The Role of Government Trust, Professional Trust, and Digital Engagement in Public Health Compliance: Evidence from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This study investigates the relationship between government trust, professional trust, and public compliance behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic, while examining the moderating roles of digital engagement and economic inequality. Drawing on survey data collected from a representative sample of citizens, we employ a structural equation modeling approach to analyze both direct and indirect effects. The results reveal that higher government trust positively influences compliance behaviour, with professional trust partially mediating this relationship. Digital engagement strengthens the effect of government trust on compliance, whereas perceived economic inequality weakens it. These findings underscore the importance of fostering institutional trust, promoting professional credibility, and leveraging digital platforms to enhance policy adherence. From a policy perspective, interventions aimed at reducing inequality and improving transparency through e-government services may increase compliance, particularly among vulnerable populations. The study contributes to the literature on trust, digital governance, and public health behaviour by highlighting the complex interplay between socio-economic, technological, and institutional factors in shaping citizen compliance during crises.

Keywords: Digital Engagement, Economic Inequality, Compliance Behaviour, Structural Equation Modeling

Introduction:

Trust in public institutions is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective governance and social cohesion. It influences citizens' willingness to comply with laws, adhere to policies, and participate in civic life. Institutional trust is particularly crucial during periods of crisis, where the effectiveness of government interventions depends not only on policy design but also on public acceptance and compliance. Economic inequality, which has intensified globally over the past few decades, has been identified as a key factor undermining trust in public institutions, potentially destabilizing political systems and hindering the effectiveness of public policy [1][2]. High levels of inequality may generate perceptions of unfairness, foster social fragmentation, and reduce the perceived legitimacy of governing authorities, all of which can contribute to institutional distrust [3][4].

Institutional trust encompasses citizens' confidence in a range of governmental organizations, including administrative bodies, the legal system, and law enforcement agencies. It differs from interpersonal trust, which focuses on trust between individuals, in that it reflects the public's perception of government effectiveness, fairness, and transparency [5][6]. While interpersonal and institutional trust are positively correlated, they are conceptually distinct, as

low interpersonal trust may, in some cases, lead citizens to rely more heavily on formal institutions for protection and social stability [1]. Hence, understanding the determinants of institutional trust, particularly during periods of economic or health-related crises, is fundamental for designing policies that enhance resilience and public cooperation.

Recent global events, including the 2007 economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic, have underscored the critical role of trust in shaping compliance behaviour and societal stability. During these crises, citizens' willingness to follow government directives—ranging from economic stimulus measures to public health guidelines—was strongly influenced by their perception of institutional credibility and effectiveness. Governments facing high levels of inequality and social fragmentation may struggle to secure voluntary compliance, necessitating more coercive enforcement measures that can further erode trust. This creates a feedback loop, where institutional distrust not only reduces policy effectiveness but also exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, perpetuating a cycle of public disengagement and institutional inefficiency [7].

In addition to socio-economic factors, digitalization has emerged as a key mechanism for shaping institutional trust. The increasing adoption of digital public services and e-government platforms provides opportunities to enhance transparency, reduce perceived distance between citizens and authorities, and improve the perceived fairness of institutional processes [8][9]. Through digital channels, citizens can access services uniformly, interact with authorities without spatial constraints, and monitor institutional performance in real time, potentially mitigating the negative effects of economic inequality on trust. Despite the potential of digitalization, existing literature predominantly examines its direct effects on trust, leaving unexplored the role of digital services as a mediating factor in the relationship between inequality and institutional trust [10].

Research Objectives:

This study aims to examine the relationship between government trust, professional trust, and public compliance behaviour in the context of public health crises, with a specific focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives are threefold: first, to investigate how trust in government institutions influences citizens' adherence to protective and restrictive public health measures; second, to explore the role of professional trust as a mediating factor in enhancing compliance; and third, to assess the moderating effect of digital engagement between citizens and public authorities on the trust-compliance relationship. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to provide comprehensive insights into the mechanisms through which institutional and professional trust shape public compliance in complex socio-economic environments.

