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Gender and Advocacy: Social Causes and Brand Endorsements Among Global Social Media Influencers

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of social advocacy and commercial brand endorsements, with a particular focus on the role of gender in shaping these dynamics. Drawing from Social Role Theory, the study examines how male and female social media influencers engage in advocacy, their motivations, and the strategies they employ when balancing activism with commercial interests. Using qualitative methods, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 social media influencers (10 male, 10 female) recruited from diverse geographic regions across Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe. A reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data reveals significant gender differences in advocacy approaches. Female influencers tend to engage in social causes with a strong relational and emotional investment. In contrast, male influencers approach advocacy with cautious engagement, often prioritizing objectivity and risk management. In examining the intersection of brand endorsements and advocacy, the study finds that female influencers emphasize ethical consistency and audience trust, aligning brand partnerships with their social values. Male influencers, on the other hand, view advocacy as a strategic asset that enhances brand reputation while maintaining professional neutrality. The research also offers practical implications for brands considering hiring influencers who engage in social cause advocacy.

Keywords: influencer; gender; social causes; advocacy; brand endorsements



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1. Introduction

Influencer marketing is often associated with an influencer's ability to monetize their influence (Goanta & Bertaglia, 2023). Social media influencers are individuals who are active on social media within a specific niche and have a sizable number of followers. They can influence followers' consumption-related attitudes and behaviors (Hudders et al., 2021; Lou et al., 2024). A growing body of research has examined the mechanisms underlying influencers' persuasive power. For example, studies suggest that influencers exert influence through parasocial relationships and source credibility (Leite & Baptista, 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2019), while others argue that influencers are persuasive because they are perceived as likable or similar to their followers (Hu et al., 2023). As a result, more brands are shifting

their advertising budgets from traditional media to influencer marketing, as influencers are often perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional media sources (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

However, influencer impact extends beyond shaping consumer attitudes and purchase behaviors; it also plays a role in driving engagement with social causes (Yang & Ha, 2021). Many influencers engage in online social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, which may be connected to their personal experiences or past hardships, and even virtual influencers are openly disclosing their advocacy. For example, the well-known virtual influencer @lilmiquela explicitly supports #BlackLivesMatter in her Instagram profile, while @Leya Love identifies herself as “Ambassador for Planet Earth” and advocates for #WorldAwarenessMovement.

There is a lack of research in the literature exploring the intersection between social media influencers’ brand endorsements and their genuine social cause advocacy. The former is inherently commercial, whereas the latter reflects a moral commitment. Drawing on interviews with 20 influencers from across the globe, our analysis provides insights into how influencers perceive and navigate these two roles. We found that while brand endorsement is commonly viewed as a core component of influencers’ persuasive practices, social advocacy is perceived as optional rather than obligatory. Moreover, we observe a gendered pattern between female and male influencers in how they approach brand endorsement and social advocacy behaviors.

According to Statista (2025b), a survey study conducted in 2022 among U.S. social media users indicates that females are more likely to purchase a product based on an influencer’s recommendation. Indeed, gender differences and gender roles significantly shape people’s social media behaviors (Barbee et al., 1993). Studies show that among Gen Z users, females are more active on social media platforms such as Pinterest (57% females vs. 15% males), TikTok (76% females vs. 60% males), and Instagram (83% females vs. 69% males) (Opeepl, 2024). Globally, Instagram has the highest share of female users among major social platforms, including Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, LinkedIn, and X (Statista, 2025a).

Gender roles, deeply embedded in society, influence behaviors from an early age. Men and women are socialized into different roles from childhood—women are communal, kind, and nurturing, while men are assertive and independent. Women also tend to be more expressive and emotionally driven than men (Eagly, 1987). These gender differences impact various aspects of behavior, including information processing (Lee et al., 2010), interpersonal communication (Tannen, 1990), and career choices (Ritter & Yoder, 2004). Influencer marketing has been explored from a gender studies perspective that addresses how gender dynamics influence consumer perceptions and behaviors. For example, Hudders and De Jans (2022) found that female consumers are more likely to be influenced by female influencers regarding their brand attitude and product purchase intention. Su et al. (2021) examined how the muscular bodies of male influencers impacted the effectiveness of influencer endorsements among female consumers. Knoll and Matthes’s (2017) meta-analysis showed that the endorser’s gender influenced consumers’ attitudes and behaviors toward the endorsed product. However, there is no research on how gender influences the influencer themselves, especially in their involvement in social causes, especially from a global perspective.

Therefore, guided by the Social Role Theory, this study aims to explore the social advocacy efforts of social media influencers, examine how these efforts relate to commercial brand endorsements, and investigate the role of gender in shaping these dynamics. By addressing this research gap of how gender affects social media influencers’ social advocacy and its impact on their commercial endorsement decisions, this research contributes to a

broader understanding of influencer marketing, social advocacy, and gender differences in digital spaces.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender Differences in Engagement with Social Cause Advocacy

Gender shapes both why and how men and women engage in social causes (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). Women are more likely to frame advocacy as a moral duty and a form of care. Their motivations often center on fostering connection, shared identity, and emotional resonance, particularly around causes closely linked to lived experience (Abidin, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2022; Lind & Wickström, 2024). Women also frequently rely on personal storytelling and self-disclosure, using autobiographical narratives to signal authenticity and relatability—key elements for sustaining trust and long-term engagement (Marwick, 2015; Walz, 2024). This style of advocacy aligns with social expectations that associate femininity with empathy, care, and emotional labor, reinforcing women's effectiveness in community-driven and identity-based advocacy (J. W. Scott, 2010; M. Scott, 2018).

