

Exploring the use of strategic influencer leadership (SIL) in health communication: a cross-cultural, multi-case study

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Abstract

Purpose – This study challenges the social media-centric view of influencers, arguing that health communication benefits from diverse strategic influencers beyond commercial figures. Trust, credibility and cultural resonance are essential for effective public health messaging, yet contemporary approaches often prioritise engagement metrics over strategic influence.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper employs a multi-case study approach to examine the strategic use of influencers in health communication across Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates and Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores how health professionals, royal representatives and a politician shaped public health messaging within culturally specific contexts. A mixed-methods approach, incorporating ethnographic research and thematic analysis, was used to analyse media coverage, social media posts, public statements, policy documents and verbal briefings.

Findings – The definition of “influencer” has been increasingly narrowed to social media figures, sidelining long-established strategic approaches. Findings from three culturally distinct case studies highlight the value of strategic influencer leadership (SIL), where credibility, suitability and cultural context take precedence over a narrow focus on social media metrics.

Social implications – Health communication performs a crucial role in distributing vital information, promoting public health, preventing disease and enhancing well-being. SIL helps overcome communication barriers such as mistrust, low health literacy and language differences, ensuring equitable access to critical information. Strategic influencers are particularly vital in diverse, multilingual societies.

Originality/value – By examining “traditional” influencers, this study challenges the dominant focus on social media influencers and vanity metrics. It encourages a more nuanced, context-driven approach to (health) communication via the use of SIL.

Keywords Influencer engagement, Social media influencer, Key opinion leader (KOL), Strategic influencer engagement (SIE), Strategic influencer leadership (SIL), Leadership, Health communication, UAE, Indonesia, Australia, COVID-19

Paper type Research article



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Plain language summary

Access to health care information is a basic human right. Influencers can help make health messaging more effective, but a focus on social media metrics may weaken their impact. Drawing on insights from three different, previously largely under-explored cultural contexts, we propose a return to the traditional understanding of strategic influence and introduce the concept of Strategic Influencer Leadership (SIL), an approach that prioritises credibility, cultural relevance and trust to ensure equitable access to vital health information.

Introduction

The rise of social media influencers has dominated discussions on health communication, often overshadowing the significant contributions of traditional and community-based influencers. This study seeks to address this gap by showcasing diverse health influencers who operate beyond commercially driven entities and imperatives. Through a focused case study approach, we illustrate how different influencer types contribute to public health messaging. Our research aims to showcase these influencers' potential impact, rather than generalise empirical findings, reinforcing the necessity of a broader lens in health communication studies.

This paper aligns with the theme of this special issue by emphasising the social impact of strategic communication beyond organisation-centric goals. By moving beyond a Western, commercially driven focus on social media influencers, the authors highlight the role of community-based and non-traditional influencers in health communication, particularly in non-Western and underexplored contexts. This study contributes to the de-organisation-centric scholarship in strategic communication by exploring how grassroots-level influencers facilitate public health messaging, often in ways that challenge conventional top-down approaches. Additionally, the research reflects the issue's call for perspectives beyond the prevailing focus on the Global North by addressing disparities in health communication effectiveness and accessibility, particularly in underrepresented communities beyond Europe and the USA.

Health communication performs a crucial role in promoting public health and wellbeing by influencing behaviour, facilitating the exchange of information and empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their health ([Rimal and Lapinski, 2009](#); [Malikhao, 2020](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role of health communication for societal wellbeing and risk limitation purposes, as individuals and communities around the world were required to rapidly adapt their behaviours to mitigate the spread of the virus, within the context of constantly evolving public health advice ([Gluckman and Mendisu, 2021](#); [Nov et al., 2021](#)). One of the most significant challenges during the pandemic was addressing communication inequalities, particularly in reaching traditionally hard-to-reach communities and ensuring widespread public cooperation ([World Health Organization, n.d.a, n.d.b](#); [Gluckman and Mendisu, 2021](#)). This required communication strategies that accounted for disparities in access to information and addressed barriers related to health literacy, language, and cultural difference ([Malecki et al., 2020](#); [Vaughan and Tinker, 2009](#)). Effective communication needed to ensure that individuals from diverse backgrounds were not only informed, but also meaningfully engaged and motivated to adopt protective health behaviours.

Five years on, infections and death rates continue to fluctuate, although these statistics remain largely unreported in mainstream media. Indeed, information fatigue appears to be contributing to new outbreaks, due to a diminished uptake of vaccinations and an overall level of complacency ([Kekatos, 2024](#)). The fact that thousands of individuals continue to die every week ([World Health Organization, n.d.b](#)), despite intensive communication efforts by local, national and global health agencies over the past years, highlights the importance of targeted, audience-focused, strategic communication that promotes behavioural change and societal wellbeing.

The basic human right to universal access to healthcare (Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights) arguably extends to the importance of access to healthcare information that is easily understood and actioned. The proliferation and omnipresence of social and digital media may be framed as an enabler of the distribution of reliable health care information, but may also facilitate mis- and disinformation, contribute to an “infodemic,” and thereby ultimately undermine health advice. The pandemic exposed some of the issues relevant to health care and human rights across the globe, particularly in developing nations.

Health professionals and researchers perform a crucial role in the context of public health communication, ensuring information is evidence-based and factually correct, rather than influenced by third party interests. Further, varying levels of health literacy may undermine the effectiveness and impact of messages delivered by professionals and government agencies (e.g. Department of Health or Ministry of Health), as they frequently fail to acknowledge language barriers, cultural sensitivities, channel preferences and information overload. This challenge is exacerbated by a focus on one-way communication (Grunig and Kim, 2017) and message dissemination, rather than meaningful engagement with diverse audiences. A key priority for health agencies is often to be seen to address contemporary challenges, with limited budgetary resources allocated to the long-term measurement and evaluation of message effectiveness.

