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***Influencers and content creators in the evolving landscape of institutional
pandemic communication:
Insights from a qualitative study with key informants in Italy***

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In disaster contexts, effective communication is essential for coordinating response efforts, promoting protective behaviors, and maintaining public trust. Pandemic disasters present some challenges as they are characterized by prolonged scientific uncertainty, rapidly evolving evidence, and the need for sustained public adherence to preventive measures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges exposed important limitations of traditional, top-down institutional communication, particularly in reaching diverse audiences, sustaining engagement over time, and competing with the vast volume of information circulating across digital platforms. These limitations have prompted increasing interest in identifying complementary communication strategies capable of expanding the reach and effectiveness of public health messages in future pandemic emergencies.

In this context, the digital landscape created new opportunities for pandemic communication, highlighting the potential role of digital actors such as social media influencers and content creators as complementary partners in disseminating health information. International experiences have emerged as valuable references, with countries such as Finland, the United States, and the Netherlands implementing collaborations between institutions and influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit with significantly different approaches and degrees of formalization. Despite these diverse implementation strategies, scientific evidence on the effectiveness of such collaborations remains limited, and the Italian context presents a particularly notable gap: while some spontaneous and uncoordinated initiatives did emerge during the pandemic, these experiences were not systematically structured, evaluated, or documented in the academic literature.

Building on this premise, the present thesis, which is part of a larger research project, investigates the potential integration of influencers and content creators into institutional pandemic communication strategies in Italy. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants, including policymakers from different levels of Italian public institutions and communication professionals, the qualitative study explores perceptions, opportunities, and challenges surrounding this potential collaboration, as well as the strategic elements required for its structural implementation.

The thematic analysis of the interviews reveals a multifaceted picture. The majority of participants recognize the potential value of influencers and content creators in reaching segments of the population that would otherwise be difficult to engage, including younger audiences and individuals who may be less responsive to traditional institutional communication channels, although this theoretical openness coexists with widespread uncertainty linked to limited familiarity with the influencer ecosystem and the absence of concrete precedents in Italy. On the operational level, participants converge in considering video as the most effective format and in entrusting creators with communicating practical behaviors rather than complex epidemiological data, while they remain divided on the phase

of the crisis in which to activate the collaboration and on the institutional level, national or local, best suited to coordinate it.

When it comes to the profile of influencers or creators to be involved, local administrators tend to consider a healthcare background unnecessary, prioritizing the ability to communicate complex information in a simple and accessible way, while other participants would prefer social media professionals with a medical background and specific expertise in health communication.

The analysis also reveals three distinct operational models for structuring the collaboration, each reflecting a different balance between creative freedom and institutional control: *creative delegation*, in which the institution provides a brief leaving the creator autonomy over format and tone; the *hybrid model*, based on co-presence between creator and institutional representative; and *institutional amplification*, in which the creator merely reposts and amplifies already pre-prepared content. Preferences for these models tend to reflect participant's broader attitude toward the collaboration itself.

The study also revealed institutional unpreparedness across Italian public administrations, characterized by procedural incompatibility with emergency time requirements, staffing shortages, limited digital skills, cultural resistance, and reputational risks. To address these gaps, participants supported several preparedness measures, including structured scientific training for content creators delivered by healthcare professionals, and a regularly updated register of influencers and content creators willing to collaborate with public institutions. Participants also advocated for pre-established regional or national guidelines, the inclusion of a dedicated communication chapter into pandemic plans, and the establishment of permanent cross-functional offices within local authorities. Strong agreement was shown about the need to structure the engagement of creators in ordinary, non-emergency communication.

This thesis ultimately recommends establishing multidisciplinary forums, developing emergency communication guidelines, strengthening digital capacity within public administrations and implementing simplified emergency selection procedures. In doing so, it contributes to understanding the evolving landscape of institutional crisis communication, while highlighting the critical gap between recognizing content creators and influencers' potential and the administrative, cultural, and procedural capacity to engage them effectively, underscoring the need for proactive, structured frameworks that systematically integrate new digital intermediaries into emergency communication.

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1.INTRODUCTION

1.1 - Crisis communication in disaster and emergency contexts: theoretical foundations, models and definitions

Disasters, conceptualized as events causing severe disruption of a society or community's functioning due to hazardous events interacting with exposure¹, vulnerability² and capacity³ (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), 2017) generate a unique set of conditions. These include high levels of uncertainty, critical time constraints for response, a multitude of interacting actors, and the profound change of both physical and social systems (Boin and T' Hart, 2010). It is within these circumstances that *crisis communication*⁴ assumes a critical role, serving as a key feature in addressing chaos, coordinating action, and guiding protective behaviors to safeguard affected populations. Although this term lacks a universally accepted definition, its core function can be described as the timely dissemination of accurate information, proactive engagement with stakeholders, and decision-making to address the crisis effectively (Coombs, 2011). *Institutional communication*⁵ also demands particular attention in disaster settings: it designates the communicational activities performed by public entities (*public administrations*⁶, or

¹ According to UNDRR, *exposure* refers to the situation of people, infrastructure, housing, production capacities, and other tangible assets located in hazard-prone areas.

² According to UNDRR, *vulnerability* refers to the conditions determined by physical, social, economic, and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards.

³ According to UNDRR, *capacity* refers to the combination of all the strengths, attributes and resources available within an organization, community or society to manage and reduce disaster risks and strengthen resilience.

⁴ For the purposes of this study, crisis and emergency communication refers to the management of the acute phase, as distinct from "disaster risk communication," which spans the entire disaster risk cycle.

⁵ For a better understanding of the specific nature of institutional communication in crisis contexts, it is useful to situate institutional communication within the broader paradigm of public communication (Mele et al., n.d.), which can be defined as the set of processes through which actors in the public sphere interact, exchange perspectives, and negotiate values in pursuit of general interest (Franca Faccioli, 2002)

⁶ Defined by Italian law, according to Legislative Decree No. 165 of March 30, 2001, Article 1, paragraph 2, as "all state administrations, including institutes and schools of all levels and educational institutions, autonomous state companies and administrations, regions, provinces, municipalities, mountain communities, and their consortia and associations, universities, independent public housing institutions, chambers of commerce, industry, crafts and agriculture and their associations, all national, regional, and local non-economic public bodies, administrations, companies and entities of the National Health Service."

interchangeably for the purpose of this work, as *public institutions*⁷) to provide authoritative guidance to the population, ensure a coherent message across actors, and preserve public trust. More broadly, institutional communication also refers to the strategic activities through which public institutions inform citizens about their actions, justify decisions, build legitimacy, and manage their relationship with the public.

Both dimensions acquire a heightened significance when the ordinary functioning of society is disrupted by extreme events such as disasters, circumstances under which the ability of institutions to communicate effectively becomes a condition with direct implications for collective safety. The COVID-19 pandemic, the most significant and recent global disaster, highlighted the fundamental role of *health communication*⁸, understood as the set of strategies and processes used to inform and engage individuals and communities on health-related issues. Its relevance is closely tied to a broader understanding of health⁹ itself, which extends beyond clinical conditions: communicating about health therefore involves enabling people to protect themselves, make informed decisions, and trust institutions in moments of uncertainty.

In the context of a pandemic, the concept of *pandemic communication*¹⁰ has gained particular prominence. This domain can be defined as the process of creating, planning, and diffusing information and communication flows dealing with a pandemic by health authorities at different levels (i.e., supranational, national, and/or regional) (Lovari, 2023). Effective communication in disaster settings can be achieved through a range of strategies based on the real-time exchange of information, advice, and opinions between experts or officials and populations facing hazards or threats to their health, survival, or social and economic wellbeing. These processes enable individuals to make informed decisions and adopt protective or preventive measures, which can be implemented both before and after a disaster (Vandrevala et al., 2024).

⁷ A public institution is a body established or recognized by law, through which the public administration carries out its administrative function for the pursuit of a public interest. These bodies operate at various levels of governance, including national authorities, regions, provinces, municipalities, and local health authorities (such as ASLs and USLs), each with specific responsibilities in public service delivery and institutional communication.

⁸ Within this field, scholars distinguish several communication-related domains, such as clinical health communication or communication for health.

⁹ According to the World Health Organization's holistic definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" (WHO, 1948)

¹⁰ For the purposes of this work, pandemic communication falls within the broader field of public health communication, which refers to the strategic communication carried out by institutions to safeguard population health during emergencies (Faccioli et al., 2020)

To understand how these strategies are structured over time, it is useful to refer to the *disaster risk management (DRM) cycle* (Figure 1). This framework conceptualizes disaster-related activities as a continuum divided into four interconnected phases: 1) mitigation, 2) preparedness, 3) response, and 4) recovery.

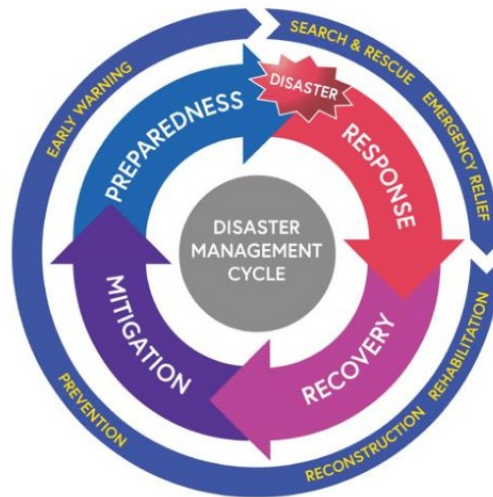


Figure 1: Disaster risk management cycle
(Source: UNDRR, 2022)

The Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) lifecycle, developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), offers a more specific framework specifically focused on communication during crisis settings. The model divides the evolution of an emergency into five interconnected phases: 1) pre-crisis, 2) initial, 3) maintenance, 4) resolution, and 5) evaluation. Each phase entails distinct objectives, messages, and communication strategies, which reflect both the evolution of the crisis and the public's expected psychological state. Since this work is specifically concerned with crisis communication, the following analysis concentrates on the shift between the first two phases of the CERC model, pre-crisis and initial, as it is precisely this transition that marks the onset of a crisis and defines its most distinctive communicative demands. This shift can be understood across three key dimensions: the underlying communication objectives, the quality and reliability of available information, and the pressing temporal constraints that shape how quickly decisions must be made and messages delivered. In particular:

I. Objective. The primary goal shifts from the pre-crisis focus on routine activities, such as informing, educating, and building long-term institutional trust to the initial phase imperative of protecting human lives. At this stage, communication aims to mitigate panic, promote individual self-efficacy, and provide timely updates to ensure public safety as the situation unfolds (CERC, 2014).

