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COVID-19 Press Conferences in Scandinavia**

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# DISTRIBUTING INSTRUCTIVE AND LEGITIMATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION: COVID-19 PRESS CONFERENCES IN SCANDINAVIA

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study presents a thematic analysis of press conferences conducted by public health authorities in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examines how pandemic-related Scandinavian press conferences framed instructive messages to resonate with the public, provide explanatory information, and offer actionable guidance in accordance with the IDEA model. In addition, this study expands on the IDEA model to include legitimacy of crisis leaders. Overall, the three Scandinavian countries implemented all dimension of the IDEA model and legitimacy. However, differences emerged between the countries, with Norway prioritizing internalization, explanation, and legitimacy and Denmark similarly prioritizing internalization and legitimacy, but action instead of explanation. Meanwhile, Sweden prioritized explanation, emphasizing data transparency and scientific information.

## **KEYWORDS**

Public Health Authorities • Crisis Communication • COVID-19 Pandemic • IDEA model • Legitimacy • Press Conferences

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges by threatening public health, straining healthcare systems, and disrupting economic and educational sectors (Coombs, 2023), yet public trust remained high in Scandinavia where a “rally-around-the-flag” came into effect during the beginning of the pandemic (Johansson et al., 2023; Skogerbø et al., 2024). This trust largely remained relatively high throughout the pandemic, despite Sweden experiencing varied levels of polarization (Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021).

Early on, press conferences became a vital means of communication for public health authorities (PHAs) and government officials to share recommendations, regulations, and updates about the evolving situation. These briefings helped establish a sense of urgency, validate government measures, and build public trust (Esaiasson et al., 2021). Swedish PHAs held daily briefings to explain their mitigation-focused approach (Johansson & Vigsø, 2021). In Norway, PHAs collaborated with government officials to conduct daily press conferences during the initial phase of the pandemic. Similarly, in Denmark, PHAs, government officials, and Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, used a press conference to announce major policy decisions in March 2020 (Kjeldsen, 2023), after which, PHAs held briefings via live updates on social media.

Press conferences have long played a pivotal role in crisis communication, serving as direct channels through which authorities can inform the public, explain decisions, and manage uncertainty (Hayek, 2024; Hernández, 2024; Scacco & Wiemer, 2019). Indeed, press conferences can accurately be described as a venue where the dynamics of political power intersect with media authority, often leading to a contestation of roles between these two influential entities (Nord, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of press conferences intensified as governments relied on this mode of communication not only to disseminate evolving public health information but also to convey a sense of control and competence (He et al., 2023; Wodak, 2021), thus setting the tone for the crisis management. Indeed, figures such as Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland (Higgins et al., 2024), and Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand (McGuire et al., 2020), exemplified how effective press conference performances helped shape public perceptions of crisis leadership. In contrast, contradictory or inconsistent messaging from leaders like President Donald Trump in the USA (Just et al., 2022) and Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the UK (McVittie, 2023) undermined public trust and diminished the credibility of government responses. As such, press conferences during crises serve a dual function: they are vehicles for instructional communication and instruments for reinforcing the legitimacy of governmental action. This dual role highlights the need to un-

derstand press conferences as a mode of instructional communication that addresses stakeholders' informational needs, as well as a means to address broader factors, such as legitimizing state authority and crisis management, both of which are crucial in high-stakes, high-uncertainty situations like pandemics.

The current study examines the communication strategies employed during press conferences, focusing on how spokespersons balance instructions with the need to maintain public trust and legitimacy. It utilizes the IDEA model (Sellnow et al., 2023) as a primary framework, which offers a structured approach to analyzing instructional communication by addressing stakeholders' informational needs. Specifically, through a thematic analysis of key press conferences conducted by PHAs in Scandinavia, this research provides a deeper understanding of how crisis messages were crafted to encourage public compliance and clarify risks. Moreover, since Scandinavia has relatively high levels of institutional trust, transparent governance, and public reliance on expert-driven communication (Dahlen & Skirbekk, 2021), this research also demonstrates how PHAs justified national crisis management during the pandemic to maintain institutional trust and credibility (Badu et al., 2023; Breslin et al., 2022; Esaiasson et al., 2021; Kjeldsen, 2023; Kjeldsen et al., 2022).

Notable differences were observed between the countries. Norway focused on internalization, offering explanations, and ensuring legitimacy. Denmark emphasized internalization, actionable guidance, and maintaining legitimacy. Meanwhile, Sweden prioritized providing explanations.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Scandinavia and COVID-19**

The Scandinavian countries are notable for their similarities and high levels of institutional trust. However, the pandemic management of each country highlighted distinct country differences, as the measures adopted and the framing and justification for the measures taken corresponded to the cultural differences between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Baekkeskov et al., 2021; Bjørkdahl et al., 2021).

