

Trust as rhythm: A temporal framework for sustainable stakeholder trust in nonprofit digital marketing

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Article history:

Received: May 14, 2026

1st Revision: August 30, 2026

Accepted: September 20, 2026

JEL classification:

L31

M31

D83

DOI:

[10.14254/jems.2026.11-2.4](https://doi.org/10.14254/jems.2026.11-2.4)

Abstract: *Purpose.* This conceptual paper develops the Trust Rhythm Framework, which explains public trust in nonprofit organizations as the outcome of periodic, predictable signaling rather than the accumulation of isolated trust-building attributes, and specifies how digital marketing channels produce that periodicity. *Methodology.* The study applies framework synthesis to peer-reviewed literature published from 2020 onward, supplemented by earlier foundational sources, codes documented trust determinants into operational domains, and converts the coded structure into falsifiable propositions. *Results.* Documented determinants are reorganized into four domains: openness, accountability, communication, and demonstrated performance. The framework proposes that trust depends on the frequency, amplitude, and predictability of signals in these domains rather than on their mere presence; that audiences read a break in an established disclosure interval as a negative signal even absent an adverse event; and that aggregate trust is distributed unevenly across nine stakeholder groups rather than represented by a single score. These are theoretically derived propositions rather than empirically observed outcomes. *Theoretical contribution.* The paper introduces trust rhythm as a three-parameter construct and offers six testable propositions, shifting the literature from static inventories of trust determinants toward their temporal coordination, with direct relevance to institutional accountability (SDG 16) and durable partnerships (SDG 17). *Practical implications.* The framework yields monitoring indicators for each trust domain, maps them onto specific digital marketing channels and cadences, and proposes a time-bound crisis communication protocol that nonprofit managers

can apply to stabilize donor, volunteer, and partner confidence.

Keywords: public trust, nonprofit organizations, digital marketing, trust rhythm, transparency, accountability, stakeholder ecosystem, sustainable development goals

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): **SDG 8:** Decent Work and Economic Growth; **SDG 16:** Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; **SDG 17:** Partnerships for the Goals

1. Introduction

1.1. Trust as a resource condition of the nonprofit form

The 2030 Agenda assigns nonprofit organizations a delivery role that neither markets nor states can absorb, and it assigns that role to a sector whose resource base is voluntary in every component. A sector unable to sustain public confidence cannot sustain the delivery, which makes trust a precondition of sustainable development outcomes rather than a communications concern adjacent to them. A nonprofit organization converts voluntary contributions into mission outputs without offering contributors an enforceable claim on the result. The contributor cannot verify most of what happens after the transfer. Willingness to give therefore rests on an expectation about future conduct, making trust the sector's operating currency rather than a reputational bonus (Burt, 2014). Becker (2023) identifies five trust-forming mechanisms, namely mission promise, reputation, transparency and accountability, performance, and use of contributions, yet the list specifies what is signaled and omits when, how often, and in what sequence. Those signals now travel almost entirely through owned digital channels, so digital marketing in this sector is not a promotional layer added to program work but the primary way the organization transports evidence to everyone who assesses it. Empirical work on charity social media marketing separates awareness, interaction, timeliness, informativeness, customization, and advertisement as distinct dimensions that reach brand trust and donation intention through different routes (Bilgin and Kethuda, 2022). Of these dimensions, timeliness carries an explicitly temporal claim, and it is also the one nonprofit practice manages least deliberately: organizations plan what they publish far more carefully than how they publish it.

Sector-level data complicate the narrative of decline. Chapman et al. (2020) analyzed Edelman Trust Barometer responses from thirty-one countries over nine years and found no general crisis of trust in nonprofits despite repeated high-profile scandals. The aggregate is stable; variance sits at the level of the individual organization, where managerial decisions are made. Becker et al. (2020) sharpen the point with a multilevel design covering 4,072 dyads from 1,686 individuals and 102 German nonprofits, reporting that individual context contributes as much as individual trust evaluation while organizational context explains far less than anticipated. If organizational attributes explain little in a static cross-section, the explanatory work lies in how those attributes are enacted over time.

The informational environment raises the stakes of that timing. Systematic evidence covering 2015 to 2024 identifies digital instruments, including blockchain-based recording and social platforms, as the principal vector for expanding disclosure (Nurdiani et al., 2025). Disclosure capacity has expanded faster than disclosure discipline. An organization can now publish more, faster, and to more audiences, so gaps in its publication record become visible sooner and to more observers.

1.2. Consequences of trust loss

Trust loss in the nonprofit setting is not a reputational inconvenience that a marketing remedy can fix. Clarke (2021) reviews the 2018 Oxfam scandal and the responses of the organization, peer international nongovernmental organizations, and United Kingdom regulators, and argues that the episode marked a structural shift in accountability expectations rather than an isolated failure. A systematic review of seventy-one articles covering three decades of scandal research treats prevention and response as distinct managerial problems (Chapman et al., 2022). The consequences cascade through the resource base: contributions contract, volunteer participation weakens, partnerships lapse, and access to beneficiaries narrows. The volunteer and beneficiary components

of that cascade, and the lag between reputational damage and volunteer attrition, remain asserted rather than measured.

1.3. Research gap and problem statement

The literature has produced a dense catalog of trust determinants but a thin account of how they coordinate. Transparency has been reviewed as a self-standing construct with its own antecedents and reporting logics (Ortega-Rodriguez et al., 2020), governance and accountability as a separate stream linked to the preservation of social mission (Eguzo, 2020), and perceptual determinants have been estimated on population data, with financial accountability, transparency, familiarity and institutional trust each carrying an independent effect (Farwell et al., 2019). None of these streams specifies what happens when a determinant previously enacted at a stable interval is enacted late, irregularly, or not at all. La Torre et al. (2020) come closest, arguing for a shift from accounting-based accountability toward accountability-based accounting and insisting on timeliness as a condition of dialogue. The nonprofit trust literature has not made timeliness a modeling parameter.

The purpose of this paper is to construct a conceptual model that explains the formation, maintenance, destruction, and restoration of public trust in nonprofit organizations as a single temporally ordered process, and to specify how that model is executed through digital marketing. The model demarcates trust from adjacent constructs, describes the ecosystem that produces it, reduces the documented determinants to four operational domains, justifies trust rhythm as the temporal parameter, formalizes the asymmetry of recovery, and specifies indicators, channel-level practices, and testable propositions.

Three research questions follow. RQ1 asks how the documented determinants of trust interact rather than accumulate. RQ2 asks why the regularity of organizational signals carries more weight than their intensity. RQ3 asks why restoring trust takes longer than its initial acquisition.

1.4. Contribution and structure

The paper contributes on three levels. The theoretical contribution is the construct of trust rhythm, which converts a managerial intuition about consistency into a parameter with frequency, amplitude, and predictability. The integrative contribution is an architecture that assigns dispersed determinants to four domains and connects each to an observable signal and an empirical proxy. The applied contribution is a monitoring indicator set, a mapping of the domains onto digital marketing channels and their cadence, and a crisis protocol with time thresholds. Across all three levels, the contribution to the sustainability agenda is to convert accountability from a declared value into an inspectable schedule, which subsection 5.1.1 maps onto named Sustainable Development Goal targets and indicators.

