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International Student Crisis Management to COVID-19: A Comparative Analysis between the United States and South Korea

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Abstract

While numerous case studies examined the effect of COVID-19 on international students, there has been limited scholarly attention on comprehensive crisis management strategies. Comparing crisis management strategies between the United States (US) and South Korea, this research aimed to explore international student crisis management strategies practiced at the onset of COVID-19, along with the stated rationales for the strategies. This study collected 119 news articles from the US and 90 from South Korea about 'COVID-19' and 'international students' from January to September 2020. Prominent rationales stated in both the US and Korea were students' Health & Security and Humanitarianism & Human Rights. Korean Universities prioritized moral rationales over Economic or Political benefits of recruiting international students, which was assumed to be a practice of East Asia's collectivist and Confucian culture. Also, Immigration & Legal Support was prioritized among universities in the US, where the government took relatively aggressive measures on visa restrictions. Despite growing interest in how universities should take the role of providing public good in higher education internationalization; Cosmopolitan Learning & Campus Diversity rationales were emphasized in neither countries.

Keywords: comparative studies, COVID-19, crisis management, international student

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted international mobility for over two years, was an unprecedented crisis for many countries and universities. Most of the research about the crisis focused on the related challenges and the supports that were provided, such as international students' physical health and emotional well-being, confusion in changing immigration policies, and personal financial difficulties as a consequence of economic downturns (Gao et al., 2022; van de Velde et al., 2021; Wen & Tian, 2022; Whatley & Fischer, 2022). Some of the ways that universities responded to these and other unexpected disruptions fall within the broader realm of crisis management. Yet, there has been a lack of research on international student crisis management (ISCM) strategies adopted by universities and the underlying rationales for such actions, especially comparatively. Systematically comparing the crisis management approaches across different countries helps to ensure that institutions are better prepared to immediately and effectively respond to future crises.

A crisis is an unstable time or state of affairs in which institutions are at high risk of undesirable and unpredictable outcomes (Barton, 1993; Fink, 1986). Whereas crises can lead to the breakdown of institutions; crisis management is the task and strategy that is taken prior to or during a crisis to reduce tensions, prevent hardships, and spillover effects of negative reactions, as well as to deal with the outcomes of the crisis (Zdziarski et al., 2021). Crisis response in crisis management not only relays significant facts but can also frame public opinion at the onset of a crisis, which could then shape public perceptions of the cause, results, and possible solutions (Coombs, 2006; Knight, 1999). At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, general public opinion in countries with large international student enrolment was that stricter immigration and travel regulations should be imposed, due to concerns that international students could spike public health concerns as potential carriers of the virus (Bogel-Burroughs, 2020). Meanwhile, domestic students were encouraged and cleared to return home, despite the risks of further spreading COVID-19 in traveling. This stigma against internationals as originators and perpetrators of disease even fueled racist discourse amongst some countries (Yao et al., 2021; Yu, 2021). Such public opinions can spill into ISCM strategies and rationales. Thus, it becomes necessary to understand and address how public communication and ISCM strategies and rationales are linked.

Therefore, in this study, we aim to address how international student crisis management (ISCM) response strategies and the underlying rationales adopted by universities are framed in crisis communications based on the case of two countries: the United States and South Korea. The selection of these countries for this comparative study is based on their distinct approaches to international student policy. Prior to the pandemic, both the U.S. and South Korea experienced relatively steady increase in international student enrolments as leading countries of higher education internationalization in their respective regions. The U.S. has long been a primary destination for international students, while Korea began prioritizing a substantial expansion of inbound mobility in around 2000, with a marked surge observed between 2000 and 2005 (Kwon, 2013). Also, South Korea and other East Asian countries have higher governmental international higher education strategies than the US, which have witnessed substantial government-led efforts in recruiting international students, with significant growth since the early 2000s (Crăciun, 2018). Considering the substantial presence of international students in both countries, the consequences and strategies employed in response to their presence have received substantial coverage in public media outlets, particularly in light of the COVID-19 outbreak. The extensive reporting on universities' crisis management strategies during the pandemic makes the United States and South Korea ideal cases for analysis.

As such, analyzing the case of these countries will provide insights into how universities have addressed the needs of international students during the crisis. It will also shed light on the reasons and justifications behind these strategies and their potential impact on public perception of ISCM. By comparing and contrasting these approaches, this research seeks to enhance our understanding of effective crisis response by universities and the mitigation of negative consequences in managing international students.

Literature Review

Crisis Management in Higher Education

Crisis management is to not only prevent a crisis from happening, but also to minimize and hamper the crisis from damaging the institution from an unpredictable risk (Coombs, 1999; Fearn-Banks, 2016). While crisis management has been acknowledged in private business management, public sectors, such as universities and colleges, have moved to utilize crisis management communication strategies to control their risks and respond to crises under the effects of privatization and marketization (Zdziarski et al., 2021).