Denmark adopted a strategy characterized by strict mandates and rapid governmental interventions, strongly influenced by cultural norms of respecting personal boundaries and upholding collective accountability (Mens et al., 2021; Olagnier & Mogensen, 2020). Norway similarly implemented stringent responses but shaped its approach through its cultural values of voluntary participation and a deep trust in the government as a protector of individual autonomy, i.e., a belief that the common good aligns with indi-

vidual interests (Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2022). At the onset of the pandemic, Kjeldsen (2023) observed that Danish and Norwegian press conferences were used to put government officials in the forefront while projecting a unified front with PHAs, showcasing a collaborative yet hierarchical crisis management structure. According to Bjørkdahl et al. (2021), this strategy involved political leaders taking charge while public health experts provided support and legitimacy for government decision-making.

Sweden, unlike its Scandinavian neighbors, did not implement strict lockdowns during the pandemic. Instead, the country relied on individuals to take responsibility under non-binding recommendations (Johansson & Vigsø, 2024). The objective was to impose restrictions without overly shutting down society. However, as Sweden's pandemic death toll surpassed that of the other Nordic countries, it was seen as an indication of a failing strategy (Johansson & Vigsø, 2024). Despite this, support for the government and its agencies remained high (Johansson & Vigsø, 2024), and according to Abdelzadeh and Sedelius (2024), satisfaction with government communication and the management of COVID-19 in Sweden increased over time, even though trust in institutions slightly declined, which has been attributed to growing politicization (Soto, 2022).

According to a study conducted by Rasmussen et al. (2023) on communicative leadership by political leaders and public health officials in Scandinavia during March and April 2020, press conferences were used to justify expert knowledge and authority. Furthermore, the study found that Sweden emphasized evidence-based justifications for measures, highlighted the economic fallout from lockdowns, and downplayed the virus threat. In contrast, Denmark and Norway acted swiftly, applying precautionary principles and prioritizing the minimization of deaths without pursuing herd immunity as Denmark implemented limited restrictions and Norway focused on resilience and fostering solidarity.

## 2.2. Press Conference as Crisis Management

During outbreaks, government officials and PHAs aim to build public trust and solidarity while balancing public health concerns with individual rights (Nihlén Fahlquist, 2021). Press conferences serve as an effective means of communication, functioning as a tool for behavioral “nudge” interventions, i.e., techniques such as invoking fear or peer pressure to encourage compliance with public health measures (Dodsworth, 2021; Gill & Lennon, 2022).

Press conferences are a cost- and time-effective format that allows for the dissemination of vital information to various stakeholders, including the media, regulators, and different community groups (Badu et al., 2023; Kjeldsen, 2023; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Press conferences combine speech,

visuals, and symbols to convey information that is adaptable for various formats, including shorter videos, audio clips, and written transcriptions, which allows for outreach to diverse segments of the population (Kjeldsen, 2023; Scacco & Wiemer, 2019).

Press conferences serve two primary purposes: to inform the public and to shape news coverage by providing visual elements for news stories (Allen et al., 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, press conferences in Scandinavia became especially important for delivering announcements, addressing media inquiries, clarifying government actions, resolving uncertainties, and fostering a sense of urgency among the public (Kjeldsen, 2023). Indeed, Byrman and Westum (2024) argue that the Swedish Public Health Agency effectively built trust through press conferences by featuring a consistent structure and multimodal interaction despite discussing two main sensitive topics: death tolls and face masks.

Studies of the UK and the World Health Organization (WHO) briefings similarly underscore how press conferences mediate uncertainty and reinforce official narratives. Visual data presentations, for instance, provided a sense of control during the UK's early pandemic response (Allen et al., 2024), while the WHO maintained a stable, formal tone aimed at fostering trust, hope, and resilience despite shifting emotional currents (He et al., 2023). Meanwhile, trust-restoring strategies in televised briefings often sought to deflect blame and reframe failures, sometimes at the expense of long-term public health goals (Bunnag & Chaemsaitong, 2024).