2. Literature review

2.1. The construct of public trust and its theoretical frames

Public trust in a nonprofit organization is a collective expectation that the organization will continue to act in accordance with its declared mission under conditions of incomplete information and voluntary exposure to loss. The defining feature is orientation toward the future. Subsection 4.1 sets out the demarcation from reputation, image, loyalty, and satisfaction in full.

The theoretical frames applied to nonprofit trust divide over whether trust is calculated or socially constituted. Stakeholder theory links accountability to preserving social mission across claimants (Eguzo, 2020), while attribution theory explains how the perceived locus, stability, and controllability of a failure shape organizational forgiveness (Hou et al., 2020). Against both, Keating and Thrandardottir (2017) challenge the rational model embedded in the accountability agenda, arguing that it misrepresents the social character of the donor relationship. If trust responds to social signals rather than verification alone, then the level of trust reflects the pattern of signaling rather than the volume of disclosed data.

Adjacent domains correct the tendency toward institutional isolation. A systematic review of seventeen studies on social trust in emergency and disaster relief distributes trust-building factors across local government, social media, social capital and community participation (Khankeh et al., 2023). A scoping review of 194 quantitative studies on trust and public health identifies socioeconomic position, perceived institutional performance, and the information environment as

recurring determinants (Kalulu et al., 2025). Both treat trust as a relationship maintained over time rather than a stock held at a point in time.

2.2. Determinants of trust and the communication environment

Financial transparency occupies the largest share of the evidence base. A systematic review shows that, absent binding disclosure legislation, nonprofits converge on voluntary disclosure policies whose scope they define themselves, and links that architecture to broader sustainability commitments (Ortega-Rodriguez et al., 2020). Later synthesis covering 2015 to 2024 identifies digital instruments as the emerging carrier of transparency and recommends board diversity and cross-sector collaboration as structural enablers (Nurdiani et al., 2025), a recommendation qualified by evidence that the relationship between board composition and web transparency is conditional rather than linear (Benito-Esteban et al., 2024). Analyzing data from 3,853 Canadians, Farwell et al. (2019) report that perceptions of financial accountability, transparency, and familiarity, together with institutional trust, significantly shape trust in charitable nonprofits. Familiarity matters here because it is not an attribute of a single disclosure act but the residue of repeated exposure.

Accountability is not a monotonic good. Keating and Thrandardottir (2017) show that intensified accountability demands can displace the relational basis of giving, so formal compliance may substitute for relational signaling. La Torre et al. (2020) argue from the reporting side for accountability-based accounting supported by more timely non-financial information. Satia (2024) completes the determinant set, concluding that accountability mechanisms deliver integrity gains only when combined with political will and participatory arrangements, placing the burden on sustained behavior rather than the formal existence of a framework. Governance research reaches an equivalent conclusion by tracing accountability arrangements to the protection of social mission (Eguzo, 2020), while Burt (2014) frames the same variables from the fundraising side.

Communication is where the evidence base thins. The nonprofit literature reviewed here contains no study isolating the effect of social platforms on organizational trust, and the closest treatment classifies social media as one of four trust-building factors in disaster relief (Khankeh et al., 2023). The absence is consequential, because the channel that carries most disclosure also carries most allegations. Nonprofit-sector research nevertheless supplies part of the design logic, and it is the appropriate starting point. Saxton and Guo (2011) show that web-based accountability practice separates into disclosure, which publishes evidence, and dialogue, which sustains contact, and that organizations perform the first far more readily than the second; that split is the one the four-domain architecture below reproduces as openness against communication. Waters and Jamal (2011) find that nonprofit social media output is dominated by one-way informational updates issued at irregular intervals, which establishes, based on nonprofit data, that cadence is unmanaged rather than merely under-theorized. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) classify that output into information, community, and action, showing that the three serve different relational functions and therefore cannot substitute for one another within a single posting schedule. These studies establish, using nonprofit data, that the pattern of contact is irregular and largely unmanaged; they do not offer a design logic for sequencing it.

Adjacent research in professional services supplies that design logic, and the transfer is deliberately narrow. Avagimyan (2026b) models omnichannel brand communication through segmentation, personalization, and retention design, treating message sequence rather than message volume as the unit of analysis. Andreasyan (2026e) specifies lifecycle messaging in which contact cadence predicts relationship persistence. Balaian (2026b) examines trust signals, offers, and funnel design as determinants of engagement conversion, the closest available operationalization of a trust signal as a designed and repeatable artifact, and positioning research ties a stated value proposition to the revenue model that must sustain it (Andreasyan, 2026c).

Exactly one claim is carried across from that body of work: a signal acquires evidentiary weight from its position in a sequence. No conversion metric, funnel structure, or revenue logic transfers with it, and three boundary conditions limit even that narrow claim. The beneficiary of a nonprofit service is not the party that funds it, so a message recipient cannot be treated as a revenue source. Withdrawal is a neutral event in a commercial market but a transmitted signal in a nonprofit ecosystem, because the exit of a donor or a partner is itself observed by the remaining groups. Moreover, commercial cadence is bounded by audience tolerance for advertising, whereas a regulatory calendar bounds nonprofit cadence that the organization does not control. These conditions are stated here, at the point of transfer, and their consequences for the scope of the framework are taken up again in subsection 5.3.

What that literature does not supply is a unit of analysis that spans the gap between contacts. Digital marketing practice in the nonprofit sector is organized around the campaign, and its governing metrics, namely reach, engagement, cost per acquired donor, and conversion to a

completed gift, are measured inside a single campaign window. Trust is observed across windows, in whether the organization that published in March also published in June. Two further limits follow. Existing frameworks treat the audience as a funnel with a terminal transaction, whereas the nonprofit ecosystem contains groups whose decisive act is a refusal to withdraw rather than a purchase, notably regulators, partners and beneficiaries. They optimize contact amplitude while leaving the interval between contacts as a residual of staff capacity. Multilevel analysis of nonprofit microvlogging points the same way, showing attention sustained through repeated small acts rather than occasional large ones (Wiley et al., 2023).

2.3. Measurement, violation, and repair

Measurement remains a weakness in trust research. Studies often substitute confidence vocabulary for trust and ignore social capital (Wilk & Platt, 2016), relying on implicit single-item indicators rather than validated multi-item instruments (Larson et al., 2018). The public health scoping review reports that only three of 194 studies addressed trust repair or maintenance (Kalulu et al., 2025). Nonprofit research is better served on the instrument side, through multinational barometer data (Chapman et al., 2020) and multilevel survey designs (Becker et al., 2020), yet it inherits the same weakness over time. Recent work narrows that gap by validating a multidimensional measure of donor-perceived transparency, which provides an instrument for one of the four domains modeled below (Dethier et al., 2024).

The violation literature is more mature. The systematic review of nonprofit scandals synthesizes three decades of work into a model of causes and consequences. It separates prevention from response (Chapman et al., 2022), and the Oxfam case shows how a single episode reallocates accountability expectations across an entire organizational field (Clarke, 2021). On repair, Hou et al. (2020) show that a higher locus of causality, higher stability, and higher controllability make forgiveness harder to obtain. For a temporal model, this implies that attribution forms early, before corrective evidence can be assembled, which is why the interval between the triggering event and the response carries disproportionate weight.