Strategic influencers and key opinion leaders

In times of uncertainty, the public look to people they trust for advice and guidance (Edelman, 2023). This has led to the adoption of non-traditional communicators of health messaging, in particular “influencers” (Looi *et al.*, 2023; Powell and Pring, 2024; Pöyry *et al.*, 2022; Zou *et al.*, 2021). Influencer engagement has traditionally been a key remit of strategic communication and public relations (Wolf and Archer, 2018). At its core, public relations is about influence (Reber and Berger, 2006): influencing change, decision making, policy decisions and behaviours. Influencers have always performed a key role in connecting organisations, departments, governments, agencies and their messages with stakeholders, by reducing resistance to messaging and facilitating code switching. They help translate complex information into clear, accessible communication, ensuring that key messages are easily understood and actionable for target audiences.

Over the past decade, the term “influencer marketing” (Jin *et al.*, 2019) has gained traction, shifting the understanding of influencers from their original conception as “a person like you” (Edelman, 2006), to a more commercialised role. Today, influencers are largely perceived as individuals with a strong online following who engage in paid collaborations to promote products or services (Borchers and Enke, 2022; Abidin, 2016). However, within a health context, the influencer concept should be considered as much broader – and strategic – than the social media influencer construct that has become synonymous with the influencer label in recent years. Through a strategic communication lens, the background, positioning, availability, networks and relevant subject knowledge of the influencer becomes more important than their social media credentials and sales conversion rates (Pöyry *et al.*, 2022).

Indeed, strategic influencers may be more closely aligned with the concept of KOLs, a term commonly used in certain geographical and industry contexts. The concept of KOLs originated in the medical and pharmaceutical industries and traces back to Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1948) “two-step flow” theory of communication (Katz *et al.*, 2017). This model suggests that opinion leaders act as intermediaries, interpreting media messages and passing them on to others in a way that shapes public perception (Clinckemaillie *et al.*, 2022). The KOL model has been widely utilised in the pharmaceutical industry, where companies engage physicians or non-physician scientists to influence medical practice, including prescribing behaviours (Scher and Schett, 2021). The term KOL is used extensively in some countries, such as Indonesia, by public relations and strategic communication practitioners, to refer to individuals with significant influence (Pusung, 2024). As Pöyry *et al.* (2022) note, while

two-step flow theory was developed before the advent of the Internet and social media, it remains highly relevant today, as “the role of various gatekeepers and opinion leaders is as critical as ever” (Pöyry *et al.*, 2022, p. 471).

Notably, KOLs – or indeed SILs - are not necessarily selected based on reach or follower count. Instead, they are chosen for their strategic message alignment, campaign relevance, and ability to authentically connect with audiences both on- and offline. Their influence is rooted in existing social capital, particular through pre-established networks within their respective field of expertise and knowledge (Wolf and Archer, 2018). In a health context, reaching hard-to-access populations can be more critical than achieving mass appeal, as it ensures that niche audiences receive targeted, relevant communication in ways that align with their specific needs and circumstances.

This study contributes to ongoing debates within strategic communication by repositioning influencer engagement not as a tactical marketing function, but as a strategic, culturally embedded leadership practice. Strategic communication, broadly defined, refers to the purposeful use of communication by organisations or actors to fulfil their mission (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). While traditionally grounded in organisational communication, public relations, and marketing, the field has evolved to encompass broader social, cultural, and political processes. Scholars have called for a move away from sender-centric, message dissemination models towards more participatory, stakeholder- and context-driven approaches (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

The concept of SIL aligns with this shift by positioning trust, credibility, and cultural legitimacy as central to communicative effectiveness. Unlike algorithmically driven influencer marketing, SIL engages influencers as strategic actors who embody and transmit culturally resonant messages across complex social terrains. This approach adds nuance to existing strategic communication theory by demonstrating how leadership, not just messaging, becomes a vehicle for engagement - particularly during public health crises in culturally diverse societies.

Research questions

This study is guided by the following exploratory questions:

- (1) What communicative attributes make strategic influencers effective in health communication across varied contexts?
- (2) How may approaches to influencer-led health communication vary across—and within—cultural contexts?

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how strategic influencers shape public health discourse and engagement, offering insights for policymakers, health professionals, and communication strategists seeking to enhance culturally competent health communication strategies.

Methodology

This study explores the use of influencers across three distinct cultural contexts—Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Australia—using a multi-case study approach. The research is not intended to provide generalisable findings but rather to highlight the potential of “traditional” influencers, also referred to as KOLs, in effectively disseminating health messages and encouraging behavioural change. The strategic selection of three diverse case studies allows for an examination of influencer-led communication strategies within underexplored cultural settings, shedding light on both the challenges and opportunities this mode of communication presents.

A multi-case study methodology was chosen to provide a comparative lens through which the effectiveness of culturally specific influencer-led communication can be explored. This

approach allows for an in-depth examination of how different influencers—spanning health professionals, royal representatives, and politicians—engaged with audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the diversity in cultural, social, and political landscapes, a multi-case study design enables the identification of key themes and variations across contexts, offering valuable insight into the adaptability and impact of influencer communication in public health, public communication and beyond.

Rationale for case study methodology

Case study research is widely recognised as an effective method for investigating contemporary events where the researcher has little control over contextual variables (Yin, 1994). As Bowen (2013) highlights, case studies facilitate retrospective or historical analysis, providing a means to distil best practices and ethical considerations. Given the evolving nature of influencer-led health communication, this approach enables the study to assess varying degrees of effectiveness, engagement strategies, and cultural adaptations across different contexts.