Crisis management in higher education, emerging as a new field of contemporary higher education studies, differs from crisis management in private or even public sector institutions, as it exclusively features higher education institutions. Higher education institutions are responsible for providing physically and mentally safe educational environments for their students, both domestic and international. Rollo and Zdziarski (2021) elaborated how threats to the safety and well-being of campus members can be a greater concern for universities in comparison to crises for other institutions in the public and private sectors. This is because universities' actions are motivated by an ethic of care for campus members when responding to crises, and this is expressed by reaching out to students, staff, and faculty with compassion, concern, and sensitivity to the situation. In the process, it adds a 'human face' to the institution. As a result, crisis management in higher education undertakes different strategies, depending on the crisis (Zdziarski et al., 2021).

In an unpredicted crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis response through public communication by institutions becomes more important. They may need to take actions in response to the crisis that could have significant consequences for stakeholders, and to maintain the trust and support of stakeholders, it is important to build a clear and persuasive justification for the actions that are taken (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, the rationales stated in their communication response carry what universities believe will be persuasive reasoning for some of their costly and risky responses to crises. ISCM approach to public communications is also linked to their institutional reputation and attractiveness to both prospective domestic and international students (Zdziarski, 2006). Thus, effective and persuasive public communication becomes even more vital during times of crisis, especially for universities. However, due to universities' loosely coupled communication channels (e.g., administration, faculty, students, parents); their crisis management communications can unintentionally foster misunderstandings with the public as research studies have shown that they are relatively inexperienced in this area (Mitroff, 2006; Moerschell & Novak, 2020).

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, infectious diseases were not the main source of crises for universities—albeit with a few minor exceptions (e.g., 2003 SARS, 2009 Swine Flu, 2013 Ebola Virus). However, none of these were on the same scale as the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about unprecedented changes to all aspects of the campus and caught most universities around the world off guard and unprepared. The closure of campuses and borders particularly impacted international students, which put this population at risk in various aspects. Consequently, universities had to respond to the crisis by adopting varying strategies for international students in particular, while also following their respective governmental policies (Gao et al., 2022; van de Velde et al., 2021; Wen & Tian, 2022; Whatley & Fischer, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

From an institutional perspective, ISCM is supported by different rationales as to why international students must be protected despite any crisis. Not only limited to the COVID-19 pandemic, but global issues such as Brexit, the 2008 financial crisis, and racism towards international students have also provoked the need for ISCM strategies, in order to address these different rationales (Bartram, 2018; Courtois & Veiga, 2020; Lee, 2020; Macrander, 2017). Based on a systematic review of prevailing literature on international student management—especially during crises—the following section introduces the analytic framework that was utilized to categorize the different types of ISCM rationales and strategies.

ISCM Rationales

Recruiting international students has been recognized as an essential practice and investment for universities seeking to be competitive in the internationalization of higher education (Teichler, 2017). Different perspectives have introduced various reasons for fostering international student mobility. These rationales form the basis for why crisis management for international student mobility should persist despite the pandemic, and so universities' strategic managerial responses to crisis may vary depending on which rationales they follow.

From a broad perspective, Knight & de Wit's (1997) classification of rationales that drive internationalization in higher education can be applied: social and cultural, political, economic, and academic. Ensuing studies such as Knight's (2004) identification of the emergence of new rationale trends acknowledged that the field continues to evolve as these classifications may not fit neatly into the aforementioned categories. Marginson (2010) explained that rationales could also differ depending on the scope of interest: national or international level. More recently, Raby and Zhang (2020) expanded this discussion by identifying four theoretical paradigms—humanitarian, neo-liberalism, post-modernism, and post-

colonialism—applied in international student research, offering additional perspectives for categorizing the rationales underpinning ISCM.

Furthermore, recent studies on international higher education policy have mentioned that policy rationales should be distinguished by broader levels, including that of country-level politics and positions in the global context as well as international-level tasks for cooperation and ethical responsibilities (Lee, 2021; Lingard & Rizvi, 2009; Lomer, 2018; Riaño et al., 2018).

Based on these ideas, prevalent literature has identified several traditional rationales of international student recruitment and management such as Financial & Economic Benefit (e.g., national brain-gain strategies for talents from overseas, international students as educational service consumers) (Haugen, 2013; Lomer, 2018), Political Partnerships & Soft Power (e.g., public diplomacy, enhancing domestic students' global education and engagement) (Lomer, 2017b; Tian & Lowe, 2018), and Institutional Management & Operations (e.g., international students as cash cows, cost-sharing effect) (Cantwell, 2015; Whatley & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2021). Furthermore, recent identification on the rationales include more ideas of higher education in terms of promoting Cosmopolitan Learning & Campus Diversity, protecting Humanitarianism & Human Rights, and regarding the current crisis, protection of Student Health & Security (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Ma et al., 2020).

