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Influencer Activism: Insights for Effective Partnership With Brands and Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Influencers can effectively promote products and brands but are also leading personalities who might inspire others to support polarizing and/or prosocial issues (e.g., against gender-based violence, social inequality, and racism). This research analyses the impact of influencer activism on perceived authenticity and prosocial behaviors, focusing on collaborations with brands and nonprofit organizations. Drawing on social influence theory and signaling theory, two key factors are examined: the influencer-partner congruity, and the influencer-sociopolitical issue alignment. The research consists of a preliminary study, four experimental studies on behavioral intentions, two experimental studies on proxies of actual behavior, and a content analysis on Instagram comments. The results suggest that congruity and alignment significantly enhance perceived authenticity, which positively impacts attitudes toward the influencer and increases the intention to engage in prosocial behaviors. The article offers further insight into individual engagement in actual prosocial behavior, such as seeking information on an issue, subscribing to newsletters, and signing petitions. The research underscores the importance of selecting congruent influencers, whose values and advocacy efforts are consistent with the brand's or organization's characteristics, and aligned with relevant issues, to enhance perceived authenticity, foster genuine engagement and effectively drive prosocial behaviors through effective partnerships.

1 | Introduction

"The world is changed by your example,

not by your opinion." (Paulo Coelho)

Consider the following scenario: Jennifer Ever, a passionate young lifestyle influencer who collaborates with several brands, used her Instagram profile to discuss abortion rights after the President of the United States of America Joseph R. Biden Jr. proclaimed January 22, 2023, as the 50th Anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Decision. However, after making two posts on the topic, she returned to her usual content and stopped discussing civil rights issues. Within this backdrop, a series of pivotal

questions naturally come to the fore. Is the activism displayed by social media influencers genuine or merely an act of virtue signaling? What are the critical factors that shape a positive perception among consumers regarding influencer activism? Can influencer activism effectively stimulate consumers' commitment to participating in prosocial actions? How do individuals perceive activist influencers who collaborate with brands to drive social change, such as signing petitions or joining an activist group? Moreover, what if the collaboration occurs with a nonprofit organization instead of a brand?

Influencers are individuals with substantial followings on social media (Harrigan et al. 2021) who often create content in exchange for compensation (Campbell and Grimm 2019).

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According to Scharff (2023), influencers are associated with monetization, commercial pursuits, and practices of self-branding. Hence, these online personalities are primarily recognized for their roles within the realm of consumer marketing. Notably, significant attention has been directed toward understanding the influencer's impact on various facets of consumer behavior and brand promotion. This encompasses investigating the connection between influencer marketing and purchase intention (e.g., Beckert and Naderer 2023; Belanche et al. 2021; Lou and Yuan 2019; Saima and Khan 2020), the influencer's role in brand recommendations (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández 2019), the effect of influencer marketing on consumers' attitudes toward the sponsored brand (Jin Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019), engagement dynamics (Chmait et al. 2020; Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019), as well as its effects on brand awareness (Lou and Yuan 2019). In the digital economy, there has recently emerged a distinct category of influencers who are gaining recognition for their active involvement in civic engagement and support for causes aligned with sociopolitical issues, such as environmental crisis, racial inclusion, LGBTQIA+ rights, sexual and gender diversity, feminism, social equal rights, education, and poverty alleviation. This category—which may encompass regular citizens who advocate for a specific issue they care about, professionals, celebrities, and content creators (SamyRoad 2023)—has been labeled by Thomas and Fowler (2023) as influencer activism.

The study of influencer activist efforts is a relatively emerging research field (Ballestar, Martín-Llaguno, and Sainz 2022; Thomas and Fowler 2023). From a conceptual perspective, the juxtaposition of *influencer* and *activism* may initially appear contradictory. Activism is a practice that ideally should not be entangled with capitalist dynamics because it involves political beliefs and convictions (Kanai and Gill 2020; Scharff 2023). However, in the current landscape of the digital economy, the distinction between *activist* and *influencer* has become increasingly blurred (Dean 2023). For instance, as Novoselova and Jenson (2019) emphasized, digital feminists can leverage their activism in various ways to monetize.

One question that may arise in discussions about influencer activism is whether supporting sociopolitical stances is nothing more than a branding instrument, a strategy to attract attention. Research in marketing agrees that authenticity is crucial for the credibility and effectiveness of influencers (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard 2020; Duffy and Hund 2019). However, the literature dedicated to discerning the authentic signs of influencer activism is limited. An exception to this scarcity is the work of Thomas and Fowler (2023), who revealed that a single act of activism (i.e., temporary activism) is not enough to convince people that the influencer is authentic. Hence, influencers must sustain their activism to benefit from it.