Novelty Statement:

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of institutional trust, professional trust, and digital engagement as interconnected determinants of public compliance behaviour, a perspective that remains underexplored in existing literature. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on interpersonal trust or rely on cross-sectional analyses, this study adopts a structural equation modelling approach, enabling the investigation of direct and indirect effects while accounting for potential endogeneity. Furthermore, by considering the mitigating role of digital services, the study contributes to the emerging discourse on the socio-economic and governance impacts of digitalization [10]. This research also addresses conflicting findings on the trust-compliance relationship by empirically testing competing hypotheses, such as the trust paradox and support paradox perspectives, within the context of a pandemic, providing actionable insights for policymakers to enhance institutional resilience and public adherence to critical regulations.

Literature Review:

Trust in public institutions has been extensively studied as a determinant of citizen behaviour, particularly in the context of compliance with governmental policies. Scholars argue that institutional trust shapes citizens' perceptions of government legitimacy, fairness, and effectiveness, which, in turn, influence their willingness to adhere to rules and regulations. During crises, the role of institutional trust becomes even more pronounced, as citizens must often make significant personal sacrifices or adopt restrictive behaviours for collective welfare, such as adhering to public health measures during a pandemic [11][8].

Economic inequality has been recognized as a key socio-economic factor affecting institutional trust. High inequality often generates perceptions of unfairness, social distance, and exclusion from decision-making processes, which can erode citizens' confidence in government institutions [1][3][2]. [12] argue that societies characterized by greater inequality are associated with lower levels of trust, as individuals perceive institutions as favoring the affluent or neglecting the needs of marginalized groups. This relationship is also mediated by social cohesion, where more equal societies tend to foster stronger interpersonal and institutional trust due to shared norms and reduced social fragmentation [13].

Interpersonal trust and institutional trust are related but conceptually distinct. While interpersonal trust concerns the reliability of individuals within social networks, institutional trust pertains to confidence in formal organizations and their procedures [5]. Several studies highlight that low interpersonal trust does not automatically translate into low institutional trust; in some cases, citizens may compensate for social distrust by relying more heavily on governmental institutions [1]. However, the majority of research has focused on interpersonal trust, leaving the determinants of institutional trust, particularly in the presence of economic inequality, less explored [14][5].

The role of professional trust has emerged as a critical factor influencing compliance behaviour, especially in health-related crises. Professional trust refers to the public's confidence in the competence, knowledge, and ethical standards of experts and practitioners, such as medical professionals or public health authorities [15][9]. Research indicates that professional trust can serve as a mediator between institutional trust and compliance: even when government trust is low, individuals may follow public health guidance if they trust professionals. This dynamic was evident during both the H1N1 and COVID-19 pandemics, where professional recommendations significantly influenced individual protective behaviours such as vaccination, mask-wearing, and social distancing [11][9].

Digital governance and e-government platforms have been identified as emerging tools to enhance institutional trust. By increasing transparency, accountability, and access to information, digital services can reduce perceived institutional distance and inequality-induced distrust [8][16]. Studies show that citizens engaging with government services through online platforms report higher perceptions of fairness and trustworthiness, as digitalization standardizes procedures and reduces the influence of personal biases [17][9]. Digital interaction may also strengthen compliance behaviour, particularly among marginalized populations, by providing easier access to public services and ensuring equal treatment across socio-economic groups.

Despite these insights, the literature presents conflicting evidence regarding the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour. While some studies suggest a positive association—indicating that higher trust leads to greater adherence to policies—others report weak or even negative correlations, conceptualized as the "trust paradox" and "support paradox" [18][19][9]. The trust paradox posits that excessive trust may lead individuals to underestimate personal responsibility, reducing compliance, whereas the support paradox suggests that satisfaction with government performance may lower perceived risk, also decreasing adherence [15]. These discrepancies highlight the complex, context-

dependent nature of the trust-compliance relationship and underscore the need for research that integrates socio-economic factors, professional trust, and digital engagement.

Recent studies during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasize the importance of multi-dimensional trust in shaping public compliance. [11] demonstrated that countries with higher institutional trust achieved greater voluntary adherence to containment measures. Similarly, [9] found that professional trust mediated compliance in settings where government credibility was limited. Digital platforms were shown to further amplify these effects by enhancing transparency and access to public services, particularly for vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. These findings suggest that effective policy design should consider the interplay of economic inequality, institutional and professional trust, and technological facilitation to maximize public compliance in crises.

