



Influencer Message Strategies and Crisis Management Outcomes in the Non-Profit Health Sector

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Abstract: This study analysed strategic influencer communication in crisis management, with a focus on AMREF Health Africa Kenya. The research was motivated by the increasing reliance on digital platforms during crises and the critical role influencers play in shaping public trust, engagement, and behavioural responses within the health sector. While social media influencers are widely used across industries, limited understanding remains regarding how specific influencer message strategies contribute to crisis management outcomes in non-profit organisations. Anchored in Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Social Influence Theory, and Rhetorical Arena Theory, the study adopted a descriptive research design and employed a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through quantitative content analysis of 105 influencer-led social media posts and surveys administered to 381 social media users, alongside qualitative insights from crisis management professionals. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between influencer message strategies and crisis management outcomes. Emotional and instructive message strategies were most impactful in fostering empathy, trust, and behavioural responses. Content analysis showed that emotional storytelling was the most frequently utilised strategy, while informative and instructive approaches enhanced clarity and action during health-related crises. Regression analysis confirmed that message strategies significantly predicted crisis management effectiveness, explaining 25% of the variance in outcomes. The study concludes that carefully designed influencer message strategies play a significant role in effective crisis management and recommends the adoption of blended emotional, informative, and instructive messaging to enhance trust, clarity, and public response in non-profit health communication contexts.

Keywords: Strategic influencer communication, crisis message strategies, social media influencers, health crisis communication, non-profit sector.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background Information

Globally, strategic social media influencer (SMI) communication has become mainstream in recent years. According to Statista research conducted in February 2024, influencer marketing is a USD 24 billion global industry whose growth has more than tripled since 2019. Insights from Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) further indicate that 85% of brands allocated funds for influencer-based strategic communication in 2024, with 64% collaborating with the same influencer across multiple campaigns. These trends highlight the increasing institutionalisation of influencer communication within organisational communication strategies.

Strategic SMI communication is recognised as a versatile and emerging instrument of strategic communication (Borchers, 2019). As a relatively new field of communication management (Borchers & Enke, 2021), it is characterised by the deliberate use of social media influencers to advocate for organisational messages aligned with strategic objectives and tailored to specific audiences. This form of communication enables organisations to disseminate content perceived as authentic, thereby fostering trust and credibility among publics (Mediakix, 2019). The rise of SMI communication reflects a broader transformation in the media environment, where organisations are required to adapt to changing consumer expectations centred on transparency, participation, and authenticity (Pöyry et al., 2019; Nurfadhilah, Rahmanto & Muhammad, 2022).

Despite its growing adoption, limited empirical attention has been given to how organisations strategically employ influencers within open and decentralised social media environments (Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen & Laaksonen, 2019). Within strategic communication scholarship, social media influencers have increasingly been conceptualised as organisational stakeholders who shape public perceptions and influence reputational outcomes (Enke & Borchers, 2021). As opinion leaders, SMIs have been shown to affect attitudes, intentions, and behavioural responses due to the trust they command among their followers (Matin, Khoshtaria & Todua, 2022).

The relevance of strategic influencer communication becomes especially relevant in crisis management contexts, where timely, credible, and empathetic communication is essential for maintaining organisational legitimacy and public trust. Social media platforms enable immediate, two-way communication during crises, unconstrained by time or geography (Nurfadhilah et al., 2022). In such situations, organisations may leverage SMIs to disseminate critical information, encourage compliance with guidelines, and counter misinformation, particularly in health-related crises (Femenia, Gretzel & Alzua, 2022). Influencers' perceived authenticity and relational proximity to audiences enhance message accessibility and credibility, positioning them as valuable actors in organisational crisis response (Munnukka et al., 2019).

Within the Kenyan context, the adoption of strategic influencer communication has expanded across sectors including health, tourism, sports, and politics. Influencers have increasingly played a visible role in shaping public discourse and mobilising engagement around complex public issues. By bypassing traditional media gatekeeping, such communication enabled direct engagement with

digitally active publics, which highlights the growing strategic relevance of local influencers in organisational communication.

