee empowerment").
4. Reviewing themes: Categories were refined by comparing them across interviews to ensure consistency and distinctiveness.
5. Defining and naming themes: Themes were given clear definitions and labels, linked to the research questions.
6. Producing the report: Findings were structured to highlight connections between themes, supported by illustrative quotations.

To strengthen analytical rigour, a second coder was engaged to review a subset of transcripts (approximately 20% of the dataset). This inter-coder reliability check ensured consistency in coding decisions and reduced the risk of researcher subjectivity. Discrepancies were discussed and reconciled, leading to refinement of the coding framework. For example, an early code labelled "digital resilience" was later split into two distinct themes: digital acceleration and system reliability, reflecting participants' emphasis on both innovation and stability, including direct quotations in the analysis provided transparency by linking abstract themes to concrete participant voices. For instance, one banking executive (P7) described how "customers needed daily reassurance that their money was safe," which was coded under both reassurance campaigns and trust preservation.

Use of Software

To organise and manage the data, NVivo 12 software was employed. NVivo enabled efficient coding, cross-referencing of data, and visualisation of relationships between themes. The use of software enhances transparency by creating an auditable trail of coding decisions.

Reflexivity

Recognising the interpretivist stance, reflexivity was embedded throughout the analysis. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to note personal assumptions, evolving interpretations, and decisions made during coding. This practice minimised bias and ensured that findings reflected participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's predispositions.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are reframed as trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure rigour, the study employed the four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility was ensured through triangulation of sources (participants from multiple industries), member checking (participants reviewed summaries of their interviews for accuracy), and prolonged engagement with the data. Direct quotations were included in the findings to illustrate authenticity.

Transferability

A thick description of the Qatari service context, organisational structures, and participant experiences was provided to enable readers to judge the applicability of findings to other settings (Geertz, 1973). While not statistically generalisable, the insights are analytically generalisable, offering lessons relevant to other small, resource-rich economies facing geopolitical shocks.

Dependability

Dependability was established through a transparent audit trail documenting each stage of the research process, including sampling decisions, interview protocols, coding schemes, and analytical memos. This allows other researchers to trace the study's logic.

Confirmability

Confirmability was achieved by maintaining neutrality in interpretation. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing with academic colleagues helped ensure that findings were grounded in data rather than researcher bias. NVivo's coding reports further enhanced confirmability by documenting evidence for each theme.

In addition to member checking and triangulation, peer debriefing was incorporated. Draft thematic maps and preliminary findings were shared with two academic colleagues specialising in crisis management and services marketing. Their feedback helped refine interpretations and challenge potential blind spots. Furthermore, industry validation was sought informally by presenting high-level findings to a small group of practitioners in the hospitality and healthcare sectors. This step enhanced both the credibility and practical relevance of the results. Transferability was also strengthened by providing rich contextualisation of Qatar's service economy, enabling readers to compare findings with other geopolitical or crisis-affected contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to the research design. Approval was obtained from the University of Hull Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines for human subjects research.

Informed Consent

Participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Written or recorded verbal consent was obtained before each interview. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

All interviews were anonymised. Personal identifiers (names, job titles, organisations) were replaced with alphanumeric codes (e.g., P1–P25). Data files were securely stored in encrypted formats, accessible only to the researcher. Findings were reported in aggregate, avoiding disclosure of identifiable details.

Minimising Harm

Given the sensitive political context of the blockade, participants were assured that their responses would not be shared with employers, governments, or external entities. Care was taken to avoid leading questions that might cause discomfort. Interviews were conducted in private or secure online settings to protect confidentiality.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher acknowledged their own positionality as a Qatari academic, recognising potential power dynamics in interviews with local executives. This awareness informed careful question framing and active listening to ensure participants' voices were prioritised.

Limitations of Methodology

Despite rigorous design, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged.

1. Subjectivity of Qualitative Data: Interpretivist research relies on participants' inherently subjective narratives. While this provides depth, it may not capture the full diversity of experiences. Reflexivity and triangulation were used to mitigate this limitation.
2. Limited Generalizability: Findings are specific to Qatar and its service industries. While transferable insights exist, results may not directly apply to different cultural or political contexts. This limitation is inherent in qualitative case study research (Yin, 2018).
3. Potential Researcher Bias: The interpretivist stance acknowledges that the researcher co-constructs meaning with participants. Although reflexive practices were employed, complete elimination of bias is not possible.
4. Access Constraints: Political sensitivity limited access to certain participants, particularly those in government-related organisations. Some participants may also have engaged in self-censorship due to the delicate nature of the blockade.
5. Time and Resource Limitations: Conducting and transcribing 25 in-depth interviews was resource-intensive. Although saturation was achieved, additional interviews might have revealed further nuance.

Another limitation relates to language and translation. Although most participants were fluent in English, some preferred Arabic. While professional translation was applied, nuances may have been lost or slightly altered during the process. This language factor introduces a potential bias, particularly in culturally sensitive expressions of trust and loyalty. A further limitation involves the use of online platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) for many interviews. While convenient, digital interviews occasionally suffered from connectivity issues that interrupted conversational flow. Moreover, some participants may have felt less comfortable disclosing sensitive opinions online compared to face-to-face settings. Finally, the study's focus on executives means that frontline employee perspectives were not directly captured, which could have provided additional insights into day-to-day CRM practices during the blockade.