Building on the foundational insights of Thomas and Fowler (2023) and Hudders and Lou (2023), this research investigates two critical factors that shape followers' perceptions of influencers and their prosocial behaviors. The first factor concerns the congruity between influencers and the brands or organizations they endorse. Specifically, this refers to how well the influencer's image, values, and persona are coherent with the brand or organization's message. A high level of congruity is

theorized to enhance the endorsement's credibility, leading to more favorable followers' perceptions and, ultimately, more effective marketing outcomes. The second factor examines the alignment between the influencer's personal values and the social or political causes they publicly support. This factor probes the perceived authenticity of the influencer's advocacy—whether followers believe the influencer genuinely supports the causes they promote or merely leverages them for personal gain. Theoretical implications of this research include a deeper understanding of how authenticity influences consumers' attitudes, intentions, and engagement in prosocial behaviors. The findings could provide brands and organizations with strategic insights into selecting influencers whose personal and public personas are likely to resonate with their target audience, thus enhancing the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. Moreover, this study has implications for social change as it delves into the potential of influencer marketing to drive consumer behavior and promote social movements.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Influencer Activism

According to Thomas and Fowler (2023, p. 2), influencer activism can be defined as an “influencer's expressed support for a cause aligned with a sociopolitical issue.” This phenomenon is the result of a cultural shift marked by diverse forms of progressive political discourse, especially prominent in the United Kingdom and the United States (Dean 2023), and the rise of a new type of socially conscious consumer (Alemany 2020; Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Influencer activism represents a contemporary manifestation of civic engagement (Marino and Lo Presti 2019; Thomas and Fowler 2023). Notably, this form of activism is grounded in the principles of connective action, where individuals share personal narratives through digital media to create a collective impact (Bennett and Segerberg 2013) and influence others' attitudes and behaviors via social learning (Knapfer, Neureiter, and Matthes 2023). Influencers have evolved into personal brands, carefully curating their identities and values to resonate with their audiences and build a consistent public image (Hsieh et al. 2023; Malik, Thapa, and Paswan 2023). As noted by Cammarota et al. (2023), brands are increasingly engaging in activism through partnerships that support social causes. Similarly, influencer activism reflects a commitment to raising awareness and driving positive societal change (Zhou, Lou, and Huang 2023). For example, influencer activism can play a crucial role in destigmatizing issues that are frequently shrouded in silence (Gurrieri and Drenten 2019), such as mental illness (Smith-Frigerio 2020), sexualized labor (Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler 2020) or racial equality (Yang, Chunterawang, and Pugdeethosapol 2021). Influencers engaged in activism often go beyond promoting messages on sociopolitical issues. Instead, they actively contribute to their cause through tangible actions, such as donating physical goods and money or volunteering their time and expertise (Thomas and Fowler 2023).

To date, much of the existing research has predominantly focused on the role of “green influencers” in promoting environmental activism. For instance, Ballestar, Martín-Llaguno

and Sainz (2022) employed artificial intelligence and natural language processing (NLP) to evaluate influencers' effectiveness in disseminating climate change awareness. Boerman, Meijers and Zwart (2022) demonstrated that selecting an influencer whose image is congruent with the proenvironmental message is crucial for encouraging proenvironmental behavior among Instagram users. Knupfer, Neureiter and Matthes (2023) discovered that green influencers may positively influence both environmentally knowledgeable and less knowledgeable young individuals through two distinct pathways of information processing: the systematic route involving engagement and the heuristic route involving engagement and parasocial relationships. Finally, Pittman and Abell (2021), focusing on popularity metrics, found that green influencers with lower popularity counts are perceived as more trustworthy. Furthermore, consumers are inclined to donate higher amounts to a related charity after being exposed to a promotional post by a green influencer with a smaller following. Table 1 presents an overview of the key literature on influencer activism, highlighting the position of our research in relation to existing contributions.

2.2 | Signs of the Perceived Authenticity

Influencer activism has proven to be an effective tool capable of inspiring people and changing behaviors (Ballestar, Martín-Llaguno, and Sainz 2022; Thomas and Fowler 2023). However, this digital form of communication can struggle with sincerity issues (Zniva, Weitzl, and Lindmoser 2023). Social media users can doubt influencers' authenticity, for example, when their self-presentation is not genuine (Claeys, Charry, and Tessitore 2024) or when, for commercial purposes, they promote brands or products that do not fit with their ordinary interests (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). Furthermore, influencers may become the target of an online backlash when they engage in actions or behaviors that violate moral principles or ethical standards (Mahy, Winarnita, and Herriman 2022). Authenticity enables influencers to differentiate themselves and build trust with their audience (Wellman et al. 2020). People tend to connect with those they perceive as "genuine," making them more receptive to the influencer's message, whether it involves a product recommendation or a social cause (Kapitan et al. 2022).

