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CONNECTING IN CRISIS: EXPLORING ONLINE INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS IN FLORIDA'S  
UNEMPLOYMENT STRUGGLE

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of Public Administration  
in the College of Community Innovation and Education  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread unemployment, significantly impacting Floridians who faced delays and systemic issues with the state's unemployment system. This study examines crisis communication within a Reddit community, focusing on how individuals used informal communications to navigate the unemployment benefits crisis. Guided by Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) and Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G), the research addresses: (1) How did individuals in the active audience discuss challenges faced when trying to access Florida's unemployment system? (2) What lessons can be drawn from the analysis of informal communications on social media for improving crisis communication strategies during future crises? A qualitative content analysis of 215 posts from a subreddit created by Floridians seeking unemployment compensation, dated April 30, 2020, to December 31, 2020, was conducted using NVivo. Key themes identified included payment delays, systemic failures, financial and emotional distress, community support, and mistrust of government actions. The findings revealed that the subreddit was proactively used for information sharing and social cohesion. Despite frustration and anxiety from payment delays and administrative inefficiencies, users actively engaged in problem-solving and advocacy. The study extends RAT by highlighting the role of informal online networks in crisis communication and supports U&G by showing how individuals seek information and support during crises. This research underscores public administrators' need for robust crisis communication strategies that incorporate digital platforms and community participation. It emphasizes the importance of transparency, consistency, and responsiveness in government communications to maintain public legitimacy and improve unemployment system management during future crises. It also speaks to the importance of capacity building for public organizations and future research with administrative burden.

To my Mom, whom I think about and miss every day; to my family and friends (especially my twin sister Ida and big brother Arya), who are my biggest advocates; to all the Floridians who trust me to be their voice; to my Chair, who didn't let me quit; and to UCF for the incredible years of growth. I also dedicate this dissertation to every educator who invested so much in me and Dr. Jenna Tosh, who completed her PhD nearly a decade ago. Watching her balance so much to still finish inspired me to keep going.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

The 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first detected in the United States (U.S.) on January 21, 2020, and with it came a health crisis and a concurrent communications crisis, amid significant economic turmoil (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [CBPP], 2022; Schumaker, 2020). The rapid increase in infections and deaths in the U.S. outpaced global trends and was coupled with a rising unemployment rate (CBPP, 2022; Elflein, 2023; Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2022). Disseminating COVID-19 information became paramount, with social media emerging as a vital informal network and conduit between citizens and their government's crisis communication (Cho et al., 2023). This research aims to investigate crisis communication within an informal network on social media during a critical juncture in the Florida unemployment crisis, coinciding with the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing qualitative content analysis and applying crisis communication theories, this study will examine how individuals trying to access unemployment benefits utilized informal communications on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida.

### **1.1 The Study Problem**

While health data, risk mitigation, and protective measures were prioritized, the rollout of vaccines in late 2020 uncovered distribution challenges. The U.S. also fell short of its goal to vaccinate 20 million people by December 31 (Diaz, 2020). This delay, alongside federal social-distancing guidelines, work suspensions, and travel restrictions, led to a sharp drop in civilian employment, culminating in a historic 13% unemployment rate in the second quarter of 2020 (Smith et al., 2021). Job loss disproportionately affected individuals living paycheck to paycheck (Gould & Kassa, 2021).

During economic recessions and high unemployment, the federal government has historically established temporary, federally funded programs to extend benefit durations or increase amounts

(Stone & Chen, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed the enactment of programs like Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation, Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, and Lost Wages Assistance Program to augment state-based programs. These federally funded initiatives were implemented and managed at the state level (Evangelist et al., 2021).

The high unemployment rate and the introduction of new federal support programs prompted everyday Floridians to seek public assistance. They turned to state benefit systems and agencies that were ill-prepared, outdated, and overwhelmed by the surge in applicants (Sainato, 2021). For the unemployed, this translated into significant delays, mental stress, and financial hardships (Sainato, 2022). For public administrators, mishandling a public crisis can result in operational disasters, reputational damage, harmful online content, and a long-term erosion of governance legitimacy (Christensen & Ma, 2021; Coombs, 2007; Diddi & Wei, 2022; Svedin, 2012). While public administrators attempt to communicate information through formal networks, a public crisis can also lead to the formation of informal networks.

Informal networks, often emerging spontaneously without formal organizational structures, serve as platforms for sharing information, knowledge, and experiences. These networks exist within workplaces, communities, online platforms, or any setting where people informally gather. During the COVID-19 crisis, informal networks thrived online, addressing unique pandemic-related challenges. Online support groups, social media pages, social networking apps, and crowdsourcing efforts connected people, helped them navigate pandemic hardships, and fostered a sense of solidarity during the crisis (Radey et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023).

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

This study explores the dynamics of crisis communication within an online informal network during a pivotal period in the Florida unemployment crisis, aligning with the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing qualitative content analysis and applying crisis communication theories, this study will examine how individuals trying to access unemployment benefits utilized informal communications on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida. Guided by Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) and Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G), this exploratory study seeks to answer two main research questions:

1. How did individuals in the active audience discuss challenges faced when trying to access Florida's unemployment system?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the analysis of informal communications on social media for improving crisis communication strategies during future crises?

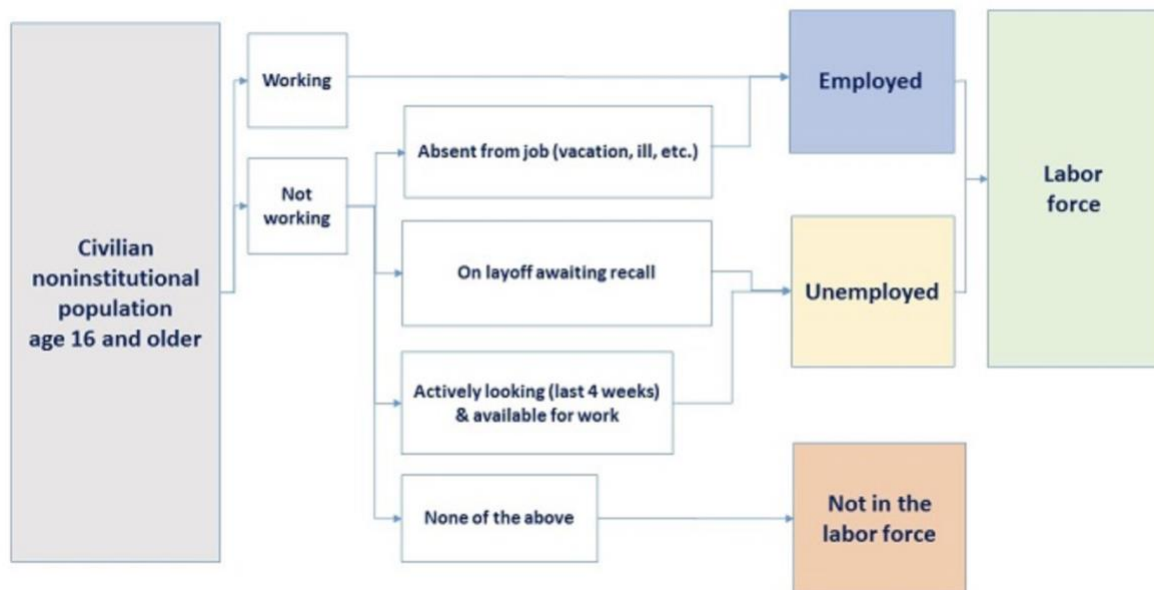
This dissertation will provide an overview of Florida's unemployment system, outline the significance of the research, review relevant literature, describe research methods, and provide a data analysis and discussion of results alongside a conclusion.

## **1.3 Background on Unemployment Systems in the United States**

The federal-state unemployment insurance system (UI) provides temporary wage replacement for eligible Americans who have lost their jobs and are seeking employment. Created in 1935, it operates as a form of social insurance, with taxes from employers funding the system to provide income support in times of job loss. While individual states manage the basic UI program, the U.S. Department of Labor covers administrative costs and sets specific rules and regulations. Every state program operates differently, but they all share two federal requirements: all funds withdrawn from the state's unemployment fund must be used solely for unemployment compensation, and states cannot impose

excessively burdensome administrative processes that hinder access for eligible individuals (Kim, 2010). In general, to qualify for UI benefits, an individual must meet three main criteria: (1) Have lost their job through no fault of their own; (2) Be able to work, available for work, and actively seeking employment; (3) Earned a specified income during a designated base period before becoming unemployed” (Kim, 2010; United States Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, 2024, para. 1-2).

Individuals are categorized as unemployed in the U.S. if: “They were not employed during the survey reference week, they were available for work during the reference week (except for temporary illness), and they actively sought employment during the four weeks leading up to the survey reference week, or they were temporarily laid off and anticipated being recalled to their job. Individuals awaiting the commencement of a new job must have actively searched for employment within the last four weeks to be classified as unemployed; otherwise, they are categorized as not in the labor force” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2023, para. 6). More details can be seen in Figure 1 below.

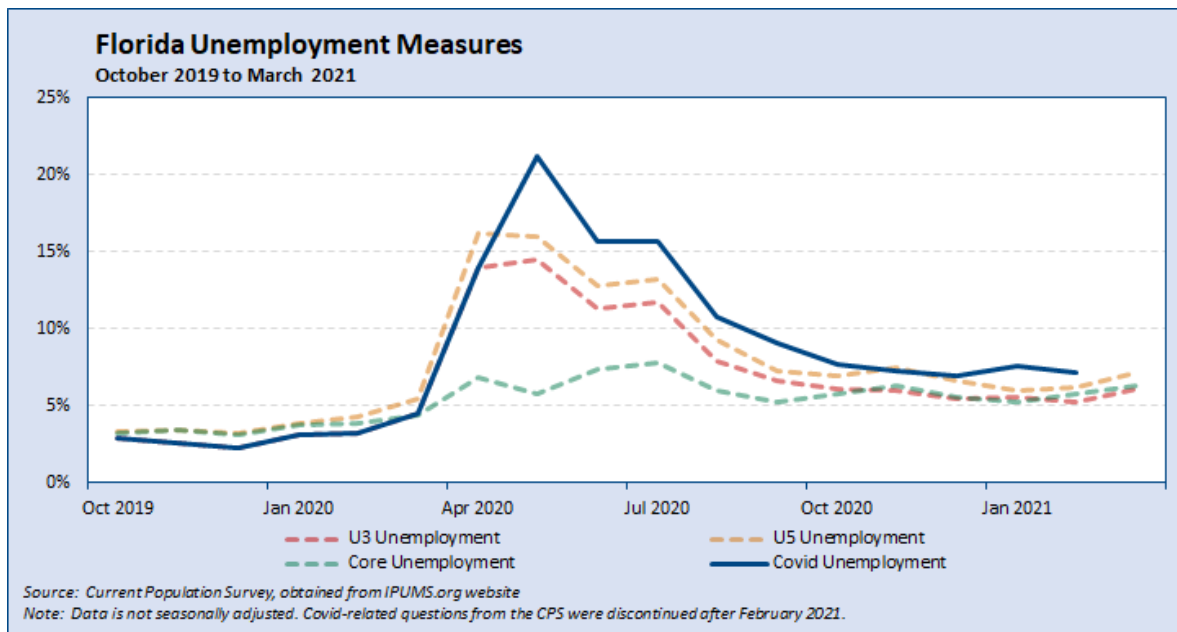


**Figure 1:** Labor force subgroups as defined by the U.S. Department of Labor, reprinted from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023).

The unemployment rate is a metric derived by “dividing the number of unemployed individuals by the total labor force and multiplying the result by 100. Mathematically, this is expressed as  $(\text{Unemployed} \div \text{Labor Force}) \times 100$  (BLS, 2023, para. 4). The Bureau of Labor Statistics delineates diverse metrics for measuring unemployment rates, but this summary will focus on U3 (or headline) unemployment and U5 unemployment.

U3 encompasses individuals who are not employed, are available for work, and have actively pursued employment in the preceding four weeks. Meanwhile, U5 unemployment encompasses U3 unemployment along with marginally attached workers. Marginally attached workers are those desiring employment, available for work, and have actively searched for jobs in the last twelve months, though not in the previous four weeks (BLS, 2023). As seen in Figure 2 below, researchers from Florida Gulf Coast University created two additional categories for consideration: Core unemployment and COVID-19 unemployment. The former is calculated by deducting temporary layoffs from U3 unemployment, whereas COVID-19 unemployment encompasses U3 unemployment and individuals unable to seek employment due to COVID-19 (Ferreira-Neto, 2021).





**Figure 2:** Florida unemployment measures; reprinted from Regional Economic Research Institute at Florida Gulf Coast University (Ferreira-Neto, 2021).

During recessions and times of high unemployment, the federal government has historically established temporary, federally funded programs to extend benefit durations or increase benefit amounts (Stone & Chen, 2014). Although these programs are enacted by Congress and the U.S. Department of Labor, they are administered at the state level (Evangelist et al., 2021).

States exhibit considerable variation in applying these general criteria and how citizens apply for unemployment compensation. These variations, language barriers, and technology gaps can hinder access to unemployment benefits. Due to these variables, only some unemployed people qualify for benefits. Additionally, specific exclusions, such as agricultural workers and domestic servants, have historically perpetuated racial disparities in the U.S. welfare state (Rodems & Shaefer, 2016). Individuals' difficulties engaging with the unemployment system can be seen as administrative burdens, which is defined as "an individual's experience of a policy's implementation as onerous" (Burden et al., 2012, p. 741).

Florida's reciprocity rate, assessing the proportion of unemployed individuals eligible for benefits, is the lowest nationally, as the Department of Labor reported in 2023 (Florida Policy Institute, 2021). This predicament is partly attributable to legislative amendments implemented in 2011, substantially curtailing the duration of support available to unemployed residents from the standard 26 weeks to a variable scale contingent on the prevailing unemployment rate, with a maximum limit of 23 weeks. Moreover, these legislative changes included a reduction in the maximum weekly benefit amount allocated to unemployed individuals in Florida, coupled with a heightened stringency in eligibility criteria (Luhby, 2011). The policy also shifted Florida's unemployment system online, closing regional unemployment offices and requiring users of the unemployment system to use a web-based portal and phone number as a contact for customer support (Wentworth & McKenna, 2015).

#### **1.4 Significance of Research**

This focus of study is academically and theoretically significant and has a purpose for public administrators and policymakers. Academically, investigating the uses of informal networks online during a public crisis provides a deeper comprehension of how various actors and channels function during a crisis. Moreover, while existing research on crisis communication primarily focuses on natural disasters, this research explores economic safety nets within informal networks during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a unique and valuable perspective. Using Reddit as a data source will also be an add-on since most academic literature using social media to examine crisis communication patterns relies heavily on Twitter data (Chen et al., 2022). Examining Reddit will inspire continued research with this online dataset.

From a theoretical standpoint, a predominant emphasis within crisis communication theory has traditionally revolved around the sender's role in disseminating information during crises, leaving the receiver as a relatively understudied component. The sender also tends to be a corporation versus a

public sector entity. This research helps to address a theoretical gap by focusing on the receiver and then providing recommendations for the sender, a public institution. The theoretical framework within this study is also unique, as it combines RAT and U&G to provide a structure for understanding informal online communities during crises. RAT emphasizes the role of the subreddit as a real-time arena where diverse perspectives shape crisis responses (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). U&G explores the motivations behind users' participation and how effectively their needs are met (Katz et al., 1974). This dual approach offers a framework that allows for deeper theoretical and practical implications to enhance crisis communication and foster stronger community engagement.

From a practical standpoint, this research has implications for governments, organizations, and communities. It can provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing crisis communication strategies by strengthening formal channels and leveraging informal networks. It will also speak to the challenges faced by Floridians when attempting to access one's unemployment benefits, helping public organizations understand this issue. Study results may also impact public administrators and policymakers seeking legislative and rulemaking approaches to their unemployment systems.

In summary, answering these research questions is significant as it has the potential to advance theoretical knowledge and practical approaches to crisis communication and governance. It can contribute to more effective crisis response strategies, better-informed policies, and enhanced community resilience during future crises. Additionally, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by focusing on the receiver and online informal networks versus the sender of crisis communication content and using Reddit as a dataset. The literature review below will expand upon these points and more.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Guided by the foundational principles of Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) and Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G), this research explores the engagement within an online informal network during the first year of Florida's COVID-19 unemployment and how that engagement intersects with conversations about the challenges Floridians faced when attempting to access their unemployment benefits. This chapter includes a literature review of research on e-government, network governance and informal online networks, crisis communications online, network governance and crisis response, and theoretical approaches to crisis communications. This review will also provide a conceptual framework for the study.

### **2.1 E-Government and Social Media**

The widespread adoption of Web 2.0 technologies over the last two decades has led to profound expansions in digital communication, social media, and e-government. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube have become integral components of the public's daily lives. In this context, Obar and Wildman (2015) define social media as Web 2.0 applications characterized by four common elements: (1) these are internet-based applications; (2) the content is user-generated; (3) user-specific profiles are created for the platform and maintained by a company; and (4) social networks are created by connecting a profile with other profiles. Bryer and Zavattaro (2011) further define social media as "technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders" (p. 327).

The use of social media has witnessed an astonishing ascent, particularly in the U.S. Based on data from the Pew Research Center, in 2005, "5% of American adults used at least one social media platform" (Auxier et al., 2019, para. 3). Six years later, that population rose to more than half of all Americans. Based on the most recent data, at least 72% of the public uses social media daily (Auxier &

Anderson, 2021) and approximately one in four use Twitter (23%), Snapchat (25%), and WhatsApp (23%). In contrast, a significantly larger percentage use YouTube (81%), Facebook (69%), and Instagram (40%; Dixon, 2023). Based on more recent data from the Pew Research Center, more than one in five adults recently surveyed say they use Reddit, with the dominant age range being 18-49 (Gottfried, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024).

Of course, social media is not just used as a means to connect with others; it also has evolved to be a primary news source. According to a recent study, three in ten U.S. adults consume news from Facebook, with slightly fewer getting their news from YouTube (Pew Research Center, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the growth and use of social media, with We Are Social finding that social media use increased at double the rate “and represents the largest quarter-on-quarter increase that we’ve seen since we started producing these reports back in 2011” (Kemp, 2020, para. 19).

As social media usage has increased, it has found a natural place within government activities. Agencies at various levels of government now actively utilize Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other social media platforms to distribute information, engage with citizens, and create public dialogue. Integrating social media into governance aligns with the principles of open government and has been a focal point within e-government literature (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). Open government refers to principles, practices, and policies to enhance transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and collaboration in government activities (Kempeneer & Wolswinkel, 2023). Open government emphasizes that citizens should be able to access information about government activities, participate in the decision-making process, and have avenues for accountability (McBride et al., 2023). Specific to the current study, Sunshine Laws in Florida refer to statutes that mandate the public's right to access government meetings and records. These laws aim to ensure transparency and openness in government activities. The primary law governing open government in Florida is the "Government-in-the-Sunshine Law," found in Chapter 286 of the Florida Statutes (Government-in-the-Sunshine Law, 2012).

Margetts and Dunleavy (2013) underscore a shift in government administration away from the traditional structures of New Public Management (NPM) towards "digital-era governance" (DEG). In the NPM era, decentralization, quasi-government agencies, outsourcing, and privatization dominated administrative discourse. However, the DEG paradigm, facilitated by online technologies, focuses on client-centered structures, promoting holistic, rather than disaggregated, service delivery. Citizens now expect electronic integration at the core of government operations, an idea that the Clinton/Gore Administration in the 1990s anticipated, culminating in the launch of the first government "portal" (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013).

With a citizen-driven expectation for more tech integration of government, other studies have focused on analyzing how administrators use online tools to measure government and public interactions. Chadwick and May (2003) developed three models of interaction between government and constituents: "managerial," "consultative," and "participatory." These models are influenced by Laudon's *Communications Technology and Democratic Participation* and are meant to define the approach of "e-government" being implemented. These categories are generated via these six questions:

(1) What role is played by government?; (2) Who are the principal actors and interests?; (3) What is the dominant perspective on the flow of information?; (4) What are the principal mechanisms for interaction between government and citizens?; (5) What attention is paid to the ability of citizens to interact electronically?; (6) What is the defining logic, or *raison d'être*, of each model? (Chadwick & May, 2003, pp. 275–276)

These three interaction models provide examples of the government's primary purpose for online usage and identify opportunities for increased public engagement. A "managerial" approach is one centered on "service delivery" to "customers" to improve access to information within and from the government. This can take the shape of sharing information online that would otherwise only be

available through legacy media or at a government building Chadwick and May (2003). It could also offer a government service online that was traditionally only accessible in person. Bryer (2013) describes this use of online tools as extensions of the government's more static websites, where information flows in one direction.

Divergent from the managerial model, the second model is consultative. Here, Information is considered a valuable resource for improving policy and administration, and communications technologies (ICTs) help communicate everyday people's opinions to public officials. By leveraging the promptness and directness of online connectivity, citizen input on various issues can be expressed in real-time, guiding policymaking to understand public sentiment better. Unlike the managerial model, the consultative model promotes greater democratic participation, though not to the extent of the third and final model: the participatory model (Chadwick & May, 2003).

This model uses a multidirectional structure that is rooted in the work of sociologist Yoneji Masuda. Masuda (1981) believed that technological advancements would lead to a new dimension of public engagement. He wrote that "Technical difficulties that have made it impossible for large numbers of citizens to participate in policymaking have now been solved" (p. 83) and outlined below are his "six basic principles" for a participatory model (p. 104).

1. All citizens would have to participate in decision-making, or at least the maximum number;
2. The spirit of synergy and mutual assistance should permeate the whole system ("synergy" means that each person co-operates and acts from their standpoint in solving everyday problems, and "mutual assistance" implies readiness to voluntarily sacrifice one's interests for the common good, to level out the disadvantages and sacrifices to other persons and groups);
3. All relevant information should be available to the public (in addition, people will be expected to provide information voluntarily to contribute to a solution of any question);

4. All the benefits received and sacrifices made by citizens should be distributed equitably among them;
5. A solution should be sought by persuasion and agreement;
6. Once decided, all citizens would be expected to cooperate in applying the solution (Masuda, 1981, pp. 101–108).

