

# Migrant Social Media Influencers as Vernacular CERC Agents: Mediating Government Communication During Covid-19

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## Abstract

Effective government communication is crucial for promoting inclusive governance, especially in increasingly diverse societies. However, a significant gap remains in engaging residents with migration backgrounds, often leaving these communities underinformed and underserved in public discourse. This shortfall becomes especially critical during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. Among transnational migrants in various countries, social networks were the main sources of information about Covid-19. Social media influencers with migration backgrounds became crucial transmitters of governmental information to their audiences. For instance, in 2020, Russian-speaking female bloggers in almost 40 countries started a global discussion about the Covid-19 outbreak on Instagram. This article presents the results of a content analysis of 113 Instagram posts by 58 Russian-speaking female influencers in 37 countries during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. It demonstrates that influencers acted as primary information sources. Instead of relying on news media, they spread information from governmental sources to audiences within their countries of residence and globally. In this article, I highlight how strategic use of social media can bridge the communication divide, ensuring that residents with migration backgrounds integrate better into the public information ecosystem while balancing public service with ethical governance.

## Keywords

Covid-19; digital public; government communication; health communication; influencers; migration; social media

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic strained healthcare systems and economies globally, placing unprecedented pressure on communication infrastructures. Governments' capacity to disseminate timely, comprehensible,

and trustworthy information emerged as a critical component of crisis management (Lerouge et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Maldonado et al., 2020). Public health experts noted that ensuring populations have access to accurate information is essential for effective outbreak control (Kalocsányiová et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Structural inequalities in information access leave many migrant communities underserved, stigmatized, and particularly vulnerable to the virus (Kalocsányiová et al., 2023; Maldonado et al., 2020; Wang & Navarro Nicoletti, 2025). Studies showed that migrants frequently encounter barriers to accessing public health information including linguistic obstacles and a lack of culturally adapted content (Kalocsányiová et al., 2023; Roble et al., 2022; Seale et al., 2023). Scholars and public health practitioners recommend integrating trusted figures, including social media influencers (SMIs), within immigrant communities to facilitate more equitable and effective information dissemination (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Roble et al., 2022; Tjaden et al., 2022).

Whereas governmental health communication during the pandemic relied heavily on traditional top-down channels, the rise of networked digital platforms enabled parallel information flows (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Within this ecosystem, SMIs became communicative actors with the potential to mobilize trust and shape behavioral norms (Abidin et al., 2021; Klucarova, 2022). In leveraging their personal credibility, influencers were often perceived as more authentic and accessible than official authorities (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022), particularly among audiences already socially or politically distanced from state institutions. However, overreliance on unpaid digital actors raises concerns about responsibility, consistency, and the potential for disseminating misinformation.

This article examines the role of Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds in disseminating and recontextualizing governmental Covid-19 communication during the pandemic's early stages. Alongside Arabic, German, and Ukrainian, Russian is among the most common migrant languages in Europe (Maldonado et al., 2020). Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts created from a transnational influencer initiative between March and April 2020, this study investigated how these actors engaged with public health messaging, encouraged compliance with official directives, and cultivated trustworthiness within their digital communities.

By focusing on influencers with migration backgrounds as an underresearched yet increasingly influential subset of digital actors, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how public health communication circulates beyond formal institutional channels. It argues that these influencers disseminated and adapted governmental information through affective, narrative, and vernacular strategies, enhancing its relevance and uptake within migrant publics.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Governmental Communication in Health Crises

Communication plays a fundamental role in governmental responses during public health emergencies. Effective communication is considered “the second most important weapon against the disease” after a vaccine (Barry, 2009, p. 324) and essential to a government's crisis management portfolio (Lee & Basnyat, 2013). In crises, governmental communication counteracts uncertainty by disseminating reliable information

(Giardini & Vilone, 2021; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Lerouge et al., 2023; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). This study draws on crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005) as a conceptual framework to understand how SMLs with migration backgrounds recontextualize governmental health messaging for migrant audiences.

As Reynolds and Seeger (2005) suggested in their five-stage model of CERC, effective communication in such contexts requires adjusting content to align with the public's needs at different stages of a crisis. This dynamic process was particularly evident during Covid-19 as governments modified their messaging strategies to address the initial urgency of containment measures and later incorporated broader health system updates and economic relief efforts. In the initial phases, characterized by heightened public fear and uncertainty, governmental messaging concentrated on lockdown measures and regulatory decrees (Lerouge et al., 2023). As the crisis unfolded, the emphasis shifted toward updates on the healthcare system's capacity and economic policies enacted to mitigate financial hardships (Lerouge et al., 2023). These shifts highlight the distinction between *crisis* and *risk* communication. The former is principally informative, involving "messages regarding current state or conditions regarding a specific event" (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p. 48); the latter, principally persuasive, focuses on "messages regarding known probabilities of negative consequences and how they may be reduced" (p. 48).

