

Article

The Experiences of Layoff Survivors: Navigating Organizational Justice in Times of Crisis

Sanghyun Lee ¹, Sounman Hong ², Won-Yong Shin ³ and Bong Gyou Lee ^{1,*}

¹ Graduate School of Information, Yonsei University, Seoul 03722, Republic of Korea; leesanghyun@yonsei.ac.kr

² Department of Public Administration, Yonsei University, Seoul 03722, Republic of Korea; sounman_hong@yonsei.ac.kr

³ School of Mathematics and Computing (Computational Science and Engineering), Yonsei University, Seoul 03722, Republic of Korea; wy.shin@yonsei.ac.kr

* Correspondence: bglee@yonsei.ac.kr

Abstract: This study explores the impact of COVID-19 layoffs on surviving employees' perceptions at Airbnb, a key player in the hospitality industry, during the global pandemic. The crisis brought organizational justice into sharp focus, raising questions about fairness, employee satisfaction, and trust in management. Utilizing an interpretivist approach, we conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with Airbnb employees who survived the layoffs. Accompanied by a comprehensive literature review, our analysis delved into the challenges these employees encountered. The thematic analysis uncovered insights into organizational justice dimensions—distributive, procedural, interactive, and informational—and their role in shaping fairness perceptions and employee outcomes. Findings reveal that despite challenging circumstances, empathetic and proactive practices like regular check-ins and transparent communication significantly helped maintain fairness perceptions among survivors. This counters the common belief that layoffs invariably diminish justice perceptions. Our study demonstrates that negative impacts can be effectively mitigated through thoughtful organizational practices. In conclusion, the research underscores the importance of organizational justice during crisis-induced layoffs. It advocates for maintaining fairness and transparency to preserve employee trust and satisfaction, which are vital for organizational resilience and sustainability. This study enriches the literature on organizational justice and crisis management, providing valuable insights for businesses in similar situations.

Keywords: Airbnb; COVID-19 layoffs; crisis management; human resource management; layoffs; crisis downsizing; organizational justice; crisis layoff; organizational challenges



Citation: Lee, S.; Hong, S.; Shin, W.-Y.; Lee, B.G. The Experiences of Layoff Survivors: Navigating Organizational Justice in Times of Crisis. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 16717. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152416717>

Academic Editors: Rollnik-Sadowska Ewa and Marko Slavkovic

Received: 8 October 2023

Revised: 15 November 2023

Accepted: 29 November 2023

Published: 11 December 2023



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented disruption globally, compelling organizations to navigate through a period of uncertainty. The hospitality industry, predominantly dependent on in-person interactions, has been profoundly impacted by COVID-19 [1,2]. The World Travel and Tourism Council reports that nearly 50 million jobs in the hospitality industry worldwide are at significant risk due to COVID-19 [3]. These pandemic-induced layoffs pose a significant social and economic challenge, affecting both employees' well-being and the survival of organizations.

Unlike previous crises, the pandemic has introduced a variety of complex challenges [2,4,5]. On one hand, organizations are struggling with economic strain due to reduced demand, declining performance, and decreased investments. These financial difficulties lead to workforce reduction, commonly known as downsizing or layoffs. Layoffs, once seen as short-term economic adjustments, now reveal deeper implications for long-term organizational sustainability. Economically, while layoffs may provide immediate cost-saving benefits, the potential long-term costs associated with recruitment, training, and potential reputational risks can negate these short-term gains [6–8].

On the other hand, organizations are also tasked with ensuring their remaining employees continue to perform well and stay engaged. This necessitates significant changes in how they approach work. Clearly, these crises present various complex challenges in managing human resources. The critical role of organizational leaders in responding to crises is emphasized [9,10]. Although crisis management remains a vital skill for executives, the unique and significant nature of this crisis poses unprecedented challenges. For example, the impact of organizational layoffs extends beyond the individuals directly affected, influencing the morale, allegiance, and productivity of the remaining workforce.

Scholars have highlighted that those who survive layoffs often grapple with feelings of survivor's guilt, heightened workloads, and eroded job security, resulting in a phenomenon commonly referred to as "survivor syndrome" [11–13]. In the midst of these intricate challenges, the concept of organizational justice has emerged as a critical element in understanding the dynamics at play. Organizational justice, as defined by Greenberg (1990, 1993), relates to employees' perceptions of fairness in the workplace. It includes four key dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice, and informational justice, each having a significant role in shaping how employees perceive fairness within the organization. Following layoffs, these dimensions become increasingly relevant for "layoff survivors" as they evaluate the fairness of the processes and outcomes surrounding the layoffs and how they influence their commitment, cooperation, and sense of respect within the organization.

However, despite the importance of organizational justice in the context of layoffs, a significant research gap remains regarding how the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted employees' perceptions of fairness and the resulting challenges they face.

With layoffs being a multifaceted challenge lacking a one-size-fits-all solution, this study aims to capture the perspectives of surviving stakeholders during the COVID-19 backdrop. This research addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the views of surviving employees regarding the fairness of layoff?

RQ2. What are the challenges in a post-layoff environment perceived by surviving employees?

RQ3. How do layoffs impact job satisfaction and trust in management, as perceived by surviving employees?

To systematically delineate the relationship between our study's objectives, these research questions, and our proposed hypotheses, we present Table 1. This table illustrates the alignment of our study's objectives with the corresponding research questions and hypotheses, ensuring a coherent structure for our research approach.

Table 1. Alignment of study objectives, research questions, and hypotheses.

Objective	Research Questions	Hypotheses
Understand how COVID-19 layoffs affected employee perceptions of fairness at Airbnb	What are the views of surviving employees regarding the fairness of layoff processes?	H1: Layoff survivors perceive a significant decline in organizational fairness due to COVID-19 layoffs.
Identify the challenges faced by employees who survived the layoffs	What are the challenges in a post-layoff environment perceived by surviving employees?	H2: Surviving employees face multiple challenges, including increased workload and survivor syndrome.
Assess the impact of layoffs on job satisfaction and trust in management	How do layoffs impact job satisfaction and trust in management from the perspective of surviving employees?	H3: Layoffs negatively impact job satisfaction and trust in management among surviving employees.