Allagui and Breslow (2016) further advocate for the use of collective case studies in public relations research, noting that analysing multiple cases allows for the identification of common trends and culturally specific variations. Their work emphasises that award-winning PR campaigns demonstrate that social media and digital storytelling enhance audience engagement and facilitate behaviour change—key considerations for this study, which examines strategic influencer-led health messaging. By employing a comparative approach, this study aligns with Allagui and Breslow's (2016) methodological recommendations, which provide a structured framework to evaluate – and showcase – the effectiveness of influencer engagement strategies.

Justification for case selection

The selection of the three case studies—representing traditional health professionals in Indonesia, royal representatives in the UAE, and a popular politician in Australia—is not intended to provide empirical proof of influencer voices and differences, but rather to illustrate the diversity of strategic influencers and their value in a health communication context. These cases were carefully and deliberately chosen to challenge the common stereotype of social media influencers. Instead, they highlight the important role that culturally embedded, authoritative figures play in sharing public health messages.

Each case study represents a distinct type of strategic influencer with varying degrees of social capital and credibility:

- (1) Traditional health professionals (Indonesia): Emphasises expertise-driven communication and the trust associated with medical professionals in public health discourse.
- (2) Royal representatives (UAE): Showcases the role of cultural authority and heritage-based legitimacy in influencing public attitudes and behaviours towards health measures.
- (3) Popular politician (Australia): Highlights the intersection of political leadership and health advocacy, demonstrating how political figures can mobilise public engagement in crisis situations.

This selection ensures a nuanced exploration of how strategic influencers operate beyond the realm of social media and how their communication is shaped by cultural expectations, historical trust in authority, and audience receptivity. By studying these three culturally distinct cases, the research provides a broader conceptualisation of influencer engagement beyond commercial or social media-driven models. The variety of influencers chosen illustrates that

influence in health communication is shaped by cultural norms, historical trust relationships, and institutional authority rather than merely digital reach. This selection strengthens the study's contribution to strategic communication and public health by revealing how different societies leverage trusted figures for effective message dissemination.

Data collection and analysis

This study employs a multi-method qualitative approach, incorporating ethnographic methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019) alongside audience insights to analyse influencer-led health communication. Ethnographic research allows for an immersive exploration of audience experiences and cultural nuances (Daymon and Holloway, 2011), while the inclusion of audience perspectives ensures responsiveness to how communication is received and interpreted. This design enables the study to capture the lived experiences of communities interacting with strategic influencers in public health messaging, ensuring culturally situated interpretations of influencer engagement.

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), provides a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. By coding and categorising key themes across media coverage, social media content, media releases, official statements, and policy documents, the study uncovers recurring communication strategies, audience perceptions, and cultural adaptations in influencer-led health messaging. Thematic analysis is particularly valuable for its flexibility and ability to reveal implicit and explicit meanings in health discourse (Saunders *et al.*, 2023), making it well-suited to cross-cultural comparisons in this study.

The inclusion of written and spoken language analysis is crucial, given that health communication operates within a socio-cultural framework (Botelho and Lima, 2020). Cultural competence in health communication refers to the ability of healthcare providers and communicators to effectively deliver health messages to diverse populations. This involves recognising that communication is more effective when it reflects the cultural beliefs, values, language, and practices of the communities being served. Cultural competence performs a vital role in ensuring that messages are understood, accepted, and acted upon, thereby ultimately contributing to improved health outcomes. Botelho and Lima (2020) emphasise that cultural competence in health communication involves the adaptation of communication strategies to meet the needs of different populations. Their approach is grounded in recognising the role that culture – and cultural sensitivities – perform in shaping how individuals perceive health, illness, and healthcare. This study examines media coverage, social media content, media releases, and official statements to identify discourse patterns and power dynamics in health messaging. It thereby seeks to understand the communication styles, leadership roles, and effectiveness of influencer-led health messaging. The research further considers how the selected influencers navigate public trust, authenticity, and authority in their respective cultural settings.

Justification for comparative cultural contexts

By studying influencer-led health communication across Indonesia, the UAE, and Australia, this study provides insights into how different socio-cultural and political environments shape health messaging. The deliberate, strategic selection of these three case studies enables a comparative analysis of varying influencer roles, audience responses, and communication strategies, thereby highlighting both universal principles and culturally specific adaptations.

The multicultural composition of the research team further strengthens the study's validity by incorporating diverse perspectives and ensuring culturally sensitive interpretations of the findings. This aligns with best practices in cross-cultural research (Friedemann *et al.*, 2008; Wardale *et al.*, 2015) and reinforces the study's contribution to both academic and practical understandings of influencer engagement in public health crises.

Cultural competence in health communication refers to the ability of healthcare providers and communicators to effectively deliver health messages to diverse populations, recognising that health communication is more effective when it considers cultural beliefs, values, language, practices linguistic backgrounds of the populations being targeted – or indeed served. Thereby, it performs a vital role in ensuring that health communication is understood and accepted by different communities, leading to better health outcomes. [Botelho and Lima \(2020\)](#) emphasise that cultural competence in health communication involves the adaptation of communication strategies to meet the needs of different populations. Their approach is grounded in recognising the role that culture – and cultural sensitivities – perform in shaping how individuals perceive health, illness, and healthcare. [Malikhao and Servaes \(2014\)](#) take a broader view of cultural competence, integrating it into the social change communication model. Their work focuses on health communication as a tool for promoting social change, especially in the context of public health campaigns. Notably, they advocate for a participatory communication approach that involves communities in the planning, implementation and evaluation of health communication interventions. Further, they emphasise that health communication should empower marginalised and vulnerable populations, via the inclusion of cultural values and practices in health messaging.

