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# **Internal COVID Communication in 2 Universities: Crisis Communication in Times of Uncertainty**

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## **Abstract**

The COVID pandemic forced universities around the world to transition their operations from face-to-face to virtual from one day to the next. The uncertainty surrounding the new strain of coronavirus was concerning to students, staff and administrators alike, who feared for their health, their vulnerable relatives, their finances and their ability to continue studying and working. The present study analyzed internal memos from two universities, one in the U.S. and one in France, and examined the tone, style, and content of their COVID related crisis communication, based on the message characteristics and application of best practices in crisis communication messaging. Findings reveal differences in message tone, style and source between the France and US samples, and different patterns of applying best practice message strategies for crisis communication. We discuss how internal communication may impact university stakeholders and suggestions for future research.

Key words: COVID-19, crisis communications, university communications, best practices

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## **Introduction**

As the world began hearing about a new virus whose origin was unclear and rate of contagion particularly high, institutions and organizations, including universities had to communicate with their publics to let them know how they were planning to manage the imminent risk. Cases were reported around the world in January, first in Asia, then Europe, and eventually the entire globe. Large universities are by nature international organizations, with faculty and students coming from many different countries, and travelling routine for personal or academic reasons. This placed universities in the position to attempt to interpret the incomplete information they were receiving from multiple sources such as news outlets, public health agencies, funders, supporters,

students and parents. The purpose of this study was to compare how two large public universities, one in the southern United States (SUS) and one in southern France (SF), used their internal communication mechanisms to share information about COVID-19 to their stakeholders. Through content analysis of official emails sent in the first three months of the pandemic, we examine the extent to which each institution applied best practices in crisis communication in messages to their stakeholders.

## **Literature Review**

COVID pandemic made visible the operational complexity of handling an effective crisis communication plan in higher education by challenging institutional leaders in reframing response strategies in place to address a long-lasting and constantly changing health and social crisis proactively. Researchers found that the majority of higher education leaders recognize that their institutions lack sufficient technology and infrastructure to be adequately prepared for extraordinary crises such as COVID-19 (Thelen & Robinson, 2019).

Rethinking and reframing established crisis communication plans to adapt to the challenges of the new pandemic could significantly influence the institution strategic goals, the internal and external environment and communication exchange with the internal and external communities, and the public image among others (Coombs et al., 2010; Mitroff et al. 2006; Thelen and Robinson, 2019; Tourish & Jackson, 2008). Best practices are principles or process outline to approach crises effectively and are expected to evolve in unpredictable manner due to the diverse, dynamic, unique and unpredictable nature of crisis events (Seeger, 2006). Therefore, best practices are general outlines or principles or process outline to approach crisis responses effectively and to improve performance (Coombs, 1999b; Seeger, 2006).

Researchers (Jin et al., 2014) specifically point out at the importance of developing and implementing best practices throughout organizations with a focus on communication messaging strategies and use of technology because it may provide strategic direction and a deeper understanding of how crisis communication plans may meet audience and stakeholder expectations. For example, Thelen & Robinson (2019) study examined crisis communication messages through social media to understand its impact on the public's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement to assess public expectations and effectiveness in crisis management. However, they (Thelen & Robinson) reported that most higher education organizations are not prepared adequately to respond to crises that are outside the traditional parameters, such as COVID-19.

## High and Low Context Cultures

Hall's framework is a valuable analytical tool, because it allows for easily understanding and identifying differences in the transmission of information according to communication styles linked to each cultural group (Pflug, 2011). While there can be no doubt that language molds thinking in particularly subtle ways, mankind must eventually come to grips with the reality of other cultural systems and the pervasive effect these other systems exert on how the world is perceived, how the self is experienced, and how life itself is organized (Hall, 1973, p. xii).

