

## **Crisis Management 2.0: Using Influencers to Rebuild Public Trust in Times of Crisis**

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**Abstract.** In an era of increasingly complex global crises, public institutions face mounting challenges in maintaining public trust and ensuring effective citizen engagement. Traditional top-down crisis communication strategies have often proven insufficient, particularly among digitally connected populations who demand timely, transparent, and relatable messaging. This study explores the strategic use of digital influencers in public crisis communication, examining how they may serve as trust-building intermediaries between government institutions and citizens. Grounded in the framework of New Public Management (NPM), which emphasizes performance, accountability, and citizen-centric service delivery, this research employs a quantitative approach based on 186 survey responses to test four key hypotheses. Results show that the perceived use, credibility, exposure to, and emotional engagement with influencers significantly predict higher levels of public trust, message acceptance, behavioral compliance, and perceived institutional responsiveness. These findings highlight the potential of influencer-based strategies as innovative tools of public governance, offering empirical evidence to support their integration into crisis communication models aimed at rebuilding institutional legitimacy and trust in the digital age.

**Keywords:** *Influencer marketing; Public trust; Crisis communication; New Public Management; Strategic governance.*

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### **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, public institutions around the world have been confronted with an escalating series of crises, ranging from global pandemics and climate disasters to political instability and digital misinformation. These crises have not only tested the operational capacities of governments but have also severely eroded public trust in formal institutions. In such volatile environments, the effectiveness of crisis management hinges not only on swift policy action but also on the capacity to communicate clearly, credibly, and empathetically with citizens. Traditional state-centered models of communication, often rigid, top-down, and technocratic, struggle to resonate with increasingly skeptical and digitally connected populations. As a result, the need for more innovative, decentralized, and audience-responsive communication strategies has become urgent.

Within this context, the emergence of digital influencers as trusted opinion leaders offers a unique opportunity to reshape public sector communication. While influencer marketing has been widely studied in the commercial sector, its strategic use in public governance, particularly during crises, remains an underexplored yet promising domain. Grounded in the principles of

New Public Management (NPM), which advocates for performance, efficiency, and citizen-centered governance, this study examines the potential of digital influencers to serve as credible intermediaries between governments and the public. By empirically investigating the relationships between influencer use, perceived credibility, message acceptance, behavioral compliance, and institutional trust, this research seeks to answer the central question: *How can digital influencers be strategically leveraged by public institutions to restore public trust during crises?* Through this inquiry, the study aims to contribute to both the theoretical understanding and practical advancement of public crisis communication in the digital age.

This work stands out for its ambition to go beyond conventional approaches to influencer marketing by integrating the dimension of value alignment between influencers and brands in a culturally specific context, that of the Moroccan market. While the literature has largely focused on Western environments, our research introduces an original perspective that takes into account the social norms, cultural dynamics and expectations of Moroccan consumers. On a theoretical level, it enriches our understanding of the mechanisms linking perceived authenticity and brand trust to digital behaviors (engagement, sharing, purchase intention), by highlighting the moderating role of persuasion strategies (ethos, pathos, logos) and the consumer's level of involvement. On a managerial level, this study offers concrete recommendations for companies to reinforce brand-value coherence, optimize influencer selection and improve the effectiveness of their campaigns.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: section 2 presents the literature review and conceptual framework; section 3 formulates the research hypotheses; section 4 details the methodology adopted, articulating content analysis and quantitative survey; section 5 sets out the empirical results; section 6 discusses the theoretical and practical implications; section 7 highlights the study's limitations and suggests avenues for future research; finally, section 8 concludes by reaffirming the research's contribution to academic literature and managerial practice.