Professional services research offers measurement architecture the nonprofit field has not imported. Multi-touch attribution with incrementality testing addresses the inferential problem that arises when a shift in public trust is attributed to a specific disclosure act (Andreasyan, 2026d), and a complementary protocol sets the evidentiary standard required before claiming an outcome (Avagimyan, 2026a). Retention research treats a continued relationship as the observable consequence of accumulated confidence (Avagimyan, 2026d), and bottleneck diagnosis isolates the single constraint governing system performance (Balaian, 2026a). The analytical move follows: an organization does not need to improve all four domains at once, only to identify which one has broken its established rhythm.

2.4. Synthesis and statement of the gap

Four deficits emerge from this review. The first is temporal. The determinants of trust have been cataloged in detail. At the same time, the sequence, frequency, and predictability with which organizations enact them have not been modeled, even though timeliness is treated as a condition of accountability in the reporting literature (La Torre et al., 2020) and familiarity operates as a determinant in perceptual studies (Farwell et al., 2019). The second is structural. Trust is measured as a scalar attached to an organization, whereas evidence on stakeholder heterogeneity and on the weakness of organizational context in cross-sectional designs (Becker et al., 2020) suggests uneven distribution across groups observing from different positions. The third is evidentiary. Repair and maintenance remain almost unstudied relative to violation, with only three of one hundred ninety-four studies in the most recent scoping review addressing them directly (Kalulu et al., 2025). The fourth is operational. Determinants have been cataloged for the organization, not for the channel that carries them, so no reviewed account states which digital marketing practice enacts which determinant, at what interval, or how a failure of that interval would be detected.

These deficits define the contribution of the framework developed below. The model reassigns the documented determinants to four operational domains, attaches a temporal parameter to each, and derives the destruction-and-repair sequence from the attribution logic established in the crisis literature (Hou et al., 2020; Chapman et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study examines the structure of relations among trust determinants that have already been estimated; therefore, primary measurement is not the relevant instrument. Researchers have estimated determinants of nonprofit trust in large population samples and synthesized them in systematic reviews (Farwell et al., 2019; Ortega-Rodriguez et al., 2020; Nurdiani et al., 2025). What those estimates do not carry is an architecture specifying how the determinants relate to one another in time. The design is therefore conceptual by construction rather than by constraint.

The framework was built through framework synthesis, in four moves. An initial scaffold was derived from the mechanisms proposed in the conceptual literature, principally the five trust mechanisms distinguished by Becker (2023) and the causal attribution logic applied to crisis recovery by Hou et al. (2020). Evidence extracted from the corpus was coded against that scaffold. Codes that did not fit were retained, and the scaffold was revised to absorb them, which is how the temporal parameter entered the model. The revised structure was converted into propositions so each could be contradicted by observation. Framework synthesis was preferred over meta-analysis because the reviewed studies measure trust through incompatible instruments (Wilk & Platt, 2016; Larson et al., 2018).

The unit of analysis is the organization as a collective bearer of obligations toward its stakeholder ecosystem. Neither an individual executive nor an individual program serves as the locus, although both generate signals the ecosystem attributes to the organization. The choice matters for the crisis section, as the perceived locus of causality determines whether a failure is read as personal or organizational (Hou et al., 2020).

3.2. Source selection and coding protocol

We retrieved records from Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals through database queries and citation tracking. The window opens in 2020 because the disclosure environment shifted with the diffusion of digital reporting instruments documented for 2015 to 2024 (Nurdiani et al., 2025) and because the empirical study of institutional trust expanded sharply after that date (Kalulu et al., 2025). Eight earlier works were admitted, either because later studies adopt their construct definitions and measurement instruments without revision or because they remain the standing empirical account of nonprofit online accountability practice: Saxton and Guo (2011), Waters and Jamal (2011) and Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) on nonprofit web and social media practice, Burt (2014) on trust as a condition of giving, Wilk and Platt (2016) and Larson et al. (2018) on measurement practice, Keating and Thrandardottir (2017) on the critique of the accountability agenda, and Farwell et al. (2019) on the perceptual determinants of trust in charities. We retained peer-reviewed articles and academic book chapters in English; we excluded conference abstracts, unreviewed preprints, non-indexed outlets, and descriptive case reports without a theoretical frame, with one exception: a working paper with a registered identifier that we retained for its systematic coverage of governance and accountability (Eguzo, 2020).

This paper reports the retrieval and screening procedure so the corpus can be reconstructed. Eleven search strands structured the retrieval, covering the conceptualization of public trust, the theoretical frames applied to it, financial transparency and voluntary disclosure, accountability and reporting practice, leadership ethics and governance quality, program effectiveness, media and platform communication, crisis communication, measurement instruments, violation and repair, and cross-cultural comparison. Queries combined a construct term, namely trust, public trust, or confidence, with a sector term, namely nonprofit, charity, nongovernmental organization, or third sector, and, in the communication strands, with a channel term, namely digital marketing, social media, or online disclosure. Searches ran on titles, abstracts, and keywords from January 2020. Because the design is a purposive framework synthesis rather than an exhaustive systematic review, retrieval was iterative across the eleven strands and continued until additional records returned only determinants already represented in the coding frame. For that reason, no PRISMA flow count is reported: the corpus was assembled to populate a coding frame, not to establish the prevalence of a finding, and a screening count would imply an exhaustiveness this design does not claim. The retained corpus comprises 40 peer-reviewed sources: 26 are nonprofit, governance, and public-trust studies coded for determinants and measurement practice, and 14 are studies of communication sequence and cadence in adjacent professional-services settings, admitted under the boundary conditions set out in subsection 2.2. The full source-to-domain coding table is provided as supplementary material, so that the corpus and every coding decision can be inspected directly. Two

strands returned thin results because no retrieved study isolates the effect of social platforms on trust in a nonprofit organization, and evidence on program effectiveness remains largely assertive. A single reviewer performed screening and coding, which subsection 3.3 records as a limitation.

Coding proceeded in two passes. The first pass extracted every organizational attribute reported as an antecedent of trust, along with its effect direction, country of data collection, design, and sample. The second reduced those attributes to operational domains under a single rule: two attributes belong to the same domain when the same class of observable signal carries them to the ecosystem. Financial disclosure and program reporting therefore separate, while accountability statements and audit submission converge. The reduction yielded four domains, and no extracted attribute remained unassigned.

We applied five comparison vectors to each coded item: the stakeholder group addressed, the channel carrying the signal, the periodicity at which the signal is normally emitted, the observability of the underlying result, and the reversibility of a violation. The last two carry most of the analytical weight. Observability separates domains where the ecosystem can verify a claim from those where it must extend credit, and reversibility distinguishes failures that admit correction from failures that do not (Chapman et al., 2022).