Acknowledging these limitations provides transparency and contextualises the findings within their methodological boundaries.

Findings

Introduction to Findings

The purpose of this section is to present the key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews with senior executives across Qatari service industries, including banking, aviation, healthcare, hospitality, and retail. The findings are structured around five major themes as follow:

1- Digital Acceleration as a Survival Strategy.
2- Reassurance and Trust Preservation.
3- Employee Empowerment and Frontline Adaptation.
4- National Identity and Collective Resilience.
5- Long-term Transformation of CRM Practices.

The themes were derived through systematic coding in NVivo 12 following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Each theme captures a distinct but interconnected dimension of how Customer Relationship Management (CRM) was adapted during the Qatar blockade. Quotations from participants are used to illustrate key points, with identifiers (e.g., P1, P7) representing anonymised participants.

Theme 1: Digital Acceleration as a Survival Strategy

Strategic Emphasis on Digital Channels

One of the strongest and most consistent themes across all interviews was the rapid acceleration of digital transformation in CRM practices. Nearly all participants emphasised that digital platforms became the primary mode of customer engagement once physical supply chains and mobility were disrupted. A senior banking executive (P7) explained:

"Customers needed daily reassurance that their funds were safe, and the only way to do this at scale was through our mobile app and SMS platforms. The blockade forced us to make digital engagement our main strategy, not a secondary channel."

This shift was particularly evident in banking and retail. Banks rolled out enhanced mobile banking features—such as real-time transaction alerts and chatbots for customer inquiries—within months of the blockade. Retailers invested in e-commerce platforms that allowed customers to order goods despite disruptions in physical logistics.

Healthcare and Telemedicine Expansion

Healthcare administrators described how telemedicine platforms were adopted almost overnight to sustain patient trust and continuity of care. One hospital manager (P12) noted:

"We had to convince patients that they could still access reliable healthcare even if certain medicines or supplies were delayed. Telemedicine consultations reassured them that continuity was possible."

The adoption of telemedicine not only addressed immediate needs but also reshaped expectations. Several participants suggested that patients had become accustomed to virtual healthcare, prompting providers to institutionalise digital health solutions as part of their long-term CRM strategies.

Aviation and Loyalty Program Adaptation

The aviation sector, notably Qatar Airways, faced unique challenges due to restricted air routes. Executives explained how loyalty programs were digitally adapted to maintain engagement with existing customers. As one manager (P4) reflected:

"We introduced bonus miles and extended the validity of memberships. It wasn't just a technical adjustment; it was about telling customers: we are with you through this period, and your loyalty is valued."

This digital-first loyalty strategy allowed the airline to signal resilience and retain emotional bonds with customers despite reduced operational capacity.

Integration of Social CRM

Executives across sectors emphasised the role of social CRM, particularly through Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Social media became a real-time platform for addressing concerns, monitoring sentiment, and disseminating reassurance messages. A retail manager (P18) observed:

"We monitored customer conversations online every hour. If there was a rumour about shortages, we posted clarifications and updates immediately. That transparency through social media became a core CRM practice."

This suggests that during crises, social CRM not only enhances communication but also serves as a reputation management tool.

Perceived Benefits of Digital Acceleration

Participants consistently reported that digital acceleration had long-term benefits beyond the blockade. A hospitality executive (P20) explained that customers developed trust in digital booking and loyalty systems, reducing reliance on traditional call centres. Another participant (P9, retail) noted:

"We had always planned to invest in e-commerce, but the blockade pushed us five years ahead in just one year."

These reflections suggest that while digital acceleration initially served as a survival strategy, it became a transformative shift that permanently altered customer expectations.

Challenges and Constraints in Digital Transformation

Despite its benefits, digital acceleration was not without challenges. Participants cited three main obstacles:

1. Infrastructure stress: Rapid demand for digital platforms exposed weaknesses in server capacity and cybersecurity.

2. Digital literacy gaps: Some customer segments, particularly older generations, struggled to adapt to mobile applications.
3. Trust in digital channels: Initial scepticism existed about the reliability and security of digital banking and healthcare services.

A bank manager (P15) recalled:

"At first, some customers didn't believe digital transactions were secure. We had to launch campaigns explaining encryption, reliability, and government backing."

This indicates that digital acceleration requires not only technical upgrades but also customer education and reassurance, linking back to broader CRM goals.

Cross-Sector Comparison

Comparing across industries, the banking and healthcare sectors appeared to accelerate digital adoption most effectively, due to pre-existing infrastructure and regulatory support. The retail sector innovated rapidly but faced logistical bottlenecks due to import restrictions. The aviation sector relied heavily on loyalty program adaptation, while hospitality emphasised online booking systems and customer engagement campaigns.

Collectively, these sectoral variations underscore that while digital acceleration was universal, its manifestations and challenges differed by industry.

