



Master's Thesis

**Communication Strategies During COVID-19: The EU and US
Perspective**

*Volume I: Leadership in Crisis: A Comparative Analysis of Donald Trump and
Ursula von der Leyen's COVID-19 Crisis Communication Strategies*

Author: Allison AULD

Supervisor: Mark ROGERSON

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CERC	Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ECDC	European Center for Disease Prevention and Control
EMA	European Medicines Agency
ERCC	Emergency Response Coordination Center
EU	European Union
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
PHEIC	Public Health Emergency of International Concern
PPP	Paycheck Protection Program
SCCT	Situational Crisis Communication Theory
US	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges, requiring swift and effective crisis communication from global leaders. This thesis explores how these leaders from the world's largest democratic blocs responded to the pandemic and whether their strategies align with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), a well-established framework for managing crises. The study also identifies new thematic crisis communication strategies that emerged during this "sticky crisis"—a highly complex, politically charged and rapidly evolving global health emergency (Tian & Yang, 2022).

Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen took fundamentally different approaches to crisis communication. Trump focused on projecting national strength and optimism for a swift recovery, while ingratiating key stakeholders, especially within the corporate sector. His messaging was highly politicized, heavily relying on Coombs' (2007) crisis communication strategies *attack the accuser* and *scapegoat*. He consistently shifted blame to external actors like China and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as domestic opponents, including the media and the Democrats. By emphasizing American resilience, Trump crafted a narrative designed to resonate with his political base, deflecting accountability for his administration's handling of the crisis.

In contrast, von der Leyen's crisis communication strategy emphasized European unity, solidarity and collaboration. She positioned the pandemic as an opportunity to advance the European Union's long-term strategic goals, such as sustainability and digital transformation. Her messaging focused on the importance of collective action, both within the European Union (EU) and internationally and called for coordination to effectively manage the crisis. Von der Leyen consistently reinforced core European values, stressing that solidarity and cooperation were essential to recovery.

While both leaders employed SCCT strategies to varying degrees, the study reveals that neither adhered strictly to the framework. Trump applied a broader range of SCCT strategies, while von der Leyen's communication was more focused on collaboration and European unity. The analysis also uncovered 11 additional crisis communication strategies that emerged outside of the traditional SCCT framework, indicating the need to adapt and expand SCCT for political crises.

The study concludes that while SCCT offers valuable insights, it is insufficient to fully capture the complexities of political crisis communication during "sticky crises" like pandemics, where public emotion, misinformation, and heightened scrutiny demand more adaptive and nuanced approaches. Furthermore, the findings provide a foundation for future research on the efficacy and impact of political crisis communication strategies and call for the refinement of SCCT to better address the distinct challenges of political leadership in crisis situations.

Keywords: *Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Political Crisis Communication, Donald Trump, Ursula von der Leyen, COVID-19*

1. INTRODUCTION

On February 29, 2020, during one of his earliest public addresses on the COVID-19 pandemic, then-president Donald Trump urged “...we would respectfully ask the media and politicians and everyone else involved not to do anything to incite a panic, because there’s no reason to panic at all” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing).

A few days later, on March 2, during her first public addresses in response to the pandemic, President Ursula von der Leyen remarked “you have witnessed that from the very beginning of the outbreak of the Coronavirus, the European Union has acted. We have for example activated our alert system immediately. We have an ongoing risk assessment that is being carried out in close coordination with all the Member States” (Joint Press Conference with Commissioners Lenarčič, Kyriakides, Johansson, Vălean and Gentiloni).

Seemingly, in this instance, the two leaders took radically different approaches to their crisis communication strategies. Trump’s emphasis on minimizing public fear contrasted sharply with von der Leyen’s focus on proactive measures and coordination.

The pandemic presented unprecedented challenges, demanding swift and effective crisis communication strategies from global leaders. This global health crisis underscored the vital importance of strong political crisis communication. In the face of rapidly evolving information, misinformation, and widespread fear, the role of political leaders in conveying clear, accurate and timely messages proved more vital than ever.

During times of crisis, citizens look to their leaders for guidance and reassurance. Effective crisis communication from political leaders can help avert the threat of the crisis at hand. As Boin et al. (2005) emphasize, during times of crisis, the public looks to their leaders to avert, or at least minimize the damage. Leaders must guide their citizens through the crisis, explain what went wrong, and assure them that the measures are in place to prevent future crises (p. 1).

Political communications can shape how citizens interpret public health threats, the nature of public discourse and the development of solutions and cures (Oliver, 2006). Additionally, how political leaders communicate about health issues can have far-reaching effects on a nation's overall health by shaping policy decisions and impacting compliance with health measures (Hatcher, 2020).

The United States (US) and the European Union (EU), the two largest democratic blocks in the Northern Hemisphere, offer a rich comparative political context for examining crisis communication. This comparative study will thematically analyze statements and speeches made available to the press issued by Ursula von der Leyen and Donald Trump between February 29, 2020 and August 29, 2020 focusing on their initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The official communications will be evaluated through the lens of Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the theoretical framework of this study. The timing of crisis response will also be examined.

While the bulk of crisis communications research focuses on corporate settings, there is growing recognition of the need to explore crisis communications within the political sphere. In an effort to narrow this gap, this study will explore the SCCT—a prominent framework traditionally studied in corporate crises—during the pandemic, which represents a "sticky crisis" or political crisis (Tian & Yang, 2022).

This study can offer fresh insights into SCCT's utility in political crises, an underexplored topic in academia. Furthermore, it will identify new crisis communication strategies, referred to as themes, that emerge in such contexts, thereby enhancing the practical application of SCCT in future crises. Finally, this comparative analysis aims to offer valuable perspectives on how these two leaders from the largest democratic blocs in the northern hemisphere employ crisis communication strategies. By doing so, this research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of political crisis communication and the effectiveness of SCCT in diverse political environments.

This study examines the crisis communication strategies employed by political leaders in the two largest democratic blocs in the northern hemisphere. However, the researchers recognized the importance of broadening the scope to include two interconnected dimensions: political and institutional communication during the pandemic. In line with this, Katerina Kongkika's study (Volume II) provides an in-depth evaluation of the communication strategy of official public health authorities in the EU and the US, specifically focusing on the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). These institutions played pivotal roles in shaping public understanding and response to the crisis, making their communication strategies critical to the overall analysis.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS

The aim of this study is to analyze the crisis communication strategies utilized by Trump and von der Leyen during the initial six months of the coronavirus pandemic. The researcher will compare and contrast the crisis communication strategies applied by two prominent leaders from the largest democratic blocs in the northern hemisphere and define if such strategies are consistent with SCCT, or if new thematic crisis communication strategies emerge.

In doing so, the study will endeavor to answer the following research questions:

RQI: *What crisis communication strategies proposed by SCCT, if any, were applied by Ursula von der Leyen and Donald Trump in their response to the pandemic?*

RQII: *What new thematic strategies emerged in the analysis of crisis communications made by Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen in response to the pandemic?*

RQIII: *What are the differences, and similarities, if any, in Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen's crisis communication strategies in response to the pandemic?*

RQIV: *When did Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen first address the pandemic in their statements or speeches made available to the press, and how did the timing of these statements differ or align?*

This study first presents a literature review which will outline the theoretical framework of the study, relevant studies and existing gaps in the literature. Next, a methodology section will detail the method, sample and approach to this research. Results will then be presented providing striking findings and contextual evidence. Finally, a discussion and conclusion will relate findings to relevant literature, address the research questions and present the advancements and limitations associated with the study.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will provide the reader with a presentation of organizational crisis and crisis communications. The theoretical framework of this study, SCCT, will be explored as well as competing theories of crisis communications. Finally, relevant studies will be introduced which will provide insight into the current gap in literature and subsequent purpose of research.

3.1. *Defining crisis and crisis communications*

While there are competing definitions as to what constitutes a “crisis”, this study will refer to the definition of organizational crisis provided by Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2010) as it reflects the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic for Ursula von der Leyen and Donald Trump.

An organizational crisis is a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or a series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals (p. 7).

Crises are moments of high uncertainty and rapid social, political and economic change. Crises can reshape institutions, societies and widely held beliefs. In times of crisis, the public’s trust in an organization is exceptionally low, which necessitates the role of effective crisis communication (Ulmer et al., 2010). Spradley (2017) defined crisis communications “...as a series of communicative practices and processes that seek to foster safety and organizational stability when normal operations are challenged by crises” (p. 1).

Seeger (2006) argued that effective crisis communication serves multiple objectives, including safeguarding reputation, mitigating damage, restoring public order, and ensuring public safety. However, these objectives can sometimes be at odds with one another, as various stakeholders—such as governmental bodies, businesses, the media and the general public—may emphasize different priorities (as cited in Castro Seixas, 2021).

3.2. *Crisis communication in the political sphere*

Heath (2010) argued that crisis communications is inherently “normative,” with the primary objective being to maintain accountability and mitigate harm to the public (p. 6). Importantly however, politicians have a vested interest in being seen as effective crisis managers, as their careers may hinge on this perception. Consequently, they shape their communications to the anticipated reactions of the public, aiming to gain acceptance, foster trust and bolster their positions (Eisele et al., 2022, p. 955).

Wirz et al. (2019) investigated how populist actors exploit crises to advance their political agendas and for political gain (as cited in Metag & Dalmus, 2019, p. 67). It is argued that, for populist actors “...crises pose opportunities because they facilitate selling politics. Through the use of specific styles such as dramatization and emotionalization, populists may even intensify the feeling of a crisis while acting as competent problem solvers” (Metag & Dalmus, 2019, p. 67).

Boin et al. (2005) in their book *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure* explored the political aspects of crisis. The authors argue that in times of crisis, citizens turn to their leaders for guidance and reassurance: “We expect policy makers to avert the threat or at least minimize the damage of the crisis at hand. They should lead us out of the crisis’ they must explain what went wrong and convince us that it will not happen again” (Boin et al., 2005, p. 1). Similarly, focusing on health crises, Liu and Horsley (2007) argue that in general, during a public health crisis, citizens hold their government to a higher standard of response and accountability compared to private-sector organizations.

It is argued that clear messaging is fundamental to maintaining consistent crisis communication. When messages are inconsistent, it can result in frustration, public confusion, perceived unfairness and a lack of adherence to crisis measures (Schnabel et al., 2023). Nevertheless, Boin et al. (2021) maintain that “while pivotal, consistency in crisis communication is challenging for political leaders, not least in the context of competing crisis narratives, which can hinder coherent responses to the crisis as well as encourage ‘politically damaging blame games’ (as cited in Schnabel et al., 2023).

In a similar vein, Eisele et al. (2021) identified four essential dimensions of public political crisis communication in their research on crises in the EU. The first being increased accessibility of information. The authors argued that “an increased accessibility of information is crucial to empower people, regardless of their cognitive or intellectual capacities, to understand and prepare, especially in a situation of increased stress and anxiety” (p. 955).

Secondly, Eisele et al. (2021) found that politicians should “allay fears” of losing control and reassure the public that they can restore normalcy. However, excessively labeling a situation as a “crisis” and emphasizing threats can provoke further chaos and give the impression of lost control, potentially triggering negative reactions (p. 955). Appearing anxious and uncertain may undermine public confidence and support, as people expect calm and strong leadership (Eisele et al., 2021, p. 955).

Eisele et al. (2021) argued that accommodating the public and crisis-affected groups is crucial. By recognizing individuals and their hardship, crisis managers show sympathy, create a sense of unity, and motivate compliance with crisis measures (p. 956). This aligns with the work of Hayes et al. (2017) who argue that in time of tragedy, such as a pandemic, organizations are “morally obligated” to acknowledge the event and offer support and condolences to the victims in order to demonstrate the collectivity of the tragedy (p. 255).

In contrast, Eisele et al. (2021) maintained that overly defensive responses can appear selfish and irresponsible, eroding trust and credibility in politicians (p. 956). Thus, “crisis communication should be characterized by inclusion of the people, but also particularly crisis-affected groups in a society, for example, employees or refugees” (Eisele et al., 2021, p. 956).

Finally, Eisele et al. (2021) argue that it is crucial political leaders show alignment in their crisis communication to convey calmness and strong leadership (p. 956). Crisis situations often fuel political rivalries, allowing different actors to vie for influence over crisis narrative. Leaders must project unity in their crisis communications as a lack of cohesion can create doubts about their ability to manage the crisis, leading to public anxiety and decreased compliance (Eisele et al., 2021, p. 956).

Boin et al. (2009) argued that in crisis, politicians engage in significant “framing contests” that have considerable political implications. Campbell (2004) defined frames as “symbols and concepts” used by politicians to influence the understanding of reality and advance their political agenda and policy goals (as cited in Béland et al., 2021). Framing in political crisis communications is a deliberate strategy, as it can help garner political support, secure electoral victories and undermine the opposition and their policy agenda (Béland et al., 2021).

When it comes to political framing in times of crisis, a well-established approach involves taking “credit” for successful or popular government actions that enhance the government's reputation, while another involves evading blame for unpopular decisions or actions that fail (Leong et al., 2023). Weaver (1986) maintained that “politicians are motivated primarily by the desire to avoid blame for unpopular actions rather than seeking to claim credit for popular ones” (p. 371).

He argued this is due to “negativity bias” in voters, suggesting they are more responsive to potential losses than to potential gains (Weaver, 1986, p. 371). Weaver (1986) added that scapegoating is more prevalent in centralized democratic governments as it is harder to shift blame than in ordered political systems like federations. In federations, blame can be easily transferred between central governments and sub-national governments (p. 390).

3.3. *Response strategies to crisis*

Crisis communication literature presents numerous theories which can be applied in practice today. For example, Organizational Renewal Theory asserts that if responded to appropriately, crises can present opportunities for organizations as they allow growth and development (Ulmer et al., 2010, p.18). Image Repair Theory emphasizes the impact of crisis on the perceived image of an organization by its stakeholders; and provides 14 impression

management skills which can be employed during time of crisis to restore the organization's impaired image (Ulmer et al., 2010, p. 17)

A framework which has been frequently explored in the literature surrounding crisis communications made in response to the pandemic is the Center for Disease Control's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications (CERC). The evidence-based framework is designed to guide public health officials, emergency responders, and organizations in delivering timely, accurate and actionable information to the public (CDC, 2018).