3.3. Limitations of the method

Four limitations bound the claims that follow. The framework rests on secondary evidence and generates no primary measurement, so the propositions in subsection 4.4 are stated but not tested. The conclusions inherit the corpus's coverage bias, which concentrates in high-income settings with developed regulatory infrastructure, and national context conditions the relationship between institutional and organizational trust (Farwell et al., 2019; Chapman et al., 2020). The coding rule that assigns attributes to domains by signal class is defensible but not unique: a rule organized by stakeholder group rather than by signal class would produce a different and equally arguable partition, so the four-domain architecture is offered as reproducible rather than as uniquely correct. A single reviewer conducted screening and coding, so no inter-rater agreement statistic is available, which limits the claims of subsection 4.2 more tightly than a multi-coder design would. To keep the procedure open to inspection in the absence of such a statistic, the supplementary material lists every extracted attribute, the domain to which it was assigned, and the signal class that produced the assignment, so that any individual coding decision can be reproduced or contested.

4. Framework development

This section derives everything from the coded corpus through framework synthesis. The statements are theoretical propositions rather than empirically observed outcomes: none has been estimated on data collected for this study, and subsection 4.4 states, for each, the observation that would falsify it. The language of the section should be read accordingly.

4.1. Demarcation of the construct and the trust ecosystem

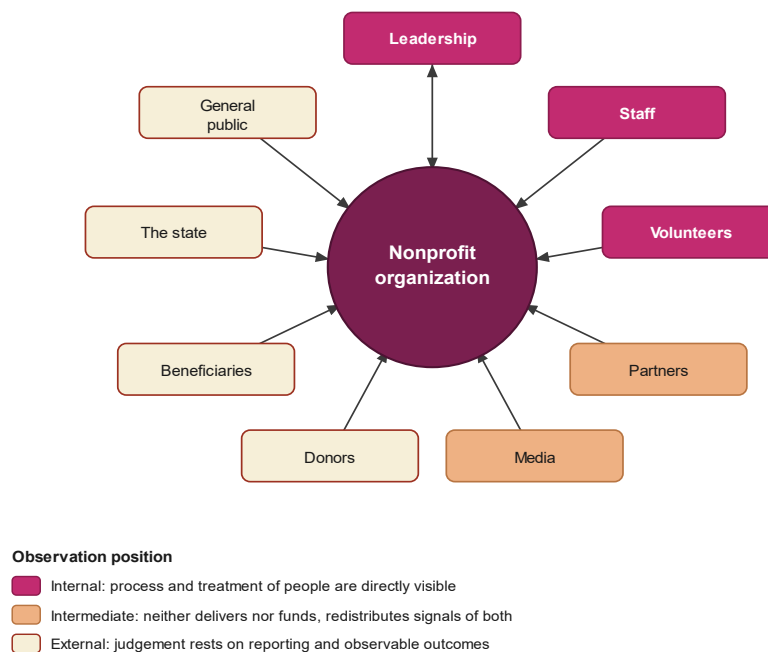
Public trust in a nonprofit organization is defined here as the collective expectation, held under incomplete information, that the organization will act in future accordance with its declared mission. Everything analytically distinctive about the construct follows from its tense. Reputation is an accumulated judgment of what an organization has already done; trust is an advance against what it has not yet done. An organization with an unblemished record can hold weak trust if its future conduct has become unpredictable, and one with a damaged record can hold usable trust if its corrective trajectory is legible.

Loyalty and satisfaction sit closer to behavior than to expectation: the first describes repeated giving, and the second the assessment of a completed interaction. Neither anticipates. Becker (2023) treats reputation as one of several mechanisms feeding trust, which supports the separation while showing how often the two are used interchangeably (Table 1).

Table 1: Public trust and adjacent constructs

Construct	Temporal orientation	What is assessed	Holder of the assessment
Public trust	Future	Expected conformity to mission	Ecosystem as a whole
Reputation	Past	Accumulated record	External observers
Image	Present	Managed projection	The organization itself
Loyalty	Repetition	Behavioural pattern	Donor, volunteer
Satisfaction	Completed event	Assessment of an interaction	Party to the interaction

Trust is produced by an ecosystem rather than issued by an audience. Nine groups participate: leadership, staff, volunteers, donors, beneficiaries, the state, partners, media, and the general public. Each occupies a distinct vantage point, and that position determines the evidence available. Volunteers observe from inside and read process, coordination, and how people are treated. Donors observe from outside and read reporting, results, and the absence of contradiction between claim and record. Media and social platforms neither deliver nor fund the work, yet they redistribute the signals of both, so no organizational signal reaches its final audience unmediated (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The ecosystem of public trust: nine stakeholder groups by observation position, internal, intermediate and external

Because the evidentiary bases differ, aggregate trust behaves as a vector rather than as a scalar, and an organization can hold the confidence of its principal donors while losing the confidence of the general public. Local ruptures are therefore diagnostically informative, because a single score reports as a modest decline what the vector shows as a rupture in one group. Public trust also has structural priority over donor trust, because familiarity and general institutional standing enter donor evaluation as inputs (Farwell et al., 2019). This is why organizational context explains less in cross-sectional designs than practitioners expect (Becker et al., 2020): the organization is assessed through a filter it does not own.

4.2. The four domain architecture and the rhythm of trust

The coding procedure reduced the documented determinants to four domains. Openness covers the voluntary release of information about operations, finance, and decisions, and its signal is the disclosure itself, verifiable against accounts; separating this disclosure function from the dialogue function carried by communication follows the division established in web-based nonprofit accountability practice (Saxton & Guo, 2011). Accountability covers accepting consequences for results, and its signal is submission to external judgment rather than the content of any single report. Communication covers the maintained flow of contact through social platforms, media and direct

channels, and its signal is the presence and tone of response under adverse conditions. Demonstrated performance covers evidence that programs produce the outcomes claimed for them, and its signal is a result observable independently of the organization's own account (Fig. 2a).

The domains are not substitutes. Financial transparency without demonstrated performance produces an organization that is legible but not evidently useful, which explains why voluntary disclosure regimes expand without proportional gains in confidence (Ortega-Rodriguez et al., 2020). Performance without openness asserts results the ecosystem cannot verify. Accountability without communication produces compliance addressed to regulators and invisible to the public. The practical failure mode is investment in the domain the organization finds easiest rather than in the one currently constraining its trust. In Table 2, the second row of each domain block holds the harder form of evidence, namely disclosure of decisions, external audit, response to criticism, and disclosure of failure, and these are the rows organizations most often leave unserved.

