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Consumers' gendered responses to influencer marketing: A research synthesis

Abstract

This review distills consumers' responses to influencer advertising based on their gender. There is a growing literature on influencer marketing, but there is no systematization of the findings related to gender, although this variable is pivotal in shaping consumers' attitudes. To cover this gap, a mapping literature review which uses a thematic approach was undertaken. The literature search in Scopus and Web of Science returned 18 studies published between 2011 and May 2022, which were eligible as they offer empirical confirmation regarding the gendered outcomes of influencer marketing. All studies focus on consumers with cisgender identities. Descriptive data concerning the main findings about gender, the proximal source, and product/service categories were extracted. The results are synthesized in factors associated with (i) female consumers, (ii) male consumers, and (iii) cross-gender patterns. They reveal the importance of gender congruity amongst female consumers and the link between a positive attitude towards the endorser and persuasive message receptivity. Male consumers' responsiveness displays a less predictable sequence, as it is enhanced to a higher degree by the persuasive message *per se*. The findings suggest that in matters of susceptibility to influencer advertising, the gender difference hypothesis holds the upper hand by comparison to the gender convergence in regard to consumers' attitudes.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, social media influencers, influentials, gender, consumer attitude, mapping review.

1. Introduction

Influencer marketing is a type of partially masked commercial communication (Petty, 2013), blending what are presented as independent (or sponsor non-interfering) statements with more or less clearly divulged promotional agendas, a format which the audiences have come to recognize as advertising (Boerman & Müller, 2022). It is the purposeful development and the ensuing commercialization of personal influence for the benefit of brands and other lucrative clients, that is, the trading of one's capabilities to affect people's attitudes. Influencer marketing represents the most prominent manifestation of the phenomenon identified decades

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ago by the researchers affiliated with the Bureau of Applied Social Research, who distinguished “opinion leaders” or “influentials” from other socially prominent people within a community by the fact that they are more concerned with some topics than the average population, and they are willing to share what they know and give advice (Jerábek, 2017; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 50). The studies of the Bureau represent a landmark in the emergence of what nowadays is known as “strategic communication” (Zerfass et al., 2018), which is underpinned by what Paul Lazarsfeld (1941) called “administrative research” in opposition to “critical research”, i.e., the deployment of research to serve the interests of specific constituencies (e.g., in marketing, in electoral campaigns).

Hynek Jerábek (2017, pp. 27-28) speculates that the origins of the concept of “opinion leaders” or “influentials” are to be found in a study carried out by Herta Herzog for a radio station. Participants assessed whether selected speakers were accustomed to give orders after listening to their voices and, then, being shown their physical appearance. The study emphasizes the link that respondents made between the speaker’s personal characteristics and their prospects of exerting personal influence. Afterward, Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955/2017) examined people’s propensity to have personal influence in their community in specific areas of consumption (e.g., fashion, movies), or in shaping public affairs opinions, by correlating three factors: (i) the life-cycle position of the opinion leader, (ii) their social status, and (iii) their “gregariousness” (i.e., the breadth of their social contacts). While social status was relevant for public opinion leadership, and the life cycle stage had a more significant effect on small consumer goods, the person’s tendency to interact with many people arose as a constant attribute of influentials. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/2017, Chapter 8) point to an additional dimension not covered by their study, that is, people’s susceptibility to advice and influence, and they caution that opinion leadership is impacted by the characteristics of the receivers of the communication. Since it was considered that influentials do not reach outside their social stratum, subsequently, the concept gave prominence to the opinion leader *in se* – to the detriment of the influential–influencee dynamic –, to their personality (“who one is”) and their competence (“what one knows”), as aspects that make them stand out in comparison to their peers (“whom one knows”) (Katz, 1957, p. 73).