Masuda argued that the participatory model would reduce the likelihood of information being monopolized by a select few, thus democratizing information. While other interpretations of the participatory model exist (Adnan et al., 2022; Baxter, 2017; Knox, 2010), Masuda's definitions and values remain foundational (Chadwick & May, 2003).

In a similar effort, Lu et al. (2016) describe social media interactions between the government and the public across three levels. Like Chadwick and May's (2003) managerial model, the first level is characterized by one-way interaction, where administrators use social media solely to distribute information. In this case, the government focuses on sharing information through a new medium. However, the content is often already available on official websites, and the government is simply resharing that content through social media (Mergel, 2012). Then, there is a two-way communication pattern, where social media is a platform for sharing and gathering public opinions and ideas. Then there is collaboration; this is the highest level. At this stage, a network is formed, and government social media outlets become self-sustaining, contributing to the shared goal of improving public policy and service delivery (Bertot et al., 2010).

González-Galván (2022) developed another breakdown that is similar but more grounded in what Charaudeau (2002) calls a "communication contract," or a set of characteristics that define the boundaries and rules for the development and analysis of speech. González-Galván (2022) discusses a new communication contract in the digital age between government and citizens that enables a discursive exchange between the two on three levels: "1) informative, 2) operational, and 3) political"



(p.345). The informative level focuses on making citizens aware of available services, where local governments act as service providers and citizens as users. The primary goal for public administrators at this level is transparency. At the operational level, the government explains projects, procedures, and decisions to address public issues, aiming to be accountable. At the political level, involving elections, public debates, and officials, citizens become political actors with varying influence and power, aiming to achieve governance. Each level has a purpose, but the other two will appear explicitly or indirectly at each level, thus recalling public organizations' dichotomous character – administrative and political (González-Galván, 2022).

As demonstrated by Chadwick and May's (2003) model structure, Lu et al.'s (2016) levels approach, and González-Galván's (2022) communications contract, there is variance in reach and interaction by government agencies and municipalities. Still, all three of these approaches break down the rules of interaction along a similar line. These scholars and others have also integrated these structures into their research designs. For example, researchers in Canada analyzed social media data and found that many government agencies use digital platforms to publish content from their websites. However, they also found that most governments did not engage in two-way interactions with their followers or view social media as a networking tool (Gintova, 2019; Landsbergen, 2011). This is not uncommon. In their 2003 article, Chadwick and May concluded that the executive-driven "managerial" model of interaction is more widespread in the U.S. when compared to the "consultative" and "participatory" models.

Governments understand open data sources via social media tools well, but using social media for open dialogue between people and their government is a different degree of engagement that seems not to be met. In that vein, Bryer (2013) encourages public administrators to use social media to convene and facilitate interactions with everyday people. This contrasts with using ICTs as a one-way authority-based figure that talks "at" people versus "with" people. By engaging in a collaborative and participatory

manner, governments can cultivate an engaged citizenry with authentic connections that have a stake in the future of their community (Nam, 2012; Song & Lee, 2016).

Conversely, Webster and Leleux (2018) offered optimism for participatory models in their study of innovative city governance. They highlight the Smart City concept as an example of introducing several innovative participatory public spaces where physical and digital elements blend to actively engage citizens in shaping public services and policies. The literature provides descriptive examples of these spaces and concludes that reciprocity is necessary for successful Smart City governance (Leleux, & Webster, 2018). Ergo, programs must be mutually beneficial for municipalities and citizens to be effective and sustainable. Bryer (2013) adds that the government's use of social media has the potential to not only foster a more civically engaged community but a more civically healthy one, too.

Regardless of engagement, governments worldwide and in the U.S. have used social media to varying degrees, often with foundational goals of improving transparency and providing more efficient public services. However, using ICTs can also be a form of administrative burden. As noted earlier, the administrative burden is "an individual's experience of a policy's implementation as onerous" (Burden et al., 2012, p. 741). Regulations and statutes established by the state and how public servants execute them can impose challenges for individuals maneuvering through intricate programs or policies (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). For example, the shift to online applications for social safety programs, thus limiting the number of client-caseworker encounters, has been noted to create burdens for demographics for people who are not tech savvy (i.e., older constituencies, those with limited internet access, etc.; Negoita et al., 2024).

The digital transformation of government is a constant process occurring at various levels of public administration. This transformation faces numerous organizational challenges, including the need to develop new laws and rules to adapt to the digital era and the creation of new ICT-centered

employment opportunities within government (Valle-Cruz et al., 2021). Creating these positions and implementing e-government functions has a cost. Bryer (2011) outlines three types of social media adaptation costs: production costs, participation costs, and democratization costs. These are not only financial costs but also time and culture changes needed to create a genuinely participatory model of social media usage. Mergel (2012) further highlights the rapid change in social media technologies, emphasizing that platform providers, with complete control over technological features, might abruptly discontinue services or features, potentially disregarding the invested resources a government body may have made. The fast pace of social media is one reason the greater public uses these platforms. However, this also proves to be a challenge for public administrators, primarily since bureaucratic entities are not known to move quickly. Social media adoption can also be met with internal resistance, especially when new platforms are released (Mergel, 2012).

Technology gaps are another challenge in integrating e-government and expanding social media within governance strategies. Not all community residents will have access to social media, and not all will be proficient in using digital technologies. Information may not be accessible in an individual's native language. As a result, ICTs can worsen information disparities if public administrators do not intentionally reduce that risk (Jing & Yushim, 2016). Enhancing someone's digital literacy to interact effectively with e-government services – and vice versa – is critical to overcoming these challenges.

## **2.2 Network Governance and Informal Online Networks**

Despite networks' long and impactful history, the study of network governance as a distinct field of inquiry emerged only in the late 20th century. This can be traced back to different disciplines and fields of study, including public administration, policy networks, social network analysis, and organizational theory (Kapucu & Hu, 2020). Network governance has evolved as an interdisciplinary field

of study that intersects with public administration and political science, sociology, economics, and management (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012).

Formal and informal networks are two distinct types of social structures in the network governance literature. Organizations, institutions, and governing bodies establish formal networks with specific objectives, structures, and roles. Formal networks include organizational hierarchies, departmental structures, project teams, and committees (Kapucu & Hu, 2020). Widely employed in government sectors such as education, health and human services, child welfare, homelessness services, and emergency response, formal networks serve as intentional frameworks designed to enhance communication, coordination, and information flow. Typically, they operate within the bounds of contractual agreements or memoranda of understanding (Isett et al., 2011). Extensive public management research has centered on formal networks, yielding valuable insights into managing intricate, multiorganizational arrangements (Milward & Provan, 1998) and the strategies employed by network participants to overcome unforeseen challenges during public emergencies (Moynihan, 2009). Notably, formal networks are perceived as more manageable than informal networks due to their stability and relatively closed structure, fostering heightened trust among participants (Isett et al., 2011).

In contrast, informal networks arise spontaneously based on social relationships, personal connections, and shared interests among individuals. They are not formally developed or governed by any organizational structure or authority. Informal online networks can be found across the World Wide Web and include online communities and forums. For example, social media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Twitter offer groups and lists where individuals can join and discuss specific topics or themes. Platforms like eBay, Etsy, or specialized online marketplaces bring together buyers and sellers, forming informal networks centered around commerce (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2012; Tadelis, 2016; Vonneilich, 2022).

Informal online networks also support and assist individuals facing specific challenges or health conditions (Zhou et al., 2018). For example, support networks for people with chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, or parenting communities provide a platform for individuals to share experiences and offer support to one another. While formal networks provide structure and official channels, informal networks are important in building social capital, fostering trust, and facilitating communication and collaboration beyond formal boundaries. Both types of networks have their strengths and functions, and understanding this is essential for effective governance and management. Though different, formal and informal networks can coexist and interact with one another, too; they are not mutually exclusive (Kapucu & Hu, 2020). As seen in this study, informal online platforms were created by unemployed Floridians at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to support one another in accessing their state benefits. These individuals had contacted the State of Florida's formal network for assistance but faced with delays and shelter-in-place orders, they turned to informal networks for support (Angel, 2021).

Table 1 below outlines the distinctions between formal and informal networks across six dimensions. As noted earlier, formal networks are intentionally established based on organizational structures and official roles, often with binding documents. In contrast, informal networks spontaneously arise from personal relationships and shared interests, lacking official establishment. Structurally, formal networks follow predefined hierarchies, while informal networks lack a predefined structure and develop based on individual interactions. Authority in formal networks is tied to official positions, whereas in informal networks, it is often based on personal influence and expertise, leading to decentralized decision-making. Communication in formal networks follows official protocols, whereas informal networks are more flexible and diverse in their communication channels. Accountability in formal networks is clear and tied to assigned roles, while informal networks rely on social norms and trust. Lastly, formal networks tend to be stable and governed by formal rules, while informal networks evolve based on changing needs and interests (Kapucu & Hu, 2020).

**Table 1:** Comparing and contrasting formal and informal networks (Kapucu & Hu, 2020).

	<b>Formal Networks</b>	<b>Informal Networks</b>
<b>Emergence</b>	Intentionally established to facilitate specific tasks, functions, or goals. Created based on the organizational structure and official roles and positions. Binding documents (i.e., contracts or joint agreements), may exist.	Arise spontaneously based on personal relationships, shared interests, or social connections within an organization or community. Not officially established or controlled.
<b>Structure</b>	Predefined structure and hierarchy, typically represented by organizational charts or reporting lines. Follow formal communication channels and reporting systems.	Lack predefined structure or hierarchy. Connections and relationships form based on personal interactions and individual preferences.
<b>Authority</b>	Authority and decision-making power are typically based on official positions and job roles. Individuals hold authority based on their hierarchical position within the organization. Very centralized.	Based on personal influence, expertise, frequency, or social capital. Authority is not necessarily tied to official positions or job titles. Decentralized.
<b>Communication</b>	Usually governed by official protocols, rules, and procedures. Follows vertical flow of information, depending on the organizational structure.	Flexible and unrestricted compared to formal networks. It can flow through various channels, including face-to-face interactions, social media, or informal gatherings.
<b>Accountability</b>	Clear system of accountability, where individuals are responsible for their assigned roles and tasks. Performance evaluation and rewards are often based on formal job responsibilities and/or network goals.	Looser system of accountability. Individuals may not have explicit responsibilities assigned to them within the network, and accountability is based on social norms, trust, and reciprocity.
<b>Dynamism</b>	Tend to be relatively stable and persistent. Designed to support the long-term functioning of the organization. Governed by formal policies and rules.	Dynamic and adaptable. Changed based on evolving needs and interests of the individuals engaged with network. Less bound by formal rules and procedures.

Studies of online informal networks have been ongoing since the introduction of the Internet and expanded with the advancement of social media platforms and other online communication channels. Researchers began exploring the formation, purpose, and additional elements of online

communities and virtual networks, with studies focused on early Internet platforms like forums, chat rooms, and mailing lists (Marlin-Bennett & Thornton, 2012).

When social media platforms expanded and gained prominence, researchers focused on investigating platforms like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter. They began exploring how individuals formed networks, shared content, and engaged in online social interactions, and this period witnessed the emergence of network analysis techniques applied to online networks with an emphasis on various aspects, including information diffusion, viral content, social influence, online activism, and examining how online networks shape public opinion (Ramia et al., 2018). The growth of mobile technology and the proliferation of smartphone usage also influenced the nature of online informal networks and the study of such networks (Marlin-Bennett & Thornton, 2012).

Today, research on online informal networks continues to evolve alongside technological advancements and changes in online communication platforms. Scholars are exploring newer platforms and studying their impact on social interactions, network formation, and information sharing. The research is increasingly interdisciplinary, drawing upon theories and methods from sociology, communication, computer science, and network science (Ramia et al., 2018). Researchers have also conducted network analysis and examined factors influencing the emergence of core-periphery structures, subgroups, and information dissemination patterns (Ramia et al., 2018).

Researchers have also explored how individuals seek and provide support, share resources, and collaborate on projects within informal online networks (Marlin-Bennett & Thornton, 2012). Others focus their research on the governance mechanisms and leadership structures within online informal networks by exploring how decisions are made, conflicts are managed, and norms and rules are developed. The role of influential members, opinion leaders, or moderators in shaping the governance of these networks is also examined (Ramia et al., 2018). These studies assess the impacts and outcomes of online informal networks on individuals, communities, and society. This allows for exploring the

benefits and drawbacks of participating in these networks. These included knowledge acquisition, social capital formation, empowerment, or potential risks like information overload or echo chambers.

Research on online informal networks utilizes various methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, content analysis, network analysis, and ethnographic approaches; Marlin-Bennett & Thornton, 2012; Ramia et al., 2018). Every approach contributes significantly to the shared understanding of how online networks shape social interactions, information diffusion, collaboration, and collective behavior in the digital realm. Overall, the literature on this topic aims to inform strategies for leveraging online networks effectively, fostering positive interactions, and addressing challenges that may arise within these networks.

### **2.3 Crisis Communication Online**

Over the past few decades, most academic literature on crisis communication has centered on organizational and public relations, primarily from the perspective of private corporations. Scholars have extensively studied the nature of crises, the strategies organizations employ to manage the situation (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007, 2014), and how to evaluate the crisis response itself (Austin et al., 2012). Originating with Hagar (2005), crisis informatics “conceptualizes emergency response as an expanded social system” that disseminates information “within and between official and public channels” (Palen et al., 2009, p. 469). As Palen and Anderson (2016) write, this “multidisciplinary field combining computing and social science knowledge of disasters; its central tenet is that people use personal information and communication technology to respond to disaster in creative ways to cope with uncertainty” (p. 224).

For this study, Coombs (2023) defines crisis generally as a “breakdown in a system that creates shared stress” (p. 2). Coombs further expands this definition into three types of crises: “disaster, public health crises, and organizational crisis” (Coombs, 2023, p. 3). Coombs also offers for consideration three stages of a crisis: “pre-crisis (detection, prevention, and preparation), crisis event (recognition, containment, and response), and post-crisis (evaluation and follow-up communication)” (Coombs, 2023,



pp. 11–12). Crisis management “seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and industry from harm while facilitating a positive response to the situation” (Coombs, 2023, p. 8). It also refers to how organizations mitigate and evolve from crises (Boin et al., 2008) and can include reputation management (Wæraas & Maor, 2014). Crisis communication is “strategic communication that can lessen the negative effects of a crisis on an organization and stakeholders” (Coombs, 2018, p. 991).

Accountability and the type of information received before, during and after are the two main factors influencing an individual’s reaction during a crisis (Coombs, 2004). Accountability can be “broadly attributed to internal or external factors” (Bakker et al., 2018, p. 1). The involvement of internal factors means the person or organization itself is held responsible. Conversely, attributions to external factors place the cause outside the person or organization (Coombs, 2007). These distinctions are vital, as past studies show that who or what is held accountable shapes people’s feelings and behaviors toward the crisis (Coombs, 2004). Perceptions of accountability can affect the relationship between the public and the organization responsible, potentially diminishing the organization’s trustworthiness or legitimacy (Becker et al., 2015).

Typically, crisis information includes “warnings, risk messages, evacuation notifications, messages regarding self-efficacy, information regarding symptoms and medical treatment, among many other” facts about the situation (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p. 44). Sutton et al. (2008) add that expressing empathy during a crisis is another vital add-on to crisis management as it shows recognition and concern for those suffering. This empathetic approach can strengthen the affinity between the public and the organization, helping deliver crisis information better (Liu et al., 2016; Seeger, 2006).

E-government and ICTs have shepherded in a new era of crisis communication (Ginige et al., 2014). Research confirms that social media platforms are vital for the distribution of information during

disasters (Jurgens & Helsloot, 2018) and has become a digital community of informal networks where crisis information is provided in unfiltered ways (Albris, 2018). The public often views social media as a credible source of crisis information, too, sometimes even more so than traditional media (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Zickuhr, 2010). Information is seen to be more readily available on social media, with examples like Twitter proving effective in sharing information quickly with citizens (Briones et al., 2011). The unpredictability of disasters drives social media users to actively search for and share information to achieve some sense of certainty (Muntinga et al., 2011).

During crises, whether natural disasters, pandemics, political events, or any other significant developments, users post updates as they happen. People on the ground or with direct experience of a crisis can share their perspectives and information, allowing others to engage and share what they have observed. Dubbed as ‘first reporters’ or ‘citizen journalists’, everyday people with smartphones and social media platforms share real-time updates and aid emergency managers in situational awareness (Knox, 2023). However, using social media by ‘first reporters’ is not just about information sharing; it is also a platform for emotional support and collective efficacy. Users often share their personal experiences, offer advice, and seek assistance from others. This solidarity during crises can provide a sense of connection in challenging times (Albris, 2018). This intersects nicely with the expansion of digital volunteers. These are individuals who, using their online skills and tools, contribute to disaster response and recovery efforts. They operate remotely, often from different geographic locations, and collaborate virtually to provide support (Mihunov et al., 2023; Ruohonen & Backholm, 2023).

It should be stressed that social media was not originally designed for emergency response but has gone through a reinvention. This refers to the diffusion of innovations literature and occurs when users modify the use of a tool (Rogers, 2003). For example, Lachlan et al. (2014) collected more than 27,000 tweets pertaining to Hurricane Sandy within a four-day period and 18 collection periods. In their analysis, they found that Twitter users frequently expressed awareness of risks and concerns related to

Hurricane Sandy. The tweets often included information about preparations, warnings, and real-time updates on the storm's impact. Users were reinventing their purpose with social media; meanwhile, only a small number of these tweets came from actual governmental agencies. This demonstrates a disparity between why and how the public uses social media compared to public administrators. Government officials can feel overwhelmed by the volume of social media engagement. One local emergency manager in Florida stated that it felt like "drinking water out of a fire hydrant" (Knox, 2023, p. 255). The sheer volume of information, questions, and rumors requires constant oversight before, during, and after an emergency. The same happens with massive fundraising efforts post-emergency as well.

Shortly following the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, millions of dollars were raised online around the world to support victims and survivors. Most of this fundraising was done online via social media platforms, which also opened the door for fraudulent acts of fundraising (Mirbabaie & Marx, 2020; Schmall, 2023). However, public audiences increasingly expect administrators to initiate external crisis communication rapidly and to continue the conversation via social media throughout the crisis in two-way communication patterns (Cheng, 2016). Digital platforms have been known to help individuals and organizations reach those in need of support and connect survivors with a broader range of social support resources (Reuter et al., 2018). This is achieved through the expansion of one's network beyond physical lines and the ability to use social media to overcome governmental capacity challenges (Ellison et al., 2011). For instance, during Hurricane Harvey in 2017 the 9-1-1 emergency systems became overwhelmed, and callers in crisis could not get through. As a result, residents turned to social media to request help, share their location, post on-the-ground content, and connect others to potential resources (Mihunov et al., 2020). Additionally, online fundraising for disaster recovery has become a common practice (Mirbabaie & Marx, 2020).

There is a great deal of research focused on COVID-19 where social media is used as a primary dataset. One study used WhatsApp and Telegram to understand attitudes towards COVID-19 among

everyday Iranians and was able to gauge trust in government systems via the study results (Ghaderi et al., 2022). Melchior and Oliveira (2024) did something similar, but instead of studying users' expressions on social media, they sought to discover which social media platform was most frequently used to find crisis information about COVID-19 in the State of Rio Grande within the nation of Brazil. Their study concluded that among educated women aged 25 – 34, Facebook was the most common platform used (Melchior & Oliveira, 2024). Raman and Chidambaranathan (2022) used social media to see which social media platforms were more commonly used to share self-reported experiences with COVID-19. Based on their research, the pair concluded that Instagram and YouTube were the most common platforms utilized, and those who turned to these platforms discussed their physical symptoms and spoke about their stress levels as well (Raman & Chidambaranathan, 2022). Vraga and Bode (2021) also used social media as a dataset to better understand misinformation shared online during COVID-19 and how public officials can respond to misinformation proactively. They note that this has become an urgent issue and tested the use of corrective infographics disseminated via the World Health Organization to combat misinformation (Vraga & Bode, 2021). Jafar et al. (2023) added to this conversation by referring to the use of social media during a public health crisis as a “double-edged sword” (p. 109) but offered in their research recommendations for social media guidance that can help mitigate the spread of misinformation.

Researchers have outlined several best practices for private and public sector practitioners to consider when implementing crisis communication via social media. A key recommendation is fully integrating social media into strategic planning and policy formulation. As Seeger (2006) emphasizes, “Crisis and risk communication is the most effective when it is part of an ongoing and integrated process” (p. 237). Additionally, agencies should consider adapting their use of social media to fit their governing needs (Lin et al., 2016). Multiple levels of government have taken these steps already. For

example, FEMA and the Red Cross have developed social media usage policies tailored to a diversity of crises and provide relevant training to support emergency response missions (Veil et al., 2011).

Scholars regard source credibility as a fundamental variable for accepting and interpreting information that reinforces the legitimacy of the public entity managing the crisis (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Spence et al., 2013). Conversely, information without credibility can hinder crisis communication efforts (Glik, 2007; Sundar, 2008). Administrators are also encouraged to use relevant and trending hashtags. This not only helps ensure that online crisis communications reach those who need them but also demonstrates an understanding of the immediate needs of the online public audience (Lin et al., 2016).

The use of social media presents both opportunities and challenges for public administrators. Social media allows for real-time interaction with a vast and diverse range of stakeholders, which is a significant advantage (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). However, the rise of user-generated content within informal networks introduces new risks and potential for crises and misinformation (Coombs, 2014). Coombs (2008) highlighted that social media use can change dramatically during organizational crises, with issues emerging online often being more unpredictable and spreading faster than offline issues. However, this rapid dissemination also enables more immediate responses to crises, allowing communication efforts to reach a broader audience quickly. Coombs and Holladay (2012) recommend that organizations use social media to scan for emerging crisis concerns and monitor potential crisis development. They emphasize the importance of being proactive rather than reactive, noting that some issues identified on social media can escalate into significant crisis threats (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

## **2.4 Reddit as a Source of Research Data**

Often hailed as the ‘front page of the Internet,’ Reddit is a social media platform connecting users without cost. Created in 2005, Reddit has 267.5 million weekly active users within its 100,000

active subreddit communities (Dean, 2024). Valued at over \$10 billion, Reddit has become one of the most visited websites in the U.S. (Dean, 2024; Semrush, 2024). The most common language used on Reddit is English, with one researcher using a sample size of one million Reddit comments and concluding that approximately 3% of Reddit comments are not in English (Hoffa, 2021).