Synthesis of Theme 1

The theme of Digital Acceleration as a Survival Strategy highlights how CRM evolved under conditions of blockade. Digital channels became the primary means of sustaining relationships, not merely supplementary tools. Importantly, participants noted that these changes were not temporary but have reshaped long-term CRM practices.

Thus, the blockade catalysed a paradigm shift: CRM in Qatar's service industries transitioned from a hybrid digital–physical model to a digital-first orientation, embedding resilience and adaptability into core strategies.

Theme 2: Reassurance and Trust Preservation

Centrality of Trust During Crisis

Across interviews, executives consistently highlighted trust as the most fragile yet crucial asset during the blockade. Customers, faced with uncertainty about access to goods, services, and mobility, needed reassurance that organisations would continue to serve them reliably. A bank manager (P3) explained:

"Our priority was not selling new products. It was making sure customers believed we would be there tomorrow and the day after."

This underscores the shift from transactional objectives to relational reassurance as the cornerstone of CRM.

Communication as Reassurance

Communication strategies were critical in preserving trust. Executives across banking and aviation sectors described launching frequent updates via SMS, email, and social media to dispel rumors and affirm continuity. An aviation executive (P5) noted:

"When airspace was restricted, misinformation spread fast. We had to be faster. Every update mattered, even if just to say: we are still operating, and your bookings are safe."

Healthcare organisations similarly used reassurance campaigns to maintain patient confidence in the availability of services.

Tangible Gestures of Benevolence

Beyond words, firms deployed tangible actions to reinforce benevolence. Banks waived late fees, airlines extended loyalty points, and retailers offered discounts on essentials. These actions aligned with

the relational marketing principle that customers interpret benevolence through actions rather than rhetoric. A retail executive (P14) reflected:

"It wasn't about profit margins. It was about sending a signal: we are standing with you during this time."

Cultural Framing of Trust

Trust preservation was often framed through cultural narratives of solidarity and resilience. Executives noted that campaigns leveraging national identity—such as emphasising unity and loyalty to Qatar—resonated deeply with customers. A hospitality director (P22) observed:

"Our message was simple: Qatar is strong, and we are part of that strength. Guests appreciated that sense of shared destiny."

This reflects how CRM practices intersect with broader cultural and political narratives, amplifying their impact.

Challenges in Trust Preservation

Participants acknowledged challenges, particularly in sustaining trust across diverse customer bases. Expatriate customers, for example, expressed distinct concerns about mobility and remittances. A bank executive (P8) noted:

"For expatriates, the main question was: can I still send money home? Reassurance for them required practical solutions, not just messages."

This highlights that reassurance is audience-specific, requiring firms to tailor messages and services to varied concerns.

Synthesis of Theme 2

Trust preservation was not incidental but strategically engineered through reassurance campaigns, benevolent gestures, and cultural framing. CRM thus served as a mechanism for emotional stabilisation, reducing customer anxiety and reinforcing loyalty during geopolitical turbulence.

Theme 3: Employee Empowerment and Frontline Adaptation

Frontline Staff as CRM Ambassadors

Executives emphasised that frontline employees became the face of reassurance during the blockade. In banks, call centre agents were trained to provide empathetic responses. In hospitality, receptionists reassured guests about the continuity of supplies. A hotel manager (P11) stated:

"Guests were more interested in whether we had stable supplies than in luxury amenities. Our staff had to reassure them at every interaction."

This demonstrates how employee-customer interactions operationalise CRM strategies.

Training in Empathy and Service Recovery

Several organisations invested in training programs focused on empathy, listening skills, and problem resolution. A healthcare administrator (P16) explained:

"We trained nurses and call centre staff to recognise patient anxiety. Sometimes reassurance was as simple as saying: Your medicine is delayed, but alternatives are available."

This indicates that employee empowerment was not only technical but also emotional, equipping staff with tools to manage customer stress.

Autonomy and Decision-Making Power

Empowerment also involved granting employees greater autonomy. Banks allowed branch managers to approve temporary fee waivers, while retailers authorised frontline staff to offer small discounts or prioritise vulnerable customers. A retail participant (P18) shared:

"We didn't have time for hierarchical approvals. We told our staff: if you can solve the customer's problem on the spot, do it."

This decentralisation accelerated responsiveness and reinforced perceptions of care.

Emotional Labour and Staff Resilience

While empowerment had benefits, participants also acknowledged the emotional burden placed on employees. Frontline staff had to manage their own anxieties about the blockade while simultaneously projecting confidence to customers. A bank employee (P21) recounted:

"We were also worried about our families, but the expectation was to reassure clients first. It was exhausting."

This reveals the dual role of employees as both recipients and providers of reassurance, raising questions about organisational support.

Cross-Sector Comparisons

The form of empowerment varied across industries:

- Banking: Empowerment meant decision-making flexibility.
- Healthcare: Empowerment involved empathetic communication and patient guidance.
- Hospitality: Empowerment focused on service recovery and creative problem-solving.
- Retail: Empowerment emphasised responsiveness to shortages and pricing concerns.

These variations highlight the sector-specific nature of employee empowerment while underscoring its universal role in CRM adaptation.