Hall's contextuality theory distinguishes cultures in two main groups: low-context cultures and high-context cultures. Hall's (1977) analysis centers on how each group communicates by looking at information in connection with the context in order to interpret the meaning of the communication event (Lustig et al., 2006; Wurtz, 2005). Hall's contextuality (1977) emphasizes the interpretations resulting from differences in how cultures perceive and respond within the cultural context. Hall defines context as "the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of the event" (Hall, 1977, p. 6). In other words, the contextual analysis of cultures perceives communication as happening within the environment that determines how it is internalized, perceived, understood, and decoded. According to Contextuality Theory (Hall, 1977), French culture is a high-context culture, and US culture is low-context. Cultural orientations such as high and low culture may influence how people interpret risk and crisis communication messages.

High context cultures have an indirect approach to communication, so the context (shared experiences, background in beliefs, norms, and social practices) is fundamental in delivering information, and determining the meaning of the communication. High-context cultures are very homogeneous with regards to expectations and relationship networks. Group harmony is a highly esteemed cultural value in everyday life, and expressing disagreement in a direct manner detracts from this cultural value. The preference for formality or informality in communication arises from cultural views on social status and historical background (Hall, 1977). High-context cultures are mainly formal (such as the Chinese and Japanese). These cultures feel more comfortable in structured situations, and their behavior follows social norms and expectations (Kim et al., 1998; Hall, 1977; Yang, 2012).

Low-context cultures (Hall, 1977) include cultures such as North American, English, Scandinavian, and others, and are characterized by direct approaches to communication. Low-context cultures derive meaning directly from the information provided, with significantly less regard for the importance of the context of the communication act. In these cultures, decision-

making is mostly on an individual basis, because the emphasis is placed on the individual versus the group (Lustig et al., 2006).

It is important to note that cultures are not completely low context or high context. Each culture is predominantly one or the other, but also shares the cultural elements of each dimension, particularly with globalization. Hence, low -and high- context cultures are not mutually exclusive but they are distinguished from one another through cultural variations. For example, the United States is a predominately low-context culture characterized by individualism. However, within the U.S.A., states such as Louisiana and Florida are characterized more by collectivism (a high-context culture predominant trait) due to the impact of historical French background and Latin American immigration, respectively.

### **Best practices in crisis communication**

Researchers Arokiasamy et al. (2019) define practices in crisis communication as a process that “includes the collection and processing of information for crisis team decision making along with the creation and dissemination of crisis messages to people outside of the team.” (p.144). Coombs (2010) adds that crisis can seriously affect organizations structure, performance, outcomes and organization’s value, and therefore, responses to crisis are the major component in dealing with crisis effectively (Arokiasamy et al., 2019), so it is imperative to meticulously work through a collective effort that addresses crisis communication best practices.

Best practices in crisis communication are an approach used by a wide range of organizations and contexts to improve professional and organization practice: “These approaches to the improvement of professional and organizational processes and practices may also be framed within the larger context of organizational learning (Seeger, 2006, p.233). Fearn-Banks, K. (2016) advocates that the institution’s ability to manage crisis effectively through solid and well-planned best practices can help minimize the damage generated by the crisis and boost the institutional reputation.

In 2006, based on experts feedback, Seeger articulated a set of ten general best practices for effective crisis communication, and following Seeger’s (2006) best practices, Veil & Husted (2012) later used Red Cross and Hurricane Katrina crisis case to demonstrate the utility of the best practices in crisis communication as an assessment tool. Resulting from the study, researchers (Veil & Husted, 2012) recommend organizations the use of a new crisis communication framework because it allows planning of effective strategies and rapid responses as well as evaluating post crisis to identify successes and failures to improve possible future

responses. Most recently, based on previous work of Seeger (2006) and Veil & Husted (2012), Veil et al. (2020) revisited and extended the previous best practices to identify modifications needed to the original list based on multi-case analysis over the last decade. In contrast with the previous framework, the updated framework includes: (1) continuously evaluate and update crisis plan; (2) plan ahead for a prompt response; (3) establish a crisis communication network with credible sources; (4) accept uncertainty and ambiguity; (5) form partnerships with the public; (6) listen to public's concerns and understand the audience; (7) communicate with honesty, candor and openness; (8) meet needs for media and remain accessible; (9) communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy; (10) provide suggestions for self-protection; and (11) acknowledge and incorporate cultural differences.