Researchers have emphasized the importance of defining different rationales for international student mobility, as it helps in understanding the changing ecosystem of international student recruitment and national policy design. Moreover, these rationales may differ from one another based on the unique national and international context in which each country operates (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Jokila et al., 2019; Lomer, 2017a). These previous studies explain how the rationales of international student mobility could differ according to specific circumstances; especially when it involves an unpredicted crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

ISCM Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a range of difficulties for international students, such as travel limitations, visa complications, and the necessity to adjust to remote learning. Effectively handling this crisis required a comprehensive approach that considered the distinctive requirements of international students. Investigations into international students' post-pandemic circumstances in academia have highlighted these challenges as a significant concern, and we synthesized the following five strategies suggested by scholars: Financial Support, Immigration & Legal Support, Educational & Pedagogical Support, University Management Response, and Health & Security Response.

Although many scholars have primarily concentrated on the physical difficulties encountered by international students, there has been growing recognition of the importance of prioritizing the mental health of these students (Alonso et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2022; Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021). Racism has especially been identified as a significant issue, particularly for individuals of Asian origin who have been unfairly accused of initiating the pandemic (Coffey et al., 2021; Koo et al., 2021; Maleku et al., 2022). This also provided a strong rationale as to why international students needed culturally sensitive approaches to crisis management during the pandemic (Chen et al., 2020). Similarly, health and security issues, such as protection from uncertain housing situations and recovery from infection, were also considered during the pandemic. Especially when campuses were shut down, international students faced much more difficulties in finding alternative places to stay while domestic students were able to temporarily move into their parents' houses (i.e., Health & Security Response) (Fischer & Whatley, 2020; Hari et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2020).

In addition, some strategies were idealized to be needed, but were regarded to be disadvantageous to the host countries such as Financial Support and Immigration & Legal Support. In many countries including the US and South Korea, national COVID-19 relief programs that exempted international students raised the need to better support them financially (Alaklabi et al., 2021; Fischer & Whatley, 2020). Also, their unstable resident status and frequent visa policy changes increased visa anxiety amongst international students, and this called for proactive partnerships between policy makers and universities (Lynch et al., 2023).

Moreover, several other strategies were put into place to address the difficulties of in-person meetings in order to help international students with their adaptation and involvement in university programs. These included customized activities that were developed to support the participation and learning of international students, as well as institutional

changes by universities to ease the admission process for international students during the pandemic (i.e., Educational & Pedagogical Support, University Management Response) (Alaklabi et al., 2021; Yang & Shen, 2022).

To provide a structured overview of the various ISCM rationales and strategies, the researchers developed a visual framework to capture the interplay between these two dimensions (see Figure 1). This 2 by 2 framework was used to categorize ISCM rationales and strategies and helped identify distinct clusters of ISCM approaches, shedding light on their relationships and providing implications for each country.

Figure 1

Analytic Framework of ISCM Rationales & Strategies

Response Strategies of International Student Crisis Management During COVID-19 / **Rationales** of International Student Crisis Management During COVID-19	**Financial Support**	**Immigration & Legal Support**	**Educational & Pedagogical Support**	**University-level Management Response**	**Health & Security Response**
Financial & Economic Benefit					
Political Partnerships & Soft Power					
Institutional Management & Operations					
Cosmopolitan Learning & Campus Diversity					
Humanitarianism & Human Rights					
Student Health & Security					

Methodology

The data source for this research was news articles collected from online news media in both the US and South Korea to examine how ISCM was framed across the four lifespan stages of crisis management. According to Fink (1986), the stages include prodromal, acute, chronic, and resolution (See Table 1). The stages help to organize various insights into the crisis management process. The articles were collected between January to September 2020, which is when COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency by the WHO and the Trump Administration (prodromal stage); when the crisis directly started to influence universities to close classes (acute stage); and when the effects of the crisis continued to extend to the following semester, which was during the summer break for most institutions (chronic stage).

To avoid biased sampling of news articles, the researchers initially used electronic news media archives (Earl et al., 2004), specifically Nexis Uni from LexisNexis for US articles and BigKinds for Korean articles. The search criteria included major national newspapers such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Voice of America, and USA Today for US articles and Joongang Ilbo, Hankyoreh, Donga Ilbo, Kukmin Ilbo, Chosun Ilbo, and Seoul Shinmun for Korean articles. The keywords “COVID-19” and “international student” were used to retrieve relevant articles. To mitigate potential omissions, the researchers subscribed to each newspaper to cross-reference and identify any missing articles. However, despite the comprehensive search, the number of articles obtained from online archives was less than anticipated. Thus, in order to ensure a thorough analysis, additional articles published by news outlets specializing in higher education, namely the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Education for U.S. articles, and University News Network and Kyosu Shinmun for Korean articles, were analyzed. Irrelevant articles such as brief announcements, opinions, and interviews were filtered, in order to keep the sole focus on articles discussing crisis management. In total, the dataset comprised 119 U.S. articles and 90 Korean articles. For a detailed breakdown of the articles found in each stage, refer to Table 1 below.