II. Information. The nature of information also changes substantially. While pre-crisis communication relies on information that is verified, stable, and relatively certain, communication during the initial phase must often be conducted in conditions of incomplete and rapidly evolving knowledge. Communications are therefore required to acknowledge and manage uncertainty while continuing to provide actionable guidance to the public (CERC, 2014).

III. Temporal constraints. Time represents another critical dimension distinguishing the pre-crisis phase from the onset of an emergency. Whereas pre-crisis communication can be planned, developed, and delivered over extended periods, crisis communication takes place under highly compressed timeframes that require rapid, precise responses. The immediate audience typically includes those directly affected by the event, such as victims, potential victims, family members, emergency personnel, first responders, and others on the front line. Providing timely information to this group can help mitigate harm and support effective action. At the same time, communication must reach a broader audience, often through the media. In this context, communication messages should reduce uncertainty and provide a clear understanding of the evolving situation and enable people to make informed decisions and respond appropriately in conditions of time pressure (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005).

Although primarily designed to guide institutional actors and emergency management authorities, it is important to notice that the CERC model describes communication dynamics that also involve other key intermediaries, such as journalists, experts, and civil society organizations, whose messages significantly shape public understanding during disasters.

1.2 - The challenge of pandemic communication: complexity, uncertainty and infodemic

As research has shown, communication requirements vary across different types of disasters depending on the nature, scale, and immediacy of the threat (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992; Reynolds and Seeger, 2005; Seeger et al., 1998; Austin and Jin, 2022). Although the DRM cycle and the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model provide an essential operational and communication framework for many emergencies, their effectiveness becomes particularly challenging in pandemic scenarios. Unlike sudden-onset disasters, pandemics evolve over long periods of time (Reynolds and Quinn Crouse, 2008) and require continuous behavioral adaptation from the public, including compliance with isolation measures, changes in social interactions, masks use, and adherence to vaccination campaigns.

Effective public health communication during pandemics must address amplified risk perception and public anxiety, as underscored by analyses of previous outbreaks such as SARS-1 (Peter M. Sandman and Jody Lanard, 2003) and COVID-19 (Abrams and Greenhawt, 2020), enhanced by the lack of familiarity with the specific biological threats (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005). Health officials therefore had to carefully balance the need to inform people adequately about potential risks without inadvertently triggering widespread panic. During a pandemic, it is necessary that ineffective communication does not lead to a sudden surge of individuals rushing to hospitals or clinics which could overwhelm the healthcare system and reduce the effectiveness of emergency response (Bauder, Giangobbe and Asgary, 2023).

One of the main difficulties in pandemic communication lies in the extreme heterogeneity of the target audiences. To address this complexity, the Social Amplification of Risk framework (Kasperson et al., 1988) provides a solid theoretical foundation, highlighting how risk signals are processed by a series of "social amplification stations" – ranging from the media to opinion leaders, personal networks, and cultural groups – which vary profoundly from one context to another and filter the information they receive. Consequently, the message must be precisely calibrated for each specific audience, considering the demographic structure and the particular sociological and cultural characteristics of the population (Trentin et al., 2025; CERC, 2014). Added to this challenge is the issue of geographical scope: while many disasters, such as earthquakes or floods, are typically

confined to delimited areas, pandemics simultaneously involve multiple communities, regions, and entire countries. As the outbreak expands, communication efforts must reach increasingly large and diverse populations, requiring pervasive coordination across different territorial and institutional levels. Thus, effective synergy between pre-existing local networks and ad hoc networks of international actors becomes essential to ensure that the message is correctly conveyed in a pandemic context (Boin and T' Hart, 2010; Hillyard Michael J., 2000).

In addition, a pandemic will generate immediate, intense, and sustained demand for information from the public, healthcare providers, policymakers, and news media (Reynolds, 2006, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2024) but this prolonged timescale introduces the challenge of maintaining public engagement over the long term far beyond the initial emergency phase. The protracted nature of communication can lead to a phenomenon known as *message fatigue*, a particular aspect of *pandemic fatigue* (WHO, 2020). This is characterized by a state of psychological exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to repetitive messages. This fatigue can manifest emotional saturation and the rejection of the message itself. In this context, the public becomes more susceptible to alternative narratives from unofficial and unverified sources, especially on social media (Jiang, 2022). This dynamic is further compounded by the phenomenon of the "infodemic" – a term originally coined during the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak (Simon and Camargo, 2023) and defined by the WHO (2020) as "an overabundance of information - some accurate and some not - that makes it difficult for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it." The intersection of pandemic fatigue and infodemic creates a pernicious feedback loop: fatigue erodes receptivity to official communications, while the infodemic overwhelms the information environment with unreliable content, collectively undermining public trust and compromising the effectiveness of health interventions (White et al., 2024; Pertwee, Simas and Larson, 2022).

Another peculiar feature of pandemic communication is the necessary linking of scientific knowledge with political decision-making. The ultimate public message is consequently a product of mediation between these two spheres, mixing the demands of scientific rigor by experts, political interest and logic (Hodges et al., 2022). This inherent tension is amplified by the contemporary media ecosystem, where the rapid circulation of information and social media dynamics often simplify the complex dialogue between experts and policymakers into

a narrative of conflict or disagreement (Cinelli et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that inconsistent or contradictory messages can undermine public trust, increase uncertainty, and facilitate the spread of misinformation and disinformation. For this reason, recent literature emphasizes that effective pandemic communication requires transparent explanation of scientific uncertainty, clear delineation of the respective roles of scientific experts and political decision-makers, and coordinated communication strategies across institutions (WHO, 2024; Malecki et al., 2021; van der Bles et al., 2020).

In summary, pandemic communication can reveal a fundamental paradox. On the one hand, it demands direct and evidence-based messages capable of promoting collective behavior. On the other hand, it collides with a reality of prolonged scientific uncertainty, an overabundance of information, and a fragmented media ecosystem. This tension exposes a critical gap: traditional communication models, based on linear and top-down dissemination through official channels and institutional gatekeepers, may be insufficient in a pandemic.

1.3 - The digital reconfiguration of the public sphere and public institutions in the hybrid media system

The transformation of communication channels is rooted in a broader transformation of the public sphere itself. The classical model, in which the communication of the political system, the everyday communication of civil society and the communication between media and the public occupied separate domains mediated primarily by traditional outlets such as press and television (Habermas, 2006; Habermas et al., 1994), has been reconfigured by the emergence of a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), in which digital platforms permeate all three domains. Consequently, the selection and amplification of messages are no longer solely determined by the institutional authority of the communicator but are increasingly dictated by a platform's logic, the message's shareability and its potential for virality. Citizens, in turn, are no longer passive recipients of authoritative information but active participants in their selection, interpretation and circulation, increasingly relying on heterogeneous and often competing sources of information (Cinelli et al., 2020).

This hybrid media environment has also modified the communicative setting of public institutions. Before the advent of social media, the communicative paradigm was predominantly top-down and unidirectional. Official communications were primarily delivered through press releases and interviews, which were then filtered and disseminated by traditional media (i.e., newspapers, television, radio). With the arrival of new social platforms, public communication became bidirectional and synchronous (Houston et al., 2015). In this new reality, institutions can no longer simply broadcast messages and expect them to be received as authoritative by the public but are instead obliged to navigate a landscape defined by fluid information flows that prioritize engagement over formality and an expectation of more public engagement.

Effective operation in the new digital environment requires public institutions to invest in internal digital capacity building (OECD, 2020). This evolution requires the formal professionalization of digital roles within public institutions such as social media managers and digital engagement officers. This trend toward institutionalization is exemplified by

recent policy developments: in Italy, for instance, a 2025 law¹¹ from the Ministry of Public Administration formally established the professional profile of social media manager, outlining specific competencies and responsibilities for the role. Consequently, this formalization of roles requires a corresponding financial commitment to fund the necessary expertise, tools, and promotional activities. In addition, the constant emergence of new platforms, each with its own distinct communication language (the text-centric nature of X (formerly Twitter), visual storytelling of Instagram and vertical video of TikTok) requires public institutions to become multimodal communicators. It is precisely within this environment that new categories of communicators have gained prominence alongside institutional actors, progressively occupying a space once held almost exclusively by traditional media. The following section focuses on two of the most significant of these new actors: influencers and content creators.

¹¹ Law 9 May 2025, n. 69 - Conversion into law, with amendments, of Decree-Law No. 25 of 14 March 2025, containing urgent provisions regarding the recruitment and functioning of public administrations.

1.4 - Influencers and content creators as new agents in the pandemic communication ecosystem

The advent of social media platforms has given rise to new categories of communication professionals who operate outside traditional media structures, building direct relationships with audiences through digital content. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated this phenomenon, propelling these figures into an increasingly dominant role within the media ecosystem. Social Media Influencers (SMIs), hereafter referred to as *Influencers*, as well as *Content Creators* (CCs), have thus become key intermediaries in the production and circulation of information.

Although the two terms are often used interchangeably and both operate through the same digital platforms, they differ in the primary purpose of their online activity and in their relationship with audiences. When it comes to the **influencers**, they are individuals who, through a substantial social media following and a recognized online presence, are able to shape the opinions, behaviors, consumption choices, or value orientations of their audience. Their content is designed both to attract attention and generate engagement, encouraging users to interact through likes, comments, shares, and other forms of participation. Because influence is closely linked to audience reach and engagement, these metrics are commonly used to assess an influencer's impact. Accordingly, influencers are often classified according to the size of their follow base (Hosie, 2019):

- Nano-influencers: influencers with a follower base ranging from 1,000 to 10,000;
- Micro-influencers: influencers with between 10,000 and 100,000 followers;
- Macro-influencers: influencers with between 100,000 and 500,000 followers;
- Mega-/Celebrity influencers: influencers with more than 500,000 followers.

On the other hand, **content creators** are individuals who indeed create and produce written, audio, or video content for social media or blogs. Their primary goal is to disseminate content on a single topic and engage audiences about a specific theme, including niche areas of interest, namely specialized or narrowly defined areas of interest that attract specific audience segments. The definition of a content creator does not necessarily imply a large

audience but rather focuses on the originality in the topics and the way they communicate them. The popularity of these figures emerges from their creative effort and originality.