Digital platforms have created an outlet for the phenomenon identified by the Bureau; the various types of sponsorship disclosure have institutionalized the transformation of opinion leadership from pecuniary disinterested advising towards a form of “testimonial advertising” (Moskowitz & Schweitzer, 2009). Before the advent of social media platforms, the term “influencer” was routinely used in marketing campaigns to identify people around targeted consumers (varying from family members and friends to sales agents and professionals, such as medical practitioners) who were in the position to recommend or discourage the purchase and use of a brand (e.g., Percy, 2008, pp. 251-252). By comparison to “influentials” – whose personality, competence, and network matter *per se* –, “influencers” become significant only in relation to target customers, namely, if they are perceived to have the formal or informal qualification to offer advice. Thus, “social media influencers” combine the traits of “influentials” with the functional role of an “influencer”, i.e., a third party likely to be involved in the consumer’s journey, in the process of purchasing and using products and services. The transition from influentials to social media influencers is marked by the following aspects (Abidin, 2015; Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 262): becoming part of a status group (versus having social status or a valued competence within a community), posting carefully planned texts, photos, videos on social media accounts (versus organically spreading oral word of mouth),

actively seeking to engage audiences (versus providing one's advice on demand), aiming to monetize these efforts (versus merely consolidating one's preeminence), the necessity of maintaining a following (versus taking for granted one's retinue).

Social media influencers (hereafter influencers) have come to stand for a distinguishable type of advertising by inferring the personal use of brands with which they collaborate. To stimulate emulation, precisely the consumption behaviour amongst their followers, they rely on cultivating parasocial effects. This means their engagement is oriented towards achieving a sense of reciprocated "understanding, connection, involvement and interaction" with their audiences (Kumar & Benbasat, 2002, p. 12) despite the lack of personal acquaintance. Parasocial interaction (PSI) – which on a continual basis evolves into a parasocial relationship (PSR) – is a technologically mediated bonding that media *personae* initiate and maintain with their public to further their popularity and interests (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In the context of digital technologies, PSI and PSR substitute the power that influentials traditionally exerted *via* direct interpersonal communication. Whereas influentials were scattered in their social milieu, where they were able to interact spontaneously with their peers, influencers are part of elective, virtual communities. In contrast to face-to-face interaction, technologically mediated audiences can withhold their responses. In the absence of this collaboration, the influencer cannot perform their distinctive media *personae* role, which involves instantiating personal influence.

In the past few years, influencers have become intensely researched, including from a strategic communication perspective (Hudders et al., 2020), which, as shown, is intrinsic to the concept's genealogy. Most commonly, this literature investigates influencer marketing by continuing the research tradition associated with assessing celebrity endorsers, focusing on the source's characteristics and impact on consumer outcomes (Vrontis et al., 2021). It looks at how source credibility (i.e., perceived expertness and trustworthiness) – leading to message internalization –, and source attractiveness (i.e., perceived similarity, likeability, and attractiveness) – facilitating identification – contribute to attitude formation and change (Ohanian, 1990; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). A small part of the literature on influencer marketing (see the reviews of Hudders et al., 2020, Vrontis et al., 2021) pays attention to consumer variables, primarily taking into consideration how consumers' gender shapes responses to influencers. This research stream indirectly attends to consumers' susceptibility to influence, problematized by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/2017, Chapter 8).

Consumer socialization theory posits that people adapt their responses to advertising messages throughout life, and that age, socioeconomic status, and gender are antecedent variables of this process (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). These variables interfere with consumers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence, defined as the inclination "to identify or enhance one's image with significant others", which manifests in being receptive to learn about products or brands by observing their behavior, seeking information from them, and aligning with their expectations in matters of purchase decisions and product usage (Bearden et al., 1989, p. 474). In gender matters, the general hypothesis is that differences arise as women are socialized to be peer-oriented, while men become achievement-oriented (Churchill & Moschis, 1979). This is derived from Maccoby's and Jacklin's (1974) contribution to gender theory, positing that sex differences can be minimized or maximized through socialization practices. Their contribution empirically underpins the prevailing sex versus gender dichotomy, according to which "sex" is the biological difference between "male" and "female" human animals, whereas "gender" is the social difference between females' and males' roles, which leads to ascribing people feminine and masculine traits (Appelrouth & Edles, 2010, p. 316). While the