Authenticity, as defined by Liedtka (2008, p. 238), centers on "the notion of being true to oneself." Existing literature suggests that authenticity is not an inherent property of an entity but rather a product of subjective or social construction (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006; Morhart et al. 2015). It follows that individuals observing influencers' behaviors infer the underlying motives and form a distinct perception, such as the manifestation of one's genuine persona (i.e., authenticity), through cognitive and inferential processing (Asch 1946; Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023). Influencers can cultivate authenticity in several ways to gain positive outcomes for themselves and the brands/organizations that decide to collaborate with them (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard 2020; Fowler and Thomas 2023). One key dimension of authenticity is a sincere personality. When influencers are open and genuine in presenting their true selves, they are less likely to face criticism (Lee and Eastin 2021). Additionally, trustworthiness,

expertise, and attractiveness are critical elements that further enhance perceptions of authenticity (Filiari et al. 2023; Lou and Yuan 2019). Jun and Yi (2020), on their part, demonstrated that interactivity plays a crucial role in enhancing followers' perceptions of influencer genuineness. Audrezet, De Kerviler and Moulard (2020) uncovered two distinctive authenticity strategies through their qualitative research: passionate authenticity and transparent authenticity. The former revolves around the concept that authenticity emanates from intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic factors. In other words, authentic individuals or brands are propelled by their inner desires and passions, prioritizing these over commercial objectives. On the other hand, transparent authenticity involves furnishing fact-based information about the product or service at the center of the brand partnership. Additionally, it encompasses the disclosure of contractual terms associated with the partnership and the publication of unedited content, contributing to a more open and genuine representation. When assessing influencer authenticity, a key factor is the alignment between their content, their genuine selves, and the persona they have carefully developed over time (Kapitan et al. 2022; Shoenberger and Kim 2023). This alignment plays a pivotal role in determining how well an influencer's core identity resonates with the sociopolitical issues they support, significantly shaping followers' perceptions of the authenticity of their activism. High alignment between the influencer and the issue can amplify the impact of sponsored activism posts, whereas a lack of it leads to negative effects by increasing perceived manipulative and selling intent (Gao et al. 2024). The importance of alignment has also been widely discussed in the literature on brand activism (Cammarota et al. 2023; Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki 2022; Verlegh 2023; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Sibai, Mimoun and Boukis (2021) specifically highlighted that a brand's perceived authenticity is largely driven by the consistency between its actions and values. For example, Lucy is a popular influencer and activist who regularly advocates for LGBTQIA+ rights on her social media platforms. However, if she were to occasionally support the cause of water pollution—a topic she has never addressed in her content—this issue would be much less aligned with her usual activities as an influencer.

According to Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955), people's attitudes toward a source are influenced by the principle of congruity. This means that the perceived authenticity of an influencer is increased when there is a match between the influencer and the brand (Kim and Kim 2021). Congruity refers explicitly to the coherence between an influencer's values, missions, and actions and those of the brand or organization they collaborate with. For example, consider Mark, a popular social media influencer known for promoting a luxurious lifestyle and expensive fashion brands. Thriftify, on the other hand, is a secondhand clothing app that encourages conscious consumption and environmental responsibility. A partnership between Mark and Thriftify would be an example of poor congruity, as Mark's past actions and image contradict Thriftify's message of affordability. Such a collaboration would likely be perceived as inauthentic and could harm both Mark's reputation and Thriftify's brand image.

This influencer-brand congruence positively impacts consumer attitudes toward the influencer and behavioral intentions, such

TABLE 1 | Overview of selected articles on influencer activism.

References	Purpose	Research methodology	Sample involved	Main findings
Ballestar, Martín-Llaguno and Sainz (2022)	Examine how two prominent social influencers, Greta Thunberg and Bill Gates, engage in climate change advocacy and their distinct approaches to influencing public opinion and behavior.	Opinion mining and sentiment analysis	23,294 tweets	Thunberg's tone is urgent and revolutionary, emphasizing the immediate need for drastic action. In contrast, Gates' approach is more measured and pragmatic, focusing on innovation and long-term solutions rather than radical change.
Boerman, Meijers and Zwart (2022)	Examine the potential use of green influencers on Instagram to encourage proenvironmental behavior.	Experiment	201 Instagram users	Influencer-message congruence enhances both influencer credibility and proenvironmental intentions. However, influencer credibility does not serve as the underlying mechanism linking congruence to proenvironmental intentions. Additionally, the type of influencer (micro vs. meso) does not moderate the impact of influencer-message congruence on these intentions.
Gao et al. (2024)	Investigate whether combining prosocial activism statements with product promotion in sponsored influencer posts can affect purchase intention, how cynicism influences the effectiveness of sponsored posts, and the impact of the fit between the influencer and the cause.	Behavioral pilot study, experiments	789 US adult Instagram users	Activism in sponsored posts leads to spending more time browsing the advertised product's website and increases purchase intentions, because of reduced perceived selling intent. The positive effect is attenuated by consumers' cynicism. Influencer-issue alignment enhances the positive effect, while poor alignment can backfire.
Knupfer, Neureiter and Matthes (2023)	Explore whether green influencers on social media can inspire adolescents and young adults to engage in both low- and high-effort environmental activism.	Survey	865 German consumers	Engagement with green influencers is directly associated with both low- and high-effort environmental activism. Parasocial relationships partially mediate this relationship. A young person's environmental knowledge does not moderate low-effort activism. However, it amplifies the positive relationship between engagement with green influencers and high-effort activism, while simultaneously weakening the positive association between parasocial relationships and high-effort activism.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