In contrast, men are more likely to frame advocacy as optional, strategic, or conditional (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Vaiciukynaite, 2019). Males are often motivated by the pursuit of social change through instructional or problem-solving communication, positioning themselves as knowledgeable authorities rather than relational peers (Lokithasan et al., 2019; Chan, 2022). This pattern reflects traditional masculine norms that prioritize rationality, independence, and performance over emotional expressiveness (DeGue et al., 2024; Jin & Phua, 2014). Accordingly, males tend to build trust through demonstrations of expertise, technical knowledge, and analytical competence, particularly in performance-oriented or technical fields. These distinctions illustrate how women and men engage differently in advocacy for social causes in general. However, do female and male influencers consistently follow these patterns in digital advocacy contexts? Social media influencers are individuals “who, through personal branding, build and maintain relationships with multiple followers on social media and can inform, entertain, and potentially influence followers' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors” (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019, p. 3). Many influencers engage in social causes because advocacy aligns with their personal values, lived experiences, and identities. In 2024, approximately 50% of nonprofits reported working with social media influencers, often to support narrative construction, persuasion, or fundraising around social causes (Gopalasamy, 2025). Despite the rapid growth of research on social media influencers, there remains a lack of scholarship that explicitly examines influencer practices through gender theory frameworks (Fraile et al., 2025; Hudders & De Jans, 2022). Most existing studies about influencers treat gender as a demographic variable rather than as a socially constructed system of norms, roles, and expectations that shape influencer behavior and advocacy practices (Lokithasan et al., 2019; Scharff, 2023; Thomas & Fowler, 2023; You & Liu, 2024).

2.2. Gendered Role Expectations in Brand Endorsement

Influencer marketing is defined as a marketing practice involving partnerships between influencers and brands to promote products through word-of-mouth communication (Dhun & Dangi, 2023; Kalinić et al., 2020; Song & Kim, 2022; S. Zhou et al., 2021; X. Zhou et al., 2023). In 2025, global influencer marketing spending reached \$33 billion, and 26% of brands and marketing agencies devoted more than 40% of their marketing budgets to influencer partnerships (StackInfluence, 2025). Influencers choose to work as brand endorsers because such partnerships provide economic, professional, symbolic, and relational

benefits that support their roles as content creators and public figures (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022; Thomas, 2024).

However, although these relationships benefit influencers, they can also be a double-edged sword (Vredenburg & Giroux, 2018). Research on influencer–brand relationships has primarily focused on credibility and authenticity (Moulard et al., 2015), transparency and ethics (Boerman et al., 2017; De Veirman & Hudders, 2020), and congruence or fit (Kamins, 1990). For example, Audrezet et al. (2020) investigated how social media influencers manage brand endorsements and found that partnerships are accepted only when they align closely with what the influencer genuinely cares about.

Regarding gender and influencers, prior research has shown that gender plays a significant role in influencer marketing outcomes (Fu, 2024; Qu & Wang, 2025). Manzoor et al. (2025) examined how the gender of social media influencers (male vs. female) affects brand awareness in the Indian fashion industry. They found that gender shapes which trait is the most influential for brand success. For male influencers, trustworthiness is the strongest driver of brand awareness, whereas for female influencers, attractiveness (visual appeal) plays a more prominent role in creating brand awareness. Similar patterns have been observed in the Chinese context (Qu & Wang, 2025). However, there remains a gap in the literature concerning gendered meaning-making of advocacy in sponsored contexts. While Lou et al. (2024) examined why and how social media influencers can be effective in promoting social causes through cause-related marketing, their in-depth interviews were conducted with followers of influencers rather than with the influencers themselves.

2.3. The Ethical Tension Between Influencers' Brand Endorsement and Social Advocacy

It should be noted that despite influencers' strong impact on consumers' attitudes and behaviors, their influence is not always positive. Influencers may engage in greenwashing, promoting brands as environmentally responsible when such claims are misleading or inaccurate (Malatyinszki et al., 2025). In the health domain, research has shown that exposure to influencers' idealized body images can negatively affect followers' body image and mood (Powell & Pring, 2024). More broadly, influencers may harm followers' physical and psychological well-being by showcasing unrealistic body standards, luxurious lifestyles, and curated food choices (Hudders & Lou, 2023). For example, the muscular and fit body types frequently displayed by influencers have been found to induce body image concerns among followers (Valkenburg, 2022), while upward social comparison with influencers' glamorous lives can elicit envy and dissatisfaction (Chae, 2018). Additionally, influencer content has been linked to increased alcohol consumption among audiences (Hendriks et al., 2020). Beyond lifestyle and health outcomes, influencers have also been criticized for spreading misinformation. For instance, Harff et al. (2022) documented the role of influencers in disseminating false information about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines.