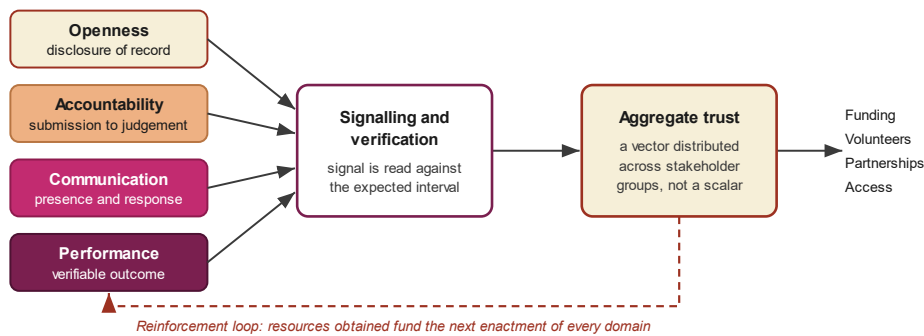
Table 2: Trust domains, signals, and proxy indicators

Domain	Determinant	Observable signal	Proxy indicator
Openness	Financial disclosure	Published report	Stability of contribution flow
	Disclosure of decisions	Minutes, board composition	Share of repeat donors
Accountability	Regulatory reporting	Submission on schedule	Duration of partnerships
	External audit	Independent opinion	Grant renewal rate
Communication	Sustained contact	Publication frequency	Growth in inquiries
	Response to criticism	Response latency	Volunteer retention
Performance	Verified outcome	Independently observable data	Beneficiary demand
	Disclosure of failure	Report on unmet targets	Referrals and recommendations

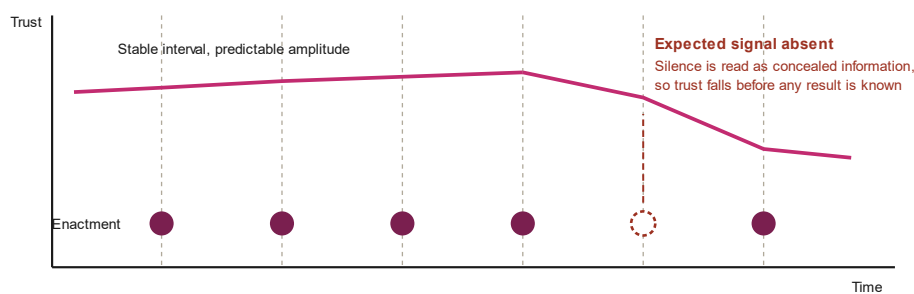
The central proposition developed here concerns timing rather than content: the framework holds that trust is sustained not by the presence of the four domains but by their periodic reproduction. Each domain carries an expected interval, and audiences are held to form that expectation from the organization's own past behavior rather than from an external standard.

Figure 2: (a) The four-domain architecture; (b) The rhythm mechanism

(a) Domain architecture



(b) The rhythm mechanism



Parameters of the rhythm

Frequency: interval between enactments of a domain

Amplitude: informational weight carried by each enactment

Predictability: variance of the interval, set by the

organization's own prior conduct rather than an external standard

An organization reporting quarterly for three years has established a quarterly expectation, and the same organization reporting annually would have established a different one, with no penalty attached. The ecosystem penalizes deviation from the established interval. The rhythm therefore has three parameters. Frequency is the interval between enactments. Amplitude is the informational weight of each enactment. Predictability is the variance of the interval, and it carries the diagnostic load (Fig. 2b).

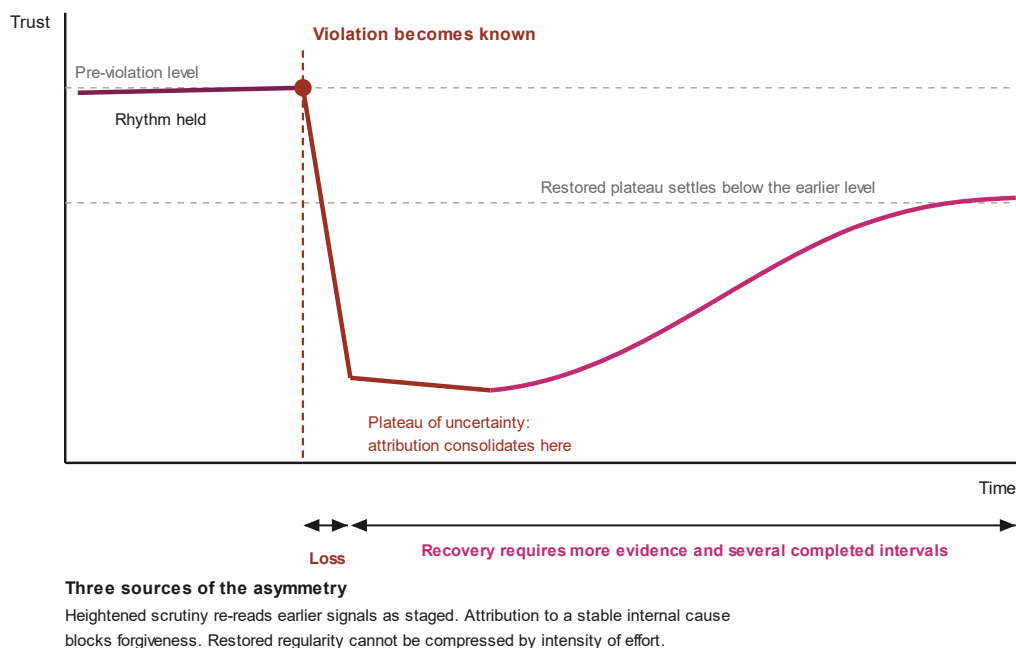
The mechanism linking a missed interval to trust decline is inferential: audiences treat silence as withheld information, and trust falls before any adverse outcome is confirmed. This aligns with the finding that intensified accountability can damage trust (Keating & Thrandardottir, 2017), because each mandated report creates another interval that can be missed. It frames timeliness in the reporting literature (La Torre et al., 2020) as conformity to expectations rather than speed.

4.3. Destruction of trust and the asymmetry of recovery

Triggers of trust destruction can be ordered by the speed and depth of the damage they inflict: diversion of organizational funds to personal use ranks first, followed by falsified reporting, concealment of material information, silence during an unfolding crisis, and overstatement of achievement. The first two do not merely reveal a failure of performance; they invalidate the evidentiary channel, meaning the organization's own reporting, through which every other claim reaches the ecosystem. Once reporting is known to be falsified, subsequent reports cannot restore confidence, because the same mechanism produces them. This is why financial violations inflict damage disproportionate to the sums involved, and why the scandal literature treats prevention and response as separate problems (Chapman et al., 2022). The Oxfam case extends the same logic to the field level (Clarke, 2021).

Recovery requires more time and evidence than initial acquisition. Three factors produce the asymmetry: audiences shift to heightened scrutiny, early attribution to internal causes blocks forgiveness (Hou et al., 2020), and restoring regularity requires several completed intervals. An organization can publish a great deal in one week. It cannot publish three quarters of consistent reporting in one week (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: The asymmetry between trust loss and restoration



The response sequence follows from those factors. Acknowledgment precedes everything, because attribution consolidates before corrective evidence can be assembled, and an early denial later contradicted converts a bounded failure into an unbounded one. Disclosure of the underlying data follows, as the ecosystem is now assessing the reporting mechanism rather than the reported figures. Personnel decisions follow disclosure, shifting the cause to an identifiable, removable source. External verification then substitutes for the compromised channel, and the sequence closes with

restoration of the ordinary rhythm, the phase most frequently omitted in practice. Denial, minimization, and rebuilding each operate effectively but under different attribution profiles, so the choice of strategy is conditional rather than universal (Hou et al., 2020). Repair remains the least secure component of the framework, since its empirical base is the thinnest in the corpus.