### **2.3. IDEA Model**

A central challenge with utilizing press conferences during epidemics and pandemics is translating complex, technical, and scientific information into messages that are accessible and actionable for diverse audiences (Borchelt & Nielsen, 2014; Sellnow et al., 2023). Public health and crisis communication scholars emphasize the importance of tailoring information so that laypeople and non-experts can understand what is happening, why it matters, and what they should do in response (Frisby et al., 2013; Sellnow et al., 2023). This approach—often referred to as instructive crisis communication—is designed not only to inform but to increase stakeholder self-efficacy and prompt protective behaviors (Coombes, 2023; Mileti & Peek, 2000; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Seeger, 2006). Instructive crisis messages, particularly in high-uncertainty situations such as pandemics, should achieve three outcomes: affective engagement, cognitive understanding, and behavioral change (Johansson et al., 2021). These learning outcomes serve as benchmarks for effective crisis communication. A common misstep during public health crises, therefore, relates to public health spokespersons focusing on

abstract scientific data (e.g., statistics and long-term projections) and failing to offer actionable steps, as this imbalance risks inducing fear or apathy rather than informed action (Sellnow et al., 2023; Slovic & Västfjäll, 2015; Wickline & Sellnow, 2013).

To evaluate whether the Scandinavian PHAs' pandemic messages aimed to foster public understanding and action, this study employs the IDEA model as an analytical framework. The model conceptualizes instructive risk and crisis communication through four interrelated components (Johansson et al., 2021; Sellnow et al., 2023):

**Internalization (I):** Capturing attention by demonstrating how the crisis personally affects the audience, highlighting relevance, proximity, and urgency to foster engagement.

**Distribution (D):** Spread the message across diverse platforms to ensure reach and accessibility for varied audiences.

**Explanation (E):** Offering clear, credible, and understandable information about the crisis, its causes, and consequences using non-technical language.

**Action (A):** Providing specific and feasible instructions for self-protection and behavior change.

The IDEA model has proven effective in various contexts, ranging from foodborne illness outbreaks to pandemic communication, and has been validated within Scandinavian cultures (Frisby et al., 2013; Johansson et al., 2021; Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2018; Sellnow et al., 2019; Sellnow et al., 2015). By analyzing how Scandinavian authorities utilized press conferences to communicate the risks to public health, explain the situation, and inform the public of actionable guidance, this study assesses the instructive strategic measures employed by Scandinavian PHAs in their press conferences in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **2.4. Maintaining Legitimate Crisis Authority**

While the IDEA model provides a framework for analyzing message content and structure, message impact is mediated by the credibility, reputation, and perceived transparency of the sender (Badu et al., 2023; Berg et al., 2021; Coombs, 2023; Sturges, 1994). In other words, instructive messages may fail to produce the desired outcomes if the public does not trust the institutions or spokespersons delivering them (Badu et al., 2023; Balog-Way et al., 2020; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014) nor except the authority or logic of the official crisis management recommendations (e.g., vaccination) over other nonofficial recommendation from competing sources (e.g., using hydroxychloroquine) (Islam et al., 2021). Thus, in formatting instructive messages, PHAs also benefit from considering the concept of legitimacy, which serves as a foundation that addresses the normative and cognitive

forces influencing, shaping, and empowering organizational actors (Suchman, 1995). For this study, legitimacy refers the creditability and competency of PHAs, along with ability to act in the public's best interest (Diers-Lawson, 2019; Györfy, 2018).

Public health crisis leaders operate within complex sociopolitical environments, where public trust in formal institutions can significantly affect the success of crisis management efforts (Abraham, 2009; Ndlela, 2019; Ullmann-Margalit, 2004). A high level of institutional legitimacy can enhance message reception, extend audience reach, minimize confusion, and facilitate coordinated public responses (Badu et al., 2023; Seeger, 2006; van Dijk & Alinejad, 2020). While such legitimacy, in the form of credibility and trustworthiness, of crisis leadership and crisis management can be assumed through studies employing the IDEA model via the concept of internalization (Sellnow et al., 2020), it is often overlooked in empirical studies.

Legitimacy is not static; it must be continuously communicated and reinforced, especially during crises. Indeed, through communicative strategies, crisis leaders can promote legitimacy by emphasizing transparency, consistency, professional competence, and respect for public concerns (Coombs, 2023; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Ihlen & Vranic, 2024; Sellnow et al., 2023). For example, PHAs who adhere to a bureaucratic-scientific ethos can clearly articulate their expertise which can bolster public confidence (Maslowska et al., 2025). Likewise, messaging that is transparent, empathetic, and coordinated across agencies contributes to a coherent and credible crisis narrative (Liu, 2015; Skogerbø et al., 2024; Veil & Ojeda, 2010).