Organisational Support Mechanisms

Some firms implemented support mechanisms to sustain employee resilience, such as counselling services, recognition programs, and regular internal communication. A hospitality executive (P19) noted:

"We kept reminding our staff: you are not alone in this. Recognition and encouragement were crucial."

This suggests that employee empowerment is most effective when accompanied by organisational care and support systems.

Synthesis of Theme 3

Employee empowerment was integral to CRM adaptation during the blockade. Frontline staff were not passive executors of strategies but active agents of resilience, shaping customer perceptions through daily interactions. Their empowerment, however, required balancing autonomy with organisational support to avoid burnout.

Theme 4: National Identity and Collective Resilience

Framing CRM Through National Solidarity

A striking feature of CRM adaptation during the blockade was the integration of national identity and solidarity narratives. Executives described how marketing and CRM messages aligned with broader political and cultural discourses of resilience. A bank executive (P6) explained:

"Every message we sent was not only about services but about being part of Qatar's strength. Customers felt reassured when they saw us speak their language of unity."

This reflects the blending of CRM with symbolic communication, embedding relational strategies in a collective identity framework.

Use of National Symbols and Campaigns

Hospitality and retail managers emphasised the use of national colours, slogans, and imagery in reassurance campaigns. A hospitality director (P19) noted:

"We redesigned our digital newsletters with the national flag as a background. It wasn't marketing; it was solidarity."

Such symbolic elements reinforced trust by linking corporate actions with collective resilience.

Customer Response to Identity Framing

Executives reported that customers responded positively to identity-based reassurance. A healthcare administrator (P10) observed:

"When we emphasised that our hospital stood with the nation, patients said they felt we were family, not just a service provider."

This indicates that identity framing transformed CRM into a community-building mechanism, elevating customer relationships beyond transactional loyalty.

Expatriate Dynamics

However, participants also noted limits to national identity strategies. For expatriates, identity-based campaigns had less resonance. A retail manager (P13) shared:

"Expatriates appreciated reassurance, but the national symbolism didn't always connect. For them, trust depended more on practical guarantees."

This demonstrates the need for audience-specific CRM that balances cultural resonance with pragmatic reassurance.

Synthesis of Theme 4

National identity provided an emotional anchor during the blockade, reinforcing solidarity and collective resilience. While effective for Qatari citizens, it had a mixed impact on expatriates, underscoring the importance of cultural tailoring in CRM.

Theme 5: Long-term Transformation of CRM Practices

From Crisis Survival to Strategic Transformation

Executives consistently reflected that the blockade triggered lasting changes in CRM. A bank manager (P7) explained:

"What started as emergency measures became permanent. Customers now expect digital-first engagement, and we cannot go back."

This highlights the blockade as a catalyst for structural transformation in CRM strategies.

Institutionalisation of Digital CRM

Banking, healthcare, and hospitality executives described how digital solutions—once experimental—became institutionalised. Loyalty programs, telemedicine platforms, and e-commerce channels are now integral to CRM. A retail participant (P15) noted:

"We had a five-year roadmap for e-commerce. The blockade forced us to implement it in one year, and now it's the backbone of our customer strategy."

Evolving Customer Expectations

Executives emphasised that customers' expectations have permanently shifted. A hospitality executive (P22) stated:

"Guests now expect seamless digital booking, personalised offers, and immediate responses. If we fail to deliver, they will assume we are not resilient."

This suggests that resilience-oriented CRM has become a new benchmark for service quality.

Strategic Role of CRM in Risk Management

Several participants highlighted that CRM has moved beyond marketing to become part of risk management and resilience planning. A healthcare administrator (P16) observed:

"CRM is now discussed in crisis committees, not just marketing meetings. It is part of national preparedness."

This shift underscores CRM's role as a strategic capability embedded in organisational resilience frameworks.

Lessons Learned for the Future

Participants reflected on lessons applicable beyond the blockade:

- Invest continuously in digital infrastructure.
- Train staff in empathetic communication.
- Integrate CRM into national resilience strategies.

An aviation executive (P5) summarised:

"The blockade taught us that resilience is relational. If customers trust you, they stay with you through any storm."

Synthesis of Theme 5

The blockade accelerated a paradigm shift in CRM, embedding digital-first, trust-based, and resilience-oriented practices into long-term strategies. CRM is no longer peripheral but central to organisational continuity and competitiveness.

Conclusion of Findings

The findings reveal that CRM during the Qatar blockade was reconfigured through five interconnected themes:

1) Digital Acceleration emerged as the primary survival strategy.
2) Reassurance and Trust Preservation became the core relational objective.
3) Employee Empowerment operationalised resilience at the frontline.
4) National Identity and Collective Resilience provided cultural and emotional anchors.
5) Long-term transformation institutionalised new practices and elevated CRM's strategic role.

Together, these themes demonstrate that CRM in the face of geopolitical turbulence extends far beyond transactional marketing. It functions as a multidimensional resilience mechanism, integrating digital innovation, cultural framing, employee empowerment, and long-term strategic transformation.