In recent years, influencers and content creators have extended their reach beyond entertainment and commercial promotion, establishing themselves as relevant voices in public debates on environmental issues, international conflicts, and political affairs. In critical contexts like a pandemic, influencers and content creators may assume a crucial role as mediators between specialized knowledge and the public. Among the positive aspects, influencers and content creators can build parasocial relationships¹² with their audiences, instilling a deep sense of confidence in those who follow and recognize them as familiar faces (Cillo and Prandelli, 2022). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, literature highlighted a direct correlation between the intensity of the parasocial relation and the level of trust placed in COVID-19-related information disseminated by content creators on YouTube. Notably, one study conducted in France during the initial COVID-19 lockdown (April–May 2020) on a sample of 596 18+ social media users recruited via 119 Facebook groups, found that one's favorite YouTuber was the second most trusted source of information, ranking just behind medical and paramedical professionals (de Bérail and Bungener, 2022). This "trust capital" could be particularly valuable in a context where public institutions operate within an environment of historically low trust (Norris, 2011, OECD, 2024, Galloup, 2023). In such a scenario, influencers and content creators can act as trust surrogates: citizens who are skeptical or distrustful of official sources may nevertheless be receptive to messages delivered by a familiar figure with whom they have established a parasocial bond (de Bérail and Bungener, 2022).

Although the theoretical premises on the potentialities of this partnership, concrete institutional applications at the global level have, to date, been relatively limited and confined to specific contexts. Within this landscape, the Finnish case stands out for the structured and formal approach adopted in engaging influencer and content creators during COVID-19 pandemics. To the best of the author's knowledge, Finland was the first country to formally recognize the role of influencers as part of its crisis communications strategy, integrating them into the official channels for disseminating government messages in the

¹² Parasocial relationships are defined as asymmetrical long-term relationships between media performers and their audience (Cillo and Prandelli, 2022).

context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Finnish government classified influencers as critical actors to society during a crisis, along with doctors, bus drivers and grocery store workers (Politico, 2020). The Finnish government justified this collaborative approach by emphasizing the need to fill gaps in the dissemination of official information. In a statement, the Prime Minister's Office specified that, despite the coverage provided by traditional channels, official messages were failing to reach all segments of the population. The stated goal of cooperating with influencers was therefore to facilitate access to reliable information for groups difficult to reach through conventional media and institutional communications (Finnish Prime Minister's Office, March 22, 2020). The project involved three stakeholders: i) the Prime Minister's Office (the institutional body that initiated and coordinated the project); ii) PING Helsinki, a consultancy firm specializing in social media, and iii) Mediapool, a network of media companies and part of the Finnish National Emergency Supply Organization. In spring 2020, the first influencer campaign using the hashtag #faktaakoronasta ("corona facts") was launched: approximately 1,500 Finnish influencers, representing a wide range of thematic niches, participate on a voluntary, unpaid basis in disseminating official and reliable information on public health measures. Influencers, already members of this agency, were added to a mailing list where they received daily or weekly information packages from government sources and a series of webinars was organized which saw the participation of more than 600 influencers to provide guidelines on how to communicate in emergencies and manage social media in these contexts.

Another example of collaboration between institutions and digital actors in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though with profoundly different characteristics from the Finnish model, is the US campaign #1000HometownHeroes (Kelly et al., 2022). Promoted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in collaboration with communications agencies and micro-influencer networks, the campaign aimed to increase trust in COVID-19 vaccines, especially within local communities and ethnic minorities. The influencers involved, often prominent figures in their cities or neighborhoods, were encouraged to share personal stories and testimonies from everyday life, positioning themselves as "hometown heroes" capable of generating horizontal trust and emotional closeness. Unlike the approach adopted in Finland, where influencers were formally integrated into the government structure, the United States model relied on a more decentralized and culturally adaptive use of influencers as informal messengers embedded with local communities. However, the actual effectiveness of these campaigns has not been

empirically assessed, leaving a notable gap in literature, raising fundamental questions about whether these campaigns truly work in changing behaviors, how audiences perceive them, what barriers limit their success and what lessons can be drawn for future health communication efforts. It is the Dutch case that partially fills this gap and thus serves as an ideal bridge to the research questions of this work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a cross-sectional survey study was launched in the Netherlands to assess how a public health message was received when conveyed by different media. The study was conducted by a multidisciplinary research team led by the Amsterdam University Medical Center (VUMC), in collaboration with Duke University (Center for Advanced Hindsight, USA) and other academic institutions and was promoted nationwide through the traditional newspaper *De Telegraaf* and via a Youtube video by the sport and travel influencer Govert Sweep, in which he demonstrated proper handwashing and interviewed a virologist (Yousuf et al., 2020). The campaign was based on a diagnostic survey (n=16,072) that identified critical behavioral gaps, followed by a post-campaign survey (n=17,189). The results indicate that exposure to the influencer's video alone was not sufficient to significantly change behavior, whereas exposure to the newspaper's infographics alone was associated with significant improvements. These findings suggest that the trust transferred by an institutional source such as a newspaper remains a crucial element for the message's effectiveness, although the combination of both media yielded the strongest effect (adjusted OR: 2.14; $p < 0.001$).

The involvement of influencers in pandemic-related public communication campaigns is not limited to the response phase of the DRM cycle, but can extend across all its stages, including preparedness and recovery. For instance, following the lifting of lockdown restrictions in the country, the Indonesian government allocated up to \$5.2 million to fund influencers to promote tourist destinations with the explicit goal of revitalizing the hard-hit tourism industry and stimulating domestic travel as part of a broader economic recovery strategy (The Jakarta Post, 2020).

1.4.1 - The Italian landscape: communicative context and experiences of institutional partnerships with influencers in the COVID-19 pandemic

In Italy, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the complexity of institutional communication, which was complicated by the infodemic and the presence of multiple actors operating at different levels of governance. This multi-actor ecosystem, characterized by both national coordination and regional autonomy in health management, at times generated overlapping responsibilities and communicative confusion. Within this context, a wide range of institutional actors assumed different communicative roles (Box 1).

BOX 1 - National pandemic communications actors: the Italian case

While the WHO outlines the global framework, the operational and informational response in Italy is orchestrated by a complex multi-actor ecosystem, characterized by a mix of institutional expertise and local authorities. This multi-role structure is due to the lack of a defined and organic framework for pandemic communications in the country and fully reflects the complexity, including the legal aspects, of national and local responsibilities. Below are the main players that play a role in the Italian institutional communication landscape in case of a pandemic:

The President of the Council of Ministers or Prime Minister: The core of national decision-making and communication is held by the Government and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. The Prime Minister is the main figure in these decisions, announcing containment measures to the public.

The National Department of Civil Protection: The National Department of Civil Protection, led by the Government-appointed Special Commissioner, is the operational actor. According to Law No. 225/1992 and in particular Article 3 paragraph 3 thereof, the purposes of this Department include "the dissemination of knowledge of civil protection and information to the public." In the pandemic context the agency's communication can be defined through daily bulletins with data on infections, hospitalizations, intensive care occupancy levels and deaths nationwide.

Ministry of Health and the Minister of Health: As the authority responsible for healthcare matters, the Ministry of Health handles more technical communications with the support of Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS): circulars for healthcare workers, vaccine authorizations and the dissemination of public information campaigns on health and hygiene measures.

Regions and the President of the Region: The Italian regions play an important role in healthcare. This role, conferred by Title V of the Constitution which grants them concurrent legislation on "health protection" and subsequently redefined during the emergency phase by Legislative Decree No. 1 of January 2, 2018, assigns the Regions, which implement it through the Regional President and the Regional Health Department, the role of communicator during the pandemic. Their role during the pandemic is crucial as they can act as close communicators with the population.

AIFA (Italian Medicines Agency): it is the scientific and regulatory authority in Italy's pandemic communication landscape. Its core function is to translate complex and evolving pharmacological data into accessible public information, authorize and monitor vaccines and treatments. It communicates to the public and the scientific community decisions on authorizations for new drugs or vaccines (in collaboration with the EMA), changes to therapeutic indications and revocations.

The institutional communication described above operated within a broader digital information environment characterized by widespread social media use, intensive online news consumption, and the growing influence of digital content creators (Box 2).

The involvement of influencers and content creators was also explored, though with a logic distinct from the international cases discussed above. Unlike the structured Finnish approach or the decentralized United States model, the Italian experience was characterized by spontaneous, uncoordinated initiatives, often driven by individual institutions or public figures, reflecting the absence of a coherent national framework for engaging digital intermediaries in crisis communication. On the one hand, some institutions have collaborated directly with influencers to convey emergency messages, such as awareness campaigns or promotion of compliance with health measures. On the other hand, several examples of social media pages and profiles dedicated to COVID-19 information have spontaneously emerged, often managed by citizens or informal groups and involving influencers. In some cases, these projects have been subsequently recognized and sponsored by institutional figures, thus expanding their capacity for dissemination and enhancing their legitimacy. Regarding the institutionalized approach, in October 2020, during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte contacted Chiara Ferragni, a digital entrepreneur and fashion influencer, and Federico Lucia, a singer known as Fedez,

with a social media follower base of 37 million together at 2020, to ask for their help in spreading awareness messages about wearing masks (Repubblica.it, 2020). Fedez shared the appeal on his Instagram profile, communicating the necessity of respecting health measures to avoid new lockdowns, while Chiara Ferragni echoed the message to her millions of followers emphasizing the importance of “small individual gestures” for public health. During the first wave of the pandemic both Chiara Ferragni and Fedez had already contributed spontaneously to communication about the health crisis through fundraising for hospitals and awareness messages shared with their followers. Therefore, the decision to involve them during the second wave appears to reflect a strategic calculation by the Italian government, leveraging the credibility and engagement capacity these figures had built through their spontaneous communication efforts during the first wave and their capacity to reach large segments of the population. Another significant example of the strategic partnership between institutions and influencers in Italy during the pandemic is the ViralVeneto initiative, promoted by the Veneto Region. The project consisted of an Instagram (132.000 followers in June 2026) and Facebook page (26.620 followers in June 2026) that combined informative content produced by healthcare professionals and researchers with videos and messages from widely followed influencers and content creators. Veneto Region President Luca Zaia openly supported the initiative, sharing a video presenting the project as a complementary tool to promote responsible behavior and encourage compliance with national and regional health measures. It is important to note that the campaign's ambassadors, in this case, were selected based on audience segmentation. On the one hand, to engage the more mature demographic, well-known entertainment personalities such as a singer from a known group band, were hired. On the other hand, to reach the younger audience, a series of lifestyle teenage influencers such as Alice De Bortoli e Sofia Dalle Rive were chosen to deliver the message. Another distinctive element of the campaign was its strong connection to the Veneto region that sponsored the initiative. This choice resulted in the engagement of ambassadors whose credibility rests on a genuine sense of belonging to the territory. This was represented both by iconic figures native to Veneto, such as swimmer Federica Pellegrini and scientific activist Sammy Basso, and by personalities whose fame is closely associated with sporting achievements with local teams, such as former volleyball player and Olympics winner Lorenzo Bernardi.