Reddit's large communities, moderated by users, cater to diverse interests. *Subreddit* is a term used on Reddit to refer to a forum focused on a specific topic; these are created and managed by users themselves (Jacques et al., 2023). Account holders can subscribe to specific 'subreddits,' creating personalized home screens filled with subscribed content they can engage with. Thousands of these subreddits cover an extensive array of topics, and many turn to Reddit as an informal network of support (Jacques et al., 2023). Within each subreddit, users engage by posting and commenting with thoughts, links, media, or queries, abiding by the subreddit's rules. Posts and comments can be 'upvoted' or 'downvoted,' collectively contributing to the user's 'karma' score. A higher karma score propels content (posts and comments) to Reddit's front page, garnering increased visibility and engagement (Massanari, 2015).

Reddit's significance lies in its vast user base and unique community-driven discussions. Unlike traditional news websites with comment sections, where stories are posted and readers respond, Reddit posts are initiated by the community. In contrast to platforms like Twitter or Facebook, Reddit enables organic networks to form around shared interests, including localized topics. Reddit also allows users to maintain anonymity; in fact, a profile of a Reddit user will typically only include their username, the date their account was created, and an avatar of their choice. Compared to digital spaces like Facebook or NextDoor, Reddit provides a more extensive and accessible public forum, fostering participation from a larger audience (Lê et al., 2020).

As noted earlier, most research analyzing social media and crisis communication tends to gravitate toward Twitter as a dataset (e.g., Bukar et al., 2020; Mihunov et al., 2020; Valle-Cruz et al., 2021). Twitter is characterized by its real-time nature, allowing researchers to capture and analyze information as it unfolds during a crisis. Twitter also has an extensive user base, including individuals, organizations, and government agencies. This diversity provides a rich source of data that reflects various perspectives, opinions, and actions during a crisis, offering a more comprehensive view of informal networks. Much of Twitter content is also public and easily accessible, enabling researchers to analyze and observe interactions within informal networks without significant privacy concerns. This openness is advantageous for studying the patterns of information sharing (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). Reddit is similar in that real-time questions and responses are shared, and the data is publicly available. One noteworthy contrast is Reddit's ability to create forums and emphasize more in-depth conversations. Reddit has no character limit, so users can share more rather than face limitations. Starting in 2022 with the takeover by Elon Musk, Twitter has been transitioning and re-branding. Now called "X," the platform is not as user-friendly as it once was, with new restrictions for data collection (Thomas & Corse, 2022). At this point, not only does Reddit offer valuable perspectives on this topic, but there was a more straightforward path to collect data via Reddit than it was for Twitter.

Reddit has evolved to become a source of crisis information for researchers. Jacques et al. (2023) used Reddit posts to analyze the impact of COVID-19's pandemic restrictions on U.S. abortion seekers. They compiled and coded 528 anonymous posts on an abortion subreddit within a month and applied inductive qualitative analytic techniques to identify themes. Attitudes about the COVID-19 vaccine were also explored on Reddit via researchers surveying 1,037 Reddit community members (Sun et al., 2022). Another group of researchers used Reddit data to examine dialogues on loneliness during the COVID-19 outbreak, leading to a conclusion that social media could be used as a tool to monitor community mental health (Bak et al., 2023). Another study example mentioned in the literature review collected

510,579 tweets and 45,770 Reddit posts, and through U&G, the two arenas and the motivations for their use were studied (Ruan et al., 2022). Yan and Liu (2022) pulled data from subreddits affiliated with eight universities to compare people's emotional status pre- and post-COVID-19. Because these subreddits existed before and after the beginning of COVID-19, researchers could look back in time and compare the two datasets. Another study focused on parenting concerns regarding the screentime of youth during COVID-19, by conducting a qualitative analysis of two separate subreddits frequently used by mothers (Blake et al., 2024). Although Twitter has dominated the research field regarding crisis communication, Reddit is beginning to grow as a vital information and analysis source.

## **2.5 Network Governance and Crisis Response**

Network governance plays a notable role in crisis response and management. First, network governance promotes collaborative decision-making by bringing together diverse stakeholders from different sectors (Kapucu & Hu, 2020). These stakeholders must collaborate during a crisis to make collective decisions, share resources, and coordinate their actions. Network governance facilitates the collaboration and consensus-building necessary to address complex and rapidly changing crises (Moynihan, 2009). For example, the Incident Command System (ICS) represents a standardized paradigm governing the command, control, and coordination of emergency response, establishing a transient yet shared hierarchical structure conducive to the efficacy of responders from diverse agencies. Ubiquitously employed across varied crises, ICS is a mechanism to foster a synchronized and efficient response within the intricate networks of responding entities. The complexities inherent in coordinating disparate members, the dynamics of authority allocation and contestation among these members, and the pivotal role of trust within the many networks are all considered in the administration of ICS (Moynihan, 2009).

The uncertain and evolving nature of crises also creates the need for adaptive and flexible response strategies, which network governance supports (Kapucu & Hu, 2020; Yordanova, 2022).



Information sharing is also a key component; in a crisis, timely and accurate information is vital for effective response and mitigation. Networks provide platforms for sharing real-time information, best practices, and lessons learned. They enable stakeholders to coordinate their efforts, avoid duplication, and align resources to address immediate needs and challenges. This is critical, especially since different stakeholders may possess unique resources, expertise, and capabilities. Network governance enables identifying and mobilizing these resources, ensuring efficient and targeted deployment in response to the crisis (Huizenga et al., 2023).

Understanding network governance can also promote resilience for public organizations by building relationships, trust, and shared understanding among stakeholders *before* a crisis occurs. Pre-existing networks and collaborative arrangements allow for more efficient response and recovery efforts. Network participants develop relationships, knowledge, and capabilities through regular interaction and collaboration, enhancing their collective capacity to respond to and recover from crises (Hu et al., 2014; Turnbull & Pirson, 2012). One example of this occurred following Hurricane Maria's impact in 2017. Following the aftermath of this natural disaster, a Multiagency Resource Center (MARC) was started at the Orlando International Airport in partnership with government agencies, nonprofit partners, and faith-based groups to support the influx of Puerto Ricans seeking refuge in Central Florida (Kapucu & Hu, 2020). Corbin (2022) conducted interviews with those who worked at the MARC center and was able to ascertain areas of success and improvement when it came to supporting individuals displaced by Hurricane Maria. Several years later, when another hurricane was set to impact Puerto Rico again, the same individuals and agencies who made up the original MARC began to meet proactively to prepare for the crisis versus respond after the fact (Corbin, 2022).

Administrators are encouraged to keep track of social media engagement within formal and informal networks, generate community crisis maps online, and help build community resilience and digital spaces where citizens support one another (Goolsby, 2010). If the public administrator creates

the online space(s) for community information sharing, it can also help identify paracrisis. As stated, Coombs and Holladay (2012) recommend scanning conversations online via informal networks to support an organization be proactive in preventing a crisis from happening in the first place and can prepare organizations for future crises. This active participation in online conversations can help administrators better understand and respond to stakeholder concerns (Lachlan et al., 2014).

During a crisis, accountability becomes even more critical to ensure effective coordination and to avoid potential issues like corruption, mismanagement, or resource diversion. By leveraging the principles of network governance, crisis response efforts can benefit from enhanced coordination, information sharing, resource mobilization, adaptive decision-making, and resilience between networks. Network-based approaches allow for a more inclusive, collaborative, and effective response to crises, leading to better outcomes and a more coordinated process (Huizenga et al., 2023).

## **2.6 Theoretical Approaches to Crisis Communications**

There are several leading theoretical concepts within the field of crisis communication, with most focusing on the organization responding to a crisis. Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is one such example and focuses on how organizations and authorities communicate during crises. SCCT underscores the importance of timely, consistent, and empathetic communication to manage and mitigate the impact of crises. Developed by Coombs and Holladay in the early 1990s, this theory posits that an organization's reaction to a crisis, primarily through its communication efforts, can significantly influence the public's view of the organization itself and the crisis as a whole (Coombs, 2007). SCCT categorizes crises into different types: victim, accidental, preventable, and intentional. Understanding the organization's past reputation and history with similar crises is essential (Coombs, 2007). SCCT is a heavily used crisis communication theory, but it focuses mainly on the sender of information, meaning that the receivers' perception of the sender's message is often overlooked. It has also been used primarily to study corporations and their crisis management versus public actors. In other words, a

limitation of this theory is that it focuses more on the private organization navigating the crisis with less attention given to the public (Bukar et al., 2020).

Image Repair Theory (IRT) is another crisis communication theory focusing on the sender of information navigating the crisis (Benoit, 1997, 2012). IRT outlines five comprehensive categories of strategies for responding to a crisis:

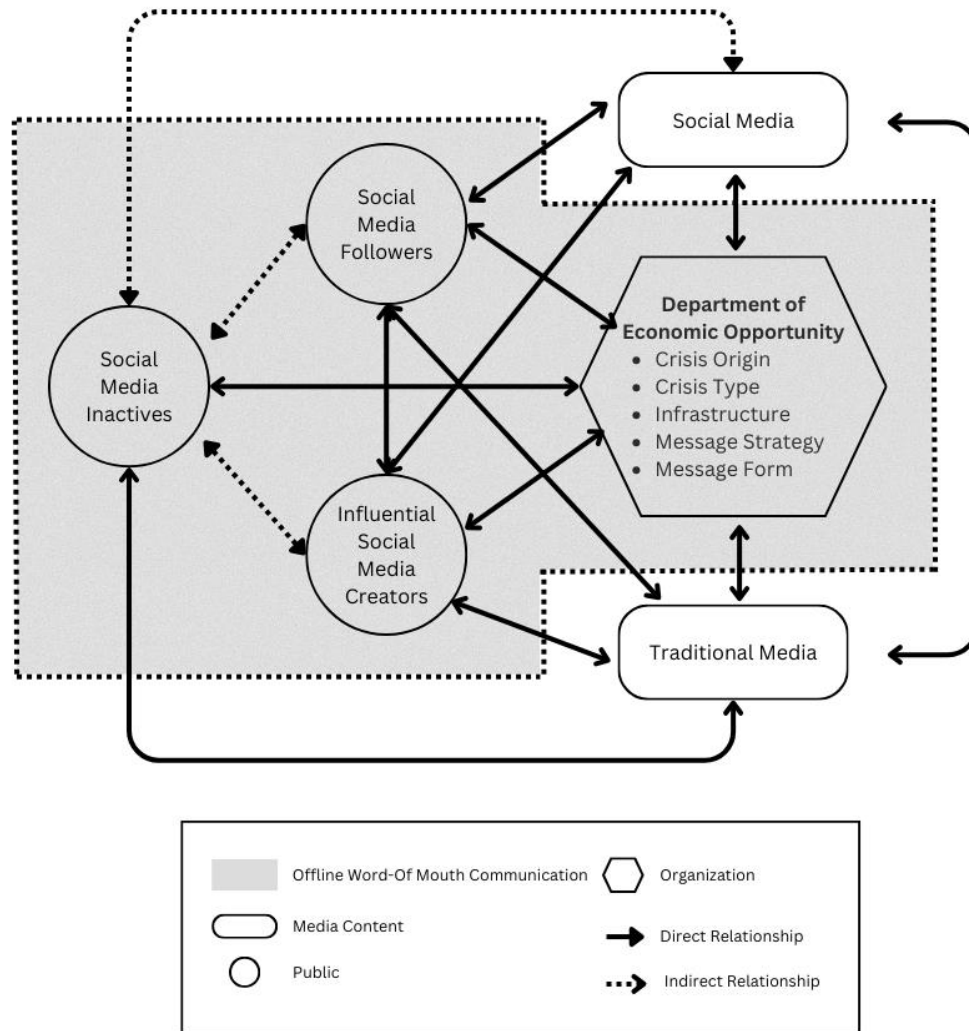
Denial: Dispute the accusation, deny its occurrence, and shift blame; (2) Evasion of responsibility: Present the act as a reasonable response to provocation, claim a lack of control over the situation, position the act as an accident, and assert that it was done with good intentions; (3) Reduce offensiveness: Leverage the strength of the reputation to seek goodwill, minimize negative sentiments toward the act, distinguish the act from more offensive actions, portray the act in a more favorable light, challenge accusers, and offer compensation to victims; (4) Corrective action: Address and rectify the problem; and (5) Mortification: Acknowledge and express remorse, seeking forgiveness (Benoit, 2006, pp. 292–293).

As described below, the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC) offers a framework for understanding how organizations in crisis interact with three categories of publics:

(1) *influential social media creators*, who create crisis information for others to consume; (2) *social media followers* who consume the influential social media creators' crisis information; and (3) *social media inactives*, who may consume influential social media creators' crisis information indirectly through word-of-mouth communication with social media followers and/or traditional media who follow influential social media creators and/or social media followers (Austin et al., 2012, p. 192).

The identity of influentials can vary per crisis, and it is not always public agencies disseminating disaster information (Cheng & Cameron, 2017). Research by Zhao et al. (2018) using data from four crises identified social media influentials based on four factors: “their output (e.g., number of tweets), reactive outtake (e.g., number of retweets), proactive outtake (e.g., number of replies), and network positioning (e.g., degree centrality)” (p.552). This finding underscores the issue of credibility, as anyone can claim to be influential online, even with a fabricated persona. The SMCC model highlights how crisis information flows directly between traditional and social media, illustrating the intertwined nature of these communication channels (Austin et al., 2012).

### Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) Model

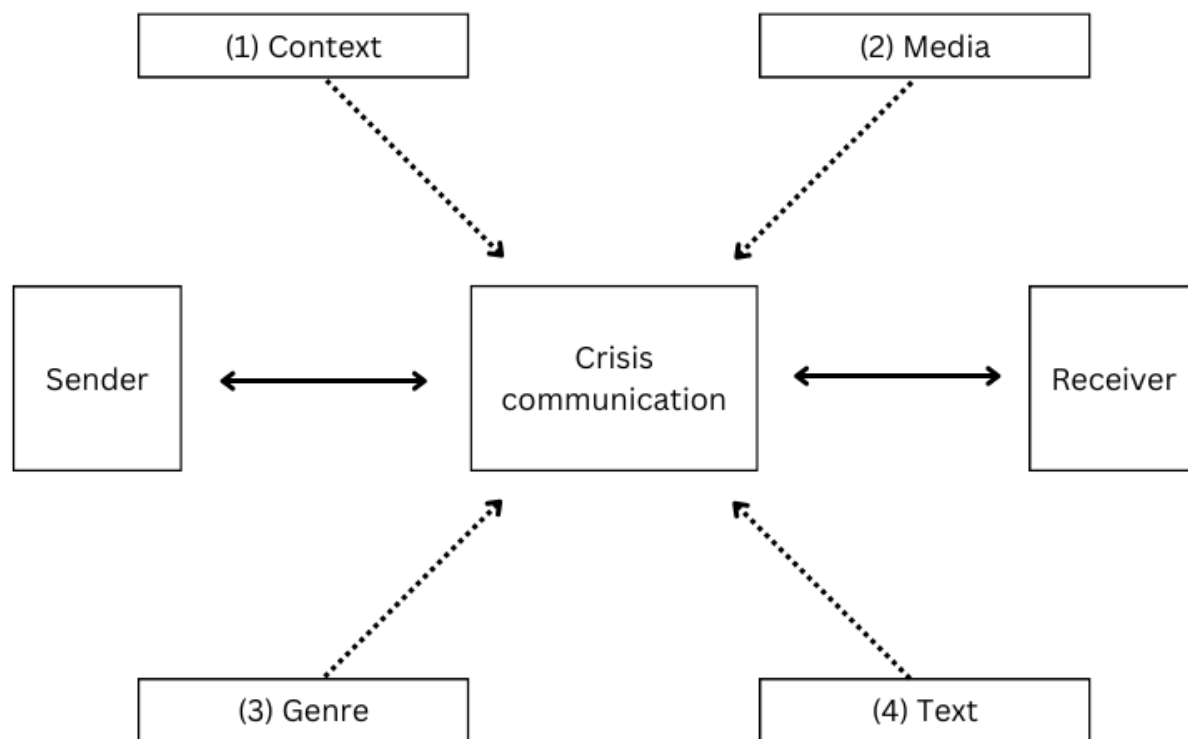


**Figure 3:** Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) Model (Zhao et al., 2019).

Another approach that centers on users of crisis information is Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT). This theory posits that a multivocal rhetorical arena emerges during a crisis, characterized by diverse voices engaging with, responding to, or contesting each other. “The aim of RAT is to study the communicative complexity that characterizes organizational crises, even the smallest of them, and to identify, describe, and explain patterns within the multiple communication processes taking place inside the arena” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 142). An arena can refer to any space (physical or virtual)

where information is exchanged. A voice means “that there are many senders and receivers in the arena communicating to, with, around, or against each other” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 143). RAT also recognizes that arenas come and go; some may close while others open – it embraces the spontaneity of communication spaces during a crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Originally developed for organizational crisis communication, RAT provides a flexible conceptual framework that can be applied to a wide range of contexts (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

RAT presents two essential perspectives: macro and micro. The macro perspective addresses the overarching arena, encompassing intricate communication activities that occur across multiple channels and involve a diverse array of information producers. The micro perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the specific parameters that define communication processes within the arena, such as “context, media, genre, and text” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 150).



**Figure 4:** Rhetorical Arena Theory (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

Context pertains to the broader circumstances or environments in which communication takes place. Media, as a fundamental component, shapes the communicative landscape in this theory. Different media channels represent distinct sub-arenas, each with its characteristics, user groups, and modes of interaction. Genre refers to the specific type or category of communication characterized by certain conventions, styles, and formats. Different communication genres, whether formal press releases or informal social media posts, contribute to the overall discourse and influence how information is perceived. Moreover, texts are the building blocks of communication within the arena. This includes statements, articles, images, videos, or any content contributing to the ongoing crisis conversation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

“The rhetorical arena of crisis is composed of multiple and reasonably distinct communication spaces that expose the public to various pieces of information, narratives and interpretations of the crisis (Rodin et al., 2019, p. 238). These spaces are referred to as rhetorical sub-arenas (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). One way to distinguish sub-arenas is by communication channel, with each media channel creating boundaries and functioning as a sub-arena. Understanding these sub-arenas is crucial because different communication channels may attract distinct user groups that then enable various communicative behaviors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Hutchby, 2001). For example, traditional news media offer wide-ranging coverage of a crisis but commonly involve unidirectional communication. In contrast, platforms like Facebook support two-way or multi-way communication, allowing the public to discover, create, and engage with the content (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016).

As previously mentioned, audiences turn to social media during crises because it offers an unfiltered, real-time communication channel (Procopio & Procopio, 2007) and provides information that is not always available through traditional outlets (Bucher, 2002; Sutton et al., 2008). Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), which focuses on the audience, posits that individuals select media avenues to fulfill a specific need or desire (Chen, 2011; Katz et al., 1973; Salubi & Muchaonyerwa, 2018).

Specifically, U&G argues that media consumption behaviors are “goal-directed and focus on what purposes or functions the media serve for a body of active receivers” (Fisher, 1978, p. 1590). The four main gratifications this model defines are information seeking, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Ruggiero, 2000). When the U&G was initially developed in the 1940s, it aimed to understand why audiences engaged with different types of media. For example, Katz et al. (1974) found that individuals used media to seek knowledge and guidance to aid in their daily living and to provide reassurance about the importance of identity and purpose within society.

More recent research indicates that people will resort to social media platforms during periods of anxiety and distress (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016). Participating in activities such as seeking and sharing information online can lead to obtaining both informational and emotional support from that online network (Zhang, 2017). This, in turn, has the potential to alleviate feelings of depression and anxiety, contributing to improved emotional well-being (Wills & Isasi, 2007). During disasters, social media communications typically help to serve four primary motivations: information sharing, support exchange, emotional coping, and opinion expression (Ko et al., 2013; Ogie et al., 2022; Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018; Reuter et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2019, pp. 389–390). Like SCCM, U&G challenges the notion of a passive audience and emphasizes that media users are active decision-makers. Because this theory originated in an era dominated by traditional media (i.e., television, radio, newspapers), some argue that U&G may need adaptation to adequately address the motivations behind using new and emerging media platforms (Ruggiero, 2000; Swanson, 1977).