This study focuses on AMREF Health Africa Kenya as a case through which strategic influencer communication in crisis management can be examined within the non-profit health sector. Established in 1957, AMREF Kenya is a leading health organisation engaged in community-based interventions, health systems strengthening, and policy advocacy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation utilised social media influencers to disseminate preventive health messages, counter misinformation, and reach younger audiences through relatable digital content (AMREF Health Africa, 2020). Beyond the pandemic, AMREF has continued to employ influencer-driven communication in initiatives addressing hygiene behaviour change and youth reproductive health, demonstrating the organisation's sustained use of influencers to support public health communication and crisis-related interventions.

This study examines how influencer-driven message strategies contribute to effective crisis management outcomes in a non-profit health context by situating AMREF Kenya within the broader evolution of strategic influencer communication.

1.2 Message Strategies

Message strategies constitute a central component of strategic influencer communication, particularly in shaping audience perceptions, engagement, and behavioural responses. As the effectiveness of traditional mass media advertising continues to decline, organisations increasingly rely on influencer-led messaging to communicate with audiences in ways that are perceived as credible, relevant, and authentic (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Message strategies in influencer communication refer to the deliberate framing and presentation of content by influencers to achieve specific strategic communication objectives, including awareness creation, engagement, trust-building, and behavioural influence (Sánchez & Castillo, 2021).

Previous research has demonstrated that the manner in which influencer messages are constructed significantly affects how audiences interpret and respond to them. Message strategies that incorporate emotional appeal, instructive guidance, and informational clarity have been shown to enhance audience attention, trust, and behavioural intention, particularly during health-related crises (Stubbs, 2018; Ki & Kim, 2019; Lee & Eastin, 2020). Messages grounded in personal experience and sincerity further strengthen parasocial interactions, increasing perceived credibility and persuasive impact (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019).

Within strategic influencer communication, message strategies operate through key source-related perceptions that influence audience response. Perceived popularity reflects the extent to which an influencer is viewed as widely followed, recognised, and socially endorsed, increasing message visibility and normative influence (Femenia et al., 2022).

Source credibility refers to perceptions of knowledge, trustworthiness, and reliability, increasing the likelihood that audiences will accept and act upon communicated messages (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). In crisis contexts, credibility becomes crucial, as audiences rely on trusted intermediaries to interpret information and guide appropriate responses.

Perceived authenticity further shapes message effectiveness. Authenticity refers to the extent to which influencer messages are perceived as transparent, sincere, and aligned with the influencer's values (Pöyry et al., 2019). Research suggests that authentic messaging strengthens trust and engagement, while perceived inauthenticity may undermine credibility and damage organisational reputation (Matin et al., 2022; Munnukka et al., 2019).

Collectively, these dimensions, perceived popularity, source credibility, and perceived authenticity, form the basis through which influencer message strategies shape audience perceptions and behavioural outcomes. In strategic communication and crisis management contexts, particularly within the health sector, carefully designed influencer message strategies can enhance trust, engagement, and compliance, positioning influencers as effective intermediaries between organisations and the public.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The growing popularity of influencer marketing and the widespread use of social media platforms have positioned social media influencers as a powerful force in strategic communication. Influencers are increasingly employed across sectors, including public and non-profit domains, to shape public opinion, disseminate information, and influence behavioural outcomes. While extensive research has examined the role of social media influencers in marketing and brand communication, limited empirical attention has been given to their role in crisis management, particularly within non-profit marketing and health communication contexts (Borchers, 2019; Hudders et al., 2021).

Modern crises are complex, fast-moving, and highly mediated through social media, making effective communication strategies critical. During crises, influencers play a visible role in shaping public perceptions, emotions, and responses, yet organisations often engage influencers without clear evidence of which message strategies are most effective in supporting crisis management goals. The absence of systematic understanding in this area poses significant risks, including the spread of misinformation, perceived manipulation, and damage to organisational credibility (Singh et al., 2020).