This study, therefore, integrates legitimacy as an additional dimension of IDEA-based instructive communication. While the IDEA model focuses on the *what* and *how* of crisis messaging, legitimacy concerns the *who* behind the message. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing as legitimacy enables instructive messages to be received, while clear and instructive messaging can help sustain legitimacy. Examining these dimensions is particularly relevant in the Scandinavian context, where public trust and institutional credibility are traditionally high but were tested during the pandemic (Abdelzadeh & Sedelius, 2024; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Power et al., 2023; Skogerbø et al., 2024). The integration of IDEA and legitimacy hence offers a more comprehensive understanding of what constitutes *effective* crisis communication in high-trust democracies in the context of a prolonged health crisis.

## 2.5. Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this research is to examine the public health crisis communication strategies of PHAs in Scandinavia as distributed via press conferences.

Considering the varying approaches to crisis management between Sweden, Norway, and Denmark and the differences in expectations of their citizens (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021), it stands to reason that the Scandinavian PHAs adopted distinct strategies in terms of instructive crisis communication. For instance, the collaboration between Danish and Norwegian PHAs and political leadership likely resulted in spokespersons prioritizing the establishment of government legitimacy and fostering a sense of communal responsibility through internalization while providing clear and actionable guidance. However, according to an analysis by Kjeldsen (2023) of press conferences, Norwegian spokespersons likely also favored disseminating explanations. In contrast, Sweden's reliance on voluntary guidelines and the independence of PHAs during press conferences suggests a lesser focus on governmental legitimacy and a communication strategy that centers on offering comprehensive explanations and actionable guidance to encourage citizens to adhere to recommendations.

Based on the above, this study poses the following research questions:

- *RQ1: How did Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish PHAs adopt elements of the IDEA model?*
- *RQ2: How did Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish PHAs adopt elements of legitimacy?*

These research questions will guide the subsequent analysis of Scandinavian press conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, to explore the country differences, this study asks:

- *RQ3: How did the communication strategies reflect existing cultural norms?*

### 3. METHOD AND DATA

This study examined press conferences conducted by PHAs across various media formats, including official websites and social media clips. Full recordings of these media briefings were selected as they represent the most direct form of communication, unfiltered by the media into sound bites or condensed formats. This approach allowed for an analysis of both prepared statements and responses to media inquiries.

The press conference served as the unit of analysis in this study. The included video material, sourced from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, consisted of 22 conferences. The conferences included are those that feature the national PHAs, either independently, as seen with Sweden and later Denmark, or in collaboration with government officials, as with Norway

and initially Denmark. In total, these briefings comprised just over 15 hours of content.

The selected briefings were organized around four distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, corresponding to key moments following announcements by the WHO regarding new developments in the spread of the coronavirus or updates about it (see Table 1). Each chosen event had an equal impact on all three countries, facilitating a comparative analysis of their potential responses. The study defined these events as week-long periods following each WHO statement, providing a timeframe deemed sufficient for PHAs and government officials to respond and update the public on important pandemic milestones.

*Table 1: Dates and Events during COVID-19*

| Date     | Event  | Denmark<br>– Press Conferences &<br>Combined Video Length | Norway<br>– Press Conferences &<br>Combined Video Length | Sweden<br>– Press Conferences &<br>Combined Video Length |
|----------|--|---|--|--|
| 20-03-11 | WHO Director-General declared COVID-19 a pandemic  | 1 Press Conferences /<br>59:03 Min:Sek                    | 5 Press Conferences /<br>193:27 Min:Sek                  | 5 Press Conferences /<br>172:76 Min:Sek                  |
| 20-12-21 | The European Union approved the first COVID-19 vaccine   | 1 Press Conferences /<br>25:18 Min:Sek                    | 1 Press Conferences /<br>63:38 Min:Sek                   | 2 Press Conferences /<br>111:68 Min:Sek                  |
| 21-02-02 | A mutation of the coronavirus that may reduce vaccine effectiveness has emerged in the United Kingdom. | 2 Press Conferences /<br>46:96 Min:Sek                    | 0 Press Conferences                                      | 2 Press Conferences /<br>117:46 Min:Sek                  |
| 21-05-31 | WHO has assigned labels for key variants of SARS-CoV-2 using letters of the Greek alphabet.            | 1 Press Conferences /<br>13:12 Min:Sek                    | 1 Press Conferences /<br>48:06 Min:Sek                   | 1 Press Conferences /<br>52:30 Min:Sek                   |
|          |  | <b>Total:</b><br>5 Press Conferences                      | <b>Total:</b><br>7 Press Conferences                     | <b>Total:</b><br>10 Press Conferences                    |

