

# The Dynamics of Influencer Advocacy in Modern Society

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## Abstract

This paper explores the influence of social media influencers on advocacy efforts to transform modern society, using examples such as Freddie Mercury and Simone Biles. It argues that influencers possess significant power to shape public opinion and drive change through their platforms and followings. With the rise of the digital age, individuals can profoundly impact societal attitudes on social, political, and medical levels, often achieving influence beyond that of ordinary citizens or traditional advocates. By examining key examples such as HIV awareness efforts spurred by Freddie Mercury and mental health advocacy championed by Simone Biles, this paper demonstrates the unique capacity of influencers to effectively mobilize societal viewpoints, highlighting the broader implications of influencer advocacy. It also addresses the complex dynamics where personal gain can overshadow genuine advocacy. Ultimately, this paper emphasizes the need for a balance between the potential of influencer advocacy and their ethical responsibilities in shaping public discourse.

## Introduction

When it comes to fighting for justice or bringing about change, various strategies can be employed. However, as Livingston[1] asserts, “the truth is: advocacy makes things happen.” Advocacy involves supporting a cause or viewpoint, and it can be done by anyone, at any time (Alliance of Justice)[2]. According to Rachael Smith, a faculty member in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Pennsylvania State University, and Edward Fink, a faculty member in the Department of Strategic Communications at Temple University[3], “scholars have argued that certain types of influential people embedded in particular social structures are better able to change others’ beliefs and behaviors.” One such group of influential figures include celebrities and social media influencers, who have become pivotal in shaping public opinion and affecting social change. Despite the abundance of studies conducted on influencers and their influence, a key question remains: To what extent does the advocacy of an influencer affect

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society's viewpoint? Considering that individuals do hold some power and can make change through dedication, the effort required is often demanding and time-consuming. Therefore, it is, in turn, influencers that hold a significant amount of power in today's society in both the political and social realm through their advocacy and platform as they are more adept at mobilizing people and leveraging their connections, enabling them to drive impactful change.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach to analyze in depth the advocacy strategies of social media influencers and their ability to shape public opinions on topics dealing with mental health and social perceptions. The analysis focused on two figures: Simone Biles, a renowned gymnast who recently competed in the 2024 Olympic Games, and Freddie Mercury, a legendary British singer from the 20th century. These figures were selected to explore the continuity and transformation of advocacy over time, highlighting the impact of both a current and historic celebrity on public opinion. A thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze patterns within the advocacy efforts of these influencers. While limited by time constraints and a focus solely on celebrities and social media influencers, this approach facilitated a deeper understanding of how advocacy practices have evolved and how influencers can leverage their platforms to create change.

## The Digital World and Influencers

Over the past decade, the digital world has opened up opportunities for influencers to spread the word about a wide range of social, political, and health-related issues such as mental health, global warming, and social justice. These influencers are uniquely positioned to be more impactful than traditional advocates as their opinions hold significant weight with their followers, shaping the way audiences perceive and engage with critical topics (Khan et al.)[4]. The greater impact of influencers has become more apparent since the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Ryan Holmes, statistics have shown that "social media use increased dramatically during the lockdown, with a survey across 30 markets showing engagement rising 61% over normal usage rates" (Archer et al.)[5]. During this time, many influencers embraced the global crisis by using social media platforms, such

as Instagram and Twitter, to share ideas and expand their influence. Influencers attained power and credibility by leveraging their large followings and engaging directly with audiences, offering trust during a period when governments and authority figures faced significant scrutiny and skepticism (Archer et al.)[5]. This erosion of trust in traditional institutions created a gap that allowed influencers to step in and gain the confidence of their followers, making their voices more impactful. As a result, followers were increasingly receptive to influencers' opinions and ideas, amplifying their ability to drive meaningful change. These digital influencers, known as social media influencers, use platforms such as Tiktok, Facebook, blogs, and Instagram to share ideas and opinions connecting to others and spreading information. Hani Aladri[6], a faculty member in the Department of TV, Radio, and Media at Middle East University, notes that the global number of social media users is projected to reach 4.89 billion, with an average annual growth rate of 10.2%. This rapid growth enables influencers to impact their audiences by establishing trust and building connections in the virtual realm. The power influencers hold as a result of this connection with their audience is crucial in driving social change. By leveraging their credibility, large followings, and platforms, influencers dedicate part of their careers to supporting public reforms and promoting societal progress. According to Dr. Turki Faisal Al Rasheed[7], an advocate in sustainable development and professor at University of Arizona, the public reform efforts done by influencers are better positioned to make an impact as influencers act as societal leaders. They advocate for change by fostering calm and creating open, receptive environments for addressing issues. This approach helps resolve problems constructively, allowing for a deeper engagement with their followers and facilitating greater societal change.