3.4. *Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)*

The most developed theory of crisis communication in the discipline of PR is Coombs' SCCT. SCCT highlights the importance of utilizing crisis communication strategies based on the reputational threat of the crisis type (Ulmer et al., 2010, p. 16) SCCT identifies three types of crisis, known as "clusters" (Coombs, 2007, p. 170):

- 1) **victim** where "...the organization is also a victim of crisis" (i.e.: natural disaster)
- 2) **accidental** where "...the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional" (i.e.: equipment error causes industrial accident)
- 3) **preventable** where "... the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation" (i.e.: laws violated by management)

Coombs (2007) argued that by determining the type of crisis, the crisis manager can predict the extent to which stakeholders will hold the organization responsible for the crisis and which crisis strategies will be most effective (p. 168).

Each crisis cluster carries an associated level of crisis responsibility attribution. For example, the victim cluster poses a minimal reputational threat to the organization because it is seen as a "weak attribution of crisis responsibility" (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). In this study, the pandemic for Trump and von der Leyen falls into the victim cluster as malevolence in that according to Coombs (2007) "[an] external agent causes damage to an organization" (p. 168).

Coombs' model outlines response strategies tailored to each crisis cluster, including both primary and secondary crisis communication strategies (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). The primary strategies are divided into three main crisis response types: **deny**, **diminish**, and **rebuild**¹. **Deny strategies** consist of the subcategories *attack the accuser*, *denial* and *scapegoat*. **Diminish strategies** include the subcategories *excuse* and *justification*. **Rebuild strategies** include the subcategories *apology* and *compensation*. Secondary strategies, known as **bolstering strategies**, include the subcategories *reminder*, *ingratiation* and *victimage* (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). Finally, SCCT suggests that crises categorized within the victim cluster are best managed with deny strategies (Sisco et al., 2010, p. 23). This implies that both von der Leyen and Trump should have utilized **deny** crisis response strategies in response to the pandemic.

¹ See Annex I for detailed overview of SCCT framework.

In contrast, crises which fall under the accident cluster are associated with high levels of responsibility and as a result should be managed with diminish strategies as they “...attempt to minimize an organization’s relationship to a crisis or lessen that perceived severity of the crisis” (Sisco et al., 2010, p. 23). SCCT also asserts that secondary strategies, specifically bolstering strategies “...offer a minimal opportunity to develop reputational assets” and are therefore best applied alongside primary strategies (Coombs, 2007, p. 173).

3.5. *COVID-19: “a sticky crisis”*

Tian and Yang (2022), in their study titled *Deny or Bolster? A Comparative Study of Crisis Communication Strategies Between Trump and Cuomo During COVID-19*, highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of the pandemic crisis. Coombs et al. (2020) categorized such crises as "sticky crises," which include longitudinal crises, industry-wide crises and public health crises.

Coombs et al. (2020) argued that COVID-19, representing both a prolonged and public health crisis, was further complicated by extended social distancing and lockdown protocols. These measures created additional challenges for political leaders who had to manage government regulations and effectively communicate with stakeholders amidst the evolving situation. The authors added that “sticky crises are enhanced by contextual factors such as misinformation, social issues, race and emotions”(Coombs et al., 2020).

Coombs et al. (2020) argued that the pandemic can be described as a “sticky crisis” due to its complex interaction of numerous challenges, organizations, and stakeholders, which expands the potential applications of the SCCT. The authors added that SCCT can be adopted to analyze “sticky crises”. This assertion underscores the importance of empirically exploring SCCT in response to “sticky crises”, as emphasized by Tian and Yang (2022).

Tian and Yang (2022) evaluated the application of SCCT in “sticky crises”, focusing on crisis communications issued by political leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examined tweets made by Donald Trump and Governor Andrew Cuomo to identify and compare their crisis communication strategies through the framework of SCCT. Researchers found that both leaders frequently employed three SCCT crisis response strategies: **deny**, **diminish** and **bolstering**.

The authors found that Donald Trump most frequently used the **bolstering** strategy, appearing in 75% of his tweets, where he highlighted his own leadership, commended his administration and provided emotional support and reassurance. He also employed the **deny** strategy in 51% of his tweets, placing responsibility on specific races and countries, criticizing “fake news” media and blaming the Democrats. Lastly, Trump used the **diminish** strategy in 21% of his tweets, minimizing the severity of COVID-19 and the public health crisis (Tian & Yang, 2022).

Tian and Yang (2022) identified a new category “cohesion, which indicated an intention to promote cooperation, cohesion and inclusion among various social members, institutions and groups.” Trump employed the cohesion strategy in 33% of his tweets, where he promoted

patriotism and nationalism. In contrast Cuomo used the cohesion strategy in over half his tweets, “which were aimed at strengthening state/national identification and integrating minority and vulnerable groups” (Tian & Yang, 2022).

Few studies examine the application of SCCT in political crisis communications made in response to COVID-19. For instance, Li et al. (2022) examined crisis communications made by the Chinese government on Weibo, one of the largest social media platforms in China, in response to COVID-19. Interestingly, their study found that the Central government utilized “bolstering” strategies in accordance with SCCT. However, it was concluded that crisis communication strategies varied with the level of government. To the researcher's knowledge, however, no studies exist on the application of SCCT in von der Leyen's crisis communication in response to the pandemic.

3.6. Crisis communication strategies in times of pandemic

Although the application of SCCT was not specifically examined in von der Leyen's crisis communication, studies have analyzed her crisis communication strategies during the pandemic more widely. Rufai and Bunce (2020) investigated the use of Twitter by G7 members, including both Trump and von der Leyen, for crisis communication. Their content analysis identified three main themes in the viral tweets of G7 political leaders: “(i) Informative—sharing information or updates, (ii) Morale-boosting—aiming to boost morale, and (iii) Political—engaging in political debate (Rufai & Bunce, 2020, p. 511).” Notably, all politically themed tweets were made by Trump, with no other G7 leaders participating in this category (p. 511). The study found that of von der Leyen's 21 viral tweets, 19 were informative and two aimed at boosting morale (Rufai & Bunce, 2020, p. 514).

Belim (2022) conducted an analysis of von der Leyen's Tweets issued in response to COVID-19, comparing them with those of António Costa, Portugal's Prime Minister. Belim (2022) identified the following categories as present in von der Leyen's crisis communication: “foreign and EU support and EU measures (70.9%), economic and financial support and recovery (17.3%), and European and international union (6.3%)” (p. 46). The study found that “less frequent mentions were also made of responsibility (2.4%), celebration and gratitude (2.4%) and emotional appeals (0.8%)” (Belim, 2022, p. 46).

Belim (2022) also analyzed the frames in von der Leyen's tweets, highlighting key frames such as humanity and ingenuity, where she emphasized the human spirit and innovation within the Union (p. 58). Another frame was union and unity, urging the importance of overcoming past divisions to tackle new global challenges. Vaccine delivery was a prominent frame, stressing the urgency of finding and distributing a vaccine swiftly. Additionally, von der Leyen emphasized power and strength, focusing on the need for resilience and sustainability. Lastly, she advocated for positive transformation, leveraging the Green Deal for social and environmental improvements (Belim, 2022, p. 58).

Interestingly, Belim (2022) noted that unlike Trump, who downplayed the impact of the virus, both von der Leyen and Costa “assumed the existence of a pandemic problem and

admitted/accepted that errors had been made in dealing with the problem” (p. 56). Additionally, von der Leyen and Costa emphasized the power of unity, cooperation and embodied a spirit of empathy and solidarity (p. 56).

In response to the pandemic, Coombs (2020) published *Public sector crises: realizations from COVID-19 for crisis communication*. In the article, Coombs asserted that there is no “one size fits all” model when it comes to crisis communications, particularly during a public health crisis. However, he identified key “communicative demands”, outlined below, that the pandemic placed on the public sector, including anxiety, empathy and efficacy. According to Coombs (2020), these demands have influenced COVID-19 crisis communications and carry significant implications for future crisis communication.

Jin (2009) argued that crises evoke various emotions such as anger, sympathy, and most notably, anxiety (as cited in Coombs 2020, p. 993). It is argued that anxiety leads to stress, which negatively affects cognitive abilities and reduces comprehension (Coombs, 2020, p. 993). Therefore, Coombs (2020) posited that crisis communications must be clear and easy to understand (p. 993).

Empathy drives people to help others and is the basis of modern risk communication. Coombs (2020) maintained that “...part of crisis communication must serve to convey to constituents that you understand their anxiety. Never forget the need to convey empathy as part of the public health crisis communication effort” (p. 994). Similarly, Coombs (1999) contends that showing compassion and offering condolences to victims can in fact, foster trust and increase credibility in the organization (as cited in Hayes et al., 2017, p. 263).

Pandemics, like COVID-19, can persist for extended durations, leading to public fatigue. Consequently, people may become tired of repeated public health messages. Coombs (2020) suggests that innovative and engaging approaches are necessary to effectively capture and maintain public attention during prolonged health crises (p. 995).

3.7. *Timing and Crisis Communication*

Traditionally, crisis literature emphasizes the importance of immediate communication with an organization’s public during a time of crisis. Ray (1999) argued that delaying the provision of information might give rise to rumors, leaks, increased perceptions of harm or suggest dishonesty on behalf of the organization (p. 111). However, an immediate response may backfire if the information is premature and inaccurate; thus, Ulmer et al. (2010) suggest some level of ambiguity in the timing of the initial response (p. 52). In contrast, it is argued that “the choice to remain silent in such a situation is strategic in and of itself. Such a decision should be arrived at through careful consideration of the risks involved in communicating or not communicating” (Ray, 1999, p. 111).

3.8. *Gap in research*

Crisis communication is widely examined in literature today, however, it is restrictive in its range of application. In fact, several studies highlight a gap in current research on organizational crisis communications, emphasizing a predominant focus on corporate crisis communications rather than political crisis communications. Crisis communications, as described by Coombs & Holladay (2010), is not a standalone discipline. Instead, it is more often considered a specialized area within the broader fields of corporate communications and public relations (as cited in Metag & Dalmus, 2019, p. 65).

In a similar vein, Olsson (2014) posited that the majority of research on crisis communication has primarily focused on the tactics employed by corporations to preserve their image and evade culpability. As a result, there is a noticeable gap in the understanding of crisis communication in the context of public sector organizations, such as governments. Basha (2023) argued that “as crisis communications research continues to progress, the importance of expanding research beyond the corporate sector continues to grow” (p. 21).

Metag and Dalmus (2019) argued that there is a lack of research on the applicability of traditionally 'corporate' theories, such as SCCT, to crises that impact the political sphere, such as “sticky crises” (p. 66). The authors added that “recognition that every crisis has a political dimension makes exploring political communication perspectives on crisis all the more relevant” (p. 67). Hayes et al. (2017) view the narrowness of Coombs’ SCCT as problematic, “in the case of tragedies, however, this typology fails to acknowledge that organizations can be affected by events for which they are neither the victim nor the perpetrator” (p. 256).

This gap highlights the need for further studies to evaluate their relevance and effectiveness in the political context (Metag & Dalmus, 2019, p. 66). In an effort to narrow this gap, this study will explore the SCCT—a prominent framework traditionally studied in corporate crises—during the COVID-19 pandemic, which represents a “sticky crisis” or political crisis. By doing so, this research aims to expand the understanding of SCCT's utility in political crises, particularly during unprecedented global events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study will identify new crisis communication strategies, referred to as themes, that emerge in such contexts, thereby enhancing the practical application of SCCT in future crises. This is particularly important as the evolving nature of global crises necessitates adaptable and effective communication strategies.

While there is existing research on Trump's application of SCCT during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a notable absence of similar studies on von der Leyen. Additionally, there is a lack of comparative analysis between the crisis communication strategies of these two leaders. This study will fill that gap by providing insights into von der Leyen's crisis communication approach and comparing it with Trump's strategy. This comparative analysis will offer valuable perspectives on how these two prominent leaders from the largest democratic blocs in the northern hemisphere employ crisis communication strategies. By doing so, this research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of political crisis communication and the effectiveness of SCCT in diverse political environments.

4. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to analyze the crisis communication strategies utilized by Trump and von der Leyen during the initial six months of the coronavirus pandemic. The researcher will compare and contrast the crisis communication strategies applied by two prominent leaders from the largest democratic blocs in the northern hemisphere and define if such strategies are consistent with SCCT, or if new thematic crisis communication strategies emerge.

This research will shed light on the relevance and applicability of crisis communication theory, specifically SCCT, in the context of contemporary political crises, a topic that remains underexplored in academia. To address the research questions outlined in the introduction, the researcher will conduct a thematic analysis of the official press statements and speeches made available to the press issued by Trump and von der Leyen, sourced from official websites.

The methodology section will provide an exploration of qualitative research methods, including their advantages and disadvantages, a description of the sample and the procedure for thematic analysis.

4.1. *Qualitative Research*

Daymon and Holloway (2011) argued that “there are two core ways of doing research in public relations and communications, namely qualitative and quantitative” (p. 3). This study takes a qualitative approach, though it does feature some elements of quantitative research.

According to Flick (2014) qualitative research is “interested in analyzing subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events, or practices by collecting non-standardized data and analyzing texts and images rather than numbers and statistics” (p. 542). Qualitative research was chosen for this study as it offers multiple benefits, which will be outlined below, and was best suited to the research questions. In this study, thematic analysis served as the qualitative method, while counting to obtain the total number of outputs and SCCT crisis communication strategies utilized is a quantitative method, known as descriptive statistics.

Qualitative research was particularly relevant for this study for “its ability to explain processes and patterns of human behavior that can be difficult to quantify” (Tenny et al., 2017). Specifically, qualitative research aims to identify themes and patterns in content, making it an ideal fit for the purpose of this study. Additionally, it was chosen for its capacity to organize and simplify data while maintaining its complexity and essence (Ochieng, 2009, p. 16). The researcher collected and analyzed a substantial amount of content (over 100 pages of transcripts), and this method enabled effective management and simplification without losing important context.

Importantly, qualitative research offers “creativity” and flexibility in research design (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 8). Additionally, qualitative research provides in-depth, detailed and rich

results which provided greater insight into the crisis communication strategies employed by Trump and von der Leyen.

While there are numerous benefits associated with qualitative research, it also has limitations. Critics argue that qualitative research can lack transparency and replicability (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 11). To counter these issues, the researcher strictly documented each step of the coding process, detailed them in the methodology section and provided clear justifications for the sample selection. This thorough documentation aims to enhance the transparency and replicability of the study.