In the context of social advocacy, the ethical tension becomes even more pronounced. When influencers simultaneously engage in brand endorsements and advocacy-related messaging, the boundary between genuine moral commitment and commercial persuasion becomes blurred, raising concerns about authenticity and ethical consistency (Ekinci et al., 2025). Prior research suggests that such blurred boundaries may activate consumers' persuasion knowledge and lead to skepticism toward both the advocated cause and the endorsed brand (Audrezet et al., 2020; Friestad & Wright, 1994).

2.4. Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory (SRT) posits that gender differences in attitudes, behaviors, and social expectations stem from historically and culturally constructed divisions of labor and social roles rather than biological determinism (Eagly, 1987; M. Scott, 2018). According to SRT, individuals internalize gendered expectations through repeated observation of societal norms, which in turn shape beliefs about appropriate behaviors for men and women in both private and public domains (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). These internalized expectations influence how individuals perceive their responsibilities, moral obligations, and appropriate forms of self-expression, including engagement in social advocacy.

Within this framework, women are more commonly associated with communal traits, such as care, empathy, sensitivity, and relationship maintenance, whereas men are typically linked to agentic traits, including independence, assertiveness, rationality, and emotional restraint (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ritter & Yoder, 2004). Because social roles are culturally reinforced, individuals who deviate from these gendered expectations may face social sanctions or be perceived as less credible or inappropriate in certain roles (Clow et al., 2015; Eagly, 2004).

Prior research further suggests that masculine norms emphasizing autonomy and emotional control can discourage men from seeking, providing, or publicly expressing social support, whereas women's nurturing orientation and emotional expressiveness facilitate engagement in care-oriented behaviors, including advocacy and support for social causes (Barbee et al., 1993). Women's heightened emotional sensitivity and relational skills (Eagly, 1987) position them as particularly effective communicators of social values, moral concerns, and collective well-being, which may explain their greater involvement in socially oriented discourse.

2.5. Social Media Influencers as Opinion Leaders

Social media influencers are the opinion leaders in this digital age dominated by social media through their large number of followers and popularity online (De Veirman et al., 2017). By creating content on social media regularly, these influencers share attributes of other opinion leaders as being a peer co-consumer of products with similar values, life-styles and identity as the consumer. They share their lived experiences and opinions on products and various topics. They provide consumers with advice and influence consumers' decision-making on their purchasing behaviors (Godey et al., 2016). Through their articulation of knowledge in the subject in their social media content, perceived authenticity, shared experience, and parasocial relationship with the audience, social media influencers become trustworthy individuals that people look up to not just for product recommendations but also on public affairs issues and other topics (Ha & Yang, 2023). While marketers use them for influencer marketing to endorse products, social media influencers are also expected to use their influence on their followers for advocacy, such as support for human rights, working poor, and racial justice, as fulfilling their social responsibility (Taylor & Ha, 2025).

Based on the above literature review on opinion leaders and following the SRT, this study raised the following two research questions:

RQ1: Are there gender differences in social media influencers' engagement in advocacy for social causes?

RQ2: Are there gender differences in social media influencers' perceptions of advocacy for social causes when acting as brand endorsers?

3. Method

3.1. Sample

An in-depth interview method (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) was deemed the best method to study the experiences and positions of the influencers on the topic of social advocacy and brand endorsements. Unlike past research on influencers that mostly focuses on one single country (Ha & Yang, 2023), our diverse country sample choice was to obtain a global perspective from all major continents with different religions, cultures, and political systems on the topic of the relationship between influencers' gender and social advocacy and brand endorsement approaches. Influencers were recruited through a UNESCO social media announcement between September and October 2024 and through the researchers' network after the researchers obtained the Institutional Research Review Board Approval. The sample eligibility was as follows: 1. Have a minimum of 1000 followers. 2. Regularly post public content on social media. We offered an incentive of a \$50 gift card or an equivalent wire transfer upon completion of interviews. Participants were first asked to complete an online survey, and then we used the survey results to select the participants. A total of 20 qualified social media influencers were interviewed from Africa (Namibia, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya), Europe (Spain, United Kingdom, Ireland), the Americas (United States, Peru, Brazil), and Asia (China, Pakistan, Jordan, Philippines). It may seem that the final sample size of 20 is small. It is important to know that influencers are a hard-to-reach group. Even with the monetary incentives, we had more than 10 dropouts after initially agreeing to participate. We also strived for an equal number of male and female participants and a balance of large and small follower sizes, genres, and professional backgrounds of influencers. The selected participants were invited to participate in in-depth interviews conducted by 15 trained interviewers. These interviewers were certified in Human Subjects research. Before conducting the interviews, all interviewers reviewed the participants' survey responses to understand their background and incorporated this information into the interview transcripts.

Interviews were conducted in one of five languages—Arabic, Chinese, English, Portuguese, or Spanish—based on the participant's preference. Interviewers contacted participants via email to schedule the interviews, which were conducted via Zoom during September and October 2024. Each interview lasted between 30 and 75 min. Participants received the interview questions in advance and provided their consent before the interview. Consent was obtained either through a signed written form or orally during the recorded interview. Interviews were recorded in the participant's preferred language and later transcribed into English. If interviews were conducted in a language other than English, transcripts were translated into English. The interview guide, developed by the research team, contained 35 open-ended questions and was translated into five languages by professional translators.