Table 1

List of Online Media Articles (US & South Korea)

Stage of CM (Fink, 1986)	US[a]	South Korea[b]
Prodromal Stage	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Acute Stage	3 (2.5%)	36 (40.0%)
Chronic Stage	63 (52.9%)	28 (31.1%)
Resolution Stage	53 (44.5%)	26 (28.9%)
Total	119 (100.0%)	90 (100.0%)

Note. [a] collected via individual website subscription and "NEXIS UNI" program. [b] collected via big data analysis website (www.bigkinds.or.kr) and two higher education-related press websites.

When the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in the US and South Korea on January 20 and January 21, 2020, respectively, the higher education sector was delayed in responding. Thus, articles on ISCM were not found during the prodromal stage. COVID-19 was perceived to be similar to previous infectious virus outbreaks in recent history, such as MERS and SARS. However, interest sharply rose around March 2020, when spring break in the US and winter break in South Korea ended, as international students started returning from their home countries. The number of articles related to ISCM increased and peaked around July 2020, as universities feared that current and incoming international students would defer or delay studying abroad. As such, universities had to prepare institutional response strategies to overcome the detrimental effect of COVID-19 on international student recruitment and enrolment.

This research used thematic analysis (TA) to analyze the different rationales and response strategies of ISCM. The primary mechanism used in TA is 'coding' the contents based on the ideas they hold and combining multiple codes that are related into 'themes' clustered around central organizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Here, the themes are constructed to have independent meanings and 'work together to form a coherent whole analytic story' (Clarke & Braun, 2014). In TA, researchers can benefit from basic theoretical frameworks to validate and extend the results conceptually (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Therefore, the researchers first constructed an analytic framework on ISCM rationales and strategies, based on previous research (see Figure 1). The codes were then verified and specified based on the findings.

Using coding and grouping methods, the data were analyzed qualitatively. To ensure uniformity, two of the authors individually coded the data before cross-checking each other's codes. They were aware that their positionality may have affected the process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting the data. As a result, they engaged in critical cross-checking to ensure that the study's outcomes were reliable. All disagreements were settled by discussion and agreement. The coded information was then combined by the authors into major themes and subthemes. The coding and grouping procedure followed the steps of data familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and completing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data was coded, cross-checked, synthesized, and verified to determine the final results. In this process, some articles had multiple informative data points for the research (e.g., a single crisis response strategy was based on two separate rationales) and some did not imply any rationales or response strategies by universities, so the total number of data units extracted from articles did not equal the total number of pieces. For example, in terms of rationales: 123 codes from US articles and 78 codes from South Korean articles were extracted. In regard to response strategies: 113 codes from US articles and 78 codes from South Korean articles were extracted.

The codes and themes extracted through this process tended to link closer to the semantic language that the data held rather than the contextual meaning on a more interpretive level. For instance, if an article titled "X University provides various extra-curricular events for international students to have a meaningful summer break" stated that the university 'provided free mental counseling services and job fairs for international students who were relatively isolated in South Korea and were unable to go back to their home countries for the summer break'; this strategy was coded as 'offering special extra-curricular programs for international students,' despite the possibility that the university's underlying strategy was to release this information to news outlets to promote the university's appeal and reputation to international students, over

other competing universities. Overall, the results may not perfectly represent the frequency of each crisis response strategy nor the level of social discourse on the rationales; however, they help explain how such ISCM rationales and response strategies were communicated to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results

ISCM Rationales

Overall, the most prominent rationale for ISCM in both countries was Student Health & Security (31.7% in the US and 74.4% in Korea). With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the protection of students' health including domestic and international students, became a paramount concern for universities. Nevertheless, there was a thematic difference in 'whose' health universities aimed to protect: domestic students and faculty, international students, or local citizens. In both countries, all three groups were mentioned with concern, but a greater emphasis was placed on 'protecting the spread of the virus on their campuses and discourage travel to China,' particularly in light of the perceived threat posed by incoming students from Mainland China (Bogel-Burroughs, 2020). In this sense, several media outlets in South Korea expressed potential conflicts between universities and local communities over the issue of incoming Chinese students (Kim, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2020):

> If all 70,000 international students from China enter the country and return to campus at once next month, it will be difficult to prevent them from spreading the virus in the local community. Although they are not subject to quarantine as prescribed by health authorities, the Ministry of Education will monitor them closely (Kim, 2020, para. 1)

This disagreement was tied to universities' rationale for maintaining institutional operations, as international students were considered essential to supporting the cost of institutional management.

Whereas managing students' mental health, stress, and pandemic fatigue was a more important issue in Korea, student stability in immigration and entry to the US was more frequently mentioned by the US. This can differ among countries where immigration—whether temporarily or permanently—is an important goal of international student mobility. Both countries also frequently emphasized the Humanitarian & Human Rights rationale (19.5% in the US and 19.2% in Korea), particularly in relation to helping international students continue to interact and engage with their respective campuses as usual during the pandemic. In the US, a notable finding was that a portion of the discourse placed emphasis on the right of international students to have secure access to education during the pandemic, which included a reliable internet connection and avoiding the risks associated with returning to their home country (Hartocollis, 2020b; Redden, 2020b).