4.4. Measurement and propositions

Direct measurement of public trust proceeds through population survey instruments, and the multinational barometer series enables longitudinal comparison at the sector level (Chapman et al., 2020). Their weakness at the organizational level is cost and cadence, as few organizations can field a survey often enough to detect a change while it is still correctable. Stability of contribution flow, the share of repeat donors, volunteer retention, partnership duration, beneficiary demand, and referral behavior each register the behavioral consequence of confidence without asking about it, and they map onto the domains asymmetrically: repeat donation tracks openness and accountability, while volunteer retention and beneficiary demand track communication and demonstrated performance (Table 2).

Two measurement requirements follow. The measurement must be longitudinal, because the model's central variable is variance in an interval and a point estimate cannot express it. It must also be disaggregated by stakeholder group, because a scalar conceals the vector structure established in subsection 4.1. Neither requirement is exotic, and both are absent from most reported practice, where trust is measured through single-item proxies and the vocabulary of confidence rather than through validated instruments (Wilk & Platt, 2016; Larson et al., 2018).

The framework yields six propositions, each stated together with the condition that would falsify it (Table 3).

Table 3 states each proposition together with the observation that would falsify it. Three designs cover the set: panel data on disclosure timing matched to periodic trust measurement for P1 to P4, event studies with a measured response latency for P5, and longitudinal case comparison across violations for P6.

Table 3: Propositions and falsification routes

No.	Proposition	Condition that falsifies it
P1	Regularity of signals affects trust more than their intensity	Trust responds to disclosure volume irrespective of interval variance
P2	A break in rhythm lowers trust before an adverse result occurs	No decline is observed absent a confirmed adverse event
P3	Financial transparency is necessary but insufficient without demonstrated performance	Transparency alone predicts trust where no outcome evidence exists
P4	Donor trust is mediated by the level of general public trust	Donor trust moves independently within the same period and jurisdiction
P5	Speed of crisis communication is inversely related to the depth of decline	Response latency shows no relationship to the depth of decline
P6	Restoration exceeds acquisition in duration when the violation is financial	Trust returns to the pre-violation level within a comparable period

4.5. The trust rhythm method in nonprofit digital marketing

The framework becomes practice as a five-step method. The first step is an inventory of actual intervals: for each domain, the organization records the dates of the last twelve enactments and computes the mean interval and its variance, turning the current rhythm into a measured quantity rather than an intention. The second step fixes the baseline cadence at a level the organization can hold in its worst quarter, and predictive scoring under capacity constraints supplies the arithmetic for setting that floor against available staff time (Avagimyan, 2026c). The third step assigns each domain to the channels that carry it and writes the resulting cadence into one editorial calendar. The fourth step monitors interval variance as a leading indicator, ahead of the behavioral proxies in subsection 4.4, and a scoring approach that compresses heterogeneous relational signals into a single decision-ready index offers a workable form for that monitor (Andreasyan, 2026a). The fifth step attaches the crisis protocol of subsection 4.3 to a latency threshold agreed before any triggering event.

This method makes three tasks tractable. Detection moves earlier, because a widening interval is observable while trust is still correctable and before any adverse outcome is confirmed. Indicator interpretation becomes safer, because separating rhythm from volume separates the domains that track trust from the loyalty and satisfaction constructs demarcated in subsection 4.1. Allocation

becomes arguable, because the domain with the highest interval variance identifies where communication resources should go, which displaces the practice of investing in whichever domain the organization finds easiest.

The method operates on named channels, and each domain carries its own failure indicator. Openness fails as days elapsed past the expected publication date, accountability as filing latency measured against the organization's own prior record, communication as variance in the posting interval together with response latency, and demonstrated performance as the interval between a claim and its independent verification (Table 4).

Table 4: Trust domains, digital marketing channels, and rhythm failure indicators

Domain	Digital channel	Expected cadence	Rhythm failure indicator
Openness	Website disclosure page, email digest	Quarterly	Days past the expected publication date
Accountability	Regulator portal, funder dashboard	Statutory calendar	Filing latency against own prior record
Communication	Social platforms, messenger, newsletter	Weekly	Variance of posting interval, response latency
Performance	Case page, recorded evidence, third-party review	Programme cycle	Interval between claim and independent verification

Two constraints bound the method. The cadence in the third column is illustrative and must be reset from the organization's own history, because the expectation being violated is the one the organization created. Moreover, a maintained interval is not a maintained signal, because content generated at volume to protect a schedule sustains frequency while degrading amplitude.

4.6. An illustrative application of the interval inventory

The first step of the method underpins the rest, and it is worth showing in full. The values used below are illustrative and are constructed to demonstrate the computation rather than reported from an observed organization. The procedure itself, however, operates entirely on dates that nonprofit organizations already hold, so any organization can substitute its own record without collecting new data.

Consider a mid-sized service delivery nonprofit observed over eight quarters. For the openness domain, the analyst records the publication date of each disclosure document released in that window; for accountability, the date on which each statutory return was filed; for communication, the date of each post on the principal maintained platform; and for demonstrated performance, the date on which each outcome claim was released with supporting evidence. Suppose the openness intervals, measured in days between consecutive publications, are 91, 88, 94, 90, 92, 148, 61 and 89. The mean interval is 94 days, which reads as a stable quarterly rhythm and would satisfy any audit of publication frequency. The standard deviation is 24 days, and it is carried almost entirely by a single pair of values: one interval of 148 days followed by a compensating interval of 61. Under a volume metric, nothing has happened, because the same number of documents was published across the window. Under the framework, the organization missed an expectation it had itself established and then published twice in quick succession to restore the count, which is precisely the pattern P2 predicts will register as a negative signal before any adverse outcome is confirmed.

Suppose the same organization records a communication standard deviation of four days against a mean interval of seven, an accountability filing latency that never exceeds two days against its own prior record, and a performance interval whose variance cannot be computed because only two outcome claims were released across the eight quarters. Two conclusions follow directly, and neither requires a survey. The domain currently constraining trust is openness, because it combines an established expectation with a visible break; the editorial calendar and any additional staff time belong there rather than in the weekly posting schedule, which is already stable. Demonstrated performance, in turn, is not underperforming but unmeasurable, and that is itself the finding: a domain enacted twice in two years has no rhythm to violate, and the first task there is to establish an interval rather than to protect one. This is the diagnostic move the method exists to make, and it is available from a spreadsheet of dates.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical contribution and position relative to existing accounts

The framework advances by reorganizing a settled body of findings around a variable the field has not modeled. Determinant-based accounts explain trust levels through the presence and strength of organizational attributes and perform well in cross-sectional estimation (Farwell et al., 2019). They perform poorly in cases where trust declines while every attribute remains formally in place. The rhythm construct resolves that class: if the operative signal is the interval rather than the act, a decline without an event is expected rather than anomalous.

This position also reinterprets a result treated as discouraging. Becker et al. (2020) report that organizational context explains far less of public trust than anticipated once individual context is modeled under a static reading that suggests limited managerial leverage. Under the present reading, it suggests a specification problem, because organizational context was measured as attributes held at a point in time, which is the operationalization the rhythm argument predicts will underperform. The claim is testable and could be false. If temporal measures of organizational conduct add no explanatory power over static attribute measures, the framework loses its principal justification.