determinative function of sex and the contiguity between sex and gender have been questioned (e.g., Butler, 1990), in this paper, the sex versus gender distinction is taken as a point of reference in understanding the concept of gender. According to consumer socialization theory, male consumers show stronger materialistic attitudes and social motivations (i.e., self-expression *via* conspicuous consumption), as it allows them to display prestige; instead, female consumers tend to exhibit socially desirable consumer behaviors, i.e., they are more engaged with the process of product evaluation and selection, which allows them to display accountability (Churchill & Moschis, 1979).

One hypothesis related to influence susceptibility was that overall women are more influenceable than men due to unequal power relations. Although cumulative evidence did not lend support to it (Eagly, 1978), this idea has resurfaced with influencer marketing (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 816). This inference draws on facts such as women – particularly the younger segments – spending more time on Instagram (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), and following a greater number of influencers than male consumers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). At the same time, Instagram – the leading platform for influencer advertising (Statista, 2021) – recently has reached an audience that is evenly split between female and male users, with the latter gender exceeding the former in the age groups 18-24 and 25-34 (Statista, 2022). Thus, we can expect male consumers to become increasingly exposed to influencer advertising. Before considering whether a specific gender is more susceptible to influencer marketing, the question that arises is whether there are gender differences in the responsiveness to this type of advertising.

The review seeks to answer this question in a context in which the expenditure on influencer marketing is projected to grow and to reach an increasing number of young consumers active online (Wielki, 2020), who often consider this type of advertising more credible than traditional advertising (Sweeney et al., 2022), despite the controversies that surround it due to its partially masked character. As influencer advertising integrates promotional messages with highly targeted entertainment, the positive attitudes it generates counterbalance the suspicion or skepticism that consumers typically experience when exposed to commercial offerings (Evans & Park, 2015). It is important to understand the factors that contribute to this process by bringing to the forefront consumers' experience for the purpose of expanding advertising literacy. This tends to be overlooked in the literature on influencers that contributes to the strategic communication field, which emphasizes the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. Since this review is underpinned by a replicable process that unbiasedly gathers the available evidence, it is helpful for scholars and professionals concerned with influencers, as well as for communication educators who share their knowledge with young people, the main target of influencer advertising.

2. Methodology

This study consists of a mapping or scoping review, which aims to indicate the amount of research on a specific topic, and to identify discernible patterns and potential gaps in the findings (Paré et al., 2015). It is performed with a thematic approach in order to present a narrative account of existing literature (Paré et al., 2015, p. 4). A mapping review starts with a comprehensive literature search to identify all the suitable studies for answering the research question. Since this type of review does not involve the appraisal of the included studies, the

literature search was undertaken in Scopus and Web of Science databases to ensure the criterion of high quality evidence. Google Scholar was used as an initial tool to become familiar with extant research and to determine the keywords used by authors contributing to this field. After screening the keywords, the following combinations were used to perform the search in Scopus (in the cumulative field: article title, abstract, keywords) and in Web of Science (in the field: topic): “influencer AND marketing, AND gender”, as well as “social AND media AND influencer, AND gender”. The search results were manually reviewed for relevance based on the abstract while keeping in mind the review aim, that is, to identify some sort of significant effects between influencers and consumers' gender. A second search strategy was to examine and cross-check the reference list of the relevant articles found *via* the bibliographical databases. The study of Liu and Brock (2011) was discovered this way. Although it deals with celebrity endorsements, it has a research design that makes the findings transferable to influencer marketing. Similarly, the paper of Todd and Melancon (2018) explores live-streaming broadcasters who are not necessarily brand endorsers, but they discuss their findings in the context of influencer marketing. Thus, it was included in the review.