Leadership during times of crisis

The strategic influencers under examination in this multi-site, cross-cultural case study emerged as leaders in the communication of public health advice, whilst engaging with varied audiences to persuade communities to adopt public health measures. Notably, whilst some were in formal leadership positions prior to the pandemic, they grew their influence and leadership capabilities as a result of their role during – in particular the early stages of – the COVID-19 pandemic.

Heroic leadership is a form of domination that evokes reverential sentiment in the context of fateful enterprises, campaigns, and social movements. The heroic leader, then, is revered not because he or she possesses authority or valued personal qualities, but because they use these to mobilise people for strenuous efforts to change or protect cultural values and institutional structures ([Schwartz, 1993](#)), in this case: World Health Organization sanctioned public health guidelines and a focus on local community cohesion.

The German sociologist [Weber \(1958\)](#) distinguished three ideal types of legitimate political leadership: charismatic, traditional and rational-legal authority, although he acknowledged that the different types rarely appear in their pure form. He defined a great leader as one who arises “in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress” and inspires his followers with “a devotion distress and enthusiasm” (1958, pp. 245-249). Greatness, in essence, is predicated on crisis ([Morris and Schwartz, 1993](#)), which test great leaders and allows them to rise. The concept of heroic leadership may have been challenged in more recent times, but there is no denying it is a common and persistent trope ([Tams, 2018](#)).

COVID-19 disrupted global economic activity, claimed over 7 million confirmed lives worldwide (Our World in Data), increased non-COVID-19 related deaths, and spurred a surge in mental health challenges. In response, individuals around the globe increasingly turned to trusted leaders for guidance amid extreme uncertainty. [Tourish \(2020\)](#) identified “five strains” of populist leadership evident during the COVID-19 crisis. These strains include *incompetent* leadership (i.e. distrust of experts, lack of action), *denialist* leadership (i.e. claiming the crisis is under control when it is not), *panic* leadership (i.e. claiming “experts misled us”), *othering* leadership (i.e. such as US President Trump’s description of COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” ([Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindaman, 2020](#) (April 22))), and *authoritarian* leadership (i.e. suspending parliamentary bodies and centralising power with a leader). These will be explored in more detail as part of this study.

Case study 1: Indonesia – medical professionals on Instagram

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, is an archipelago of over 17,000 islands in Southeast Asia, known for its cultural diversity and geographical complexity. These factors, along with limited healthcare access in remote areas, present significant public health challenges (Wenang *et al.*, 2021; Wulandari *et al.*, 2022). As one of Asia's most active social media user bases, Indonesia ranks third for social media engagement, with 86.5% of its population using Instagram (Statistica, 2024). Social media has become an essential tool for health education, spreading awareness, and mobilising communities—particularly in areas where traditional healthcare communication channels are less accessible (Assegauff *et al.*, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several Indonesian doctors took to Instagram to combat misinformation, increase public awareness, and encourage protective health behaviours. By leveraging their medical authority and digital presence, these doctors engaged large audiences, building trust and credibility beyond traditional public health messaging. A review of three prominent health professionals' Instagram accounts (@dr.ningz, @dhika.dr and @lulakamaldr), with a combined following of 314,800, highlights the ways in which these medical influencers simplified complex health messaging using a combination of videos, images, and text-based posts. Their approach was grounded in authenticity, humour, and emotional engagement, making medical advice more relatable and accessible.

A key aspect of these medical influencers' success was their ability to evoke emotion, particularly through what Aristotle referred to as *pathos*—a rhetorical strategy that appeals to emotions to influence attitudes and behaviours (Griffin *et al.*, 2023). Zhang and Clark (2018) argue that *pathos* is particularly significant in health promotion, as emotional appeals often inspire action and foster deeper connections than purely rational arguments (Zhang and Clark, 2018). Rather than relying solely on factual medical information, these doctors shared personal stories, first-hand experiences, and everyday observations to create compelling narratives that resonated with their audience. Their ability to integrate relatable, human-centred storytelling into their posts was particularly effective, with 92% of surveyed followers stating that the accounts had a positive influence on their health-related decisions, and 84% indicating a greater willingness to adopt healthier behaviours (Assegauff *et al.*, n.d.).

Findings suggest that video content was particularly impactful, as it allowed for direct interaction and expression, making messages feel more immediate and personal. Posts were often characterised by informal language, conversational tones, and humour—an approach that lowered resistance to public health messaging and increased audience receptivity.

Beyond emotional engagement, humour played a pivotal role in overcoming public scepticism and misinformation. Instead of adopting a formal, authoritative tone, these doctors used wit, sarcasm, and culturally embedded humour to challenge misconceptions and encourage positive health behaviours. For example, when faced with conspiracy theories suggesting hospitals were falsely diagnosing COVID-19, one doctor posted an image of an overcrowded hospital ward with the caption:

Do you think these patients are here because of laryngitis or because they ate too many potato chips?

Another doctor responded to accusations that pandemic precautions were exaggerated by declaring:

If protecting ourselves and those around us means being called 'stupid,' then I would proudly embrace the label.

This type of communication, which combines medical authority with everyday relatability, fostered trust and engagement, positioning these doctors as both credible sources of information and approachable figures within their communities. Unlike traditional health campaigns that rely on polished, professionally designed materials, these posts were informal and directly responsive to public sentiment, often gaining thousands of likes and comments.