To address these research questions, we utilized an exploratory case study approach. We interviewed fifteen current employees of Airbnb who have survived recent layoffs, representing diverse functions within the organization. Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives on the COVID-19 layoffs and to provide insights into the challenges and impacts on organizational productivity and employee well-being in the post-layoff

environment. Additionally, these insights were supported by the analysis of empirical data and prior case studies [14].

Our study offers significant contributions to the field. It is the first qualitative exploration of surviving employees' perceptions during COVID-19 layoffs, specifically within the context of Airbnb. Moreover, our study introduces the systematic identification and categorization of factors influencing layoffs from the perspective of surviving employees. Furthermore, it applies thematic analysis [15] as a systematic approach for identifying patterns within qualitative data. Unlike existing literature, often reliant on review-based recommendations (e.g., [16–18]), this research focuses on an empirical foundation, offering a framework for sustainable post-layoff strategies.

The article continues with an overview of the relevant literature on COVID-19 layoffs and organizational justice, followed by a description of our research method, a presentation of our data, and a discussion of our study's findings and implications.

2. COVID-19 and the Hospitality Sector

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in extensive disruptions worldwide, impacting countries and individuals globally. The hospitality sector, including businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and travel services, has been particularly vulnerable to the pandemic's far-reaching effects. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing measures implemented to contain the virus have crippled the hospitality industry, leading to significant economic losses and numerous challenges for both organizations and employees [16,19–24].

Researchers point out that the hospitality sector suffered disproportionately compared to other sectors. The halt of travel and leisure activities and the enforcement of stringent safety protocols led to a drastic decline in revenue and customer demand [4,5,14,25–29]. This sudden and severe impact on the industry's workforce prompted psychological and organizational challenges, particularly survivor syndrome among employees who remained after widespread layoffs [13,30–32].

Airbnb serves as an illustration of the hospitality industry's turmoil. The company, famous for its platform offering unique accommodations, experienced a severe downturn during the pandemic [33–41]. Travel fears and restrictions dramatically reduced demand for shared lodging services, leading to a 67% decrease in Airbnb's revenues in 2020 [41]. This reflects the extent of disruption in the hospitality sector, highlighting the struggles of even digitally native enterprises.

Consequently, managers in the hospitality sector faced multifaceted responsibilities. They needed to ensure employee safety, adapt business models, innovate new revenue streams, and support the emotional resilience of layoff survivors [42,43]. The pandemic underscored the importance of effectively managing layoff survivors.

3. COVID-19 Layoffs at Airbnb

A notable example is Airbnb, which underwent a significant downturn due to travel restrictions and a decline in demand for shared accommodations. In May 2020, Airbnb announced the layoff of approximately 25% of its global workforce, about 1900 employees, in response to the pandemic's challenges [34,36,41].

The company's co-founder and CEO, Brian Chesky, delivered a heartfelt letter regarding the layoffs, emphasizing empathy and maintaining core values [35]. The media highlighted Airbnb's unique approach to downsizing. Articles and reports focused on how Airbnb's commitment to transparency and empathy resonated with both employees and the public. This approach spurred discussions about the impact of such a people-centric approach on organizational reputation, stakeholder trust, and employee loyalty [14,36].

For instance, Chesky personally communicated the layoff decision, acknowledging its emotional weight and maintaining a human touch in the decision-making process, contrasting with impersonal layoffs by other organizations during the pandemic. Airbnb also offered extended healthcare benefits and support in finding new employment opportunities, demonstrating a commitment to employee well-being beyond their tenure [34].

Furthermore, the introduction of the “Talent Directory” by Airbnb enabled departing employees to showcase their skills and connect with potential employers [44]. This innovative initiative highlighted the company’s dedication to assisting employees during challenging times. Researchers in organizational behavior and crisis management, as well as the media, have regarded Airbnb’s strategy as a model illuminating the importance of fairness, transparency, and sensitivity in conducting layoffs, especially during tumultuous periods [14,45,46].

4. Literature Review and Research Questions

4.1. Organizational Justice and Surviving Employees

Airbnb’s case highlights the importance of organizational justice, a concept concerning employee perceptions of fairness in the workplace [47,48]. Previous research has shown that fairness is crucial for several reasons [48–51]. Firstly, fair decision implementation by supervisors leads to greater organizational commitment and improved performance among employees (e.g., [52]). Secondly, the perception of justice can enhance cooperation among employees, fostering a sense of community and belonging [48,53]. Lastly, employees who feel respected through fair treatment contribute to a virtuous cycle in organizational operations [14,54–58].

Organizational justice encompasses four key dimensions, namely, distributive justice, procedural justice, interactive justice, and informational justice. Each plays a pivotal role in shaping employees’ perceptions of fairness within the workplace. For example, distributive justice is centered on the equitable allocation of rewards and resources, encompassing compensation, promotions, and opportunities. It examines how employees assess whether outcomes align fairly with their contributions and those of their colleagues [59–62]. Procedural justice underscores the importance of the fairness of decision-making processes within an organization. Factors such as transparency, consistency, and employee participation in decisions related to resource allocation and distribution are central [63–65]. Those scholars have emphasized the significance of procedural justice in shaping employees’ perceptions.

For decades, the main pillars of justice have been distributive and procedural justice. However, subsequent research introduced the concept of interactional justice, emphasizing the importance of fairness in interpersonal exchanges. Bies and Moag [66] posited that interactional justice is attained when management transparently and respectfully conveys procedural specifics and supports decision outcomes with honest feedback. Greenberg [48] further divided interactional justice into two dimensions: interpersonal justice, which concerns the quality of personal interactions, and informational justice, which pertains to the caliber of information provided. Studies indicate that these four facets of organizational justice—distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational—not only influence organizational results individually but are also interrelated and can impact each other [67].