4.2. *Sample*

In December 2019, cases of the coronavirus were first recorded in China. On 30 January 2020, WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). On 11 March 2020, this outbreak would be deemed a “pandemic” (World Health Organization, n.d.)

All statements and speeches made available to the press issued by Trump and von der Leyen in response to the pandemic, spanning from February 29 to August 29, 2020, were collected for analysis. This specific timeframe was chosen because it includes the first official press statements from both leaders regarding the coronavirus outbreak—Donald Trump’s on February 29 and Ursula von der Leyen’s on March 2, 2020—both issued before the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

It is important to note that the samples used for von der Leyen included both her speeches and press statements made available to the press. This approach was necessary because Trump issued significantly more press statements, with his administration providing daily statements to the press through the White House Coronavirus Task Force briefings made during the months of March and April. To ensure a relatively equal sample size between the two leaders, the researcher included more of von der Leyen’s speeches, which were made available to the press. The equal sample size ensured a fair and accurate comparison, leading to a more balanced analysis.

The six-month period was selected because it encapsulates the initial shock and uncertainty of the crisis, providing a comprehensive view of their early crisis communication strategies, and how they evolved as the number of cases and deaths rose. This period also saw the introduction and implementation of key measures and policies aimed at combating the virus, as well as recovery packages and support programs, such as the proposal of Next Generation EU in Europe and the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) in the US. This period allowed for an in-depth comparative analysis of their crisis communication strategies during a period of rapid escalation and significant national and global impact. This timeline also limited the excessive number of samples, allowing for an in-depth and thorough analysis.

The researcher gathered statements and speeches made available to the press from two primary sources: the American Presidency Project archive, a free searchable database for Trump’s statements, and the European Commission’s press corner for von der Leyen. In the press corner,

the researcher filtered statements by “commissioner (Ursula von der Leyen),” “policy type” (COVID-19) and “date” to ensure comprehensive collection and analysis. On the American Presidency Project archive, the researcher utilized advanced search options to filter by “president” (Donald Trump), “document category” (Spoken Addresses and Remarks) and “date”. The total sample size for both leaders was 78².

4.3. Analysis

Thematic analysis was the primary research method of the study. This method was selected because “...through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Thematic analysis is the identification of themes in qualitative data, which are based on the emergence of repetition and patterns (p. 78).

When carrying out the thematic analysis, Bryman’s (2016) “steps and considerations in coding” detailed set of steps and instructions informed the overall coding process (p. 581). First, the researcher pasted all the statements and speeches made available to the press on Google Documents. The sample was arranged chronologically by earliest to latest. Next, the researcher closely reviewed all the content, noting initial codes, keywords and significant observations using Excel spreadsheets. The use of Excel spreadsheets helped organize and record findings based on variables such as timing, political leader, new or emerging crisis communication strategy and SCCT crisis communication strategy. Additionally, the researcher coded the content using a highlighter, each color representing a different code, for clarity and ease.

In the next phase, a second review of the sample allowed the researcher to further identify shared elements among the initial codes, refine and enhance existing codes, remove codes which were rarely observed or combine them with other similar codes, and expand relevant codes into themes (Bryman, 2016, p. 588). During this stage, the researcher began defining and summarizing each theme, taking the form of a specific crisis communication strategy. Finally, a third and final review allowed the researcher to reexamine the existing codes, further consolidate them, enhance the thematic definitions and label the emerging themes (Bryman, 2016, p. 588).

Upon completion of the thematic analysis, the number of times each strategy occurred in the statements and speeches made available to the press made by Trump and von der Leyen was counted and recorded. As noted above, counting is a quantitative method, descriptive statistics.

Both deductive and inductive research are featured in this study. Coombs’ SCCT served as the theoretical framework for this study. Adhering to a deductive approach, the study aimed to determine whether the strategies proposed in the framework emerged in the data and were thereby utilized by the political leaders in their crisis communications. Although the researcher followed this framework to code the data for themes, she also identified and coded new emerging themes through an inductive process to further analyze the strategies utilized by the

² See Annex II for detailed sample size broken down per month.

leaders and to provide greater insight into the applicability of crisis communication strategies in times of political crisis. According to Bryman (2016), inductive coding is the “...analysis of qualitative data that aims to generate theory out of research data by achieving a close fit between the two” (p. 111). An inductive approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the leaders’ crisis communication strategies, offering a deeper and richer analysis.

5. RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of the statements and speeches made available to the press issued by Ursula von der Leyen and Donald Trump in response to the coronavirus pandemic identified the use of existing SCCT strategies (5.1) as well as the emergence of new crisis response strategies (5.2). The following section will present, define and compare their contextual usage.

5.1. Presentation of key findings: Coombs’ SCCT Crisis Communication Strategies

As outlined in the literature section, Coombs’ SCCT offers crisis strategies which should be applied according to crisis type, including *attack the accuser*, *scapegoat*, *excuse*, *denial*, *justification*, *compensation*, *apology*, *reminder*, *ingratiation* and *victimage*. According to Coombs’ framework, these ten strategies, known as subcategories, are organized into four main crisis response strategies: **deny**, **rebuild**, **bolster** and **diminish**. The use of SCCT strategies by the two political leaders will now be explored.

The following figures present the outcomes of the coding process, highlighting the frequency with which SCCT strategies were used by Trump and von der Leyen. This section will analyze these key findings, offering contextual evidence to explain and support their application.

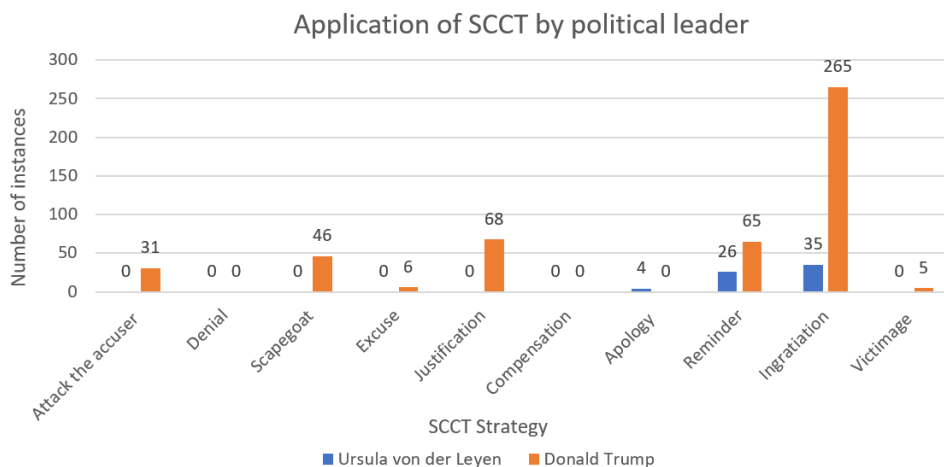


Figure 1: Total number of instances each SCCT strategy (subcategory) was used by Trump and von der Leyen in their crisis communications.

Distribution (%) of von der Leyen's use of SCCT strategies

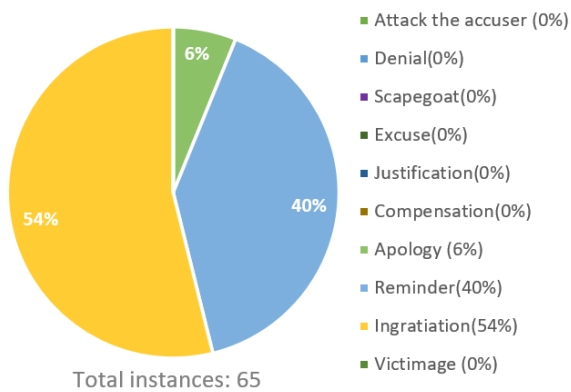


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of von der Leyen's use of SCCT strategies (subcategories). The coding process identified 65 instances where von der Leyen employed SCCT strategies.

Distribution (%) Trump's use of SCCT strategies

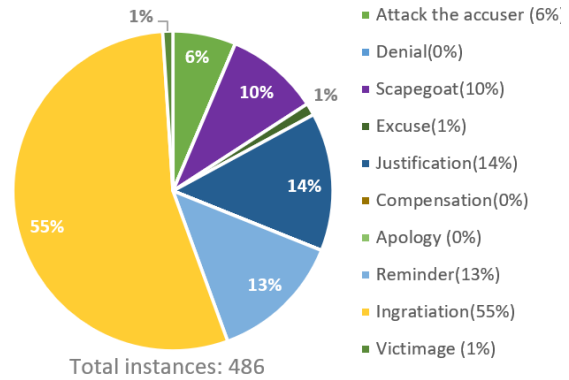


Figure 3: Percentage distribution of Trump's use of SCCT strategies (subcategories). The coding process identified 486 instances where Trump employed SCCT strategies.

As shown in Figure 1, 2 and 3, Trump employed a greater number of SCCT strategies in his communications compared to von der Leyen. The coding process identified 486 instances where Trump employed SCCT strategies, compared to 65 instances for von der Leyen. Trump used seven SCCT strategies: *ingratiation*, accounting for 55% of his total instances (265 out of 486), *justification* at 14% (68 instances), *reminder* at 13% (65 instances), *scapegoat* at 10% (46 instances), *attack the accuser* at 6% (31 instances), and both *excuse* and *victimage* strategies, which each represented only 1% (6 and 5 instances, respectively).

In contrast, von der Leyen used three SCCT strategies: *ingratiation*, representing 54% of her total use of SCCT strategies (35 out of 65 instances), *reminder* at 40% (26 instances) and *apology*, which accounted for 6% (4 instances).

Notably, the most frequently used strategy by both leaders was *ingratiation*. The *reminder* strategy which was the second most utilized SCCT strategy by von der Leyen, was Trump's third most used SCCT strategy. Interestingly, Trump's second most employed strategy *justification* was never employed by von der Leyen. Neither leader utilized the *denial* or *compensation* strategy.

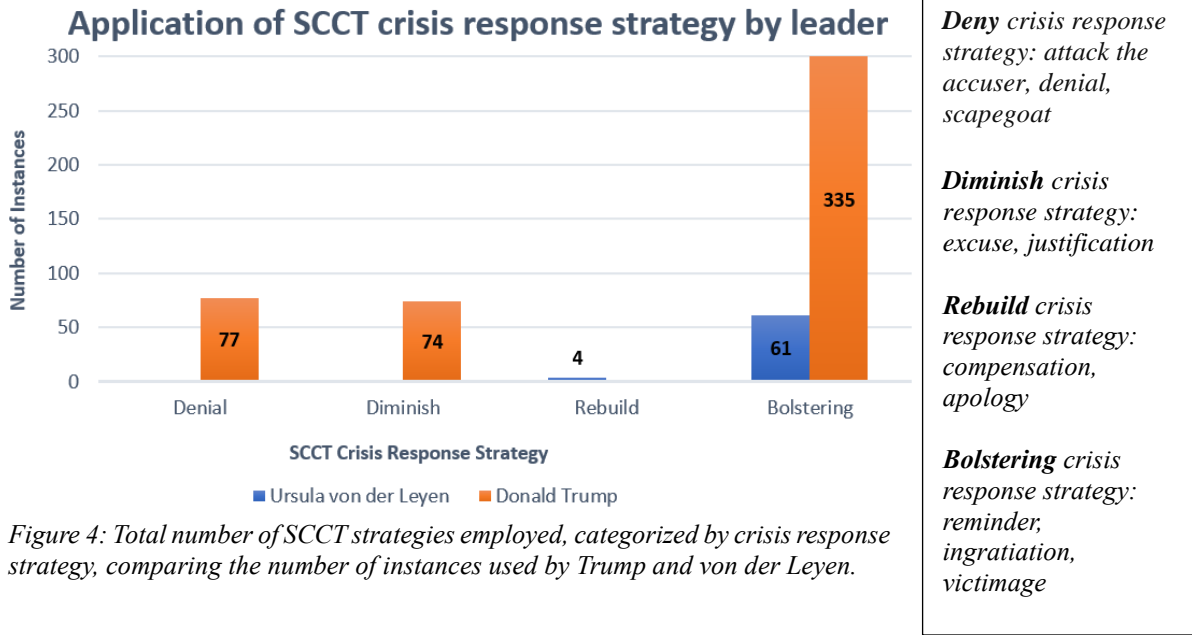
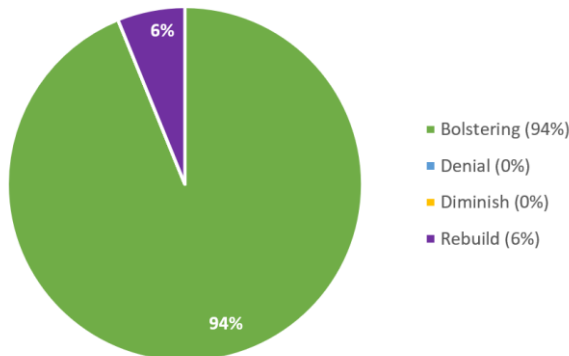


Figure 4: Total number of SCCT strategies employed, categorized by crisis response strategy, comparing the number of instances used by Trump and von der Leyen.

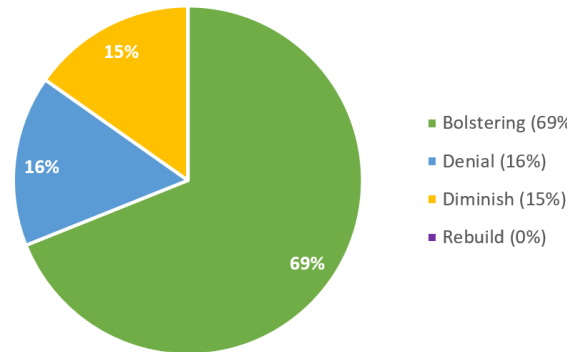
Distribution (%) of von der Leyen's use of SCCT crisis response strategies



Total references: 65

Figure 5: Percentage distribution of von der Leyen's use of SCCT strategies. The coding process identified 65 instances where von der Leyen employed SCCT strategies. These strategies, which are subcategories, are grouped into four main crisis response types (**bolster**, **deny**, **diminish**, **rebuild**) according to the SCCT framework. This chart reflects the usage of crisis response strategy types.

Distribution (%) Trump's use of SCCT crisis response strategies



Total references: 486

Figure 6: Percentage distribution of Trump's use of SCCT strategies. The coding process identified 486 instances where Trump employed SCCT strategies. These strategies, which are subcategories are grouped into four main crisis response strategy types (**bolster**, **deny**, **diminish**, **rebuild**) according to the SCCT framework. This chart reflects the overall usage of crisis response strategy types.