Direct engagement on comment threads further reinforced a sense of accessibility and real-time interaction, making the information feel less prescriptive and more like a natural part of social media discourse.

In his analysis of populist leadership, [Tourish \(2020\)](#) identifies five dominant strains—messianic, demagogic, authoritarian, post-truth, and narcissistic. However, the leadership styles observed in these medical influencers do not neatly fit into these categories. Rather than relying on fear, division, or self-promotion, these figures leveraged subject-specific expertise, humour, and sympathetic leadership to engage audiences. Their leadership was characterised by authenticity and a sense of shared experience—acknowledging public concerns while providing clear, evidence-based guidance.

By embracing humour and direct audience interaction, these doctors cultivated a form of leadership that resonated with their communities in a time of uncertainty. Their engagement extended beyond one-way communication, fostering a participatory dialogue where audiences felt empowered to ask questions, challenge misinformation, and adopt healthier behaviours at their own pace.

This case study highlights the value of culturally adapted, emotionally compelling messaging in public health communication. The success of Indonesian doctors on Instagram emphasises the importance of continued digital presence, relatability, and humour in shaping health behaviours. Their approach challenges conventional health communication models by demonstrating how informal, interactive, and emotionally resonant content can drive engagement and behavioural change in public health crises.

Case study 2: United Arab Emirates – royal health messaging/modelling

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates located in the southeastern Arabian Peninsula along the Arabian Gulf. With Abu Dhabi as its capital and Dubai serving as a global commercial hub, the nation has rapidly modernised into a major transit and travel destination. This strategic positioning presented distinct challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in managing the heightened risks associated with international travel and a complex governance structure. Further adding to these challenges, 88% of the UAE's population consists of expatriates from over 200 nationalities ([Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.](#)), creating a highly diverse linguistic and cultural landscape that required tailored health communication strategies. However, unlike nations where political tensions led to fragmented public health communication, the UAE's leadership maintained a cohesive, unified approach, reinforced by the strong influence of the rulers of the seven emirates. This coordinated response was crucial in implementing effective health measures and maintaining public trust during the crisis.

Public health governance in the UAE is shared across multiple entities, including the Ministry of Health and Prevention and various emirate-level health authorities. However, beyond formal health policies, the country has a long-standing tradition of modelling healthy behaviours through the actions of its leadership. The UAE's rulers have taken an active role as custodians of national wellbeing by championing public health initiatives not only through policy but also by setting a personal example—an approach that was especially evident during the pandemic.

Long before COVID-19, the UAE leadership had prioritised public health awareness, exemplified by the Dubai Fitness Challenge (DFC), an initiative launched in 2017 by H.H. Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai. Designed to encourage residents and visitors to commit to 30 min of exercise daily for 30 days, the campaign leveraged Sheikh Hamdan's 16 million Instagram followers, positioning health as a shared, social experience rather than an individual responsibility. The initiative incorporated free fitness classes, corporate partnerships (e.g. Nike, Asics and PepsiCo), and school-based activities, integrating health promotion into daily life.

During the pandemic, the 2020 DFC adapted to COVID-19 restrictions by shifting online ([Masudi, 2020](#)). With 1.5 million participants, including 620,000 schoolchildren,

the campaign aligned with public health guidelines while reinforcing the importance of fitness in building immunity and resilience ([Government of Dubai Media Office, 2020](#)). UAE leaders' ability to model healthy behaviours through these campaigns illustrates their dual role—not only as policymakers but also as influential figures who actively shape public norms.

During the pandemic, this behavioural modelling extended beyond fitness into critical public health interventions. In March 2020, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (then Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, now UAE President) personally participated in a drive-thru COVID-19 test, sharing a first-person video detailing his experience. The widely circulated footage reassured the public about the safety and accessibility of the new testing centres ([The National, 2020](#)).

As vaccine hesitancy grew globally, the UAE leadership once again led by example. In late 2020, members of the royal families, cabinet ministers, and high-ranking officials publicly received COVID-19 vaccinations, posting images on social media along with messages of gratitude for healthcare workers. This act served two purposes:

- (1) Reinforcing public confidence in vaccine safety and effectiveness.
- (2) Positioning vaccination as a collective responsibility, rather than an individual choice.

In 2021, when concerns arose over vaccinating children against COVID-19, UAE authorities trialled an “immunity bridge” vaccine programme for minors ([The National, 2021](#)). To alleviate public concerns, members of the royal families enrolled their own children in the trial and documented the process through carefully produced video content ([AD Media Office, 2021](#)). This act sent a clear message of trust in the vaccine's safety. Unlike conventional public health campaigns, which rely on scientific persuasion, this approach used direct personal investment by traditional leaders to establish credibility. The implication was clear: “If we are willing to vaccinate our own children, you should feel safe doing the same”.

This gesture was particularly effective within the UAE's collectivist cultural framework, where leadership is seen as closely tied to the wellbeing of the nation. As [Alshateri \(2020\)](#) noted at the time, “The people's general perception of the government is that it is benevolent and goes the extra mile to provide care and services.” The royal families' participation in health initiatives reinforced this perception, positioning them not only as authority figures but as active participants in the nation's health journey. By June 2022, local media reported that 100% of target groups had been vaccinated ([The National, 2022](#)).

The UAE's leadership during the pandemic does not fit neatly into any of [Tourish \(2020\)](#) five strains of populist leadership. Instead of using rhetoric, polarisation, or fear, the overarching approach relied on modelling behaviour—demonstrating rather than simply advocating health behaviours. This can be characterised as a form of sympathetic leadership, where leaders reduce uncertainty by engaging in visible, relatable actions. Unlike traditional populist strategies, which often appeal to emotions through division or crisis narratives, UAE rulers depicted themselves as part of the collective experience—sharing in both the risks and responsibilities of public health efforts. This emphasis on participation over proclamation was instrumental in fostering public trust and compliance.