> Declarations from Harvard and MIT students submitted into the court record argued to the contrary that the students have compelling academic, personal, and professional reasons to stay in the U.S. —or in some cases to re-enter the U.S. —even if their coursework would be online (Redden, 2020b, para. 10).

However, two rationales that were quite notable in the US but not in South Korea were Financial & Economic Benefit as well as Political Partnerships & Soft Power. Through prevailing research in the field of international higher education and international students, it is hard to deny that recruiting international students and producing international student graduates have a positive impact on the economy of the nation itself; especially by securing highly skilled talent and creating new jobs (rather than overtaking domestic positions) in the country (NAFSA, n.d.). This need to attract financial and human resources also leads to competition between countries on international student recruitment, which tends to be criticized in academia for the possible rising number of unqualified international students and inadequate university services for them (Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012). Unfortunately, in this sense, international students were perceived as "cash cows," leading universities to fear that COVID-19 would cause international students to defer or go on leaves of absence—leading to sudden drops in tuition income (Bogel-Burroughs, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2020; Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020):

> The loss of international students could have cost universities millions of dollars in tuition and jeopardized the ability of U.S. companies to hire the highly skilled workers who often start their careers with an American education. (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020, para. 3)

> In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly half of Chinese international students enrolled in South Korean universities have put their travel plans on hold. For universities, fewer Chinese students would ease the burden of quarantine, but the financial losses incurred when students leave school en masse are also significant. (Kim & Lee, 2020, para. 1)

While this has been an issue in both the US and Korean higher education context; Korean universities did not directly place Financial & Economic Benefits at the front of ISCM as often as the US did. Moreover, in the US higher education context, there were disruptions of Political Partnerships & Soft Power with China and their international students due to rising anti-Asian sentiments, which proved problematic to many US universities (Bogel-Burroughs, 2020). This was, however, hardly mentioned or discussed in the Korean higher education community. Finally, the rationale for Cosmopolitan Learning & Campus Diversity was not a major focus of discussion in either country with it being of least interest both in the US and Korea.

ISCM Response Strategies

Overall, US universities took the most action on Immigration & Legal Support (40.9%)—compared to less coverage in South Korea—followed second by University Management Response (32.2%), which ranked third in South Korea (27.3%). In South Korea, Health & Security Response (37.7%) and Educational & Pedagogical Support (32.5%) were the most frequently mentioned response strategies, respectively. However, Financial Support was not the main action taken for ISCM in either country.

Regarding Immigration & Legal Support, one similarity the two countries shared is that they were at least partly influenced by political orders and government policies (e.g., visa regulations), as they had a direct impact on international students' residence status. Universities in the US and South Korea had to take different approaches depending on how their respective governments dealt with immigration affairs regarding international students. While Korean universities for the most part showed acceptance of governmental decisions and worked within regulations laid out by the government; US universities took more defensive actions against their government, with several universities publicly announcing that they would sue the government over unfair visa regulations against international students (Hartocollis, 2020a).

By the start of the second semester, the South Korean government took proactive measures to allow universities to provide degrees without any on-campus courses (100% online course degrees), whereas in the past, universities were required by law to provide only up to 20% of their courses online (Shin, 2020). The reason was that the Korean government wanted to prevent international students from taking leaves of absence due to COVID-19 and enable them to finish their degree wherever they wished to stay (in their home country or South Korea). However, a few Korean universities were more resistant or cautious of the new policy. The most significant reason was that this new policy could conflict with academic credit and degree recognition policies in other countries such as China (Heo, 2020). International students who chose not to complete their college degree from South Korea could risk their credits not being recognized elsewhere because they were online. Still, without better options for Korean universities in the continuing pandemic, universities took the initiative to provide blended learning classes (online & offline) or entirely online courses. They also promoted special extra-curricular activities on campus to increase international student morale and attendance (i.e., Educational & Pedagogical Support) (Cho, 2020) rather than expressing their direct opposition to government policies, as in the case of the US. Unlike US universities, Korean universities tended to use the media to promote their extra-curricular activities (e.g., traditional Korean food cooking & tasting, international student job fairs, mentoring & buddy programs for international students, etc.) during this period, which in return led to the high frequency of Educational & Pedagogical Support response strategies mentioned in Korean news articles (Lee, 2020; Paik, 2020).