### **The Role of Influencers in Shaping Public Opinion**

Influencer marketing is defined as “a collaboration between popular social-media users and brands to promote brands' products, [ideas], or services” (McKinsey & Company)[8]. Influencer branding has been a prominent feature of social media, aiming to spread awareness about various issues. Social media influencers and celebrities have a unique ability to advocate for their beliefs and causes, fostering discussions on a wide range of topics. According to P. David Marshall[9], ph.D Professor of Communication at Charles Sturt University, many well-known celebrities have evolved into branded figures,

embodying both economic and transformative societal values. These figures advertise and promote campaigns and viewpoints, influencing individual perspectives. This phenomenon fosters a psychological connection and sense of belonging, as individuals identify with influencers. This emotional resonance amplifies their willingness to align with influencers' viewpoints, often leading to greater support for the ideas and causes being advocated. Jackie Raphael, an honorary researcher at the University of Western Australia, and Celia Lam, an assistant professor of media and cultural studies, highlight how support from audiences enables critical issues to gain visibility. For instance, "Freddie Mercury, [worldwide recognized British singer], was reluctant to openly acknowledge his HIV/AIDS status in life" (Raphael and Lam)[10]. Despite keeping diagnosis private, Jackie Raphael, an honorary researcher at the University of Western Australia, and Celia Lam, an assistant professor of media and cultural studies, highlight how support from audiences enables critical issues to gain visibility. This reinforces the idea portrayed by P. David Marshall[9] as Freddie Mercury has turned into a transformative value for society to advocate for awareness and change in mindset in regards to the disease. Indeed, Mercury's role in raising awareness has contributed to greater societal acceptance of the disease and helped raise approximately \$15 million in aid for those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (Waxman)[11]. Building on Marshall's[9] idea of inclusivity to bring about awareness and advocacy from supporters, Marcus Thompson II[12], a prominent voice in sports and lead columnist at The Athletic, examines how changing perceptions of athletes can drive awareness. He challenges the traditional image of athletes as "invincible gladiators" by highlighting Simone Biles' decision to prioritize her mental health during the Olympics. Thompson praises Biles' courage to speak openly about mental health challenges that led to her withdrawal, shedding light on the reality of athletes' struggles. By breaking the stigma around mental health, Biles dismantled the expectation that athletes should mask their issues and maintain an image of invulnerability. This transparency allowed audiences to connect deeper with influencers and well-known social figures and revealed shared vulnerabilities that were not previously recognized. The transparency also sparks change within athletes themselves as Simone's response led to a push for greater openness about the realities of mental health in sports. Simone Biles exemplifies a prominent influencer who has been branded for helping spread awareness on mental health and shedding a new light on the athletics industry through her sheer honesty.

Indeed, the level of openness and insight gained by Olympic viewers and society would not have been as significant without her influential status.

## **Influencers and the Government**

Additionally, many influencers hold significant power within the government through discussions and opinions on policies when compared to ordinary citizen.. Anne Rasmussen[13] and her colleagues, researchers from the University of Copenhagen, believe that it is essential to interpret the extent to which interest advocates and influencers can influence political environments as many “invest vast resources into lobbying with the hope of advancing their policy goals”. The amount of effort influencers place into advocating is crucial to consider as “their potential influence has important implications for democracy” (Rasmussen, Anne, et al.)[13]. For instance, Greta Thunberg, a globally recognized climate activist, has used her influence as a social media figure to push governments worldwide to address climate change. Her viral campaigns, such as her “Fridays for Future” movement, have inspired mass protests and brought environmental policies into political discussions (King)[14]. Her ability to mobilize millions of supporters– despite not holding an office position– demonstrates how an influencer’s platform can create pressure on policymakers and demand change. This influence is also evident with influencers campaigning for elections and raising awareness after significant events occur. For example, in 2020, according to Ho-Chun Herbert Chang [15], a faculty member of the Department of Communications and Journalism at the University of Southern California, many influencers stood up and advocated for justice for George Floyd under the Black Lives Matter Campaign and raised more awareness of other previously unrecognized cases. Certain content creators also used their platform to highlight cases such as Breonna Taylor’s, leading to increased public awareness and calls for accountability in the United States. Political topics are not always introduced by the influencer but are often initiated by their audience. Aleksi Suuronen and colleagues, positive reinforcement and the frequency of collaborations allow discussions about politics to surge. When an influencer has a large number of supporters, they often feel greater confidence in expressing their views. This dynamic is intensified when viewers actively participate in politically charged content by commenting, sharing, or tagging influencers, causing them to address or highlight certain topics. For example, during the 2020