The UAE's approach to health communication during COVID-19 highlights the influential role of leadership as a model for behaviour. Rather than relying solely on top-down directives, the nation's rulers actively engaged in public health initiatives, thereby reinforcing trust, unity, and collective responsibility. By leveraging social media and participating visibly in health campaigns, they ensured that critical messages resonated across the country's diverse population. By authentically engaging in health interventions, the UAE's leadership not only deviated from traditional public health approaches but furthermore modelled the potential of SIL during times of crisis and uncertainty.

Case study 3: Western Australia – an island within an island

WA is home to the world's most isolated capital city, Perth, which is situated over 2,000 kilometres from the nearest major city, Adelaide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this geographical isolation became a strategic advantage, as the state implemented some of the world's strictest border controls, effectively cutting itself off from the rest of the country—and the world—for nearly two years (Towie, 2022).

WA's pandemic response was led by Premier Mark McGowan, a former naval officer who served as the state's 30th Premier until his retirement from politics in 2023. Despite implementing stringent restrictions that prevented many residents from seeing family members or travelling interstate for extended periods, McGowan maintained an unprecedented approval rating of up to 91%—a level of political support rarely seen in Australian history (Zadvirna, 2023). His exemplary leadership was formally recognised when he was awarded the Companion of the Order of Australia, the country's highest civilian honour (Ottaviano, 2024).

Unlike many political leaders who rely on traditional media as a gatekeeper, McGowan's approach was characterised by high visibility and direct engagement with the West Australian public through social media. His daily live-streamed COVID-19 updates, broadcast across government and social media channels, became must-watch events, reaching thousands of Western Australians who had previously shown little interest in political briefings (Raphael, 2021). While mainstream media journalists were invited to attend, the briefings were also broadcast live, in real time, via social media outlets. These updates were widely shared across Facebook, television, and radio, ensuring that government messaging was not only accessible but unfiltered by third-party media outlets (Hastie, 2023). McGowan's direct-to-public communication strategy was highly effective in a time of uncertainty, reinforcing clarity and consistency in government messaging. His presence on social media was so dominant that political commentators compared him to an influencer, with his Facebook page amassing 499,000 followers—a stark contrast to his successor's 25,000 followers in 2023 (Hastie, 2023). The daily briefings also arguably created a parasocial relationship between McGowan and State residents, with the Premier's humour celebrated (Dietch, 2022). Indeed, McGowan has mostly maintained his social media following and still has far more followers than the current Premier with McGowan's Facebook followers in 2025 sitting at 474,000 compared with current Premier Roger Cook's followers of 91,000.

One of the most significant aspects of WA's COVID-19 communication strategy was its commitment to accessibility, particularly for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. WA was among the first jurisdictions to include AUSLAN (Australian Sign Language) interpreters in all live COVID-19 media conferences, ensuring that vital public health information was accessible to deaf Australians in real-time. This move was widely praised as a step toward equity in emergency communication, setting a precedent for other states and countries to follow. It reinforced McGowan's broader leadership style, which prioritised visibility, access, and information flow, ensuring that critical health updates reached all segments of the population.

McGowan's leadership does not neatly align with Tourish (2020) categories. Rather than leveraging crisis narratives or political polarisation, he positioned himself as a facilitator of expert knowledge, modelling a calm and evidence-based approach to crisis communication. Unlike leaders who centralise power and decision-making, McGowan frequently deferred to subject-matter experts, including the Chief Medical Officer, Police Commissioner, and Vaccine Commander, who became public figures in their own right. By consistently amplifying expert voices, McGowan reinforced public trust in institutional knowledge, rather than presenting himself as the sole authority on pandemic management.

This visibility of expertise—paired with his own constant presence in daily updates—contributed to an unparalleled level of public engagement in health messaging. During his tenure, Western Australians were more engaged with public health information than ever before—a level of attentiveness that is unlikely to be replicated in the future (Towie, 2023).

Despite the strict and sometimes controversial nature of WA's lockdown policies, McGowan developed an unexpected cultural following. Dubbed "State Daddy" or "Papa Mark", he became the centre of viral memes, an (unlikely) sex symbol, and even the subject of a country love song that went viral ([Raphael, 2021](#)). Mainstream media reported other various acts of "affection" by citizens, including one Western Australian resident tattooing an image of the Premier on their arm ([Quaggin, 2021](#)). Headlines reflecting on McGowan's leadership, following his resignation in 2023, focused on his unprecedented popularity. For example, the nationally circulated [The Australian Financial Review \(2023\)](#) stated: "McGowan leaves a legacy of unrivalled political dominance". Another, from the same newspaper, reported "How a young navy officer became king of WA" ([McIlroy, 2023](#)). A *Conversation* article from 2023 explored his popularity stating "the advent of COVID took his popularity to completely new levels. McGowan's most popular policy was the closure of the WA borders to other states from mid-2020. Opinion polls indicated that as many as 91% of WA voters approved of his handling of the pandemic" ([Drum, 2023](#)).

However, this popularity came at a cost. As the pandemic wore on, McGowan and his staff faced escalating threats, including violent attacks on his electorate office ([AAP, 2022](#)). The very public trust and visibility that had fuelled his early success eventually became a liability, as restrictions were lifted and public sentiment shifted.