In the aftermath of organizational layoffs, employees who remain, often referred to as “layoff survivors”, find themselves at the crossroads of these four dimensions of organizational justice. Distributive justice prompts them to assess whether they bear a fair share of responsibilities and opportunities in the post-layoff landscape [60,63]. Procedural justice leads survivors to scrutinize the transparency and consistency of the layoff procedures, searching for evidence that their input was considered [63,64,68]. Interactive justice comes into play as survivors navigate challenging communication about the layoffs, seeking respectful and empathetic treatment from management [66,69]. Meanwhile, informational justice becomes crucial as survivors seek clarity and honest information about the reasons behind the layoffs and how they will affect the organization’s future [14,48,70,71]. These dimensions collectively shape how layoff survivors perceive their treatment and the organization’s commitment to fairness during these trying times.

4.2. Research Questions

To visually represent the complex interplay of these dimensions of organizational justice and their impact on layoff survivors, we introduce a schematic model (refer to

Figure 1). This model delineates the relationship between the four dimensions of perceived organizational justice (distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational) and their collective influence on layoff survivors' perceptions of fairness. It also illustrates how these perceptions are related to employee job satisfaction and trust in management, as highlighted in our research findings.

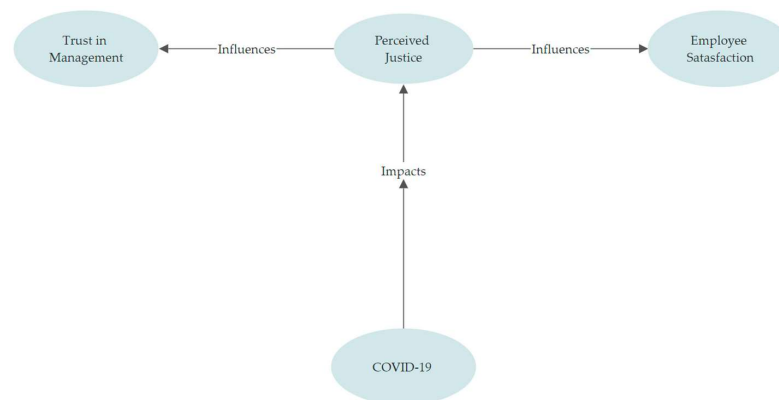


Figure 1. Schematic model of organizational justice and its impact on layoff survivors.

Exploring the role of organizational justice in mitigating layoff challenges among the surviving employees, S. Lee et al. [14] found that employees' perceptions of organizational justice are positively related to their job satisfaction and trust in management. In line with past research, it showed the importance of organizational justice in mitigating the negative challenges of layoffs [72–77]. Furthermore, the researchers found that interactional and procedural justice matters more than distributive justice and that interactional justice was the most important dimension, which was somewhat inconsistent with previous research [63,72]. To address this research gap, we examine the impact of COVID-19 layoffs on the perceptions of surviving employees, analyzing these through the lens of organizational justice in the following section.

5. Methods

Informed by the interpretivist paradigm, we aim to delve deeply into the lived experiences of employees navigating layoffs and the post-layoff work environment [78–82]. Our approach, grounded in interpretivism, seeks to uncover the intricate layers of subjective perceptions, meanings, beliefs, and motives that individuals attach to their experiences, offering a nuanced understanding of their social realities [83,84]. This approach is particularly salient in the context of organizational layoffs during crises, where individual experiences and interpretations are often imbued with complexity and ambiguity [85–87]. Recent scholarly recommendations advocate for more qualitative studies to enrich our understanding of the aftermath of COVID-19 layoffs, thereby augmenting the depth and complexity of data available for interpretation [14].

5.1. Participants

The unit of analysis in this research comprises Airbnb employees who survived a major COVID-19 layoff. Data collection took place over three weeks in June 2020, involving a study sample of 15 participants (8 females and 7 males) working in various functions within the organization. These participants represented a diverse range of roles, including Business Development, Communications, Community Support, Employee Experience, Engineering, Marketing, and Public Policy. This diversity allowed for a richer exploration of variations and commonalities in layoff perceptions across different teams and contexts. For the purpose of confidentiality, prior to the interviews, all participants provided their consent and were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their information. Pseudonyms,

represented by assigned numbers (e.g., Participant 1), were used to protect the participants' identities. Table 2 presents the demographic information of the participants.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Participants	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Years in Service
Participant 1	37	Female	Single	12
Participant 2	35	Male	Married	10
Participant 3	43	Male	Married	18
Participant 4	43	Male	Married	15
Participant 5	35	Male	Married	10
Participant 6	35	Female	Single	10
Participant 7	41	Female	Married	14
Participant 8	31	Female	Single	7
Participant 9	30	Male	Single	5
Participant 10	37	Female	Single	11
Participant 11	33	Male	Single	8
Participant 12	31	Female	Married	6
Participant 13	32	Female	Single	7
Participant 14	33	Female	Single	8
Participant 15	31	Male	Married	6

Our participant selection utilized a nonprobability sampling method, specifically a purposive sampling technique involving snowball sampling [88–90]. Two of the researchers, having previous connections with Airbnb employees, initiated contact with a preliminary list of employees from diverse teams. The initial round of interviews led to further recommendations for participants, enabling us to employ a snowball sampling method. These recommendations helped us identify additional participants fitting our research criteria [79,80]. The interviews, ranging from 50 to 90 min, were conducted via telephone, adhering to social distancing protocols.