The information that ultimately reaches the public is rarely a direct transmission of government statements; rather, media coverage reframes and contextualizes it (Guidry et al., 2017; Lee & Basnyat, 2013). Among the various communication channels, social media has become particularly dominant in crisis management (Harrison & Johnson, 2019; Kavanaugh et al., 2016). It serves multiple roles, functioning as a real-time update channel and platform for public engagement and collaborative support (Seltzer et al., 2017; Zhang & Zhao, 2020). Although existing CERC-based research has examined institutional messaging and formal media channels' role, it paid relatively little attention to how informal communicators, like SMLs, translate and adapt these messages within multilingual, transnational digital networks.

The CERC model raised an important question about the reach of the "special population...any group that cannot be reached effectively during the initial phases of a public safety emergency with general public health messages delivered through mass communication channels" (Reynolds, 2007, p. 97). Based on the general CERC approach, Quinn (2008) developed an additional model for building resilience in minority communities, suggesting to "engage community partners who act as channels for communication" (p. 22). More recently, Seale et al. (2023) called these channels "information intermediaries." However, the literature has largely focused on institutional partnerships with recognized community leaders or nongovernmental organizations. The role of digitally native actors, particularly those not formally affiliated with institutions, remains underexplored in this context.

The CERC model emphasizes the importance of governments actively engaging informational partners—community leaders, organizations, and other intermediaries—to ensure crisis communication effectively reaches diverse audiences. However, despite recognizing the importance of tailored communication strategies, many governments struggle to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate information for migrant and minority communities (Kalocsányiová et al., 2023; Roble et al., 2022; Seale et al., 2023). Further, the literature has paid little attention to the fact that governmental communication mediation is not solely a top-down process. Thus, this article highlights SMLs with migration backgrounds as grassroots actors in

governmental crisis communication, a group rarely analyzed in this context. It reframes influencers as not merely content creators or commercial figures but mediators of state messaging during emergencies, thus extending the scope of actors relevant to the CERC framework.

Community actors often assume the role of information intermediaries, working proactively with open sources to meet their audiences' specific needs. These self-initiated efforts are especially significant in addressing information gaps for "special populations," who may be excluded from formal communication channels. Although several studies critiqued governmental shortcomings in inclusive health messaging, few investigated how noninstitutional actors spontaneously stepped into communicative functions typically reserved for official messengers. This article helps fill this gap by examining Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds residing across multiple countries who, during the Covid-19 pandemic, assumed the role of governmental communication mediators for their transnational audiences. Herein, "migration backgrounds" were operationalized as a first-generation relocation experience, referring to influencers who personally migrated and self-identified in their blogs as Russian-speaking individuals living abroad. The sample included content creators who resided in countries where Russian is not an official language and openly positioned their online presence around themes of migration, adaptation, or cross-cultural experiences.

## ***2.2. Tailoring Communication for Vulnerable Groups During Pandemics***

Effective communication in a public health emergency requires conveying information across media platforms, cultures, and languages (Quinn, 2008). Hyland-Wood et al. (2021) echoed this sentiment, stressing that governmental communication strategies must consider the diverse needs of society to ensure maximum support (see also Haw, 2024; Krystallidou & Braun, 2022). During the pandemic, many governments recognized the importance of knowing their audiences' communication preferences and tailored their strategies to meet these needs (Gonçalves et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, vulnerable populations, such as migrants, the elderly, and low-income communities, often face barriers to accessing timely and accurate health information due to linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic factors (Roble et al., 2022). Many government communication efforts failed to adequately address their needs, resulting in limited access to critical health guidance (Pourmarzi et al., 2022; Roble et al., 2022; Seale et al., 2023) due to language and cultural barriers (Maldonado et al., 2020). These communication barriers were not merely national failings; Piller et al. (2020) argued that they exposed the global consequences of persistent underinvestment in multilingual communication infrastructures and the systemic neglect of minority languages in public health planning.

A main challenge in communicating with vulnerable groups is ensuring language accessibility. For example, studies in Australia and the US highlighted discrepancies in the availability of Covid-19 information in languages other than English, leaving non-English speakers at a disadvantage (Pourmarzi et al., 2022; Seale et al., 2023; Tagliacozzo et al., 2021). While many European countries made Covid-19 information available in multiple languages, the materials translated into migrant languages frequently omitted key details regarding health-care entitlements and testing (Maldonado et al., 2020; Roble et al., 2022).

Studies revealed that even when translated, the content did not always reflect the migrants' lived experiences or specific vulnerabilities (Brønholt et al., 2021; Kalocsányiová et al., 2023). As the advanced

CERC model suggested, the involvement of trusted messengers, including religious and community leaders, is highly important for successful CERC (Quinn, 2008). In the Covid-19 pandemic context, messages from trusted community leaders, such as faith leaders and community organizations, proved essential in bridging the trust gap and disseminating accurate information (Wieland et al., 2021).