References	Purpose	Research methodology	Sample involved	Main findings
Pittman and Abell (2021)	Study the green living orientation of influencers as a moderating factor that influences how audiences interpret popularity metrics in the context of green advertising messages.	Experiment	895 MTurk participants	Lower popularity metrics actually benefit green influencers. Specifically, green influencers with a smaller following are perceived as more trustworthy, which leads to more positive attitudes toward sponsored products and higher purchase intentions. Moreover, after viewing a promotional post from a less popular green influencer, consumers are more inclined to make large donations to related charities.
Scharff (2023)	Analyze how digital feminist activists construct and portray the concepts of “activists” and “influencers.”	Qualitative in-depth interviews	30 digital feminist activists	Feminist activists view influencers as commercial and profit-driven, while activists are seen as working for social change without financial motives. The paper argues that this view overlooks how market forces shape digital activism. It also challenges the idea that influencing is trivial compared with activism.
Thomas and Fowler (2023)	Explore how influencers’ activism affects consumer attitudes and expectations.	Experiment	143 business undergraduate, 502 MTurk participants	Results show that activism benefits influencers, but a single act is not enough. Influencers must continue their activism over time for sustained benefits in terms of perceived authenticity and positive attitudes.
The present research	Investigate how congruity between influencers and their partners, as well as the alignment of the influencer with sociopolitical issues, affects perceived authenticity and prosocial behaviors in collaborations with brands or nonprofit organizations.	Experiments and content analysis	178 US and 2400 Italian consumers	High influencer-partner congruity and high influencer-issue alignment enhance perceived authenticity, which in turn positively impacts attitudes toward the influencer and intention to engage in prosocial behaviors. Such effects are confirmed also by analyzing proxy of actual behaviors, such as seeking information on the issue, subscribing to newsletters, and signing petitions.

Source: Authors’ own work.

as engagement and purchase (Han and Balabanis 2023; Torres, Augusto, and Matos 2019). While there are several studies (e.g., Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki 2022; Vredenburg et al. 2020) that investigate the congruence between a brand activism program and the partnered social cause, no study has explored the congruity of the collaboration between the activist influencer and a sponsored brand or nonprofit organization working for social good. Additionally, the potential difference in consumer responses to partnerships involving institutions or nonprofit organizations rather than brands has emerged as a topic of research interest. To the best of our knowledge, this aspect has not yet been explored in the existing literature. However, even if the partnership with a nonprofit organization is, by its inherent nature, different from that with a commercial brand, it may still be a retributed collaboration. One might wonder whether the users' reactions may differ and generate other results compared with brand partnerships.

3 | Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

This study investigates the phenomenon of influencer activism by drawing upon two established theoretical lenses: social influence theory (Kelman 1958; 1961) and signaling theory (Rynes, Bretz, and Gerhart 1991; Spence 1973). According to social influence theory, we are shaped by the social groups we belong to and the people we interact with. This theory assumes that we are open to changing our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors based on the influence of others. The theory extends the concept of influence beyond authority figures or close friends, suggesting that we can be influenced by anyone we perceive as possessing power, expertise, or attractiveness. This can encompass celebrities, influencers, peers, or even strangers within a large crowd (Shen et al. 2011). Kelman (1961) identified three main ways social influence could happen: (1) compliance, that is, individuals conform to the expectations of others, even if they do not necessarily agree, to avoid disapproval or gain rewards; this is often seen in situations where there is social pressure to fit in; (2) identification, that is, individuals adopt the beliefs and behaviors of others because they admire them or want to be like them, such as in the case of influencer marketing; this can be a stronger form of influence than compliance because it stems from a desire to connect; and (3) internalization, that is, individuals genuinely adopt the beliefs and behaviors of others because they come to see them as valuable and important; this is the most lasting form of influence as it is based on a genuine shift in the individuals' internal values.

Extant literature suggests that individuals are more likely to follow recommendations from authentic influencers. For instance, Janssen et al. (2022) emphasized the critical role of authenticity in influencer marketing, particularly in endorsements. Their research demonstrated that when influencers are perceived as genuine, their recommendations hold more significant influence, resulting in higher levels of follower engagement and behavioral responses, including purchasing decisions. Similarly, Lou and Yuan (2019) found that when influencers are viewed as authentic sources, individuals are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward the recommended product and exhibit stronger purchase intentions.