Discussion

Introduction to the Discussion

The findings of this study provide new insights into how service organisations in Qatar adapted Customer Relationship Management (CRM) practices under the extraordinary conditions of the 2017 blockade. By analysing the perspectives of senior executives across banking, aviation, healthcare, hospitality, and retail, the study demonstrates that CRM was reconfigured as a multidimensional resilience mechanism, encompassing digital acceleration, reassurance campaigns, employee empowerment, cultural framing, and long-term transformation.

This section interprets these findings in relation to the existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The discussion is organised around the five themes identified in the findings, examining how each aligns with, diverges from, or extends prior research. Particular attention is paid to the theoretical contributions of this study to CRM, services marketing, and crisis management, as well as the practical implications for managers and policymakers.

Digital Acceleration as a Survival Strategy

Alignment with Digital CRM Literature

The theme of digital acceleration resonates strongly with prior research emphasising the centrality of digital platforms in modern CRM (Payne & Frow, 2017; Buttle & Maklan, 2019). Existing studies suggest that digital tools enhance efficiency, personalisation, and scalability of customer engagement. The Qatar blockade, however, demonstrated that digital adoption was not merely a competitive advantage but a survival strategy.

In line with Chatterjee et al. (2021) and Dwivedi et al. (2021), this study shows that crises act as catalysts for digital transformation. Banks that had long planned gradual digital rollouts compressed five-year strategies into a matter of months, echoing Sigala's (2020) findings on how COVID-19 accelerated digitalisation in tourism. The findings thus reinforce the idea that crises force firms to overcome inertia and adopt innovations at unprecedented speed.

Extending Theories of Service Resilience

While prior research on resilience in services (Coombs, 2015; Bundy et al., 2017) often emphasises supply chain continuity, this study extends the discussion by demonstrating that digital CRM itself is a resilience mechanism. Executives described how mobile banking apps, telemedicine platforms, and online loyalty programs became the backbone of reassurance. This indicates that resilience is not limited to physical infrastructure but is embedded in relational and technological systems.

The evidence also highlights the role of social CRM in managing reputational risk during crises. By monitoring social media in real time and dispelling rumours, firms demonstrated transparency and responsiveness. This finding aligns with He and Harris (2020), who argue that trust in digital communication becomes critical when uncertainty is high.

Divergences from Existing Research

A notable divergence lies in the speed and scale of digital adoption. While literature on digital CRM often discusses incremental implementation (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016), the blockade context demanded rapid, large-scale changes. This suggests that existing models of CRM adoption may underestimate the role of external shocks as accelerants. Furthermore, the findings indicate that digital transformation in crises is not only technological but also psychological, as firms had to educate customers about the reliability and security of new platforms.

Theoretical Contribution

The key theoretical contribution of this theme is the conceptualisation of digital CRM as both a reactive adaptation and a proactive enabler of resilience. Whereas literature typically separates digital innovation and crisis management, this study integrates them, showing that digital CRM practices constitute a core resilience strategy in politically turbulent contexts.

Reassurance and Trust Preservation

Trust as the Core of CRM in Crises

The second theme emphasises reassurance and trust preservation, which aligns with the relationship marketing literature that identifies trust, commitment, and reciprocity as the foundations of customer loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In stable contexts, trust develops gradually through consistent service quality. However, the blockade revealed that under crisis conditions, trust must be actively engineered through reassurance campaigns, tangible gestures, and symbolic alignment.

This finding supports He and Harris (2020), who show that during health crises, empathetic communication enhances perceptions of competence and benevolence. Similarly, Makarem and Jae (2016) argue that failures in transparency erode trust rapidly in financial crises. The current study extends these insights by demonstrating that geopolitical crises demand even more proactive reassurance due to heightened uncertainty and misinformation.

Tangible and Symbolic Dimensions of Reassurance

The findings illustrate that reassurance took both tangible and symbolic forms. Tangible gestures included fee waivers, extended loyalty points, and discounts, echoing studies that emphasise service recovery as a trust-building mechanism (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998). Symbolic reassurance, such as framing messages around national unity, added a cultural dimension absent from much of the CRM literature. This aligns with emerging research on cultural embeddedness in services marketing (Aksoy, 2022), suggesting that reassurance strategies must be contextually tailored.

Audience-Specific Trust Strategies

The findings also highlight that reassurance is audience-specific. While Qatari citizens resonated with identity-based campaigns, expatriates required practical guarantees, such as continued remittance access. This nuance extends existing trust models by showing that trust is not homogeneous but segmented across

customer demographics. Scholars such as Grönroos (2015) have noted the importance of tailoring CRM strategies, but this study provides empirical evidence of how such segmentation becomes critical in crisis contexts.

Divergence from Prior Literature

Whereas much of the CRM literature assumes trust is an outcome of service delivery quality, this study shows that during crises, trust becomes a strategic objective in itself. Firms redirected resources from product promotion to reassurance communication, indicating a shift in priorities. This divergence underscores the need to reconceptualise CRM under turbulence, not as a growth engine but as a stability mechanism.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to theory by proposing that CRM in crises should be understood as a process of trust engineering that combines communication, benevolence, and cultural alignment. This extends Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Commitment-Trust Theory by showing that, under political disruption, trust is not merely maintained but must be actively reconstructed to counter uncertainty.