The literature is summarized in Table 1, and the following data were extracted: (i) research design; (ii) the product/service category employed for conducting the research, and the targeted gender population (if any, the product-gender matching is specified, i.e., products that are for feminine or masculine targets); (iii) influencers' gender included in the study; (iv) the proximal source where the respondents were exposed to influencer advertising; (v) the main finding(s) related to gender.

3. Results

With the established eligibility criteria (empirical studies related to consumer outcomes and the integration of consumers' gender variable), 18 studies have been identified, published in English, and available online, full-text, in Scopus and Web of Science. The most recent studies included in the review date from May 2022, and the earliest is from 2011.

All but one paper have a quantitative approach; the exception (Tsen & Cheng, 2021) uses qualitative insights from focus groups to develop questionnaire items. Many of the studies ($n = 10$) have a survey design, while the remaining ones are experiments. Mostly they map consumers' attitudes (feelings, beliefs, actions) in regards to parasocial interaction and relationships (Aw & Chau, 2021; Bhattacharya, 2022; Hudders & De Jans, 2021; Jin & Ryu, 2020), attractiveness dependent on physical appearance (Todd & Melancon, 2018; Liu & Brock, 2011; Von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021), perceived source-receiver similarity or social attractiveness (Le & Hancer, 2021; Xu & Pratt, 2018), trustworthiness or credibility (Balaban et al., 2020; Le & Hancer, 2021; Tsen & Cheng, 2021).

The eligible papers are based on consumers with cisgender identities, making the findings relevant according to a gender binary framework. The product and service categories employed to conduct the studies are gender neutral ($n = 8$). In some papers ($n = 3$), female and male consumers are gender-matched with the advertised product (e.g., shoes, jeans), while in others ($n = 4$), the product and service categories are inapplicable given the research design; in one study there is a lack of product-gender matching, while in two of them, the matching is unreported.

To answer the review question, a thematic synthesis (Fink, 2014) was performed, and the data collected from the 18 articles was organized into findings related (i) to female consumers, (ii) to male consumers, and (iii) shared or cross-gender patterns.

Table 1. Extracted data

Author(s)	Research design	Product/ service category; targeted gender population (if any)	Influencers' gender	Proximal source	Main finding(s)
Aw & Chau, 2021	Survey	Does not apply ¹	Female and male	Does not apply ²	In the case of female consumers, attractiveness and expertise contribute to parasocial relationships, and in the case of male consumers this is achieved <i>via</i> the display of prestige. Parasocial relationships reduce the likeliness of perceiving the motives of influencers as self-serving.
Balaban et al., 2020	Survey	Does not apply	Not reported ³	Does not apply	Provided there is perceived quality of information, influencers' trustworthiness did not vary based on consumers' gender, but consumers' age increase led to diminished perceived trustworthiness.
Bhattacharya, 2022	Survey	Does not apply	Not reported	Does not apply	In the case of both female and male consumers, influencers' social attractiveness has a stronger effect on PSI than physical attractiveness.
De Veirman et al., 2017	Experiment	Does not apply	Female and male	Instagram	The number of followers correlates positively with influencers' likeability, but not with their perceived opinion leadership; in the case of female consumers, the ratio of followers vs. followees impacts the influencer's assessment.
Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020	Experiment	Unbranded bottled water; gender neutral product	Female and male	Instagram	The levels of attentional activation and emotional activation differ according to the influencer's range of influence; male (vs. female) consumers display a more homogeneous attentional activation, as well as heterogeneity in emotional activation.