In their study of Covid-19 communication in Australia, Seale et al. (2023) defined community leaders as “those who actively deliver services via migrant resource centres, refugee health services, settlement services, community-based organisations, translation services, and primary care settings” (p. 2). However, in the contemporary communication landscape, it is equally critical to recognize the role of digital information intermediaries who produce content in their audiences’ native languages, different from their country of residence’s official language(s). These actors constitute an emerging category of informal communicators whose significance in CERC is only beginning to be acknowledged. Although migrant experiences as recipients of public messaging are increasingly documented, a striking lack of research remains on how migrants actively participate in shaping the public health information landscape. This article addresses the experience of Russian-speaking migrants as CERC actors, which existing scholarship has underexplored. It refines understanding of the CERC framework by positioning influencers as key intermediaries of state messaging for hard-to-reach populations, highlighting the role of noninstitutional actors in crisis communication ecosystems.

### ***2.3. SMIs’ Role During the Covid-19 Pandemic***

Migrants, especially those with limited proficiency in the host country’s official language, relied on social media because information there was often available in their native language (Mahic et al., 2023; Matsuoka et al., 2022; Tjaden et al., 2022)—through ethnic community groups for South and Southeast Asian immigrants in Japan (Matsuoka et al., 2022), foreign news channels for Somali and Pakistani immigrants living in Oslo (Mahic et al., 2023), or influencers of Chinese descent living in the UK, Spain, or Argentina (Wang & Navarro Nicoletti, 2025). Migrants often turned to informal, community-based sources to compensate for the gaps in knowledge that native residents took for granted, such as the timing of government briefings (Brønholt et al., 2021).

Although existing research has shown that migrants often rely on social media during crises (Goldsmith et al., 2022), the mechanisms by which SMIs with migration backgrounds disseminate and contextualize governmental communication remain underexplored. This article addresses this gap by analyzing influencers as not merely commercial content creators but culturally embedded grassroots actors who bridge communicative divides.

Much existing literature frames influencers primarily as commercial actors embedded in marketing ecosystems (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Gerlich, 2022); their role as informal civic communicators during crises has received far less empirical attention. This is particularly true for migrant-centered influencer networks which operate at the intersection of cultural translation, community solidarity, and public health communication. This study builds on prior findings by examining influencers’ strategies to establish credibility and adapt institutional messages to their audiences’ needs—functions the CERC model traditionally attributed to journalistic actors.

Research showed that parasocial relationships (one-sided emotional connections between influencers and their followers) grew stronger during the Covid-19 pandemic, enhancing trust in the messages influencers

shared (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022). Governments and public health agencies actively engaged SMIs as part of their strategic communication to reach broader audiences (Pöyry et al., 2025), especially young people (Abidin et al., 2021; Attwell et al., 2021). Many influencers also embraced social responsibility, using their platforms to support philanthropic causes (Adinia & Hanifa, 2022; Mateus et al., 2022). Their success hinged on quickly adjusting their content while staying authentic and relatable (Leon & Mateus, 2021). Influencers adapted their messaging to address pandemic challenges by blending health guidelines with personal narratives, thus maintaining authenticity while promoting public health (Reinikainen et al., 2022).

Although it is reasonable to assume that SMIs with migration backgrounds were crucial in bridging communicative divides and offering authentic, culturally resonant narratives during the pandemic, this phenomenon has received little systematic scholarly attention (Young et al., 2025). Empirical studies rarely focus on how such actors navigate their dual position between institutional messaging and community-based trust, especially in the context of health crises (Wang & Navarro Nicoletti, 2025; Zhang & Zhao, 2020). To examine how informal communicators translate institutional crisis messaging across linguistic and cultural boundaries, this article analyzes a case study of Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds. These actors function as information intermediaries without institutional mandates, training, or accountability frameworks. By examining how these actors voluntarily assumed this role—working with open sources and addressing their audiences’ needs as a “special population”—this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complex, bottom-up processes complementing (and sometimes compensating for) formal government communication efforts. This perspective also foregrounds the broader question of responsibility in crisis communication, highlighting the potential and limitations of relying on unpaid digital labor within marginalized communities. This informal role raises important questions about accountability, potential misalignment with governmental objectives, and SMIs’ ethical ambiguity as information brokers and personal-brand curators. These dual roles suggest that influencers’ mediation of public health messages may not always align with institutional interests and may, at times, privilege emotional resonance or platform visibility over consistency with expert guidance.

### 3. Research Questions and Methodology

#### 3.1. Case Study

The case study builds on my long-standing engagement with Russian-speaking Instagram influencers, which I have researched since 2018. In an earlier work (Smoliarova & Bodrunova, 2021), I identified a distinctive practice of coordinated posting, in which bloggers across countries simultaneously publish posts on a shared topic using unique hashtags and cross-mentions to create a distributed conversational network. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, one influencer in Italy initiated a similar transnational campaign, inviting Russian-speaking bloggers in various countries to share updates about governmental measures in their respective locations. This emergent collaboration became the focus of the present study. As a researcher with experience studying Russian-speaking digital communities and as a member of this linguistic and cultural space, I approached this analysis with disciplinary expertise and an understanding of the sociopolitical contexts affecting these transnational audiences.