Employee Empowerment and Frontline Adaptation

Alignment with Service Recovery Literature

The theme of employee empowerment aligns with long-standing research on service recovery and the importance of frontline responsiveness (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Scholars argue that frontline employees play a critical role in shaping customer perceptions during service encounters. The findings of this study confirm that in crisis contexts, frontline staff become the primary agents of reassurance, directly operationalising CRM strategies through everyday interactions.

This echoes studies in hospitality and healthcare that emphasise the role of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012). Employees in Qatar were not only delivering services but also absorbing customer anxieties, embodying what Grandey (2000) describes as "surface acting" and "deep acting" to display empathy.

Extension of Empowerment Theories

Existing empowerment theories (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995) frame empowerment as increasing employee autonomy, competence, and impact. The blockade context extends these models by demonstrating that empowerment in crises also includes the capacity to reassure customers under uncertainty. Empowerment was not limited to decision-making power but encompassed the emotional and symbolic authority to speak on behalf of the organisation.

Divergence from Prior Research

A divergence from prior literature lies in the speed and necessity of empowerment. In many service contexts, empowerment is gradual and strategically planned. Here, firms were compelled to delegate authority rapidly, allowing staff to make on-the-spot decisions such as granting fee waivers or prioritising vulnerable customers. This unplanned empowerment challenges traditional hierarchical structures, suggesting that crises accelerate the redistribution of decision-making power.

Implications for Employee Resilience

The findings also raise questions about employee resilience. While empowerment enhanced responsiveness, it also placed heavy emotional burdens on staff. This aligns with research on the risks of burnout and compassion fatigue among frontline workers (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Firms that paired empowerment with support mechanisms—such as counselling, recognition, and internal communication—were more successful in sustaining both employee morale and customer trust.

Thus, this study contributes to theory by highlighting the dual nature of empowerment: it is both an enabler of customer reassurance and a potential stressor for employees if not supported by organisational care.

Theoretical Contribution

This theme advances empowerment theory by showing that in crisis contexts, empowerment must be conceptualised as both operational (decision-making autonomy) and relational (capacity to reassure). It also integrates service recovery and emotional labour literatures, positioning frontline empowerment as a critical bridge between organisational resilience strategies and customer trust.

National Identity and Collective Resilience

Alignment with Cultural and Identity-Based Marketing

The fourth theme illustrates how CRM during the blockade was embedded in narratives of national identity and solidarity. This aligns with literature on identity-based marketing, which argues that firms can strengthen loyalty by aligning their values with those of customers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In the Qatari context, national symbols, slogans, and solidarity campaigns provided an emotional anchor, reinforcing customer trust.

This finding also resonates with Holt's (2004) work on cultural branding, where brands leverage cultural narratives to establish resonance. Hospitality firms using the Qatari flag in newsletters or airlines that emphasise unity exemplify how CRM extends beyond transactions to symbolic reassurance.

Extending Crisis Communication Theories

Crisis communication theories (Coombs, 2007) emphasise transparency, timeliness, and empathy. The findings extend this framework by showing that in geopolitical crises, identity alignment becomes an additional dimension. Customers were reassured not only by operational continuity but also by affirmations of collective resilience and shared destiny.

This dimension has been underexplored in CRM literature, which typically emphasises functional trust. By incorporating cultural symbolism, Qatari firms deepened the emotional dimension of CRM, reinforcing both loyalty and a sense of community belonging.

Divergences: Audience-Specific Resonance

A divergence emerges when considering expatriate customers. While national identity campaigns resonated strongly with Qatari citizens, expatriates prioritised practical guarantees such as remittance services or product availability. This highlights a limitation in one-size-fits-all approaches to identity-based CRM. It supports Grönroos' (2015) argument that CRM must be tailored to diverse customer segments, extending it by demonstrating that cultural narratives can sometimes exclude or alienate segments if not balanced with universal reassurance strategies.

Broader Implications for CRM

The integration of national identity into CRM underscores how firms can serve as cultural institutions during crises, thereby shaping collective resilience. This extends the conceptualisation of CRM from a managerial tool to a societal mechanism, bridging organisational objectives with national solidarity. It also suggests that in contexts of geopolitical turbulence, firms are not only economic actors but also symbolic participants in nation-building.

Theoretical Contribution

This theme contributes to theory by integrating identity-based marketing and crisis communication into CRM scholarship. It shows that CRM can be culturally and politically embedded, serving as a channel for both reassurance and national solidarity. The blockade context thus illustrates the need for CRM models that incorporate sociocultural dimensions of trust, particularly in regions where national identity is central to social cohesion.

Long-term Transformation of CRM Practices

From Emergency to Institutionalisation

The fifth theme demonstrates that what began as emergency measures during the blockade became institutionalised as permanent CRM practices. This resonates with theories of organisational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996), which view crises as opportunities for reflection and capability development.

Participants highlighted that digital platforms, reassurance campaigns, and employee empowerment have now become embedded in organisational strategies.