United States presidential elections, social media platforms saw an upsurge in influencers responding to their followers' worries about voter suppression, misinformation, and mail-in methods. This interaction between influencer and audience not only raised awareness of these issues, but also fostered a sense of communal responsibility, as followers believe their feedback has a direct impact on the influencer's platform and reach.

### **Discussion- Impact Can Stem From Anyone**

To a lesser extent, while influencers do hold power that allows them to influence legislation and drive change on a government level, ordinary citizens also have the ability to bring about change through advocacy work. Barbara Klugman[16], an associate professor at the faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Witwatersrand, is an example of an individual who has made an impactful change through her work of advocating for reproductive rights and access to safe legal abortion in South Africa through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Klugman)[16]. However, Klugman's impact differs from that of recognized influencers such as Freddie Mercury. While effective, Klugman does not possess the widespread reach or platform that enables influencers to mobilize audiences and create immediate change. The rapid growth of media platforms amplifies this distinction, highlighting the extent of influence available to social media figures. Influencers frequently use media to reach their followers, often employing it as a strategic publicity tool to appeal to their audience, and it is crucial to consider this. Jackie Raphael and Celia Lam[lam] observe that "the publicity associated with celebrity involvement in activism can also function as a double-edged sword, working to subsume the cause into the celebrity's broader public persona rather than focusing attention on the issue." This underscores the extent to which influencers can go about spreading messages and viewpoints for their own personal gain with or without consideration of the effect that viewpoint may have on society if it is for a controversial cause or belief. This raises important considerations about the sincerity of their efforts and the potential consequences when controversial causes are involved. While Klugman's[16] work as an NGO worker was able to make a significant impact in South Africa, her story marks a unique occurrence in comparison to the more widespread and immediate impact achieved by influencers after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Jiseon Han and George Balabanis[17] at Bayes Business School in London, influencers effectively establish societal

outcomes through three aspects with their followers: credibility, trustworthiness, and attitude (Balabanis and Han)[17]. These three aspects allow for a strong bond to form between influencers and their followers, which enables influencers to bring large groups together for a cause. This dynamic pushes forth the act of uniting individuals under an idea, creating a rippled effect far beyond what individuals can achieve independently in an allotted time. Therefore, while individuals can make change, the work conducted by influencers tends to leave a more enduring and wide-reaching impression on society.

## Conclusion

While there is potential for the misuse of power by influencers for personal gain and the acknowledgment that ordinary citizens can independently create impactful change, influencers hold a significant amount of power that allows them to serve as effective platforms for advocating and garnering support for change.. The support they receive while advocating for a stance or change, empowers them to reach higher levels of influence, further advancing their objectives. Some influencers even become symbols for a cause, raising awareness on topics such as HIV. Although advocating for change is essential for everyone, those with strong government connections—like celebrities—and large followings can leverage their influence to drive impactful change on a broader scale. However, the power of influencers is not without its limitations. While influencers can amplify important causes, the demographics may be limited. Additionally, some influencers risk oversimplifying or distorting messages to appeal to a wider audience, raising questions about the validity and accuracy of their advocacy. Furthermore, financial incentives may be seen as a hidden motive within influencers which hinders the integrity of their actions. These limitations underscore the need for critical evaluation of influencer-driven movements. While influencers carry the ability to drive social change, it's important to ensure that their motives remain focused on the greater good. Influencers should be held accountable for their impact and further studies could explore the long term effects of their advocacy on public policy and the authentic cause they promote.

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