For this study, I invited participants to publish posts about the pandemic using a shared Russian-language hashtag and mention one another to amplify reach and encourage sequential reading across accounts. In this

form of coordinated posting, the SMIs published curated content simultaneously under a common thematic structure, drawing significant attention and engagement from followers. The participants further strengthened the campaign's visibility by actively commenting on one another's posts, forming a dynamic commenter network that sustained discussion and boosted algorithmic visibility.

This collaborative strategy was replicated several times using different hashtags but overlapping contributors. These coordinated efforts facilitated the transnational exchange of firsthand information about governmental Covid-19 measures across diverse geographic contexts, fostering vibrant, user-driven conversations. In total, the initiative included 113 posts authored by 58 bloggers residing in 37 countries (see Tables 1 and 2). Sampling was exhaustive within the boundaries of the campaign. I included all publicly available posts published under the coordinated hashtags (Table 1) between March 14 and April 22, 2020. No additional selection or exclusion criteria were applied because the aim was to capture the full scope of the coordinated initiative across countries and influencer types.

**Table 1.** Composition of the dataset.

| Date in 2020 | Hashtag                            | Number of posts |
|--------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| March 14     | Corona_situation_in_my_country     | 20              |
| March 21     | Corona_situation_in_my_country_2   | 18              |
| March 30     | Corona_situation_in_my_country_3   | 16              |
| April 4      | value_life                         | 30              |
| April 8      | Corona_situation_in_my_country_new | 14              |
| April 22     | Corona_situation_update            | 15              |

**Table 2.** Types of influencers involved in “coordinated posting.”

| Type of influencers* | Number of authors | % of authors |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Macro (100K–500K)    | 12                | 21           |
| Micro (10K–100K)     | 39                | 67           |
| Nano (<10K)          | 7                 | 12           |
| Total                | 58                | 100          |

Source: \* Bertani (2025).

Based on this theoretical framework, this article addresses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How did Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds engage with and adapt key themes from governmental Covid-19 communication over time?

RQ2: What communicative strategies did these SMIs use to construct trustworthiness and express support for governmental health directives in their posts?

### 3.2. Methodology

To answer RQ1, I used qualitative content analysis, examining how SMIs with migration backgrounds communicated information about Covid-19 and governmental measures during the early phase of the

pandemic. All posts were systematically coded using a predefined set of thematic categories (Table 3) derived from a prior study of governmental communication during Covid-19 (Lerouge et al., 2023). The current study's primary aim was not to produce an entirely new set of themes. Instead, it aimed to trace the presence and transformation of specific messages previously identified in governmental communication within the content produced by information intermediaries addressing hard-to-reach populations. By focusing on these established categories, the current study assessed the extent to which influencers, as informal communicators, engaged with, amplified, or recontextualized key dimensions of institutional messaging during the Covid-19 crisis. This approach aligns with the broader objective of understanding how governmental narratives circulate and are adapted in transnational, linguistically diverse digital spaces, particularly among migrant communities often excluded from formal communication infrastructures.

**Table 3.** Coding categories.

| Category               | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Epidemic spreading     | Mentions of the geographical diffusion and epidemiological developments of Covid-19, often including references to global case counts, cross-border spread, or escalation of the outbreak |
| Health situation       | Descriptions of medical infrastructure challenges such as hospital overload, staff shortages, or preventive health measures to reduce transmission                                        |
| Decrees and measures   | Posts detailing new rules and regulations issued by national or regional authorities including quarantine orders, travel bans, or lockdown-related policies                               |
| Economic downturn      | References to financial consequences of the pandemic including employment loss, business closures, economic relief programs, or fiscal policy measures                                    |
| Government action      | Statements about political leadership, institutional responses, or policy coordination at the local, national, or international level, often highlighting central government figures      |
| Life-changing scenario | Narratives reflecting the social and psychological effects of the pandemic such as changes to daily routines, emotional responses to lockdowns, or broader lifestyle impacts              |

Two coders were involved in the analysis to ensure the coding process's reliability. During the training phase, both coders jointly coded a pilot subset of 15 posts, selected from different countries and posting waves, to ensure thematic diversity. Disagreements were discussed until conceptual consensus was reached, and the coding scheme was refined accordingly. This training aimed to calibrate their understanding of the predefined thematic categories and refine the coding scheme where necessary. Inter-coder reliability was assessed during this phase using Krippendorff's alpha, and adjustments were made until a high level of agreement was achieved across all categories. For the six thematic categories, alpha values ranged from 0.77 to 0.82, indicating acceptable to high reliability (Krippendorff, 2011). Once sufficient consistency was established, the two coders coded the entire dataset independently. Regular meetings were held throughout the process to discuss ambiguous cases and ensure ongoing alignment, further strengthening the validity of the coding outcomes.