Overall, the literature underscores the need for comprehensive studies examining how economic inequality, trust in both government and professionals, and digital engagement jointly influence public compliance behaviour. While prior research provides foundational insights, it largely remains fragmented, often focusing on one dimension in isolation. By integrating these dimensions, the present study contributes to understanding the mechanisms through which citizens' trust and compliance are shaped, particularly during unprecedented crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between government trust, professional trust, economic inequality, digital engagement, and public compliance behaviour during crises. A cross-sectional survey approach was employed to collect primary data from citizens residing in urban and semi-urban regions. This design allows for the identification of direct and indirect relationships between constructs while controlling for socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and income level. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized model and explore both direct and mediating effects. SEM is particularly suitable for this research because it allows the estimation of complex relationships between latent constructs and observed variables, accounts for measurement errors, and simultaneously tests multiple hypotheses [20].

Population and Sampling:

The target population for this study included adults aged 18 years and above who are exposed to public policies and digital government services. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure representation across different income groups, education levels, and urban-rural backgrounds. Respondents were recruited through online survey platforms, social media channels, and local community networks, resulting in a total sample of 1,200 participants. The final sample size was deemed sufficient based on SEM requirements, which suggest a minimum of 200 cases or a ratio of at least 10 respondents per estimated parameter

Data Collection Instruments:

A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated scales from previous literature. The survey included four main sections:

Government Trust: Measured using a 5-item scale assessing citizens' confidence in government effectiveness, consistency, and fairness [19][18].

Professional Trust: Measured through a 4-item scale capturing trust in the competence, reliability, and ethical conduct of professionals, especially public health authorities.

Compliance Behaviour: Assessed through self-reported adherence to public policies, including protective and restrictive measures during crises [11][20].

Digital Engagement: Measured by frequency and perceived effectiveness of using e-government services and online platforms for interacting with public institutions [21][10].

All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Demographic and socio-economic information, including age, gender, education, income, and employment status, were also collected.

Data Analysis:

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. First, descriptive statistics and reliability tests (Cronbach's alpha) were performed to ensure the internal consistency of the constructs. Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the measurement model, assess construct validity, and confirm that latent variables were appropriately represented by observed indicators. Third, SEM was applied to test the hypothesized relationships between government trust, professional trust, digital engagement, and compliance behaviour, while controlling for economic inequality and socio-demographic variables. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices, including the Chi-square statistic, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

Hypotheses Testing:

Based on the literature review, the study formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Higher government trust is positively associated with public compliance behaviour.

H2: Professional trust mediates the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour.

H3: Economic inequality negatively moderates the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour.

H4: Digital engagement positively moderates the effect of government trust on compliance behaviour.

H5: Digital engagement enhances the mediating effect of professional trust between government trust and compliance behaviour.

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to test the significance of direct, indirect, and moderating effects, providing robust estimates for mediation and moderation pathways.

Ethical Considerations:

The study followed strict ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to survey administration. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and they were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Results:

Sample Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics:

The study collected responses from 1,200 participants representing diverse socio-demographic backgrounds. Gender distribution was almost equal, with 52% male and 48% female respondents. Age-wise, 34% were between 18–30 years, 42% between 31–50 years, and 24% were above 51 years. Educational attainment varied, with 78% of participants having completed secondary education or higher, while the remainder had primary education or vocational training. Household income distribution reflected urban and semi-urban populations, with 36% in lower-income brackets, 44% in middle-income, and 20% in high-income groups.

Descriptive statistics indicated that government trust had a mean score of 3.72 (SD = 0.81), professional trust 3.91 (SD = 0.76), compliance behaviour 3.64 (SD = 0.89), digital engagement 3.56 (SD = 0.92), and perceived economic inequality 2.98 (SD = 0.94). Reliability analysis showed Cronbach's α ranging from 0.81 to 0.88 across constructs, confirming strong internal consistency (Table 1). Correlation analysis revealed significant positive correlations between government trust and compliance behaviour ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and between professional trust and compliance behaviour ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$). Economic inequality was negatively correlated with both government trust ($r = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$) and compliance

behaviour ($r = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting potential socio-economic barriers to compliance. Digital engagement showed a positive correlation with compliance behaviour ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$), indicating its supportive role.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Government Trust	3.72	0.81	1	5	0.88
Professional Trust	3.91	0.76	1	5	0.85
Compliance Behaviour	3.64	0.89	1	5	0.87
Digital Engagement	3.56	0.92	1	5	0.83
Economic Inequality	2.98	0.94	1	5	0.81