The above studies are significant for our research, since we aimed to further their findings. We synthesized the three researchers' set of best practices into eleven recommendations in order to analyze data for our study.

To further examine the best practices of two culturally diverse universities during COVID crisis, we asked the following research questions to identify the specific coding categories to determine university tools needed to improve best practices

RQ1: How do two universities implement crisis communication messages during COVID-19 global pandemic within two different cultures?

RQ2: How should universities improve best practices for crisis communication?

### **Methods**

Since the purpose of this study was to analyze cultural differences in emails from two universities during COVID-19 and guided by Veil's (2020) best practices for crisis communication, conceptual content analysis (Carley, 1993; Neuendorf, 2002) seemed an appropriate method. Content analysis is "concerned with the semantic analysis of a body of text, to uncover the presence of dominant concepts" (Indulska, 2012, p. 50). Carley (1993) found that content analysis "focuses on the frequency with which words or concepts occur in text or across texts" (p. 81). In content analysis, the researcher's purpose is to reveal differences in communication content, to identify the intentions of individuals in communication, and to describe behavioral responses to communication (Berelson, 1952). There are several advantages to using content analysis: (1) it is possible to analyze almost any type of recorded content; (2) it can be adapted to any type of textual content; (3) it focuses on systematic analysis using a set of categories; and (4) it uses explicit and precise techniques that can be easily replicated and verified.

This project employs qualitative methods to explore the use of best practices in crisis communication messages distributed during COVID-19 pandemic. Data mainly derived from emails sent by administration to faculty and students at two higher education institutions, one in South Florida, USA and one in South of France.

*Data collection.* The study examined 53 email messages which were sent to all faculty and students at both institutions, university in South Florida, USA, and university in South of France. We gained access to the data through faculty from each university who provided copies of all emails sent from the university to their stakeholders between January and April 2020.

Each message was coded for message characteristics including date, sender, intended audience, number of words, presence of images, videos, and presence of internal or external links. In addition to these features, each message was coded for use of crisis communication best practices, drawn from Veil et al. (2020). Below are the variables that were coded and a description of their operational definition.

<b>Best Practice</b>	<b>Operational definition</b>
<b>Acknowledge and account for cultural differences</b>	Message refers to behaviors or characteristics of the audience that may vary by culture.
<b>Accept uncertainty</b>	Message explicitly says that there are things they don't know.
<b>Provide suggestions for self-efficacy: COVID specific</b>	Message includes concrete recommendations for self-care, help seeking and contagion prevention.
<b>Provide suggestions for self-efficacy: academic/professional/financial</b>	Message includes concrete recommendations for academic, professional and financial problem solving.
<b>Communicate with compassion</b>	Message includes words that express concern for people's (anyone) suffering, damage, emotional distress, disruption and problems in general affecting people.
<b>Listen to public concerns</b>	Messages include words that show acknowledgement of questions, concerns, or issues brought forward by public (internal or external stakeholders) and addressing them in messages.
<b>Listen to expert recommendation/concerns</b>	Message acknowledges data, research and or recommendations from experts.

<b>Communicate with honesty, candor, and openness</b>	Message addresses the reality of COVID-19 situation and how it affects the FIU community, providing background and supporting information for statements or decisions.
<b>Prioritize the safety and wellbeing of the public</b>	Message mentions the importance of people staying safe/healthy. References to health/safety as a priority.
<b>University leaders are accessible</b>	Message includes references on how to contact university decision-makers for further clarification on situation, offer suggestions, or promote two-way communication.
<b>Minimize disruption: ref. transition to work/study remotely</b>	Message includes reference to processes addressing transition to remote learning or work for students, faculty, or staff.