To further understand the evolution of crisis-related narratives in Russian-speaking blogs from SMIs with migration backgrounds, I examined how each thematic category changed between March 14 and April 22, 2020. The diagram (Figure 1) visualizes percentage-based distributions across six observation dates.

The “over-time” component of my analysis refers to the communicative phases of the CERC model rather than to chronological variance, as the dataset covers a short period with stable thematic composition. To answer RQ2, I explored the performative markers of reliability, the presence of informative and emotionally charged coverage, and the sources referenced by the SMIs. I used binary coding to mark whether the posts contained personal recommendations advocating for compliance with governmental health directives.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. RQ1

Analyzing social media posts by Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds revealed six major thematic categories, each reflecting different aspects of pandemic-related communication. These themes varied in prominence, indicating the influencers’ shifting communicative priorities during the crisis (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Salience of the key themes.

| Category               | Number of posts | % of posts* |
|------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Decrees and measures   | 106             | 93.81       |
| Epidemic spreading     | 93              | 82.30       |
| Life-changing scenario | 79              | 69.91       |
| Government action      | 70              | 61.95       |
| Economic downturn      | 40              | 35.40       |
| Health situation       | 37              | 32.74       |

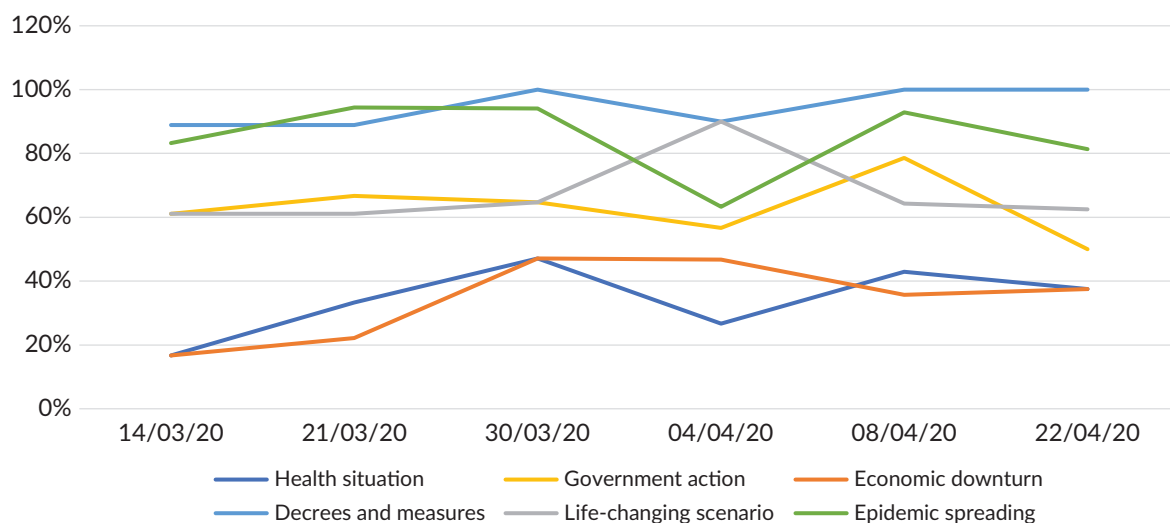
Note: \* The total exceeds 100% because a single post could address multiple themes simultaneously.

The most dominant category, “decrees and measures” (93.81%,  $n = 106$ ), primarily conveyed information about closures, public safety, and institutional adjustments, serving as a conduit for relaying formal directives: “Yesterday the government tightened the recommendations. No more than two people can gather together. The exception is people (family) who live together. Fine \$1600+” (SMI, Australia).

The consistent and frequent appearance of this theme suggests that influencers actively circulated institutional messages, often integrating them into personalized, accessible formats. These posts align with the initial stage of the CERC model, in which governments must issue clear, authoritative instructions to reduce uncertainty (Figure 1). Influencers served as unofficial yet trusted channels who reframed these decrees in more accessible formats, helping overcome the initial noise and confusion often present in institutional messaging.

The “epidemic spreading” theme was also highly prevalent (82.30%,  $n = 93$ ), particularly during the early stage of the pandemic. Posts in this category detailed the spread of the virus across geographical locations, with frequent mentions of specific regions, countries, and outbreak statistics: “Sick—2,837 people. Total tests conducted—43,498 people. Recovered—11 people. Deaths—17 people” (SMI, Czech Republic).

Contrary to comparable studies (Poirier et al., 2020) that typically showed this topic as diminishing as the pandemic became global, Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds continued to make it visible.



**Figure 1.** Temporal dynamics of the key themes.

This type of information corresponds to the CERC risk communication element, which aims to inform the public about probabilities and expected consequences. By providing real-time numbers and localized data, influencers helped enhance perceived transparency to maintain public trust during crisis escalation.

The “life-changing scenario” theme was identified in 69.91% of posts ( $n = 79$ ). This category encompassed reflections on how the pandemic disrupted everyday life and altered emotional states: “The closure of mosques is what makes Egyptians sad the most, especially the fact that Muslims have been deprived of Friday prayers for the third time in their history since the adoption of Islam” (SMI, Egypt).