Alongside the theoretical and strategic benefits discussed, it is also important to consider the potential risks associated with these collaborations. A particularly illustrative example

emerged during a regional COVID-19 campaign in Italy. Specifically, in October 2020, the Lombardy Region chose Milan football player Zlatan Ibrahimović, recovering from his own coronavirus infection, as the testimonial for an anti-COVID awareness campaign (Corriere della Sera.it, 2020). However, in April 2021, controversy arose when he was allegedly seen dining in a restaurant in violation of COVID-19 restrictions (Corriere della Sera, 2021). This case thus exemplifies the potential unintended consequences inherent in this type of collaboration. In such strategic partnerships, the influencer becomes closely associated with the institutional voice. Consequently, any personal misconduct by the influencer regarding the measures they advocate may indirectly affect the sponsoring institution, whose credibility can be jeopardized and whose reputation is placed at risk.

Another critical challenge for public institutions concerns the selection criteria for influencers. Research by Picazo-Sánchez et al. (2022) demonstrates that most creators presenting themselves as 'health experts' on Instagram fail to share evidence-based content, instead focusing primarily on beauty, aesthetics, and marketing. This evidence highlights the importance of thoroughly vetting both current and past content produced by potential collaborators prior to institutional engagement. The choice lies between an approach derived from traditional marketing, which emphasizes quantitative metrics such as follower count or engagement rate, and a more sophisticated strategy based on a contextual analysis that considers the nature of the message, the target audience and the relevant sociocultural context. From this perspective, it has been proposed to use the SIL (Strategic Influencer Leadership) model which encourages prioritizing qualitative and strategic criteria over mere numerical indicators, identifying figures capable of exercising communicative leadership based on three key dimensions: credibility, value coherence and cultural proximity to the audience (Wolf et al., 2025).

While these challenges reveal the inherent complexity of involving influencers in institutional pandemic communication, academic literature offers limited guidance on structuring and evaluating such partnerships. This gap is particularly evident in the Italian context, where, despite some practical experience gained during COVID-19, no systematic empirical investigation has yet addressed the perceptions, opportunities, and barriers associated with these collaborations.

BOX 2 – Italian social media landscape

This institutional complexity unfolded within a broader digital context. According to the Digital 2025 report, social media usage in Italy is widespread, with 44 million active users, approximately 75% of the population, and an average daily usage of 1 hour and 48 minutes. Significantly, 32% of Italian internet users rely on social media as a primary source of news, while influencers and content creators remain among the most followed accounts, particularly for their perceived authenticity and engagement capacity. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram dominate the landscape, underscoring the centrality of digital channels in everyday information consumption. (Digital report, 2025). This widespread digital penetration has been accompanied by the structural growth of the Italian influencer and content creator ecosystem. According to a joint study by Fiscozen and Kolsquare, approximately 40,000 individuals in Italy operate professionally as influencers, with an average annual turnover of €24,038 in 2025, up 11.8% from the previous year, and with 74% of profiles falling into the nano (1,000–10,000 followers) and micro (10,000–100,000 followers) categories. The sector is dominated by men, who make up 66% of the workforce, with an average age of 32 and it is mainly concentrated in the sectors of fashion and beauty, fitness, and food. (Repubblica.it, 2026).

2. AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this thesis is to investigate perceptions, possibilities, and challenges perceived by Institutional Italian key informants to integrate influencers and content creators into institutional communication strategies during a pandemic emergency. In this study, KIs represents a useful source of information for two main reasons. First, professionals working in Italian public institutions are well aware of the challenges of crisis communication, often navigating fragmented governance and procedural constraints. Second, their direct operational experience provides them with a unique vantage point, enabling them to offer informed and conscious visions regarding the future, identifying which strategic adjustments are essential for effectively integrating new digital intermediaries into emergency frameworks.

Additionally, this work seeks to fill a gap in the academic literature, particularly with reference to the Italian context, because, while some partnerships between institutions and digital content creators were indeed implemented during the COVID-19 response in 2020, these initiatives remained sporadic and uncoordinated, lacking any formal structure or systematic evaluation. To date, no scholarly effort has examined how such collaborations could be strategically designed, formally governed, or effectively assessed in future pandemic scenarios.

More specifically, the study addresses the following Research Questions (RQs):

- I. RQ1: How do key informants (i.e., policymakers and communication professionals) perceive the role and effectiveness of influencers and content creators in supporting pandemic communication in a future scenario of this kind?
- II. RQ2: What are the main opportunities and the challenges identified by key informants regarding the potential structural integration of non-traditional actors such as influencers and content creators into pandemic communication?
- III. RQ3: Which strategic elements should characterize guidelines for collaboration between public administrations and digital intermediaries in the context of pandemic emergencies?

Ultimately, the findings of this study will inform a set of practical recommendations and guidelines tailored for Italian public institutions. These evidence-based suggestions aim to provide a strategic roadmap for the potential effective integration of digital creators into future crisis communication frameworks.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 - Study design

The Methods section is reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007).

It is important to note that this research is situated within a broader project, named DIGI-PAN that began in January 2026 and is still ongoing, aimed at collecting and comparing institutional perspectives with those of digital content creators and influencers. However, this master's thesis focuses on the institutional perspective, based on interviews with policymakers and communicational professionals.

This study employed an in-depth qualitative design aimed to explore perceptions as well as perceived opportunities and challenges in possible communication initiatives envisioning the collaboration between Italian institutions and influencer and content creator in future pandemic scenarios.

The choice of a qualitative approach was guided by three main considerations. First, the study sought to explore personal views, interpretations, and professional judgments of policymakers and communication experts regarding the use of influencers and content creators in pandemic communication, which are best accessed through open-ended and narrative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Second, the research was exploratory in nature, aiming to generate rich insights into the evolving use of digital intermediaries in institutional communication rather than to produce generalizable findings (Levitt et al. 2018). Third, qualitative methods are particularly effective for capturing the complexity and context-dependency of human experience, including how institutional communication practices are shaped in specific national and local contexts. In this study, this allows for an in-depth understanding of Italian institutional practices, including relevant regulatory and organization frameworks, in the potential use of influencers and content creators in pandemic communication.

3.2 - Participants recruitment

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling strategies (Gray, 2021). An initial convenience sampling was used, drawing on the professional networks of the researchers to access eligible participants. At the same time, a purposive sampling approach was adopted to identify and select KIs based on their professional roles and relevance to the research objectives. Furthermore, a snowball sampling technique was employed, whereby at the end of each interview, participants were invited to suggest other potential informants who met the inclusion criteria and could provide further relevant insights. Participants were eligible for inclusion in the study if they met the following general criteria: they were aged 18 years or older, professionally active in the Italian context, and belonged to one of the two categories outlined below, namely policymakers and communication professional, each corresponding to a specific professional profile relevant to the research aims.

- I. **Policymakers:** Individuals were eligible if they held an institutional role at the national, regional, provincial, or local level within the Italian context. Direct involvement in decision-making processes or public communication activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic was not a mandatory requirement for inclusion; however, where present, such experience was considered an additional asset to the study.
- II. **Technical staff and communication professionals:** Individuals were eligible if they provided technical, professional, or advisory support to institutional actors, public bodies or communication agencies within the Italian context. This category included, but was not limited to, communication officers and press office staff working within Italian institutions; professionals working in communication agencies involved in institutional or public health campaigns; social media managers and digital communication specialists, as well as consultants with expertise in emergency communication or public health messaging. Prior direct involvement in communication activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic was not a mandatory requirement for inclusion, although where present it was considered an additional asset to the study.

Policymakers and technical staff were initially contacted and received a clear explanation of the research aims and the operational modalities involved. Finally, it is worth remembering that the larger project DIGI-PAN previously mentioned also includes influencers and content creators, whose analysis is reserved for a separate discussion and lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

3.3 - Data collection, analysis and reporting

Adopting a qualitative approach, the data collection process was designed to capture the diverse perspectives of the stakeholders involved, specifically regarding challenges and perceptions surrounding a possible partnership between influencers and Italian public institutions in a future pandemic scenario.

To ensure the relevance of the investigation, two distinct semi-structured interview guides, one for policymakers and the second for technical staff, were developed in Italian (see Appendix A and B). Both guides were structured into major thematic blocks investigating the participants' professional background and any previous crisis experience, their perceptions regarding the strategic involvement of influencers in pandemic communication initiatives, perceived challenges, and a final section dedicated to future perspectives and strategic planning, including the potential development of dedicated guidelines. A total of two pilot interviews with a pool of research fellows were conducted. This phase allowed a comprehensive assessment of the questions' clarity, flow and technical appropriateness across different interaction modes. Following the pilot phase, the interview guides were refined to eliminate ambiguities and better align with the professional language of the participants.

Data collection involved a total of 10 interviews, specifically:

- 6 interviews were conducted in-person at the participants' respective workplaces.
- 4 interviews were carried out remotely via Google Meet.

The interviews lasted between 29 minutes to a maximum of 1 hour and 18 minutes, with an average duration of 53.5 minutes per interview. Each interview was preceded by the

acquisition of informed consent, and all sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' explicit permission. The recordings were subsequently processed through *verbatim* transcription. The qualitative data gathered from the transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Analysis to identify recurrent patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To ensure methodological rigor and systematic organization of the data, the entire coding process was managed using Atlas.ti (version 26.0.1 (33971)).

The analysis was conducted through the following steps:

- I. Development of the codebook: a structured codebook (Appendix C) was developed to maintain consistency across the dataset. The codebook was developed by relying on the study objective and on inductive themes emerging from reading a subsample of transcripts and it was kept flexible to allow new codes to emerge inductively from the text.
- II. Data preparation and familiarization: multiple readings of the texts have been performed to gain an immersive understanding of the participants' narratives, noting initial ideas and recurring concepts.
- III. Systematic coding in Atlas.ti: segments of text were assigned to specific codes. Atlas.ti facilitated the constant comparison between different interviews, allowing for the refinement of the codebook as new nuances emerged from the accounts of both policymakers and technical staff.

The Results section will also give voice to the participants through direct quotations, all of which have been translated from Italian.

3.4 - Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in strict accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments. Prior to data collection, the research protocol was submitted and formally approved by the University of Eastern Piedmont Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 34613/2026). Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Each KIs was provided with a written informative detailing the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, the modality of participation, as well as the use of the findings. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the start of each interview, which included explicit permission for audio recording. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason and without any professional or personal consequences. To ensure anonymity, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Participants were assigned alphanumeric codes (e.g., K01, K02) to protect their personal identities.