Drawing on Spence's (1973) work, signaling theory explores communication in situations with unequal information (asymmetric information). One party, the sender, elaborates a message using specific signs, that the other party, the receiver, interprets for evaluation or making decisions. The way influencers signal their activist efforts to their audience is of paramount importance, since their main goal is to convince the audience that their virtue-signaling is authentic (Mirzaei, Wilkie, and Siuki 2022). The perception of their activist strengths depends on how the signals are perceived. Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the following two contextual cues that individuals can utilize to form an idea about the authenticity of a given influencer activist: (1) the congruity of the collaboration between the influencer and the sponsored brand or the nonprofit organization; and (2) the alignment between the influencer and the sociopolitical issue.

The congruence between the influencer and the brand plays a key role in influencer marketing strategy (Belanche et al. 2021). For instance, a collaboration between an influencer who promotes civil rights and a brand accused of labor exploitation can result in a backlash against both the influencer and the brand. Influencers are perceived as more authentic when they partner with brands or nonprofit organizations that genuinely share and support a similar social cause due to their core values. The congruence between an influencer's advocacy and a brand's principles reinforces the authenticity of the influencer's message and enhances their credibility with followers. Based on the above, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1a. *A high (low) congruity between the influencer and the partner brand positively (negatively) impacts the perceived authenticity of the influencer.*

H1b. *A high (low) congruity between the influencer and the partner organization positively (negatively) impacts the perceived authenticity of the influencer.*

Pracejus and Olsen (2004) underscore that a high alignment, as opposed to a low alignment, between a cause and a brand can yield 5–10 times more donations in cause-related marketing campaigns. Given that influencer activism essentially involves a form of self-branding, we can put forth the following hypotheses:

H2a. *A high (low) alignment between the influencer and a sociopolitical issue positively (negatively) impacts the perceived authenticity of the influencer, when collaborating with a brand.*

H2b. *A high (low) alignment between the influencer and a sociopolitical issue positively (negatively) impacts the perceived authenticity of the influencer, when collaborating with a nonprofit organization.*

According to the extant literature, authenticity influences individuals' behavioral outcomes, such as purchase behavior or intention to engage in prosocial behaviors (Lindmoser, Weitzl, and Zniva 2022; Liu, Liao, and Wei 2015; Quach, Cheah, and Thaichon 2024). Furthermore, authenticity can influence the attitudes toward the influencer (Thomas and Fowler 2023), which in turn mediates the relationship between perceived

authenticity and behavioral outcomes (Nguyen et al. 2023; Zniva, Weitzl, and Lindmoser 2023). Hence, we can suggest the following hypotheses:

H3a. *The perceived authenticity of the influencer who collaborates with a brand to support a sociopolitical issue has a direct and positive effect on individuals' intention to engage in prosocial behavior.*

H3b. *The perceived authenticity of the influencer who collaborates with a nonprofit organization to support a sociopolitical issue has a direct and positive effect on individuals' intention to engage in prosocial behavior.*

H4a. *The perceived authenticity of the influencer who collaborates with a brand to support a sociopolitical issue has a direct and positive effect on the attitude towards the influencer.*

H4b. *The perceived authenticity of the influencer who collaborates with a nonprofit organization to support a sociopolitical issue has a direct and positive effect on the attitude towards the influencer.*

H5a. *Attitude towards the influencer who collaborates with a brand to support a sociopolitical issue has a direct and positive effect on attitude towards the influencer.*

H5b. *Attitude towards the influencer who collaborates with a nonprofit organization to support a sociopolitical issue has a direct and positive effect on attitude towards the influencer.*

H6a. *Attitude towards the influencer who collaborates with a brand to support a sociopolitical issue mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and individuals' intention to engage in prosocial behavior.*

H6b. *Attitude towards the influencer who collaborates with a nonprofit organization to support a sociopolitical issue mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and individuals' intention to engage in prosocial behavior.*

4 | Materials and Methods

4.1 | Overview of the Studies

As summarized in Table 2, this research includes a preliminary study, six experimental studies, and a final qualitative study. We explored individuals' behavioral intentions in Study 1A, Study 1B, Study 2A, and Study 2B. The theoretical framework and the corresponding research hypotheses underpinning these studies are illustrated in Figure 1. Study 3A and Study 3B employ nonindexed landing page interactions as a proxy for prosocial behavior. By tracking how individuals engage with real-world scenarios, such as signing petitions or subscribing to newsletters, we observed whether specific signals of influencer activism authenticity (i.e., influencer-partner congruity and influencer-issue alignment) prompt individuals to take concrete actions. The theoretical framework guiding Study 3A and Study 3B is depicted in Figure 2. Finally, in Study 4, we conducted a content analysis on users'

comments posted in response to activist content shared by influencers partnering with brands or organizations. This approach enabled us to gain additional insights that help explain the underlying mechanisms behind the quantitative results (Crick 2021).

4.2 | Scales and Measurements

All variables were operationalized in a questionnaire using scales adapted from previous literature. An overview is presented in Table 3.