According to Coombs' framework, the ten SCCT strategies are organized into four main crisis response categories: **deny**, **rebuild**, **bolster**, and **diminish**. As demonstrated in Figures 4, 5, and 6, the **bolstering** crisis response strategy was the most frequently employed by both

leaders. Trump used this strategy 69% (335 of 486 instances), while von der Leyen used it 94% (61 of 65 instances).

Interestingly, von der Leyen's second most used strategy was the **rebuild** strategy, accounting for 6% (4 instances) of her SCCT usage. Trump's use of SCCT crisis response strategies was more varied, with 16% (77 instances) involving **deny** strategies and 15% (74 instances) involving **diminish** strategies.

With the data on SCCT strategy usage now presented, the study will next explore the contextual application of these strategies by the leaders. This analysis will reveal how each strategy was employed, providing deeper insights into their application of the SCCT framework and their broader crisis communication strategies.

Coombs' *scapegoat* strategy was strongly observed in the analysis; however, it was witnessed exclusively in Trump's communications. The *scapegoat* strategy was present in instances where he blamed factors outside his government for the pandemic and its impact, including the media, China, WHO, Barack Obama, Congress, the Democrats and the Federal Reserve. Trump diverted responsibility to China through the frequent use of the term "China virus" and blamed the Democrats for their "broken system" in most instances of the *scapegoat* strategy.

"As we continue to marshal every resource at America's disposal in the fight against the Chinese virus" (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 22, 2020).

"And, as we go along, just like with ventilators, we'll get better, more advanced, and you know, it will be—we'll be able to do things that nobody would have even believed possible. But we started off with a broken system. We inherited a broken, terrible system" (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 18, 2020).

Similarly, Coombs' *attack the accuser* strategy was a predominant theme utilized by Trump. Importantly, it was not used by von der Leyen. Trump employed this strategy to aggressively confront his critics and those who blamed his administration for mishandling the pandemic. This approach was frequently evidenced in his attacks on the Democratic Party and accusations against the media for broadcasting "fake news."

"The headline in the Washington Post was totally inaccurate. The statement wasn't bad in the Post, but the headline was ridiculous, which is—as I say, that's fake news. And CNN is fake news, like, crazy, and they had just totally the wrong story, which they knew. They were asked to change it, and they wouldn't do that" (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 22, 2020).

Coombs' *apology* strategy was rarely observed in the analysis; more importantly, it was witnessed exclusively in von der Leyen's communications. The *apology* strategy was present when von der Leyen apologized for the situation in Italy, at which she recognized the Commission and Europe's delay and lack of preparedness in responding to the country first in crisis, ahead of other member states.

“Yes, it is true that no one was really ready for this. It is also true that too many were not there on time when Italy needed a helping hand at the very beginning. And yes, for that, it is right that Europe as a whole offers a heartfelt apology. But saying sorry only counts for something if it changes behavior (Speech at the European Parliament Plenary, April 16, 2020).”

Both leaders’ communications prominently featured Coombs’ proposed strategy of *reminder*. This strategy involved leaders highlighting previous successful initiatives to reassure stakeholders. Trump emphasized the robust economy during his presidency, citing achievements such as low unemployment rates, strengthened borders and the resurgence of manufacturing jobs in America. He also underscored the swift and decisive actions taken early in response to the pandemic.

“Think of it: 22 days ago, we had the greatest economy in the world. Everything was going beautifully, the stock market hit an all-time high again for the over 150th time during my Presidency, and the world was looking good” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 26, 2020).

Similarly, Ursula von der Leyen reminded her stakeholders of her government’s prompt and effective pandemic response, focusing on the early actions taken.

“Since this crisis started, we have already achieved a lot. We have built a network of states, global health institutions, philanthropists, and businesses to provide a common answer to coronavirus. We started to collect money for a global response. We have built a system to coordinate the efforts of all players involved” (Statement at the ‘Global Goal: Unite for our Future’ Summit, June 27, 2020).

Coombs’ *justification* strategy was exclusively observed in Donald Trump’s communications. This strategy was evident in his efforts to downplay the severity and impact of the crisis. Trump frequently minimized the reported numbers, likened COVID-19 to the common flu, downplayed its economic and employment repercussions and assured the public that the pandemic would soon be over.

“This is ending. This will end. You'll see some bad things, and then you're going to see some really good things. And it's not going to be too long” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 3, 2020).

He also trivialized the need for mask-wearing, which was a critical measure recommended by health experts.

“In light of these studies, the CDC is advising the use of nonmedical cloth face covering as an additional voluntary public health measure. So it's voluntary; you don't have to do it. They suggest it for a period of time. But this is voluntary. I don't think I'm going to be doing it” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 3, 2020).

Similarly, Coombs' *excuse* strategy was exclusively observed in Trump's communications. This strategy was evident in cases where he claimed his administration had no control over the events that triggered the pandemic. Trump frequently blamed China for the outbreak, asserting that the pandemic was a result of actions beyond his control. He argued that it was an unforeseen event that could have been contained if China had acted differently.

"I don't view it as an act of God; I would view it as something that just surprised the whole world. And if people would have known about it, it could have stopped—been stopped in place. It could have been stopped right where it came from—China—if we would have known about it, if they would have known about it" (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 19, 2020).

Ingratiation emerged as a dominant SCCT strategy in the communications of both leaders, marked by consistent stakeholder praise. Von der Leyen, frequently lauded her colleagues in the Commission for their dedication, thanked President Charles Michel and Chancellor Angela Merkel for their perseverance in negotiating the recovery package, praised EU member states for their contributions and collaboration, applauded leaders in the private sector for their innovation and resilience, recognized journalists for their efforts to combat the spread of misinformation, celebrated the resilience of the European people and honored frontline heroes combating the crisis.

"I want to pay tribute to the women and men leading that fight. I think of the nurses, doctors and care workers in Italy, Spain and across Europe who ran towards the fire without any second thought. The heroes who are putting everything on the line, every hour of the day, to save our parents, to save our grandparents, friends and colleagues, neighbors and strangers" (Speech at the European Parliament Plenary, March 26, 2020).

Similarly, Trump expressed gratitude to the American people and frontline workers for their bravery. He praised the FDA's swift approvals, acknowledged the collaboration of specific Governors, and honored American veterans. However, unlike von der Leyen he placed significant emphasis on thanking the leaders of American companies for their efforts in meeting the nation's needs.

"Darius Adamczyk of Honeywell—you know that. And Darius has been somebody that I've dealt with in the past, and he's a great leader of a great company. Debra Waller of Jockey International. A friend of mine, Mike Lindell of MyPillow. Boy, do you sell those pillows. That's unbelievable what you do. I just want to tell all of you that America is very grateful to you and what you've done. An amazing job you've done, we thank you very much" (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 30, 2020).

Coombs' *victimage* strategy was seldom used by Trump and never by von der Leyen. Trump occasionally depicted his administration as victims, arguing that while they fought the virus, criminals and malicious actors took advantage. He highlighted the pandemic's severe economic impact, framing his administration as a victim of these circumstances.

“Remember, we had the greatest economy in the world, and then one day, we were told, you've got to shut it down, stop it, tell everyone to stay home, because of this horrible virus” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 4, 2020).

Finally, neither von der Leyen or Trump’s communications included the SCCT crisis communication strategies, *denial* and *compensation*.

5.2. Presentation of key findings: Emerged Thematic Strategies

The researcher employed an inductive process to identify and code emerging themes, allowing for a deeper analysis of the crisis communication strategies used by Trump and von der Leyen. This approach provided enhanced insight into the applicability of crisis communication strategies during political crises.

The coding process revealed eleven **new** thematic strategies beyond those outlined by Coombs' SCCT. These strategies, which emerged from the leaders' pandemic communications, were organized into four crisis response groups based on shared characteristics: **practical crisis response** strategies, **emotional appeal** crisis response strategies, **mobilization and engagement** crisis response strategies and **strategic messaging** crisis response strategies.³

Practical crisis response strategies include: *scientific guidelines and preventative measures, economic impact and fiscal support measures, swift and decisive action and informative updates*. **Emotional appeal** crisis response strategies include: *acknowledgement, condolences and hope*. **Mobilization and engagement** crisis response strategies include: *call to action and coordination and cooperation*. **Strategic messaging** crisis response strategy include: *reiterate position and editorializing and reframing*.

This section will present these key findings, providing contextual evidence to explain and support the emergence and application of these strategies. The following graphs illustrate the results of the coding process, highlighting the number of instances of emerged strategies employed by Trump and von der Leyen.

³ For full definitions of emerged crisis response strategies see Annex III.

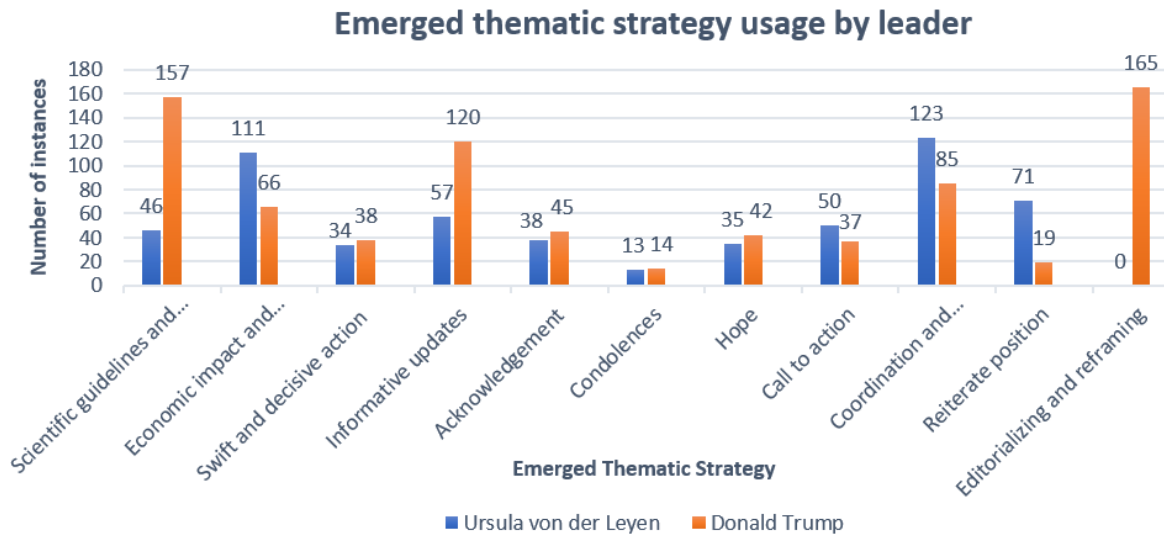


Figure 7: Total number of instances each emergEd strategy was utilized by Trump and von der Leyen in their crisis communication.

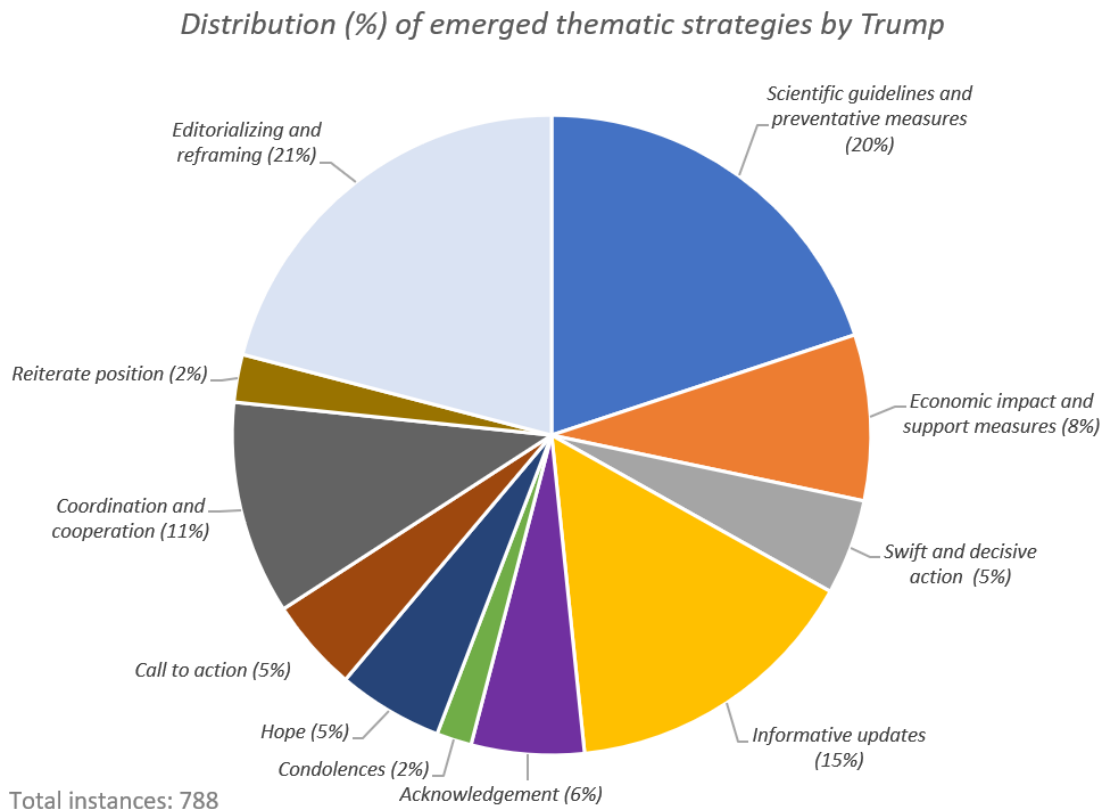


Figure 8: Distribution of Trump's use of emergEd strategies. The coding process identified a total of 788 instances where he utilized emergEd strategies.