### 3.1. Analytical Method

This analysis followed an iterative process based on a six-step approach by Naeem et al. (2023) to thematic analysis. Utilizing transcriptions from the press conferences, the analysis began by familiarizing oneself with the transcribed data and identifying preliminary themes and representative quotes that reflect diverse perspectives relevant to the research questions. The second step involved a thorough examination of the data to identify recurring patterns and key terms through open coding. The third step included segmenting the data into short phrases or words into codes that encapsulate core themes and elements. The fourth step involved developing themes by grouping these elements into meaningful categories to uncover patterns and relationships related to the research questions via

axial coding. The fifth step focused on conceptualizing and defining emerging concepts from the data, refining them based on themes established by Frandsen et al. (2016), Sellnow-Richmond et al. (2018), Sellnow and Sellnow (2019), and Skogerbø et al. (2024). The final step involved developing a conceptual model that represents the data (see Tables 2-5).

Final thematic categories were organized as follows: *Internalization* (identified people, specific places, time, degree of negative impact, additional negative impact, and empathy), *Explanation* (similar events, other countries, government responses, credible sources, and scientific information) including the level of intelligibility, *Action* (guidance, preparation, and examples) and *Legitimacy* (ability to act, inter-organizational cooperation, expertise, resources, known/unknown facts, and accountability).

While the IDEA model includes Distribution, the empirical material is limited to recorded press conferences. These briefings represent a single communication channel in this study. Thus, the distribution component, which concerns multi-platform dissemination strategies, lies outside the scope of this analysis.

**Table 2. Internalization**

| Theme                      | Example Quote   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Identified people          | <i>"The age distribution shows that the majority of cases are between the ages of 40 and 60..."<sup>1</sup></i>   |
| Specific places            | <i>"Where many people are gathered - daycare centers, schools, educational institutions, activities, events, public transport."<sup>2</sup></i>                 |
| Time                       | <i>"...that is, by spreading the infection over time, spreading the disease over time, can we get a manageable situation in the health service"<sup>3</sup></i> |
| Degree of negative impact  | <i>"Today there are 514 Danes infected."<sup>4</sup></i>  |
| Additional negative impact | <i>"Businesses will suffer losses."<sup>5</sup></i>   |
| Empathy                    | <i>"We must not panic, but we must help each other, show energy, thinking of others, especially those who are vulnerable."<sup>6</sup></i>                      |

- 1 The Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020, March 11). *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*. <https://share.mediaflow.com/se/?SDFE907K30>
- 2 Norwegian Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health and Welfare. (2020, March 12) *The corona situation: Press conference on new measures to combat the coronavirus* <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/smk/pressemeldinger/2020/pressekonferanse-om-nye-tiltak-for-a-bekjempe-koronaviruset/id2693286/>
- 3 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*.
- 4 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*.
- 5 The Danish Prime Minister's Office . (2020, March 11) *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*. <https://www.stm.dk/presse/pressemoedearkiv/pressemoede-om-covid-19-den-11-marts-2020/>
- 6 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*

Table 3. Explanation

| Theme                  | Example Quote  |
|------------------------|--|
| Similar events         | "We've managed to get through tough times before, and I'm absolutely sure we'll be able to do it now too." <sup>7</sup>  |
| Other countries        | "Italy is in lockdown. In the hospitals, there is a shortage of ventilators and staff." <sup>8</sup>   |
| Government responses   | "We will no longer focus on testing travelers from specific risk areas, as these have become increasingly diffuse." <sup>9</sup>                                       |
| Credible sources       | "WHO says that we need to increase the production of this type of equipment in the world by 40 percent..." <sup>10</sup>   |
| Scientific information | "The graph here shows how the cases have been reported. Note that the latest bars may contain some lag, but they still give an indication of the trend." <sup>11</sup> |

Table 4. Action

| Theme       | Example Quote  |
|-------------|--|
| Guidance    | "Avoid contact with the elderly if you have symptoms" <sup>12</sup>  |
| Preparation | "Restrictions on visits may become relevant if the spread of infection increases" <sup>13</sup>  |
| Examples    | "...to make sure that we all understand what was and what one can do - both as individuals and collectively, for example at workplaces." <sup>14</sup> |

Table 5. Legitimacy

| Theme                           | Example Quote  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Ability to act                  | "It is not the individual citizen's responsibility to ensure that they have what they need. We make sure of that; the authorities make sure of that through the state's crisis management preparedness." <sup>15</sup> |
| Interorganizational cooperation | "Money that we will collaborate on, together with the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Public Health Agency..." <sup>16</sup>  |
| Expertise                       | "The Public Health Agency - which stands for expert knowledge about the infection and healthcare..." <sup>17</sup>   |