Hudders & De Jans, 2021	Experiment	Smartbox gift (travel); gender neutral product	Female and male	Instagram	Same-gender (vs. other-gender) endorsements increase PSI amongst female consumers, while male consumers were not more responsive to either gender situation.
Jin & Ryu, 2019	Experiment	Luxury brand bags; gender-specific product (feminine target matched, masculine target unmatched)	Female	Instagram	Female consumers characterized by vanity or opinion leadership or fashion consciousness are likelier to trust brands when they are exposed to product photos posted by fashionistas vs. by the brand itself. Male consumers with the same traits showed more trust when exposed to content posted by the brand, but they were not the main target of the product.
Jin & Ryu, 2020	Experiment	Luxury brands items (e.g. bags); feminine and masculine targets matched	Female and male	Instagram	Influencer's type of photo impacts consumers' buying intention differently: for female viewers, the outcome is achieved <i>via</i> group photos (which trigger PSI), for male receivers the outcome is achieved with selfies and portraits (which trigger materialistic envy).
Le & Hancer, 2021	Survey	Travel destination; gender neutral service	Female and male	Does not apply	Due to the impact of social attractiveness, the gender mismatch between the influencer and the consumer correlates positively with the intention to engage with the consumption behavior. Overall, female (vs. male) endorsers were considered more physically attractive, whereas male (vs. female) endorsers were perceived as more credible.
Liu & Brock, 2011	Experiment	Sports shoes, mineral water, pain-easing ointment, female perfume, diamond rings, carbonated drinks, credit card, bank service, cookies, contact lenses, laptop, electric fans, fashion lamps, immersion heater; gender neutral products, gender-specific products (feminine target), matching unreported	Female	Does not apply	For both female and male consumers even if there is a low product-endorser match-up, a highly attractive female endorser will generate a high purchase intention. The same outcome will be achieved in the case of female consumers with a middle attractive female endorser when there is a high product-endorser match-up.
Roman, 2020	Survey	Dietary supplement; gender neutral product	Not reported	Does not apply	Overall, female (vs. male) consumers have more positive attitudes towards influencers. With increases in age or level of education or size of the town, positive attitudes diminish across genders.

Su et al., 2020	Experiment	Thermos water bottle; gender neutral product	Male	Instagram	Female (vs. male) consumers perceive less trustworthy endorsements made by a muscular influencer, and this correlates with lower purchase intention.
Sun et al., 2021	Survey	Event endorsement; gender neutral service	Not reported	Does not apply	Female consumers' attitude towards an event is directly shaped by their attitude towards the influencer promoting it, whilst male consumers' attitude is indirectly shaped by the attitude resulting after being exposed to the post of the influencer about the event.
Todd & Melancon, 2018	Survey	Video game live-streaming; gender neutral service	Female and male	Twitch	Female receivers do not rate attractiveness differently depending on broadcasters' gender, while male receivers perceive female broadcasters as more attractive. Female and male receivers do not differentiate between broadcasters' trustworthiness based on their gender; male broadcasters are rated higher in terms of perceived expertise by both female and male viewers.
Tsen & Cheng, 2021	Focus group & Survey	Tourism products, fashion and accessories, electronic products and food and beverage; gender neutral products, gender-specific products (masculine and feminine targets), matching unreported	Not reported	Does not apply	Across genders, credibility was emphasized as the main aspect when evaluating influencers; female consumers rate physical appearance and content production techniques to a higher degree, while male consumers appreciate more often the display of political sense.
Vaiciukynaitė, 2019	Experiment	Luxury brand shoes; gender-specific (feminine and masculine targets matched)	Female and male	Facebook	Overall, male (vs. female) consumers spent more fixation time on social media posts, and they gave more "likes" to the male influencer. Female consumers spent more fixation time on the male influencer, giving more "likes" to the female influencer.

Von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021	Survey	Jeans; gender-specific product (masculine and feminine targets matched)	Female and male	Instagram	Endorsers characterized by high attractiveness are perceived as likable independently from consumers' (self-assessed level of) attractiveness, and this generates purchase intention. Male consumers show anti-attractiveness bias towards male influencers, which lowers purchase intention compared to being exposed to female endorsers.
Xu & Pratt, 2018	Survey	Travel destination; gender neutral service	Female	Does not apply	Consumers' perceived congruence with endorsers' image positively correlates with the intention to engage with the consumption behavior, including when there is gender mismatch between the endorser and the consumer.