Stakeholder reasoning supplies the ecosystem structure and the vector treatment of aggregate trust (Eguzo, 2020). Attribution theory supplies the destruction-and-repair sequence, and specifically the finding that locus, stability, and controllability govern the availability of forgiveness (Hou et al., 2020). Signaling logic supplies the inferential mechanism that converts a missed interval into negative information. The critique advanced by Keating and Thrandardottir (2017) remains unresolved, because each additional mandated disclosure creates another interval that can be missed. This mechanism is inconsistent with regulatory reasoning that treats disclosure volume as monotonically beneficial. A rule raising mandatory reporting from an annual to a quarterly cycle, for instance, quadruples the number of deadlines an organization can visibly miss, and can therefore lower observed trust even where every individual report is accurate in content. Reporting research pointing toward accountability-based accounting is, by contrast, consistent with the mechanism (La Torre et al., 2020).

The relation to existing digital marketing frameworks is additive rather than competitive. Engagement and funnel models optimize the amplitude of a single contact through targeting, creative quality, and personalization, and they evaluate that optimization inside a campaign window. The framework advanced here leaves those mechanics intact and adds the parameter they treat as residual, namely the variance of the interval between contacts. The two are separable and therefore testable against one another, since holding volume and creative treatment constant while manipulating interval variance isolates the rhythm effect. Where charity social media research identifies timeliness as a distinct dimension of practice (Bilgin and Kethuda, 2022), the framework specifies what it means: conformity to a self-established interval rather than speed.

One boundary condition deserves statement. The framework assumes an ecosystem capable of observing intervals, which presupposes a minimum level of public visibility. Below that threshold, in small localities or closed donor networks, trust is transmitted through direct relational contact rather than through published signals, and the model should not be applied without modification.

The framework connects to the sustainability agenda through governance rather than environmental performance, and the connection is specific enough to be stated at the level of individual targets rather than as a general alignment. Subsection 5.1.1 sets out that mapping.

5.1.1. Mapping the framework onto SDG targets and indicators

The connection to the sustainability agenda can be stated at the level of named targets rather than as a general alignment, and doing so shows what the framework adds. Target 16.6 calls for effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels, and its indicator set measures institutional performance against declared commitments. The framework's contribution here is to specify the observable: an institution is accountable in an inspectable sense when its disclosure record holds a stable interval, and a widening interval is a leading indicator of the accountability failure that indicator 16.6.2 would otherwise register only after satisfaction has already fallen. Targets 17.16 and 17.17 treat multi-stakeholder and public-private partnerships as means of implementation, and partnership durability, which the framework tracks through filing latency and grant renewal, is the operational form of that durability. Targets 8.5 and 8.8 concern productive employment and safe working environments, which in the nonprofit case extends to a volunteer and staff base sustained through the communication domain, where response latency and posting variance track retention (Meier & Searing, 2026). Table 5 maps the domains.

Table 5: Trust domains, SDG targets, and the contribution of the rhythm parameter

Domain	SDG target	Existing indicator logic	What the rhythm parameter adds
Openness	16.6, 16.10	Presence and public availability of disclosure	Interval variance in publication as a leading indicator of accountability failure
Accountability	16.6 (16.6.2)	Satisfaction with, and responsiveness of, institutions	Filing latency against the organization's own prior record, observable before satisfaction moves
Communication	8.8, 16.7	Participation and responsiveness of decision-making	Posting interval variance and response latency as proxies for sustained engagement
Performance	17.16, 17.17	Partnership effectiveness and resource mobilization	Interval between an outcome claim and its independent verification

5.2. Practical implications

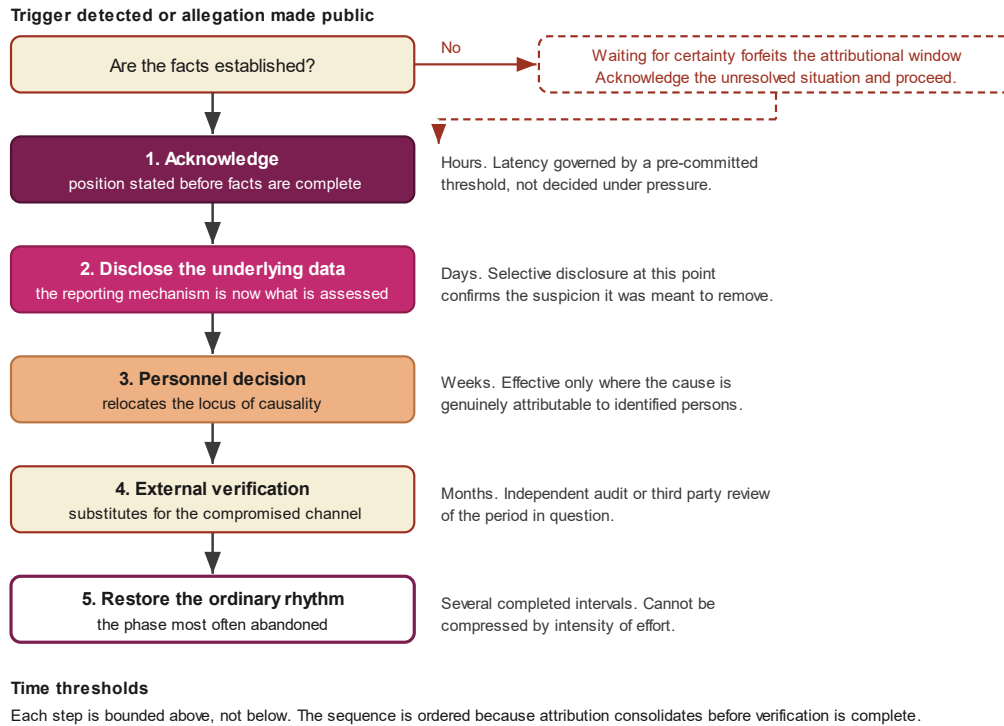
The first implication reverses a common managerial priority. Organizations facing weak trust typically increase the volume of what they publish. The model recommends stabilizing the interval first and expanding volume second, at a cadence the organization can sustain during its worst quarter rather than its best. A commitment to publish quarterly and keep it beats a commitment to publish monthly and miss two months. This holds for all four domains and most acutely for accountability, where the reporting calendar is visible to regulators and funders at once.

The second implication concerns the composition of disclosure. Publishing failures alongside results serves a signaling function distinct from its ethical one, because an organization that reports only favorable outcomes gives the ecosystem no basis to distinguish selection from performance. Demonstrated performance depends on evidence observable independently of the organization's own account, which is why external verification carries more weight than internal narrative (Ortega-Rodriguez et al., 2020; La Torre et al., 2020).

The third implication is channel design. Because most disclosure now travels through digital channels, maintaining cadence is an operational, not rhetorical, problem. Nonprofit social media output divides into informational, community-building, and action-oriented content that serve distinct relational functions, so a disclosure calendar must be designed as a sequence rather than assembled as a series of independent posts (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Evidence from Meta platform campaigns indicates that staged warming sequences outperform single-exposure contact, supporting the prediction in P1 that distributed regular contact outperforms concentrated intensity (Demydova, 2025a).