5.2. Instruments and Procedures

Our semi-structured interview approach, with open-ended questions, facilitated detailed and focused discussions. This format allowed participants to elaborate on their responses while interviewers gauged whether to probe further. The interview protocol, developed from the extant literature, encompassed a wide range of themes about post-layoff situations pertinent to our study. After peer review, the instrument was finalized to ensure clarity and the absence of leading statements. The interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

The interview process began with open-ended questions about general perceptions of layoffs, offering participants a chance to share their lived experiences. This initial broad framing was deliberately chosen to enable participants to comfortably engage with the subject matter, thereby creating a rich data set for analysis [15,91–93]. Following this, the interviews transitioned to a more focused discussion on specialized facets of the post-layoff experience. While the authors initially employed a predetermined set of open-ended questions, they also encouraged participants to express their thoughts beyond the predefined inquiries. Some of the key questions posed during the interviews included: (1) What has your experience of layoffs been like? (2) How have you made sense of and adapted to the subsequent changes in your work environment? (3) Have specific aspects of your job become more or less enjoyable since the layoffs? (4) How has your perception of the management team evolved post-layoff?

Every participant was keen to relay their experiences, enriching the data and facilitating our process. We held all interviews over the phone in adherence to physical distancing measures. On average, each session spanned roughly ninety minutes. We urged participants to elaborate with specific examples and anecdotes for a comprehensive under-

standing. With the participants' approval, we recorded the discussions and subsequently transcribed them word-for-word.

5.3. Data Analysis

We analyzed the data in this study using Braun and Clark's [15] thematic analysis guide, which involves six phrases: (i) familiarizing ourselves with the data, (ii) generating initial codes, (iii) searching for themes, (iv) reviewing themes, (v) defining and naming themes, and (vi) producing the report. We applied detailed open coding to the data, closely following what participants said. This information was recorded in a spreadsheet and used to create subthemes and main themes [94,95]. We refined these subthemes and themes further by comparing new data as more participants were included in the analysis.

The interpretative coding process began immediately after we reached consensus on the descriptive codes. Manual coding was applied alongside a thematic approach involving the derivation of first-order codes and the creation of conceptual categories by synthesizing these codes. This synthesis involved a comprehensive examination of the data and relevant theories to uncover commonalities, relationships, and distinctions [96].

Upon completing 15 interviews, we reached a point of data saturation where no novel information or themes surfaced. To validate these findings, we undertook three more interviews, all of which reinforced the insights gleaned from the initial set of participants. Following independent transcription of the interviews, we adopted a descriptive coding approach to identify data relevant to our research inquiry, with a specific focus on participants' experiences of layoff. This process introduced a form of investigator triangulation, allowing us to present varying perspectives based on our interpretations of the coded transcripts [97,98]. We discussed, debated, and improved these categorizations until all of the authors agreed. Participants had the chance to review their transcripts for accuracy and provide feedback during the drafting of this article.

6. Results

As a result, we identified four overarching themes (as shown in Table 3) that effectively addressed the three research questions: (1) broader business context, (2) challenges faced by surviving employees, and (3) leadership communication. This coding protocol not only enhanced data validity but also allowed us to provide a theoretical framework that aligns with the acquired data [96,99,100]. For example, we analyzed patterns within the data to uncover the foundational elements of organizational justice, such as context, procedure, and outcomes.

Table 3. Qualitative data analysis.

Research Inquiry	Illustrative Quotes	First-Order Codes	Creation of Conceptual Categories through Code Consolidation	Main Themes
Understanding the Layoff Experience	I somewhat expected the layoffs due to my role in vendor and contractor management. They were impacted early on, and I saw a significant reduction in contractors. I thought if the economy didn't recover soon, Airbnb employees would also be affected. So, the news wasn't that surprising. (Participant 1)	Predictability and Awareness	Prediction of Layoff	Unique Circumstances Brought by COVID-19
	I believed there could have been better alternatives than layoffs, like salary cuts. However, the industry's downturn was evident. While I'm sad, I understand the need for drastic measures. (Participant 7)	Understanding and Acceptance	Prediction of Layoff	
	The timing of the layoff seemed predictable. The week before, all contractors were let go globally. As employees, we thought, if contractors are gone, we might be next. There was fear and nervousness. (Participant 9)	Predictability and Fear	Prediction of Layoff	

Table 3. Cont.