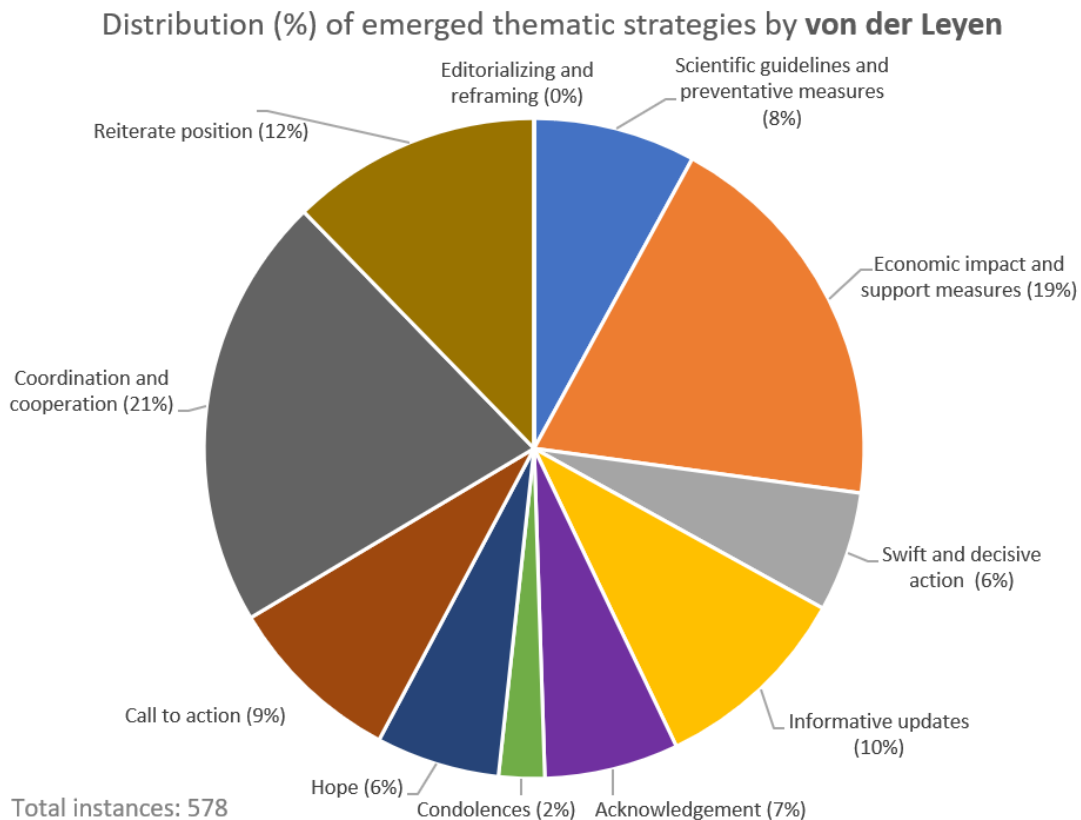


Figure 9: Distribution of von der Leyen's use of emerged strategies. The coding process identified a total of 578 instances where she utilized the emerged strategies.

Figures 7, 8, and 9 demonstrate that the new strategies which emerged in the crisis communication by Trump and von der Leyen were significantly more prevalent than the application of SCCT strategies. Specifically, von der Leyen utilized the new emerged strategies 578 times, in contrast to the SCCT strategies which were used in 65 instances. Similarly, Trump employed the new emerged strategies 788 times, compared to 486 uses of SCCT strategies.

Interestingly, both leaders showed similar usage patterns for certain crisis response strategies within their total application of emerged strategies: *acknowledgment* (von der Leyen 6%, Trump 5%), *condolences* (both 2%), and *swift and decisive action* (von der Leyen 6%, Trump 5%).

Trump's most frequently used emerged strategy was *editorialize and reframe*, accounting for 21% (165 instances) of his overall use of emerged strategies, a strategy not used by von der Leyen. Conversely, von der Leyen's most utilized emerged strategy was *coordination and cooperation*, representing 21% (123 instances) of her overall use of emerged strategies, compared to 11% (85 instances) for Trump.

Trump's second most used strategy was *scientific guidelines and preventative measures*, representing 20% (157 instances) of his use overall of emerged strategies, compared to 8% (46 instances) by von der Leyen. On the other hand, von der Leyen's second most utilized strategy was *economic impact and fiscal support measures*, used in 19% of her overall use of emerged strategies (111 instances), compared to 8% (66 instances) by Trump.

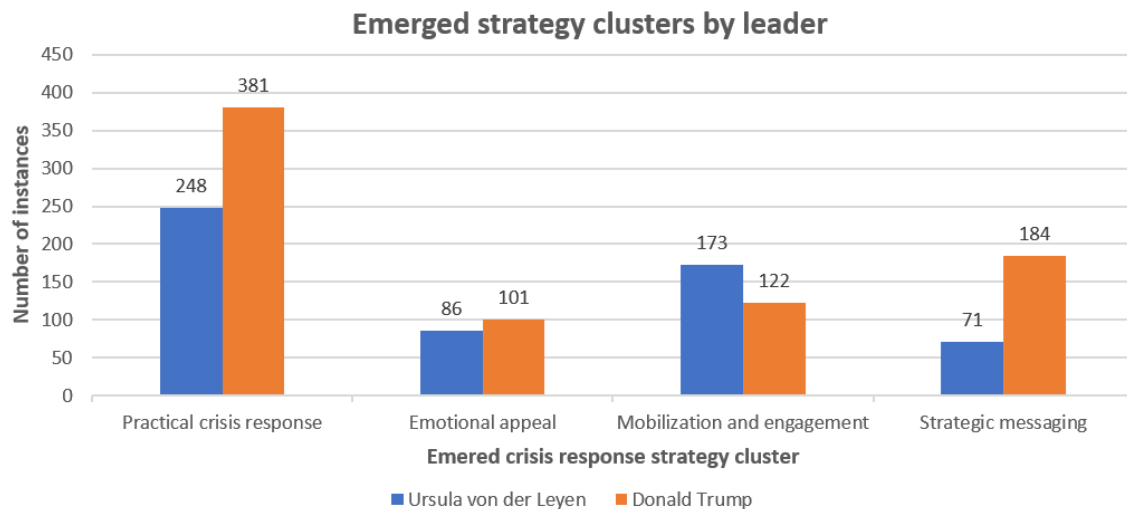


Figure 10: Total number of emerg ed crisis strategies employed, categorized by crisis response strategy (cluster), comparing Trump and von der Leyen's use of crisis response strategies.

Strategic messaging: reiterate position, editorializing and reframing

Mobilization and engagement: call to action, coordination and cooperation

Emotional appeal: hope, condolences, acknowledgement

Practical crisis response: scientific guidelines and preventative measures, economic impact and fiscal support measures, informative updates and swift and decisive action

Emerg ed strategy clusters (%) by von der Leyen

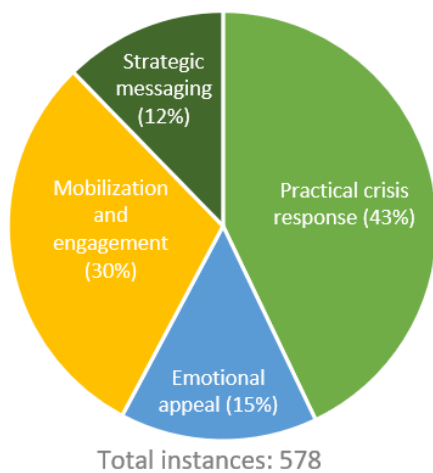


Figure 11: Percentage distribution of von der Leyen's use of emerg ed strategies. The coding process identified 578 instances where von der Leyen used the new emerg ed strategies. These strategies, are organized into four main crisis response strategy types (clusters) including (strategic messaging, practical crisis response, mobilization and engagement and emotional appeal).

Emerg ed strategy clusters (%) by Trump

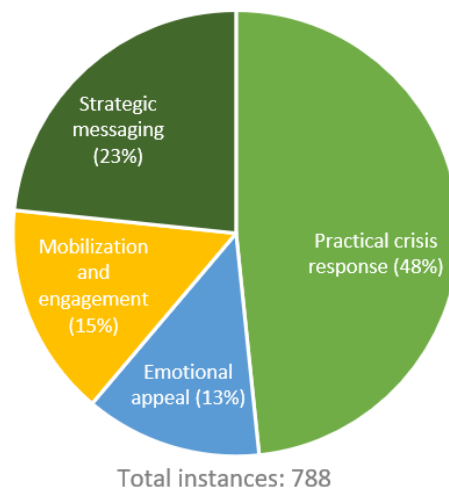


Figure 12: Percentage distribution of Trump's use of emerg ed strategies. The coding process identified 788 instances where Trump used the new emerg ed strategies. These strategies are organized into four main crisis response strategy types (clusters) including (strategic messaging, practical crisis response, mobilization and engagement and emotional appeal).

As shown in Figures 10, 11, and 12 the **practical crisis response** strategy was the most frequently employed by both leaders. Von der Leyen used this strategy 43% (248 of 578 instances), while Trump used it 48% (381 of 788 instances).

Von der Leyen's second most used strategy was the **mobilization and engagement** strategy, accounting for 30% (173 instances) of her emerged strategy use. Trump's second most employed emerged strategy was **strategic messaging** with 22% (184 instances). Interestingly, this was von der Leyen's least employed strategy with 12% (71 instances), while Trump's least utilized emerged strategy was **emotional appeal** with 13% (86 instances).

With the data on the emerged thematic strategy usage now presented, the study will next explore the contextual application of these strategies by the leaders. This analysis will reveal how each strategy was employed, providing deeper insights into their application and the broader crisis communication strategies.

A prevalent theme that emerged in the crisis communications issued by both Trump and von der Leyen was the **mobilization and engagement** crisis response strategy, *coordination and cooperation*. Von der Leyen repeatedly emphasized that the EU was stronger and more resilient when acting in unity and coordination, particularly through a robust and well-functioning single market. She asserted that solidarity and collective action were essential for effectively managing the pandemic.

“Once again, in general, for any measures to be effective, they need to be coordinated at EU level. Member States, especially neighbouring ones, need to work very closely together. In this way – and it is the only way –, we can make sure that our citizens receive the health care that they need immediately, wherever they are at the moment” (Statement at Press Conference with Executive Vice-Presidents Vestager and Dombrovskis, March 13, 2020).

Von der Leyen underscored the importance of a coordinated international response, calling on the G20 to take unified action to address the global crisis. She highlighted the necessity of close collaboration with health agencies both within Europe and globally, specifically citing the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

“The world needs to unite, so that the virus can be defeated once and for all. The good news is – this is already happening. One month ago, a worldwide coalition came together to shape the Coronavirus Global Response to the pandemic. We all rallied around the World Health Organization, when it called for a global mobilization” (Press Statement on Next Steps in Coronavirus response, May 28, 2020).

In contrast, Trump's communications focused on fostering collaboration within the US, particularly between political parties to pass essential legislation.

“We're really all working together. Democrat, Republican, conservative, liberal—we're all working together. This is not about parties; this is about our country” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 16, 2020).

More frequently, Trump referred to the unity among the American people, highlighting their collaborative efforts to overcome the pandemic for the greater good of the nation.

“Throughout our country, Americans from all walks of life are rallying together to defeat the unseen enemy striking our Nation. In times of struggle, we see the true greatness of the American character, and we are seeing that” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 20, 2020).

An additional theme that emerged in the crisis communication issued by both Trump and von der Leyen was the **mobilization and engagement** crisis response strategy, *call to action*. This theme was reflected in instances where the leaders directed stakeholders to follow a prescribed course of action in response to the pandemic. These *calls to action* ranged from urging the public to remain vigilant and adhere to health measures and protocols, to calling on politicians to reach agreements and to appeals for funding.

For example, Ursula von der Leyen responded to a global pledging marathon aimed at securing funding for the collaborative development and universal distribution of diagnostics, treatments and vaccines against coronavirus with a *call to action*:

“I want to invite everyone – governments, business leaders, philanthropists, artists and citizens – to raise awareness about the pledging effort.” (Joint Press Conference on the Call for Global Action, April 24, 2020)

In the face of the escalating crisis in New York City, Donald Trump issued a *call to action* to support the overwhelmed healthcare system. Recognizing the urgent need for medical personnel, he appealed directly to healthcare professionals:

“Doctors, nurses, first responders, and other health care providers who want to help New York at this critical time should visit the website NYC.gov/helpnow. NYC.gov/helpnow. They need help now. They need people to help them” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 2, 2020).

An additional shared thematic strategy that emerged in the analysis includes the **emotional appeal** crisis response strategy, *acknowledgement*. *Acknowledgement* was observed in instances where the leaders acknowledged the tragedy of the event and or identified and supported a specific community most affected by the pandemic. For instance, von der Leyen acknowledged the European countries hardest hit by the crisis, such as Italy and Spain.

“We should also not forget that those who were hit first by the virus were often hit the hardest. Because it was the painful experience and the full transparency of Italy and Spain in dealing with the pandemic - that helped others to brace themselves for the impact” (Speech at the European Parliament Plenary on the new MFF, May 13, 2020).

Additionally, von der Leyen highlighted the disproportionate effects on specific industries, including fishing, culture, and tourism, emphasizing the varied capacities of Member States to respond to the crisis.

“The virus is the same in every Member State, but the capacity to respond and absorb the shock is very different. For instance, countries and regions with economies that are built on client facing services – such as tourism or culture – have suffered way more” (Speech at the European Parliament Plenary on the new MFF, May 13, 2020).

Alternatively, Donald Trump focused on specific segments of the population adversely affected by the pandemic. For example, he focused on small businesses, the elderly and particular races, such as African American and Hispanic, who were deemed more vulnerable to the effects of the virus due to existing and exacerbated social inequalities related to race, class, and access to healthcare.

“These centers provide care to 28 million people living in medically underserved urban and rural regions, including many African American and Hispanic communities. We're taking care of them. And it's so important because you've all been reading about the disproportionate numbers in African American communities, and you're reading a little bit less about Hispanic communities, but likewise Hispanic communities. The numbers are disproportionate” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 8, 2020).

An additional shared thematic strategy that emerged in the analysis includes the **emotional appeal** crisis response strategy, *condolence*. *Condolence* was observed in instances where the leaders expressed sympathy and sorrow for those who lost loved ones or were otherwise adversely affected by the crisis. This strategy was evident when they addressed the human impact of the pandemic, acknowledging the pain and suffering experienced by individuals and communities.

“We think and we pray for all of the families in mourning. And we promise to each other that we will tell their stories and honor their lives and their legacies. We will remember them all. We will remember Julie, the French teenager with her whole life ahead of her, Jan, the veteran Czech historian who always fought for what he believed in, and Gino, the Italian doctor who came out of retirement to save lives.” (von der Leyen, Statement at the ‘Global Goal: Unite for our Future’ Summit, June 27, 2020).