4.3 | Preliminary Study

To enhance our understanding of influencer activism in real-world settings and to create more authentic scenarios for the proposed experimental studies, we analyzed a sample of 15 English-speaking influencers who create content about pressing sociopolitical issues. After checking each influencer's profile on Instagram, we manually downloaded and transcribed the text of the latest 30 posts from the account (last updated November 2023), to conduct a thematic analysis (Chandra et al. 2022). Several relevant themes have been identified. First, the influencers often engage their followers by asking questions, seeking their opinions, and inviting them to participate in discussions, which can create a sense of community and encourage interaction. Second, some posts highlight collaborations with other influencers, organizations, or brands. This includes partnerships for educational content and product endorsements. Third, some posts include brand endorsements or advertisements, where the influencer promotes a product or brand. These posts integrate the product promotion with the influencer's content style and themes. Fourth, many posts include clear calls to action, such as visiting websites for more information, supporting specific causes, or participating in certain activities or pledges. Finally, several posts include personal stories and experiences, which can enhance influencers' relatability and authenticity.

5 | Study 1

5.1 | Stimuli Development

Based on previous literature and the results of the preliminary study, we designed several Instagram posts as manipulations for the experiments. First, in line with Thomas and Fowler (2023), we employed a fictitious name for the influencer, "Jennifer Ever," to avoid issues related to previous experiences with real activist influencers, such as pre-existing attitudes and familiarity. Based on the real Instagram profiles analyzed, we created a fictitious Instagram page that includes all relevant information, such as the number of posts, followers, and following, along with a brief description of the influencer, as shown in Appendix A. The content creator's emphasis on sexual freedom and her commitment to inspiring prosocial behavior among followers are evident from the description. This thematic focus was

TABLE 2 | Overview of the studies.

Study	Purpose	Method	Experimental design	Sample
Preliminary Study	Understand how real influencers produce and communicate content on activism through their channels and design realistic scenarios for the experiments	Secondary data analysis		$N = 15$ influencers' Instagram profile
1A (brand)	Analyze the effect of high (low) congruity between the influencer and the partner on perceived authenticity. Analyze the effect of high (low) alignment between the influencer and the sociopolitical issue on perceived authenticity. Explore the connections between authenticity, attitudes toward the influencer, and followers' intention to engage in prosocial behaviors.	Between-subject online experiment; SEM	2×2	$N = 178$ US consumers
1B (organization)				
2A (brand)	Analyze the effect of high (low) congruity between the influencer and the partner on perceived authenticity. Analyze the effect of high (low) alignment between the influencer and the sociopolitical issue on perceived authenticity. Explore the connections between authenticity, attitudes toward the influencer, and followers' intention to engage in specific prosocial behaviors.	Between-subject online experiment; SEM	2×2	$N = 600$ Italian consumers $N = 600$ Italian consumers
2B (organization)				
3A (brand)	Analyze the effect of high (low) congruity between the influencer and the partner and high (low) alignment between the influencer and the sociopolitical issue on perceived authenticity and prosocial behaviors.	Between-subject online experiment	2×2	$N = 600$ Italian consumers $N = 600$ Italian consumers
3B (organization)				
4	Examine how individuals perceive posts from activist influencers when collaborating with brands or organizations in real-world settings.	Content analysis, NLP		1441 comments from 14 activist influencers' profiles

Source: Authors' own work.

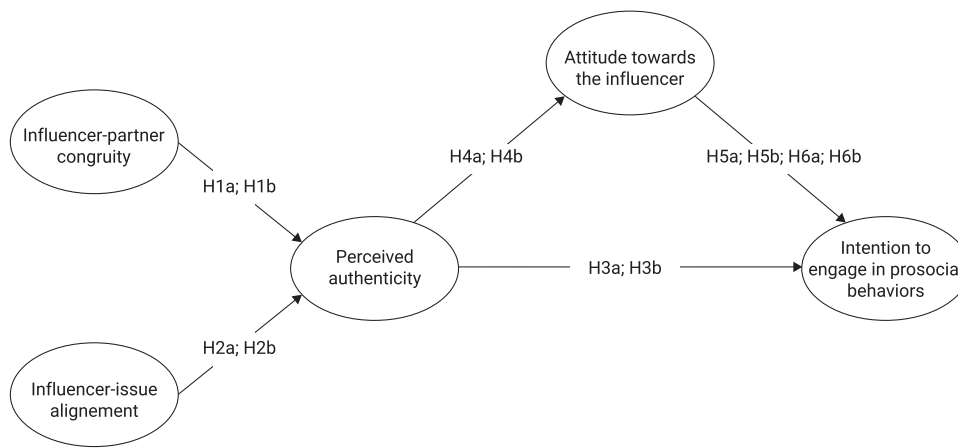


FIGURE 1 | The theoretical model tested in Study 1A, Study 1B, Study 2A, and Study 2B. *Source:* Authors' own work.