Research Inquiry	Illustrative Quotes	First-Order Codes	Creation of Conceptual Categories through Code Consolidation	Main Themes
Post-Layoff Challenges and Coping Mechanisms	It was difficult. Not even knowing who the victims were, I still feel bad about their situation, and it also caused me significant personal stress. Some people I used to work closely with were directly impacted by the layoffs, and I had a hard time watching their situation right next to mine. I think the hardest part was witnessing my closest colleagues losing their jobs suddenly. There were no clear criteria regarding who was laid off. It wasn't a matter of people with longer or shorter tenure being laid off; it seemed more random. Even individuals with over 5 years of tenure were laid off suddenly. (Participant 13)	Emotional Stress, Uncertainty, Random Layoffs	Uncertainty	Survivor Syndrome
	What I felt was that it's an incredibly heart-wrenching process to let go of people who were closer than family. I've been crying for the past three weeks and have been mentally unstable. My top priority was to help the victims find new jobs as soon as possible. However, on the other hand, I learned a lot during the process. Would I have been able to make such a decision if I were the CEO? So, I think this is why many people, including HR managers, also view the recent layoffs as a best practice. It was an inevitable decision made in a difficult situation, but, you know, business has its ups and downs. I really learned a great deal through the recent layoffs about how to handle a difficult situation in the least painful way (Participant 4)	Emotional Stress, Learning Experience, Best Practice	Emotional Stress	
	The layoff occurred after COVID, during a period when we saw a surge in the number of projects executed on a global scale. We became even busier than before, and the restructuring made things worse by significantly increasing our workload. That's what I can say in terms of job satisfaction. Not only has the atmosphere become more tense, but the actual workload has also skyrocketed. This increase is due to the layoffs, but it's also because HQ initiated numerous projects in response to the COVID situation. (Participant 2)	Increased Workload, Tension, COVID-19 Response	Increased Workload	Increased Workload
	After the layoffs, the workload increased significantly, and I can't say I'm happy about the situation. I believe this has been the most stressful part. (Participant 5)	Workload Stress	Increased Workload	
	At first, we were all deeply affected by the layoffs but tried to maintain our spirits and give our best despite the increased workload. However, I began to perceive this as unjust for the survivors. While I do sympathize with the victims, the workload for the survivors has surged dramatically, and it feels like we're being pushed to our limits to compensate for the manpower loss and cost-cutting measures. This became one of my primary concerns about the current situation. (Participant 10)	Injustice, Sympathy, Workload Concerns	Increased Workload	
	After the layoffs, my workload increased significantly, and I no longer see a clear vision for this team. These are the two most significant changes. Additionally, I'm still uncertain about whether I should continue with the company or consider other options. (Participant 12)	Increased Workload, Uncertainty, Job Continuation	Increased Workload	
	We have offices across the globe, including Europe, the US, and Asia. The US was hit the hardest, while Asia was relatively less affected. Even though the company assured us that there wouldn't be any more layoffs after the initial wave that saw 25% of the entire workforce being let go, employees had different concerns. We constantly felt anxious and worried that there might be another round of layoffs unless the COVID situation stabilized, and that those who had survived the first wave could also be affected at any moment. I felt uneasy every time I received an email in the morning, and for quite some time, I actively searched for news about Airbnb on the internet. Among the survivors, there were various opinions, and we shared information we had gathered from different sources. (Participant 11)	Anxiety, Predictability, Information Sharing	Information Sharing	Information Sharing
	I believe there are two distinct types of stress. One is the emotional strain stemming from the loss of my colleagues, while the other is work-related stress resulting from the increased workload caused by a smaller workforce. I realized that there's little I can do about emotional stress, so I decided to accept reality, and this approach significantly helped alleviate it. Regarding work-related stress, fortunately, the company was willing to discuss what kind of additional support we needed after the layoffs, so the impact wasn't as significant as initially feared. Nevertheless, it became each team's responsibility to make things work, and I imagine the leadership team must have been under tremendous stress, likely working day and night. I heard that some individuals even had to work on weekends to optimize the workload under the new system. (Participant 15)	Emotional Stress, Work-Related Stress, Leadership Support	Leadership Support	Open Communication by Leadership

Table 3. Cont.

Research Inquiry	Illustrative Quotes	First-Order Codes	Creation of Conceptual Categories through Code Consolidation	Main Themes
Impacts on Job Satisfaction and Trust in Management	CEO said that it was no one's fault. He also said that when the company recovers from the situation, he wants to bring back the people who were impacted first. The company made a talent directory and made people voluntarily upload their resumes and made sure that the information is shared with many recruiters. Everyone, including the impacted and survivors share the directory through LinkedIn. There were many victims in my team; for instance, some were people that were ranked number one in Asia in terms of performance. Just by that, we can see that performance was not the main criterion when deciding who would be impacted. So, the company really provided good support in supporting these people to find new jobs. The package was also generous. The company allowed the victims to keep the company computers and cell phones. The remaining recruiters are also providing career coaching and resume building services to the impacted. (Participant 4)	CEO Communication, Support, Generous Package	Organizational Support for victims	
	Airbnb did not simply lay off employees but kindly held one-on-one sessions with each victim, so the company told us that if you received a Google Calendar invite, you would most likely be laid off. This kept us from focusing on work all day long, and I remember looking at the Google Calendar all day. In the big picture, I think this is the best way the company could deal with the situation. Because the layoff started off from an extremely understandable background, I think no one could really argue against the necessity of a layoff from the company's perspective. Although I am not a victim, I would like to say that the company's approach to each victim was actually commendable. On top of that, I heard that the severance package was also quite generous. Overall, I think Airbnb really cared about the victims compared to other companies. (Participant 9)	Communication, Layoff Approach, Generosity	Open Communication	
	I am sure that the company treated us with dignity. Some companies take a really inhumane approach in laying people off. However, Airbnb treated everyone in a very humanitarian manner. Although I was not laid off, the way the company treated people that were impacted was so humane. I heard that some companies simply notify the layoff through email or simply make the direct supervisor hold one-on-one sessions to notify the victim to stop coming to work from the next week. However, Airbnb even put into consideration how the supervisor would feel. Just think about how it would feel when a supervisor has to notify his/her team member of the bad news. Airbnb structured the process in a way that an indirect supervisor would be the one conveying the news. So, a manager who is not a direct reporting line of the impacted would notify the victim through a video conference. I believe this can minimize the pain in the process. (Participant 5)	Humanitarian Approach, Layoff Notification	Communication	
	The CEO reported to employees on the situation on a weekly basis, and everyone was aware that the travel industry was in a downturn and that layoffs were inevitable. People to be laid off were selected not based on work performance but based on the assessment of the need of the company for a specific function after the COVID situation. If the function is no longer in need after the situation, people were cut off from the team. (Participant 3)	Layoff Rationale, Functional Assessment	Regular Check-in	Regular Check-in
	Although not explicitly announced, the leadership team understood that it was a hard time for everyone, so they gave us some time to mourn. I think it was also communicated well because the leadership team told us not to focus too much on delivering work on time. They also told us to try to stay true to what's immediately in front of us and to relax. The company gave us one extra day off called the wellness holiday. Even before the layoff, the CEO held virtual check-in sessions with all the employees and told us that he is also extremely sad about the situation and that there won't be additional layoffs going forward. I think that kind of effort helped us in focusing and getting back to work. I personally did not feel an extreme amount of tension. Of course, there were discussions around the fear that I could be laid off next, but after the latest check-in by the CEO, everyone was somewhat relieved. (Participant 15)	Leadership Support, Company Efforts, Relief	Regular Check-in	

6.1. Broader Business Context

Participants acknowledged the unique circumstances brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the experience of layoffs distinct from typical situations. Participant 1 noted, "We somewhat expected it, so the news wasn't actually that surprising". Participant

7 added, “I think anyone who ever worked for a service company or anyone who has experience working for a travel or hospitality company would have felt that a layoff was coming, just wasn’t sure how it would come”. This broader understanding of the external pressures organizations faced, beyond their control, influenced how employees perceived the fairness of these decisions. Participant 7 also remarked, “Of course, I believed there could have been better ways to handle the situation than layoffs, such as salary cuts, but it was too obvious that the industry was on a downslope. While I’m sad, I understand the need for drastic measures”. Another survivor, Participant 9, added, “The timing of the lay-off seemed predictable. The week before, all contractors were let go globally. As employees, we thought if contractors are gone, we might be next. There was fear and nervousness”.