The **emotional appeal** crisis response strategy, *hope*, was employed by the two political leaders. This theme was reflected in instances where the leaders conveyed optimism and resilience in an attempt to uplift the public and restore hope. This strategy involved sharing positive developments, success stories, and future prospects, including advances in medical research, community solidarity and eventual recovery plans.

“Small acts of kindness, compassion, solidarity are helping to spread hope through all Europe: from volunteering to balcony singing. From sending postcards to the lonely,

to shopping for the elderly. From hotels offering their beds for free, to restaurants donating their food. From luxury perfumers and vodka producers making sanitizing gel, to car makers and fashion houses producing masks” (von der Leyen, Speech at the European Parliament Plenary, March 26, 2020).

A dominant theme in the communications of both leaders was the **practical crisis response** strategy, *informative updates*. This strategy involved providing the public with timely and relevant information about the evolving crisis, such as the outcomes of meetings with governors (Trump) and commissioners (von der Leyen), interactions with WHO and the G7, as well as the timing and results of important votes. Ursula von der Leyen exemplified this approach when she announced:

“In just 10 days, on 4 May, we will launch a global pledging effort. On that day, we will also announce the next milestones of a global campaign. This campaign is to kick off an ongoing rolling replenishment” (Joint Press Conference on the Call for Global Action, April 24, 2020).

An additional shared theme includes the **practical crisis** response strategy, *swift and decisive action*. This was demonstrated in instances where leaders conveyed the urgency and decisiveness of their responses to the pandemic or urged for prompt action. This included timely decisions to mitigate the pandemic's impact and ensure recovery, such as reaching a quick agreement on a recovery package and shutting down borders, accelerating vaccine and treatment production.

“We're working very hard to expedite the longer process of developing a vaccine. We're also moving with maximum speed to develop therapies so that we can help people recover as quickly as possible” (Trump, White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, Feb 26, 2020).

A dominant thematic strategy which emerged in the communications made by both organizations includes the **practical crisis** response strategy, *economic impact and fiscal support measures*. This theme was reflected in instances where leaders address the financial ramifications of the pandemic and outline actions to support the economy. This strategy involves detailing the economic challenges caused by the pandemic, such as widespread job losses, business closures, market disruptions, industry impacts and presenting specific measures to mitigate these effects.

These measures included financial aid packages, stimulus plans, unemployment benefits, tax relief, and support for small businesses and essential workers. Examples include the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) and NextGeneration EU in Europe, as well as the CARES Act, Paycheck Protection Program, job retention loans, expanded unemployment benefits and temporary waiving of student loans in the US.

“In the last few days alone, we have approved schemes that will provide 1 billion euro to Croatian businesses, 1.2 billion for Greek SMEs or 20 million to Portuguese

fishermen. There are many more examples I could pick, from Latvia and Estonia to Belgium or Sweden” (von der Leyen, Speech at the European Parliament Plenary, April 16, 2020).

Both leaders frequently utilized the **practical crisis** response strategy, *scientific guidelines and preventative measures*, where leaders provide evidence-based health recommendations and provide updates on critical pandemic metrics. Their communications included guidelines on social distancing, mask-wearing, hand hygiene and the availability of medical equipment such as ventilators. Additionally, they provided regular updates on death rates, infection rates and progress in treatment and vaccine development.

“As of today, FEMA has shipped over 9 million N95 masks, 20 million face masks, 3.1 million face shields, nearly 6,000 ventilators, 2.6 million gowns, 14.6 million gloves” (Trump, White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 26, 2020).

A prevalent thematic strategy which emerged in the communications made by both leaders includes the **strategic messaging** crisis response strategy, *reiterate position*. This theme was reflected in instances where they restated their governments’ mission and platform, and or their political position in response to the crisis. For von der Leyen, she frequently referenced the Commission’s focus on the Green Deal, the Twin Transition as well as the founding principles of the EU. She emphasized these priorities to reinforce the EU's commitment to sustainability, digital transformation and core values.

“The European Union is founded on the values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. These values are common to all of us. We must uphold and defend them, even in these challenging times. (Statement on Emergency Measures in Member States, March 31, 2020).

Alternatively, Donald Trump reiterated his long-standing position on bringing manufacturing back to America, viewing the pandemic as an opportunity to reinforce domestic production and reduce dependency on foreign supply chains.

“The coronavirus shows the importance of bringing all of that manufacturing back to America, and we will have that started. It's already started, frankly. It started about a year ago” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 2, 2020).

Finally, the thematic strategy which emerged strongly in Trump’s communication but was not utilized by von der Leyen, includes the **strategic messaging** crisis response strategy, *editorializing and reframing*. This strategy was witnessed where Trump injected his personal opinions or interpretations into his statements, often reshaping the narrative to align with his perspective and agenda or to shift the focus away from criticism. This approach allowed him to influence public perception by controlling how key events and issues were presented.

“We had a great meeting. I tell you what: I'm sure you have tapes of the meeting. I'm sure that you were able to get tapes very easily. So you had 50 Governors-plus. And if you had tapes, you'd see it was really—I mean, there was no contention. I would say

virtually none. I would say maybe one person that was a little tiny bit of a raising of a voice, a little wise guy, a little bit. But he's usually a big wise guy” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 26, 2020).

6. DISCUSSION

The following section endeavors to answer the research questions drawing on the results and relevant literature, presented in the previous chapters.

6.1. RQ1: *What crisis communication strategies proposed by SCCT, if any, were applied by Ursula von der Leyen and Donald Trump in their response to the pandemic?*

Both Ursula von der Leyen and Donald Trump utilized SCCT crisis communication strategies. However, discussing which SCCT strategies were applied by these political leaders is especially relevant. As discussed in the literature section, according to Coombs, crises categorized within the victim cluster are best managed with **deny** strategies (Sisco et al., 2010, p. 23). This implies that following the SCCT framework, both leaders should have applied **deny** crisis response strategies in response to the pandemic. SCCT **deny** strategies include *attack the accuser*, *denial* and *scapegoat*. To reiterate, the coronavirus pandemic qualifies in the victim cluster of crisis types because it was triggered by an external agent beyond the control of political leaders. The emergence of this event was not something they could have originally prevented, positioning them as responders and “victims” of the crisis rather than its cause.

Interestingly, Trump's crisis communications prominently featured two of the three **deny** crisis response strategies: *scapegoat* (46 instances, 10%) and *attack the accuser* (31 instances, 6%), however, *denial* (0 instances, 0%) was absent from his approach. In contrast, von der Leyen did not employ any of the **deny** crisis response strategies (*scapegoat*, *attack the accuser*, *denial*) outlined in Coombs' theory. Overall, Trump's use of the **deny** crisis response strategy accounted for 16% of his total usage of SCCT crisis response strategies. These findings suggest that, in practice, von der Leyen did not follow the recommended crisis communication strategies for a victim-type crisis. While Trump utilized *scapegoat* and *attack the accuser* strategies, suggesting partial alignment with SCCT, the **deny** crisis response strategy was not his most frequently used approach within the SCCT framework, suggesting that he did not fully align with Coombs' theory given the crisis type.

This indicates that Trump seems to have politicized the crisis more than von der Leyen. This observation aligns with existing literature, which suggests that crises, such as the pandemic, often intensify political rivalries, allowing different actors to vie for influence over crisis narrative (Eisele et al., 2021, p. 956). This dynamic was clearly demonstrated through Trump's use of both the *scapegoat* and the *attack the accuser* strategy. He redirected blame towards the Democrats, accusing them of obstructing administrative efforts and thereby prolonging the crisis response.

Additionally, by repeatedly emphasizing that he had inherited a "broken system" from the previous Democratic leadership, Trump not only deflected blame but also positioned himself as a leader trying to overcome obstacles set in place by his political opponents. These tactics underscore his effort to dictate the crisis narrative, framing the opposition as responsible for the challenges he and his administration faced. This approach aligns with the work of Weaver (1986) who argued that in times of crisis, leaders often use political framing to either take credit for successful actions that enhance their government's reputation or deflect blame for unpopular decisions (p. 371).

This finding also aligns with the findings of Rufai and Bunce (2020), as presented in the literature section, which analyzed the tweets of G7 political leaders, including Trump and von der Leyen. The researchers categorized the tweets into three primary groups, one of which was "political—engaging in political debate." Notably, Trump was the only G7 leader who consistently employed this strategy, politicizing the crisis through his tweets (Rufai & Bunce, 2020, p. 511). In contrast, von der Leyen did not engage in such political maneuvering, as evidenced in the absence of Coombs' *attack the accuser* and *scapegoat* strategies.

The **diminish** crisis response strategies, specifically *excuse* and *justification*, were used exclusively by Trump and never by von der Leyen. *Justification* was Trump's second most frequently employed SCCT strategy (68 instances, 14%), while *excuse* was used sparingly (6 instances, 1%). Overall, Trump's use of the **diminish** crisis response strategy accounted for 15% of his total usage of SCCT crisis response strategies. Trump used *justification* to downplay the severity and impact of the crisis, a tactic consistent with the literature that suggests that Trump minimized the virus's effects, whereas von der Leyen refrained from such strategies (Belim, 2022, p. 56).

Trump did not employ the **rebuild** crisis response strategies *apology* or *compensation*, which is consistent with the SCCT discussed in the literature review. According to Coombs (2007), **rebuild** strategies are most effective when the government bears a high level of attributional responsibility for the crisis (p. 173). As Trump did not accept responsibility for the pandemic, he neither issued apologies nor offered compensation.

Similarly, Ursula von der Leyen did not use the *compensation* strategy. However, she did issue a few *apologies* (4 instances, 6%), specifically directed toward Spain and Italy, where the pandemic's initial impact was severe, and the response was criticized for being delayed and unprepared. Overall, von der Leyen's use of the **rebuild** crisis response strategy accounted for 6% of her total application of SCCT crisis response strategies, indicating partial alignment with the SCCT framework.

Interestingly, this observation aligns with Belim's (2022) findings, as discussed in the literature review, which noted that von der Leyen acknowledged the reality of the pandemic and admitted errors in handling the crisis (p. 56). This is reinforced by her apologies to Spain and Italy for the delayed and uncoordinated response, demonstrating her willingness to accept responsibility rather than deflect blame.

Bolstering was the most used crisis response strategy by both leaders. Trump used this strategy 69% (335 of 486 instances), while von der Leyen used it 94% (61 of 65 instances). Both political leaders employed *ingratiation* and *reminder* in their crisis communications. *Ingratiation* was the most dominant strategy for both, with Trump using it in 265 instances (55%) and von der Leyen in 35 instances (54%). The *reminder* strategy was employed by Trump in 65 instances (13%) and von der Leyen in 26 instances (40%). Notably, Trump rarely used the *victimage* strategy, with only 5 instances (1%), and von der Leyen did not use it at all.

Interestingly, as discussed in the literature review, **bolstering** is considered a secondary strategy and is most effective when paired with primary strategies (Coombs, 2007, p. 173). Von der Leyen combined **bolstering** with the **rebuild** crisis response strategy, while Trump paired it with both **deny** and **diminish** crisis response strategies.

This finding aligns with Tian and Yang's (2022) study, discussed in the literature review, which applied the SCCT framework to analyze crisis communications by political leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tian and Yang (2022) analysis of Trump's tweets revealed that the **bolstering** crisis response strategy was his most frequently used approach, appearing in 75% of his tweets. This heavy reliance on bolstering aligns closely with this study's findings, which showed that he employed **bolstering** crisis response strategies in 69% of his overall use of SCCT crisis response strategies.

To conclude, although Trump employed more SCCT strategies than von der Leyen, neither leader fully utilized the entire range of SCCT strategies. Additionally, neither leader fully embraced all **deny** crisis response strategies (*scapegoat, denial, attack the accuser*) as would be expected given the victim crisis type. Therefore, it is argued that in times of political crisis, specifically a “sticky crisis”, political leaders do not always subscribe to the SCCT, as presented in response to the second research question, they employ specific crisis communication tactics that differ from those proposed in SCCT.

6.2. RQII: *What thematic strategies emerged in the analysis of crisis communications made by Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen in response to the pandemic?*

As revealed in the results section, in addition to SCCT strategies, eleven **new** thematic strategies emerged in the coding process of the crisis communications issued to press by both leaders. The emergent thematic strategies were clustered into crisis response types based on their shared characteristics, these included **emotional appeal, practical crisis response, mobilization and engagement** and **strategic messaging**.

The following emergent thematic strategies were observed in von der Leyen's crisis communications: *acknowledgement, condolences, hope, scientific guidelines and preventative measures, economic impact and fiscal support measures, swift and decisive action, informative update, call to action, coordination and cooperation* and *reiterate position*. Similarly, the following thematic strategies emerged in Donald Trump's crisis communications: *acknowledgement, condolences, hope, scientific guidelines and preventative measures,*

economic impact and fiscal support measures, swift and decisive action, informative update, call to action, coordination and cooperation, reiterate position and editorializing and reframing.

The **emotional appeal** crisis response strategy was employed in 86 instances by von der Leyen (15% of total use of emerged strategies) and 101 instances by Trump (13%). Notably, both leaders utilized the **emotional appeal** strategies *acknowledgment* and *condolences*, representing a striking finding in relation to previous literature. Both Trump and von der Leyen recognized the gravity of the pandemic and expressed support for affected groups. Von der Leyen focused on economies reliant on tourism and services, while Trump addressed the vulnerabilities of minority groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic due to exacerbated social inequalities related to race, class and healthcare access. This aligns with the work of Eisele et al. (2021), discussed in the literature section, which emphasizes that crisis communication must prioritize the inclusion of all affected groups within society, particularly those most vulnerable (p. 956).

These findings also support the work of Hayes et al. (2017) who suggest that in time of tragedy, such as a pandemic, organizations are “morally obligated” to acknowledge the event and offer support and condolences to the victims in order to demonstrate the collectivity of the tragedy (p. 255). As highlighted in the literature review, Coombs (1999) argued that offering support and condolences to the victims of crisis can foster trust and increase organizational credibility (as cited in Hayes et al., 2017, p. 263), thus providing a plausible explanation for the emergence of these thematic strategies.

The analysis of **mobilization and engagement** crisis response strategy, *coordination and cooperation* in the communications of political leaders reveals findings that align closely with existing literature. Tian and Yang (2022) explored the application of the SCCT in "sticky crises," examining crisis communications from political leaders during the pandemic. In their analysis of Donald Trump’s tweets, they identified not only the use of SCCT strategies but also introduced a new category, "cohesion."