Automation resolves the resource constraint that makes cadence fragile in small organizations. A reporting convention that fixes in advance which evidentiary standard a published claim must meet keeps amplitude stable when frequency is automated (Balaian, 2026c), and an audit sequence that ranks interventions after a diagnostic pass determines which domain enters the calendar first (Andreasyan, 2026b). Scheduling and templating of routine contact then protect the interval when staff time contracts. The claim for the nonprofit setting is not that automation increases giving but that it decouples the reliability of routine communication from staff availability, which is the most frequent cause of a missed interval.

The fourth implication cautions against instruments that raise engagement without raising evidence. Gamified mechanics raise customer lifetime value in online service markets through extrinsic reward (Demydova, 2025b), which, in a nonprofit context, affects the loyalty and satisfaction constructs demarcated in subsection 4.1 rather than the expectation of future mission conformity. Gamification can therefore lift repeat giving while leaving trust unchanged, which corrupts the indicator profile if repeat donation is used as the sole proxy. Automated content generation carries the parallel risk, because a system that protects the schedule without adding evidence sustains frequency while degrading amplitude. Practitioners are most likely to lose the distinction between a maintained interval and a maintained signal.

Figure 4: The crisis response sequence

The fifth implication concerns crisis response and follows from P5. Response latency should be governed by a pre-committed threshold rather than decided under pressure, because attribution consolidates before verification is complete and the organization that waits for certainty forfeits the attributional window, which is the short period before observers settle on an explanation of their own. Acknowledgment of an unresolved situation is available immediately. The remaining steps and their time bounds follow the sequence set out in subsection 4.3 (Figure 4; Chapman et al., 2022; Clarke, 2021).

5.3. Limitations and directions for further research

The framework is untested. Every proposition in subsection 4.4 states a relationship the reviewed literature makes plausible, and none has been estimated on data collected for this purpose. Two further limitations qualify the argument. The corpus concentrates in high-income jurisdictions with functioning reporting infrastructure, so the interval mechanism may not transfer to settings where publication is irregular by default, and audiences hold no stable expectation to violate. The repair sequence rests on a thin evidentiary base, with only three of one hundred ninety-four studies in the most recent scoping review addressing repair or maintenance directly (Kalulu et al., 2025).

The communication domain rests partly on transfer from commercial research. Subsection 2.2 states three boundaries limiting that transfer, and one has a visible consequence for the framework itself. Because a regulatory calendar bounds nonprofit cadence the organization does not control, the accountability row of Table 4 carries a statutory calendar rather than a number. Whether the narrow claim carried across, namely that a signal acquires evidentiary weight from its position in a sequence, holds in a setting where the recipient of the message is not the source of the revenue remains an open empirical question, and the experimental design proposed below is the direct test of it.

Four research directions follow. Panel measurement of disclosure timing matched to periodic trust assessment would test P1 and P2 and requires nothing beyond archival collection of publication dates paired with an existing survey series. Experimental manipulation of interval variance, holding disclosure volume constant, would isolate the rhythm mechanism from the volume mechanism, and standard A/B protocols from digital marketing field research offer a ready design template. Event study designs with measured response latency would test P5, and comparative longitudinal case work across regulatory regimes would establish the boundary conditions identified in subsection 5.1. Testing any of these requires validated multi-item instruments rather than the single-item proxies that dominate (Wilk & Platt, 2016; Larson et al., 2018).

A pilot of the Trust Rhythm Method is specified here so that the first test does not require new instrument development. The design is a prospective observational panel of twenty to thirty nonprofit organizations in one jurisdiction, stratified by budget size, observed over eight consecutive quarters. The collected variable is a set of dates: publication dates for disclosure documents, filing dates for statutory returns, posting dates on each maintained platform, and dates on which outcome evidence is released. From these dates, we compute the mean interval and its variance per domain and organization. The dependent variables are the behavioral proxies of subsection 4.4, drawn from records the organizations already hold, together with a periodic short-form trust measure administered to a stakeholder panel. No new construct instrument is required for P1, P2, and P5, which makes the pilot feasible ahead of the broader agenda above.

6. Conclusions

This paper reorganizes the fragmented determinants of nonprofit public trust, namely openness, accountability, communication, and demonstrated performance, around a single temporal parameter: the rhythm with which these domains are enacted. The central claim is that audiences do not merely register the presence of trust-building signals but calibrate their expectations to the organization's own prior cadence, so that deviation from an established interval, rather than the absolute frequency of disclosure, is what erodes confidence.

Three findings follow from this architecture. First, aggregate trust is not a single score but a vector distributed unevenly across nine stakeholder groups, so an organization can retain donor confidence while losing public confidence without either shift showing up in a composite metric. Second, trust destruction is hierarchical: violations that corrupt the evidentiary channel itself, such as fund diversion or falsified reporting, cause disproportionate and durable damage because they invalidate every subsequent claim the organization makes. Third, restoration is structurally slower than initial acquisition, because it requires several completed intervals under heightened scrutiny rather than a single corrective act.

These results answer the paper's three research questions. Determinants interact through a shared temporal schedule rather than accumulating independently, which answers RQ1 and is carried by P1 and P3. Regularity is proposed to outweigh intensity because a missed interval functions as withheld information, which answers RQ2 and is stated as P2. Restoration lags acquisition because attribution forms before corrective evidence can be assembled, which answers RQ3 and is stated as P6. Read against the Sustainable Development Goals, a disclosure rhythm that is inspectable and consistent is the operational expression of accountable institutions under SDG 16, of durable partnerships under SDG 17, and of a stable volunteer and staff base under SDG 8, as subsection 5.1.1 sets out target by target.

The paper contributes an indicator set pairing behavioral proxies with the domains they track, a mapping of those domains onto the digital marketing channels that carry them, a response sequence for violations, and six propositions, each with a falsification route. Its principal limitation is that the framework remains untested. All six propositions await empirical confirmation, the repair sequence rests on an especially thin evidentiary base, and transferring communication-design logic from commercial to nonprofit contexts requires further scrutiny given the structural difference between payers and beneficiaries in the two settings. Future research should prioritize panel measurement of disclosure timing matched to periodic trust assessment; the interval inventory illustrated in subsection 4.6 and the eight-quarter observational pilot outlined in subsection 4.5 together offer a feasible starting point using data organizations already hold. The practical claim is narrower than the usual prescription and more demanding: trust is not accumulated through disclosure and is not defended through volume. It is held only while it is continuously reproduced.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The author used AI-assisted language tools for language editing and structural drafting while preparing this manuscript. All conceptual content, including the framework, the propositions, the analysis and the interpretation, is the author's own. Every citation was verified by the author against the published record. The author reviewed and edited the manuscript in full and takes complete responsibility for its content.

Declaration on self-citation

The reference list contains two citations to the author's own prior work, Demydova (2025a) and Demydova (2025b). Each is cited for a specific empirical claim for which the reviewed nonprofit literature offers no equivalent source, as documented in subsection 2.2. Neither is cited for a claim that another source in the reference list also supports.

Citation information

Demydova, A. (2026). Trust as rhythm: A temporal framework for sustainable stakeholder trust in nonprofit digital marketing. *Economics, Management and Sustainability*, 11(2), 48-66. doi:10.14254/jems.2026.11-2.4.

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