Surviving employees recognized that the pandemic had introduced a multitude of challenges beyond the economic strain. For example, Participant 14 expressed, “The stress was overwhelming, not just because of the layoffs but also due to the sudden shift to remote work. We lost that daily interaction, and it felt isolated”. The pandemic’s impact on mental well-being was a common sentiment among survivors, influencing their overall experience of layoffs.

Moreover, uncertainty surrounding the criteria for layoffs amplified employees’ concerns about their future job security. Participant 14 shared, “Not knowing why some were chosen for layoffs and others didn’t leave me worried about what’s next”. This uncertainty added an extra layer of complexity to the already challenging situation.

Another survivor, Participant 13, added, “Before the layoff, I was worried about the layoff, but even after the layoff, as a survivor, I also became even more worried about not knowing the criteria used by the company and CEO. Now, the remaining employees face increased workload without the severance package that the victims received. And my job satisfaction dropped during the layoff process due to stress from increased workload. I’m not more motivated because I still don’t know the layoff criteria, and a second wave is a concern”.

Additionally, while some survivors understood the necessity of layoffs during the pandemic, there was skepticism about the promises made by the organization’s leadership. Participant 10 highlighted this skepticism, saying, “It’s hard not to think of it as just talk when we’ve been through this. It felt like cheap reassurance given the unpredictable circumstances”. The skepticism regarding such promises highlighted the need for organizations to demonstrate their commitment to fairness consistently. In this extraordinary context shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evident that the views of surviving employees regarding the fairness of layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic were influenced by a unique set of circumstances.

6.2. Challenges Faced by Surviving Employees

Participants delineated several multifaceted difficulties, which were mainly grouped into three main categories: increased workload, heightened stress levels, and survivor syndrome.

Participant 15 observed, “Stress takes two forms for me. One is emotional, stemming from the loss of colleagues, and the other is work-related due to a shrunken workforce. While I’ve come to terms with the emotional aspect, the work stress was slightly mitigated by the company’s willingness to negotiate additional support. Still, the onus of making the new workload manageable falls on each team, creating constant pressure, especially on leadership. Some of my colleagues even had to work weekends to adapt to the new circumstances”.

Often, these employees assume duties formerly managed by their now-absent peers. Participant 10 articulated this sentiment, saying, “Initially, there was a pervasive sense of gloom, but we tried to remain optimistic while tackling the additional responsibilities. However, it became increasingly evident that this burden was inequitably placed on the remaining staff. Although I sympathize with those who were laid off, the workload for those of us who stayed has surged, feeling like exploitation to make up for the lost workforce and cut costs. That’s a significant concern for me”.

Survivor syndrome emerged as another prevalent challenge among our interviewees. This phenomenon, exhaustively researched in organizational psychology, encapsulates the emotional and psychological strain experienced by layoff survivors. According to Appelbaum et al. [11], this syndrome may express itself through feelings of guilt, heightened anxiety, and a specific form of ‘survivor’s guilt’. Participant 13 added, “The experience of watching my colleagues leave was devastating. Maintaining any level of motivation afterward has been a real struggle”.

Another layoff survivor, Participant 1, shared, “The most substantial stress I felt wasn’t due to any resentment toward the company, but rather the sudden disappearance of my closest colleagues. Especially painful for me was having to let go of employees I personally brought into the organization. If we ever face another crisis like this, I believe emotional support would be the most crucial requirement. For those who started their careers at Airbnb, the layoffs were especially shocking”.

Participants also noted the dignity and respect with which the company treated both departing and remaining employees. The organization’s approach had a significant impact, even down to the smallest gestures extended to those who were laid off.

Participant 5 provided further insights, saying,

“I’m convinced the company handled the layoffs with a great deal of humaneness, unlike some organizations that employ more callous methods. Even though I wasn’t directly affected by layoffs, I observed how considerately the company dealt with those who were. Many companies announce layoffs via impersonal channels like emails or direct supervisors, often making for an abrupt and uncomfortable transition. Airbnb, on the other hand, was thoughtful even about the emotional toll on supervisors. Rather than having direct supervisors deliver the unfortunate news, Airbnb arranged for it to be done by a manager who wasn’t in the direct reporting line. This approach could lessen the emotional strain on everyone involved. In addition, laid-off employees were allowed to keep their company-issued MacBooks and cell phones. Most commendable, perhaps, was the creation of a Talent Directory on the corporate website to aid the departed employees in their job search, alongside other outreach efforts aimed at potential employers. This led to a less bitter exit experience for those who had to leave”.

6.3. Leadership Communication

This study’s participants expressed high regard for interpersonal justice and voiced appreciation for the conscientious efforts made by Airbnb’s leadership. Participant 1 elucidated the multilayered communication strategy employed by Airbnb, remarking, “The leadership’s approach to the layoff was both meticulous and empathetic. The initial disclosure came from the CEO, followed by subsequent updates from directors and regional directors. This structured cascade of communication offered us a coherent narrative and a logical sequence, helping us to understand the necessity behind the layoffs”.

Adding another layer to this perspective, Participant 3 celebrated the transparent and regular communication from the highest levels of the organization: “The layoff, although painful, served as an instructive lens through which to view organizational resiliency and crisis management. The CEO’s commitment to open dialogue—evidenced by weekly Q&A sessions that offered both current updates and a window into the company’s financial struggles—ensured that employees were not blindsided by the changes”.