## **2.7 Conceptual Framework for the Study**

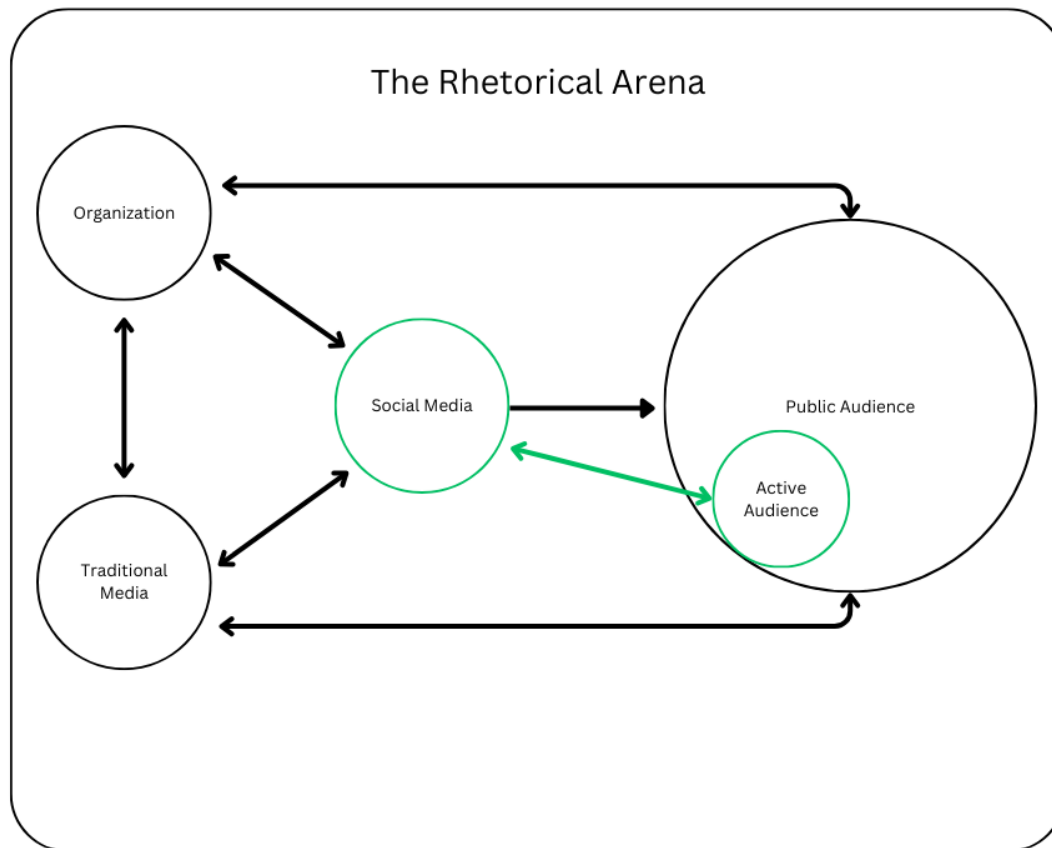
This study explores the discussions within an informal social media network that emerged during a critical period of the Florida unemployment crisis, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the focus on receivers of crisis communication and the intersections between network



governance, social media, and crisis communication, this study will use RAT as a framework, with U&G as the foundation for the study's codebook. RAT recognizes social media as a tool for information dissemination and a dynamic environment where public discourse, opinions, and reactions are shaped, shifted, and amplified (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). The model's emphasis on the multidirectional nature of communication is particularly relevant, as it acknowledges that crisis communication in the modern age is not a one-way street but a varied exchange between multiple actors with varying goals. Frandsen and Johansen (2017) stress that incorporating the perspectives of customers, employees, investors, news media, and others is essential for a thorough and accurate understanding of a crisis.

As shown in Figure 5, the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO, now called the Department of Commerce) is a formal organization with direct relationships established between multiple actors. Most of these relationships are bidirectional, as DEO regularly updates traditional media by sharing press releases directly with media and posting them on their website and social media platforms. However, an active audience has formed within the public audience; these are content creators and information seekers engaging at higher levels than their peers within this crisis, creating informal networks via social media. The interactions of those characters specific to this study and what

will be analyzed for this study within the rhetorical arena are highlighted in green below.



**Figure 5:** Simplified Macro Rhetorical Arena Theory Framework (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

This is a macro-level perspective on the communication arena formed during Florida's unemployment crisis. Though RAT offers a solid framework to analyze the relationship between networks, U&G will serve as the foundation for the codebook for analyzing content in the online informal network. This additional theory was selected based on the literature; U&G helps researchers better understand the motivation of receivers who engage with different media platforms during a crisis. The following chapter will provide an analytical framework and research design for more guidance.

## 2.8 Summary

In navigating the complex landscape of e-government, network governance, and crisis communication, this literature review has thoroughly explored the research that shapes organizational

and digital information dissemination during crises. By synthesizing diverse perspectives, it became evident that while the existing body of literature offers invaluable insights, discernible gaps demand further exploration.

One notable absence in the literature pertains to users' intentions and experiences seeking guidance and support via social media platforms. Understanding the motivations of user engagement and the impact of the information disseminated can help address a research gap. Additionally, a need for more studies to scrutinize specific levels of government engaging with social safety needs online, particularly within the context of an economic crisis, is evident. As social media usages surge and shift dramatically during organizational crises, comprehending the varying levels of engagement becomes imperative for public administrators, who must navigate online information's unpredictable, sometimes incorrect, yet potentially viral nature. Also, Twitter and Facebook are familiar sources of online data for crisis informatics research, but Reddit thus far is sparse. This study will help demonstrate how valuable Reddit is as a dataset for researchers and practitioners.

Furthermore, within the expansive realm of crisis communication literature, the intersections of crisis management, government operations, and informal networks on social media still form a crystallizing area of study. While the foundational principles of crisis communications from an organizational perspective have been extensively explored, case studies and in-depth analyses focusing on the intricate interplay of crisis management, governmental response, and the influence of informal networks on social media are notably scarce. This void represents a significant gap that calls for attention and targeted research efforts to decipher the evolving landscape of crisis communication in the digital age.

In embarking on this exploratory investigation, I acknowledge these identified gaps, viewing them not as impediments but as invitations for deeper exploration. Through the lens of Rhetorical Arena

Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory, this qualitative study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and actively address research gaps, offering new insights into the complexities of crisis communication within online informal networks on social media. This study will provide a foundation for future scholarship and practical applications in crisis communication strategies and public administration.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Employing qualitative content analysis and applying Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) and Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G), this study will explore crisis communication within an online informal network during a pivotal period in the Florida unemployment crisis, aligning with the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reddit, an informal social media network, will serve as a source for the informal network dataset. Below is a justification for the methods selected and a review of other research design elements.

### **3.1 Rationale for Using Qualitative Content Analysis**

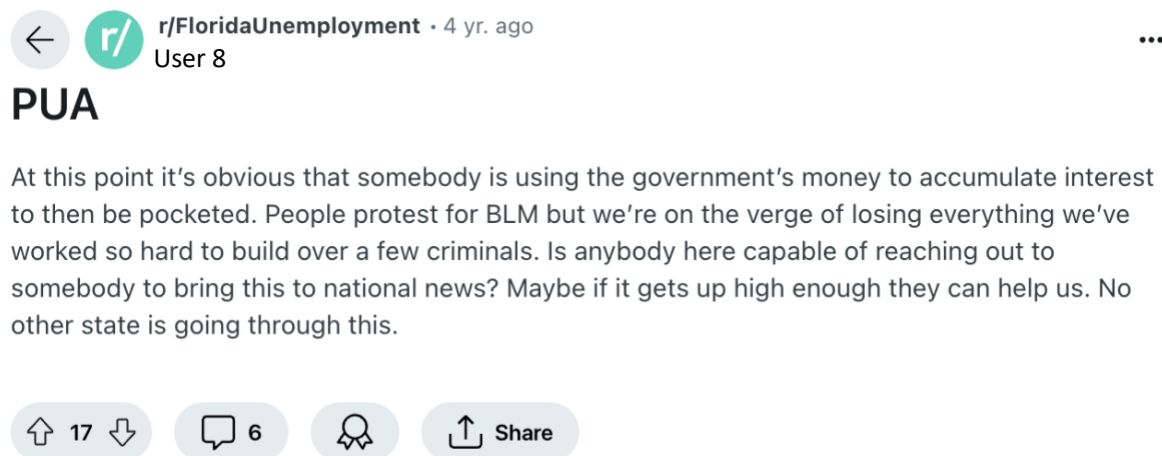
Qualitative research serves as a methodological approach to comprehending subjective facets of the social domain, encompassing individuals' opinions, attitudes, motivations, and rationales for their actions and experiences. Predominantly employed in exploratory research, qualitative research proves valuable for illuminating topics or concerns, revealing trends and patterns, and testing theories (Mayring, 2022). Content analysis within qualitative research is recognized by researchers as a reliable and valid methodology for the examination of textual data (Cavanagh, 1997; Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005). The selection of a particular content analysis approach by a researcher is contingent upon both the theoretical and substantive concerns of the investigation and the specific nature of the problem under scrutiny (Mayring, 2022; Rosengren, 1981; Weber, 1990).

This study focuses on crisis communication in a complex environment involving an informal online social media network called Reddit. Qualitative content analysis will allow nuanced exploration of this network's rich and multifaceted content. Since qualitative content analysis allows for a theory-driven exploration, this study has a structured approach to uncover network communications patterns that align with the selected theories. It will also allow for the extraction of unique insights and practical implications for improving crisis communication strategies during future crises. Finally, the exploratory

nature of the study necessitates flexibility in the analysis. Qualitative content analysis allows for the emergence of themes and patterns not predefined, enhancing the study's ability to capture unexpected themes (Choi, 2012; Weber, 1990).

### 3.2 Dataset

The r/FloridaUnemployment subreddit served as this research's primary informal network data source. There are several reasons behind this choice. To begin with, r/FloridaUnemployment is a subreddit created explicitly during the COVID-19 pandemic to address issues related to Florida's unemployment and reemployment assistance program. It was established on April 30, 2020, in response to COVID-19, and is described by moderators as “A place for users of Florida's unemployment assistance program to share information and tips about how to use and proceed through the arcane and confusing Florida assistance system” (Reddit, 2020, para. 1). This subreddit quickly grew and today, with nearly 5,000 members, r/FloridaUnemployment stands out as one of the larger and more active subreddits, with Reddit ranking the subreddit as being in the top ten percent by size. This high level of community engagement ensures a substantial volume of content and interactions, providing a rich dataset for analysis.



**Figure 6:** A sample of a subreddit post from r/FloridaUnemployment.

This subreddit also serves as an online network for users to share their experiences navigating Florida's unemployment assistance system. This user-generated content is invaluable for gaining a deeper insight into potential challenges users faced with Florida's unemployment system. By focusing on this subreddit, we can gain a deeper understanding of how a localized crisis narrative can have broader implications, too. This subreddit's specific focus and usage make it an ideal source for capturing discussions and experiences directly relevant to the research questions. Due to no identifying information being collected or included in this dataset, this study was approved as IRB-exempt<sup>1</sup>.

### **3.3. Data Collection**

For this study, the subreddit data was collected with PRAW (Python Reddit API Wrapper), an automated application that uses Python to obtain Reddit post text (Bhandari & Sun, 2023). The Reddit API is open to the public, enabling researchers to gather language data directly from the site. As noted earlier, Reddit does not gather comprehensive user demographic data. Ergo, I could only describe the sample's characteristics within what is shared in their posts. Reddit posts were collected chronologically from April 20, 2020, up to the data collection on September 3, 2023, resulting in 1,966 posts. Because this research is focused on the early stages of COVID-19 in Florida, posts from April 20, 2020, to December 31, 2020, were used, resulting in 215 posts. Based on prior research on Reddit, comments under the main posts were not collected (Altshuler et al., 2015; Arya et al., 2022; Manchaiah et al., 2021). This sampling decision ensured a research focus on the leading content creators within the informal network. All 215 posts were related to the unemployment system; thus, none were removed.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Once the data was collected from the subreddit via PRAW, it was organized into an Excel sheet. Before data collection, account usernames were proactively given an individual number. All identifying

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A.

information inadvertently collected was meticulously removed from the dataset and securely stored digitally per IRB requirements. This dataset was converted from an Excel sheet into a Word document to mimic the format of interview transcripts. It was then imported into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package (QSR International, 2019). A codebook based on Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) was also imported into NVivo and used to interpret the dataset. This initial codebook was derived “deductively from theory and prior research” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4) and from the research questions and objectives in this study (Roberts et al., 2019). The initial codebook can be seen in Table 2. The refinement and specificity of codebooks significantly strengthen a research study's reliability, which is why the codebook below includes both parent and child codes (Roberts et al., 2019).

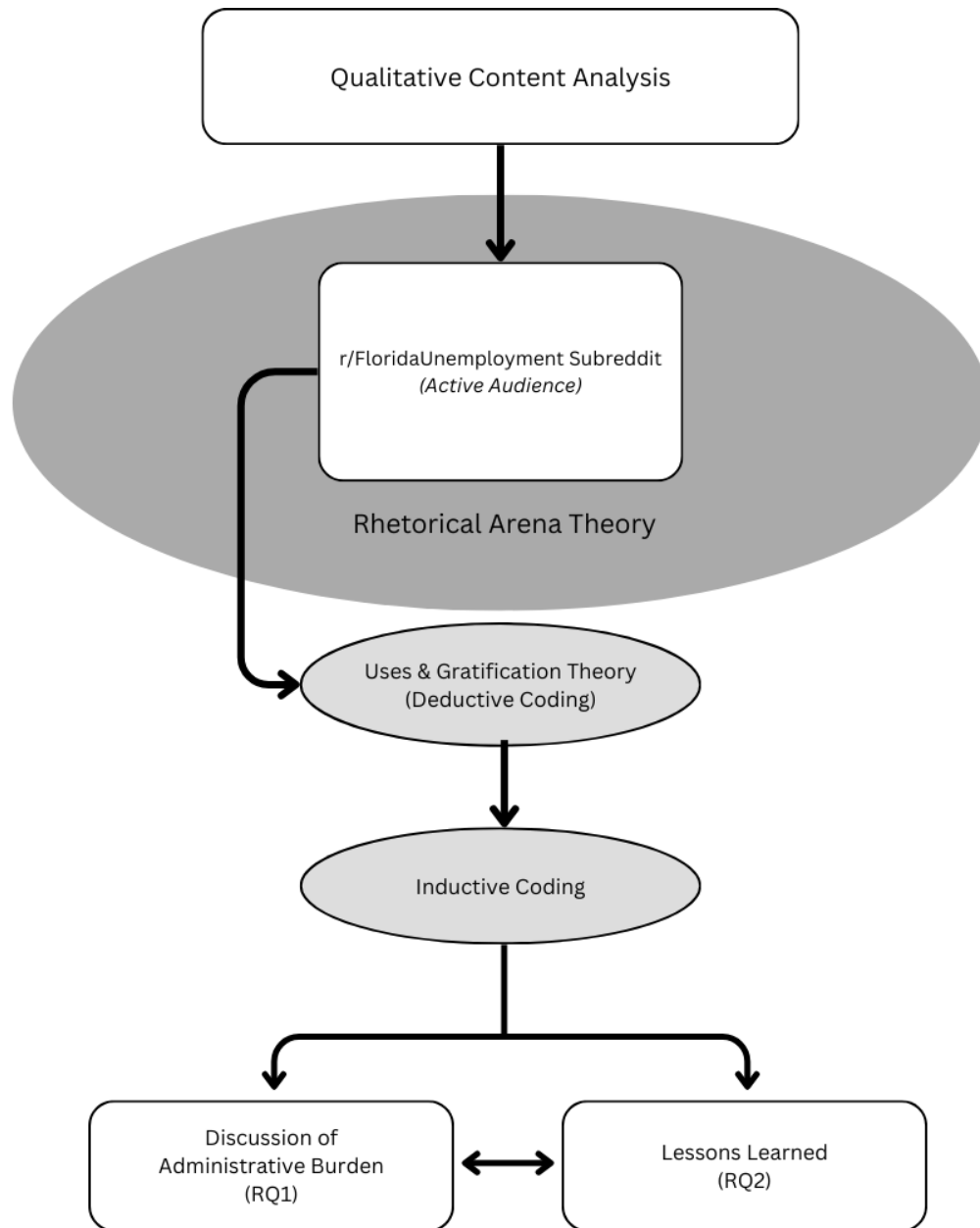


**Table 2:** Initial codebook for data analysis of informal network based upon Uses and Gratification Theory (Zhao et al., 2019).

Parent code	Definition	Child code	Definition
<b>Information sharing</b>	Posts reflect sharing information regarding the Florida unemployment system	Application process	Posts related to the application procedures and/or delays for unemployment benefits
		Website issues	Posts related to challenges or success with unemployment website
		Resources	Posts sharing external resources or links relevant to unemployment benefits
		Data and statistics	Posts sharing statistical information about unemployment rates
		Legal information	Posts about rights, responsibilities, and legal recourse for individuals facing challenges
<b>Support exchange</b>	Posts reflect seeking guidance on Florida's unemployment system	User experiences	Personal stories and experiences related to the unemployment system in Florida
		Problem resolution	Posts about resolving issues and challenges encountered during the unemployment process
		Sharing contacts	Posts providing contact information of people and/or organizations that can help
		Networking for opportunities	Posts discussing networking opportunities, job leads, or potential employment options
<b>Emotional coping</b>	Posts reflect emotions and feelings about the crisis, its personal impact, and tactics to manage	Community support	Posts providing emotional support and encouragement to those navigating the unemployment system
		Personal coping strategies	Shared stories of resilience and coping strategies during this crisis
		Emotional toll	Posts about the emotional toll of unemployment and ways to manage stress
<b>Opinion expression</b>	Posts reflect an opinion (negative, positive, or neutral) about the unemployment system, state agencies, public administrators, or policies	Policy critique	Posts opinions and critiques related to the state's unemployment policies
		Government response	Posts opinions regarding the government's response to the unemployment crisis
		Bureaucratic challenges	Expressions of frustration or satisfaction with bureaucratic processes
		Economic impact commentary	Opinions on the economic impact of unemployment on individuals and communities

From here, I began to read and re-read the data, using a deductive and inductive approach to analyze the content. This enabled me to use a pre-established codebook with a theoretical foundation and to generate new codes based on what emerges from the datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The constant comparison method was used, ensuring emerging categories are identified while refining existing codes (Fram, 2013; Tesch, 1990). The identified elements in each dataset were examined thoroughly and compared. Cross-referencing specific data points or examples within coding categories helped to uncover similarities between subreddit posts. The coding process continued until data saturation was reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Additionally, an assessment of the frequency and salience of themes within the data was also conducted, as was the alignment of topics in their meaning and expression (Weber, 1990). Exemplar posts and statements were marked to illustrate specific observations, and all the original text's wording, punctuation, grammar, and syntax were preserved. This original codebook evolved through data analysis to include new and more refined child codes and five new parent codes. Figure 6 below provides an analytical framework for the research design, and Table 3 showcases the final codebook. The prevalence of a code was measured in two ways via NVivo. First, by the number of times a code is referenced, and second, by the percentage of text the coded words comprise.



**Figure 7:** Analytical framework of research design.

**Table 3:** Final codebook following the deductive and inductive data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Zhao et al., 2019).

Parent code	Definition	Child code	Definition
<b>Information sharing</b>	Posts reflect sharing information and experiences regarding the Florida unemployment system	Application process	Posts related to the application procedures and user experiences with the unemployment experience
		Website issues	Posts related to challenges or success with unemployment website
		News stories	Posts sharing news articles and headlines relevant to unemployment benefits
		Data and statistics	Posts sharing statistical information about unemployment rates
		Legal information	Posts about policies, rights, responsibilities, and legal recourse for individuals facing challenges
		Delays Faced	Posts illustrating delays faced with unemployment system
<b>Support exchange</b>	Posts reflect seeking and sharing guidance on Florida's unemployment system	Seeking insight	Posts asking questions on issues related to the unemployment system in Florida
		Problem resolution	Posts about resolving issues and challenges encountered during the unemployment process
		Sharing resources	Posts providing contact information and/or links of people and/or organizations that can help
		Networking for opportunities	Posts discussing networking opportunities, job leads, or potential employment options
<b>Emotional coping</b>	Posts reflect emotions and feelings about the crisis, its personal impact, and tactics to manage	Social cohesion	Posts referencing connectedness and solidarity among others
		Hope	Posts that express concepts of hope to others
		Emotional toll	Posts about the emotional toll of unemployment
<b>Opinion expression</b>	Posts reflect an opinion (negative, positive, or neutral) about the unemployment system and experience, state agencies, public administrators, or policies	Policy critique	Posts opinions and critiques related to the state's unemployment policies
		Government response	Posts opinions regarding the government's response to the unemployment crisis
		Bureaucratic challenges	Expressions of frustration or satisfaction with bureaucratic processes involved with unemployment system
		Economic impact commentary	Opinions on the economic impact of unemployment on individuals and communities
<b>Spoke to DEO</b>	Post references some sort of communication with DEO, either by email or by phone	Negative experience	The experience with contacting DEO was negative
		Neutral	The experience with contacting DEO was neither positive or neutral
		Positive experience	The experience with contacting DEO was positive
<b>Unemployment systems and programs</b>	Posts that reference specific unemployment systems and programs	Federal stimulus	Posts are related to discussions of new federal stimulus bill
		Lost wages assistance	These are posts that reference the lost wages assistance program
		Work search issues	Posts that mention policies and experiences with the work search
<b>Job found</b>	Posts where an individual returns to work	N/A	N/A
<b>Health related</b>	Posts where health issues related to COVID-19 are mentioned	N/A	N/A
<b>Eskamani mentioned</b>	Posts where Eskamani is mentioned	N/A	N/A

### 3.5 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are key to evaluating the effectiveness of a measurement method.

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure, indicating how well study results can be replicated under comparable conditions. Validity pertains to the accuracy of a measure, evaluating whether the results genuinely reflect what they are intended to measure (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Triangulation is an essential step to strengthen the reliability and validity of any study. Triangulation, within the context of qualitative research, denotes utilizing diverse methods or data sources to improve the understanding of the subject under investigation (Patton, 1999). This methodological strategy is instrumental in enriching the depth of analysis and fortifying the overall validity of research findings by corroborating information derived from distinct origins. Scholars such as Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999) have delineated four principal forms of triangulation: “(1) method triangulation, (2) investigator triangulation, (3) theory triangulation, and (4) data source triangulation” (San Diego, 2019, p. 546).

Each of these triangulation approaches serves as a deliberate and systematic means to fortify the dependability and authenticity of qualitative research outcomes (Begley, 1996). This research used investigator triangulation by inviting two academic colleagues -- each having extensive knowledge of risk and crisis communication and serving as faculty within the University of Central Florida -- to independently review a random sample (10%) of the coding and look for discrepancies in the assignment of codes. A third expert, this time an academic colleague who works in public policy in Florida and has expertise in unemployment policy, independently reviewed a random sample (10%) of the coding and looked for discrepancies. The findings from the experts were shared collectively, and any discrepancies were discussed to refine the coding frame and enhance precision (Joffe & Yardley, 2003). Having multiple researchers analyze the data enhanced the rigor of the analysis (Rankl et al., 2021).