Meanwhile, US universities were preparing legal action against the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)'s decision to deny visas to international students who did not attend universities that offered on-site classes (Svrluga & Anderson, 2020). This stance by the incumbent US government at the time showed how international students—at least in

this stage—were perceived as potential immigrants in the big picture. Facing fierce backlash from universities that "ICE's decision reflects an effort by the federal government to force universities to reopen in-person classes" (Redden, 2020a, para. 4), the US government explained that it had given universities enough time to adapt to and cope with the pandemic crisis (Barros, 2020). However, universities were against international students being forced to leave the US for numerous reasons; shedding light on humanitarian rights such as providing equal rights to international students to study in a better environment and also protecting them from infectious risks on their way back home (i.e., ISCM Rationales: Humanitarianism & Human Rights, Student Health & Security). US universities also provided empirical data on the economic benefits international students gave to their nation by remaining in the country to study (i.e., ISCM Rationale: Financial & Economic Benefit) (Strauss, 2020).

As for the high frequency of University Management Responses by universities in both countries, this included changes to admission requirements, postponing the start of semesters, and transitioning university-wide events (e.g., graduation ceremonies, admission ceremonies) into online formats (Hartocollis & Levin, 2020; Jeong, 2020; Rosenthal, 2020). Changes to admission requirements and delaying of application deadlines for international students were found to be more prominent in the US, where international student tuition is nearly three times that of domestic students (Hartocollis & Levin, 2020; Rosenthal, 2020). This implied that US universities acted swiftly and pre-emptively in order to prevent the fall in international student applications and enrolment, which would lead to larger financial repercussions. For example, many US universities announced that they would temporarily allow language proficiency exams to be taken online (e.g., Duolingo) so that students from countries that had regular on-site tests canceled due to COVID-19 would not be disadvantaged (Fischer, 2020). Another change that followed was delaying the application deadline for international students from May 1 to June 1, 2020 (Anderson, 2020).

In the case of South Korea, both the government and universities coordinated their efforts in supporting incoming international students—from the moment they arrived at the airport to their transportation to university dormitories and relevant quarantine facilities. The central government even encouraged local and regional governments to financially support universities that had enrolled international students. The most significant concern for the Korean government was that the massive influx of international students into the country could possibly weaken the national epidemic prevention system (Kim & Lee, 2020). Therefore, by postponing the start of the semester, the Ministry of Education addressed the need for international students to stay in their country until the pandemic outbreak was mitigated. While Korean universities prepared quarantine facilities and health support systems for international students in order to ensure their safety upon arrival in South Korea; the rationale by universities was to prevent the possible spread of COVID-19 via international students. In other words, amidst an unprecedented national health emergency; Korean universities tried to avoid negative media accusations as the possible source of COVID-19 outbreaks for not having properly managed and quarantined their international students.

Although financial support was mentioned in both countries, this was not the main action taken for ISCM. In South Korea, it was merely discussed in legislative proposals and limited to supporting universities rather than directly funding students (KMOE, 2020). The US government's stance on funding students left international and undocumented students ineligible to access federal financial aid during the COVID-19 crisis. The emergency response aid from Congress in April 2020 included $14 billion for eligible students, but undocumented and international students were excluded. While several universities (e.g., Harvard and MIT) turned down the relief money, they remained committed to supporting students in need, including international students (Svrluga & Douglas-Gabriel, 2020).

On another note, from a crisis management strategy; many Korean universities suffered financially from the COVID-19 crisis and thus suggested that they could not provide direct financial support to international students unless it was provided by external sources (e.g., central, regional, or local government). Moreover, although worries over student satisfaction fallout prevailed with the emergence of online classes; for the most part, universities in both the US and South Korea did not express responsibility for the inconveniences for international students that occurred (e.g., shortage of dormitory housing, rising anti-Chinese sentiment, etc.). This is further explained by Fuchs-Burnett (2002) and Coombs & Holladay (2008), who wrote that such accommodative strategies (e.g., admitting wrongdoing or negligence) might lead to substantial financial and reputational loss, as it would mean that universities were responsible for the crisis. The overall relationship between ISCM rationales and response strategies identified through the analysis is summarized in Figure 2.

Discussion

This section provides a review of the link of ISCM strategies implemented by universities and the underlying rationales behind them. Furthermore, the researchers discussed how these rationales were perceived as convincing or not in the context of the two countries' differences.

Prominent ISCM rationales, notably students' Health & Security and Humanitarianism & Human Rights, were identified in both the US and Korea. Unlike the other rationales, these two were rooted in the pursuit of public good in international higher education. This perspective aligns with scholars' arguments advocating for universities' responsibilities in providing a safe learning environment, even during global crises (Shields & Lu, 2023). However, a closer examination on the contextual linkages and empirical studies revealed that many universities' financial reliance on international student tuition (Cantwell, 2015) and this raises questions about whether these rationales were solely aimed at international student protection during the pandemic. For instance, within the Health & Security rationale, subthemes extended beyond safeguarding international students (e.g., providing residential support or financial aid for international students) to include the broader goal of preventing COVID-19 spread on campus and in the local community. This was particularly evident in Korea's preparation of quarantine facilities, international student arrival protocols, and the postponement of the Spring semester—primarily intended to curb COVID-19 transmission within the national community.