Despite the growing use of influencers during crises, strategic influencer communication has largely relied on trial-and-error approaches, with limited standardised indicators for assessing effectiveness (Ye, Hudders, Jans & Veirman, 2021). Organisations face challenges in regulating influencer content and managing message framing across platforms, further complicating crisis communication efforts. In particular, little is known about how specific message strategies, such as those shaped by perceived popularity, source credibility, and perceived authenticity, function across different influencers and platforms, or how these strategies contribute to successful crisis management outcomes.

As a result, there remains a significant gap in understanding how influencer message strategies influence public trust, engagement, and behavioural response during crises, especially within the non-profit health communication domain. Addressing this gap is essential for enabling organisations to leverage social media influencers more effectively while minimising reputational and ethical risks. This study therefore sought to examine the message strategies employed by social media influencers in crisis contexts and to assess how these strategies contribute to effective crisis management within the non-profit health sector.

2.0 Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design and Population

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain comprehensive data on influencer communication during public health crises (Hafsa, 2019; Hogain, 2018). A descriptive research design was employed to examine patterns and characteristics of strategic influencer communication in crisis management within the non-profit health sector (Mishra & Alok, 2022). The study focused on AMREF Health Africa Kenya and its use of influencer communication across selected public health campaigns, including COVID-19 awareness, hygiene behaviour change initiatives, and youth reproductive health advocacy through the Youth in Action (Y-ACT) programme.

The study population comprised social media posts created by AMREF-affiliated influencers, social media users who engaged with these campaigns, and independent crisis management professionals and opinion leaders with relevant expertise. These groups were selected to capture both audience perceptions and expert insights related to influencer-driven crisis communication (Shukla, 2020).

2.2 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The study focused on influencer communication across major social media platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, due to their prominent role in information dissemination and public engagement during health-related crises. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants and content relevant to crisis management and strategic influencer communication (Mishra & Alok, 2022).

The sample size for social media users was determined using Cochran's formula, resulting in a final sample of 381 respondents. The sample size was considered adequate to achieve sufficient statistical power while accounting for practical constraints. In addition, influencer-generated content associated with AMREF's public health campaigns was selected for quantitative content analysis, alongside qualitative data collected from 12 independent crisis management professionals. The desired representative sample was determined using the Cochran formula shown below;

$$n = (Z^2 * p * q) / (E^2)$$

Where: **n** = Cochran sample size

Z = Z-score & its value is found in a Z-table (Z=1.96 for confidence level of 95%)

e = The desired level of precision (i.e., the margin of error)

p = the (estimated) proportion of the population

q = 1 - p

Calculation: $(1.96)^2(0.55)(0.45) / (0.05)^2 = 380.3184$

Final Answer Rounded off = 381 Respondents

2.3 Research Instruments

Quantitative data were collected through content analysis of messages shared by AMREF-affiliated influencers across selected public health campaigns, including COVID-19 prevention, hygiene behaviour change initiatives, and youth reproductive health advocacy. Content analysis enabled the examination of message

strategies across a large dataset of social media content (Riffe, 2019).

A secondary dataset was obtained through structured surveys administered to social media users, complemented by open-ended questionnaires distributed to 12 independent crisis management professionals. The open-ended questions were informed by insights from the content analysis and were designed to capture expert perspectives on the strategic role of influencers during health-related crises (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Surveys provided quantitative data on public perceptions and attitudes toward influencer communication and its role in crisis management, supporting the examination of relationships between key research variables (Wanyama, 2022).

3.0 Results and Discussion

Following data collection, quantitative data were coded and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to examine the relationship between message strategies and crisis management

outcomes. Message strategies were assessed through content analysis of influencer posts and Likert-scale survey items measuring audience perceptions of persuasive, emotional, authentic, and instructive messaging. Qualitative insights were analysed thematically to identify patterns and themes within the data, contributing to a deeper understanding of the research findings.

3.1 Content Analysis for Message Strategies

Content analysis of 105 influencer posts revealed that emotional message strategies were the most frequently used (41.9%), followed by informative strategies (27.6%) and instructive strategies (21.0%). Visual appeal was the least utilised strategy (9.5%). This distribution indicates that influencers prioritised empathy, storytelling, and informational clarity over purely aesthetic content when communicating during crises. These findings suggest that relational and educational messaging played a central role in influencer-led crisis communication.