### **3.6 Anticipated Limitations**

While this research design and dataset offer valuable insights into crisis communication and governance strategies, it is fundamental to recognize several limitations. First, the study's reliance on Reddit posts within the context of Rhetorical Arena Theory means it captures only a portion of public discourse within a more extensive communication ecosystem. The active audience being studied may not represent the viewpoints of individuals who do not use Reddit or opt for different discussion platforms. Notably, Reddit's user base skews younger and tech-savvy, potentially restricting the findings' generalizability to the larger population. Furthermore, since the study concentrates solely on primary Reddit posts and omits comments, it could miss valuable insights and interactions. However, as mentioned earlier, multiple studies of Reddit data do not use comments and still offer a robust evaluation of research questions (Altshuler et al., 2015; Arya et al., 2022; Manchaiah et al., 2021).

Second, Reddit posts do not exist in isolation. The study may need to fully encompass the broader context of the crisis, including real-time events, press coverage, social media trends, and public sentiment. Third, this research centers on the early impact of COVID-19 in Florida. Consequently, it may not consider later developments and changes in crisis communication and governance strategies after the study period. Finally, the study lacks interviews with Reddit users. These limitations need to be considered when interpreting the study's results, discussing implications, and identifying potential areas for further research and improvements in crisis communication analysis.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Research ethics revolve around safeguarding the dignity of both participants and the data gathered throughout the research process. As per UCF's IRB Office, this study is exempt from IRB review as it is considered non-human subjects research with publicly available data. To ensure the anonymity of the post authors, Reddit usernames were not collected, and numbers were put in their place instead.

Any other identifying information was removed from the dataset (Ayers et al., 2018; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011).

### **3.8 Researcher's Positionality**

As an elected state representative in Florida, I deliver constituent services, communicate to the greater public through multiple mediums, work with state agencies to address community needs, write and pass legislation, and work with colleagues to craft and pass the annual state budget. I also played a leading role in helping Floridians navigate the COVID-19 crisis, especially in accessing their unemployment benefits. Starting in 2020 and well into 2022, I became a point of contact and source of information for tens of thousands of Floridians searching for assistance accessing their unemployment benefits. Floridians in need of support would attempt to contact the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity and then, unable to get through by phone or online, would turn to state legislators for assistance. As a result, my legislative office, with a staff of two and a team of volunteers, helped to answer questions, escalate claims to the department, and ultimately become experts in this policy arena. We provided support to more than 60,000 unemployed Floridians from every county, spent hours responding back to emails and phone calls, and hosted town halls late into the night on platforms like Facebook and Zoom. This lived experience as a responder to economic turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic gives me a unique strength in my ability to analyze data on unemployment, but it also means I may have a bias, which is why our investigator triangulation approach is essential to ensuring reliable and valid results. As a researcher, I want to challenge my lived experiences and assumptions of the unemployment system with theoretical frameworks and data analysis. This study will allow me to establish a broader understanding of this topic and contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding public administration and crisis response.

### 3.9 Summary

The research methods chapter provides a detailed overview of the approach to answer research questions related to crisis communication during the first ten months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida. Employing a qualitative content analysis framework guided by the Rhetorical Arena Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G), the study aims to examine how individuals trying to access unemployment benefits utilized informal communications on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida and what challenges they experienced attempting to access their unemployment benefits. As an informal network, the r/FloridaUnemployment subreddit will serve as this study's primary data source due to its focused engagement on issues related to Florida's unemployment during the pandemic. With nearly 5,000 members, this active community offers a rich dataset reflecting personal experiences and narratives.

The study employed a deductive and inductive analysis approach using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, and a codebook initially generated by U&G. The constant comparison method was utilized to maintain rigor and refine emerging trends throughout the analysis. The analysis involved cross-referencing and comparing identified elements from the dataset to explore correspondences and distinctions. Anticipated limitations of the study include potential representation biases due to the reliance on Reddit, contextual limitations regarding the broader crisis context, and temporal constraints related to focusing on the first ten months of COVID-19 in Florida. The study also acknowledges the lack of interviews with Reddit users as a limitation, highlighting the importance of considering these limitations when interpreting findings.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS**

This chapter reviews findings from the qualitative content analysis of data collected from a subreddit focused on the Florida unemployment crisis during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a reminder, the two main research questions are:

1. How did individuals in the active audience discuss challenges faced when trying to access Florida's unemployment system?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the analysis of informal communications on social media for improving crisis communication strategies during future crises?

Guided by Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), 215 individual posts from a subreddit created by Floridians in 2020 to navigate the unemployment compensation process were collected and analyzed. The analysis was conducted using NVivo, and a codebook was developed using deductive and inductive approaches. The codebook comprised 9 parent codes and 23 child codes, providing a detailed framework for the content analysis. The prevalence of a code was measured in two ways via NVivo. First, by the number of times a code is referenced, and second, by the percentage of text the coded words compromise.

This chapter will begin by outlining characteristics of the collected data. Then the core findings will be discussed, highlighting the significant themes, implications within the theoretical framework, and discrepancies.

### **4.1 Characteristics of Data**

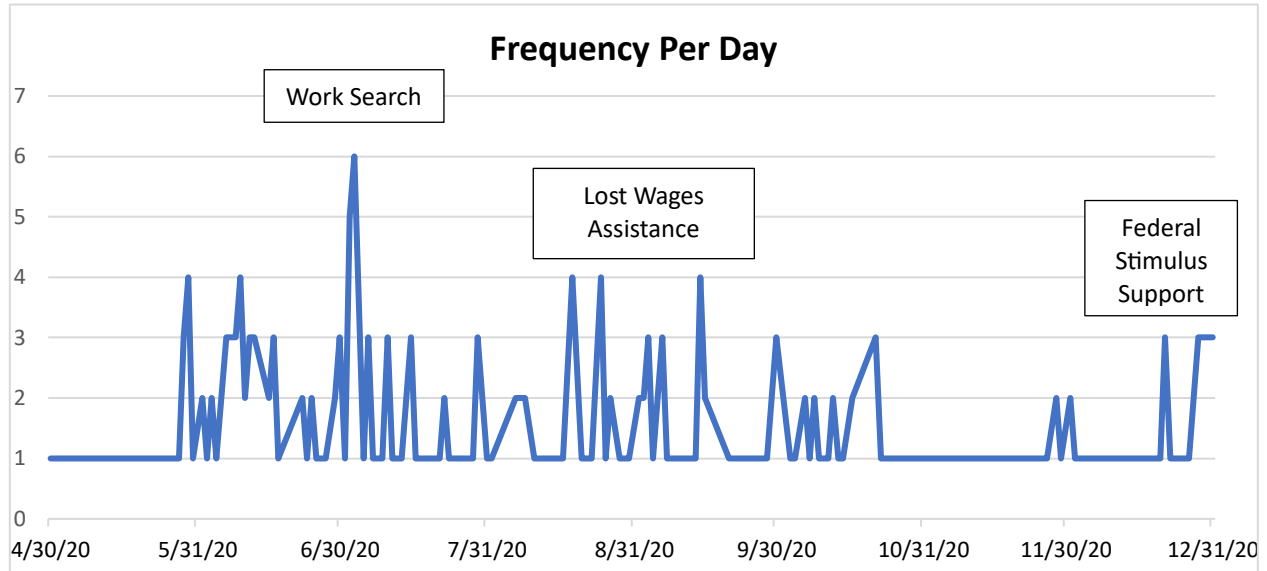
This dataset is a rich collection of user-generated content from a subreddit dedicated to the Florida unemployment crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes detailed textual descriptions of individual experiences, advice, and emotional responses. Posts contain textual content and, in some

cases, URLs to additional resources or related articles. The posts are dated between April 30, 2020, and December 31, 2020, covering a critical period during the COVID-19 pandemic when Floridians were experiencing high unemployment rates (CBPP, 2022; Elflein, 2023).

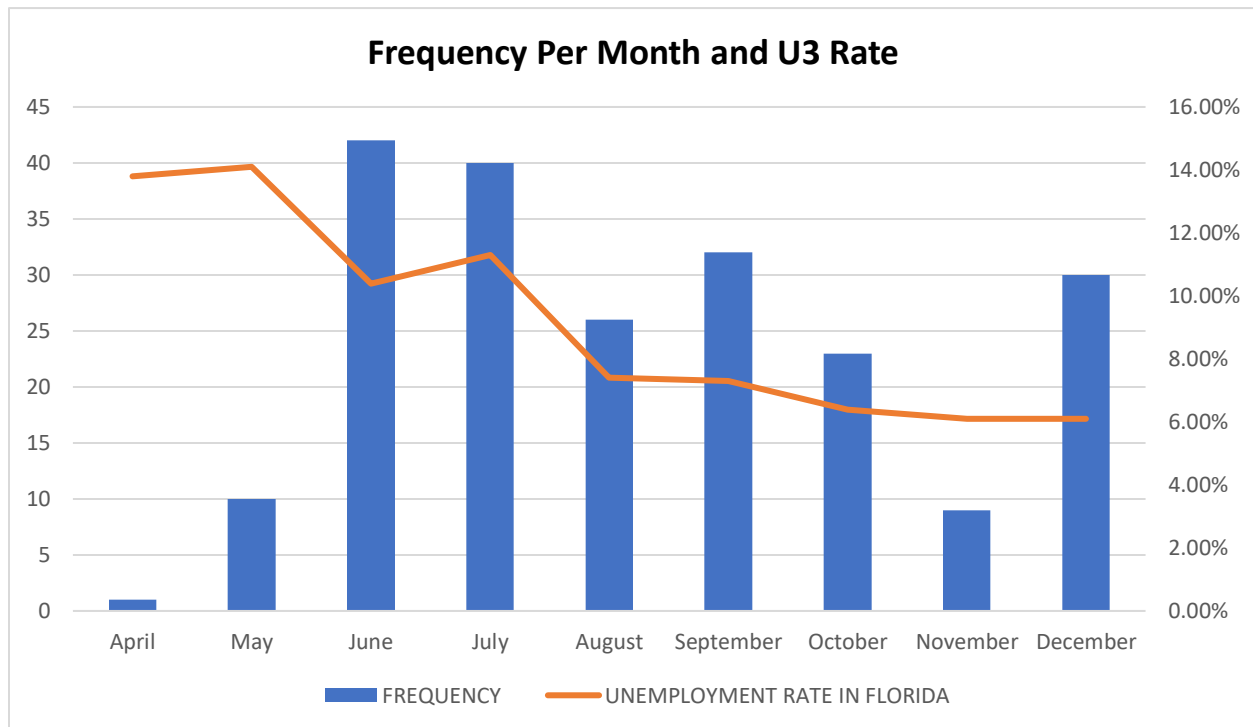
There is a notable gap in posts between April and May. Based on statements from the subreddit moderators, individuals were not following the rules of the informal network, leading to some posts initially being deleted. This was followed by re-emphasizing forum rules in May, as seen in Appendix B. Although this research only examined the initial posts, the subreddit reflected a high level of interaction among users, with many posts receiving comments and upvotes to build a high karma score and engagement from other community members. The 215 individual posts were made by 124 unique users, meaning that some posted more than once within the collection timeframe.

Figures 7 and 8 below illustrate the frequency of posts per day and month. Several detected trends speak to the peaks of frequency. First, a trend line exists between high unemployment rates and online engagement. The months with the most network engagement are June, July, September, and December. Florida experienced high unemployment rates during the COVID-19 impact, specifically in June and July, with a slight uptick in September (Ferreira-Neto, 2021). However, it should be noted that even when Florida's unemployment rate was still high but more stable, the conversations on the subreddit intensified. Ego, even when the unemployment rates stabilized, there was still ongoing dialogue within the informal network. Another trend is that posts in the subreddit immediately peaked whenever reports of new unemployment programs were debated or finalized in the news cycle. This revolved around three main unemployment updates: (1) policy decisions about the mandatory work search, (2) the Lost Wages Assistance programs, and (3) federal stimulus support. These topics were discussed in the subreddit and surrounded by speculation before and after the policy was enacted. For example, users are posting about the Lost Wages Assistance Program as early as July 31, 2020, but the

policy itself was not put in place until mid-August, and Florida did not agree to implement it until September 8, 2020 (Florida Commerce, 2020). Thus, the conversation on these topics spanned over a specific period.



**Figure 8:** Frequency of posts per day with major updates highlighted.



**Figure 9:** Frequency of posts per month with U3 unemployment rate as reported by the Department of Economic Opportunity.

Users shared articles, screenshots, and updates about these three unemployment-related programs, and those updates were some of the most popular posts in the subreddit. Indeed, when analyzing the top ten percent of posts with the highest karma scores, more than 50% (n=11) pertained to updates about the unemployment system and intersected with one of these codes. The other most popular posts focused on individuals who, after struggling for extended periods, were finally able to access unemployment benefits. Some posts expressed frustration with the government's response to the unemployment crisis. The top 22 posts can be seen in Appendix D.

Another critical characteristic of this data was the variation in user experiences with the unemployment system. While some users eventually received their payments after persistent efforts, others faced unresolved issues, indicating inconsistencies in handling cases. A quote from User 9 on June 8, 2020, summarized this point well: *"If you are also waiting and wondering if you've done something wrong or missed a pending item, etc., you aren't the only one."*

As previously noted, this study analysis concluded with nine parent and 23 child codes. Table 4 provides the frequency breakdown per code, but the following sections provide a more detailed exploration of key themes and findings.

**Table 4:** Final codebook following the deductive and inductive data analysis with number of references and percentage of coverage for each code.

Parent code	Definition	Child code	Definition	References	% Coverage
<b>Information sharing</b>	Posts reflect sharing information and experiences regarding the Florida unemployment system	Application process	Posts related to the application procedures and user experiences with the unemployment experience	156	20.09
		Website issues	Posts related to challenges or success with unemployment website	25	1.86
		News stories	Posts sharing news articles and headlines relevant to unemployment benefits	11	.85
		Data and statistics	Posts sharing statistical information about unemployment rates	3	.19
		Legal information	Posts about policies, rights, responsibilities, and legal recourse for individuals facing challenges	50	5.26
		Delays Faced	Posts illustrating delays faced with unemployment system	30	1.80
<b>Support exchange</b>	Posts reflect seeking and sharing guidance on Florida's unemployment system	Seeking insight	Posts asking questions on issues related to the unemployment system in Florida	99	6.57
		Problem resolution	Posts about resolving issues and challenges encountered during the unemployment process	59	8.63
		Sharing resources	Posts providing contact information and/or links of people and/or organizations that can help	34	3.22
		Networking for opportunities	Posts discussing networking opportunities, job leads, or potential employment options	0	0
<b>Emotional coping</b>	Posts reflect emotions and feelings about the crisis, its personal impact, and tactics to manage	Social cohesion	Posts referencing connectedness and solidarity among others	15	1.21
		Hope	Posts that express concepts of hope to others	25	1.06
		Emotional toll	Posts about the emotional toll of unemployment	33	2.34
<b>Opinion expression</b>	Posts reflect an opinion (negative, positive, or neutral) about the unemployment system and experience, state agencies, public administrators, or policies	Policy critique	Posts opinions and critiques related to the state's unemployment policies	26	2.08
		Government response	Posts opinions regarding the government's response to the unemployment crisis	42	4.21
		Bureaucratic challenges	Expressions of frustration or satisfaction with bureaucratic processes involved with unemployment system	25	1.96
		Economic impact commentary	Opinions on the economic impact of unemployment on individuals and communities	20	2.03
<b>Spoke to DEO</b>	Post references some sort of communication with DEO, either by email or by phone	Negative experience	The experience with contacting DEO was negative	5	.68
		Neutral	The experience with contacting DEO was neither positive or negative	9	2.81
		Positive experience	The experience with contacting DEO was positive	16	2.91
<b>Unemployment systems and programs</b>	Posts that reference specific unemployment systems and programs	Federal stimulus	Posts are related to discussions of new federal stimulus bill	15	2.60
		Lost wages assistance	These are posts that reference the lost wages assistance program	21	1.82
		Work search issues	Posts that mention policies and experiences with the work search	12	.61
<b>Job found</b>	Posts where an individual returns to work	N/A	N/A	3	.09
<b>Health related</b>	Posts where health issues related to COVID-19 are mentioned	N/A	N/A	4	.48
<b>Eskamani mentioned</b>	Posts where Eskamani is mentioned	N/A	N/A	1	.10

## 4.2 Key Themes and Findings

The analysis identified recurring issues with payment delays, systemic failures, and administrative challenges that users faced. Emotional and financial distress were prevalent, highlighting the significant impact of the crisis on individuals' well-being. Despite these challenges, the subreddit was a vital support network where users shared experiences, advice, and emotional support. Additionally, the data revealed a pervasive mistrust of government actions and policies, with users frequently criticizing the management of the unemployment system.

Each theme is discussed in detail, supported by representative quotes from the data. The findings are contextualized within the theoretical frameworks guiding this study: Rhetorical Arena Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory. Co-occurrences were also explored, and examples are provided below.

### 4.2.1 Issues with Payment Delays

One of the most prominent themes that arose from the analysis of the Florida unemployment subreddit was the issue of payment benefit delays. This was primarily detected via the intersection of two codes: "Application process" and "Delays faced." When running a co-occurrence test through NVivo, these two codes identified 177 references (21.6% coverage) within the dataset, with 24 (13.4% coverage) instances of clear overlap. Samples are presented in Table 5. Users frequently shared their experiences with delays in receiving their unemployment benefits, both from state programs and the federal \$600 weekly payments provided by the CARES Act that was facilitated via the State of Florida. For example, User 11 wrote on June 2, 2020, *"I haven't received a payment since 05/19. I still haven't received any of my unemployment either, even though I've been claiming the last 3 weeks. Applied 04.05. I've been calling and emailing with no luck."* Similarly, User 9 shared on June 8, 2020, *"It's officially been 20 days*

since I've received a \$600 deposit (no paper checks either). Also haven't received backdated payments from state UI." Below is a sample of additional co-occurrences and a screenshot of a subreddit post.

**Table 5:** Sample statements falling within the co-occurrence of "Application process" and "Delays faced."

Date Posted	User Number	Text from Post
5/27/2020	User 3	<i>So since I have been approved I haven't been given the option to claim weeks and I check every day on three different browsers to make sure it not one of those. I haven't got the FL unemployment for the past three weeks but I have got the six hundred. This week so far nothing has shown up and I normally get the six hundred on Monday.</i>
5/28/2020	User 5	<i>Anyone else? It usually deposits on Tuesday. I did get a \$240 deposit on Tuesday, but not the 600</i>
5/29/2020	User 7	<i>I've been getting deposits every Monday since I got approved. The \$275 and the \$600. I got paid last Monday, but this week I got nothing. Was there a delay because of Memorial Day or something?</i>
6/3/2020	User 13	<i>Hey, so I have been seeing a lot of people commenting that they have not been receiving there \$600 dollars the last couple of weeks, I am also in the same boat.</i>
6/4/2020	User 14	<i>Hi Guys, It's getting more and more frustrating to access the website to get information on your Florida Unemployment benefits. It's been weeks since I was able to get anyone on the phone from the DOE.</i>
6/6/2020	User 15	<i>Is it just me or am i the only one that hasn't got my federal payment in 2.5 weeks?</i>
6/24/2020	User 31	<i>I haven't gotten a unemployment payment since 5/13, I was also missing the \$600 payment. Last week I got a \$540 payment, but still no unemployment.</i>
6/29/2020	User 34	<i>Was just on hold for 1 hour and 38 min and they just disconnected me</i>
7/2/2020	User 38	<i>1. it crashes all the time 2. you have to wait for over 2hrs to be logged in 3. one you are in, it crashes and comes back to the very first step. FLORIDA IS A JOKE.</i>



r/FloridaUnemployment • 4 yr. ago  
User 11



## Has anyone received their \$600 Federal payment this week or last week?

I haven't received a payment since 05/19. I still haven't received any of my unemployment either, even though I've been claiming the last 3 weeks. Applied 04.05 I've been calling and emailing with no luck. Does anyone have any other successful numbers or email address they can share??



11



31



Share

**Figure 10:** User 11 shares their experience with delays in receiving unemployment compensation.

These experiences with payment delays were widespread, with many users sharing their challenges with attempting to access their unemployment and then, following that, sharing a plea for help. This fits into the parent code of "Support exchange" and a child code of "Seeking advice." There were 99 (6.57% coverage) references within the data of Floridians asking questions related to the unemployment system in Florida. To meet this demand, users proactively shared resources to help others and spoke about their methods of accessing benefits. Overall, 59 (8.63% coverage) references to the code "Problem resolution," and 34 (3.22% coverage) references Floridians sharing links, contacts, and insight into solving varying challenges with accessing unemployment benefits. One quote to help illustrate this point came from User 9 on June 12, 2020, *"Hi everyone - I sincerely apologize for posting so often in this group, but I hope and assume that what I've shared and commented has helped some of you navigate the process and/or keep hope that we will be paid."*

User 9 was one of many sharing guidance. The data analysis shows that this subreddit served as a vital platform for peer-to-peer assistance, where users shared their experiences and provided practical advice. This communal support seemed to help mitigate some of the stress and uncertainty individuals



faced with the state's failures and administrative challenges. This concept will be explored further in an upcoming section.

#### **4.2.2 Systemic Failures and Administrative Challenges**

A common theme that came to light from the analysis of the Florida unemployment subreddit is the systemic failures and administrative challenges faced by users of the unemployment system. The data reveals that the DEO faced delays in responding to the surge of unemployment claims during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to widespread frustration and confusion among claimants. Coding allowed for a deep dive into the specific issues encountered by users, including technical difficulties with the DEO website, lengthy waiting times, and inconsistent information from DEO representatives. These issues compounded the delays faced by users and the challenges of receiving timely payments. There were 30 (1.8% coverage) references within the dataset of delays faced, 25 (1.86% coverage) referenced website issues, and 30 (3.12% coverage) references about contacting DEO – each with varied results.