7 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*

8 Norwegian Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health and Welfare. *The corona situation: Press conference on new measures to combat the coronavirus*

9 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*

10 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*

11 Norwegian Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health and Welfare. *The corona situation: Press conference on new measures to combat the coronavirus*

12 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*

13 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*

14 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 11, 2020*

15 The Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020, March 16). *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 16, 2020* <https://share.mediaflow.com/se/?SDFE907K30>

16 The Danish Prime Minister's Office. *Press conference on COVID-19 on 11 March 2020*

17 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus) March 16, 2020*

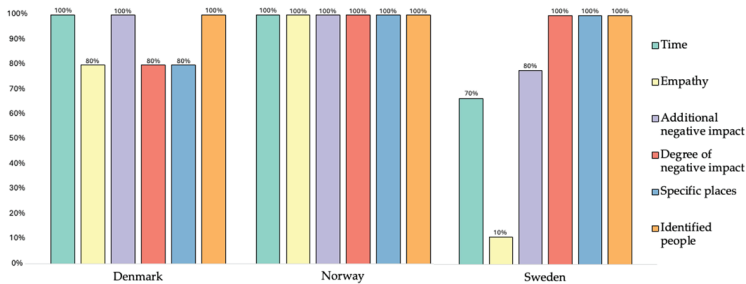
|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Resources           | "... The biggest challenge right now is access to protective equipment." <sup>18</sup>                                  |
| Known/Unknown facts | "We know too little. In the near future, knowledge will also be generated from Norway" <sup>19</sup>                    |
| Accountability      | "...we may have learned to be more aware of our health and the world around us in a way we didn't before" <sup>20</sup> |

The findings are presented as patterns of themes that emerged per press conference. The Swedish Public Health Institute conducted daily press conferences, while their Norwegian and Danish counterparts held press conferences less frequently. As a result, findings are presented as percentages relative to their respective totals—for instance, Sweden held ten press conferences compared to Denmark's five (see Table 1)—to ensure a comparable analysis of thematic elements across the three countries. Specifically, the frequency analysis account for the average number of elements per theme relative to the total number of press conferences conducted by each country.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Internalization

Figure 1. Comparative frequency analysis of elements of Internalization



The thematic analysis, as shown in Figure 1, revealed that Norway consistently prioritized all elements of internalization across all press confer-

18 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus)* March 16, 2020

19 The Public Health Agency of Sweden. *Press release on covid-19 (coronavirus)* March 11, 2020

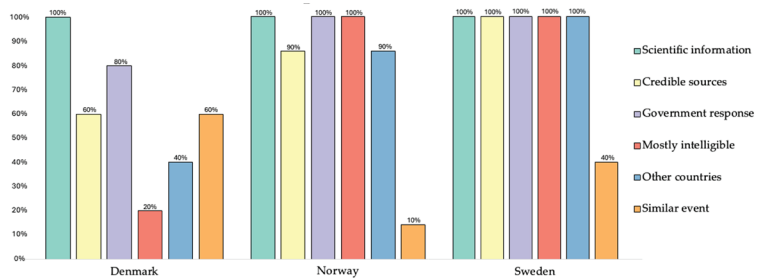
20 The Danish National Board of Health (2021, Februari 4). *ASK ABOUT THE COVID VACCINES* Thomas Senderowitz, director of the Danish Medicines Agency, and Søren Brostrøm, director of the Danish Health Authority. <https://www.facebook.com/sundhedsstyrelsenDK/videos/sp%C3%B8rg-om-covid-vaccinernethomas-senderowitz-direkt%C3%B8r-i-l%C3%A6gemiddelstyrelsen-og-s%C3%B8rg/736158977012226/>

ences, more so than Denmark and Sweden. In Denmark, every press conference identified people affected by COVID-19, addressed issues related to time, and discussed additional negative impact of the pandemic. In 80% of these appearances, spokespersons expressed empathy for those impacted by the pandemic, acknowledged the extent of the degree of negative impact caused by COVID-19, and identified specific places that were affected.

In contrast, the patterns for Sweden were different. In all appearances, spokespersons referenced identified people and specific places affected by the pandemic, and they included information on the degree of negative impact. However, mentions of additional negative impact appeared in only 80% of the press conferences, while time was addressed in 60% of appearances. Empathy was expressed in just 10% of the Swedish press conferences.