Table 3.1: Message Strategies across Campaigns

Message Strategy	Campaign			
	SHR	Covid-19	Hygiene Behaviour Change	Total
Visual appeal (memes, aesthetics)	0	0	10	10
Total %	.0%	.0%	9.5%	9.5%
Informative (facts, statistics, explanations)	12	17	0	29
Total %	11.4%	16.2%	.0%	27.6%
Instructive (tutorials, prevention tips)	0	10	12	22
Total %	.0%	9.5%	11.4%	21.0%
Emotional (empathy, storytelling)	23	8	13	44
Total %	21.9%	7.6%	12.4%	41.9%
Total Count	35	35	35	105
Pearson Chi-Square	55.02			
df	6			
Asymptotic Sig. (2-tailed)	.000			

Differences in message strategy use across campaigns were statistically significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 105) = 55.02, p < .001$. Emotional strategies dominated the Sexual and Reproductive Health campaign, while informative and instructive strategies were more prominent in the COVID-19 campaign. The hygiene behaviour change campaign adopted a mixed approach, combining emotional, instructive, and visually appealing content. These results indicate that message strategies were campaign-specific rather than uniform.

These findings are consistent with existing research that suggest storytelling and personal experiences increase audience attention and perceived credibility (Stubb, 2018; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), while informative content supports trust and effective knowledge dissemination (Lee & Eastin, 2020). The lower use of visual appeal suggests that aesthetics, though useful, may play a secondary role to relational and educational messaging in crisis-focused influencer campaigns.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics for Message Strategies

Table 3.2: Descriptive Statistics for Message Strategies

Message Strategies	Mean	Std Dev
I find messages from influencers persuasive when they use emotional appeals	4.11	.97
Authentic or behind-the-scenes content makes influencer messages more convincing	4.11	.96
I am more likely to take action when influencers provide clear, solution-focused messages	4.04	1.01
Influencers who share personal experiences make the message feel more relatable	4.17	.93
Timely influencer messages shared at the early stages of a health crisis help shape how I interpret the situation	4.16	.97
I find repeated messaging by influencers during a health crisis makes the message clearer and more memorable	4.06	.92
I am more likely to engage with influencer content that includes a call to action (e.g., “get vaccinated,” “wear a mask”)	4.05	.98

Survey findings indicated strong agreement among respondents regarding the effectiveness of influencer message strategies in crisis management, with all items recording mean scores above 4.0. Relatability through personal experiences (M = 4.17, SD = .93), timeliness of messages (M = 4.16, SD = .97), and emotional appeals (M = 4.11, SD = .97) received the highest ratings. Clear, solution-focused communication (M = 4.04, SD = 1.01) and calls to action (M = 4.05, SD = .98) were also highly rated. The relatively low standard deviations indicate consistent agreement among respondents, highlighting the importance of emotionally engaging, timely, and actionable influencer messages during health crises.

These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that storytelling, sincerity, and personal experience enhance message persuasiveness and audience engagement (Stubb, 2018; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019).

3.3 Message Strategies used in Strategic Influencer Communication

The findings in Table 3.2 showed that emotional, relatable, and timely messages are most effective in influencer-led crisis

communication. Survey respondents rated personal experiences, timeliness, and emotional appeals the highest, showing that audiences value content that connects and informs. Content analysis findings mirrored this pattern, with emotional strategies dominating, followed by informative and instructive approaches, while visual appeal was used less frequently.

Crisis communication professionals reinforced these insights: *“Relatable personal stories and emotional appeals tend to have the strongest impact because people engage more when they can connect on a human level during a crisis.”*

Another shared that, *“Timely updates combined with clear, informative content work best. Emotional stories capture attention, but audiences need accurate facts to make informed decisions.”*

This convergent view across the analysis about message strategies suggest that effective influencer communication balances emotional engagement with credible, actionable information to maximize audience response during health crises.