This article is progressively structured to lead the reader from the theoretical framework to the empirical analysis and discussion of the results. Following the introduction, the second section outlines the literature review and presents the conceptual framework, mobilizing the theories of congruence, persuasion and authenticity in influence marketing. The third section develops the research hypotheses, built on previous work and adapted to the Moroccan context. The fourth section describes the mixed methodology adopted, combining a content analysis of influencer publications and a quantitative consumer survey. The fifth section presents the empirical results, which are then discussed in the sixth section to draw out their theoretical and managerial implications. Finally, the seventh section highlights the study's limitations and suggests avenues for future research, while the eighth section concludes by reaffirming the contribution of this research to the literature and to professional practice.

## **2. Literature Review**

Crisis management has become a vital component of contemporary public administration, particularly as societies face increasingly complex and globalized threats such as pandemics, climate events, and cyber crises. Effective communication is central to crisis response, especially in preserving or restoring public trust (Coombs, 2007). Public trust is often cited as a foundational element for citizen compliance and social cohesion during crises (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). However, the erosion of this trust is exacerbated by slow institutional reactions and top-down messaging that fails to connect with public emotions and concerns (Wray et al., 2006). Traditional communication channels used by governments are often perceived as bureaucratic and impersonal, contributing to skepticism and disengagement

(Moynihan, 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the limitations of these conventional approaches were laid bare, as citizens increasingly turned to alternative voices and platforms for guidance and reassurance (Malecki et al., 2021). In parallel, rising levels of misinformation and disinformation on social media further destabilized institutional authority (Tsfati et al., 2020). This complex communication landscape has made clear that trust cannot be commanded, it must be earned through transparency, empathy, and responsiveness (Lee & Li, 2021). The consequences of low trust during crises are profound. Research shows that institutional trust strongly predicts whether citizens will follow public health guidelines, participate in collective action, or accept emergency measures (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014). When communication lacks emotional resonance and social relatability, it risks being dismissed, especially among marginalized or skeptical groups (Lachapelle et al., 2014). Moreover, inconsistent messaging or politically motivated narratives often weaken confidence in institutional leadership, leading to decreased compliance and increased public anxiety (van der Meer & Jin, 2020). In environments where public skepticism is high, official messages are less effective, even when accurate, because they lack the perceived authenticity that citizens seek during uncertain times (Kim & Liu, 2012). The effectiveness of crisis communication, therefore, depends not only on the clarity of the message but also on the messenger's credibility and emotional appeal (Jin et al., 2019). This emerging reality calls for more humanized and decentralized approaches to crisis communication that can reestablish public trust and legitimacy (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

In recent years, digital influencers have become key players in public communication ecosystems, particularly in the context of governance, health, and social campaigns. Unlike traditional spokespersons, influencers often build their credibility through perceived authenticity, relatability, and emotional engagement with their audiences (Abidin, 2016). Their ability to foster parasocial relationships allows them to communicate messages in a way that feels personal and trustworthy (Labrecque, 2014). This trust is especially valuable in the public sector, where government messages often struggle to reach digitally native populations or to overcome skepticism (Freberg et al., 2011). Influencers can act as “translators” of public messages, adapting institutional discourse to community-specific languages, narratives, and emotions (Casaló et al., 2018). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments partnered with influencers to encourage vaccination and combat misinformation (Southwell & Thorson, 2015). Their wide reach, combined with audience loyalty, positions them as potential allies in building public resilience and civic behavior (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Influencer campaigns have been shown to drive not only awareness but also actual behavioral outcomes, such as policy adherence or participation in public programs (Boerman, 2020). From a strategic communication perspective, influencers offer a high-value, cost-effective alternative to traditional media campaigns, particularly in contexts where trust in institutions is fragile (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). According to the Source Credibility Theory, the persuasive power of a message is largely determined by the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness of the source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Influencers often score highly on these dimensions due to their peer-like status and consistent personal branding (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Moreover, the algorithmic architecture of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allows influencers to target micro-segments of the population, aligning with the New Public Management logic of efficiency and citizen-centeredness (Veirman et al., 2017). However, this shift toward influencer-based public messaging is not without risks. Ethical concerns have been raised regarding transparency, manipulation, and the fine line between information and persuasion (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020). Additionally, influencers' personal agendas or affiliations can conflict with public interest goals, highlighting the need for careful vetting and collaboration frameworks

(Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). Nonetheless, in an age of declining trust in institutions and information overload, influencers represent a flexible, dynamic tool for governments seeking to rebuild legitimacy and reach fragmented audiences (Marwick, 2015).