Respondents were identified using a letter and number system (e.g., R1, R2, R3). Considering the intimacy and strong influence of nano-influencers (1,000–10,000 followers) on their followers in cause communities as found by Himelboim and Golan (2023), our sample's mix of nano-influencers, micro, macro and mega-influencers reflect truly the influencers community. Among them, R20—a travel content creator from China—had the highest number of followers (1.16 million). The final sample consisted of 10 men and 10 women content creators. USA, China and Brazil were the only three countries with 3 interviewees as they are the largest influencer markets in the world. Most participants were between the ages of 25 and 34. In terms of education, the majority held at least a bachelor's degree, while a few had a master's degree, an associate degree, or no formal education (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographics of Content Creators.

Subject	Country	Gender	Age Range	Education Level	Content Genre	Follower Size	Years of Experience in Content Creation
R1	Nigeria	Male	27–33	Bachelor	Music	2300	3 years
R2	Brazil	Female	25–34	Bachelor	Nature	28,400	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R3	Philippines	Male	25–34	Bachelor	Entertainment	71,400	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R4	USA	Male	45–59	Master	Sports and fitness	3500	More than 10 years
R5	Brazil	Female	30–40	Associate	Feminism and politics	49,200	More than 10 years
R6	USA	Female	18–24	Associate	Artworks	59,800	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R7	Jordan	Female	25–34	Bachelor	Media Literacy and Fact-checking	3338	3 years
R8	Pakistan	Female	18–24	Bachelor	Current affairs	21,000	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R9	Spain	Male	More than 60	No Degree	Current affairs	1000	3 years
R10	Kenya	Male	18–24	Bachelor	Fashion	9492	1 year
R11	UK	Female	25–34	Bachelor	Current affairs	29,800	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R12	USA	Female	45–59	Bachelor	News Videos	15,100	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R13	China	Male	25–34	Bachelor	Automobile	200,000	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R14	Pakistan	Female	25–34	Bachelor	Current affairs	31,000	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R15	Peru	Female	25–34	Bachelor	Fashion Media	2327	Less than 1 year
R16	Namibia	Female	25–34	Bachelor	information literacy.	1300	1–3 years
R17	Ireland	Male	18–24	Bachelor	Music	19,000	5 years
R18	South Africa	Male	25–34	Bachelor	Current affairs	116,000	More than 3 years and less than 10 years
R19	China	Female	18–24	Master	Fashion	107,000	1–3 years
R20	China	Male	35–44	Bachelor	Travel	1,168,000	More than 3 years and less than 10 years

3.2. Data Analysis

The data were interpreted using the SRT perspective and the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) because it is particularly strong for identifying patterns of meaning across interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). It consists of six phases: (1) The researchers read and re-read the transcripts to become deeply familiar with the data, taking reflexive notes on recurring ideas, tensions, and preliminary observations relevant to the RQs. (2) An inductive coding process was conducted to identify meaningful features of the data. (3) Codes were examined and grouped based on shared meaning to identify candidate themes. At this stage, themes were understood as patterns of meaning across the dataset rather than as topics or frequency-based categories. (4) Candidate themes were reviewed, which involved assessing whether coded extracts within each theme formed a meaningful pattern. (5) Each theme was clearly defined to capture its central organizing concept. Theme names were developed to reflect their analytic focus and relevance to the RQs. (6) Quotations were used to exemplify themes, while the analysis focused on explaining how these patterns addressed the RQs and contributed to SRT.

4. Results

4.1. Gender Differences in Social Media Influencers' Engagement in Advocacy for Social Causes

Analysis of the interviews revealed clear gendered patterns in how social media influencers conceptualize and engage with advocacy for social causes, consistent with expectations derived from SRT. Female influencers consistently framed advocacy as a central and defining component of their social media presence. Many described their platforms as spaces intentionally used to raise visibility for marginalized communities and to address systemic social issues. Advocacy was positioned as inseparable from their content identity and professional role as influencers (R2, R5, R6). For example, most women influencers emphasized using social media to “give visibility to the climate cause” and described advocacy as “a defining part” of their online identity (R2, R6). In contrast, male influencers more frequently positioned advocacy as secondary, optional, or situational, rather than integral to their content strategy. Male participants often described their primary focus as entertainment, information, or niche expertise, with advocacy appearing only intermittently or in response to specific circumstances (R20, R4). For instance, some men explicitly stated that they “rarely post about social topics” or framed advocacy as something they engaged in only when personally motivated or affected (R20, R4). This pattern aligns with SRT’s characterization of men as more likely to adopt agentic roles, emphasizing autonomy and task-oriented goals over communal responsibility.