Overall, subreddit users reported numerous problems with the DEO's digital and call center infrastructure. One quote to illustrate this point came from User 21 on June 10, 2020, *"The DEO is the worst for Florida! Unemployment is IMPOSSIBLE to get ahold of. I just waited on the phone for 45 minutes just to get hung up on!"* Another major issue detected in the data was the inconsistent and unreliable communication from the DEO. Several users felt they were left in the dark about the status of their claims and payments, leading to widespread frustration and mistrust. User 27, on June 16, 2020, speculated that the governmental agency had no control over the situation: *"DEO is frantically trying to figure out what's going on, who's been paid, who hasn't, who's been overpaid, who has yet to be paid, etc. I think their system is so broken they are literally operating in the dark."*

Other users came to the subreddit to share insight from DEO call center employees who admitted to having internal systematic challenges. User 129, on July 6, 2020, walked through their

experience on the phone with DEO for several hours. They eventually were connected to a claims agent who was trying to work on their unemployment case with a supervisor. The same user shared a specific number they called, intending to help others access “shortcuts” to seek help from the department. Others, as seen in Table 6, experience serious website issues. Since applying for unemployment benefits must be done through an online portal, website issues mean a claimant cannot access their benefits.

**Table 6:** Sample of users experiencing website delays and crashes.

Date Posted	User Number	Text from Post
6/14/2020	User 14	<i>Hi Guys, It's getting more and more frustrating to access the website to get information on your Florida Unemployment benefits. It's been weeks since I was able to get anyone on the phone from the DOE. So I put together a quick tutorial and hope this helps. This tutorial is specifically for Chrome users.</i>
6/30/2020	User 36	<i>Anyway, Connect site issues prevented my claim from being approved until a month or so later, and it originally deemed me ineligible even though I exceeded the base range limit for 2019.</i>
7/2/2020	User 38	<i>1. it crashes all the time 2. you have to wait for over 2hrs to be logged in 3. one you are in, it crashes and comes back to the very first step.  FLORIDA IS A JOKE.</i>
7/3/2020	User 41	<i>I was able to get through to a human at the DEO, and she confirmed the site has indeed crashed. If you have been stuck in a loop and unable to claim weeks, this has been going on all week. She said they hope to have it fixed by Sunday.</i>
7/5/2020	User 44	<i>My husband is trying to reapply and he keeps getting told he has a claim log in. He does and it just does the same thing over again.</i>
10/6/2020	User 90	<i>Is anyone else having trouble logging in to the Connect website??? It let's me put my info in and then immediately boots me out once I submit it to only leave me with a technical error. Does anyone know what this means?</i>

As seen from this sample, users frequently mentioned long waiting times via the call center and website, system crashes, and delays in receiving benefits, indicating in part that the state's systems were overwhelmed, overworked, and unable to handle the volume of unemployment claims effectively. Many posts also highlighted the lack of effective communication from the DEO, suggesting that the agency was

struggling to provide timely updates and assistance. Numerous users reported technical issues with the online portal, including error messages and unresponsive interfaces, pointing to significant capacity limitations in the digital infrastructure.



**r/FloridaUnemployment** • 4 yr. ago  
User 21



## DEO is the worst for Florida !!

This is absolute BS !! Unemployment is IMPOSSIBLE to get ahold of . I just waited on the phone for 45 minutes just to get hung up on !! Now ive been on hold for 30 minutes and they just hung up on me again !!!!

**Figure 11:** User 21 expresses their opinion about the unemployment system in Florida and shares their experience in trying to reach a call center agent.

Many users who posted about new or upcoming unemployment programs also expressed doubt and distrust in the government of Florida's ability to make such benefits available to its citizens. For example, User 45, on July 6, 2020, wrote a post regarding new federal unemployment programs that the State of Florida would manage. In that post, they wrote: *"And it will be retroactive to August first. So, get in line for \\*another\\* backdating fiasco!"* Backdating refers to trying to update the start date of your unemployment compensation plan, which requires DEO staff assistance. More insights regarding perspectives on the Florida government's response point will be explored later.

### 4.2.3 Financial and Psychological Stress

The delays in payments and systematic failures directly impacted the financial stability of many users who turned to the subreddit to express their experiences from an economic and emotional lens. Individuals shared that they needed timely access to unemployment benefits to pay bills, rent, and other essential expenses. This financial instability exacerbated psychological factors like stress and anxiety already present due to the pandemic and job loss. On July 7, 2020, User 31 wrote, *"I am so tired of waking up every day without a payment. It's like no one is looking at our accounts. I am fed up. I don't*

*know what to do, but I am so done."* They added, *"I am so tired of begging someone for help, and crying and stressing over this. I am at a loss for words. What a waste."*

There were 20 (2.03% coverage) direct references to economic impact. Desperation is evident in the tone and content of many posts. User 8 wrote on May 20, 2020, *"I've just about had it with the criminals who refuse to pay us. We've all been taken advantage of in our time of need."* The dataset also revealed constant worry about financial stability and the inability to access necessary funds, and in total, there were 33 (2.34% coverage) references in the subreddit to "Emotional toll." Table 7 and Image 11 provide a sample of additional examples of posts that intersect with the codes of emotional toll and economic impact.

**Table 7:** Sample of co-occurrence between emotional toll and economic impact.

Date Posted	User Number	Text from Post
6/30/2020	User 35	<i>I'm tired of waiting and my apartment complex and utility company is definitely tired of waiting.</i>
8/18/2020	User 66	<i>My rent is so far behind I'm probably close to eviction at this point. It's extremely frustrating and idk what else to do but give my experience with unemployment thus far. This is a true nightmare.</i>
10/21/2020	User 96	<i>I have made the decision to say screw floridas unemployment system and just embrace my life as a homeless person. I have racked up over 1k in late fees across my bills and the little 125 a week i was getting will not save me. I have no family or friends to move in with. Im gonna have to rehome my pet dog and aquarium, sell my tv and electronics, but what hurts the most is gonna be leaving my grandmothers heirloom bed frame behind. Im just so done with everything. This might be my last post for a while as I fight tooth and nail to scrape up whatever money i can to survive.</i>
11/24/2020	User 104	<i>Covid scares the hell out of me and this state is just now "look for work or screw off" how can they not care in the slightest about the people who pay taxes?.</i>

Four users expressed anxiety connected to both economic concerns and health concerns. For example, User 104 shared on November 24, 2020, *"What am I suppose to do. I have 3 children under 5 and no care for them right now. The daycare that they were in isn't open anymore because of covid. And*

*to be honest I don't know if I would send them back. Covid scares the hell out of me and this state is just now "look for work or screw off" how can they not care in the slightest about the people who pay taxes?."*



r/FloridaUnemployment · 4 yr. ago

User 31

...

### **I'm am tired. No unemployment since 5/9 and one random payment of \$540/\$600**

I have emailed, called, filled out forms claimed my weeks and nothing. I am so tired of waking up everyday without a payment. It's like no one is looking at our accounts. I am fed up.

I was so shocked when a random payment was sent to me and hoped that meant things were improving. Well it's been 3 weeks since then and 7 or 8 weeks since any unemployment.

I don't know what to do but I am so done. What is the point of all of this?!

**Figure 12:** The delays and systemic issues had a profound impact on users' financial stability and emotional well-being.

#### **4.2.4 Community Support and Expressions of Hope**

Despite these challenges, the subreddit community provided support and hope. Users turned to this informal network to share updates and advice on navigating the DEO system, contact representatives, and other methods to resolve their unemployment compensation issues. This communal support seemed to help individuals cope with the delays and uncertainties experienced by the unemployment system's administrative challenges. There were 25 (1.06% coverage) individual references to the concept of hope within the dataset. Table 8 offers a sample of these references.

**Table 8:** These are samples of subreddit users expressing concepts of hope to others.

Date Posted	User Number	Text from Post
6/11/20	User 9	<i>Keep holding on, everyone.</i>
6/16/20	User 26	<i>Praying you all got good news too.</i>
6/16/20	User 22	<i>Gives me hope after 4 weeks of no payments</i>
6/17/20	User 10	<i>Good luck and stay diligent.</i>
6/30/20	User 36	<i>That said...maybe this account helps someone retain some hope?</i>
7/6/20	User 8	<i>Hang in there kids!</i>
7/17/20	User 54	<i>There is hope if you keep working it!</i>
8/24/20	User 68	<i>Don't give up hope!</i>
9/1/20	User 74	<i>Good luck to all you wonderful folks still fighting</i>
10/8/20	User 91	<i>just Wanted to give hope to those who couldn't get through to unemployment</i>
10/14/20	User 78	<i>I hope this helps someone, even one person.</i>

There was evidence in the data that social cohesion motivated some users to engage with this subreddit, with many users wishing each other luck, reminding others to drink water and exercise, and expressing empathy. User 74 wrote in part on September 2, 2020, *“I'm so sorry if you're struggling. I know what you're going through, and I don't wish it on anyone.”* Posts like this were shared, with many users expressing solidarity in their struggles to access unemployment benefits. In mid-October, User 78 wrote, *“This can be intimidating and stressful, especially with how Florida has seemed to make it much more difficult than most states...but it is doable with a little patience.*



**Figure 13:** Despite the challenges, the subreddit community provided crucial support and expressions of hope.

In addition to social cohesion and concepts of hope, it was mentioned earlier that some of the most popular posts with the highest karma points highlighted success stories of users finally succeeding in accessing their benefits or getting a positive response from a call center agent. As seen in Appendix D, many would share that they had accessed their benefits and follow up with a hopeful message. For example, User 45, on July 6, 2020, shared a celebratory photo of themselves with the subject line, *“We’re gonna make it after all! After months of waiting and waiting I got all funds owed and I’m employed again! Hang in there kids!”* Similarly, User 67 wrote on August 25, 2020, *“I finally got all my back pay guys. The 4 month battle is over. I wish everyone else the best of luck. My 4800 came today. I’m going car shopping! And I’m gonna treat myself and family to a nice lunch.* These two posts were among the top 10% of most popular within the subreddit sample period. There were three references of someone returning to work, celebrating the end of their unemployment experience.

The dataset did not detect the code “Networking for opportunities.” Indeed, the online subreddit served as a support group for unemployment compensation and not as a job board. It should also be mentioned that I was mentioned once within the dataset as a resource for help accessing unemployment compensation. This is another example of users sharing information with their peers in the hope of finding solutions to their crises.

#### **4.2.5 Criticism of Government Actions**

As noted in the literature review, crisis communication is defined as a “form of strategic communication that can lessen the negative effects of a crisis on an organization and stakeholders” (Coombs, 2018, p. 991). With that definition in mind, this subreddit highlighted the dissatisfaction (negative effects) and distrust many users felt toward the DEO and government officials during the COVID-19 pandemic. The posts reveal a pervasive frustration and skepticism about the government’s handling of the unemployment crisis, which has significant implications for crisis communication

strategies and public trust. One example to illustrate this point came from User 8, who wrote the following on May 29, 2020: *“I’ve just about had it with the criminals who refuse to pay us. We’ve all been taken advantage of In our time of need. No one in the country knows of the criminal activity done by these scumbag politicians. If we don’t take action now, they’ll continue to get away with it. Why haven’t we protested? Why hasn’t this been brought to the national news? Are we just gonna sit here and wait to be kicked out and have our cars repoed? We need to take action, any suggestions?”* This post also had a karma score of 14, meaning that 14 others agreed with the post.

As local media reported, Florida’s unemployment system was overwhelmed by demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to significant delays, mental stress, and financial hardships for Floridians seeking assistance (Sainato, 2021, 2022). In total, 27 users turned to the subreddit to express dissatisfaction with how the State of Florida and government officials managed the unemployment system during the pandemic. This dissatisfaction often stemmed from payment delays (30 references, 1.80% coverage), bureaucratic challenges (25 references, 1.96% coverage), government response to the crisis (42 references, 4.21% coverage), and policy critique (26 references, 2.08% coverage). The posts frequently mentioned a perceived lack of competence and accountability among government officials and DEO representatives. Users felt that the system was flawed and that there was a lack of effort to address these flaws adequately. This perception was reinforced by repeated failures to deliver unemployment payments and resolve ongoing issues. A sample of posts that speak to this criticism of the government’s response is below to provide additional context.



**Table 9:** These are samples of subreddit users expressing criticism of Florida’s statement government.

Date Posted	User Number	Text from Post
5/29/2020	User 6	<i>DEO is getting sued. Serves them right.</i>
6/6/2020	User 8	<i>At this point it’s obvious that somebody is using the government’s money to accumulate interest to then be pocketed.</i>
6/9/2020	User 19	<i>At this point I think Desantis is trying to force unemployed people to take any job they can find so they won't have to pay any federal benefits.</i>
6/10/2020	User 21	<i>DEO is the worst for Florida !!</i>
6/11/2020	User 9	<i>I’m not saying this will be the case for everyone - because as we all know, there seems to be no consistency from one person to the next.</i>
6/16/2020	User 27	<i>Here’s my theory: the DEO literally has no idea what they’re doing.</i>
7/3/2020	User 43	<i>I truly hope every person who has experienced this system refuses to vote for them. Actions should have consequences.</i>
8/24/2020	User 62	<i>DeSantis said nothing about unemployment at his press conference today. WTF is wrong with this guy? All that he has to do as ask FEMA for the money, but he acts like it is coming out of his pocket. Arizona has already started paying out the \$300.</i>

As Table 9 shows, users also criticized specific political decisions and policies that they believed exacerbated the crisis. These included critiques of how funds were managed, the implementation of new programs, and the overall strategic direction taken by state and federal officials. These criticisms often reflected broader concerns about political leadership and governance.

In some cases, the frustration and distrust evolved into conspiracy theories about intentional wrongdoing. Five users believed that the government or certain officials deliberately obstructed access to benefits or mismanaged funds for personal or political gain. Three quotes to help illustrate this point came from User 8, who wrote on June 6, 2020. *“At this point, it’s obvious that somebody is using the government’s money to accumulate interest to then be pocketed. People protest for BLM but we’re on the verge of losing everything we’ve worked so hard to build over a few criminals.”* User 19 (as seen in Figure 13) wrote on July 2, 2020: *“Does anyone else think some Florida politician is just pocketing our Federal unemployment benefits? Something happened May 19th and it all just went to crap ever since.”*

On that same day, User 38 wrote in all caps: “FLORIDA IS A JOKE.” User 50 wrote on October 24, 2020, “Just got wind that PUA and the like under The Cares Act will expire at the end of December unless extended by our so called politicians. I do not trust them at all as they are basically playing games now so worse comes to worse know where the food pantries are, low cost clinics, and call your billing departments and ask if they could work out a deal.”



**Figure 14:** There was pervasive mistrust and criticism of the DEO and government officials throughout the subreddit.

The mistrust and dissatisfaction led to calls for action among users. Calls to action included two users who suggested a protest be hosted, four who had contacted their elected officials and encouraged others to do the same, and three who had contacted the media. User 8 asked on May 29, 2020, “We need to take action, any suggestions? Why haven’t we protested? Why hasn’t this been brought to the national news?” Most of these posts were categorized under the “opinion expression” parent code.

### 4.3 Discrepancies and Variability in Experiences

This Florida unemployment subreddit data analysis revealed significant discrepancies and variability in users' experiences. These variations were evident in several key areas: inconsistent payment experiences, varied effectiveness of contacting DEO, and mixed outcomes from following community advice. This section explores these differences in detail, supported by illustrative quotes from the data.

One finding was the inconsistent payment experiences among users. While some individuals reported eventually receiving their unemployment benefits, others continued to need help with unprocessed claims and missing payments. Users' experiences with payment delays and inconsistencies were widespread yet varied significantly. Some users reported receiving back payments after persistent efforts, while others faced ongoing delays with no resolution. This inconsistency suggests that the system's functionality and responsiveness were highly variable, potentially influenced by the timing of claims, the accuracy of submitted information, and the effectiveness of individual follow-up actions. Two quotes highlighting this contrast include from User 67 on August 25, 2020, *"I finally got all my back pay guys. The 4 month battle is over."* Moreover, from User 61 on August 21, 2020: *"I've claimed three weeks worth of benefits but no payments have been made what should I do?? I've gotten one payment since applying."* User 26 wrote on June 12, 2020, *"Though there are real people you can try to call, they basically just say 'the money is coming, don't worry.'" These quotes illustrate the significant differences in users' experiences, highlighting the unpredictable nature of the unemployment system and the resulting frustration and anxiety.*

Another area of variability was the effectiveness of contacting the DEO for assistance. Users reported mixed results when attempting to resolve issues through official channels, reflecting inconsistencies in the support provided by DEO representatives. Some individuals found helpful representatives who resolved their problems promptly, while others encountered unresponsive or unhelpful staff. This inconsistency in support suggests differences in DEO representatives' training, resources, and authority and potential systemic inefficiencies. Table 10 shows an example of this.

**Table 10:** Examples of Successful and Unsuccessful Interactions with DEO Representatives.

Successful Interaction	User 22 Posted: 6/16/2020	<i>"I called like 50 times redial and finally got an option sign up for a callback. 2 hours later they called and they updated my claims so now I'll get paid State next week too"</i>
Unsuccessful Interaction	User 21 Posted: 6/10/2020	<i>"Unemployment is IMPOSSIBLE to get ahold of . I just waited on the phone for 45 minutes just to get hung up on !! Now ive been on hold for 30 minutes and they just hung up on me again !!!"</i>

The discrepancies and variability in user experiences with payment delays, the effectiveness of contacting the DEO, and the outcomes of following community advice underscore the complexity and unpredictability of using the unemployment system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.4 Theoretical Implications**

The analysis of the coded data from the Florida unemployment subreddit reveals significant insights that align with and contribute to the theoretical frameworks guiding this study: Rhetorical Arena Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory. This section delves into how the findings from the data intersect with these theories, highlighting both expected patterns and novel insights.

##### **4.4.1 Rhetorical Arena Theory**

Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) posits that various stakeholders, including organizations, media, and the public, engage in a dynamic discourse within a shared communicative space or rhetorical arena in a crisis. This theory emphasizes the plurality of voices and the complexity of interactions in shaping the crisis narrative (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). The rhetorical arena consists of different communication spaces, each presenting the public with distinctive information about the crisis. These spaces are called rhetorical sub-arenas (Coombs & Holladay, 2014).

The subreddit served as a rhetorical sub-arena where diverse voices converged to respond to the unemployment crisis. The plurality of voices is evident in the varied posts, ranging from personal experiences and advice to political critiques and calls for action. The interactions within the subreddit

reflect the multivocal nature of RAT. Users did not merely post complaints; they engaged in discussions, shared resources, and collectively sought solutions, illustrating the active role of the public in the online rhetorical arena. This quote by User 9 was shared earlier but speaks to this point perfectly: *“Hi everyone - I sincerely apologize for posting so often in this group, but I hope and assume that what I’ve shared and commented has helped some of you navigate the process and/or keep hope that we will be paid.”*

The subreddit also functioned as a platform for public accountability, where users voiced their dissatisfaction and mistrust towards the DEO and government officials. This discourse is an important aspect of the rhetorical arena. The karma system within Reddit also allows users to decide what voices and posts are a priority for them over others, reflecting the fluidity of crisis communication environments embraced by RAT. Users also collaborated to solve individual and collective problems, exemplifying the theory’s emphasis on cooperative efforts in crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Sharing tips, resources, and emotional support underscored the community’s resilience and adaptability.

#### **4.4.2 Uses and Gratification Theory**

Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G) explores how “individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs” (Katz et al., 1974). This model defines four primary gratifications: information seeking, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment. Specifically, U&G maintains that media consumption behaviors “are goal-directed and focus on what purposes or functions the media serve for a body of active receivers” (Fisher, 1978, p. 1590). Previous research indicates that people will resort to social media platforms during periods of anxiety and distress (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016). This research implemented U&G to explain why individuals turned to the subreddit and what gratifications they sought and obtained. The original codebook was built based on U&G, and as seen in the earlier analysis, a great deal of information was gleaned via this dataset by applying a codebook grounded in U&G.

To add to the analysis already shared, the dataset highlighted several prominent motivations that need to be stated. First, a primary motivation for users engaging with the subreddit was to obtain information about the unemployment process, navigate the DEO system, and find solutions to their problems. The high frequency of posts seeking advice and sharing experiences highlights this need for information. Second, the desire for social and emotional support was constant. Users of this sub-arena expressed their frustrations, found solace in shared experiences, and received encouragement from others facing similar challenges. This social interaction helped mitigate the psychological costs of the delays users were experiencing in accessing their benefits. Third, engagement with the subreddit helped users develop a sense of community and shared identity. The collective struggle and mutual support fostered a strong sense of belonging and solidarity among the users. This was especially evident under the “Emotional support” coding category and “Social cohesion.” Finally, the platform also served as a space for people to express their opinions and make calls to action for government accountability. This active participation aligns with the theory’s premise that media use can fulfill a need for agency and influence.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter analyzes the data collected from a subreddit focused on the Florida unemployment crisis created during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) and Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G), and to address the two primary research questions:

1. How did individuals in the active audience discuss challenges faced when trying to access Florida’s unemployment system?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the analysis of informal communications on social media for improving crisis communication strategies during future crises?

The insights gained from this analysis provide a foundation for discussing the wider implications of these findings. The next chapter will delve into these discussions, offering a comprehensive overview of the study's theoretical contributions and suggesting practical measures for enhancing crisis response mechanisms for public administrators.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

Chapter 5 synthesizes the findings presented in the previous chapter, providing a comprehensive discussion of the results and their implications. This chapter aims to interpret the key themes and findings identified through the analysis of the Florida unemployment subreddit, addressing how these findings relate to the broader theoretical frameworks of Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) and Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G). Additionally, this chapter answers the research questions posed at the study's outset and offers practical recommendations for improving crisis communication strategies.

The chapter is structured as follows: first is a summary of the key findings. The chapter then responds to the research questions directly, discussing how individuals used informal communications on social media during the economic crisis and what lessons can be drawn for future crisis communication strategies. Subsequently, the chapter delves into the theoretical implications of the study, discussing how the findings extend or challenge existing theoretical perspectives. Practical implications and recommendations are provided, focusing on enhancing crisis communication, improving administrative processes, and supporting community networks. The chapter also acknowledges the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research. Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflection on the study's overall contributions to the public administration field.

### **5.1 Summary of Key Findings**

Posts within a Florida unemployment subreddit were collected between April 30, 2020, and December 31, 2020, and analyzed via a theory-based codebook created within NVivo. In total, 215 posts were gathered and coded, revealing five main themes. Table 11 below describes these themes and briefly explains each one.