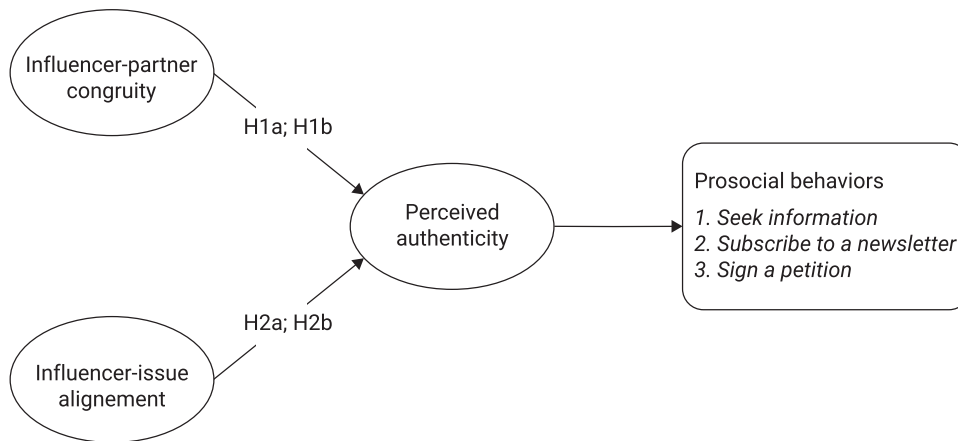


FIGURE 2 | The theoretical model tested in Study 3A and Study 3B. *Source:* Authors' own work.

underscored in the introduction to the experiments. Second, a series of Instagram fictitious posts was designed and employed as research stimuli, faithfully recreating the structure of authentic social media content. We kept the visual of the post constant, as shown in Appendix B, while manipulating the text according to our experimental procedure. For the theme with high alignment with the influencer, we selected sexual freedom, while climate change was employed as the issue with low alignment. Third, for the high congruity condition between the influencer and the brand partner, the popular dating app brand Tinder was selected, while for the low congruity condition, the popular fashion design brand Uniqlo was employed. Similarly, for the high congruity condition between the influencer and the organization partner, we selected Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the largest LGBTQIA+ advocacy group in the United States, while for the low congruity condition, we employed Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), an international environmental advocacy group. Texts of Instagram posts were then adjusted to reflect the combinations of the different independent variables being researched. Each post always follows the same pattern (introduction, collaboration presentation, impulse toward action, call to action) and structure (“paid partnership” label, tag to partner profile, hashtags). All stimuli, also employed in Study 2 and Study 3, are available in Appendix B.

5.2 | Procedure

Study 1 consists of two parts: Study 1A, which examines partnerships with brands, and Study 1B, which focuses on partnerships with organizations. Both studies use a 2 (high congruity vs. low congruity) × 2 (high alignment vs. low alignment) between-subjects online experimental design. The experiment was conducted using Qualtrics and administered through Prolific, with participants recruited from the United States in November 2023. Analysis was carried out using SPSS 29 and AMOS 23. A pilot test was conducted to identify and address potential issues related to the research protocol, technical aspects, timing, manipulations, measurements, and questionnaire flow, in line with Branca, Resciniti and Loureiro (2023). At the beginning of the experiments, all participants were instructed that they would view an Instagram profile of an activist influencer and, after that, one of her posts. In addition to what is shown on the profile, the following text was used in the survey introduction: “Jennifer Ever is an Instagram content creator and influencer. She has long used her Instagram profile to do activism and advocacy regarding sociopolitical issues, such as sexual freedom.” We randomly assigned participants to one of the four conditions: high congruity high alignment (HCHA), low congruity high alignment (LCHA), high congruity low alignment (HCLA), and low congruity low alignment (LCLA).

TABLE 3 | Scale measurements.

Construct	Response scale	Items	Scale/item origins
Perceived authenticity (PA)	7-point (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i>)	I feel the recommendation message from this influencer is sincere. This influencer introduced a message from the heart. This influencer is delivering a genuine message.	Ren, Lee and Chun (2023); Lee, Lee and Choi (2020)
Attitude toward the influencer (ATT)	7-point (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i>)	I do believe that this activist influencer serves as a model for me. I do believe that this activist influencer presents interesting content. I do consider this activist influencer as a reliable source of information and discovery.	Chetioui, Benlafqih and Lebdaoui (2020)
Intention to engage in prosocial behavior (INT)	7-point (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i>)	I would like to engage in prosocial behavior in the future. After seeing this post, I want to engage in prosocial behavior.	Basil, Ridgway and Basil (2008)
Brand awareness	7-point (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i>)	I can recognize the brand among other competing brands./I can recognize the organization among other organizations. I am aware of the brand./I am aware of the organization.	Washburn and Plank (2002)

Source: Authors' own work.