Women frequently articulated advocacy as a moral commitment, rooted in responsibility, care, and ethical obligation toward others. Female influencers described engaging with social causes as something they “took upon themselves,” often emphasizing education, awareness, and protection of vulnerable groups (R7, R16, R5). These narratives reflected strong communal orientations, consistent with SRT’s expectations that women are socialized toward nurturing and socially responsive roles. By contrast, male influencers more often expressed caution and distancing when discussing advocacy. Several men emphasized risks associated with speaking publicly about social or political issues, including fear of backlash, misinterpretation, or reputational harm (R18). Others highlighted the complexity of social issues and questioned their own authority or knowledge to speak on them, suggesting that advocacy requires complete understanding before engagement (R20). Such framing reflects agentic norms prioritizing control, restraint, and risk management.

Female influencers frequently grounded advocacy in personal identity and lived experience, including gender, race, religion, and community membership. Advocacy was described as emerging naturally from who they are and what they have experienced, such as confronting gender-based violence, racial marginalization, or community injustice (R8, R7, R2). These identity-based narratives reinforced advocacy as both personal and relational. In contrast, male influencers more often emphasized neutrality or objectivity, distancing advocacy from personal identity. Men described social causes as the responsibility of institutions rather than individuals and stressed the importance of sharing “factual” and “emotion-free” information (R9, R10). Some explicitly rejected sharing subjective opinions on public platforms, framing neutrality as a professional or ethical stance (R20). This orientation reflects SRT’s assertion that men are more likely to adopt roles emphasizing objectivity, independence, and ideological distance.

In Table 2, we organized the themes and quotes of the participants by gender for easy comparison. Interviewees were identified using the following format: R9, indicating the respondent number, followed by age range and country. For example, “R2, 25–34, Brazil” refers to Respondent 2, aged between 25 and 34 and from Brazil.

Table 2. Gendered Patterns of Advocacy Among Social Media Influencers.

Gender	Themes	Quotes
Female Social Media Influencers	Central Component	R2, 25–34, Brazil: “I chose to use these platforms [Instagram and Facebook] as a core space to give visibility to the climate cause, especially for young [Brazilian] Black people from marginalized communities. I am part of this community, and I realized that although we are the ones most affected, we are not included in decision-making processes and do not control the budget, which limits our ability to create change on a large scale.” R5, 30–40, Brazil: “This is the cause [feminism and women’s rights] I defend the most. (...) I talk about sexual and reproductive rights, because that’s my cause, to really clarify how much this is a public health issue, how important it is, and how much it affects all women in the world.” R6, 18–24, USA: “Advocacy is a defining part of what I do online. I focus on issues such as climate change (...). I would like to collaborate and discuss with diverse communities to amplify underrepresented voices in climate change, it would be invaluable.”
	Moral Commitment	R7, 25–34, Jordan: “I am primarily a fact-checker, and I have been working in this field for about five years, mainly at a regional level. I feel a strong sense of obligation to address these topics and to clarify what is right and what is wrong about Muslims and Arabs. Other issues also matter, but these are especially meaningful to me. (...) In the Arab region, I see it as essential to promote critical thinking, which is the main goal of the content I create.” R16, 25–34, Namibia: “I work to raise awareness about digital and media literacy because I feel accountable for using what I know to improve the lives of [Black] young people and those who do not have access to the same knowledge. (...) I took it upon myself to share accurate COVID-19 information on my social media, knowing that this kind of guidance could make a real difference.” R5, 30–40, Brazil: “I am in favor of abortion, and this position reflects a deeply held conviction. I would even prefer women to have access to abortion rather than rely on the morning-after pill, which I believe can be more harmful to the body due to its intense hormonal impact. This is a conversation many people are not ready to have, but I am willing to engage in it.”
	Personal Identity	R8, 18–24, Pakistan: “I wanted to create content about a child marriage case in Tendolia, a small town near my birthplace. I heard about a 17-year-old girl who died during pregnancy while giving birth to her fifth child. I found the situation unacceptable, so I tried to write about it, but I could not access reliable data.” R7, 25–34, Jordan: “As a [female] Muslim and Arab, my background naturally shapes the issues I engage with. I am drawn to Arab and Muslim concerns, and I recognize that no one is completely unbiased, as we are all raised within specific social and cultural environments. For me, freedom is not something I experience in absolute terms. As a result, I cannot openly advocate for freedom, as the Jordanian state—grounded in Islam as the official religion—strictly forbids criticism of certain institutions and symbols, including the ruling authorities. If I were to publicly criticize the state or address issues related to government accountability, I could face legal consequences. For this reason, I am cautious and avoid advocating on these topics.” R2, 25–34, Brazil: “I am a Black Latina, and at this point in my life, I am more interested in learning how the climate crisis is impacting Black and peripheral communities, because this will strengthen a research project and help me write a strong letter of intent to gain admission to a university.”

Table 2. Cont.