This category signified “an intention to promote cooperation, cohesion and inclusion among various social members, institutions, and groups” (Tian & Yang, 2022). The researchers found that while Trump employed the cohesion strategy in one-third of his tweets, these messages often promoted patriotism and nationalism (Tian & Yang, 2022). In an analysis of Ursula von der Leyen’s tweets during the pandemic, Belim (2022) found that her communications prominently featured themes of unity, cooperation, and a spirit of empathy and solidarity (p. 56). This aligns with the findings of this study, where von der Leyen used the *coordination and cooperation* strategy in 123 instances (21%), underscoring her focus on fostering collective action.

In line with the conclusions of Tian and Yang (2022), Trump rarely extended his calls for collaboration to the international arena, focusing instead on unifying and fostering collaboration strictly within the United States, as the literature suggests. Von der Leyen’s strategy was deeply rooted in multilateralism and international cooperation, emphasizing that

global challenges require global solutions. Her focus on EU unity and collaboration with international organizations and governments reflects a strategy aimed at harnessing collective efforts and shared resources to combat the pandemic.

The **practical crisis response** strategy was employed in 248 instances by von der Leyen (43%) and 381 instances by Trump (48%). The prominence of **practical crisis** response strategies, *scientific guidelines and preventative measures* and *informative updates* as dominant themes in the communications of both political leaders strongly aligns with findings presented in the literature review. By regularly delivering updates and providing scientific recommendations, it is assumed that both leaders sought to keep the public informed of critical developments, while reducing uncertainty to alleviate public anxiety. This approach reflects the conclusions of Eisele et al. (2021), who stress that "increased accessibility of information is crucial to empower people, regardless of their cognitive or intellectual capacities, to understand and prepare, especially in situations of heightened stress and anxiety" (p. 955).

Additionally, this focus aligns with the findings of Rufai and Bunce (2020), who examined the use of Twitter by G7 leaders, including Trump and von der Leyen, for crisis communication. Their content analysis revealed a shared theme across these leaders' viral tweets: the frequent sharing of informative content and updates (p. 511).

Notably, Trump more frequently utilized the *scientific guidelines and preventative measures* strategy (157 instances, 20%) in his communications compared to von der Leyen (46 instances, 8%). This disparity could suggest that von der Leyen relied more heavily on the expertise and communications of specialized agencies, such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), to disseminate detailed scientific information. However, it's important to recognize that this analysis was limited to statements and speeches made available to the press. The emphasis on scientific guidelines might vary in other forms of communication, such as her tweets (X), where von der Leyen might have focused more on direct public engagement.

Interestingly, while both leaders emphasized the **practical crisis** response strategy, *economic impact and fiscal support measures* in their communications, von der Leyen utilized this thematic strategy significantly more often (111 instances, 19%) than Trump (66 instances, 8%). For von der Leyen, after *coordination and cooperation*, *economic impact and fiscal support measures* emerged as the second most dominant theme in her communications. This pattern aligns with Belim's (2022) analysis of von der Leyen's tweets, which identified "economic and financial support and recovery" as the second most prevalent theme, following "EU support and EU measures." This further highlights von der Leyen's strategic focus on addressing the economic dimensions of the crisis within a broader framework of international and regional cooperation.

The **strategic messaging** crisis response strategy *editorializing and reframing* emerged exclusively in Trump's communications (165 instances, 21%). According to the literature, leaders often attempt to shape public perception by taking credit for successful or popular actions while deflecting blame for unpopular decisions (Leong et al., 2023). Trump's use of these tactics is a clear example, as he consistently positioned his administration's actions in a

favorable light through strategic editorializing and reframing. This approach not only served to enhance his narrative but also reflects a deliberate effort to control the political discourse during a time of crisis.

Finally, both leaders utilized the strategic messaging response *call to action*. Von der Leyen did so in 50 instances (9%), while Trump did so in 37 instances (5%). In these cases, they directed stakeholders to follow a prescribed course of action in response to the pandemic, suggesting an effort to demonstrate their control over the crisis.

6.3. RQIII: *What are the differences, and similarities, if any, in Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen's crisis communication strategies in response to the pandemic?*

Both Trump and von der Leyen employed SCCT crisis communication strategies in response to the pandemic, as well as shared thematic strategies that emerged during the coding process. However, a deeper analysis reveals significant differences in how each leader applied these strategies, highlighting their contrasting crisis communications management approaches.

A key distinction lies in their use of SCCT crisis response strategies. As explored in response to the first research question, Trump's communication strategy prominently featured **deny**, **diminish**, and **bolstering** tactics, while von der Leyen relied on **bolstering** and a limited use of **rebuilding** strategies.

Both leaders used **bolstering** strategies, particularly *ingratiation* and *reminder*, to emphasize their accomplishments and reinforce their leadership during the crisis. **Bolstering** was the most frequently employed strategy by both, suggesting that both Trump and von der Leyen understood the importance of reassuring the public and projecting competence in a time of uncertainty. However, Trump used these strategies more extensively, employing *ingratiation* in 265 instances, compared to von der Leyen in 31 instances. Trump's frequent use of *ingratiation* suggests that he prioritized building personal rapport with his stakeholders through repeated praise.

Trump's crisis communications prominently featured **deny** crisis response strategies such as *scapegoat* and *attack the accuser*. He frequently redirected blame towards external actors, notably China, and his political opponents, particularly the Democrats. This aligns with literature on the politicization of crises, which highlights how leaders may use crises to deflect blame and dominate the narrative (Weaver 1986, p. 371). His frequent use of the **diminish** crisis response strategy, *justification* (68 instances, 14%) suggests an effort to minimize public concern and assert control over the crisis narrative, consistent with the findings of Belim (2022) who argued that Trump often sought to undermine perceptions of the pandemic's dangers (p. 56).

Rather than minimizing the impact of the pandemic, von der Leyen utilized the **rebuild crisis response** strategy, *apology*. This was evident when she apologized to Spain and Italy—two member states that she acknowledged had been inadequately supported during the early stages of the EU's pandemic response. By offering an apology, it could be suggested that von der

Leyen sought to restore trust and solidarity by emphasizing a commitment to rectify initial missteps.

Von der Leyen's frequent references to *economic and fiscal support* (111 instances, compared to Trump's 66) suggests a focus on addressing the economic dimensions of the crisis, particularly in sectors and European countries hit hardest. This shift in focus indicates that von der Leyen prioritized collective action and regional recovery, in contrast to Trump's more inward-looking, politically charged narrative.

While both leaders called for *coordination and cooperation*, a significant difference in their strategies was their focus on domestic versus international collaboration. Trump's messaging was primarily geared toward unifying the US, emphasizing national collaboration to streamline the legislative process and ensure swift action within the country. His calls for cooperation were largely confined to domestic efforts, aligning with his broader "America First" narrative. In contrast, von der Leyen's strategy was rooted in multilateralism, emphasizing that global challenges require global solutions. She frequently highlighted the need for EU unity and collaboration with international organizations.

Both leaders utilized **practical crisis response** strategies, *informative updates* and *scientific guidelines and preventative measures*. This reflects a shared objective: keeping the public informed of critical developments and reducing uncertainty to alleviate public anxiety. This is consistent with the findings of Eisele et al. (2021), who stress that making information accessible to the public is crucial during times of heightened stress and uncertainty (p. 955).

Furthermore, Trump's communication strategy included *editorializing and reframing*, which was absent from von der Leyen's approach. This effort to control the political discourse during the crisis highlights Trump's focus on framing the pandemic in a way that bolstered his political standing and portrayed his administration's response in a positive light. Von der Leyen, on the other hand, appeared to refrain from such political maneuvering, opting instead for a less politicized communication style that emphasized the human experience, the strength and resilience of the EU and the economic impact of the pandemic and subsequent fiscal support measures.

Despite these differences, both leaders recognized the importance of acknowledging the human impact of the pandemic. Interestingly, the frequency of **emotional appeal** strategies — *hope*, *condolences*, and *acknowledging* the suffering of those affected—was nearly identical between them. Trump employed the **emotional appeal** crisis response strategy in 101 instances (13%) and von der Leyen in 86 instances (15%).

However, the timing and emphasis varied significantly. While both leaders employed the *condolences* strategy, notable differences in their timing were observed. Von der Leyen offered *condolences* in her opening statement during her first press statement on the pandemic on March 2, 2020, setting a tone of empathy and solidarity from the outset. In contrast, Trump began expressing *condolences* nearly a month later, on March 31, 2020. This delay could be related to the initially lower death toll in the US compared to countries in Europe, or possibly

indicate an initial reluctance to fully acknowledge the crisis's impact, though this remains speculative.

Another stark difference included the use of the **strategic messaging** crisis response strategy, *reiterate position*. Von der Leyen employed this strategy significantly more than Trump, with 71 (12%) instances compared to 19 (2%). This approach involved restating their government's mission, platform, or political stance in response to the crisis. For von der Leyen, it meant consistently highlighting the European Commission's focus on the Green Deal, the Twin Transition and the founding principles of the EU.

By doing so, she reinforced the EU's long-term commitment to sustainability, digital transformation and core European values, even in the midst of a global crisis. This aligns with the findings of Belim (2022) which analyzed the frames in von der Leyen's tweets in response to the pandemic, one major frame was that she advocated for positive transformation, highlighting the Green Deal for social and environmental improvements (p. 58).

In contrast, Trump's less frequent use of this strategy reflects his tendency to editorialize or reframe the situation rather than reiterate a consistent policy position. This supports the findings of Boin et al. (2021) who maintain that "while pivotal, consistency in crisis communication is challenging for political leaders, not least in the context of competing crisis narratives, which can hinder coherent responses to the crisis as well as encourage politically damaging blame games" (as cited in Schnabel et al., 2023).

This difference could suggest that von der Leyen's communication was anchored in reinforcing stability and continuity, while Trump's was more reactive, adjusting to the shifting political landscape.

To conclude, although both Trump and von der Leyen utilized SCCT crisis communication strategies in their responses to the pandemic, as well as shared certain thematic strategies identified through the coding process, their communication approaches were notably distinct. These differences and similarities offer valuable insights into how these two political leaders navigated communication in times of a "sticky crisis", the pandemic.

6.4. RQIV: *When did Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen first address the pandemic in their statements or speeches made available to the press, and how did the timing of these statements differ or align?*

Donald Trump publicly addressed the pandemic for the first time in a formal press conference at the White House on February 29, 2020, while Ursula von der Leyen delivered her initial press statement shortly after, on March 2, 2020 in a joint press conference with Commissioners Lenarčič, Kyriakides, Johansson, Vălean and Gentiloni at the Emergency Response Coordination Center (ERCC) European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) on the EU's response to COVID-19.

Although the difference in timing between the two leaders' first statements was relatively minor, these dates are significant when examined in the context of crisis communication theory.

As presented in the literature review, crisis literature traditionally emphasizes the necessity of swift communication to maintain public trust during a crisis. A delay in addressing a crisis can lead to rumors, leaks and increased perceptions of harm and dishonesty on the part of leadership (Ray, 1999, p. 111). In this light, Trump's earlier response might be viewed as a strategic attempt to assert control over the narrative quickly. However, immediate communication carries risks, particularly when the available information is premature or inaccurate (Ulmer et al., 2010, p. 52). Trump's early press conference, which downplayed the virus's severity, illustrates the potential drawbacks of premature messaging.

Von der Leyen's slightly later response suggests a more measured approach, potentially allowing for greater clarity and coordination within the EU before making an official statement. As Ray (1999) highlights, "the choice to remain silent in such a situation is strategic in and of itself," indicating that silence or a delayed response might be a carefully considered tactic rather than a failure to act (p. 111).

Importantly, it is worth noting that this analysis of timing is limited to official statements and speeches made available to the press. A valuable avenue for further research could involve examining other communication platforms, particularly social media outlets such as Twitter (X). These platforms may reveal that leaders initially communicated their responses to the pandemic through these channels, offering potentially earlier or more nuanced insights into their crisis management strategies.

7. LIMITATIONS

It is important to recognize the limitations of this study. While the emergence of new strategies in the communications of Trump and von der Leyen may offer lessons for other political leaders, these findings are not generalizable. The study focused on two distinct political leaders operating in specific political contexts during an unprecedented global crisis. Therefore, the results cannot be applied universally to all political leaders or situations. Additionally, this study only examined official speeches and statements made available to press, excluding other forms of communication, such as social media, which could serve as an interesting avenue for future research.

Finally, while the study effectively analyzed the methods of crisis communication used by Trump and von der Leyen, it did not measure the success or effectiveness of their communications. This presents a potential area for future research that could further contribute to the field of political crisis communications, particularly in times of "sticky crises." Future studies that assess the impact and success of these communication strategies could provide deeper insights into their efficacy and potential improvements for future crisis response strategies.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the crisis communication strategies employed by Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen during the initial six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (February 29, 2020 – August 29, 2020). This study provides valuable insights into how two prominent leaders from the world's largest democratic blocs respond to political crises. By examining their communication strategies during the pandemic, this analysis not only highlights key similarities and differences between their approaches but also sheds light on the distinct ways they navigated the complexities of a global health crisis.

The study revealed that Trump's crisis communication during the first six months of the pandemic was defined by an emphasis on projecting national strength, deflecting blame, and politicizing the crisis to serve his political agenda. He frequently used *scapegoating* strategies, blaming external entities like China—referring to COVID-19 as the "China virus"—as well as international organizations like the WHO, and domestic opponents such as the media, the Democratic Party and former President Obama. This allowed him to deflect responsibility and create a narrative that positioned his administration as combating external threats and internal opposition, rather than addressing its own shortcomings.

Simultaneously, Trump sought to *ingratiate* key stakeholders, particularly within the corporate sector. He often downplayed the severity of the crisis in his communications by providing optimistic timelines for a return to normal. However, he frequently provided *scientific updates* and emphasized the importance of preventative measures in his communications. While he frequently called for collaboration, his focus remained largely on national efforts, minimizing the focus of international coordination. This approach not only allowed Trump to appeal to his base by emphasizing American self-reliance but also served to reinforce his political identity as a leader prioritizing the economy and deflecting criticism through blame-shifting tactics.