A bank executive (P7) explained:

"Initially, extending fee waivers was a temporary response. Now, flexible customer care policies are part of our long-term model."

This finding illustrates that crises can accelerate not only digital transformation but also cultural and procedural change.

Evolution of Customer Expectations

The blockade permanently shifted customer expectations. Customers now demand seamless digital engagement, immediate communication, and visible resilience strategies. This aligns with Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1988) SERVQUAL framework, which identifies responsiveness and assurance as key dimensions of service quality. However, this study extends SERVQUAL by showing that, in crisis contexts, customers also evaluate organisations on their resilience—their ability to withstand shocks and maintain continuity.

CRM as a Strategic Resilience Tool

The findings reveal that CRM has evolved from a marketing function to a strategic risk management tool. Healthcare administrators described CRM as central to crisis committees, while aviation executives positioned loyalty programs as a resilience mechanism. This supports Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011), who argue that resilience is a dynamic capability. The contribution here is demonstrating that CRM itself is a resilience capability, shaping organisational continuity.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to theory in three keyways:

1) Extending CRM to Geopolitical Crisis Contexts:

While most CRM research focuses on stable environments, this study situates CRM within the context of geopolitical disruption, showing how practices adapt to sustain trust, loyalty, and resilience.

2) Integrating CRM and Crisis Management:

The findings bridge two streams of literature—CRM and crisis management—demonstrating that CRM is not peripheral but central to organisational resilience in service industries.

3) Introducing Trust Engineering as a Framework:

Building on Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Commitment-Trust Theory, this study proposes that in crises, firms must actively reconstruct trust through reassurance, benevolence, and cultural framing, extending traditional models of relationship marketing.

Managerial and Policy Implications

Implications for Managers

- Digital Preparedness: Firms must invest in scalable digital CRM platforms to ensure continuity during disruptions.
- Employee Training: Empowering frontline staff with empathy and problem-solving skills enhances resilience.
- Audience Segmentation: Reassurance strategies must be tailored—citizens respond to cultural framing, while expatriates value practical guarantees.
- Loyalty Programs as Resilience Tools: Flexible policies, such as extensions and bonus rewards, can help maintain emotional engagement during service interruptions.

Implications for Policymakers

- National Digital Infrastructure: Governments can support service resilience by investing in secure digital ecosystems.
- Regulatory Flexibility: Allowing banks and airlines temporary regulatory relief enables them to prioritise reassurance strategies.

- Integration with National Vision: Aligning CRM innovation with broader policy frameworks, such as Qatar National Vision 2030, embeds resilience in long-term planning.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

- Contextual Specificity: The study focuses on Qatar, a small, resource-rich economy, which may limit transferability to other contexts.
- Executive-Centric Perspective: The data was collected primarily from senior managers, excluding frontline employees and customers, who may provide additional insights.
- Language and Translation: While most interviews were in English, some were in Arabic, raising the possibility of nuance loss in translation.

Future Research

- Comparative Studies: Future work could compare CRM adaptations across different geopolitical crises (e.g., sanctions, trade wars).
- Customer Perspectives: Research capturing customer experiences would enrich the understanding of the dynamics of reassurance and trust.
- Quantitative Validation: Large-scale surveys could test the generalizability of the themes identified here.
- Cross-Cultural Analysis: Exploring how cultural narratives shape CRM in other Gulf states or emerging economies could extend these findings.

Conclusion of Discussion

The discussion highlights how CRM in Qatar's service industries was transformed by the blockade from a marketing tool into a resilience capability. Digital acceleration, reassurance campaigns, employee empowerment, cultural framing, and institutionalised transformation collectively demonstrate that CRM is integral to organisational survival in turbulent times. The study thus advances CRM scholarship by embedding it in the context of crisis and resilience, offering both theoretical innovation and practical guidance.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion

This study examines how service organisations in Qatar adapted their Customer Relationship Management (CRM) practices during the 2017 blockade, a period of profound geopolitical turbulence. Conducting 25 semi-structured interviews with senior executives in the banking, aviation, healthcare, hospitality, and retail sectors revealed that customer relationship management has become a strategic resilience mechanism, integrating digital transformation, reassurance strategies, employee empowerment, cultural framing, and long-term institutionalisation.

The blockade forced organisations to move beyond incremental CRM improvements and adopt radical adaptations to sustain customer trust and loyalty. Digital platforms emerged as the backbone of continuity, while reassurance campaigns and employee empowerment operationalised trust at the frontline. National identity narratives provided emotional anchors, reinforcing solidarity and resilience. Importantly, many of these measures were institutionalised beyond the crisis, transforming CRM into a central component of organisational strategy.

The study contributes to theory by situating CRM within the context of geopolitical crises and by bridging the relationship marketing and crisis management literatures. It extends models of trust and empowerment by showing how these constructs are reconstructed under uncertainty. It also demonstrates that CRM is not merely a marketing tool but a multidimensional capability that underpins organisational resilience.

The study contributes three main insights to theory and practice:

1. CRM in crisis contexts must be reconceptualised as a resilience mechanism rather than just a marketing tool.

2. Trust engineering, through empathy, communication, and cultural alignment, is vital for customer retention under uncertainty.
3. CRM adaptation in geopolitically volatile environments demands a fusion of digital innovation and frontline empowerment.