4. RESULTS

A total of 10 KIs were recruited for this study, including policymakers (mayors, regional and provincial councilors) and technical staff from both public institutions and private agencies. Geographically, participants come from six Italian regions (Piedmont, Veneto, Liguria, Lombardy, Tuscany, and Lazio). Age ranges from 30 to 64, with a predominance of the 45–64 cohort, and the group is predominantly male. Further details regarding the key informants who took part in the study are specified in Table 1.

TABLE 1 - Study participants

ID	Gender	Age range	Professional Role	Type of institution	Region
K01	M	45-64	Mayor	Provincial Capital Municipality - Tier 2	Piedmont
K02	F	45-64	Mayor	Municipality - Tier 3	Veneto
K03	M	30-44	Head of Cabinet	Provincial Capital Municipality - Tier 2	Piedmont
K04	M	45-64	Head of Press Office	Civil Protection Department	Lazio
K05	F	45-64	Head of Press Office	Provincial Capital Municipality - Tier 2	Piedmont
K06	M	45-64	Vice President of the Regional Council	Regional Legislative Assembly	Piedmont
K07	M	45-64	Regional councilor	Regional Legislative Assembly	Liguria
K08	M	30-44	Provincial Councilor (<i>Consigliere provinciale delegato</i>)	Provincial Authority	Piedmont
K09	M	30-44	Head of communications agency	Communication Agency	Lombardy
K10	F	45-64	Social Media Manager, journalist, disasters risk communication expert	Regional Communication Agency	Tuscany

Municipalities are categorized by population size: Tier 1 (>250,000 inhabitants), Tier 2 (50,000 -250,000), Tier 3 (15,000-49,999), and Tier 4 (<15,000).

4.1 -Influencers and content creators in institutional communication in a pandemic scenario: general considerations and operational nodes

Most of the interviewees expressed a favorable view of the potential role of influencers and content creators, acknowledging their capacity to enhance the effectiveness of public communication and to reach population segments that would otherwise be difficult to engage. On the other hand, a small minority dissented from this position, arguing that during an emergency communication should remain an institutional prerogative to preserve legitimacy and authority.

The general consensus toward a possible collaboration between institutions and influencers and content creators expressed by the participants coexists with widespread uncertainty regarding its practical implementation that is rooted in two converging factors: a limited familiarity with how the influencer system actually works and the absence of any concrete historical precedent, as this collaboration was, in practice, never systematically structured in Italy. On the first point, participants reported limited familiarity with the influencer system and difficulty in identifying profiles that are both recognizable and authoritative. Since influencers are perceived as figures structurally tied to entertainment or commercial promotion, one participant questioned whether citizens would trust the involvement of this figure in delivering a neutral and authoritative emergency message. On the second point, participants are largely in agreement: the involvement of influencers and content creators was almost never contemplated by Italian institutions during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The reasons for this are multiple and interconnected, as noted by participants. First, these figures were not yet perceived as potential intermediaries for public utility purposes. Second, many interviewees acknowledged that, at the time, the phenomenon was not yet regarded as sufficiently consolidated or suited to addressing complex institutional needs. This resulted in recourse to traditional channels, often managed in a spontaneous and unstructured manner, while attention remained focused almost exclusively on content definition, relegating communication strategies to a secondary concern.

When asked about the target audience for this potential partnership, participants largely converged in identifying young people and the less educated as the primary recipients of this potential partnership. One participant, however, broadened this perspective, observing that

immediate language and digital formats are also effective for the elderly, who are increasingly accustomed to receiving real-time information via smartphones and tablets (K08, Provincial Councilor). These findings are further reinforced when considered alongside the structural weakness of traditional institutional communication channels: one participant acknowledged that his organization's social media pages often reach less than a third of the resident population, creating what another participant described as a state of "communicative isolation":

[The city] has 95 thousand residents. The Facebook channel of the Municipality of [the city] has 21 thousand subscribers, so either 70 000 people don't go on social media, it might be, it seems a bit strange to me because we have 60% of over-sixties so out of 95 thousand people, if I calculate this fact, yes, there are other channels, Instagram, but even if we add Instagram, I don't think we won't reach 30 000 subscribers to the social channels, it seems a bit low to me...

(K01, Mayor)

Addressing this structural gap, one interviewee (K07, Regional Councilor) observed that the most interesting aspect lies precisely in searching for a balance between a popular "container" (the influencer) and the scientificity of the message. In his view, this synergy allows institutions to overcome the traditional "white coat" barrier, defined as the intimidating distance often associated with formal expertise and institutional authority and efficiently establish what another participant called a "code of dialogue", defined as a shared register of communication, accessible to both institutions and the public, built on mutual understanding.

Creativity was widely cited as the main added value these figures may bring, especially considering the structural lack of internal creativity that some participants explicitly acknowledged within their administrations. Video is regarded as the most effective format for conveying institutional messages, and there is broad agreement on the advisability of entrusting influencers primarily with communicating practical behaviors, such as wearing masks, handwashing and social distancing, rather than disseminating complex

epidemiological data like deaths and infections, about which most respondents expressed skepticism.

One critical point addressed concerns the operational implementation of these professionals, particularly the broader institutional and organizational conditions that shape how collaboration with influencers and content creators can be effectively designed and implemented within public communication systems. The debate over when to activate the partnership between institutions and influencers and content creators across different stages of a crisis (e.g., initial onset, lockdown periods, acute emergency phase, recovery, and vaccination campaigns) proved to be highly nuanced. Opinions diverge sharply regarding the initial phase: some believe creators should be involved immediately at the onset of the crisis to build trust among citizens; others see them as useful for bringing order to the most chaotic phase of the emergency; and still others maintain that communication in the early stages should remain exclusively formal, unambiguous and managed directed by institutions. One participant (K07, Regional Councilor) added a consideration that cuts across all phases: activating creators only in response to specific triggers, rather than maintaining a continuous presence, risks generating a "manipulative effect" among the population, thus necessitating ongoing involvement from the very outset. Regarding their use at the peak of the crisis, one participant (K04, Head of press office) clearly criticizes their inadequacy, arguing that information saturation at that point renders any additional contribution superfluous. It is, however, during the subsequent phase of declining attention that the broadest convergence among participants is observed, with most agreeing on the usefulness of creators in sustaining public engagement once institutional messaging begins to lose traction. Finally, in the recovery phase, one participant suggested a narrative approach, explaining how the situation has changed and how the post-crisis landscape is evolving, thereby offering citizens a comprehensible assessment of what occurred.

Uncertainty remains regarding how such a partnership would be implemented across national and local institutional contexts. Some participants lean toward national coordination; others favor the local level, arguing that only those working locally truly understand their citizens and the specific needs of the community. One particularly detailed proposal distinguishes between "macro-emergencies", to be managed at the national level with large-scale creators, and "micro-emergencies", best addressed locally through micro-influencers.

When asked about the variety of thematic profiles to involve, participants—with local administrators in particular—expressed a preference for thematically diverse figures anchored in the local territory. Yet some cautioned that this approach would introduce considerable coordination challenges, while others suggest focusing on a small group of creators to be involved on a recurring basis, thereby building a recognizable relationship of trust with the public over time. On the question of whether a healthcare background is indispensable for creators involved in pandemic communication, participants expressed fragmented positions, with no clear consensus. Local administrators tend to dismiss the need for specific scientific expertise, believing the ability to convey simple behaviors in an accessible manner is sufficient. Other participants would favor figures with a healthcare background, although one (K06, Regional councilor) expressed reservation even about young medical graduates, questioning the absence of a consolidated experiential foundation. A middle ground is offered by one participant (K07, Regional councilor) who rejects the logic of a stark alternative, specifying that the "backbone" of communication must remain anchored to figures connected to science, to avoid the risk of separating dissemination from the research that underpins it. It is precisely this issue that finds a practical solution in a training course proposal for influencers and content creators. Introduced by the research team during the interviews, the idea of developing training courses taught by health professionals garnered widespread support. Participants consistently framed the initiative as both pragmatically achievable and strategically valuable and they strongly advocated for its inclusion in preparedness planning for future health emergencies. On the organizational level of this training, one participant (K10, Social Media Manager, journalist, disasters risk communication expert) suggested a two-tier structure, with common core modules complemented by differentiated courses based on each creator's type of communication and audience; another (K02, Mayor) identified the local health authorities as the natural entities responsible for providing the necessary professionals, envisioning a coordinated system across multiple municipalities. The debate over creators' reputations is similarly complex: while many believe a careful review of the public history of any profile to be involved is essential, two participants agree on a more nuanced interpretation. The first cautions that the profile must be neither hyper-institutional nor anti-institutional or it will lose significant audience segments; the second goes further, arguing that a figure with past controversies should not be ruled out a priori but indeed, having weathered moments of turmoil, can render

them more credible and more accessible to those segments that distrust official communication.

Participants did not agree on a single operational model for how creators should be engaged and integrated into institutional communication. Instead, three distinct approaches emerged from the interviews, each reflecting a different balance of institutional control and creative freedom.

- I. *Creative delegation model*: In this approach, the institution provides the influencers and content creators with a detailed communicative brief, outlining key messages, boundaries and requirements, but grants the content creator complete autonomy over the final format (e.g., short-form video, Instagram Reel, TikTok, podcast, etc.), tone and creative execution.
- II. *Hybrid model*: This configuration envisions live-streamed formats in which one or more content creators are joined directly by an institutional representative (e.g., a health official) or vice versa.
- III. *Institutional amplification model*: This third approach inverts the relationship entirely: content creators are not asked to produce original material but merely to repost and "amplify" videos and messages already issued by official institutional figures.

4.2 - Obstacles to the integration of influencers and content creators into institutional communication: institutional barriers and perceived risks

The interviews touched upon public administration's unpreparedness to implement a partnership as the one under analysis. The most effective summary of this situation is provided by a participant:

"The public administration isn't ready for this stuff. Influencers are more ready to enter this world than the public administration is to do so."

(K04, Head of press office)

On a procedural level, the most frequently cited obstacle is the incompatibility between the approval timelines of administrative acts and the speed demanded by an emergency crisis. This procedural rigidity is compounded by a structural shortage of staff and skills in Italian public administration. Participants unanimously acknowledged that institutions lack sufficient human resources to manage a potential ecosystem of collaborating influencers and content creators. Comment moderation was cited as a case in point: a single campaign could generate thousands of comments, requiring constant monitoring that current staff cannot provide. Participants also highlighted a generational issue affecting the Italian public sector. As they noted, those responsible for communication in press offices were often trained before the advent of social media and consequently face objective difficulties in operating on digital platforms. Culturally, some of them added, a widespread stigma persists around the role of content creators, who are still perceived more as commercial figures than as potential public service assets. In provincial settings and in organizations whose senior management is close to retirement, participants observed, this resistance is regarded as more pronounced and harder to overcome.