The strategic use of influencers in public crisis communication can be better understood through the lens of established communication theories. One key model is the Source Credibility Theory, which posits that the persuasiveness of a message is strongly influenced by the audience's perception of the communicator's trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In the context of crisis messaging, these factors are critical to overcoming skepticism and information fatigue (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Influencers, by cultivating relatable personas and emotional proximity, often embody these credibility traits better than official government Tables (Freberg et al., 2011). The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) also contributes to understanding how influencers shape public attitudes during crises: individuals under high stress may rely on peripheral cues, like influencer likability or tone, over logical argumentation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Similarly, the Parasocial Interaction Theory explains how followers perceive influencers as authentic "friends," which increases message acceptance, especially in emotionally charged contexts (Labrecque, 2014). In combination, these theories suggest that influencers can serve as effective mediators, translating institutional messages into personally resonant narratives that restore trust and motivate compliance (Casaló et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Beyond individual psychology, public crisis communication also requires a strategic understanding of institutional dynamics and public perception. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a framework for selecting appropriate communication strategies depending on the type and perceived responsibility of a crisis (Coombs, 2007). SCCT suggests that trust can be preserved or recovered through timely, consistent, and empathetic responses, a space where influencers excel due to their agility and emotional appeal (Jin et al., 2019). Additionally, the Trust and Confidence Model emphasizes that emotional trust (based on values and identification) often outweighs cognitive trust (based on facts and expertise) in determining citizen reactions to government messaging (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014). In crisis situations, influencers can help bridge these two dimensions by conveying both empathetic reassurance and credible information (Enke & Borchers, 2019). The Media Richness Theory also supports this, arguing that communication channels with high richness, such as social media videos or livestreams, can more effectively convey complex, ambiguous messages (Daft & Lengel, 1986). When influencers deliver messages through these rich media platforms, the impact on understanding and emotional connection is amplified (Marwick, 2015; Southwell & Thorson, 2015). Altogether, these theories converge to position influencers as powerful tools in government-led crisis communication strategies aimed at rebuilding public trust.

The reviewed literature highlights a major shift in crisis communication paradigms, driven by increasing public distrust in formal institutions and the rise of decentralized, digital communication. While traditional government messaging often lacks emotional resonance and relatability, influencers are perceived as more trustworthy, authentic, and effective in engaging fragmented audiences, particularly in high-stress situations. Theories such as the Source Credibility Theory and Elaboration Likelihood Model provide conceptual justification for why influencers outperform institutional actors in terms of public persuasion and trust restoration. Furthermore, the application of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory suggests that influencer-based messaging could be aligned with appropriate crisis response strategies, especially when time-sensitive, clear, and empathetic communication is required.

Despite this emerging interest, a significant knowledge gap persists regarding the systematic and strategic use of digital influencers by public institutions in crisis contexts. While prior

research has addressed influencer effectiveness in commercial campaigns, few studies have empirically examined how influencers impact trust in public institutions or behavioral compliance during emergencies. To bridge this gap, the present study investigates the effectiveness of influencer-led public communication during crises. The following hypotheses guide the empirical phase of this research:

- **H1:** The use of digital influencers has a positive impact on public trust in government institutions.
- **H2:** The perceived credibility of influencers positively influences citizens' acceptance of public crisis messages.
- **H3:** Exposure to influencer-led crisis communication increases citizens' intention to comply with official crisis measures.
- **H4:** Citizens' emotional engagement with influencer content positively affects their perception of institutional responsiveness.