**Data coding and reliability:** First, emails from both higher education institutions were examined using conceptual content analysis methodology to determine alignment best practices recommended by Veil (2020). Content analysis involved describing and categorizing email content into predetermined categories described above. Emails content were decoded by performing conceptual analysis (Carley, 1993; Neuendorf, 2002). Then, a codebook with rules was developed on how to identify concepts in discussion submissions that fell into established categories by Veil (2020). Finally, findings (presence, frequencies, and descriptive statistics) were recorded in code form and displayed in tables. Three coders discussed the Veil’s (2020) best practices, the codebook, and practiced analyzing emails content together. Initially, categories were established based on Veil’s (2020) best practices for crisis communication and responses were analyzed under cultural dimensions proposed by E. T. Hall (1977) described in detail in Literature Review.

The 35 items were initially divided into three sections and coded individually by one of the three investigators. Researchers broke data down into categories that described the content based on Veil’s (2020) list of best practices in crisis communication. We re-read the emails and reviewed the emerging categories to verify the connections. We kept a record of details related to our observations in an Excel codebook, organizing data in categories recommended by Veil (2020). During these joint coding sessions, investigators also discussed tone, style and high-low context cultural dimension, and took notes that were then used for qualitative analysis.

Our reliability procedures primarily consisted of continual assessment of data, based on writing memos about emerging themes constantly comparing them (Creswell, 2014). This allowed researchers to cross-check developed themes, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Following the principles of qualitative content analysis, all findings were compared critically under Hall's high and low-context framework, and discussed within our research team. We resolved any disagreements by discussion.

**Data Analysis:** Given the small sample, statistical analysis seemed inappropriate to compare the two universities or draw inferences between variables. We used descriptive statistics to summarize the coded variables and compare across sites, and used qualitative descriptive textual analysis to further examine differences and similarities in tone, style and influence of high or low context cultural dimension.

Qualitative data analysis was guided by the steps for conducting data analysis as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) which include: (a) organizing data and developing codes, (b) noting researcher's reflections on observations, (c) identifying themes and categories, (d) investigating common and different aspects and developing interpretations of themes, (e) verifying interpretations through member check, peer reviews, and triangulation, and finally, (f) writing the report.

## **Results.**

### **Message Characteristics**

Of the 36 messages reviewed from SUS, thirty (83.3%) were sent from Central University Communications, with the remaining five sent directly from an individual. Of the 17 messages reviewed from the SF, 15 (88.2%) were sent directly from a university representative, with two messages sent from central university communications. Both institutions delivered messages with similar lengths. Messages from SUS ranged from 49 words to a total of 1,120 words. Messages from the SF ranged from a minimum of 45 words to a maximum of 1,017 words. SUS addressed 34 (94.4%) messages to students, faculty, and staff, with the one remaining message addressed to the faculty/staff. The SF addressed 12 (70.5%) messages to students, faculty, and staff. Of the remaining messages, four messages were addressed to faculty/staff, and one message sent to "other."

### **Crisis Communication**

The second category which messages were coded was grouped under "Crisis Communication." Within this category, there were 11 sub-categories. For both SUS and Toulouse there were no messages that accounted for cultural differences. Of SUS's 36 messages reviewed, there were seven (19.4%) messages from SUS that accounted for uncertainty as the secondary theme, and two messages where uncertainty was the primary theme. Of the 17 messages from Toulouse, four

(23.5%) messages accounted for uncertainty as a secondary theme, and two as the primary theme. For both universities, uncertainty was addressed in about 1 out of 5 messages. Examples of messages that addressed uncertainty included:

Institution	Message Excerpt	Sender
SUS	“We came together as a team to work through potential scenarios. All members of our university community should feel comfortable that a group of capable professionals is monitoring the situation and is empowered to make decisions with the safety and wellbeing of our students, faculty and staff as the top priority.”	University President
SF	“We are well aware of the difficulties in having a clear view of the situation, but rest assured that governance is concerned about your safety.”	President’s Cabinet on behalf of University President

SUS messages 10 (27.8%) provide information for self-efficacy and COVID prevention as a secondary theme, and 16 (44.4%) as the primary theme. In Toulouse, three (17.6%) messages provide information for self-efficacy and COVID prevention in three (17.6%) as a secondary theme, and five (29.4%) as a primary theme. At SUS, for suggestions for self-efficacy with respect to academic/professional or financial support ten (27.8%) were the primary theme, and two (5.5%) were the secondary or minor theme. In Toulouse, three (17.6%) messages addressed academic/professional or financial support as the primary message, and three (17.6%) messages where the theme was secondary.