**Table 11:** Review of the study's key findings

Theme	Description
Issues with Payment Delays	Users came to this subreddit to report their experience of significant delays in receiving their unemployment benefits, both from state programs and federal supplements. These delays caused widespread frustration and financial instability, and Floridians turned to this informal network to express that frustration.
Systemic Failures and Administrative Challenges	Numerous technical and administrative issues within the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) were identified by users of the subreddit, including website crashes, long waiting times, and inconsistent information from DEO representatives. These systemic failures compounded the difficulties in accessing timely payments.
Financial and Psychological Stress	The delays and systemic issues had a profound impact on users' financial stability and emotional well-being. Many individuals turned to the subreddit to share their struggles to meet essential expenses and expressed significant stress and anxiety.
Community Support and Expressions of Hope	Despite the challenges, the subreddit community provided crucial support. Users shared resources, advice, and emotional encouragement, creating a sense of solidarity and hope. The community's peer-to-peer assistance helped mitigate some of the stress and provided practical solutions to access benefits too.
Mistrust and Criticism of Government Actions	There was pervasive mistrust and criticism of the DEO and government officials throughout the subreddit. Users expressed dissatisfaction with the management of the unemployment system, highlighting perceived incompetence and lack of accountability. This criticism often included broader political and policy-related concerns.

It is also worth noting that significant variability was observed in user experiences via the subreddit posts, including inconsistent payment outcomes and mixed effectiveness in contacting DEO representatives. Users also reported varied results from following community advice, reflecting differences in individual circumstances and systemic inefficiencies. There were also unique conclusions regarding the frequency of when posts were made, and which posts were most popular. An observed trend is that with high unemployment rates comes increased online engagement. The months with the most network engagement are June and July, during which Florida experienced the highest unemployment rates during the COVID-19 impact (Ferreira-Neto, 2021). Another trend is that posts in the subreddit immediately peaked whenever reports of new unemployment programs were debated or

finalized in the news cycle. This revolved around three main unemployment updates: (1) federal stimulus support, (2) the Lost Wages Assistance programs, and (3) policy decisions about the mandatory work search. Discussing these program issues had increased interest within the subreddit, with many users choosing an “up arrow” with Reddit’s karma system to increase their visibility to other users.

## **5.2 Answering the Research Questions**

Two primary research questions guided this study. Those research questions are:

1. How did individuals in the active audience discuss challenges faced when trying to access Florida’s unemployment system?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the analysis of informal communications on social media for improving crisis communication strategies during future crises?

The following sections address each research question in detail, drawing on the thematic analysis and the theoretical frameworks of RAT and U&G. Later, the study's practical and theoretical implications, study limitations, recommendations for future research, and concluding thoughts will be explored.

### **5.2.1 Research Question 1**

As noted previously, administrative burden refers to the challenges, obstacles, or difficulties individuals encounter when interacting with government systems, policies, or services (Burden et al., 2012). This can lead to significant “learning, compliance, and psychological costs” (Moynihan et al., 2015, p. 46) and encompasses various aspects, including the complexity of procedures, the time and effort required to comply with regulations, the costs associated with gathering information or meeting requirements, and the emotional or psychological stress experienced during these interactions (Herd & Moynihan, 2020). Administrative burden may result in administrative exclusion’ from accessing rights, services, and benefits (Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010). These burdens can have “long-term consequences

for social and economic participation” (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2020, p. 2), and their impact is not equally distributed across any population. According to Bhargava and Manoli (2015), individuals of high economic need experience “low program awareness, confusion, or an aversion to program complexity or hassles” which leads to a lower level of participation in social programs overall (p. 3490). This means that inequalities in accessing government services exist, and administrative burdens only further reinforce these disparities (Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010; Heinrich & Brill, 2015).

The first research question asks: how did individuals in the active audience discuss challenges faced when trying to access Florida’s unemployment system? Even if users were unaware, there were numerous instances where administrative burdens were being experienced and discussed within the active audience of this subreddit. As noted previously, one primary purpose of the subreddit was to disseminate information and resources. Official channels to seek support on one’s unemployment compensation were often overloaded or unresponsive (Sainato, 2021). As a result, users turned to this online informal network to share vital information and seek support. As seen in the data analysis, this included updates on unemployment policies, step-by-step guides for navigating the DEO website, and contact details for DEO representatives who had been helpful. This behavior aligns with U&G and the need for accurate and timely information (Ruggiero, 2000). This is a need that users faced difficulty attempting to acquire from the State of Florida. The online subreddit community’s ability to aggregate and share this information effectively underscores the value of peer-to-peer communication in crises (Martin, 2019). From a RAT perspective, the subreddit acted as a decentralized information hub, where the community’s collective knowledge enhanced individual users’ ability to navigate the unemployment system (Raupp, 2019). Together, Floridians attempted to overcome the administrative burden of trying to learn and use the complicated and cumbersome unemployment system.

Another cost associated with administrative burden is the emotional or psychological stress experienced during interactions with government systems (Herd & Moynihan, 2020). This subreddit

served as an avenue for emotional and psychological support. Users within the active audience often expressed frustration and anxiety, while others shared posts of empathy and encouragement. Providing and receiving emotional support is a critical component of U&G, fulfilling users' needs for social interaction and emotional reassurance (Zhang, 2017). In the context of RAT, these interactions illustrate how the rhetorical arena accommodates informational exchanges between various voices (Rodin et al., 2019).

The subreddit's collaborative nature enabled users to engage in collective problem-solving to overcome issues like the complexity of receiving unemployment compensation, the time and effort required to comply with the state's regulations and processes, and the various costs associated with meeting these standards. This means users were actively experiencing administrative burden (Herd & Moynihan, 2020) and turned to the subreddit for support. Users shared strategies to resolve common issues, such as dealing with application errors or understanding new policy changes. The network also allowed users to express opinions and advocacy efforts, such as encouraging their peers to contact representatives or bringing media attention to systemic failures. This collaborative problem-solving highlights the active audience's role in crisis communication, a core tenet of RAT (Zhao & Valentini, 2022).

Users shared feedback and criticism in the subreddit regarding how DEO and government officials responded to the unemployment crisis. These discussions often focused on systemic failures and inefficiencies, highlighting the lived experiences of citizens navigating administrative burdens. For example, there are only two means of contact to access help with one's unemployment compensation in Florida - the call center or online portal, called CONNECT. The State of Florida decided to eliminate physical unemployment offices nearly a decade ago (Luhby, 2011), which means there is no physical location or in-person help one can connect with when assistance is needed. As a result, when the call center is inundated and the website crashes (as witnessed via the subreddit's posts), Floridians have no other official department channels to turn to. Thus, unemployed Floridians experience obstacles, long

waits, and high stress – all elements of administrative burden. The reliance on federal supplemental programs (as noted by the peak discussion points throughout the subreddit) is also the result of state policies. Starting in 2011, Florida cut unemployment benefits and changed eligibility requirements (Luhby, 2011), making those in need overtly reliant on federal programs versus those of the state. The state is still responsible for issuing those payments (Kim, 2010), which created uncertainty and barriers for Floridians to access those benefits. Federal programs were basically integrated into the state's system of administrative burdens.

As stated before, the impact of administrative burden is not equally distributed and tends to reinforce existing inequalities, even leading to individuals excluding themselves completely from the government service or program they are trying to access (Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010). As seen in the data analysis, there was at least one example of this in the subreddit where a user said they had given up trying to apply for unemployment and would choose to become homeless instead. Other users encouraged peers not to give up on their application, with some speculating that the challenges in accessing their unemployment benefits were intentional and done by design via public officials.

Posts in this subreddit reflected the experiences of navigating administrative burdens, even if it was never explicitly said. Individuals trying to access Florida's unemployment system during the economic crisis used informal communications on social media to share information, provide emotional support, facilitate problem-solving, and voice criticisms. These interactions helped individuals navigate immediate administrative challenges and contributed to a broader discourse on systemic failures and potential policy change. By considering the concept of administrative burden, this analysis also highlights the various costs associated with navigating complex bureaucratic systems, which have costs on an average day, but those costs worsen when facing a crisis and impact vulnerable communities to a greater degree (Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010).

### 5.2.2 Research Question 2

The analysis of informal communications on social media during the Florida unemployment crisis provides several valuable lessons for enhancing crisis communication strategies. These lessons are framed within the context of RAT and U&G, offering insights into how digital platforms can be leveraged to improve public responses and support systems in future crises.

The Florida unemployment subreddit served as an informal network where affected individuals, helpers, and critics converged to share information and perspectives in real-time. This is consistent with literature describing social media as a “a virtual community where people provide and seek social support during disasters” (Zhao et al., 2019, p. 390). The literature also emphasizes that informal networks are impactful for building social capital, fostering trust, and facilitating communication and collaboration beyond formal boundaries (Kapucu & Hu, 2020). Similarly, RAT highlights the importance of multiple voices in crisis communication (Raupp, 2019), further underscoring the value of these informal, diverse interactions.

By encouraging multivocal participation on platforms like this subreddit, public administrators can enhance crisis communication efforts, making government more accessible and approachable. Via enhanced e-government systems, public administrators can implement participatory models of communication rather than one-way communication (Lu et al., 2016). This can lead to a more civically engaged and healthy community (Bryer, 2013). This approach can also help public administrators detect and address misinformation or paracrisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

This subreddit also provided a network for users to express their crisis-related stress alongside empathy and words of encouragement. Emergency managers and public administrators may want to ensure that crisis communication plans include components that address the affected individual's emotional and psychological well-being. As someone who was on the front lines of this economic crisis, I

can share from experience the occurrence of phone calls from individuals seeking help who were also experiencing suicidal ideation. Emotional exhaustion is detected throughout this subreddit; ensuring a mental health response is integrated into the crisis communication plan can help address this serious issue (Guy et al., 2009). U&G emphasizes the role of media in fulfilling users' emotional and psychological needs (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Leung, 2009). With that motivation in mind, ensuring that crisis communication is both informational and emotionally supportive can significantly enhance public well-being and maintain trust (Abdelzadeh & Sedelius, 2024; Zheng, 2023).

This data analysis showed that users relied heavily on the subreddit for information about the unemployment process. Crisis communication strategies should prioritize disseminating clear, accurate, and timely information (Procopio & Procopio, 2007). Regular updates on official websites, social media channels, and community platforms can help meet this recommendation, but as noted previously, public administrators should consider going beyond one-way forms of communication and implement higher-level interaction opportunities through information technologies (Bertot et al., 2010).

The critical discourse of government agencies and political officials on the subreddit revealed users' desire for accountability and transparency from public officials and agencies. Users sought explanations for delays and inconsistencies, highlighting the need for open and honest communication. The literature states that crisis communication strategies benefit from emphasizing accountability and transparency (Abdelzadeh & Sedelius, 2024; Zheng, 2023). Based on the data analysis, trust could be built through regular updates for the public on the status of crisis management efforts, acknowledging challenges and setbacks, and providing clear, honest explanations. Facilitating such communications can also foster a sense of solidarity and collective resilience (Koerber et al., 2024; Zhang & Shay, 2019).

The lessons drawn from the analysis of informal communications on social media during the Florida unemployment crisis underscore the importance of leveraging digital platforms, addressing

emotional needs, simplifying processes, and maintaining transparency. By integrating these lessons into future crisis communication strategies, government agencies and crisis managers can enhance their responsiveness, build public trust, and provide more effective support during times of crisis.

### **5.3 Theoretical Implications**

Analyzing the Florida unemployment subreddit through the lenses of RAT and U&G provides significant theoretical insights. These findings extend and, in some cases, challenge existing theoretical perspectives, offering new directions for future research in crisis communication and media use during crises.

#### **5.3.1 Rhetorical Arena Theory**

RAT is a newer theory than other crisis communication theories, and Reddit is a newer social media platform used for research than other platforms, like Facebook and Twitter. As a result, this researcher could not identify other examples of where RAT was used to study Reddit. In contrast, past studies using RAT as a framework have used content from newspapers (Rodin et al., 2019), Facebook posts and comments (Johansen et al., 2016; Rodin et al., 2019), and comments alongside side Weibo posts (Rodin et al., 2019; Zhang & Chen, 2022) to answer research questions. However, because RAT emphasizes the importance of a plurality of voices and the real-time dynamic nature of discourse in crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017), utilizing Reddit data fits well. As a result, this study extends RAT by illustrating how digital platforms like Reddit can facilitate a multiplicity of voices within a crisis. One noteworthy contrast between Reddit and other social media platforms is the ability to create multiple forums and emphasize more in-depth conversations; this is the perfect reflection of RAT, and though this study only examined one arena, it would fit with RAT to study more than one arena at the same time.



The subreddit also functioned as a space for public accountability, where users could voice their criticisms of government actions and policies. This discourse is a core aspect of RAT, highlighting the role of public opinion and multiple voices in shaping crisis responses (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). The findings extend RAT by demonstrating the influential role of digital platforms in amplifying public accountability, and it alludes to the notion that different conversations – on the same issues – are happening all at the same time in one arena and across multiple arenas (Rodin et al., 2019). It should be noted that the anonymous nature of Reddit sometimes led to unconstructive criticism and the spreading of misinformation. This highlights a need for further theoretical exploration as RAT addresses voices that conflict with each other but not necessarily voices that intentionally or unintentionally share inaccurate statements (Frandsen & Johansen, 2022).

While RAT primarily focuses on informational exchanges and public discourse, the emotional and psychological support within the subreddit highlights an often-overlooked dimension of crisis communication. For example, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) primarily focuses on cognitive evaluations of crisis types and responsibilities, often neglecting the emotional transfer and its impact on the public (Kim & Cameron, 2011). This study suggests a need for crisis communication that involves empathy, one that addresses emotional and psychological needs during crises (Sutton et al., 2008). Recognizing the importance of emotional support in the rhetorical arena can enhance the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies, making them more holistic and responsive to the needs of affected individuals.

### **5.3.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory**

U&G posits that during a crisis, users search for media that meet specific needs, such as information and problem-solving. Some have argued that because this theory originated in an era dominated by traditional media (i.e., television, radio, newspapers), U&G may need adaptation to

adequately address the motivations behind using new and emerging media platforms (Ruggiero, 2000). This study has demonstrated the relevance of U&G today to the modern age. Identifying and categorizing the gratifications that individuals seek from media can be complex and subjective. Motivations may change over time and context. Building a codebook from U&G, first deductively and then inductively, allowed for the theory's adaptability for an in-depth data analysis.

U&G includes the need for agency and influence (Leung, 2009), which was evident in this research. Users engaged in problem-solving and expressed a desire to hold government officials accountable. This study supports and extends U&G by illustrating how receivers participate actively in crisis communication. Like RAT, U&G challenges the notion of a passive audience and emphasizes that media users are active decision-makers (Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018). Reddit has recently evolved to become a data source for researchers, and this includes for crisis communication too (Bak et al., 2023; Belcher et al., 2023; Du et al., 2021; Jacques et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2022), though applying U&G qualitatively is thus far rare. There is one notable study where U&G was used to study both Reddit and Twitter following the 2019 Ridgecrest earthquake in the northwest U.S. Their findings highlighted the importance of examining cross-platform online networks to gain a more complete understanding of people's reactions and needs to specific disasters (Ruan et al., 2022).

This study's results support U&G by demonstrating how social media platforms fulfill users' needs for information and problem-solving during a crisis. The active participation and information sharing observed on the subreddit highlight the goal-directed nature of media use in crises (Katz et al., 1974). The subreddit also fulfilled users' needs for social interaction and emotional support (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). The platform enabled users to express their frustrations, find solace in shared experiences, and receive encouragement and guidance from others facing similar challenges. That said, the subreddit also exposed users to some negative interactions and potential harassment, which is not addressed within U&G. U&G tends to focus more on media use than on the effects of media content over time. It

does not adequately address how different types of content influence gratifications and user experiences (Ruggiero, 2000).

### **5.3.3 Summary of Theoretical Implications**

The findings from this study extend our understanding of RAT and U&G in several ways. The subreddit functioned as a dynamic rhetorical arena where diverse voices and perspectives converged to share information, provide support, and advocate for themselves. This highlights the complexity and plurality of crisis communication in digital spaces. The study supports U&G by showing how individuals use social media to fulfill specific needs during a crisis, including seeking information, obtaining emotional support, and participating in collective problem-solving and opinion expression. While the findings largely support and extend these theories, they also highlight growth areas that emphasize the need for further refinement of RAT and U&G theories to better account for the nuances of digital communication platforms and their effects during crises.

For example, it was mentioned earlier that one unique aspect of Reddit is the anonymous nature of users. Though some individuals may decide to use their real name in their profile, most users maintain anonymity. RAT focuses on informational exchanges and public discourse between arenas (Coombs & Holladay, 2014), while U&G posits that individuals select a particular communication medium to fulfill their needs and wants (Ruggiero, 2000). Thus, the anonymous nature of the network, in the context of these theories, is neutral – however, if future research can acquire demographic data, that will no doubt add new insights. With that said, one could argue that the anonymous nature of Reddit allows users to be more honest and vocal than they otherwise would be, adding to the uniqueness of this dataset.

Combining RAT and U&G in this study provides a unique and comprehensive framework that enhances our understanding of online communities during crises. RAT emphasizes the role of the subreddit as a real-time rhetorical arena where diverse perspectives and public discourse shape crisis

responses (Raupp, 2019). It focuses on the multiplicity of voices and the dynamic nature of interactions in shaping how information is disseminated and debated. On the other hand, U&G delves into the motivations driving users' active participation in the subreddit, examining how effectively their needs for information, emotional support, and social interaction are met (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). By integrating these two theories, the study provides a robust theoretical framework that accounts for online crisis communication's structural and functional aspects. This dual approach allows researchers to draw theoretical implications for further research and practical implications for enhancing crisis communication and fostering more robust community engagement.

This study met the purpose of both theories and reaffirmed the effectiveness of these theories in answering the research questions. With that said, there is a need for further theoretical exploration of how RAT addresses conflicting information in crisis communication, including anonymous voices. Similarly, conflicting information could disrupt the supportive environment, which could lead to users leaving the subreddit and moving on to other communication mediums. U&G focuses on why an individual uses a specific medium (Ruggiero, 2000); it is an area for further theoretical exploration that could be why someone leaves a platform and what would motivate them to come back. In addition, the informal network on the subreddit empowered some users to share means to hold elected officials accountable and to influence public policy, demonstrating the potential of collective efficacy being built via social media platforms during a crisis. This was categorized under the theme of “opinion expression” via the codebook, but perhaps there would be another parent code to consider for future research.

## **5.4 Practical Implications**

This research offers practical implications for public administrators, crisis managers, and policymakers, especially in developing more effective and responsive systems during future crises and

improving systems when there is no crisis. Answering the two research questions has already led to the formation of recommendations, but this section will go beyond those points.

Examining Reddit posts during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the value of real-time interaction and feedback in crisis communication. Posts related to information sharing – especially those about new unemployment programs -- were often the most popular, highlighting the need for effective information dissemination during a crisis. As noted in the literature, crisis communication strategies should prioritize regularly disseminating clear, accurate, and timely information (Coombs, 2004, 2007). The e-government literature highlights how some governments engage with online platforms via one-way communication (Lu et al., 2016). However, the results of this study suggest that more governments should embrace a community participant model instead. Communication during a crisis should be empathetic and supportive, addressing the affected individual's emotional and psychological well-being (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). This aspect of emotional well-being could also be implemented via the methods described above and can provide a sense of connection in challenging times (Albris, 2018).

One way to reduce users' emotional stress would be to address the challenges Floridians face when trying to access their unemployment via the online dashboard and call center. Despite states being prohibited from imposing excessive burdensome administrative processes that hinder unemployment access for eligible individuals (Kim, 2010), it can be concluded from this study that Florida's unemployment system is challenging to understand and navigate. The widespread issues with payment delays, the complexity and confusion of unemployment applications, the time and effort required to comply with policy regulations, and the emotional stress reflect the administrative burden within the system itself (Herd & Moynihan, 2020). More specifically, the active audience reported frequent website crashes, error messages, and long loading times, which made it nearly impossible to complete

applications or check the status of their claims. When users called DEO, it led to varied results, with many waiting hours to speak to someone, only to be dropped.

Simplifying application procedures and providing clear, user-friendly instructions would help alleviate the stress expressed and delays faced by Floridians in the subreddit. This can involve streamlining forms, reducing unnecessary steps, and ensuring that digital interfaces are intuitive and accessible to all users, including those with limited digital literacy. In addition, frequent technical issues with the DEO's digital infrastructure, such as website crashes, underscored the need for robust and reliable system improvements. Investing in and maintaining robust digital infrastructure is imperative for handling increased demand during crises. This includes ensuring that websites and online portals are scalable, secure, and user-friendly. Regular stress testing and updates can help prevent technical failures and improve user experience.

These implications intersect well with organizational capacity theory, which refers to an agency's ability to meet the needs of its constituents, modify internal management practices, and respond effectively to changes in the external environment (Glor, 2007). Public administrators are recommended to integrate the unemployment system in their emergency response plans and to prepare to scale up staff alongside making investments in technology improvements so that capacity can improve.

The stress and frustration caused by these administrative hurdles and lack of capacity were reflected in the criticism expressed toward governmental officials via the subreddit. This leads to the concept of legitimacy in public administration. Public administration legitimacy is defined as "one that is respected by the public, has more control, authority, and discretion to act independently than at present, and is given the status of a somewhat equal partner in relation to elected officials and other parts of government" (Box, 1998, p. 134). The rhetoric used by the public in this arena indicates that they are questioning the legitimacy of DEO and the state's handling of this crisis. Knox (2016), applying

Habermas' theory, argues that social media platforms can enhance legitimacy by allowing for more symmetrical and inclusive discourse between administrators and citizens. Enhancing communication and interaction with the public could help address the legitimacy dilemma and reflect the first point made in this section.

Finally, policymakers should use social media and community forums to inform policy decisions. Regularly reviewing and responding to public concerns can lead to more effective and responsive policies. As an elected state representative, exploring posts within this subreddit taught me so much. Implementing feedback mechanisms where the public can easily report issues and suggest improvements can enhance the adaptability and effectiveness of crisis management systems. The failure to address public criticism exacerbates the immediate crisis and undermines government institutions' long-term public confidence and image (Benoit, 1997, 2012).