Alongside these barriers, participants identified a series of specific risks associated with engaging these new intermediaries. The most frequently mentioned concern relates to credibility: a creator known for working in a non-healthcare communicative niche could be perceived by the public as lacking authority when addressing a pandemic. As one participant noted, even healthcare training only partially improves perceived credibility, since the public

still tends to question the financial motivations behind the collaboration. Closely connected is the risk of losing control of the message, described by one participant as “a tragic mistake” if creators are granted uncontrolled communicative autonomy. Such autonomy, it was argued, can trigger a copycat effect through the mechanism of “*responsive influencers*”, those who intervene spontaneously when a topic becomes trending, without training or supervision, potentially leading to the spread of unverified information. Further structural criticalities include the algorithmic logic of platforms, which tends to confine content within each creator’s thematic niche and thus makes it difficult to reach transversal audiences, and the challenge of recruiting influencers and content creators in local contexts. Reputational damage is perceived as a serious risk but not an absolute deterrent; the prevailing solution is prevention through careful selection and contracts that stipulate penalties for conduct incompatible with the institutional mandate. Should damage nonetheless occur, the majority of participants believe the institution should publicly dissociate itself.

Regarding remuneration, there is broad agreement on one general principle: creators are professionals and must be paid and the associated public spending is considered justifiable by the majority of participants. A key analogy used by one participant (K07, Regional Councilor) is that these modern campaigns should be explained as being as useful as the public service announcements of the past and that with proper explanation, citizens would understand. The reasoning extends to the nature of the service itself; one interview (K01, Mayor) emphasizes that this is a form of communication that the public entity would otherwise have to do itself, making the creator's service a direct substitute for in-housework.

However, complexities emerge in the administrative framework: selection through competitive tenders is bureaucratically burdensome, and the risk of disputes over the choice of a specific profile is perceived as a deterrent. One participant suggested resorting to Article 90¹³, which provides for direct recruitment, as long as the criteria are documented and transparent. A rotation mechanism is also proposed to avoid excessive stabilization of roles, with fixed-term contracts and strict engagement rules. Engaging creators on an unpaid basis is considered bureaucratically less risky but not feasible in cases that require ongoing and structured commitment.

¹³ Pursuant to Art. 90 of Legislative Decree no. 267/2000 (TUEL), the “direct appointment” regulates the discretionary recruitment of external staff for the political office of local authorities.

4.3 - Operational and governance frameworks for integrating influencers and content creators into institutional communication

With regard to a potential prior mapping suggested by the research team - consisting of a register of influencers and content creators to be maintained by the institutions themselves, to be set up in advance of any crisis so as to have pre-identified contacts available during a pandemic - the majority agreed on the utility of establishing a register of influencers and content creators willing to collaborate with public institutions. This tool is perceived as a fundamental enabling condition because, in the absence of pre-existing relationships, any attempt at emergency activation risks proving excessively slow or improvised. One participant stressed, however, that such a register cannot be static: given the speed with which creators' careers evolve, in terms of audience, positioning, and credibility, regular updates, approximately every two years, are suggested. At the territorial level, it emerged that mapping ought not to be delegated to individual municipalities, which, particularly small and medium-sized ones, lack the resources required to structure it autonomously. The regional level is identified as the minimum appropriate scale for ensuring systematic and effective action. Irrespective of the model adopted, the importance of knowing each creator's target audience in advance is underscored, so as to construct communication configurations capable of covering different segments of the citizenry in a complementary fashion.

On the governance front—specifically the institutional framework, decision-making procedures, and coordination among authorities—the convergence among participants is even more pronounced. The development of pre-established guidelines at the regional or national level is regarded as essential by all interviewees: having a pre-defined framework enables rapid action in an emergency, obviating the need to build procedures and criteria from the ground up precisely when reaction times are most critical. In this vein, one participant argues forcefully that pandemic plans, both national and regional, should include a chapter specifically dedicated to communication, one that does not list the names of individual communicators but rather defines the professional profiles deemed suitable for each communication role.

“If you're talking about a pandemic, there is a national pandemic plan and therefore the communication related to that national pandemic plan must also take into account these professional figures who carry out a communication activity on behalf of the institutions, as we said before, with content provided by the institutions. Then there are the regional pandemic plans, which have specific competences for the regional territory, and those figures, for the competences of the region, should carry out that communication role”

(K06, Vice President of the Regional Council)

In terms of institutional coordination, participants identify the State–Regions liaison as the most appropriate level for ensuring consistent messaging: fragmentation at the municipal level, where each entity communicates autonomously and potentially inconsistently, is perceived as a source of confusion for citizens and a factor that undermines overall effectiveness. Supporting this position is the proposal to establish permanent cross-functional offices within local authorities, with responsibilities spanning crisis communication, the management of environmental emergencies, and mobility. Finally, on a procedural level, the recourse to special commissioners is indicated as a viable emergency solution. These figures - known in the Italian legal framework as *commissari straordinari* - are extraordinary government-appointed executives empowered to derogate from standard administrative rules during emergencies. Their key advantage lies in shielding local authorities from ordinary procurement procedures. Specifically, they authorize direct calls (*affidamenti diretti*), allowing institutions to directly hire an influencer without a public tender, within significantly shorter timeframes than the standard administrative process would permit.

4.4 - The potential role of creators in ordinary communication

Although not a central focus of the study, the interviews also brought to light broader considerations regarding the potential role of influencers and content creators in institutional communication during ordinary times. There was widespread agreement among participants that, outside of emergency scenarios, their engagement would not only be logistically simpler to implement but would also represent a structural prerequisite for the modernization of institutional communication. The fields of application identified by participants are numerous and include tourism promotion and territorial marketing, youth policies, culture and entertainment, health prevention, urban hardship, waste sorting, and sexual and affective education in schools. Two examples, however, emerged as particularly emblematic. The first concerns cancer prevention among women: an interviewee (K06, Vice President of the Regional Council) noted that paper-based letters dispatched by local health authorities prove ineffective in persuading young women to undergo Pap tests, suggesting that a creator capable of addressing prevention through accessible language- specifically by adopting an empathetic and peer-to-peer tone, could exert a markedly different impact. The second touches upon the theme of multiculturalism: traditional institutional channels struggle to reach non-Italian-speaking citizens, and content creators who communicate in other languages could offer an effective means of bridging this gap.

5. DISCUSSION

This qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews with ten key informants - including mayors, regional councilors, heads of press offices, and communication experts from six Italian regions - aimed to explore perceptions and challenges regarding a potential partnership between Italian public institutions and influencers in a future pandemic scenario, an increasingly relevant issue given that the risk of emerging infectious disease outbreaks is expected to rise in the coming decades (IPBES, 2020).

The findings emerging from the interviews offer a nuanced picture of how Italian decision-makers perceive the potential role of influencers and content creators in institutional communication during pandemic emergencies. On the one hand, there is significant theoretical openness toward their potential use, largely motivated by the capacity of influencers to access audiences that traditional institutional channels struggle to reach and to convey messages in more relatable and engaging formats; on the other, this principled willingness coexists with widespread uncertainty regarding operational modalities for translating this openness into practice, as well as an almost complete absence of structured experiences at the national level, alongside a range of cultural, procedural, and structural barriers that hinder such implementation. This discrepancy signals a more profound problem: the critical issue resides not so much in the theoretical institutional legitimacy of these new actors but in their operational translation within an administrative and cultural system that is not yet structured to accommodate them. This pattern resonates with the broader theoretical premise whereby the shift from a top-down, unidirectional communicative paradigm to a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) requires institutions to rebuild internal digital capacity (Mergel, 2016), a transition that, as the results of this study suggest, remains structurally incomplete in much of the Italian public administration.

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly accelerated awareness of the potential value of these new professional figures, yet it also clearly highlighted how wide the gap between theoretical awareness and operational capacity remains nowadays. It can be hypothesized that this distance is expected to diminish over time, particularly considering two converging phenomena. The first is the quantitative and qualitative growth of the influencer phenomenon (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024), which during and after the pandemic has assumed dimensions and relevance such that it can hardly be ignored by even the most

traditionalist institutions in a future similar scenario. The second is the generational shift currently underway within the public administration (OECD, 2021; AgID, 2023; Capello and Caragliu, 2020), which will progressively bring to decision-making roles individuals more familiar with social media dynamics and the language of digital communication. However, the mere passage of time does not appear sufficient; rather, a structured intervention is necessary to accompany and accelerate this process of change.

A more general reflection concerns the possible limitations of communication strategies that rely on influencers and content creators. In the contemporary digital ecosystem, algorithmic content selection and user self-selection constitute a powerful filter that no policy strategy can entirely circumvent. It is not the institution that "reaches" the user, but rather the user, mediated by the algorithm, who decides whether a given content will enter their feed. This dynamic introduces an element of unpredictability and partial ineffectiveness that must be duly considered even in an emergency context. Such reflection leads to a critical consideration: those who are already sensitive or informed receive additional and redundant information from converging sources, while those who reject the message remain structurally excluded (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). This phenomenon might be defined as the "echo" effect of digital communication, which risks reinforcing pre-existing beliefs rather than modifying them. The logic of thematic niches, which characterizes social platforms, therefore constitutes not only a limitation for the audience but also for the institution, which must choose which niches to access. Should a strategic use of non-thematic creators be hypothesized, that is, those operating in areas apparently distant from health, such as sports, gaming, or lifestyle, it could potentially reach otherwise inaccessible audiences. The example of an individual skeptical toward health institutions but passionate about a particular sport, who could be reached by a sports creator in collaboration with an institution, effectively illustrates this potential mechanism. Cross-sector creators could function as "involuntary bridges" toward audience niches resistant to official channels, overcoming cognitive and cultural barriers that institutional messages struggle to surmount. However, this remains a possibility that would require a level of strategic planning currently challenging for Italian public administrations.