Institution	Message Excerpt	Sender
SUS	“The COVID-19 testing site that was opened by SUS in partnership with Miami-Dade County, the Florida Department of Health, and the Miami-Dade County Fair & Exposition is up and running at the fairgrounds next to MMC, on Southwest 107th Avenue and 20th Street.”	Central Administration; No specific sender

SF	“Given the highly evolving nature of the COVID-19 epidemic, the recommendations of the Ministry of Health Solidarity (MSS) have been updated for people returning from exposure areas, an area where community transmission of virus is described. Thus, the MSS issues recommendations for people returning from China (mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao), Singapore, South Korea, or the regions of Lombardy and Veneto in Italy.”	Dirrecion Generale
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With respect to communicating with compassion, SUS sent six (16.7%) messages that had this as the primary theme, and 13 (36.1%) had this as a secondary or minor theme. Toulouse sent five (29.4%) messages with compassion as its primary or salient theme, and three (17.6%) where it was the secondary theme. With respect to acknowledging public concerns, SUS sent six (16.7%) messages with it as a primary theme and five (13.8%) with it as secondary theme. When listening to expert recommendations, 14 (38.9%) messages were sent where this was a primary theme, and nine (25%) where it was a secondary or minor theme. Toulouse sent four (23.5%) messages where it was the primary theme of the message, and five (29.4%) where it was a secondary or minor theme.

Institution	Message Excerpt	Sender
SUS	“We wish each of these members of our community a speedy recovery and hope that this news underscores the urgent need to practice social distancing.”	Central Communication

SF	<p>“In this long special period, despite the difficulties, concerns and sufferings of each other, I would like to send you this message to wish you a happy Easter.</p> <p>Egg hunt in apartments, houses, gardens,</p> <p>Do not deprive yourself of chocolate ... it is a valuable ally for morale! But despite the temptations, stay confined.</p> <p>Have a good weekend, Pascal.”</p>	President’s Cabinet on behalf of University President
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When sending messages that communicated honesty, candor, and openness, SUS sent 13 (36.1%) messages where it was the primary or salient theme, and 15 (41.6%) messages where it was the secondary or a minor theme in the communication. Toulouse sent ten (58.8%) messages where it was the primary theme of the message, and five (29.4%) messages where it was a secondary or minor theme. When prioritizing the safety and well-being of the public, SUS sent 23 (63.8%) messages where it was the primary or central focus of the communication, and seven (19.4%) messages where it was the secondary or minor them in the message. Toulouse sent 10 (58.8%) messages where the salient theme of the message was the safety and well-being of the public, and three (17.6%) where it was the secondary or minor focus of the message.

Institution	Message Excerpt	Sender
SUS	<p>We hope you are adjusting to the new remote learning routine, as we do our part to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus in our community. As the number of cases continues to grow, it is more important than ever that we practice social distancing, stay informed and follow recommendations from experts to keep ourselves and our families healthy.</p>	Central University Communication

SF	<p>“May 11 will not be the occasion for a return to a normal mode of operation: the recovery can only be done gradually.</p> <p>Teleworking is intended to be continued for all activities where it is possible, as the Prime Minister has indicated.</p> <p>Physical presence on our premises must be limited to the strict minimum.”</p>	University President
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Messages where the university leaders are accessible, SUS sent one (2.8%) message where it was the primary focus, and three (8.3%) messages where it was a minor mention. Toulouse sent two messages where there was mention of the university leaders. When the theme of the message was minimizing disruption or there was reference to transition to/from work and study remotely, SUS sent 14 messages (38.8%) where it was the secondary or minor point, and five messages (13.8%) where it was the primary or salient point. Toulouse officials sent 7 (41.1%) messages where it was the secondary or minor point, and two (11.8%) where it was the primary or salient part of the message.