Adding to this, a few ISCM rationales found in the US context did not appear in the Korean context—such as Economic & Political benefits. Korean universities showed stronger response strategies based on more moral rationales, such as Student Health & Security, rather than directly emphasizing Economic & Political Benefit—even though Korean universities' response strategies were triggered by underlying concerns that international student enrolment could fall. According to previous research on crisis communication strategies in South Korea, this may have been because of South Korea's collectivist and Confucian culture (Wertz & Kim, 2010), which prioritizes the group's well-being before the individual, and frowns upon publicly expressing financial ambitions. In sharp contrast, US universities were more upfront in detailing the financial risk of losing international students and the detrimental effect it would have on institutional and even national levels.

The most significant difference, however, was found in response strategies concerning Immigration & Legal Support, whereby US universities were very active while hardly ever emphasized in the Korean higher education context. Although the issue of Immigration & Legal Support for international students was important in South Korea as well, the differences were due to contrasting attitudes towards ISCM by the respective governments. This led to positive (in South Korea) and negative (in the US) amendments by the immigration offices. In many Asian countries, such as South Korea, the government actively oversees the recruitment and management of international students. In contrast, Western English- speaking countries like the US primarily rely on universities to drive international student recruitment, with governments providing the overarching policy framework while taking a more subsidiary role. Notably, both countries exhibited a shared reluctance to prioritize Financial Support as the primary ISCM response strategy. Consequently, most universities portrayed themselves as victims of the pandemic crisis to the public, rather than accepting full responsibility, thereby mitigating potential financial and reputational losses (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002). This approach allowed universities, especially in South Korea, to legitimately seek financial support from their respective governments while garnering positive press coverage for benevolent actions supporting struggling international students (e.g., distributing free masks, providing housing, organizing special extracurricular events, etc.).

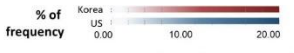
Implications and Conclusion

This research provides direct implications for researchers and practitioners in the field of higher education, particularly for international students. First, it showed that universities in both host countries prioritized the overall safety of international students above all else during the pandemic, even after providing necessary educational and pedagogical support (e.g., online classes). However, although universities in the US and South Korea contributed heavily to protecting international students' health by adopting Health & Security responses; the underlying rationales for those actions focused more on the potential health risks international students posed to local communities rather than the health of international students themselves. This is an issue that higher education practitioners should keep in mind because it may interfere with providing timely humanitarian aid to international students in the early stages of future crises.

Second, there were differences in how international students were viewed by universities, in addition to their respective governments and immigration offices (e.g., as highly skilled talent, potential immigrants, cash cows, etc.), and whose responsibility it was to recruit and manage them during COVID-19. Different governmental approaches to international student visa regulations showed that university ISCM response strategies were affected by institutional stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni), and by political actors and government policies as well. Thus, researchers conducting further studies on ISCM rationales and response strategies should consider both institutional and national levels (Marginson, 2010).

Figure 2

Summary of the Result of ISCM Rationales and Response Strategies



Rationales of International Student Crisis Management During COVID-19	Response Strategies of International Student Crisis Management During COVID-19	Financial Support: partial tuition refund	Financial Support: provide financial aid	Financial Support: collect more tuition	Img. & Legal Sup.: opposition to visa restrictions	Educational & Pedagogical Support: delivery of courses and programs to online or hybrid	Educational & Pedagogical Support: holding special events for international students	University-level Management Response: enrollment policy change	University-level Management Response: administration and closing/cancelling events and classes	University-level Management Response: establishing special task force and support team	University-level Management Response: postponing academic semester	University-level Management Response: new international student recruitment strategy	University-level Management Response: open campus and classes	University-level Management Response: downsizing	University-level Management Response: opposition to reopening onsite lectures	Health & Security Response: campus health checking & monitoring	Health & Security Response: mental checking & counseling	Health & Security Response: providing basic necessities	Health & Security Response: providing quarantine facilities and services	Health & Security Response: residential support	none	Total: US	Total: Korea
Financial & Economic Benefit	economic benefits of int. student inflow				9.76%								0.81%						0.81%				**11.4% (14)**	**0.0% (0)**
Political Partnerships & Soft Power	difference in degree qualifications												0.81%										
	US-China conflict				0.81%					0.81%												0.81%	**6.5% (8)**	**0.0% (0)**
	disagreeing to political action by government				3.25%																		
Institutional Management & Operations	new forms of teaching methodology required					1.28%	2.56%																
	enrollment rate fall		0.81%		3.25%	0.81%		5.69%	1.63%			0.81% 1.28%	0.81%						0.81%			2.44%	**29.3% (36)**	**5.1% (4)**
	loss of tuition income			0.81%	4.88%			1.63%					0.81%	0.81%					0.81%			2.44%		
Cosmopolitan Learning & Camp. Diversity	lack of campus diversity and engagement				1.63%	1.28%																	**1.6% (2)**	**1.3% (1)**
Humanitarianism & Human Rights	low student morale						17.95%											1.28%						
	need for humanitarian measures		0.81%											0.81%				1.63%			4.88%	0.81%	**19.5% (24)**	**19.2% (15)**
	infringement of equal learning rights		0.81%		7.32%										0.81%				1.63%					
Student Health & Security	stress from adapting to new environment	1.28%					1.28%			2.56%														
	spread of COVID-19 in local citizens					0.81% 2.56%		1.28%	3.25% 1.26%	2.56%	8.97%						3.85%			0.81% 12.83%				
	immigration and entry issues				4.65%	1.63% 2.56%							2.44%								0.81%	0.81%		
	high risk of infection and danger				3.25%	0.81%	1.28%						3.25%		3.25%		0.81%		0.81% 11.54%	0.81%	3.25%	0.81%	**31.7% (39)**	**74.4% (58)**
	job search challenges						2.56%																	
	mental health and pandemic fatigue																	1.28%						
	financial difficulties																		6.41%	1.28%				
Total	**US**	**3.3% (4)**			**38.2% (47)**	**4.1% (5)**		**28.5% (35)**									**17.9% (22)**					**8.1% (10)**	**100.0% (123)**	
	Korea	**1.3% (1)**			**0.0% (0)**	**33.3% (26)**		**26.9% (21)**									**38.5% (30)**					**0.0% (0)**		**100.0% (78)**