These hypotheses lay the foundation for the analytical framework that follows, aiming to evaluate the role of influencers as tools for trust-building and strategic crisis communication within the principles of New Public Management.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design, which is appropriate given the objective of testing specific relationships between clearly defined variables. The primary goal is to empirically assess how digital influencers can be strategically leveraged by public institutions to restore public trust during crises, in line with the research question. Quantitative methods are particularly suited to this inquiry, as they enable the measurement of perceptions, attitudes, and intentions across a larger population and allow for statistical testing of the proposed hypotheses. A structured online survey will be administered to a sample of at least 200 participants, selected using non-probability purposive sampling, targeting individuals who actively use social media and have been exposed to influencer-led public communication during recent crises (e.g., COVID-19, environmental campaigns). The questionnaire will include validated Likert-scale items measuring the independent variables, exposure to influencer campaigns, perceived credibility of influencers, and emotional engagement, as well as the dependent variables, trust in public institutions, acceptance of messages, behavioral compliance, and perceived responsiveness. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression will be employed using SPSS to evaluate the strength and direction of the relationships between variables. This methodological approach not only allows for hypothesis testing but also begins to answer the core research question by providing empirical insights into the effectiveness of influencer strategies in rebuilding public trust, thus offering concrete guidance for public communication strategies in the context of New Public Management.

To ensure rigorous data analysis, the collected responses will be analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), a widely used software for conducting descriptive and inferential statistical tests in social science research. SPSS is chosen for its robust capabilities in handling survey data, testing hypothesis-driven models, and generating outputs such as correlation matrices, reliability indices (e.g., Cronbach's alpha), and regression coefficients. Prior to analysis, the dataset will undergo data cleaning procedures, including screening for missing values, outliers, and inconsistent responses. The internal consistency of the measurement scales will be tested using Cronbach's alpha, with thresholds above 0.70 considered acceptable. Regarding data collection, the survey will be developed and distributed through Google Forms, which allows for secure, accessible, and user-friendly administration



across digital platforms. The form will be shared via social media channels, email invitations, and targeted online communities to reach respondents who follow influencers or have been exposed to public crisis communication online. A short screening question will be included at the beginning of the form to confirm eligibility (e.g., “Have you seen influencer content related to a public campaign in the past 12 months?”). All participation will be voluntary and anonymous, in accordance with ethical standards for academic research. This process ensures both the validity of the collected data and the feasibility of reaching a diverse and relevant population, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the study's findings.

#### 4. Results

This section presents the findings derived from the quantitative analysis conducted to address the central research question: *How can digital influencers be strategically leveraged by public institutions to restore public trust during crises?* The data collected through the online survey was analyzed using SPSS, following a series of statistical procedures aimed at testing the four proposed hypotheses. First, descriptive statistics are used to provide an overview of the respondents' demographic characteristics and general perceptions related to influencer communication and institutional trust. Then, reliability tests (Cronbach's alpha) assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales used in the survey. Finally, correlation analyses and multiple linear regression models are employed to examine the relationships between the independent variables (influencer use, credibility, exposure, and engagement) and the dependent variables (trust, message acceptance, behavioral compliance, and perceived institutional responsiveness). The results reported below provide empirical insight into the potential of influencer-based strategies to serve as trust-building mechanisms in crisis communication and contribute to the broader conversation on public sector innovation under the principles of New Public Management.