Influencers discussed the psychological toll of quarantine, restrictions on freedom of movement, and new routines shaped by home confinement. The narratives often carried a personal tone and contributed to normalizing the collective experience of disruption, resonating with the “societal impact” and “personal stories” categories observed in earlier research (Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Poirier et al., 2020). These narratives contributed to the CERC maintenance phase, in which governments must sustain public engagement and emotional resilience. Influencers helped normalize fear, isolation, and adaptation through personal stories, functioning as affective bridges between policy and everyday experience.

The “government action” theme (61.95%,  $n = 70$ ) focused on communications involving high-level political figures and institutional responses: “A task force to combat the Covid-19 virus has been set up in Mauritius from today. It includes an immunologist and virologist, a representative from the police, from the government, etc.” (SMI, Mauritius).

The progression from local to national focus in these communications likely mirrors a broader strategy to centralize public messaging in an emergency, as government authority was consolidated in crisis response efforts. This theme reflects a transition from decentralized to centralized crisis communication. Influencers’ focus on high-level decision-makers mirrors the CERC emphasis on strategic coordination and visible leadership, which are crucial to sustaining message consistency as the crisis evolves.

The theme of “economic downturn” appeared in 35.40% of posts ( $n = 40$ ), capturing business closures, job losses, economic aid, and general uncertainty: “Many Brazilians have been transferred to home-office work. Many have lost their jobs. Private businesses are suffering losses. The quarantine situation is unknown how long it will last, and the bills are huge and no one has cancelled them” (SMI, Brazil).

As in prior studies (e.g., Pan & Meng, 2016), the economic dimension of crisis communication proved vital in shaping public understanding of the pandemic’s broader societal toll. Messages related to economic impact and support measures reflect both maintenance and resolution phases of CERC. Here, the focus shifts from immediate health threats to structural consequences, and influencers function as intermediaries helping audiences navigate complex support systems.

Finally, “health situation” was the least frequent theme, occurring in 32.74% of posts ( $n = 37$ ). Posts in this category highlighted pressures on the healthcare system—hospital overcrowding and shortages of protective equipment—and promoted preventive behaviors. Although health-related content became less central than institutional and personal themes, its presence nonetheless points to influencers’ roles in disseminating public health messaging, particularly through practical advice and appeals for collective responsibility. This theme relates to the persuasive aspects of risk communication. Its lower frequency suggests that influencers prioritized information directly addressing community needs, especially in transnational contexts where health systems varied widely.

Together, these thematic patterns mirror the communicative demands outlined in the CERC framework across crisis phases. Although not formally integrated into governmental strategies, influencers with migration backgrounds acted as grassroots information intermediaries, filling informational and emotional gaps for audiences otherwise underserved by institutional communication.

## 4.2. RQ2

The initiator, a Russian-speaking SMI from Italy, framed the endeavor on March 14, 2020, as a form of grassroots transnational reporting, stating: “The virus is spreading across all continents, so: I asked bloggers from all over the world to talk about the current situation in their countries—WHAT IS HAPPENING REALLY in the countries we live in.”

This appeal highlighted the global scale of the crisis and established communicative norms around authenticity, immediacy, and professional ethos that underpinned the bloggers’ strategies for cultivating trustworthiness.

A central discursive strategy across these posts was using performative markers that framed the SMIs as reliable, proximate, and nonpartisan observers. These included explicit references to first-hand experiences and real-time presence, designed to position the influencer as an eyewitness embedded in the social and political realities they describe. Typical formulations included: “First-hand information—a real-time picture” (Germany); “Today I called the hotline in Finland—everything was confirmed” (Finland); “Every day I report the statistics, developments in Italy, and public mood so you can understand that many countries are following our scenario” (Italy).

Bloggers marked a clear division between emotionally neutral reporting on public health restrictions and more affective storytelling in other parts of their posts (e.g., narratives of life-changing experiences or emotional appeals to follow health guidelines). This rhetorical boundary reinforced the impression that the information presented about government action, healthcare systems, or the spread of the virus was both factual and dispassionate. One blogger (Kuwait) noted: “I do not want to comment on any controversial issues—I just want to tell you what is really going on here.”

Several others echoed this disavowal of polemics, articulating a civic duty to inform without sensationalism. A Dutch influencer expressed the need to avoid panic: “As much as I would like to, I cannot ignore this—so many inadequate assessments, and most importantly, panic.”

Similarly, an Australian blogger emphasized her role as a stabilizing information source: “The purpose of my note is to tell what is happening in Australia at the moment—without whipping up panic and without hysteria. Dry facts and my personal impressions.”

Such formulations highlighted both affective restraint and an ethics of care that framed trustworthiness not merely as factuality, but as emotional composure and civic responsibility. This self-positioning reflects the CERC principle that trusted messengers are often “insiders” or figures perceived as culturally proximate. Their personal histories and shared migrant background framed them discursively as information intermediaries (Seale et al., 2023), mediating between institutional narratives and community perspectives.