Note. The numbers displayed in each cell represent the percentage frequency of Themes and Subthemes. The values reflect the results obtained from the case of the United States (shown in the upper-left side of cell) and Korea (shown in the lower-right side of cell). The numbers in parentheses indicate the corresponding number of codes for ISCM rationales and strategies. Cells with a frequency of 0.00% have been omitted for clarity. See the figure online via this link.

Third, the research showed that universities were not eager to provide direct financial support to international students during the crisis. This was not just due to the rising financial burdens but because of the message such actions would represent: alleviating the crisis by taking financial responsibility (Fuchs-Burnett, 2002). Most universities chose to instead portray themselves as victims of the pandemic, rather than face the threat of losing international students by taking on greater responsibility in addressing the crisis. It also provided legitimacy for their ISCM response strategies and allowed them to get their desired message across to the general public via the media.

These findings and implications extend beyond the specific context of the pandemic and call into question the prevailing assumptions related to international student management. The results emphasize the diverse rationales and strategies employed in international student management, illustrating the need for careful consideration and analysis of the underlying motives and approaches in this domain. Moreover, it can be suggested that multiple stakeholders (universities,

public community, government) can play significant roles in framing the value of international students in society. It is also important to ensure that this be mutually beneficial for all involved parties in order to bring collaborative efforts amongst these stakeholders. Thus, researchers and practitioners should take use of these ideas by cooperating and establishing a shared understanding in order to provide an atmosphere that realizes the potential of international students.

Despite the value of implications, certain constraints must be considered when interpreting the results. The early pandemic reports on international students that were examined in this study came from online news sources. Results from the data thus far may illustrate how the media portrays international students' support mechanisms and attitudes during times of international crises, and how the general public perceives them. Yet, in terms of communication during crisis management, the media may not simply have been used to deliver information or convince the public to support international students in spite of challenges, but also to highlight the efforts done by specific universities. This can be foreseen by looking at press releases that were published by multiple publishers with the same content on the same date (e.g., news articles on particular programs that a university held for international students). Unfortunately, this causes different interpretations of each stakeholders' perceptions, depending on whose opinion the media is focusing on. This phenomenon was particularly prevalent in articles discussing Korea's educational and pedagogical responses. Therefore, the frequency of each rationale and strategy as represented numerically may not adequately reflect the level of significance that the general public senses. Consequently, additional research that examines the differences among various stakeholders, including university leaders, domestic students, and the general public, is required in order to gain a more thorough understanding of public consensus on the recruitment and support of international students during crises.

Also, the search was conducted using general keywords related to international student crisis management and COVID-19, without focusing on any particular country. While this approach was taken to avoid potential biases, some relevant articles focusing on specific countries may have been missed. It is possible that the research may have underestimated the number of findings related to the Health & Security rationale of ISCM, as the search result may have left out articles focusing on specific countries or regions while only searching for international students in general (e.g., 'Korean' or 'Chinese' students vs. 'International Students'). A recommendation to future studies could consider using more targeted search criteria and examining media outlets in multiple languages to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ISCM in different national contexts.

In conclusion, this research makes a valuable contribution to the current scholarly conversation around the management of international students. It supports the notion that an effective approach should encompass both empathy and strategic considerations. The implications presented in this analysis should serve as an impetus for additional study and an additional dedication to developing an ISCM system that is not only adaptable but also considers the diverse range of stakeholders, particularly the international students who contribute to the enhancement of our educational institutions and localities.

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