A reflection that emerges concerns the theme of trust. The literature has extensively documented how trust is an essential prerequisite for effective emergency communication (Vandrevala et al., 2024; WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2024), and the results of this

study confirm that such awareness is present even among Italian decision-makers. However, the issue becomes more complex when the figure of the influencer or content creator is introduced, whose reputation is subject to sometimes unpredictable fluctuations. A point for reflection concerns the perception of influencers in the Italian context. The Italian public debate has recently been traversed by several cases of reputational crises involving some of the most prominent figures on the national digital scene, contributing to consolidating the image of influencers as intrinsically fragile figures from a reputational standpoint. Episodes of legal and personal controversy involving high-profile digital personalities have exposed the vulnerability of figures whose entire business model rests on personal image and public trust. This underlying distrust manifests in multiple aspects of participants' reflections. The risk that controversial behavior by the influencer could negatively reflect on the institution that engaged them represents a significant deterrent for some interviewees. However, it is interesting to note that nearly all participants, while recognizing this risk, did not consider it an absolute deterrent but rather a problem to be managed through appropriate contractual and procedural instruments, echoing the selection logic of the Strategic Influencer Leadership (SIL) model (Wolf et al., 2025), which privileges credibility, value coherence, and cultural proximity over other factors.

The reflection on operational collaboration models between institutions and creators raises more general issues that transcend the merely technical dimension. Notably, the preference expressed for one model over another did not appear to be randomly distributed but rather correlated systematically with participants' overall disposition toward the partnership: those more favorably inclined toward collaboration with influencers and content creators tended to endorse the creative delegation model, whereas more skeptical participants gravitated toward the hybrid and institutional amplification models. Behind the choice of one configuration over another also lie different conceptions of the relationship between institution and citizen, of the nature of communicative authority, and of the role that new digital intermediaries can legitimately assume in an emergency context. A continuum can be identified, ranging from extreme creative delegation to extreme centralization of control. At one pole, the institution limits itself to defining the scientific content to be conveyed, renouncing any interference on the expressive plane. This approach presupposes significant trust in the creator's capabilities and, more profoundly, a conception of institutional communication that is not exhausted in the mere transmission of information but recognizes the value of relational authenticity and adaptation to the languages of different audiences. At

the other pole, the creator is substantially reduced to an amplification channel, deprived of their expressive specificity and called upon to faithfully reproduce pre-packaged content from the institution. This configuration, while minimizing risks for the institution, might betray the very reason for resorting to these figures, which lies precisely in their capacity to establish a relationship of proximity with the audience, as repeatedly highlighted in the literature. Between these two extremes lies an intermediate configuration, which might be defined as institutional co-presence. In this scheme, the scientific or decision-making authority and the creator share the communicative space, balancing authoritativeness and proximity. Beyond their description, these models raise deeper questions. Firstly, they reflect different degrees of trust not only toward creators but also toward the public: greater delegation corresponds to greater trust in the public's ability to distinguish useful information from mere entertainment, while tighter control reveals a conception of the citizen as a passive recipient of pre-packaged messages. Secondly, they imply a different conception of the institution's role in the contemporary communicative ecosystem, consistent with the bidirectional, participatory model enabled by social platforms (Houston et al., 2015) and with the hybrid media system framework (Chadwick, 2013).

A further reflection concerns the tendency of some participants to superimpose, in their perception, the figure of the content creator onto that of the scientist-communicator. Although they had been provided with a clear operational definition of influencer and content creator, many interviewees, when questioned about these figures in the health domain, spontaneously evoked physicians and scientists who gained public visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than generalist creators with large followings. This tendency can be explained by the fact that the interviewee's mind, when faced with an abstract category applied to the health context, automatically retrieves the most recent and salient cases linked to that domain. This is consistent also with the broader literature on cognitive authority in online health information, which has shown that, during the pandemic, trust tended to consolidate around recognizable and scientifically credentialed figures (Malinen and Koivula, 2024). During COVID-19, the most present and recognizable faces on platforms were precisely scientists who effectively adopted the logics of content creators - daily presence on social media, cultivation of a loyal audience, recognizable personal formats - rendering them, in the collective imagination, assimilable to influencers and content creators.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the central problem is not whether Italian public institutions should engage influencers and content creators in a future pandemic scenario, but how such an engagement should be structured before the emergency materializes. The results converge on a small number of concrete starting points that could facilitate an implementation strategy. First, a regularly updated register of influencers and content creators willing to collaborate with public institutions, mapped at the regional level and built around detailed audience profiles, with AGCOM¹⁴ acting as a facilitator given its already stringent regulatory role over new digital professions and with The Department for Information and Publishing of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers which oversees public communication campaigns. Second, a dedicated communication chapter within national and regional pandemic plans, defining professional profiles and coordination, would provide the pre-established governance framework that the results identify as the single most consensual condition for reducing response time under pressure, consistent with the CERC model's emphasis on preparedness as distinct from response (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005); such framework, however, presupposes an internal digital capacity that current legislation does not support, since Law 150/2000 still keeps the press office and the URP¹⁵ (*Public Information and Citizen Relations Office*) artificially separated, a divide that no longer matches the demands of a hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2013).

Third, a structured training pathway for creators, delivered by health professionals and organized around a common core complemented by audience-specific modules, would translate into practice the twofold need, confirmed by the results and by the broader literature on selection criteria (Wolf et al., 2025; Picazo-Sánchez et al., 2022), to preserve scientific accuracy while safeguarding the communicative style that makes these figures effective in the first place. Fourth, contractual and procedural safeguards defined in advance, including accountability clauses, would allow institutions to manage reputational risk without treating it as an insurmountable obstacle. Lastly, the preference that emerges for creative delegation and institutional co-presence models over pure amplification, at least among more favorably disposed decision-makers, suggests that if Italian institutions want influencer-mediated

¹⁴ AGCOM (Italian Communications Regulatory Authority) is Italy's independent authority regulating telecommunications, media, postal services, and digital communications, with the aim of ensuring fair competition, consumer protection, and media pluralism.

¹⁵ URP (Ufficio Relazioni con il Pubblico) refers to the Public Information and Citizen Relations Office within the Italian Public Administration. It is an institutional unit responsible for facilitating communication between public authorities and citizens, ensuring access to administrative information, supporting transparency, and promoting citizens' rights to information and participation, as established by Italian law (Law No. 150/2000).

communication to retain any real effectiveness, they will need to resist the temptation – administratively more comfortable but communicatively weaker – of reducing creators to passive megaphones.

5.1 - Strengths and limitations

This study presents several strengths that contribute to its originality and academic relevance. First, the research addresses a topic that, while increasingly visible in public discourse, remains largely underexplored in the academic literature, particularly in the Italian context. Notably, this is the first study in Italy to explore this specific issue with institutional stakeholders. Second, the study benefits from the high profile and authority of the key informants interviewed, which operate at various institutional levels. Third, the study is oriented towards the future and offers actionable contributions for the management of upcoming crises.

Several limitations of this study should also be acknowledged. The recruitment process posed significant challenges. Several institutional actors contacted for potential participation either declined or did not respond, resulting in a lower response rate than initially anticipated. At the same time, self-selection bias cannot be excluded: those who agreed to participate may have been more open, interested, or favorable toward the integration of influencers and content creators in institutional communication compared to non-participants.

6. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

This work may represent the initial step in an investigative process that can be extended along several complementary directions. First, while this study did not seek statistical generalization or sample representativeness, future research could expand the scope of the analysis by including a wider range of institutional stakeholders, a more diverse age distribution, and a broader geographical coverage, especially Southern Italy and the Islands, which were not represented in the present study.

Second, further work should also examine the citizen's perspective. This study has focused exclusively on institutional actors, leaving open the question of how different population groups, particularly younger and lower-educated individuals, perceive the involvement of influencers and content creators in emergency communication, and whether such perceptions align with or diverge from those expressed by key informants. A further and particularly relevant line of inquiry concerns vulnerable populations. Future research could explore how socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, individuals with lower health literacy, or structurally marginalized communities respond to public health messages delivered through influencers and content creators, and whether these communication channels enhance trust, comprehension, and behavioral uptake or, conversely, reinforce existing inequalities in access to reliable information. Third, future research could move beyond perceptions and explore measurable outcomes, testing whether the operational models identified in this study, namely creative delegation, institutional co-presence, and institutional amplification, differ not only in their institutional acceptability but also in their actual effectiveness in influencing behavior change in the population.

It is suggested that the first operational stage could involve the establishment of permanent, multidisciplinary discussion forums, and institutional roundtables including, for instance, within already existing institutional settings such as Forum PA¹⁶. These discussion forums should act as incubators for dialogue between public health experts, policymakers, and representatives of new digital intermediaries such as influencers and content creators, aiming

¹⁶Forum PA is a conference event dedicated to the modernization and digital transformation of the Italian Public Administration. Founded in 1990, it acts as a meeting and networking platform for public institutions, businesses, and the research community, with the goal of promoting technological innovation, transparency, and the effectiveness of administrative action, as well as the implementation of the State's structural reforms.

to bridge information asymmetry and mutual possible biases. This is precisely the objective of the broader DIGI-PAN research project, of which this thesis forms a part. While the present study has focused on the institutional perspective, the project also encompasses interviews with influencers and content creators, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the views and expectations of both actors involved.

This co-design process must culminate in the drafting of specific emergency communication guidelines, conceived as an operational framework applicable to different levels of governance (national, regional or local). The primary objective of these directives is to provide public institutions with a regulatory and procedural tool that facilitates the strategic engagement of influencers and content creators in anticipation of future pandemic crises. The guidelines must precisely define communication objectives, intervention methodologies, operational support structures and the system of mutual responsibilities between parties. Critically, national and regional pandemic plans should incorporate a dedicated chapter on communication alongside simplified selection procedures applicable under emergency conditions. To further support operational coherence, a standardized contractualization system for creators should be established, with clear rules of engagement, penalties for conduct incompatible with institutional values and rotation mechanisms designed to prevent the over-institutionalization of individual figures.

7. CONCLUSION

This present study, based on semi-structured interviews with ten key informants, aimed to investigate perceptions, opportunities, and challenges regarding the potential integration of influencers and content creators into institutional pandemic communication strategies in Italy. This research ultimately reveals a central paradox in Italian institutional pandemic communication: while there is broad recognition of the theoretical potential of influencers and content creators, there is profound operational, cultural, and procedural unpreparedness to integrate them. Institutions acknowledge their utility but face bureaucratic barriers, limited digital skills, cultural resistance, and reputational risks that hinder implementation. The findings demonstrate that this gap between awareness and capacity cannot be bridged through episodic or ad hoc initiatives alone; rather, the solution requires a systemic approach that addresses both external partnerships and internal digital capacity building. On the research and policy side, this translates concretely into the establishment of permanent multidisciplinary forums where public health experts, policymakers, and digital intermediaries can co-design strategies and bridge information asymmetries. Co-designed guidelines, developed through these forums and applicable across different governance levels, must provide institutions with a clear regulatory and procedural framework for engaging creators in anticipation of future crises. Standardized contractual frameworks, including clear rules of engagement, accountability clauses, and rotation mechanisms, are equally essential to manage reputational risks while preserving the communicative authenticity that makes creators effective. Critically, the integration of a dedicated communication chapter into national and regional pandemic plans, alongside simplified emergency selection procedures, would ensure that communication is treated as a strategic pillar of preparedness rather than an afterthought. Crucially, involving creators in ordinary, non-emergency communication would transform everyday outreach into a genuine testing ground for emergency collaboration, building trust and familiarity before a crisis materializes. Only through proactive, structural intervention - sustained across research, governance, and daily institutional practice - can institutional communication evolve from reactive to strategic, finally bridging the gap between theoretical awareness and operational capacity to face future pandemics effectively.