An analysis of references to information sources revealed that most influencers refrained from citing traditional media or governmental institutions directly, opting instead for vague references to “the news” or unsourced paraphrasing of official statements. For example, a US blogger wrote: “The news says that we are still about a month away from the peak of the disease, and hospitals are already struggling to cope.”

Only one blogger (Finland) cited media outlets explicitly, mentioning the Finnish broadcasting corporation Yle and *The New York Times*, suggesting that platform conventions (e.g., the absence of hyperlinks in Instagram posts) may discourage overt citation.

Instead, the SMIs framed themselves as secondary gatekeepers who interpret and disseminate institutional information for lay audiences. This role was frequently reinforced by references to government press briefings and anticipated policy updates, often expressed in real-time idioms: “Today at 16:00 there will be a new meeting of the Czech government....I’ll keep you posted” (SMI, Czech Republic).

Posts also highlighted using Instagram stories as dynamic spaces for ongoing updates and fact-checking: “I do all the updates about HOW RAPIDLY the situation is developing in our country all the time in stories” (SMI, Italy).

References to institutional actors functioned as rhetorical markers of credibility rather than measurable indicators of trust, aligning with CERC’s focus on the perceived reliability of information sources. By combining official data with familiar language and personalized framing, the SMIs positioned their posts to appear aligned with formal messages while remaining accessible to their audiences.

Approximately one in five posts featured a direct appeal from bloggers to their audiences, advocating for compliance with governmental health directives during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. These appeals functioned as influential acts of public alignment with official quarantine measures and were articulated across five interrelated formats. Each format reflected the bloggers' distinctive communicative strategy to frame public health guidance in relatable, persuasive, and often affective terms. These appeals reflected the CERC risk communication phase which emphasizes the importance of persuasive, actionable guidance once the initial crisis phase is underway. By framing the need to follow government instructions as morally imperative and logically sound, influencers discursively aligned themselves with institutional narratives, using emotionally charged yet relatable language to express civic responsibility.

Emotional statements represented one prominent strategy. Influencers drew on affective language to emphasize the gravity of the pandemic and the moral imperative of staying at home. These messages often cast self-isolation as a collective civic duty and reimagined quarantine as a form of solidarity rather than deprivation. One Russian-speaking influencer from Turkey expressed this vividly: "Right now, to defeat this global disease, we simply need to stay home. Just stay home—do you understand? No fighting, no trenches, just quietly staying home and doing our own thing." Similarly, a Russian-speaking Italian influencer invoked a sense of shared responsibility:

"Thanks to those providing essential services, we CAN stay home and stop the virus from spreading. For them, we MUST stay home." Such statements discursively connected institutional directives with everyday emotions and experiences, highlighting the affective dimension of compliance narratives.

Personal endorsements of health measures were also prevalent. These posts revealed bloggers' explicit support for national policies and often reinforced the necessity of the restrictions, even when they were subject to criticism. For example, an influencer from Mauritius wrote: "I fully support all the measures, even though they came late. Quarantine is absolutely necessary!" Others expressed solidarity with local governmental efforts: "I support the quarantine measures Thailand is taking to protect the country from infection. They are essential."

By positioning themselves as responsible actors aligned with state responses, influencers discursively associated their posts with the credibility and authority of official communication within diasporic and transnational contexts.

In some cases, bloggers took on a more instructive and normative tone, offering direct recommendations that mirrored public health messaging. These posts provided clear behavioral guidance framed as collective advice: "We advise everyone to stay home, take the situation seriously, wash your hands, and take care of your loved ones" (SMI, Ukraine). Here, the blogger's voice operated less as an individual opinion and more as an authoritative reiteration of institutional guidelines—although articulated in a familiar, peer-based register.

Several bloggers also relied on rational justifications, presenting adherence to quarantine as a self-evident, logical action to curb viral transmission. These messages stripped back emotional or political language in favor of scientific rationality: "There is a clear understanding of what needs to be done: Simply self-isolate to reduce the outbreak" (SMI, Turkey). This strategy aligned closely with official expert discourses and aimed to depoliticize compliance by framing it as reasoned decision-making.

Finally, personal experience sharing emerged as a subtle but effective mechanism of behavioral modeling. Bloggers described their lifestyle adjustments as soft advocacy: “I spend most of my time at home, and I strongly advise you to do the same” (SMI, United Arab Emirates). These posts humanized public health measures by integrating them into everyday life, making compliance appear manageable and socially normative within their digital communities.

Although this study focuses on transnational communicative patterns, national policy contexts and the course of the pandemic in each country shaped influencers’ narratives. In Italy, where the early death toll was exceptionally high, influencers expressed particularly emotional and detailed appeals for adherence to governmental restrictions. The tone of their communication reflected collective trauma and a heightened sense of civic duty. The Egyptian blogger highlighted the closure of mosques as a way to convey the magnitude of the crisis and its profound social implications.