Theoretically, this study extends CRM scholarship by situating resilience within the context of geopolitical crises and illustrating how CRM evolves from a marketing function into a multidimensional resilience mechanism.

Managerially, the findings provide actionable insights for service organisations to strengthen customer trust, enhance digital adaptability, and sustain loyalty in the face of uncertainty.

Theoretical Implications

The study offers several key theoretical contributions:

- CRM as a Resilience Capability:

The findings extend the literature on organisational resilience (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011) by positioning CRM itself as a resilience capability. Digital platforms, trust campaigns, and empowerment mechanisms are not peripheral adjustments but core enablers of continuity.

- Trust Engineering in Crisis Contexts:

Building on Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Commitment-Trust Theory, the study shows that in crises, trust is not simply maintained but must be actively engineered. Organisations engaged in reassurance communication, tangible benevolence, and cultural framing to rebuild trust under uncertainty.

- Cultural Embeddedness of CRM:

By highlighting the role of national identity, the study extends relationship marketing theories to show that CRM can be culturally and politically embedded. This suggests that CRM models in emerging markets should account for sociocultural narratives, particularly in contexts where national solidarity is salient.

- Dynamic Empowerment:

The findings contribute to empowerment theory by showing that in crises, empowerment is not only about autonomy but also about emotional authority to reassure customers. This dual role expands the conceptualisation of empowerment beyond operational efficiency to relational reassurance.

Managerial Implications

For managers in service industries, the findings underscore several actionable lessons:

- Invest in Digital CRM Infrastructure: Crises expose the fragility of physical systems; robust digital platforms ensure continuity and scalability of engagement.
- Prioritise Reassurance Over Promotion: In turbulent times, customers value trust and stability more than new offerings. Communication strategies should focus on reassurance rather than sales.
- Empower Employees Responsibly: Frontline staff are critical ambassadors of trust. Empowerment should be paired with training, emotional support, and recognition to prevent burnout.
- Tailor Strategies by Audience: CRM must recognise diverse customer bases. Citizens may resonate with identity narratives, while expatriates require practical guarantees such as financial continuity.
- Institutionalise Crisis Innovations: Measures introduced in emergencies—such as telemedicine or loyalty flexibility—should be integrated into long-term strategy, not abandoned post-crisis.

Policy Implications

The study also offers implications for policymakers and regulators:

- Strengthen National Digital Infrastructure: Reliable internet, cybersecurity, and payment systems are essential to sustain digital CRM during disruptions.
- Support Service Sector Resilience: Governments can provide regulatory flexibility (e.g., allowing fee waivers or policy extensions) to enable firms to focus on customer reassurance.
- Promote Public-Private Collaboration: During crises, aligning corporate reassurance campaigns with national communication strategies can reinforce customer confidence.
- Integrate CRM into National Resilience Planning: CRM should not be viewed solely as a business function but as part of national continuity strategies, particularly in small, interconnected economies.

In addition, policymakers should consider establishing national crisis communication frameworks that integrate corporate CRM strategies with government messaging. During the blockade, the alignment between corporate reassurance campaigns and national solidarity initiatives amplified customer confidence. A formal framework could institutionalise such collaboration, ensuring that future crises are met with coordinated, multi-level reassurance strategies. Furthermore, regulators could incentivise firms that invest in resilience-oriented CRM innovations—for example, through tax benefits or recognition schemes—encouraging organisations to prioritise long-term trust-building alongside profitability.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations must be considered. First, the focus on executives excludes customer and frontline perspectives, which may yield additional nuance. Second, the single-country case study limits generalizability, though it provides transferable lessons. Third, the reliance on interview data introduces subjectivity, though triangulation and reflexivity mitigate bias.

Another limitation lies in the temporal scope of the data collection. Interviews captured perspectives during and shortly after the blockade, but did not fully explore how CRM practices evolved in the years following normalisation of relations. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insight into whether trust engineering and resilience-oriented CRM endure beyond immediate crises. Additionally, exploring customer perspectives across different demographic groups—citizens, expatriates, high-net-worth clients, and vulnerable populations—could reveal how reassurance strategies are experienced and valued differently.

Future research could pursue comparative studies across different crisis contexts (e.g., sanctions, pandemics), incorporate customer perspectives to validate organisational narratives, and employ mixed-methods to balance depth and breadth. Cross-cultural research could also examine how identity narratives shape CRM resilience across diverse geopolitical settings.

Closing Reflection

Ultimately, this research underscores that CRM is not only about managing customers but about sustaining societal resilience. The blockade revealed the interconnectedness of business continuity, cultural solidarity, and national identity, placing CRM at the crossroads of economic and social life. Future crises—whether geopolitical, environmental, or health-related—will demand similar integrative approaches. By reconceptualising CRM as a strategic resilience lifeline, organisations and policymakers alike can better prepare for uncertainty while fostering enduring trust and loyalty.

This study provides novel insights into CRM under geopolitical crises and offers actionable implications for both managers and policymakers in similar contexts.

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