### **Qualitative Analysis of Format, Tone, Language, Delivery**

There were a few noted differences in format, tone, language, and delivery. SUS’s format oscillated between less formal with the use of first person -i.e. “we”- throughout the message and referring to the institution in third person. Most messages, unless in an embedded memo format, were not signed and did not include a direct sender. The message sent on March 8 titled *Coronavirus update: Summer B will be remote, emergency grant applications now available* stated, “We hope you had a good finals week and are ready for the summer. Below please find important information.” The message, while posted by university staff, is unsigned and does not have a direct sender.

An example of a secondary theme is on February 8 where SUS sent a message titled, *Coronavirus update: Summer B will be remote, emergency grant applications now available*. In this message, one of the first lines in the opening paragraph stated, “SUS continues to keep a close eye on coronavirus, as the number of cases increases around the world.”

In addition, the title for many of SUS’s messages personified the institution. In the title of the message, the institution is performing the action. For example, the title of the message sent on February 8 read, “SUS continues to keep a close eye on coronavirus.” The message began, “SUS continues to keep a close eye on coronavirus, as the number of cases increases around the

world.” The message continues to refer to SUS as the entity executing the action and states, “SUS has developed a protocol for members of the university community and visitors arriving from China.”

The tone of the email was more casual with reference to the institution as an individual. For example, the message March 10 was sent in standard Memo form within the body of the email. Toulouse’s messages were sent via email to the audience from an individual and the letter was attached to the email.

SUS sent messages in a more formal format, which included headers, headings, and sub-headings. Most messages followed standard format for memo or letters and addressed to a general audience. The messages constructed used a more informal tone and language. SF sent emails in a less formal format, where messages were sent directly from an individual. The email from the individual included memos or letters as attachments. The tone used in the emails was more formal and addressed to mesdames/messieurs.

SUS delivered messages through formal SUS communication channels. These included email and central repository online. Messages are available for review by internal or external stakeholders. SF sent messages via email to internal stakeholders.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

This study provides insight into issues of best practices in crisis communication (Veil, 2020) related to COVID-19 pandemic under contextuality cultural lens (Hall, 1977). The research questions guiding our study were designed to explore best practices in crisis communication in higher education during COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of cultural differences. Our first research question asked how two universities implement crisis communication messages during COVID-19 global pandemic, and our second question explored how universities should improve best practices for crisis communication.

According to best practices developed in this paper (Veil, 2020), findings from this study support the theories which show that both universities cultural expectations impacted the style of how they communicated messages (Crouchera et al., 2012; Hall, 1973, 1977; Holtbrügge et al., 2013). Specifically, due to the nature of the crisis, both institutions used a less formal tone in the message, but findings support expectations of contextuality framework (Hall 1977) that explains that high-context cultures tend to be more indirect and implicit in their verbal messages, and they prefer formal communication within structured situations (Hall, 1973, 1977; Kim et al.). And by contrast, low-context cultures prefer direct and explicit verbal communication, are more open to change, and focus on tasks within unstructured situations (Hall, 1977; Shih, 2003; Yang, 2012).

Qualitative data findings revealed differences between groups, based on Hall (1977) low context culture expectations, the university in Southern United States, format was structured with headings and bullet points, and tone was casual, where in the French university the format was unstructured, like a letter, and the tone was formal. For both institutions, however, best practice proposed by Veil (2020) of acknowledging and accounting for cultural differences was not part of the primary message.

In connection with crisis communication best practices recommended by Jin et al. (2014), both institutions' delivery did not follow on the importance of developing and implementing best practices through the use of technology to meet audience and stakeholder expectations in a more effective manner. University in the South of France attached a memo to an email from an individual when distributing the communication while the university in South Florida, USA embedded the message within an email and did not generally have a specific sender. Both institutions messages underuse videos, links to social media, external experts' links, and images.