3.1. Female consumers

Gender congruity contributes to the development of parasocial interaction in the case of female consumers, who are more receptive – by showing greater post-engagement and brand attitude – towards female influencers (Hudders & De Jans, 2021). Furthermore, PSI or the feeling of perceived closeness with the source predicts increased buying intention (Jin & Ryu, 2020). In their initial influencer assessment, female consumers prioritize the influencer's credibility, looks, and content production techniques (Tsen & Cheng, 2021), and they pay less attention to expertise. In the long term, influencers' expertise, as well as the display of attractive content, are important for the cultivation of parasocial relationships (Aw & Chuah, 2021).

Influencers' physical attractiveness – i.e., being considered attractive, beautiful/handsome, elegant, and/or sexy (Ohanian, 1990) – is a factor emphasized across the eligible studies. When there is a low fit between the endorser's image and the category of the sponsored product or service, a high physical attractiveness will counteract this lack of match-up (Liu & Brock, 2011). For female consumers, both female and male endorsers are attractive communication sources, and they are equally invested in their success as providers of entertainment (Todd & Melancon, 2018). Physical attractiveness *per se* does not increase brand purchase intention, but this effect is produced by the likeability and credibility that female consumers associate with attractive endorsers (Von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021).

A positive attitude toward the influencer is important when it comes to the responsiveness of female followers. Their initial attitude toward the endorser will prevail over the content of a well-crafted social media post; it will directly impact how they respond to what is being advocated (Sun et al., 2021). In contrast to male consumers, female consumers will notice whether an influencer with a high number of followers will follow a small number of people, and this will lead to diminished levels of endorser likeability (De Veirman et al, 2017). Overall, influencers' endorsements are more effective than the brand itself posting on social media in amplifying brand trust among key categories of female consumers (e.g., those who are fashion-conscious) (Jin & Ryu, 2019).

The findings are conflicting when it comes to the contribution of gender congruity to perceived credibility: on the one hand, it is suggested that female sources benefit from enhanced credibility amongst female receivers (Von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021). On the other hand, this specific interaction was not found (Le & Hancer, 2021). As I will show later on, influencers' perceived credibility is important for both female and male consumers, and arguably it has to do with the fact that influencers are associated with a type of advertising that is susceptible to deceptive practices. Perceived similarity *via* gender enhances parasocial interaction amongst female consumers, meaning that they feel comfortable bonding with their female peers who are influencers. Possibly, the effect does not emerge consistently when it comes to credibility as it requires a track record over time, and this also can be related to research design limitations, such as a one-time exposure to the purported influencer.

3.2. Male consumers

The factor linked to heightened parasocial interaction amongst male receivers was influencers' showcase of prestige in their social media content (e.g., social status, affluence) (Aw & Chau, 2021). Next in sequence, brand purchase intention is achieved as male consumers develop post-exposure materialistic envy, while feeling of perceived closeness with the source did not contribute to the marketing outcome (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Neither gender is more conducive to feelings of parasocial interaction amongst male consumers (Hudders & De Jans, 2021), although male receivers as their female counterparts are likelier to show active participation (e.g., liking posts) towards endorsers who match their gender (Vaiciukynaite, 2019).

The impact of physical attractiveness will depend on the influencer's gender. Overall, male consumers see female communication sources as more attractive than male sources, and they are more invested in their success (Todd & Melancon, 2018). A highly attractive male influencer is seen as less likable than a highly attractive female influencer; in these circumstances, a female endorser is more effective in increasing brand purchase intention amongst male consumers (Von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021). When female influencers' physical attractiveness is emphasized, buying intention increases as the perceived level of attractiveness is higher (Liu & Brock, 2011).

Two other factors that persuade male receivers were identified. They give more weight to influencers' political sense, which entails sharing a similar political orientation with the endorser, and the expectation to see endorsers express their opinions on social issues (Tsen & Cheng, 2021). Male consumers' attitudes toward what is being advocated can be shaped by a well-written social media post. Consequently, the pre-existing attitude towards the endorser will not override (Sun et al., 2021). Two converging findings indicate that male receivers pay more attention than female receivers when looking both at the content posted by female and male sources (Vaiciukynaite, 2019), and that they display attention behavior which tends to be constant (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020).