In contrast, Ursula von der Leyen's crisis communication focused on *coordination and cooperation*, European unity, and reaffirming the EU's core values. She continually stressed the need for solidarity, urging member states to uphold the core principles of the EU. Von der Leyen positioned the pandemic not only as a crisis but as an opportunity to accelerate the EU's long-term strategic goals, such as sustainability through the European Green Deal and digital transformation. Her messaging tied recovery efforts to these broader aspirations, presenting the crisis as a chance to build a more resilient and future-oriented Europe. Additionally, von der Leyen called for international collaboration, recognizing that a coordinated global response was essential to overcoming the pandemic. This approach reinforced the EU's commitment to unity, both within its borders and on the international stage, ensuring that recovery efforts aligned with a vision for a greener, more connected world.

Von der Leyen also focused on ingratiating key stakeholders, particularly political and institutional leaders. She praised figures like President Charles Michel and Chancellor Angela Merkel for their leadership in negotiating the EU recovery package and commended member

states for their contributions to collective action. Her communication extended beyond political actors, acknowledging the efforts of private sector leaders, healthcare workers and journalists, particularly in combating misinformation. She also highlighted the importance of economic support measures, championing initiatives like the NextGeneration EU recovery plan and assistance for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

While it remains unclear whether either leader explicitly or implicitly followed Coombs' SCCT, the analysis revealed that Trump utilized a greater number and broader range of SCCT strategies than von der Leyen, though neither leader fully applied the SCCT framework.

Nonetheless, the emergence of eleven **new** crisis communications strategies: *acknowledgement, condolences, hope, scientific guidelines and preventative measures, economic impact and fiscal support measures, swift and decisive action, informative update, call to action, coordination and cooperation, reiterate position* and *editorializing and reframing* applied by the political leaders during the pandemic, a “sticky crisis”, reveals a broader approach to crisis communication that extends beyond the traditional SCCT framework.

The emergence of these **new** strategies beyond those outlined in Coombs' SCCT framework highlights the need for the theory to be further researched, adapted and expanded to better address the distinct challenges posed by political crises—an area that remains largely underexplored in academic research.

SCCT, originally developed with a focus on corporate crisis communication, requires further refinement to capture the complexities of political leadership during crises more effectively. Unlike corporate crises, political crises often unfold in a highly charged environment where leaders must navigate government regulations, engage diverse stakeholders and address public concerns in real time. These crises demand nuanced and adaptive communication strategies, given the unpredictable and rapidly changing landscape. The findings of this research suggest that traditional SCCT strategies may be insufficient to manage the intricacies of political crises, where the stakes are higher and the public scrutiny more intense.

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10. ANNEXES

10.1. ANNEX I: Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Table 1: SCCT crisis types by crisis clusters

Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.
(Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat)

- Natural disaster:* Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.
- Rumor:* False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.
- Workplace violence:* Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.
- Product tampering/Malevolence:* External agent causes damage to an organization.

Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional.
(Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)

- Challenges:* Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.
- Technical-error accidents:* A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.
- Technical-error product harm:* A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.

Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation.
(Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)

- Human-error accidents:* Human error causes an industrial accident.
- Human-error product harm:* Human error causes a product to be recalled.
- Organizational misdeed with no injuries:* Stakeholders are deceived without injury.
- Organizational misdeed management misconduct:* Laws or regulations are violated by management.
- Organizational misdeed with injuries:* Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

Crisis types proposed in Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007, p. 167)

Table 2: SCCT crisis response strategies

Primary crisis response strategies

Deny crisis response strategies

- Attack the accuser:* Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.
- Denial:* Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.
- Scapegoat:* Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.

Diminish crisis response strategies

- Excuse:* Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.
- Justification:* Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

Rebuild crisis response strategies

- Compensation:* Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.
- Apology:* Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

Secondary crisis response strategies

Bolstering crisis response strategies

- Reminder:* Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.
- Ingratiation:* Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.
- Victimage:* Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

Crisis response strategies proposed in Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007, p. 170)

10.2. ANNEX II: Sample Defined

Table detailing the total number of communications (statements to the press) issued by Ursula von der Leyen and Donald Trump in response to the pandemic per month. The total sample size was 78.

Month	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Total
Von der Leyen	0	11	6	9	4	3	0	33
Trump	1	18	22	1	2	1	0	45

10.3. ANNEX III: Emerged Thematic Strategies Defined

Emotional appeal crisis response strategies: Leader uses the following crisis communication strategies to connect with the public's emotions and foster trust:

Acknowledgement - *Leader acknowledges the tragedy of the event and identifies and supports a specific community most affected by the pandemic.*

Condolence - *Leader expresses sympathy and sorrow for those who lost loved ones or were otherwise adversely affected by the crisis.*

Hope - *Leader conveys optimism and resilience in an attempt to uplift the public and restore hope.*

Mobilization and engagement crisis response strategies: Leader uses the following crisis communication strategies to rally collective action and active participation:

Coordination and cooperation - *Leader emphasizes the need for unified efforts to tackle the pandemic or praises successful collaborative efforts.*

Call to Action - *Leader directs stakeholders to follow a prescribed course of action in response to crisis.*

Strategic messaging crisis response strategies: Leader uses the following crisis communication strategies to effectively communicate their agenda and manage public perception:

Reiterate position - *Leader restates their governments' mission and platform, and or their political position in response to the crisis.*

Editorializing and reframing - *Leader injects their personal opinions or interpretations into statements, reshaping the narrative to align with their agenda or shift focus away from criticism.*

Practical crisis response strategies: Leader uses the following crisis communication strategies to effectively manage the pandemic and provide clear, actionable information:

Scientific guidelines and preventative measures - *Leader provides evidence-based health recommendations and provides updates on critical pandemic metrics.*

Economic impact and fiscal support measures - *Leader addresses the financial ramifications of the pandemic and outlines actions to support the economy.*

Swift and decisive action - *Leader conveys the urgency and decisiveness of their responses to the pandemic or urges for prompt action.*

Informative Updates - *Leader provides stakeholders with timely and relevant updates about the evolving crisis.*

10.4. ANNEX IV: Contextual Evidence Of Themes

Theme (Strategy)	SCCT or Emerging Theme	Contextual Evidence Ursula von der Leyen	Contextual Evidence Donald Trump
Attack the accuser	SCCT: Deny crisis response strategies	Strategy not witnessed	<i>“The Governors have been very gracious for the most part, I would say. There are a couple that aren't appreciative of the incredible job. They have to do a better job themselves; that's part of the problem.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 27,2020)
Denial	SCCT: Deny crisis response strategies	Strategy not witnessed	Strategy not witnessed
Scapegoat	SCCT: Deny crisis response strategies	Strategy not witnessed	<i>“A cruel virus from a distant land has unfairly claimed thousands of precious American lives.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 16, 2020)
Excuse	SCCT: Diminish crisis response strategies	Strategy not witnessed	<i>“I don't view it as an act of God; I would view it as something that just surprised the whole world. And if people would have known about it, it could have stopped—been stopped in place. It could have been stopped right where it came from—China—if we would have known about it, if they would have known about it.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 19, 2020)
Justification	SCCT: Diminish crisis response strategies	Strategy not witnessed	<i>“I don't think it's going to end up being such a rough patch. I think it's going to, when we open—especially, if we can open—the sooner, the better—it's going to open up like a rocket ship. I think it's going to go very good and very quickly.”</i> (White House

			Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 25, 2020)
Compensation	SCCT: Rebuild crisis response strategies	Strategy not witnessed	Strategy not witnessed
Apology	SCCT: Rebuild crisis response strategies	<i>“Yes, it is true that no one was really ready for this. It is also true that too many were not there on time when Italy needed a helping hand at the very beginning. And yes, for that, it is right that Europe as a whole offers a heartfelt apology.”</i> (Speech at the European Parliament Plenary, April 16, 2020)	Strategy not witnessed
Ingratiation	SCCT: Bolstering Crisis Response Strategies	<i>“First of all, I would like to thank the President of the European Council – Charles Michel – for his enormous efforts and perseverance. This European Council’s success is also his success.”</i> (Joint Press Conference with President Michel, July 21, 2020)	<i>“Our warriors in this life-and-death battle are the incredible doctors and nurses and health care workers on the frontline of the fight. We pledge to them our eternal gratitude and everlasting support. They make all of us very proud. Our country is very proud.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 5, 2020)
Reminder	SCCT: Bolstering Crisis Response Strategies	<i>“Since this crisis started, we have already achieved a lot. We have built a network of states, global health institutions, philanthropists and businesses to provide a common answer to coronavirus. We started to collect money for a global response. We have built a system to coordinate the efforts of all players involved.”</i> (Global Goal Unite for the Future Summit, June 27, 2020)	<i>“I don’t think any administration has done anywhere near what we’ve done in 3½ years.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 15, 2020)
Victimage	SCCT: Bolstering Crisis Response Strategies	Strategy not witnessed	<i>“As governments and nations focus on the coronavirus, there’s a growing threat that cartels, criminals, terrorists, and other malignant actors will try to exploit the situation for their own gain.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 1, 2020)

Acknowledgement	Theme Emerged: Emotional Appeal	<p><i>“The countries most affected by the virus – like Italy, Spain and France, which are also impacted economically – are not the only ones whose economies have suffered. Those dependent on tourism, those with weaker capital markets or those whose industry is highly dependent on European and international value chains have also been hit.”</i> (Press statement on the MFF and the Recovery Instrument, May 27, 2020)</p>	<p><i>“And we're actively engaging on the problem of increased impacts—this is a real problem, and it's showing up very strongly in our data—on the African American community. And we're doing everything in our power to address this challenge—it's a tremendous challenge; it's terrible—and provide support to African American citizens of this country who are going through a lot. But it's been disproportional. They're getting hit very, very hard.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 7, 2020)</p>
Condolences	Theme Emerged: Emotional Appeal	<p><i>“We think and we pray for all of the families in mourning. And we promise to each other that we will tell their stories and honor their lives and their legacies.”</i> (Speech at the European Parliament Plenary, April 16, 2020)</p>	<p><i>“As we express our gratitude for these hard-fought gains, however, we continue to mourn with thousands of families across the country whose loved ones have been stolen from us by the invisible enemy. We grieve by their side as one family, this great American family. And we do grieve.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 27, 2020)</p>
Hope	Theme Emerged: Emotional Appeal	<p><i>“Today, Italy is getting back on its feet. The shopping windows on your cities' main streets are lighting up again. Factory gates are reopening. Cafes and restaurants are once again filled with the sound of chatter and the smell of good food. There is still so much to do, but this is already something that warms our heart.”</i> (Speech at event Progettiamo il Rilancio, June 13, 2020)</p>	<p><i>“Thanks to our comprehensive strategy and extraordinary devotion to our citizens—we have had such tremendous support all over—we continue to see encouraging signs of progress. Cases in the New York area, New Orleans, Detroit, Boston, and Houston are declining.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 27, 2020)</p>
Scientific Guidelines and Preventative Measures	Theme Emerged: Practical Crisis Response	<p><i>Awareness campaigns should continue to encourage the population to keep up the strong hygiene practices acquired. They are very simple, but they are very effective.”</i> (Joint Press Conference with</p>	<p><i>“The more aggressively we commit to social distancing—so important; social distancing, such an important phrase; and we do it right now—the more lives we can save and the sooner we can eventually get people back to</i></p>

		President Michel, April 15, 2020)	<i>work, back to school, and back to normal.</i> ” (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 25, 2020)
Economic Impact and Fiscal Support Measures	Theme Emerged: Practical Crisis Response	<i>“Europe has had economic crises before. But we have never had an economic shutdown like this. Nobody is to blame and everybody will need support. We need unprecedented measures to do this and to make sure our economy is ready to bounce forward as soon as it can.”</i> (Speech at the European Parliament Plenary, April 16, 2020)	<i>“We're giving relief to affected industries and small businesses, and we're ensuring that we emerge from this challenge with a prosperous and growing economy, because that's what's going to happen.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 17, 2020).
Swift and Decisive Action	Theme Emerged: Practical Crisis Response	<i>“We are living in extraordinary times, and governments, in principle, need to have the necessary tools to act rapidly and effectively to protect the public health of citizens.”</i> (Statement on Emergency Measures in Member States, March 31, 2020)	<i>“This month, we have taken bold action to cut through the red tape and make telehealth available for millions more Americans during this crisis.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 22, 2020)
Informative Update	Theme Emerged: Practical Crisis Response	<i>“To this end and as provided for under Article 324 of the Treaty, I have invited David Sassoli, the President of the European Parliament, and Angela Merkel, German Chancellor, in her capacity as rotating Presidency of the Council, as well as Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, to a meeting on 8 July to take stock of progress and prepare the intensive political negotiations that lie ahead.”</i> (Statement on Reaching Agreement on the European Recovery Package, July 2, 2020).	<i>“Today you broke the 150 mark for the virus. We have 150 countries—over 150 countries where you have this virus.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, March 24, 2020)
Call to Action	Theme Emerged: Mobilization and Engagement	<i>“As part of this, I urge all Member States to make the most of SURE – the new scheme proposed by the Commission to protect Europeans against the risk of</i>	<i>“I urge all of our Nation's Governors to ensure that the massive deliveries that we've made to your States over the past few weeks are distributed as quickly as possible.”</i> (White

		<i>unemployment.</i> ” (Statement at Joint Press Conference with President Michel, March 16, 2020)	House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 6, 2020).
Coordination and Cooperation	Theme Emerged: Mobilization and Engagement	<i>As we all know, the virus knows no borders. It can only be defeated through international cooperation and coordination – what goes for the European Union also goes for the globe. The G20 has made this its focus and I welcome that.</i> ”(Joint Press Conference with President Michel, April 15, 2020)	<i>“We’ve seen throughout our proud history, America is never greater than when our people are working in unison toward a common goal. That’s what’s happening right now. We’ll forge an even brighter future today than we had.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 15, 2020).
Reiterate Position	Theme Emerged: Strategic Messaging	<i>“On this path, we will uphold our European values and human rights. This is who we are, and this is what we stand for.”</i> (Statement on Emergency Measures in Member States, March 31, 2020)	<i>“Don’t forget, I will always protect your Social Security, your Medicare, and your Medicaid. We’re protecting Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, and I always will.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 2, 2020)
Editorializing and Reframing	Theme Emerged: Strategic Messaging	<i>Not witnessed</i>	<i>“And the New York Times is a very dishonest newspaper. It’s my opinion. It’s not an opinion. It’s actually, from my standpoint—you know, the very hard thing to figure, though: Most people wouldn’t know that, but I know it, because I know the facts.”</i> (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, April 18, 2020)