McGowan's leadership during the pandemic was distinctly characterised by visibility, access, and information flow. By removing media gatekeepers, he ensured direct access to government messaging, while his commitment to inclusive communication—including AUSLAN interpreters in all media briefings—set a benchmark for accessibility in public health communication. McGowan's approach also aligns with the qualities regarded as "exemplar" leadership by [Nicola et al. \(2020\)](#) for the pandemic, including open communication, acting early and decisively, leading by example, and not ignoring sections of the community. [Nicola et al. \(2020\)](#) contrast these leadership qualities with those who did not lead by example, such as British Prime Minister Boris Johnston and other leaders who infamously flouted their own lockdown rules, or Singapore where immigrant workers, housed in dormitories were forgotten.

Unlike traditional populist leaders described by [Tourish \(2020\)](#), McGowan did not rely on emotional rhetoric or crisis narratives but instead positioned himself as a conduit for expert knowledge. His unprecedented public engagement and record approval ratings highlight the power of visibility and direct communication in public health crises—though his eventual decline in popularity underscores the fleeting nature of public trust in leadership during times of uncertainty. For all the shifting sands and pandemic fatigue of citizens, McGowan's legacy is not forgotten and in late 2024 he received an honorary doctorate from the State's oldest "sandstone" University, the University of WA ([Gartner, 2024](#)). Politically, McGowan's Labor Party continues to have a hold beyond the term of his leadership, recently decisively winning the State election ([Mayes, 2025](#)).

Discussion

The preceding case studies illustrate context-specific applications of SIL across three culturally distinct settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. These cases form the empirical foundation of this study and illustrate the situated nature of influence across different socio-political environments. This section draws together insights from across the cases to identify common themes and points of divergence. Rather than presenting new data, it offers a cross-case discussion that interprets how influence was enacted and legitimised in each context, and how these practices align with - or extend - existing knowledge in influencer theory and strategic communication scholarship.

Much of the existing influencer literature frames influence in terms of social media engagement metrics, often conflating influence with visibility and follower counts ([Borchers and Enke, 2021](#)). However, contrary to assumptions in social media influencer research (e.g.

Sumandiyar *et al.*, 2023), the strategic use of KOLs predates modern influencer culture and remains a critical component of public relations and strategic communication. The alternative, strategic approaches observed in this study highlight the value of credibility, trust, and cultural alignment, rather than a narrow emphasis on social media performance metrics.

Despite varying cultural, social, and political landscapes, all three case studies illustrate that modern-day KOLs from different realms (royalty, politics, or healthcare) are now firmly intertwined with digital communication strategies. This study identifies three core drivers of effective health communication through SIL:

- (1) Trust and credibility: Strategic influencers were effective because they were pre-existing, trusted figures with deep cultural and social capital. Their influence was derived from expertise, leadership, or symbolic authority, rather than digital popularity alone.
- (2) Language and cultural context: Health messages resonated when delivered in a format, tone, and style aligned with audience communication preferences. This included the use of humour, storytelling, and culturally embedded leadership practices.
- (3) Visibility and accessibility: Strategic influencers were highly visible, providing timely, unfiltered access to health information via direct-to-public communication channels, including social media live-streams, interactive Q&As, and real-time engagement with audiences.

Government-led public health communication often defaults to static, formal communication formats (e.g. downloadable PDFs and official websites), prioritising institutional control over audience accessibility. Strategic influencers, however, operated outside these rigid structures, delivering messages in ways that are adaptive to health literacy levels, language preferences, and digital access constraints. Their ability to circumvent bureaucratic communication barriers enables more audience-centric and responsive messaging.

The three case studies in this article focus on pro-social, health-driven influencers, but it is important to acknowledge that influence can also be leveraged for non-progressive or commercially motivated agendas. The level of trust audiences place in influencers also exposes them to mis- and disinformation risks, particularly when non-experts present unverified health claims. The pharmaceutical industry, for example, has strategically engaged influencers to promote medical products (Romo *et al.*, 2020; Shankar and Li, 2014), while commercial entities have used social media influencers to normalise certain behaviours—such as vaping (Jancey *et al.*, 2024) and nicotine pouches (Aggeler, 2024)—under the guise of public health discourse. Thus, while strategic influencers may enhance public trust in legitimate health information, they also hold the potential to undermine evidence-based communication when driven by corporate, ideological, or political motivations.

Mainstream social media influencer culture is often associated with younger women promoting luxury brands, lifestyle content, or “wellness” trends (Carland and Fitch, 2023). The dominance of marketing-oriented definitions has led to the conflation of influencer marketing with strategic communication (Sumandiyar *et al.*, 2023). This study suggests that the current concept of “influencer marketing” is too narrow to capture the broader, strategic role of influence in public discourse. We propose the working definition of SIL to describe individuals in positions of power or authority who leverage digital platforms—alongside other channels—as tools to shape public attitudes, behaviours, and decision-making. Unlike traditional influencer marketing, which prioritises reach and engagement metrics, SIL focuses on credibility, expertise, and long-term strategic impact. Given the increasing encroachment of marketing into public relations (Gesualdi, 2019), it is critical that health communication strategies prioritise leadership over platform – or indeed vanity – metrics (Rogers, 2018), ensuring that audience trust and engagement are based on legitimacy rather than promotional appeal.

This study identified trust, cultural resonance, and visibility as core attributes that drive effective health communication through strategic influencers, answering our first guiding question. Unlike traditional top-down dissemination strategies, strategic influencers build engagement by aligning with cultural expectations and directly addressing audience needs. In response to the second guiding question, we found significant variation across cultural contexts. In Indonesia, medical professionals used relatable humour; in the UAE, royal figures modelled public health behaviours; in WA, political leadership was marked by real-time, inclusive communication. These differences highlight the contextualised nature of influence, shaped by existing social hierarchies and cultural norms.