3.3. Cross-gender patterns

Endorsers' social attractiveness or perceived source-receiver similarity plays a significant role in influencing consumers across genders. Bhattacharya (2022) found that social attractiveness, as well as credibility, are more important than physical attractiveness in generating parasocial interaction; as consumers consider themselves similar to the influencers they follow – in terms of status, beliefs, tastes, etc. – they are inspired by their consumption choices.

es, and they develop brand preference in regard to the promoted brand which leads to increased purchase intention.

Two studies related to travel destinations show that the emulation of the consumption behavior occurs also when there is a gender mismatch between the source and the receiver of the communication (Le & Hancer, 2021; Xu & Pratt, 2018). In this context, the impact of social attractiveness on developing the intention to imitate the influencer was higher when female consumers were exposed to a male endorser, and vice versa when male consumers were exposed to a female endorser (Le & Hancer, 2021). At the same time, matching the endorsers' image with the destination was three times more effective in predicting consumers' visiting intention than perceived source-receiver similarity (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

The interaction of gender with other sociodemographic characteristics decreases consumers' susceptibility to influencer marketing. The influencer's credibility is equally prioritized by female and male receivers (Le & Hancer, 2021; Tsen & Cheng, 2021), but as consumers' age increases (Balaban et al., 2020), and they reside in towns of greater size and/or have higher levels of education (Roman, 2020), influencers are perceived as less trustworthy, i.e., to a smaller extent inclined to communicate the most accurate information.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The reviewed data indicates that female and male consumers' responsiveness to influencer advertising differs. Most of the eligible literature has Instagram as a proximal source ($n = 7$), making the findings particularly relevant for this platform.

For female consumers, gender-based identification impacts their susceptibility to influencer marketing. Although they find that both female and male influencers are attractive communication sources, female receivers are more inclined to develop parasocial interactions and relations with female influencers. This type of involvement is considered the cornerstone of influencer advertising, as it leads to superior marketing outcomes (e.g. brand attitude, purchase intention) (Lou, 2022). A sequence can be delineated: it starts with assessing the influencer's credibility, whether they are providers of genuine information and advice; it is underpinned by the source's commitment to content production, while physical attractiveness is an advantage, as it makes the endorser appear more likable and credible. The influencer's expertise supports the transformation of episodic parasocial interaction into a parasocial relationship. The consolidating factor is a sense of shared similarities with the source, with gender-based identification playing a significant role. Perceived similarity with the source is associated with increased trust: as the receivers will feel there is psychological safety and a supportive climate, they will be prone to engage with the influencer (Ohanian, 1990). If a female consumer has a favorable disposition toward the influencer, the acceptance of what the source is advocating will be facilitated; however, if such favorability is not established, it is less probable for them to become subjects to the influencer's persuasion.

For parasocial interaction and buying behavior to occur in the case of male consumers, the aspiration to be like the source – in terms of social status and/or material possessions – is more impactful than the interest that arises due to the shared identity. The perceived similarity with the communication source also persuades male consumers, but it is prominent across the psychographic dimension (e.g. common political views) versus the sociodemographic one (e.g. gender), and this allows them to feel similar to both female and male influ-

encers. When influencers' physical attractiveness is prioritized by the marketing campaign, male consumers (presumably with a heterosexual orientation) respond positively to the persuasion attempt only when the source is a female. As in the case of female receivers, they pay attention to the source's credibility and to the attractiveness of the content, however their attitude towards what the source is promoting can be changed *via* the content *per se*, and it is less predetermined by the way they relate to the source. Thus, it appears that for male followers, the favorability of responses can be contingently shaped by the way that the source communicates the persuasive message.