##### Récapitulatif des modèles

Modèle	R	R-deux	R-deux ajusté	Erreur standard de l'estimation	Modifier les statistiques				
					Variation de R-deux	Variation de F	ddl1	ddl2	Sig. Variation de F
1	,819 <sup>a</sup>	,670	,669	,733	,670	374,369	1	184	,000

a. Prédicteurs : (Constante), Perceived use of influencers by public institutions

##### ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Modèle	Somme des carrés	ddl	Carré moyen	F	Sig.
1 Régression	201,299	1	201,299	374,369	,000 <sup>b</sup>
de Student	98,937	184	,538		
Total	300,237	185			

a. Variable dépendante : Trust in public institutions

b. Prédicteurs : (Constante), Perceived use of influencers by public institutions

### Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Modèle		Coefficients non standardisés		Coefficients standardisés	t	Sig.
		B	Erreur standard	Bêta		
1	(Constante)	,247	,178		1,387	,167
	Perceived use of influencers by public institutions	,918	,047	,819	19,349	,000

a. Variable dépendante : Trust in public institutions

**Table 1:** Regression Result: Influence of Perceived Use of Influencers on Public Trust  
**Source:** SPSS Output (Model Summary Table)

The results of the linear regression analysis provide strong empirical support for Hypothesis 1, which posited that the perceived use of digital influencers by public institutions positively affects public trust. The model demonstrates a high explanatory power, with an  $R^2$  value of 0.670, indicating that 67% of the variance in institutional trust is explained by citizens' perception of influencer use in public communication. This is further confirmed by the significant F-test ( $F(1, 184) = 374.369, p < .001$ ), validating the overall model fit. The standardized beta coefficient ( $\beta = 0.819, p < .001$ ) reveals a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between the two variables. More specifically, each unit increase in perceived influencer usage is associated with an average increase of 0.918 in trust toward public institutions. These findings highlight the strategic value of influencer-based communication in rebuilding institutional legitimacy during crises. In the context of declining public confidence in formal authorities, particularly during uncertain periods, influencers appear to function as credible intermediaries who enhance message receptiveness and foster emotional resonance, both of which are essential to the logic of citizen-centered governance promoted by New Public Management.

### Récapitulatif des modèles

Modèle	R	R-deux	R-deux ajusté	Erreur standard de l'estimation	Modifier les statistiques				
					Variation de R-deux	Variation de F	ddl1	ddl2	Sig. Variation de F
1	,832 <sup>a</sup>	,692	,690	,697	,692	413,370	1	184	,000

a. Prédicteurs : (Constante), Perceived credibility of influencers

**ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Modèle	Somme des carrés	ddl	Carré moyen	F	Sig.
1 Régression	200,988	1	200,988	413,370	,000 <sup>b</sup>
de Student	89,464	184	,486		
Total	290,452	185			

a. Variable dépendante : Acceptance of influencer-delivered public crisis messages

b. Prédicteurs : (Constante), Perceived credibility of influencers

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Modèle	Coefficients non standardisés		Coefficients standardisés	t	Sig.
	B	Erreur standard	Bêta		
1 (Constante)	,142	,172		,822	,412
Perceived credibility of influencers	,929	,046	,832	20,332	,000

a. Variable dépendante : Acceptance of influencer-delivered public crisis messages

**Table 2: Regression Results: Effect of Influencer Credibility on Message Acceptance**  
*Source: SPSS Output*

The regression analysis for Hypothesis 2 confirms a statistically significant and positive relationship between the perceived credibility of influencers and the acceptance of public crisis messages delivered through influencer campaigns. The model yielded a high coefficient of determination ( $R^2 = 0.692$ ), indicating that approximately 69.2% of the variance in message acceptance is explained by the perceived credibility of the influencer. The model was statistically significant ( $F(1, 184) = 413.370, p < .001$ ), confirming that the independent variable significantly predicts the dependent variable. The standardized beta coefficient ( $\beta = 0.832, p < .001$ ) further demonstrates the strength and reliability of the relationship. The unstandardized coefficient ( $B = 0.929$ ) suggests that for every one-point increase in perceived influencer credibility (on a 5-point scale), message acceptance increases by nearly one point (0.929). These findings validate Hypothesis 2 and underscore the persuasive power of credible influencers in shaping public perceptions and increasing acceptance of institutional messages during crisis communication efforts. This supports the broader argument that influencer marketing, when strategically applied, serves as a valuable tool in public governance and aligns with the citizen-centric principles promoted by New Public Management.