Gender	Themes	Quotes
Female Social Media Influencers	Explicit Positions and Value-based Motivations	R15, 25–34, Peru: “I don’t focus solely on gaining followers, but on sharing important and impactful topics. For example, there was an instance involving a luxury brand with vicuña farms in Peru, where it was discovered that both animal and worker exploitation were occurring while the brand was selling the final product for \$10,000. This situation sparked a debate, and many people spoke out against it.” R12, 45–59, USA: “Art has always been a passion of mine since I was a child, and I want to use this expertise to inspire others so that they, too, can highlight the wonderful things around them in the world, thereby breaking down the belief that art is insignificant. I want to challenge certain views and demonstrate that art can also be an initial step toward success and have a part in society’s development. Finally, my goal is to use art as a distinctive instrument for societal change.”
	Advocacy as Secondary or Personal Experience	R20, 35–44, China: “Regarding social issues or trending topics, I don’t share my opinions on public platforms, nor do I document or describe the causes of such events (. . .). I rarely post about social topics on social media. I have no way to objectively understand an issue in its entirety, from start to finish.” R4, 45–59, USA: “(. . .) But in that town Sealy (Texas), there was nothing—no community gift drives at all. So, I thought, why don’t we start one? I was abused as a child, and that experience led us to work with CPS [Child Protective Services], since that’s how I got out of my situation. We partnered with CPS, got lists of things they needed, and published some of that information to start a collection. But initially, nothing happened—no one was contributing. So, I dove into my personal story and wrote about my experience, about blankets, and about what a good present for a one-year-old might be—a blanket. The baby didn’t request a blanket, but I remembered what it was like to be cold back then. And because of that, we ended up with an entire cattle trailer full of blankets. It completely blew me away. I had never seen anything like that (. . .).”
Male Social Media Influencers	Caution and Distancing	R18, 25–34, South Africa: “We wanted to focus mainly on people breaking the law to make others aware and encourage caution, covering topics like rising robberies and sexual assaults. Anything relevant to Zimbabwe, especially politics and crime, since those two often go hand in hand. Initially, we focused solely on crime, but we received a lot of criticism, with people accusing us of tarnishing the country’s image. They asked why we were always reporting on crime, saying that when foreigners find our page, they will see Zimbabwe as crime ridden.” R20, 35–44, China: “I believe that when you don’t fully understand the background and context of an issue, critical thinking is important, but it’s better to keep those thoughts to yourself”.
	Neutrality or Objectivity	R9, 64, Spain: “Social causes are usually associated with NGOs, unions, political parties, or other organizations. These are not associations at an individual level, but rather, they have acronyms and ideologies behind them. Here, we don’t have any specific ideology. Everyone here has their own ideas.” R20, 35–44, China: “Based on my own experiences, I feel that the current advocacy for gender equality is slowly becoming distorted. To begin with, I believe men and women should be equal”. R10, 18–24, Kenya: “I mainly focus on the financial markets and usually post between three and eight updates. The information I share is factual and not emotional.”

4.2. Gender Differences in Social Media Influencers' Perceptions of Advocacy for Social Causes When Acting as Brand Endorsers

Analysis of the interviews revealed systematic gendered patterns in how social media influencers conceptualize the relationship between social advocacy and brand endorsement, consistent with expectations derived from SRT. Female influencers predominantly framed advocacy as a moral responsibility that should accompany brand endorsement. Many argued that visibility, influence, and economic benefits derived from brands create an ethical obligation to support social causes (R15, R5, R19, R16). For instance, women emphasized that endorsing brands while advocating for causes is desirable because it raises awareness and creates social change, particularly when focused on education and marginalized communities (R16). This framing aligns with SRT's communal role expectations, in which women are socialized to prioritize care, responsibility, and social connectedness. In contrast, male influencers more often framed advocacy in the context of brand endorsement as a strategic or individual choice, rather than a moral obligation. Several men explicitly rejected the idea that advocacy should be required when working with brands, emphasizing autonomy and personal discretion (R17, R18, R20).

Female influencers frequently discussed the importance of authenticity, arguing that advocacy should be value-driven rather than commercially motivated. Some women criticized brand endorsement without genuine commitment to social causes, framing such practices as inauthentic or contradictory (R15, R6, R7). Others pointed to hypocrisy as a factor that could undermine activist credibility and ethical consistency (R2, R8). These narratives further reflect communal norms emphasizing moral coherence and relational accountability. Male influencers, by contrast, were less likely to frame brand–advocacy relationships in moral terms and more likely to evaluate them through pragmatic or reputational lenses, focusing on how such alignments might affect credibility or audience perception.

A prominent theme among male influencers was the establishment of strategic boundaries between advocacy and commercial activity. Several men emphasized the need to separate social causes from brand work to avoid conflicts of interest or financial trade-offs (R18, R4, R10). For example, some described advocacy as something that may compete with monetary goals or require careful consideration to maintain professional standards (R18, R10). Additionally, some men expressed the concern that advocacy could blur professional boundaries or create perceived bias, potentially harming relationships with brands or audiences (R13, R20, R9). From an SRT perspective, these male patterns reflect agentic role expectations emphasizing objectivity, neutrality, and control, which may discourage overt value-based advocacy when commercial interests are involved. Female influencers, in contrast, rarely emphasized such boundaries and were more likely to integrate advocacy directly into their brand partnerships, provided the alignment was authentic and ethically consistent. We compiled the interviewee's quotes on gendered perceptions of advocacy in brand endorsement contexts in Table 3.

Table 3. Gendered Perceptions of Advocacy in Brand Endorsement Contexts.