Participant 15, reflecting on the leadership’s empathetic stance, shared, “The emotional toll of the layoffs was clearly recognized by our leaders. They provided what could best be termed ‘emotional space’—the freedom and time to grieve and come to terms with the new organizational landscape. They even introduced a ‘wellness holiday,’ as a respite for emotional recovery, and reassured us about the stability of our positions in future check-ins. Such a compassionate approach significantly mitigated the emotional and psychological stresses we were experiencing”.

Participant 4 further highlighted Airbnb's comprehensive support for both layoff victims and survivors: "The CEO made it clear that the layoffs were not a reflection of individual performance. The company took steps to assist those affected, such as allowing them to retain company-owned computers and phones. Moreover, the remaining HR personnel provided career coaching and resume-building services. The company even launched a Talent Directory to facilitate the job search for those who were laid off. Such actions demonstrated Airbnb's genuine concern for its employees, setting a precedent for best practices within the corporate landscape".

These employee accounts illuminate the nuanced ways in which layoffs affect not just job satisfaction but also trust in leadership. They underscore the value that employees place on transparent, open communication and regular managerial check-ins.

7. Discussion

7.1. Theoretical Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about unique circumstances that made the experience of layoffs distinct from typical situations [101,102], and this difference was echoed in the perspectives of layoff survivors [14,42,103,104]. During this global crisis, the expectation of layoffs became almost ubiquitous due to the unprecedented economic challenges faced by numerous organizations [104–107]. Layoff survivors often recognized this exceptional context, acknowledging the inevitability of workforce reductions [108]. In this extraordinary context shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, the dimensions of justice continued to be significant, with the experiences and concerns of layoff survivors reflecting the multifaceted challenges of these unprecedented times.

In response to RQ1, it is evident that the views of surviving employees regarding the fairness of layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic were influenced by a unique set of circumstances. The pandemic's widespread impact, expectations of layoffs, and the challenges brought about by remote work amplified the significance of organizational justice dimensions. Survivors acknowledged the necessity of layoffs in the face of global upheaval, but they also highlighted the importance of transparency, clear communication, and empathy in the decision-making and communication processes. Uncertainty about criteria for layoffs and skepticism about future assurances added complexity to their perceptions. As exemplified by layoff survivors' voices, the interplay of distributive, procedural, interactive, and informational justice remained integral in shaping how employees perceived the fairness of these exceptional circumstances.

In response to RQ2, a robust body of research, exemplified by studies from Brockner [109] and Noer [110], underscores that an escalated workload is among the most immediate challenges layoff survivors encounter. Furthermore, existing research finds new relevance and application; the principles of interpersonal and interactive justice emerge as practical, significant factors that shape employees' post-layoff experiences [48,111]. The emotional toll mentioned by the participants echoed the assertions by Brockner and Wiesenfeld [112] regarding the importance of interpersonal justice in meeting the emotional and psychological needs of employees. This speaks to the significance of treating employees with dignity and respect during times of organizational change. On the other hand, those participants' accounts of Airbnb's thoughtful approach to layoffs align with Tyler and Blader's [113] focus on the role of interactive justice, demonstrating how transparent and compassionate communication can maintain or even enhance trust in organizational leadership. These findings validate the pivotal role of justice dimensions in shaping post-layoff environments [66,69]. However, contrary to some literature that suggests layoffs generally lead to diminished perceptions of justice [114], the evidence presented here suggests that these negative impacts can be ameliorated through careful and empathetic organizational practices. In sum, these elements collectively create a work atmosphere where the negative impact of layoffs may be lessened by thoughtful organizational behavior and supportive interactions among colleagues.

Lastly, in response to RQ3, layoffs within organizations invariably result in considerable consequences for job satisfaction and trust in management among the employees who remain [115,116]. Existing literature underscores the deleterious impact of layoffs on job satisfaction among surviving employees [117–119]. As delineated in the preceding section, lay-off survivors often grapple with an augmented workload and heightened responsibilities.

Trust in management, a critical determinant of organizational well-being [120], is particularly vulnerable during times of layoffs. As affirmed by Spreitzer and Mishra [121], the manner in which organizations execute layoffs can wield substantial influence over employees' trust in their leadership.

Drawing upon the findings presented, it is evident that Airbnb's approach to layoffs offers important insights that both corroborate and challenge existing research. In line with Mishra and Spreitzer's [121] work on the role of organizational actions in shaping employees' trust in management, Airbnb's transparent and empathetic communication strategies appeared to mitigate some of the negative consequences often associated with layoffs. However, contrary to studies that often report a decline in job satisfaction post-layoffs [110,122], many survivors in this case indicated relatively stable levels of job satisfaction. This discrepancy could be attributed to Airbnb's unique handling of the layoff process, which included offering emotional support, clarifications about the necessity of layoffs, and tangible assistance to the impacted employees. Organizations that adopt similar compassionate and transparent practices may, therefore, be more successful in maintaining employee trust and job satisfaction during periods of workforce reductions.

7.2. Practical Implications

Surviving employees consistently highlighted the importance of clear, empathetic, and regular communication from leadership. They also emphasized the challenges of increased workload, stress, and survivor syndrome post-layoff. These challenges can negatively impact job satisfaction, employee morale, and productivity. Thus, it is crucial for companies to balance operational needs with the well-being of their staff.

Based on our interviews and analysis, we propose five strategies that organizations can implement after a layoff to keep surviving employees engaged and productive without incurring substantial costs:

7.2.1. Workload Prioritization

Surviving employees often face increased workloads, leading to stress and potential burnout. Participant 3 noted, "After the layoffs, the work just didn't disappear". Implementing workload prioritization systems can help organize tasks and mitigate feelings of overwhelm. A simple weekly check-in meeting could facilitate this, aligning with Tims, Bakker, and Derks' [123] findings on effective job crafting and workload management.