## 4.2. Explanation

*Figure 2. Comparative frequency analysis of elements of Explanation*

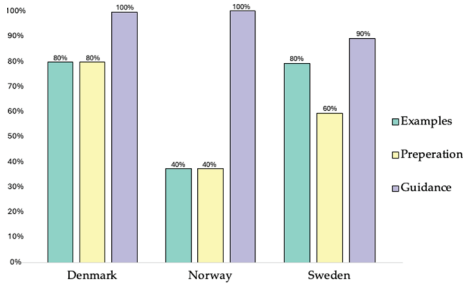


As illustrated in Figure 2, the findings indicate that Sweden is the country that prioritized providing explanations most consistently. Their spokespersons included all elements of explanation except for mentions of similar events which occurred in 40% of press conferences. Norway shows a similar trend, with all appearances incorporating scientific information and details about specific government responses, and credible sources and references to other countries in 90% and to similar events in only 10%. All press conferences adhered to mostly intelligible communication.

In contrast, Denmark, despite including scientific information in all appearances, provided explanations to a lesser degree. In Denmark, specific government responses are mentioned in 80% of press conferences, while mentions of credible sources and comparisons to similar events are included in 60% of the appearances. Contrasts with other countries' COVID-19 responses are included in only 40% of the appearances. Furthermore, only 20% of Denmark's briefings featured mostly intelligible information.

### 4.3. Action

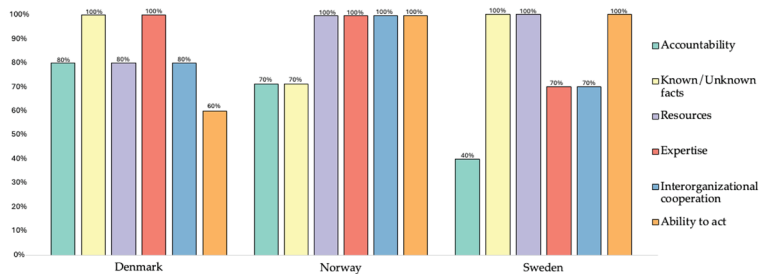
Figure 3. Comparative frequency analysis of elements of Action



In the comparison of the theme of action, as shown in Figure 3, both Norway and Denmark consistently provided guidance to the public in all cases. Sweden on the other hand, included guidance in 90% of their appearances. Regarding providing examples, Sweden and Denmark incorporate examples of action in 80% of their press conferences, while Norway does so in only 40% of cases. Additionally, Denmark offered recommended actions for preparation in 80% of appearances, compared to Sweden, which preparation in 60% of appearances, and Norway, which included actionable preparation recommendations in only 40% of their presentations.

### 4.4. Legitimacy

Figure 4. Comparison of elements of Legitimacy



In examining the use of legitimacy, as illustrated in Figure 4, Norway consistently incorporated references to expertise, inter-organizational cooperation, ability to act, and information about resources in all their appearances. In 70% of the instances, spokespersons expressed appreciation for their accountability and referenced known and unknown facts regarding COVID-19 and related issues.

For Denmark, language regarding expertise and known and unknown facts of COVID-19 was present in all press conferences. In 80% of their appearances, spokespersons acknowledged their accountability, resources, and inter-organizational cooperation. Additionally, their ability to act was mentioned in 60% of the press conferences and briefings.

Meanwhile, Swedish spokespersons prioritized sharing information about their ability to act, resources, and known and unknown facts about the COVID-19 pandemic in all their appearances. References to expertise and inter-organizational cooperation were included in 70% of their press conferences, while the acknowledgment of their accountability appeared in 40% of their press conferences.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

Building on previous research regarding the IDEA model and effective crisis communication (Badu et al., 2023; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Ihlen et al., 2024; Sellnow et al., 2023; Skogerbø et al., 2024; van Dijk & Alinejad, 2020), this study examined how PHAs in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden utilized press conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver instructive crisis communication and establish authoritative legitimacy.

Norway stood out as the most consistent proponent of internalization strategies in its press conferences, showing empathy, recognizing affected peoples, discussing time-related aspects, and acknowledging further adverse effects in all appearances. This comprehensive incorporation of internalization highlights a significant effort to create messages with emotional and prosocial appeals as well as public assurance (Sellnow et al., 2023). Denmark similarly exhibited a strong dedication to internalization. Each appearance acknowledged the affected groups, included spatial details, and addressed the pandemic's effects. Additionally, empathy was conveyed in most presentations, showcasing an attempt to include emotional appeals, albeit not as consistently as in Norway.