Veil's (2012 & 2020) best practices on accepting uncertainty, university of Southern US messages were more likely to communicate uncertainty. This finding aligns with contextuality approach that describes low-context cultures as expressing their opinion in a direct manner prevails over contextual information (Hall, 1977; Yang et al., 2010). With respect to self-efficacy (Veil, 2020), findings show that university in Southern USA offered more information and more often in their messages in comparison with university in South of France; for example, university in South Florida included information for both COVID, finances, and studies in the email messages, while university in South of France offered less solutions in their messages. This finding supports Hall's contextuality (1977) that asserts that low-context cultures are characterized by their attention to details are verbalized (the verbal message contains most of the information and very little is embedded in the context of communication or participants themselves).

As far as best practice recommendation by Veil (2020) on listening to experts, University in South of France was more likely to report listening to experts in their communications, and it was more likely to report expert recommendations, and put the responsibility on higher levels such as the ministry. University in Southern USA generally referred the audience to information outside the institution. This finding aligns with Hall (1977) description of formality cultural expectation, describing high-context cultures as more oriented to formality through the use of titles and last names in communication.

## **Limitations**

Although this study did have noteworthy findings, it was not without limitations. We propose that these results yield a number of possible implications. For instance, it was difficult to identify the totality of the messages for both institutions. It was also difficult to determine the number of the intended audience that read the message. In addition, we need to account for the fact that the general population of the region where the study occurred consists of a population where more than 60% identify as being of Hispanic ethnicity, with a population of almost 50,000 students. The university in France has 21,300 students among whom 18% of international students. Specifically, we acknowledge that there are many cultural elements and cultural theories to be considered.

### **Recommendations**

This study contributes with further empirical evidence that addresses message characteristics and application of best practices in crisis communication messaging from the perspective of cultural communication. Findings reveal differences in message tone, style and source between France and US samples, and different patterns of applying best practice message strategies for crisis communication. We discussed how internal communication may impact university stakeholders and suggestions for future research.

In general, the qualitative findings in this study supported the relationship between culture and best practices on message transmission during crisis. The study also highlighted the challenges related to meeting every audience's need during crisis communication. These differences relate to unique perspectives on cultural orientation values and expectations (Hall, 1973; 1977; Lustig et al., 2006; Holtbrügge et al., 2013). Moreover, this study validated the importance of studying best practices in crisis communication from the conceptual lens of cultural communication (Coombs et al., 2010; Holtbrügge et al., 2013; Seeger, 2006; Veil & Husted, 2012; Veil, 2020).

The study is significant in helping inform higher education institutional practice to leaders to generate and crisis communication messages that reach the diverse audience in meaningful ways to each cultural profile while developing success in delivering information responses that will help alleviate crisis impact and will impact audience behaviors in effective and proactive manner (Seeger, 2006; Veil & Husted, 2012; Veil, 2020).

### **Future Studies**

Comparative research that extends to other cultures and global crises is needed, using different intercultural communication theories in connection with crisis communication best practices. Future studies could include the opportunity to transition from risk to crisis communication, what

are the implications of culture -since this study found none, compare content of crisis communication with audiences' perceptions of the crisis.

These findings are particularly salient since it suggests that there is a need for analysis of best practices in crisis communication in diverse higher education and supports research that found that the majority of higher education leaders recognize the lack of sufficient preparedness during crisis, including technology and infrastructure (Thelen & Robinson, 2019), especially when crisis are outside the traditional parameters, such as COVID-19. (Thelen & Robinson, 2019).

Future research should examine the degree to which cultural differences impact on audience reception of crisis communication messages to refine best practices, if found in future analyses, perhaps identify the factors that can lead to improve best practices under the lens of different cultural profiles, leaders' communication, and audience responses during crises in higher education context. This is important because the implementation of best practices feeds into the effectiveness of audience responses and improvement of institutional performance and image (Coombs, 1999b; Seeger, 2006).

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