7.2.2. Regular Check-Ins

Transparent and consistent communication is crucial. Participant 15 mentioned, "Regular check-ins by the CEO were extremely helpful". Regular meetings, even brief virtual ones, can maintain trust and engagement. Rupp and Cropanzano [124] showed that open communication significantly contributes to perceptions of justice during challenging times.

7.2.3. Recognition of Survivors' Struggles

Acknowledging the difficulties faced by survivors is essential. Participant 1 reflected, "The largest stress came from seeing colleagues leave". Recognizing these challenges through team meetings or electronic tokens can boost trust and commitment [121].

7.2.4. Training and Development

Continued investment in employee development signals organizational commitment. Participant 3 stated, "The layoff has become a learning opportunity". Offering training sessions or workshops, even cost-effective online platforms, can be invaluable. Costen

and Salazar [125] found that skill acquisition opportunities lead to higher job satisfaction and loyalty.

7.2.5. Reaffirming the Purpose and Vision of the Company

Reiterating the company's mission during times of change is crucial. Participant 15 highlighted the CEO's reassurance about no further layoffs. Discussing future projects and the company's long-term goals can create a sense of collective purpose, countering negative emotions [126].

In summary, the five strategies of workload prioritization, regular check-ins, recognition of survivors' struggles, training and development, and reaffirming the purpose and vision of the company offer a comprehensive yet practical approach for organizations to navigate the complexities of the post-layoff environment. These strategies are not only grounded in the real-world experiences of surviving employees but also supported by existing research, making them both empirically and theoretically robust. Their low-cost and high-impact nature makes them particularly valuable tools for organizations aiming to maintain employee engagement and trust during challenging times.

7.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations. Primarily, its focus on Airbnb employees post COVID-19 layoffs limits its generalizability across various industries and organizational contexts, like different corporate cultures and economic conditions. Moreover, the qualitative methodology, despite providing depth, introduces subjectivity and limits broad statistical generalizations. The small sample size and potential hesitancy in discussing sensitive subjects may not fully capture the diversity of survivors' experiences and attitudes. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional nature only captures a snapshot in time, missing the evolving impacts and complex causal relationships, particularly under extraordinary circumstances like a pandemic.

7.4. Future Research Directions

Future research could broaden this study's findings by comparing experiences across different platforms, companies, or industries, particularly in the sharing economy. This comparative analysis could reveal if the insights from Airbnb are applicable in other contexts. Moreover, future studies could explore how different employee groups, based on tenure, role, or hierarchical level, perceive layoffs and the importance of various justice elements to them. This might uncover differences in perspectives between leadership and frontline employees. Lastly, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of layoffs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how employees' perceptions and attitudes evolve. These studies could also evaluate the effectiveness of post-layoff strategies, offering practical insights for organizations.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, our study suggests that justice dimensions remain influential even amid the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to previous literature suggesting layoffs invariably lead to diminished justice perceptions, our findings indicate that negative impacts can be mitigated through empathetic organizational practices. Regular check-ins, transparent information sharing, and open communication by leadership are key to maintaining fairness and justice perceptions among surviving employees.

Our findings have important implications for human resource management. With organizational downsizing and layoffs prevalent in today's society, effectively communicating organizational change is a continuous responsibility for leaders and managers. Especially in the context of the COVID-19 recession, principles of respect for individuals, dignity, and courteous management conduct, combined with transparent and thorough communication, are crucial. These elements not only uphold justice but also foster trust and confidence among employees, which is essential for organizational resilience in challenging times.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.L., S.H., W.-Y.S. and B.G.L.; Methodology, S.L., S.H., W.-Y.S. and B.G.L.; Software, S.L.; Validation, S.L. and S.H.; Formal analysis, S.L., S.H. and B.G.L.; Investigation, S.L., S.H., W.-Y.S. and B.G.L.; Resources, S.L., S.H., W.-Y.S. and B.G.L.; Data curation, S.L. and S.H.; Writing—original draft, S.L.; Writing—review & editing, S.L., S.H., W.-Y.S. and B.G.L.; Visualization, S.L.; Supervision, S.H. and B.G.L.; Project administration, S.L. and B.G.L.; Funding acquisition, S.L. and W.-Y.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) grant funded by the Korea government (MSIT) under Grants 2021R1A2C3004345 and RS-2023-00220762.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank Steven Donghwan Kim and Junbok Choi for their support in interviews, as well as the six anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Understanding the Layoff Experience

- Can you describe your personal experience during the company's layoffs, including your thoughts and feelings at that time?
- How did you interpret the reasons and motivations behind the layoffs as they were communicated to you?
- Can you share any moments or actions that particularly stood out for you?
- Did you get a sense of how decisions were being made about who was laid off?

Challenges Post Layoff and Coping Mechanisms

- In response to the layoffs, how did you make sense of the situation and adapt to the changes in your work and life?
- Can you share any personal strategies or coping mechanisms you employed to navigate the challenges brought on by the layoffs?
- Can you describe any new pressures or responsibilities you've noticed since the layoffs?
- How does this impact your daily work-life balance?

Impacts on Job Satisfaction and Well-Being

- Can you talk about how your feelings toward your job have changed since the layoffs?
- Are there specific things that have made your work more or less enjoyable?
- How do you subjectively assess your job satisfaction and overall well-being now, compared to before the layoffs?
- What factors, both within and outside of work, do you believe contribute most to your sense of well-being in the current context?

Trust in Management and Organizational Culture

- Has your view of the management team changed since the layoffs? In what ways?
- Are there things that could be done to rebuild or strengthen that trust?
- From your perspective, how has the company's culture influenced your experiences and reactions during and after the layoffs?
- Can you share instances where trust or mistrust in the organization's leadership played a role in your perceptions and actions?

Career and Personal Growth

- If so, can you describe how it has impacted you?

- Have your values, priorities, or perspectives on work and career changed in any way since the layoffs?
- Looking ahead, what are your hopes or aspirations for the future within the organization or beyond?

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