Influencers’ capacity to encourage compliant behavior also depended on their observations of local publics. In Germany, one blogger noted that “people here are generally disciplined, no one strolls aimlessly or has picnics under the bushes.” Contrarily, in Brazil, another influencer observed that “despite the ban, some shops in the favelas have reopened; people do not want to stay at home.” Such contrasts reveal how national attitudes toward regulation and collective behavior informed influencer communication’s tone and rhetorical stance. These examples illustrate that although the campaign operated transnationally, its discursive patterns remained deeply rooted in locally specific policy and cultural environments.

Across these formats, Russian-speaking SMIs functioned as intermediaries between state authority and the public, recontextualizing governmental health directives within accessible, affective, and culturally resonant narratives. Their endorsements helped to domesticate institutional messaging, bridging the gap between formal instruction and the social realities of their followers.

## 5. Discussion

In line with CERC principles stressing the need to reach “special populations” through trusted “informational mediators,” this study affirms that SMIs acted as critical intermediaries in contexts in which formal communication infrastructures often failed to account for migrants’ lived realities. Migrant communities are frequently positioned as “hard to reach” due to linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers, and even translated governmental messages often lack cultural resonance. The influencers in our sample responded to these gaps by reframing governmental advice in ways that acknowledged their audiences’ everyday concerns, thereby offering a more inclusive and context-sensitive form of communication.

The CERC model recommends collaboration with community leaders but it rarely accounts for influencers’ informal, often unpaid labor. This raises critical questions about the ethics of outsourcing state responsibilities to grassroots actors. Still, many influencers voluntarily assumed this role, aligning with CERC’s call for timely, credible, and empathetic messaging. Influencers enacted a form of vernacular CERC by combining emotional appeals, rational explanations, and direct advice—strategies mirroring the model’s distinction between crisis (informative) and risk (persuasive) communication. Their credibility stemmed not from institutional authority but from parasocial trust, narrative authenticity, and cultural proximity. These dynamics resonate with recent literature on influencer communication (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2022).

The influencers' work also reflected strategic recontextualization, embedding abstract policies into emotionally grounded stories, daily routines, and moral appeals. They discursively mirrored the CERC's focus on combining behavioral guidance with emotional reassurance. Many influencers actively rejected misinformation and emotional manipulation, framing their content as ethical and socially responsible. These communicative choices illustrate how informal actors can amplify official messaging, especially during highly uncertain phases of a crisis.

One limitation of this study was its reliance on predefined thematic categories from Lerouge et al. (2023), rather than an inductive approach that could have revealed unexpected themes beyond institutional frameworks. Although this deductive strategy ensured comparability, it may have overlooked emergent patterns. A second limitation is the lack of attention to national variation. The study offers a transnational view of SMIs as information intermediaries but does not analyze how specific governmental strategies shaped their messaging. Future research could explore how SMI practices intersect with diverse policy contexts. Finally, the focus on social media presents two issues. First, although platforms like Instagram are accessible to many, structural inequalities exclude some migrants, limiting the reach of digital communication. Second, the study does not examine cases where influencers diverged from official narratives or spread misinformation. This warrants further investigation into the risks and contradictions of their dual roles as civic communicators and independent content creators.

The study ultimately supports a shift toward more integrated models of governmental communication whereby formal and informal actors collaboratively shape public understanding. Recognizing influencers as part of the public health communication infrastructure—particularly those with migration backgrounds—offers an opportunity to improve crisis communication in multilingual, multicultural contexts. Rather than bypassing official narratives, these actors coproduce them, embedding state advice within networks of trust, familiarity, and cultural nuance.

## 6. Conclusion

This article examined the communicative practices of Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds during the first wave of Covid-19. Through qualitative analysis of Instagram posts from a grassroots campaign between March and April 2020, the study shows how these influencers mediated and recontextualized governmental health messages. The findings reveal that influencers did more than circulate official information; they adapted and framed content to reflect followers' emotional and cultural contexts, including a focus on regulations and narratives around emotional impact, healthcare pressure, and economic uncertainty. Acting as informal information intermediaries, SMIs reframed institutional messages in accessible and personalized ways, according to their perceptions of the needs of audiences underserved by mainstream public health communication. Influencers constructed credibility discursively through personal testimonies, real-time updates, and references to journalistic style. This helped fill communicative gaps in contexts of low institutional trust, particularly within migrant communities. Their work represents a bottom-up model of vernacular crisis communication, offering culturally embedded alternatives when state outreach fell short.

The study highlights the value of engaging influencers rooted in marginalized communities as strategic partners in public communication. Rather than viewing them as peripheral actors, governments should

recognize their capacity to translate official discourse into culturally resonant, community-based communication forms. Future research should further explore influencers' roles in crisis communication, particularly in underrepresented language communities, and examine the ethical tensions they face at the intersection of civic, commercial, and institutional responsibilities.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT-5 was used in part for improving the grammar and style of the first version of the manuscript. All outputs were thoroughly checked, modified, and refined by the authors.

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