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10. APPENDIX A- INTERVIEW GUIDE POLICYMAKES

Section 1 – Institutional role and previous experience in health crisis contexts

1. Can you briefly describe your current institutional role and the main responsibilities you hold in this role?

1.1 At what institutional level do you currently operate?

1.2 How long have you been carrying out this role?

1.3 What other public positions did you hold before your current role?

2. In your work, do you ever find yourself managing communication with citizens?

3. What relationship do you have with social media and the digital ecosystem in your work?

3.1 Do you have personal social media profiles for your public communication? On which platforms are you active?

3.2 Who manages your social media channels? Are you supported by an agency for content creation?

4. If different from the one you have now, what institutional role did you carry out during the COVID-19 pandemic?

4.1 During the COVID-19 pandemic, what role did you personally have in public communication? Can you give us a concrete example?

5. Looking at past experiences of managing health crises, to your knowledge, has your institution ever evaluated or experimented with the use of influencers or content creators in institutional communication?

5.1 If yes, in which phase of the crisis?

5.2 How were these influencers chosen?

5.3 What was the biggest difficulty in that project?

5.4 Did you in any way measure the results obtained?

5.5 In cases where this option was not adopted, do you know if it was discussed or consciously excluded?

5.5.1 If you are aware, what were the main considerations or reasons behind this choice?

5.5.2 In your opinion, why was this possibility never taken into consideration by your institution?

Section 2 – Perceptions on the Role of Influencers and Content Creators in Pandemic Communication

6. Starting from a general point of view: would you consider it useful or plausible to involve influencers and creators in public communication during an emergency such as a pandemic?

6.1 For which segments of the population could they be most useful in your opinion?

6.2 In which phases of the crisis would you consider them most useful?

7. In your opinion, how should a collaboration between institutions and influencers ideally be structured in a pandemic context?

7.1 Regarding the temporal dimension, when should this collaboration be activated (e.g., preparedness, acute phase, long-term recovery)?

7.2 Would you prefer to engage a single big name or many medium-small influencers/content creators?

7.3 At which institutional level (e.g., national, regional, or local), should coordinate this initiative be coordinated?

7.4 What messages would you entrust to an influencer/content creator?

7.5 In what way should these contents be disseminated?

7.6 How should the flow of information and content approval work?

7.7 Would you authorize the use of your institution's logo in these contents?

8. What characteristics should an influencer or content creator have, in your opinion, to collaborate with institutions in a pandemic context?

8.1 What do you think about the lack of health training of many influencers?

8.2 Would your institution be interested in organizing scientific training courses for influencers?

8.2.1 In your opinion, would your institution be able to organize such training? With what time and resources?

9. At a practical level, how should they be chosen?

9.1 Would it be strictly necessary for them to be registered in AGCOM?

9.2 Would you see the creation of a registry of reliable influencers as useful?

10. In your opinion, should such collaboration be paid or free of charge?

10.1 If compensation were necessary, would it be problematic to justify this expense to citizens?

11. Regardless of your personal inclination, what are the main intrinsic challenges and potential risks in using influencers in a delicate context such as a pandemic?

11.1 Do you think the use of influencers could damage the credibility of the institution?

12. In your opinion, would it be useful to develop a framework or institutional guidelines for the use of influencers and content creators in case of a pandemic?

12.1 If yes, at what institutional level should this be done?

13. In your opinion, should the availability to collaborate with influencers also be considered in ordinary times?

13.1 If yes, would the conditions change?

14. Is there any aspect you consider important to add that we have not addressed?

11. APPENDIX B - INTERVIEW GUIDE TECHNICAL STAFF

Section 1 – Professional Positioning and Previous Experience in Health Crisis Contexts

1. Can you describe your current professional role and briefly indicate your main tasks?
What has been your professional career path?

1.1 How does your role intersect with institutional or public communication activities within your institution?

1.2 To what extent are you involved in social media communication? Do you manage the institution's accounts and/or those of individual political figures?

1.3 On which social networks is the institution active?

2. In a crisis situation (e.g., flash floods, flooding, wildfires), how is the transmission of information from the institution to citizens managed? How do you ensure that social networks and media receive official and verified information in very rapid timeframes?
Who is responsible for this?

3. During the COVID-19 pandemic, what professional role did you hold (if any), and what were your specific communication-related responsibilities?

4. Looking at the overall experience, what do you believe was the main critical issue in institutional communication during the pandemic?

Prompt: Content; channels used; timing; relationship with specific audience segments

4.1 Did you perceive that the available communication tools were insufficient to reach certain audiences? If so, which segments?

Prompt: Elderly; young people; foreigners; peripheral areas; anti-vax groups; skeptics

5. Have you ever, in your work, interacted with influencers or content creators for professional purposes?

5.1 If yes, how was that experience? What worked and what did not?

5.2 If not, in your opinion, why has this not occurred?

5.3 Are you aware of any institution, either in your city or elsewhere, that has experimented with this?

Section 2 – Professional Perceptions of Influencers and Content Creators

6. If, during an emergency, official communication does not reach everyone or is difficult to understand, would you consider involving influencers to help disseminate correct messages more effectively?

6.1 How would you ideally structure this collaboration?

6.2 In terms of message effectiveness, which type of content would you prioritize?

Would you prefer formats typical of the creator or more structured institutional content?

7. In your opinion, which institutional messages are most suitable to be communicated by an influencer?

7.1 Which messages, instead, should remain within traditional institutional communication?

8. In a future pandemic, what would be the main strengths of involving influencers in institutional communication?

8.1 What, instead, would be the most concrete risks to consider?

Section 3 – Operational and Practical Considerations

9. At which institutional level do you believe this collaboration would be most feasible?

10. From an operational perspective, at which stage of a future pandemic would the involvement of influencers be most appropriate?

11. From a practical and administrative perspective, how would you structure a collaboration with influencers/content creators?

11.1 From an administrative standpoint, how would such a collaboration be framed economically? Is it possible to remunerate them? In what form?

11.2 How would an influencer be selected to collaborate with a public institution?

11.3 What are the average timeframes required to activate such a collaboration (days, weeks, months)?

11.4 How could the effectiveness and success of the campaign be evaluated?

Would an impact evaluation be necessary to justify the collaboration to citizens, especially if public funds are used?

11.5 Would you agree to allow collaborating influencers to use the institution's official symbol in their content?

11.6 If an influencer involved in the collaboration became involved in a scandal, what would happen? Who would manage the situation?

11.7 Should an influencer necessarily be registered in the AGCOM registry to collaborate with institutions, or could smaller creators not included in the registry also be suitable?

11.8 What would you think about creating a registry—separate from AGCOM—mapping influencers willing to collaborate with institutions in emergency scenarios? Could the institution itself create and manage it? Would this be feasible?

12. How would the hypothesis of collaborating with influencers be perceived within your institution?

12.1 Who would be most supportive?

12.2 Who would be most opposed?

12.3 What concrete objections might be raised?

13. In your opinion, should an influencer collaborating with institutions during a pandemic necessarily have a background in health, or could individuals with different expertise but strong communication skills also be useful?

13.1 If influencers without health expertise were involved, should preparatory training courses be organized with technical experts? If yes, who should organize them?

14. In a concrete collaboration, should the content be supervised and approved by the institution before publication?

14.1 If yes, who should carry out the supervision?

14.2 Do you believe such supervision would be manageable with your current resources, or would it require excessive time and dedicated personnel, increasing workload?

15. Should this type of collaboration be limited to emergencies, or also used in ordinary times for prevention campaigns or civic education?

15.1 Would administrative procedures and modalities change outside an emergency context?

Section 4 – Concluding Reflections

16. Do you believe that an official system to involve influencers during health emergencies could be created in Italy? Would it be useful to have clear guidelines regulating such collaborations?

17. Are there any additional elements or reflections you consider relevant that have not been addressed during the interview?

12. APPENDIX C - CODEBOOK

Main Group	Subgroup	Code
Profilo e background		Ruolo attuale
		Responsabilità
		Esperienza precedente
Uso inf/CC comunicazione ordinaria		Uso influencer/content creators(CC) comunicazione ordinaria
Comunicazione d'emergenza (COVID+general)		Comunicazione emergenza (general)
		Ruolo COVID-19
		Comunicazione COVID-19
Coinvolgimento inf/CC pandemia	Eventuali esperienze pregresse uso inf/CC	Eventuali esperienze pregresse uso inf/CC
	Opinione su inf/CC	Opinione su inf/CC
	Scelta Inf/CC	Inquadramento amministrativo
		Monitoraggio
		Patto inf/CC
	Format content	Collaborazione dichiarata vs non dichiarata
		Format contenuto
		Supervisione
		Uso logo/tag istituzione/profilo social
	Implementazione operativa uso Inf/CC	Fasi della crisi
		Livello di implementazione locale vs nazionale
		Background sanitari vs non sanitari
		Tipologia/numero inf/cc
	Vantaggi uso inf/CC	Audience
		Linguaggio/stile comunicativo
	Challenges coinvolgimento inf/CC	Danno reputazionale
		Perdita controllo messaggio
		Semplificazione messaggio
		Credibilità percepita
		Difficoltà reclutamento Inf/CC
		Algoritmo
	Barriere istituzionali	Budget
		Burocrazia
		Personale
		Resistenze culturali
	Retribuzione inf/CC	Retribuzione inf/CC
	Differenziazione contenuto istituzione vs inf/CC	Differenziazione contenuto istituzione vs inf/CC
	Supporto/training per inf/CC	Supporto/training per inf/CC
	Preparedness	Predisposizione contenuto
		Linea guida/governance
		Mappatura Inf/CC
		Mansioni comunicative
Gestione comunicazione		Modello gestione account
		Criticità comunicazione
		Presenza digitale
		Social e istituzioni
Raccomandazioni		Raccomandazioni
Altro		Quotations

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