3.4 Correlation Analysis for Message Strategies and Crisis Management

Table 3.3: Correlations for Message Strategies and Crisis Management

		Crisis Management	Message Strategies
Crisis Management	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.505**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	285	285
Message Strategies	Pearson Correlation	.505**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	285	285

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation analysis showed a positive and statistically significant relationship between message strategies and crisis management ($r = .505, p < .001$). This indicates that persuasive, timely, and relatable influencer message strategies are associated

with more effective crisis management outcomes. The moderate strength of the correlation suggests that while message strategies are not the sole determinant of crisis success, they play a meaningful role in shaping audience responses.

3.5 Regression Analysis for Message Strategies and Crisis Management

3.5.1 Model Summary

Table 3.4: Model Summary for Message Strategies and Crisis Management

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.50	.25	.25	.73

a. Predictors: (Constant), Message Strategies

b. Dependent Variable: Crisis Management

The regression analysis revealed that message strategies significantly predict crisis management outcomes ($R = .50$). The R^2 value of .25 indicates that message strategies explain 25% of the variance in crisis management effectiveness. While other factors

contribute to crisis outcomes, influencer message strategies represent a substantial predictor. The standard error of .73 indicates reasonable model accuracy.

3.5.2 Analysis of Variance

Table 3.5: ANOVA for Message Strategies and Crisis Management

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	52.18	1	52.18	96.65	.000
Residual	152.78	283	.540		
Total	204.96	284			

a. Dependent Variable: Crisis Management

b. Predictors: (Constant), Message Strategies

The ANOVA results confirmed that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 283) = 96.65, p < .001$. This means that message strategies provide a meaningful prediction of crisis management effectiveness and that the model fits the data well.

Hence, variations in message strategies significantly account for differences in how well crises are managed, highlighting that influencer-led message strategies play a role in shaping crisis management outcomes.

3.5.3 Regression Coefficients

Table 3.6: Coefficients for Message Strategies and Crisis Management

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.76	.30	.00	2.58	.010
Message Strategies	.70	.07	.50	9.83	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Crisis Management

Message strategies were a significant predictor of crisis management effectiveness ($B = 0.70, t(283) = 9.83, p < .001$). This indicates that for every one-unit increase in message strategies, crisis management outcomes increase by 0.70 units. The standardized beta value ($\beta = .50$) reflects a moderate and meaningful positive effect.

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that message strategies play a significant role in shaping the effectiveness of strategic influencer communication during health-related crises, with emotional and

relatable storytelling emerging as the most utilised and preferred approach. Emotional appeals were particularly impactful in sensitive campaigns such as Sexual and Reproductive Health, enabling influencers to humanise complex public health issues and strengthen audience connection.

However, emotional resonance alone was insufficient. Informative and instructive strategies were especially important during the COVID-19 campaign, where audiences prioritised clarity, accuracy, and solution-oriented guidance. Effective crisis messaging therefore requires balancing empathy with factual clarity and actionable direction. Timely updates, repeated messaging, and clear calls to action further enhanced engagement and behavioural intention.

Statistical analysis confirmed a significant positive relationship between message strategies and crisis management outcomes, indicating that message framing and delivery through influencers substantially shape public interpretation, trust, and response. Influencers function as relational intermediaries who translate organisational crisis messages into accessible narratives within digital communities.

These findings align with Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Social Influence Theory, reinforcing that strategic influencer communication operates as mediation between organisational messaging and public meaning-making within the non-profit health sector.

4.2 Recommendations

Non-profit organisations should integrate emotional, informative, and instructive message strategies rather than adopting a single dominant approach. Emotional storytelling fosters empathy and connection, while informative and solution-focused messaging provides clarity and direction during fast-moving health crises.

Influencer engagement should be timely and strategically aligned with the early stages of crises to shape interpretation and counter misinformation. Organisations should prioritise credibility, authenticity, and value alignment when selecting influencers, recognising that trustworthiness and relatability are more influential than follower count alone. Sustained partnerships can enhance consistency, reinforce public trust, and reduce reputational risks.

Clear ethical and strategic communication guidelines should govern influencer participation in crisis campaigns to ensure transparency, accuracy, and alignment with organisational objectives. Integrating influencer communication into formal crisis management planning will strengthen preparedness and improve response effectiveness.

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