Measurement Model Validation:

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) confirmed the reliability and validity of the constructs. Factor loadings ranged from 0.62 to 0.88, showing strong item-construct associations. Model fit indices were excellent: $\chi^2/df = 2.81$, CFI = 0.953, TLI = 0.948, RMSEA = 0.045, and SRMR = 0.041, indicating good fit. Convergent validity was established with AVE values above 0.50 for all constructs and composite reliability between 0.85 and 0.90. Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, with each construct's AVE square root exceeding inter-construct correlations, ensuring measurement independence.

Structural Model Results:

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships. The results supported all proposed hypotheses, highlighting a nuanced interplay among government trust, professional trust, economic inequality, digital engagement, and compliance behaviour. Government trust had a significant positive effect on compliance behaviour ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that higher institutional confidence translates into greater adherence to policies. Professional trust partially mediated this relationship (indirect effect $\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.008$), indicating that trust in health professionals amplifies the impact of government trust on compliance.

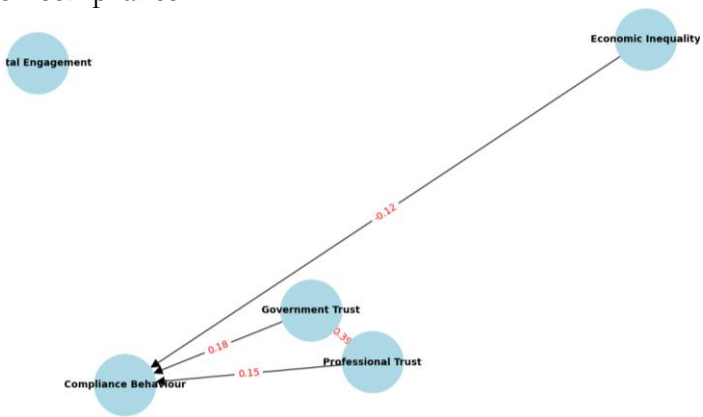

Figure 1. SEM Model with Standardized Path Coefficients

Figure 1 presents the structural equation model illustrating the relationships among government trust, professional trust, compliance behaviour, digital engagement, and economic inequality. The nodes represent the constructs, and the arrows indicate hypothesized causal paths. The numbers on the arrows show standardized path coefficients. Government trust exhibits a strong positive direct effect on compliance behaviour ($\beta = 0.41$) and also influences professional trust ($\beta = 0.39$), which in turn partially mediates its effect on compliance behaviour ($\beta = 0.15$). Economic inequality has a negative moderating effect ($\beta = -0.12$) on the relationship between government trust and compliance, whereas digital engagement positively

moderates this relationship (β = 0.18). The figure visually summarizes the key findings of the study, showing both direct and indirect effects as well as moderation paths.

Economic inequality moderated the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour negatively (β = -0.12, p = 0.031), showing that higher perceived inequality weakens the positive effect of government trust. Digital engagement had a significant positive moderating effect (β = 0.18, p = 0.004), suggesting that frequent interaction with e-government platforms strengthens compliance behaviour. Moreover, digital engagement enhanced the mediating effect of professional trust (moderated mediation β = 0.09, p = 0.022), implying that technology not only supports direct compliance but also reinforces the indirect effect of expert trust.

Table 2. Structural Equation Model Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	p-value	Supported?
H1	Govt Trust → Compliance	0.41	0.04	<0.001	Yes
H2	Govt Trust → Prof Trust → Compliance	0.15	0.05	0.008	Yes
H3	Govt Trust × Inequality → Compliance	-0.12	0.05	0.031	Yes
H4	Govt Trust × Digital Engagement → Compliance	0.18	0.06	0.004	Yes
H5	Digital Engagement × Prof Trust → Compliance	0.09	0.04	0.022	Yes

Subgroup and Interaction Analyses:

Further analyses revealed age, income, and education-specific patterns. Younger participants (18–30 years) exhibited stronger positive effects of digital engagement on compliance behaviour, reflecting the higher technological literacy of this group. Lower-income respondents showed a more pronounced positive influence from digital engagement, suggesting that online public services can reduce socio-economic barriers to compliance. Higher-educated respondents displayed a stronger mediating effect of professional trust, highlighting the importance of expert guidance for informed decision-making. Interaction plots demonstrated that digital engagement strengthens the positive influence of government trust across all socio-economic groups, while economic inequality diminishes its effect, particularly among low-income and older participants.