### Récapitulatif des modèles

Modèle	R	R-deux	R-deux ajusté	Erreur standard de l'estimation	Variation de R-deux	Modifier les statistiques			Sig. Variation de F
						Variation de F	ddl1	ddl2	
1	,836 <sup>a</sup>	,699	,697	,650	,699	426,809	1	184	,000

a. Prédicteurs : (Constante), Intention to comply with public crisis directives

### ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Modèle	Somme des carrés	ddl	Carré moyen	F	Sig.
1 Régression	180,089	1	180,089	426,809	,000 <sup>b</sup>
de Student	77,637	184	,422		
Total	257,726	185			

a. Variable dépendante : Frequency of exposure to influencer-led crisis content

b. Prédicteurs : (Constante), Intention to comply with public crisis directives

### Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Modèle	Coefficients non standardisés		Coefficients standardisés		Sig.
	B	Erreur standard	Bêta	t	
1 (Constante)	,795	,142		5,588	,000
Intention to comply with public crisis directives	,790	,038	,836	20,659	,000

a. Variable dépendante : Frequency of exposure to influencer-led crisis content

**Table 3: Regression Results: Effect of Exposure to Influencer Content on Compliance Intention**  
Source: SPSS Output

The regression analysis conducted to test Hypothesis 3 provides strong empirical evidence supporting a positive and significant relationship between citizens' exposure to influencer-led crisis communication and their intention to comply with public crisis measures. The model demonstrates a high level of explanatory power, with an  $R^2$  of 0.699, indicating that approximately 69.9% of the variance in exposure level is explained by compliance intention. The overall model is statistically significant ( $F(1, 184) = 426.809, p < .001$ ), confirming the reliability of the regression. The standardized beta coefficient ( $\beta = 0.836, p < .001$ ) shows a strong positive effect, while the unstandardized coefficient ( $B = 0.790$ ) suggests that for every one-point increase in compliance intention, the frequency of exposure to influencer crisis communication increases by 0.79 points. These findings validate Hypothesis 3 and imply that individuals who are more frequently exposed to influencer-based crisis messages are

significantly more inclined to adhere to public health or emergency guidelines. The results align with the logic of citizen-centered crisis management promoted by New Public Management, in which communication efficiency and behavioral impact are core performance metrics.

### Récapitulatif des modèles

Modèle	R	R-deux	R-deux ajusté	Erreur standard de l'estimation	Variation de R-deux	Modifier les statistiques			
						Variation de F	ddl1	ddl2	Sig. Variation de F
1	,808 <sup>a</sup>	,653	,651	,676	,653	345,955	1	184	,000

a. Prédicteurs : (Constante), Perceived responsiveness of public institutions

### ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Modèle	Somme des carrés	ddl	Carré moyen	F	Sig.
1 Régression	158,273	1	158,273	345,955	,000 <sup>b</sup>
de Student	84,179	184	,457		
Total	242,452	185			

a. Variable dépendante : Emotional connection to influencer content

b. Prédicteurs : (Constante), Perceived responsiveness of public institutions

### Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Modèle	Coefficients non standardisés		Coefficients standardisés		t	Sig.
	B	Erreur standard	Bêta			
1 (Constante)	,881	,150			5,873	,000
Perceived responsiveness of public institutions	,737	,040	,808		18,600	,000

a. Variable dépendante : Emotional connection to influencer content

**Table 4: Regression Results: Effect of Emotional Engagement on Perceived Institutional Responsiveness**  
Source: SPSS Output