Practical and social implications

[Tourish \(2020\)](#) identified five strains of populist leadership, each with negative connotations, including authoritarian, demagogic, and post-truth leadership styles. While elements of authoritarian leadership may be observed in the UAE and Western Australian cases, these case studies do not fit neatly into Tourish's populist framework. Instead, they highlight the value of culturally specific, audience-centric facilitation of information. Rather than relying on fear-based appeals, division, or crisis narratives, the leaders in these case studies leveraged trust, accessibility, and participatory engagement to communicate health messages.

Their leadership styles align more closely with [Schwartz's \(1993\)](#) concept of heroic leadership, which emphasises personal influence and visionary thinking in crisis situations. More importantly, these leaders were visible and accessible, adapting their communication to community needs rather than imposing rigid, one-size-fits-all leadership styles. These positive, society centric characteristics warrant recognition.

The basic right to universal healthcare ([United Nations, 1948](#)) extends beyond medical access—it includes the right to accessible, actionable health information. [Botelho and Lima \(2020\)](#) and [Malikhao and Servaes \(2014\)](#) emphasise that culturally competent health communication requires cultural sensitivity, community engagement, empowerment, flexibility and adaptation.

The strategic influencers in our case studies demonstrated these principles by aligning messaging with cultural and social expectations. Whether through humour (Indonesian doctors), participation-based health promotion (DFC and vaccine roll out), or real-time engagement and visibility (WA's Premier), these leaders successfully bridged the gap between public health messaging and audience receptivity. By communicating with key stakeholders in easy to follow, audience-centric language, strategic influencers in this study promoted health literacy, empowering individuals to take control of their own health with the aid of relevant information. While no communication strategy is without flaws, these case studies offer a blueprint for reconsidering the role of strategic influencers in health communication. Cultural competence is an ongoing process, and these examples serve as a starting point for refining the integration of SIL in health and crisis communication strategies.

However, while strategic influencers can serve as effective enablers of reliable health communication, they also pose potential risks by facilitating misinformation and disinformation, contributing to an infodemic that ultimately undermines public health efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed critical vulnerabilities in health communication systems worldwide, particularly in under-resourced regions, where trusted local figures often played a crucial role in shaping public understanding of health measures. Influence is not inherently neutral. Influencers—whether government representatives, health professionals, or social media personalities—may not always act independently. Despite limited transparency requirements, influencers often align with specific agendas, industries, or political interests, whether in support of public health measures or commercial ventures.

Given these dynamics, future pandemic preparedness and health communication strategies must incorporate lessons from past experiences, particularly in audience engagement, trust-building, and behavioural change strategies. Ironically, despite historically low global trust in

governments (Edelman, 2023), the most effective strategic influencers in our case studies were government representatives and political leaders. What distinguished them was not their institutional status but rather their authentic, culturally attuned communication styles. These case studies reinforce the importance of cultural considerations in selecting strategic influencers, particularly in leveraging humour, storytelling, and participatory engagement to make health messages more accessible and persuasive.

Conclusion and limitations

This study advances strategic communication theory by introducing the concept of SIL as a culturally attuned, audience-centric model of influence, particularly relevant during public health crises. It reflects the field's shift beyond organisational reputation management toward socially responsive and stakeholder-oriented paradigms (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014; Johnston and Taylor, 2022; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). SIL repositions influence not as a function of platform metrics, but as a product of trust, credibility, and cultural legitimacy. While much of the existing influencer literature remains anchored in commercial logics—focusing on visibility, brand promotion, and audience reach (Jin *et al.*, 2019; Enke and Borchers, 2019)—this study reframes influence as a context-sensitive form of leadership. By examining how health professionals, royals, and political leaders adapted their communication to specific audience needs, this study contributes to recent calls to centre audience engagement and listening as core strategic functions (Macnamara and Gregory, 2020). Importantly, the study adds to efforts to decentre Global North perspectives in strategic communication by exploring culturally embedded leadership practices in Indonesia, the UAE, and Australia. These case studies demonstrate that influence is context-dependent, shaped not only by formal authority but also by cultural resonance, symbolic capital, and community trust.

This study illustrates that strategic influencers - whether government leaders, healthcare professionals, or individuals with lived experience - can be highly effective when carefully selected and contextually positioned. While formal leadership may carry weight in some settings, local, relatable figures may have a greater impact in others. Across all cases, audience-centric, culturally competent communication emerged as more effective than top-down, one-size-fits-all messaging. This study has several limitations. Its exploratory, multi-case study design focuses on illustrating diverse approaches to SIL rather than generating generalisable findings. Nonetheless, all three cases emphasise the need to broaden the definition of “influencer” beyond the dominant social media model. Unlike commercial influencers chosen for their reach or aesthetics, KOLs or strategic influencers are valued for their credibility, campaign relevance, and authentic connection to audiences - both online and offline (Wolf and Archer, 2018).

In public health communication, reaching hard-to-access or marginalised communities may be more critical than achieving mass appeal. This reinforces the need for engagement strategies that prioritise equity, trust, and social capital. We therefore advocate for a shift away from the narrow “influencer marketing” paradigm toward a broader understanding of SIL or Strategic influencer engagement, i.e. approaches that emphasise credibility, trust and long-term impact (Zadvirna, 2023) over channel preferences and visibility (Rogers, 2018).

By adopting a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach to influencer engagement, health communication efforts can better meet the needs of diverse publics, especially during future crises. Such strategies are more likely to foster inclusive participation, trust in leadership, and behavioural change, offering a more equitable path forward than visibility-driven metrics alone.

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