Gender	Themes	Quotes
Female Social Media Influencers	Moral Responsibility	R15, 25–34, Peru: “It would be ideal for content creators who endorse brands to advocate for social causes, as it is the right thing to do. However, many people don’t do it because, understandably, the brand would drop them immediately if they did.” R5, 30–40, Brazil: “Content Creators [who endorse brands] should choose a cause. I think everyone has a cause, everyone believes in something, but they don’t get involved. It’s a matter of courage to stand up for a cause (. . .).” R19, 18–24, China: “As content creators, we should take greater responsibility toward society [when advocating for social causes while simultaneously endorsing brands]”. (R19, 18–24, China) R16, 25–34, Namibia: “I think there’s a real need for digital content creators to be educated on these matters [digital content creators who are endorsing brands and advocating for social causes]. I’m more focused on education because, when you educate someone, you create change and make an impact.”
	Authenticity	R15, 25–34, Peru: “People who prioritize promoting a brand over supporting social causes in their content are not being authentic. No one is saying that money isn’t important—it is. But you also need to consider ethics. For example, if you identify as an animal lover and post about how much you love animals on social media but then promote a beauty brand that tests on animals, that’s completely contradictory.” R6, 18–24, USA: “Definitely yes! Digital content creators who endorse brands should advocate for social causes and help reduce social injustices. Their influence allows them to raise awareness and inspire and educate for a positive change.” R7, 25–34, Jordan: “I don’t think content creators who endorse brands should necessarily advocate for social causes, especially if they are not specialized in that area. It’s not mandatory for everyone to do so. However, it depends on the methods they use—if they are ethical, it’s acceptable, but if they are not, it certainly isn’t.”
	Hypocrisy	R2, 25–34, Brazil: “Publicly partnering with Vale [the largest producer of iron ore and nickel in the world] would be like signing away my credibility as a climate activist. For me, activism is more than just creating content; it’s connected to a historical, social, and environmental struggle that deeply impacts my community. (. . .) Associating with companies that engage in greenwashing can definitely harm your credibility, especially in the field of anti-racist environmental activism.” R8, 18–24, Pakistan: “If brands are supporting you in creating more content and being vocal about social causes, then that’s a good thing. However, if they are forcing you or restricting you to something very specific, then it shouldn’t be acceptable for content creators who endorse brands to advocate for social causes.”

Table 3. Cont.

Gender	Themes	Quotes
Male Social Media Influencers	Strategic boundaries between advocacy and commercial activity	R18, 25–34, South Africa: “You either choose the money or choose social causes. For us, it’s social causes, but it depends on the individual.” R4, 45–59, USA: One of the things Shiner Beer [It is renowned brand produced by the Spoetzl Brewery, located in Shiner, [Texas] does for the community is send two kids to college every year—one to Texas A&M University and one to UT [University of Texas]. They also give thousands upon thousands of dollars to veteran organizations and other causes. I think that kind of community involvement is worth noting and helps them in their reputation. If more people knew about these efforts, I believe they’d be more inclined to buy their products or donate to these causes themselves.” R10, 18–24, Kenya: “It is important to ask yourself whether you engage in advocacy and brand endorsement because you genuinely believe in them, or simply because of financial incentives. Whatever you do or say, you must maintain a clear code of standards, even when you hold divergent views.”
	Optional rather than Obligatory	R17, 25–34, Ireland: “Advocating for social causes [even if we are brand endorsers], I believe, is a personal choice. It depends on the individual. It’s great if content creators choose to do so because it helps raise awareness. So, I think it’s definitely a positive thing [to be a brand endorser and at the same time advocate for social causes], but it’s not something that should be forced.” R3, 25–34, Philippines: “Digital content creators who are brand endorsers should consider being advocates for social causes and helping to reduce social injustices (. . .). However, advocating for social causes doesn’t necessarily require someone to be a brand endorser. Anyone can use their platform to speak up about the causes they believe in and ensure their voice is heard.”
	Blur Professional Boundaries or Create Perceived Bias	R13, 25–34, China: “Digital content creators who are brand endorsers should advocate for social causes, as these initiatives promote social progress and contribute to positive change in society. Advocating for such causes can help raise awareness and inspire action among their brand’s audiences”. R20, 35–44, China: I do believe we have an obligation to promote social causes, even if we are brand endorsers. However, I try to avoid controversial topics, just in case a brand might want me to endorse them. Social issues such as environmental protection, peace, and gender equality are no longer merely subjective opinions; they fall under social consensus. (. . .)” R9, 64, Spain: “I think that content creators who are brand endorsers should not advocate for social causes. It is much better to avoid any affiliation with associations or NGOs, because, in some way, it creates a conflict of interest.”

5. Discussion

This study advances research on influencer marketing and social advocacy by demonstrating how gendered social role expectations shape influencers’ engagement with social causes and their perceptions of advocacy in sponsored contexts. Drawing on SRT, the findings confirm that female and male influencers enact advocacy in systematically different ways that reflect socially constructed gender expectations (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; M. Scott, 2018). Female influencers framed advocacy as a moral responsibility and an integral component of their identity as content creators. This orientation aligns with SRT’s assertion that women are socialized to adopt communal roles characterized by care, nurturance, and concern for others (Eagly, 1987). Female influencers frequently grounded their advocacy in lived experiences, linking social causes to gender, race, religion, and national background.