Conversely, Sweden adopted a more informational approach. While Swedish representatives consistently mentioned the impacted individuals and locations, and discussed the severity of the effects, expressions of empathy were infrequent. Additionally, references to time were limited in just over half of the appearances, suggesting that Swedish spokespersons did not prioritize reassuring the public of the duration of the crisis or recommendation, nor did they prioritize emotional appeals. Instead, Sweden consistently prioritized providing explanations, scientific data, information about government actions, and references to reliable sources, indicating a preference for a cognitive rather than an affective approach (Sellnow et al., 2023). For Norway, the theme of explanation

showed a similar pattern emerging, with a prioritization of all elements of explanations except for references to similar events. Denmark, while sometimes including scientific information, provided fewer comparisons and was less consistent in using clear language, which may have hindered public comprehension.

Both Norway and Denmark provided actionable guidance in all their appearances. Sweden offered similar advice, but not in every instance. Interestingly, the decision to rely on mostly voluntary recommendation did not encourage the Swedish PHAs to promote actionable guidance consistently. However, both Sweden and Denmark were more consistent than Norway in providing actionable examples, which indicates a cognitive appeal. Additionally, Denmark, more than Norway and Sweden, offered preparatory advice, and the overall prioritization of the theme of action suggest that Danish spokespersons focused on promoting and improving the audience's self-efficacy.

For legitimacy, Norway consistently emphasized its expertise, resources, inter-agency collaboration, and ability to act. Furthermore, Norwegian officials often emphasized their accountability and transparency regarding both known and unknown facts—factors that Ihlen et al. (2024) argue fostered Norway's high institutional trust and public support.

Denmark likewise placed importance on legitimacy, with expertise and acknowledgment of factual uncertainties being included in all speeches, indicating a strategy to legitimize government decision-making. However, Danish spokespersons did not prioritize emphasizing their ability to act, again suggesting that Denmark's communication focused on the public's self-efficacy in managing the situation. Sweden, on the other hand, emphasized its ability to act, transparency regarding both known and unknown facts, and resource availability in all press releases, but placed less emphasis on its expertise, inter-organizational cooperation, and accountability, in line with an overarching prioritization of factual information related to COVID-19.

In terms of reflecting existing cultural norms, the patterns in which the themes were utilized are alignment with previous research (Baekkeskov et al., 2021; Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Ihlen & Vranic, 2024; Kjeldsen, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2023). Indeed, Norwegian PHAs, standing on stage with government officials, showed a preference for transparency, prosocial and emotional appeals, and collaborative leadership. Meanwhile, Denmark's emphasis on identifying the public, promoting actionable guidance and preparations, transparency, and expertise is reflected in the country's structured yet compassionate leadership, demonstrating Denmark's crisis management strategy of political hierarchy while also pro-

moting collective accountability by emphasizing messages that resonate with the public and increase self-protective actions (Mens et al., 2021; Olnagier & Mogensen, 2020). Finally, the rational-technical approach observed in Sweden mirrors both institutional and national preferences for providing cognitive understanding of the public health situation (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Kjeldsen, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2023).

This study makes two contributions to crisis communication research. First, it delivers empirical validation of the IDEA model's effectiveness as distributed via press conferences during a pandemic in high trust societies (Abdelzadeh & Sedelius, 2024; Johansson et al., 2023; Skogerbø et al., 2024). Second, it broadens the understanding of effective crisis leadership by demonstrating that fostering legitimacy can enhance instructive crisis communication when aligned with cultural and institutional contexts. As governments prepare for future public health emergencies, these insights underscore the importance of tailoring instructional communication strategies that align with national values and communicative norms, which may enhance message effectiveness and foster public compliance.

### **5.1. Limitations and Suggestion for Future Research**

The primary focus of this study was to identify overall thematic differences in the use of instructive messaging during press conferences across the Scandinavian countries, as well as to assess elements of legitimacy. Therefore, a limitation of this study was that it did not include a more granular analysis of the frequency of each element per press conference.

A further limitation was the inclusion of press conferences held in Norway and initially in Denmark which included government officials, entailing that the findings from Norway and Denmark may reflect the inclusion of politicians in the press conferences rather than merely cultural contexts. However, since these appearances were part of the PHAs' strategy for press conferences, they were included in the study.

The limited timeframe selected for this study resulted in a dataset consisting of 22 press conferences. Moreover, this study excluded briefings that were held exclusively by government officials. While this allowed for a focused analysis of PHAs' communication during a critical phase of the pandemic, future research should consider extending the time period to facilitate an analysis of a larger data set for more detailed and comparative analysis.

Finally, achieving affective, cognitive, and behavioral change, as well as legitimacy, requires a shift in perception among stakeholders. Therefore, future research would benefit from analyzing public perceptions of legitimacy alongside messaging that aligns with the IDEA model.

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