In accordance with consumer socialization theory, the review findings suggest that male consumers' behavior continues to be triggered by materialistic attitudes, while female consumers' tendency to pay increased attention to product evaluation and selection is (re)directed towards assessing the influencer's *persona*. The patterns can be further linked to the literature concerned with information processing strategies in advertising (Darley & Smith, 1995). According to this body of research, female consumers engage in a comprehensive strategy of information processing, by taking into consideration the broader scope of information; as such, they attempt to integrate all the available cues of the persuasive message. Male consumers rely on selective processing, by prioritizing information that is highly salient and immediately available in the episodic exposure; consequently, their responses are less predictable.

Beyond these gendered patterns that arise due to socialization, the findings need to be placed in the environment of influencer marketing, in which female influencers outnumber male influencers (IZEA, 2022). In this situation, the type of source-receiver similarity that is more plausible to emerge is the one between female influencers and female followers. Neither female consumers nor male consumers are necessarily more receptive to persuasive messages coming from a person who shares their gender (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003), however source-receiver similarity identification is routinely cultivated by media formats and contents (Feilitzen & Linné, 1975). Influencer marketing is a gendered format (Edwards, 2022), it is mainly associated with areas of consumption that traditionally are feminized, such as beauty, fashion, and lifestyle, effectively stimulating the buying behavior of a young female target (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). As influencer advertising currently emphasizes gender similarity between sources and receivers who identify as (cisgender) women, this also accounts for the reduced impact of gender-based identification amongst male consumers, and their orientation towards other types of perceived similarities with influencers.

The research of the interaction between gender and consumers' responsiveness to influencer advertising would benefit from the participation of gender/sex diverse respondents. They represent a growing segment of young consumers, and their inclusion would allow the understanding of patterns more accurately, possibly across a continuum rather than in the form of gender binarism. The limitations of the review are related to the small number of studies that pay attention to consumers' gender when investigating responses to influencer advertising. The review offers a point of departure in examining this receptivity in a context concurrently marked by the expansion of influencer marketing, and by the sharp increase of the literature on this topic. A problem related to the emerging literature is that the findings are not always comparable despite the shared interest in understanding the mechanism of influencer advertising. Although researchers are interested in the same phenomenon (e.g., source attractiveness), they often use constructs that measure and explore different dimensions of the phenomenon (e.g., see Aw & Chau, 2021 vs. Todd & Melancon, 2018).

The synthesis contributes by cumulating and harmonizing the evidence regarding consumers' gender-based responsiveness to influencer advertising, and by extrapolating the main patterns. The review shows that there are gender differences in the receptivity to influencer marketing, and given the existing literature, it cannot be inferred whether a specific gender is more susceptible to this type of advertising. What emerges is that female consumers' outcomes are related to the feeling of perceived closeness with the source of the message, and with the comprehensive examination of the influencer's persuasive attempts; in contrast, male consumers' outcomes are linked to materialistic attitudes, and by a more detailed processing of the source's message. The outcomes are partially achieved with distinct means as female and male consumers share the propensity to engage with influencers to whom they feel socially attracted due to perceived similarity. More research is needed to substantiate these patterns, and to expand them beyond the use of influencers for commercial purposes. Currently, gender appears to be the most significant factor in determining the influencer-influencee interaction as cisgender women dominate numerically influencer marketing, and women with cisgender identities, with shared life-cycle positions, will become susceptible to their influence and advice in matters of consumption. It cannot be concluded that female consumers are inherently more susceptible to influencer marketing as what is being witnessed is a structural effect of the influencer business environment. To have a better grasp of consumers' responsiveness to influencer advertising and its gendered patterns, it would be necessary to explore the increasing involvement of influencers with social (marketing) causes, to see whether life-cycle position – traditionally, associated with the consumer goods sphere – and the proneness to identify with the source of the message will have the greatest impact on outcomes or if social status and experiencing the internalization of the message will become prominent.

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Notes

¹ Respondents were asked to think about influencers they follow without being required to indicate endorsed product/service categories.

² Respondents were not required to indicate the proximal source where they interact(ed) with the influencer(s).

³ Respondents were not required to indicate the gender of the influencer(s) they had in mind during the survey.

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