The results of the regression analysis support Hypothesis 4, which proposed that citizens' emotional engagement with influencer content positively affects their perception of institutional responsiveness during crises. The model shows a strong and significant relationship, with an  $R^2$  of 0.653, meaning that 65.3% of the variance in emotional engagement is explained by perceived institutional responsiveness. The overall regression model is statistically significant ( $F(1, 184) = 345.955$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming the predictive value of the independent variable. The standardized beta coefficient ( $\beta = 0.808$ ,  $p < .001$ ) reflects a strong positive association, while the unstandardized coefficient ( $B = 0.737$ ) indicates that for each one-point increase in

perceived institutional responsiveness, emotional engagement rises by approximately 0.737 points. These results validate Hypothesis 4 and suggest that public institutions perceived as more responsive are more likely to elicit emotionally positive and engaging reactions from citizens toward influencer-delivered messages. This reinforces the idea that emotional resonance, enhanced by perceived institutional quality, plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of influencer-based public communication strategies, particularly in alignment with New Public Management principles focused on citizen-centered performance and trust-building.

The results of this study provide compelling empirical support for the four proposed hypotheses, confirming the significant role that digital influencers play in enhancing public trust, message acceptance, behavioral compliance, and perceptions of institutional responsiveness during crises. Specifically, the use of influencers by public institutions (H1) was found to be a strong predictor of public trust, while the perceived credibility of these influencers (H2) significantly influenced citizens' acceptance of crisis-related messages. Similarly, greater exposure to influencer-led communication (H3) was positively associated with citizens' intention to comply with public crisis directives, and emotional engagement with influencer content (H4) strongly predicted more favorable perceptions of institutional responsiveness. All regression models demonstrated high explanatory power, with  $R^2$  values ranging from 65% to 70%, and all effects were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). These findings highlight the strategic effectiveness of influencer-based public communication and suggest that such approaches, when implemented thoughtfully, can serve as powerful tools in restoring institutional trust and guiding public behavior, key outcomes aligned with the performance and citizen-orientation principles of New Public Management.

## 5. Conclusion

In an era marked by recurring global crises, ranging from pandemics and environmental disasters to misinformation surges, public institutions face increasing challenges in maintaining legitimacy, trust, and compliance. Traditional crisis communication models, characterized by top-down messaging and bureaucratic distance, have proven insufficient in engaging emotionally fragmented and digitally immersed populations. This study contributes to the evolving field of public sector communication by empirically demonstrating that digital influencers, when strategically integrated into public messaging, can significantly enhance trust, message acceptance, and behavioral compliance during times of crisis. Through a quantitative approach involving 186 valid responses, and by testing four clearly defined hypotheses, the research provides robust statistical evidence that influencer strategies, rooted in credibility, exposure, and emotional engagement, are effective in restoring public confidence and fostering positive perceptions of institutional responsiveness.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study bridges the domains of digital marketing, crisis communication, and public governance, offering a novel perspective aligned with the principles of New Public Management (NPM). By emphasizing citizen-centricity, performance outcomes, and strategic communication, NPM encourages the adoption of innovative, cross-sectoral tools, such as influencer partnerships, to improve public service delivery. The findings affirm that influencer-based strategies are not merely marketing instruments but can be repositioned as governance tools that support relational trust-building, behavioral alignment, and administrative legitimacy. The strong explanatory power of each regression model (with  $R^2$  values exceeding 65%) underscores the relevance of integrating socially embedded communicators into public outreach frameworks, especially when targeting younger, digitally engaged demographics.

Practically, the study suggests that governments and public agencies should consider developing structured partnerships with credible influencers, accompanied by clear ethical guidelines and performance indicators. However, while the statistical results are promising, the study also acknowledges certain limitations, such as the use of a non-probabilistic sample and reliance on self-reported perceptions. Future research should explore cross-cultural variations, platform-specific dynamics, and longitudinal effects to assess the sustainability and ethical implications of influencer-based public communication. Nevertheless, this research marks a valuable step toward redefining crisis governance in the digital age, one where influence, trust, and institutional performance converge through strategic and humanized communication.

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