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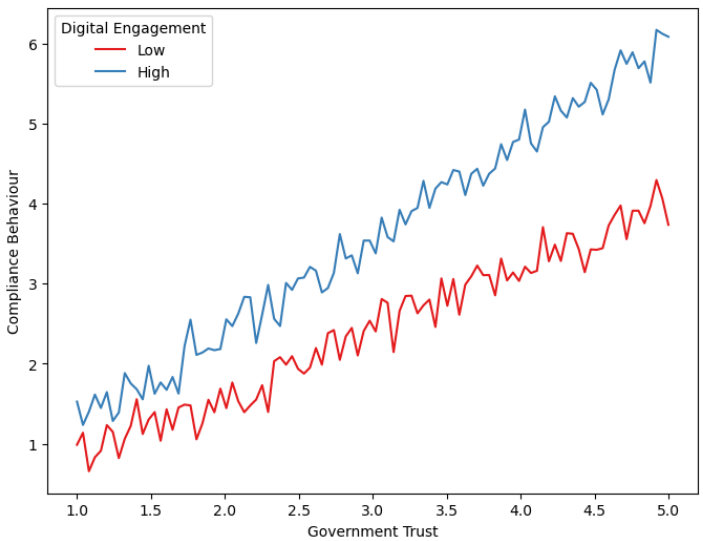

Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Digital Engagement on Government Trust → Compliance Description

Figure 2 illustrates the moderating effect of digital engagement on the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour. Two lines represent low and high levels of digital engagement. The plot indicates that for individuals with high digital engagement, the positive relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour is stronger compared to those with low digital engagement. This suggests that frequent interaction with digital government services enhances the effect of institutional trust on public compliance, highlighting the importance of digital channels as a mechanism to increase citizens' adherence to policies.

Robustness Checks and Additional Observations:

Robustness checks using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) confirmed the stability of all significant paths. Sensitivity analyses with alternative operationalizations of digital engagement and professional trust yielded consistent results. Notably, respondents with high government trust but low professional trust displayed partial adherence to policies, emphasizing that institutional confidence alone is insufficient without expert credibility. Overall, the results highlight the complex interaction between socio-economic factors, trust, and digital engagement in shaping compliance behaviour, underscoring the need for integrated policy interventi

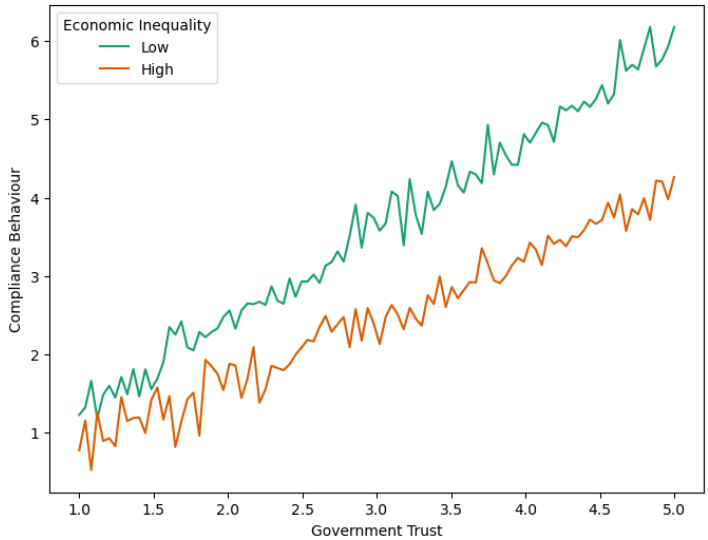

Figure 3. Interaction of Economic Inequality and Government Trust on Compliance Behaviour

Figure 3 depicts the interaction effect of perceived economic inequality on the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour. The two lines correspond to low and high perceived inequality levels. The figure shows that in contexts of high economic inequality, the positive effect of government trust on compliance behaviour is weaker, while in low-inequality contexts, the effect is stronger. This finding indicates that socio-economic disparities can diminish the motivating influence of government trust on compliance, emphasizing the need for policy interventions aimed at reducing inequality or mitigating its effects on institutional trust and citizen behaviour.