## **5.5 Limitations of the Study**

While this research design and dataset offer valuable insights into crisis communication and governance strategies, limitations of the study do exist and should be considered when discussing research results. The study's reliance on Reddit posts within the framework of RAT captures only a segment of the broader public discourse. This dataset may not represent the viewpoints of individuals who do not use Reddit or prefer other discussion platforms. Reddit's user base tends to be younger and more tech-savvy, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. The study relies solely on textual analysis of Reddit posts and does not include user interviews. Conducting interviews could provide deeper insights into users' motivations, perceptions, and experiences, adding a unique perspective to the analysis and helping to counterbalance the platform's anonymous nature. The data collection process may also be subject to selection bias, including only publicly available posts that did not consider

deleted or moderated content. This could skew the findings if specific posts were more likely to be removed or hidden from public view.

While the primary subreddit posts provide valuable data, excluding comments may omit critical insights and interactions within threads. Comments often contain detailed discussions, follow-up questions, and peer support, which could enhance understanding of the community dynamics and responses. Although previous studies have successfully analyzed primary posts without comments (Altshuler et al., 2015; Arya et al., 2022; Manchaiah et al., 2021), including comments could offer a more comprehensive view of the discourse. That said, social media posts do not exist in isolation, and the study may not fully capture the broader context of the crisis, including real-time events, press coverage, social media trends, and public sentiment. These external factors can significantly influence online discourse and should be considered to provide a more holistic analysis.

This research focuses on the early impact of COVID-19 in Florida, covering posts dated between April 30, 2020, and December 31, 2020. Consequently, after the study period, it may not account for later developments and changes in crisis communication and governance strategies. Ongoing analysis is necessary to understand how communication strategies evolved as the pandemic progressed.

One theoretical limitation is how U&G assumes audiences are highly active and rational in their media choices. It may overlook situations where media consumption is more passive or habitual and where users may not have clear motives (Salubi & Muchaonyerwa, 2018). U&G primarily describes how and why people use media but does not predict media behavior or outcomes. It focuses on explaining media use post-factum rather than predicting future behavior. Another theoretical limitation is how new RAT is as a field of study; more studies should be conducted to understand these theories' applications better.



## 5.5 Future Research

This study opens several avenues for further exploration. Future research could consider applying qualitative content analysis methods to other social media platforms or online forums to validate the findings and assess their generalizability across informal online networks. One could also examine traditional media headlines during the same research period and see how Reddit conversations compare to traditional media. Moreover, applying U&G to explore why users choose specific subreddits over others and examining factors influencing user engagement and satisfaction within different subreddits could provide deeper insights. Studying the moderator's role in shaping online communities' discourse and effectiveness during crises and analyzing the spread and impact of misinformation within these communities are potential areas for future research that could intersect with network governance and leadership studies. These research ideas would reflect RAT, investigate why users choose one informal network over another, and highlight the multivocal arenas.

Additionally, conducting semi-formal interviews with impacted public administrators, subreddit moderators, and focus groups with subreddit users would offer deeper insights into their experiences, motivations, and perspectives. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of an informal network over time could provide insights into how users adapt and change with their motivations, helping us understand the long-term effects of crises on public trust and administrative processes.

This study approach could also be expanded to other states, providing insights into regional variations and the influence of state-specific policies. Researchers could also explore how political and cultural factors influence crisis communication within the informal network. This could involve studying how political ideologies or cultural background impact public trust and the dissemination of information.

Exploring the concept of administrative burden is essential, particularly as it forms the foundation of the first research question. Researchers could analyze the data with a codebook based on

administrative burden and examine how these results interact with crisis communication literature. It would be beneficial to investigate whether the subreddit helped users overcome systemic barriers and explore the impact of the informal network on building collective capacity and efficacy.

With these future research recommendations in mind, scholars can build on this study's findings to better understand crisis communication within informal online networks. This expanded knowledge will contribute to more effective and adaptive crisis management strategies, ultimately improving public trust and resilience during crises.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

By analyzing the posts on a dedicated subreddit during the beginning of Florida's unemployment crisis during the COVID-19 crisis, this research has highlighted the role of informal online networks in disseminating information, providing emotional support, facilitating collective problem-solving, and expressing opinions about policy. The study demonstrates the value of diverse community participation in crisis communication, showing how digital platforms can facilitate various voices and dynamic interactions. The importance of real-time communication and the potential for feedback mechanisms was underscored, with digital platforms enabling immediate information exchange and problem-solving.

Providing emotional support became another takeaway for crisis communication experts, as it helps mitigate the psychological impact of crises on individuals. Another conclusion was the need for government officials to simplify the unemployment processes and address system failures with the call center and online portal. These steps will reduce compliance, learning, and psychological costs individuals face during an economic crisis, help build public trust, and alleviate inequities in accessing unemployment compensation.

Furthermore, this research has expanded the field's theoretical knowledge by providing valuable insights into applying RAT and U&G in crisis communication. The subreddit served as a dynamic

rhetorical arena where diverse voices converged to share information, provide support, and advocate for change. This highlights the complexity and plurality of crisis communication in digital spaces. The study also supports U&G by showing how individuals use social media to meet their needs during a crisis, such as seeking information, obtaining emotional support, and engaging in problem-solving and opinion expression.

However, the findings also reveal areas for growth. The variability in information quality, potential for adverse interactions, and limited impact of advocacy efforts suggest that crisis communication within social media arenas are more complex than initially assumed by these theories. These challenges highlight the need to refine RAT and U&G theories to better account for the different degrees of digital communication platforms and their effects during crises. This could be accomplished by applying RAT and U&G more regularly to studying online informal networks.

In times of crisis, individuals rely heavily on accurate, timely, and empathetic communication to navigate uncertainties and challenges. Social media platforms are indispensable in facilitating this communication and providing information and emotional and psychological support. This data and discussion show that effective crisis communication strategies must prioritize transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to build and maintain public trust. Simplifying administrative processes and reducing the burden on individuals can help to ensure that support systems are accessible and practical. Public administrators should consider addressing capacity issues and integrating unemployment compensation into their disaster response plans.

In conclusion, this study underscores the growing role of informal online networks in crisis communication and the critical importance of public administrators in addressing the informational and emotional needs of the public. By fostering inclusive, transparent, and supportive communication environments, public administrators can better equip themselves, their teams, and communities to face

the challenges of future crises. As User 78 wrote on October 14, 2020: *“I hope this helps someone, even one person.”*

## **APPENDIX A: UCF IRB LETTER**



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

**Institutional Review Board**

FWA00000351  
IRB00001138, IRB00012110  
Office of Research  
12201 Research Parkway  
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

**EXEMPTION DETERMINATION**

April 1, 2024

Dear Anna Eskamani:

On 4/1/2024, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Connecting in Crisis: Exploring Online Informal Communications in Florida's Unemployment Struggle
Investigator:	Anna Eskamani
IRB ID:	STUDY00006457
Funding:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• HRP-251 - FORM - Faculty Advisor Scientific-Scholarly Review (1).pdf, Category: Faculty Research Approval;</li><li>• A. Eskamani, Category: IRB Protocol;</li><li>• Example of Subreddit, Category: Other;</li></ul>

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in is detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu). Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Tamiko Fukuda  
Designated Reviewer

## **APPENDIX B: FORUM RULES CREATED BY SUBREDDIT MODERATORS**



r/FloridaUnemployment • 4 yr. ago



## r/FloridaUnemployment Lounge

A place for members of [r/FloridaUnemployment](#) to sit in timeout in the corner.

The Automoderator has been turned up to filter anyone without certain levels of karma and all new accounts. It will also now block posting people's social media links. If you post people's social media links you will be banned and turned in to Reddit admins - this is against your terms of service. The site will be left locked for a few days, to allow those who feel the need to engage in immature tactics to think. Live and let live.



34



897



Share



## **APPENDIX C: DATA FOR FIGURE 7 AND FIGURE 8**


Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency
4/30/20	1	6/6/20	3	6/23/20	1	7/6/20	3	7/21/20	1
5/23/20	1	6/8/20	3	6/24/20	2	7/7/20	1	7/22/20	2
5/27/20	1	6/9/20	4	6/25/20	1	7/9/20	1	7/23/20	1
5/28/20	3	6/10/20	2	6/27/20	1	7/10/20	3	7/27/20	1
5/29/20	4	6/11/20	3	6/29/20	2	7/11/20	1	7/28/20	1
5/30/20	1	6/12/20	3	6/30/20	3	7/13/20	1	7/29/20	3
6/1/20	2	6/15/20	2	7/1/20	1	7/14/20	2	7/31/20	1
6/2/20	1	6/16/20	3	7/2/20	5	7/15/20	3	8/1/20	1
6/3/20	2	6/17/20	1	7/3/20	6	7/16/20	1	8/6/20	2
6/4/20	1	6/22/20	2	7/5/20	1	7/17/20	1	8/8/20	2
Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency
8/10/20	1	8/26/20	2	9/8/20	1	9/28/20	1	10/12/20	2
8/13/20	1	8/28/20	1	9/9/20	1	9/29/20	2	10/13/20	1
8/14/20	1	8/29/20	1	9/10/20	1	9/30/20	3	10/14/20	1
8/16/20	1	8/30/20	1	9/12/20	1	10/3/20	1	10/16/20	2
8/18/20	4	9/1/20	2	9/13/20	1	10/4/20	1	10/21/20	3
8/20/20	1	9/2/20	2	9/14/20	4	10/6/20	2	10/22/20	1
8/21/20	1	9/3/20	3	9/15/20	2	10/7/20	1	10/24/20	1
8/22/20	1	9/4/20	1	9/20/20	1	10/8/20	2	10/25/20	1
8/24/20	4	9/6/20	3	9/21/20	1	10/9/20	1	10/27/20	1
8/25/20	1	9/7/20	1	9/26/20	1	10/11/20	1	10/30/20	1
Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency	Post Date	Frequency				
11/2/20	1	12/3/20	1	12/26/20	1				
11/3/20	1	12/4/20	1	12/27/20	2				
11/4/20	1	12/7/20	1	12/28/20	3				
11/8/20	1	12/9/20	1	12/29/20	3				
11/24/20	1	12/14/20	1	12/30/20	3				

11/26/20	1	12/17/20	1	12/31/20	3
11/28/20	2	12/18/20	1		
11/29/20	1	12/20/20	1		
12/1/20	2	12/21/20	3		
12/2/20	1	12/22/20	1		


Month	Frequency
April	1
May	10
June	42
July	40
August	26
September	32
October	23
November	9
December	30

## **APPENDIX D: TOP 10% KARMA SCORE POSTS**

Title	Author	Score	Text	Created	Coding Referenced
I WAS ABLE TO GET RESULTS! HOW I WAS ABLE TO GET FLDEO TO CALL ME & FIX ALL....	User 10	41	<p>Follow me on twitter (@TobiasTheGeek). I have been on a crusade against FLDEO. Yesterday I started posting all contact info for the FLDEO upper echelon. I called and called every number. I left messages, strong-worded, but professional messages. Within an hour I received a call from someone from FLDEO. She was THE BEST! You could tell she was from the actual office and not one of the newly hired phone support staff. She jumped through hoops and fixed everything with my UI and my wives as well. My wife had been stuck on "pending" the entire time. By the time we were finished, we were able to claim ALL 11-12 weeks. The woman said the money "should be deposited within a couple of days". There are some good ones out there. Good luck and stay diligent.</p> <p><a href="https://preview.redd.it/he0fyposkh551.png?width=598&amp;format=png&amp;auto=webp&amp;s=5d87b60443523e451dd67bb9830380e10ca9c363">https://preview.redd.it/he0fyposkh551.png?width=598&amp;format=png&amp;auto=webp&amp;s=5d87b60443523e451dd67bb9830380e10ca9c363</a></p> <p><a href="https://preview.redd.it/h4kiuioskh551.png?width=604&amp;format=png&amp;auto=webp&amp;s=863a4483e218b9f61984ca7b64eb9b5b761e5f05">https://preview.redd.it/h4kiuioskh551.png?width=604&amp;format=png&amp;auto=webp&amp;s=863a4483e218b9f61984ca7b64eb9b5b761e5f05</a></p>	6/17/20 10:37	Application Process, Problem Resolution, Government Response, Spoke to DEO (Positive Experience), Sharing resources, Hope
Work search has been waived till Feb 27th.	User 122	41	Just saw it on Twitter. If you need a reference go on Twitter and look up Vanessa Brito. She just posted it.	12/30/20 20:49	Legal information, Sharing resources, Work search issues

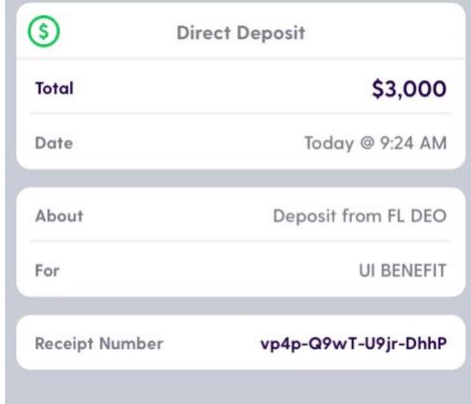
Sad but true Unemployment Meme	User 92	36	 <b>One Hot Mess AK</b> @libbybakalar  I realize this is a controversial take but maybe being one blown tire, one broken bone, or one paycheck away from homelessness & financial ruin at all times isn't actually "freedom" the way we were raised to believe it is.	10/8/20 21:58	Economic impact commentary
Weâ€™re gonna make it after aaallll! After months of waiting and waiting I got all funds owed and Iâ€™m employed again! Hang in there kids!	User 45	34	<i>Celebratory image shared of Reddit user</i>	7/6/20 18:07	Problem resolution, Hope
DeSantis Caves! \$300 a Week Coming Your Way!	User 62	33	And it will be retroactive to August first. So, get in line for \*another\* backdating fiasco!	8/26/20 14:09	Application process, Government response, Legal information, lost wages assistance
Its finally over for me	User 67	32	I finally got all my back pay guys. The 4 month battle is over. I wish everyone else the best of luck. My 4800 came today. I'm going car shopping! And I'm gonna treat myself and family to a nice lunch	8/25/20 7:12	Application process, Hope
Federal Benefits	User 13	29	Hey, so I have been seeing a lot of people commenting that they have not been receiving there \$600 dollars the last couple of weeks, I am also in the same boat.	6/3/20 16:54	Application process, problem resolution,


			<p>Today I managed to get in contact with Florida DEO, and finally got some answers. According to the lady that I spoke with they are currently backed up because the system has been reworked instead of it being \$600 weekly it will now be \$1200 on the 15th and last of the month, technically it will be \$1080 because they will be removing the taxes for everyone (regardless of whether you opted in or not). Due to this the last weeks of May haven't been paid out and many of us should start seeing those payments come into our account either Thursday, Friday, or next Monday. They are trying to join both the Federal and state payments together so the would work under the same payout structure. The most we can do for now is wait, it's just really sucks because of a lot of us don't have the option to keep waiting. Hopefully this helps clear some questions.</p>		Spoke to DEO (Positive experience),
<p>This article breaks down the details about unemployment benefits in the new stimulus bill</p>	User 75	28	<p>[<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/21/new-stimulus-provides-300-per-week-11-weeks-enhanced-unemployment.html">https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/21/new-stimulus-provides-300-per-week-11-weeks-enhanced-unemployment.html</a>](<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/21/new-stimulus-provides-300-per-week-11-weeks-enhanced-unemployment.html">https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/21/new-stimulus-provides-300-per-week-11-weeks-enhanced-unemployment.html</a>)</p> <p>The TL;DR version:</p> <p>\- Adds another 11 weeks of eligibility for PUA and PEUC, from Dec 27th to March 14th.</p> <p>\- Enhanced payments will be \$300 a week, but you can receive an extra \$100 if you previously received both a W-2 and 1099. (So basically, if you were an employee somewhere, but also had a second income as an independent contractor or your own side business, as I understand it.)</p> <p>\- It will immediately go into effect on Dec 27th, but could take weeks for states to update their systems to get the new enhanced payments out to people. (No surprise there, especially for us Floridians.)</p> <p>That's about it. So for those wondering, this does not include any retroactive enhanced benefits. The \$300/400 payments would be applied starting next week, no earlier. We also have to worry about whether DeSantis will extend the work search waiver beyond the current January 2nd expiration date.</p>	12/21/20 12:31	<p>Legal information, Government response, Lost wages assistances, Work search requirements</p>

\$300 Payments This Week!!!!	User 77	26		9/6/20 21:08	Legal information, Lost wages assistance
TRUMP HAS JUST SIGNED THE BILL!!!!	User 116	26	TRUMP HAS SIGNED THE BILL!!!!	12/27/20 20:06	Legal information, Federal stimulus
PEUC to PUA positive experience / advice	User 78	24	<p>I've been reading PEUC to PUA posts since this has started and see a lot of fear and struggles with it but want to share these tips when you go from PEUC to PUA.</p> <p>First, you'll see your balance and know when your last PEUC amount will be paid. If there is only enough for 1 payment, just claim that week. (Be patient, you'll get that second week). Once you do so you will either get an immediate PUA link or have one the next morning. My son had one immediately but have heard it's the next day by some as well.</p> <p>Go to your PUA link and fill out the information CAREFULLY question by question so there is no error that could cause a denial. The questions are simple but you will need to know the information on your 2019 W2s so have a copy ready.</p> <p>There will be one confusing question that asks you reasons you were off due to Covid. They list quite a few (caregiver, have covid, etc) but none seem to pertain to laid off and awaiting job return. I was told to check company ended by a DEO worker and did so for him. When it gives you the opportunity in a box to explain in</p>	10/14/20 8:24	Problem resolution, Emotional toll



			<p>detail why you lost your job, that's where you simply put that you were laid off due to COVID19 and have not been called back. Just that simple statement works.</p> <p>After applying you likely will see an immediate eligible/active with weeks and new amount showing.</p> <p>You will be able to request your weeks at that point.</p> <p>And, very important, you WILL see that it says there is an adjudication and on another screen waiting employers response. The adjudication will disappear once you've been sent your payments for the requests.</p> <p>My son immediately requested and one said 0 hold and the other pending. 0 hold was for waiting week, which they waived that evening and today he has both payments and no adjudication message.</p> <p>It still says Awaiting Employer Response on next screen but the claim was approved and I've been told that doesn't affect anything as they already have the quarterly from his employer for the last quarter of 2019 which still is what your PUA is based on.</p> <p>I hope this helps someone, even one person. This can be intimidating and stressful, especially with how Florida has seemed to make it much more difficult than most states...but it is doable with a little patience.</p>		
Good news!!!	User 22	22	<p><b>UPDATES:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governor Ron DeSantis has directed DEO to continue waiving the work search and work registration requirements for claimants through <b>August 1, 2020</b>.</li> <li>• Additionally, the waiting week requirement will continue to be waived through <b>August 1, 2020</b>.</li> </ul>	7/1/20 23:21	Legal information, Work search requirements

The DEO has suspended work requirements through the week ending of September 5, 2020	User 50	22	Just claimed my weeks and this greeted me. Was unexpected but it was there. Hope y'all have a nice and safe day. Get some sun and exercise if you can!	7/29/20 10:34	Application process, Legal information, Social cohesion, Work search issues
FINALLY!! After submitting 3 request and waiting since Aug 16th I received my back pay!	User 110	22		12/9/20 12:09	Application process, Problem resolution
Work Search Requirement and Waiting Week Waiver Extended to September 5	User 51	21	<a href="https://www.abccactionnews.com/news/coronavirus/gov-desantis-asks-deo-to-continue-to-waive-work-search-requirements-until-sept-5">https://www.abccactionnews.com/news/coronavirus/gov-desantis-asks-deo-to-continue-to-waive-work-search-requirements-until-sept-5</a>	7/29/20 1:40	Legal information, Work search issues
PSA. extended Florida EBT BENEFITS approved for September. I know this is not unemployment related.	User 79	21	<p>My EBT APP showed this yesterday with my normal refill date.</p> <p>So check your balance and pending or future deposit for the month.</p> <p>I know people could use the extra food assistance.</p> <p>I use the app called Fresh EBT to check balance and upcoming deposits to the EBT in Florida.</p>	9/12/20 14:48	Sharing resources, Economic impact commentary

Trump wants a stimulus bill from his hospital bed	User 22	21		10/3/20 16:23	Legal information, Federal stimulus
CONNECT Downtime for CARES Act Extensions	User 124	21	<p>"In order to continue implementing recently passed changes to programs available through the CARES Act, CONNECT will NOT be available to claimants and employers between Friday, January 1 and Saturday, January 2" ... "CONNECT [will be] available on Sun, Jan 3, from 8am - 5pm"</p> <p>Source: <a href="https://twitter.com/FLDEO/status/1344712556091473921">https://twitter.com/FLDEO/status/1344712556091473921</a></p>	12/31/20 14:08	Application process, Legal information, Federal stimulus, Website issues
Fill this form out immediately - FI DEO is working with senators to allegedly help push federal payments through (Iâ€™m guessing because they have no idea who is owed what....) .	User 9	20	<p><a href="https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe1f9cqOKEcAXowF2HTmE8u61DXVu8KfYabaFSWnwIB1WVwvA/viewform">https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe1f9cqOKEcAXowF2HTmE8u61DXVu8KfYabaFSWnwIB1WVwvA/viewform</a></p>	6/9/20 12:25	Problem resolution, Sharing resources
DeSantis Says Nothing at Press Conference	User 62	20	<p>DeSantis said nothing about unemployment at his press conference today. WTF is wrong with this guy? All that he has to do as ask FEMA for the money, but he acts like it is coming out of his pocket. Arizona has already started paying out the \$300.</p>	8/24/20 13:24	Government response, Lost wages assistance
Finally 900\$	User 133	20	<p>WOOHOOOOOO! 900\$ WAS DEPOSITED THIS MORNING!</p>	9/9/20 7:59	Application process, Lost wages assistance

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