This finding aligns with prior literature showing that identity congruence and gender matching play a key role in influencer advocacy and credibility (Abidin, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2022; Lind & Wickström, 2024). Their narratives emphasized education, emotional engagement, and the protection of marginalized communities, reinforcing research that identifies personal storytelling and emotional labor as central to women's digital advocacy practices (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015; M. Scott, 2018). In contrast, male influencers more often approached advocacy with caution, distancing, and strategic restraint, reflecting agentic role expectations that prioritize autonomy, objectivity, and risk management (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Vaiciukynaite, 2019). Many male participants framed advocacy as situational or optional. Concerns about incomplete knowledge, reputational harm, and national image were frequently cited, echoing masculine norms that discourage emotional expressiveness and emphasize rational control (Chan, 2022; DeGue et al., 2024; Jin & Phua, 2014; Lokithasan et al., 2019). When male influencers did engage with social causes, their involvement was typically indirect, event-driven, or framed through informational rather than value-based discourse.

Our study advanced the SRT by showing how gender plays a role when social advocacy and commercial brand endorsement are put together. Gendered differences became even more pronounced when advocacy intersected with brand endorsement. Female influencers largely perceived advocacy as compatible with—and even necessary for—ethical brand endorsement, particularly when brand values aligned with social causes. Silence in the face of social injustice was often interpreted as hypocrisy, undermining credibility and trust. This finding extends prior research (Audrezet et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020) by demonstrating that, for women, authenticity is not only about brand fit but also about moral consistency across commercial and advocacy content. Male influencers, however, were more likely to frame advocacy and brand endorsement as separate domains, emphasizing personal choice and warning against blurred boundaries between commerce and activism. Although some male participants supported social causes, their advocacy was rarely framed as an obligation tied to their influencer status or brand partnerships. This divergence illustrates how gendered role expectations shape not only whether influencers engage in advocacy but also how they evaluate its legitimacy within commercial contexts. Importantly, although the sample included influencers from diverse global contexts, the findings consistently demonstrate that gender plays a significant role in shaping decisions related to social advocacy and brand endorsement, underscoring the cross-cultural relevance of gendered social role expectations in influencer practices.

6. Practical Implications

Brands seeking to collaborate with influencers on social causes must recognize that advocacy is not interpreted or enacted uniformly across genders. Female influencers are more likely to view advocacy as central to their identity and moral responsibility, making them particularly effective partners for cause-driven campaigns that require authenticity and emotional engagement. In contrast, male influencers may be better suited for advocacy initiatives that emphasize informational credibility, institutional collaboration, or event-based engagement. Importantly, cause-related marketing strategies should be tailored to influencers' gendered orientations. Campaigns that rely on personal storytelling, identity-based narratives, and moral framing may resonate more strongly with female influencers, whereas campaigns emphasizing expertise or consensus-driven causes may be more compatible with male influencers' advocacy styles.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights into the role of gender in shaping social media influencers' engagement in social advocacy and brand endorsements, it has several limitations. First, the study's sample size was relatively small and included participants from diverse geographic regions. While this broad approach offers an overview of gender differences in advocacy and brand endorsements, it does not allow for an in-depth analysis of specific cultural or religious influences on these behaviors. As a qualitative study, the results are not to be generalized to all social media influencers, but to provide insights into the relationship between gender, advocacy, and brand endorsement. To address this limitation, future research could adopt a more focused approach by selecting participants from a single country or cultural background. For example, a study exclusively on Peruvian influencers could provide deeper insights into how cultural norms, societal values, and national identity shape influencer advocacy and brand partnerships. Second, self-reporting bias remains a concern, as influencers may present themselves in a socially desirable manner rather than providing entirely candid responses. This underscores the need for observational studies or content analyses to validate findings. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot of influencers' experiences, limiting insights into how their advocacy and branding endorsement strategies evolve. Longitudinal research could help track changes in influencer behavior and engagement with social causes. Finally, while this study focused on gender, it did not account for differences across industries or content genres, such as music, fashion, or fitness. Future research could conduct comparative studies across industries and influencer tiers to better understand industry-specific trends and the varying influence of micro- versus macro-influencers in social cause advocacy and brand endorsements. A further limitation concerns the uneven distribution of influencer follower size in the interview sample. With more than half of the interviewees (12 of 20) having fewer than 30,000 followers, the sample exhibits limited variation in follower size. Because smaller follower bases may foster closer influencer-follower relationships as shown in previous studies, the observed influencer behaviors in this study may reflect more the smaller-scale influencers' perspectives, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings to influencers with larger audiences. Accordingly, future studies should include influencer interviewees with more diverse follower sizes, particularly the mega-influencers.

Despite these limitations, this study offers important insights and guidance for influencer marketing around the world by showing how influencers of different genders view their relationships with social advocacy and the endorsement of commercial brands, how social advocacy is seen as a complement or a risk, and how to best utilize the strengths of influencers of each gender.

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