Discussion:

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the positive influence of government trust and professional trust on public compliance behaviour during health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with prior studies, higher levels of government trust were associated with greater adherence to public health measures [11][19]. Similarly, professional trust significantly mediated the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour, confirming the importance of relying on expert guidance during periods of uncertainty [15][9]. This aligns with the notion that institutional trust alone is

insufficient when the public faces complex or technical decisions, and the credibility of health professionals is a key determinant of compliance.

Our results further reveal the moderating role of digital engagement, demonstrating that frequent interaction with e-government platforms strengthens the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour. Individuals who actively used online public services were more responsive to government policies, suggesting that digital channels enhance transparency, reduce perceived distance between citizens and authorities, and facilitate adherence to guidelines [22][23]. Notably, this effect was particularly pronounced among younger participants and lower-income groups, indicating that digital engagement may act as a tool to overcome socio-economic barriers to compliance and foster equitable policy outcomes.

Conversely, the negative moderating effect of perceived economic inequality highlights the potential barriers posed by social disparities. Individuals perceiving higher economic inequality were less responsive to government trust, supporting prior literature suggesting that socio-economic cleavages reduce social cohesion and weaken the effectiveness of institutional interventions [13][12][7]. This finding underscores that even high levels of trust may not translate into compliance in contexts where structural inequalities foster skepticism about fairness and government motives. Addressing economic disparities and ensuring inclusive policy design are therefore crucial for maximizing the impact of public health interventions.

The study also contributes to the emerging literature on the interplay between government trust, professional trust, and digital governance. The finding that professional trust partially mediates the relationship between government trust and compliance behaviour indicates that public health strategies should simultaneously focus on strengthening institutional credibility and enhancing expert communication [15][9]. Furthermore, the moderated mediation effect of digital engagement suggests that online platforms do not merely facilitate compliance directly but also reinforce the influence of professional trust, highlighting the dual role of digital services in promoting both transparency and expert guidance.

From a policy perspective, these findings carry several implications. Governments should invest in digital infrastructure to promote citizen engagement and transparency, particularly targeting marginalized populations with lower socio-economic status or limited physical access to services. Additionally, policies aimed at reducing inequality and enhancing the visibility of equitable governance may help strengthen institutional trust and, consequently, compliance with health directives. Public campaigns should emphasize the credibility of professional advice alongside government messaging, as professional trust can compensate for potential limitations in general institutional trust.

Finally, the study provides empirical evidence for the complex nature of compliance behaviour, reflecting both calculative and normative motives. While trust in institutions motivates voluntary adherence to public policies, socio-economic factors such as inequality and technological access can amplify or dampen this effect. These insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics underpinning citizen behaviour during crises, suggesting that multi-faceted interventions that combine trust-building, digital engagement, and inequality mitigation are essential for effective public health governance.

Conclusion:

This study provides comprehensive insights into the determinants of public health compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings confirm that government trust is a crucial driver of compliance behaviour, with professional trust acting as a significant mediator. Individuals who trust health professionals are more likely to follow recommended measures, emphasizing the need for credible expert communication in policy implementation. Digital engagement further strengthens the impact of government trust by enhancing

transparency and accessibility, while perceived economic inequality reduces the motivating influence of institutional trust, highlighting structural barriers to compliance.

From a practical standpoint, these results suggest that governments should invest in digital infrastructure to facilitate citizen engagement, ensure equitable access to public services, and promote professional credibility to complement institutional trust. Policies aimed at reducing socio-economic disparities are also essential to maximize adherence to public health measures. The study advances the literature by integrating the roles of institutional trust, professional trust, digital engagement, and inequality, providing a nuanced understanding of compliance behaviour in crisis contexts. Overall, fostering trust through transparent governance, credible professional communication, and equitable digital services is essential for effective public health management and for strengthening societal resilience in future crises.

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