After viewing the stimulus, each participant completed a questionnaire with the variables and the manipulation checks. The median time to complete the experiment was 3 min and 49 s. For the manipulation check, participants were required to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale their degree of disagreement or agreement with the following statements: “There is a high congruity between the influencer and the brand (organization)”; “There is a high alignment between the influencer and the sociopolitical issue.” Most participants in the experiment have an Instagram profile, with 33.1% using it regularly, 37.1% using it less frequently, and 14.0% not using it at all. Only 15.7% of participants reported not having an Instagram profile.

5.3 | Study 1A Results

One hundred and seventy-eight US consumers participated in the study (50.0% male, 50.0% female, median age 37 years, $SD = 14.434$), randomly assigned to the four conditions: high congruity high alignment (HCHA, 46), low congruity high alignment (LCHA, 44), high congruity low alignment (HCLA, 45), and low congruity low alignment (LCLA, 43). The brands employed in the manipulation have a good level of awareness ($M_{Tinder} = 5.24$, $SD_{Tinder} = 1.48$; $M_{Uniqlo} = 4.26$, $SD_{Uniqlo} = 1.87$). According to the results of the One-Way ANOVA conducted for the manipulation check, the differences between the four scenarios are statistically significant for both congruity condition ($M_{HCHA} = 4.96$, $SD_{HCHA} = 1.33$; $M_{LCHA} = 4.41$, $SD_{LCHA} = 1.56$; $M_{HCLA} = 4.22$, $SD_{HCLA} = 1.87$; $M_{LCLA} = 3.74$, $SD_{LCLA} = 1.58$; $F [3, 174] = 4.402$; $p = 0.005$) and alignment condition ($M_{HCHA} =$

4.87, $SD_{HCHA} = 1.46$; $M_{LCHA} = 4.52$, $SD_{LCHA} = 1.59$; $M_{HCLA} = 3.60$, $SD_{HCLA} = 1.92$; $M_{LCLA} = 3.91$, $SD_{LCLA} = 1.73$; $F [3, 174] = 5.290$; $p = 0.002$). The result of the One-Way ANOVA shows that as the congruity between the influencer and the brand increases, individuals' perceived authenticity of the activist influencer also increases: $M_{HC} = 5.90$, $SD_{HC} = 0.64$; $M_{LC} = 3.27$, $SD_{LC} = 1.14$. Thus, H1a is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values less than 0.05 ($p < 0.001$). However, the results of robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) for the equality of means are significant (p value < 0.001). The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [1, 176] = 363.906$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.674$). Focusing on the alignment condition, the results of the One-Way ANOVA reveal that individuals perceive influencers as more authentic when there is a higher alignment between the influencer and the issue. Specifically, participants rated perceived authenticity higher in the high-alignment condition ($M_{HA} = 4.76$, $SD_{HA} = 1.45$) compared with the low-alignment condition ($M_{LA} = 4.47$, $SD_{LA} = 1.74$). Thus, H2a is supported. However, Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values less than 0.05, and the robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) are not significant because the p values are more than 0.05 (0.236). The between-subject effect test was found to be not significant ($F [1, 176] = 1.418$; $p = 0.235$; $\eta^2 = 0.08$). When it comes to the combination of congruity and alignment, the results of the Univariate ANOVA show that perceived authenticity is higher in the HCHA condition ($M_{HCHA} = 5.91$, $SD_{HCHA} = 0.56$) and HCLA condition ($M_{HCLA} = 5.88$, $SD_{HCLA} = 0.72$), followed by LCHA condition ($M_{LCHA} = 3.55$, $SD_{LCHA} = 1.05$) and LCLA condition ($M_{LCLA} = 2.99$, $SD_{LCLA} = 1.16$). Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values less than 0.05

TABLE 4 | Results of hypotheses testing Study 1A.

Paths	β	95% CI		SE	<i>p</i> value	Hypothesis
		Lower	Upper			
PA → INT	-0.042	-0.170	0.141	0.077	0.650	H3a not supported
PA → ATT	0.226	0.081	0.376	0.075	0.005	H4a supported
ATT → INT	0.276	0.111	0.439	0.085	0.001	H5a supported
PA → ATT → INT	0.063	0.020	0.144	0.030	0.003	H6a supported

Abbreviations: β , standardized β weights; CI, confidence interval; SE, standard error.

Source: Authors' own work.

($p < 0.001$). However, the results of robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) for the equality of means are significant ($p < 0.001$). The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [3, 174] = 128.315, p < 0.001; \eta^2 = 0.689$), thus there are significant differences across the conditions. All the pairwise comparisons are significant, except for the HCHA and HCLA conditions (0.868). Similarly, all the multiple comparisons are significant, except for the HCHA and HCLA conditions (Turkey 0.998; Bonferroni 1.000; Games-Howell 0.996). To test hypotheses H3a, H4a, H5a, and H6a, we performed a SEM analysis. The measurement model presents validity and reliability (PA: Alpha = 0.982, AVE = 0.947, CR = 0.982; ATT: Alpha = 0.945, AVE = 0.901, CR = 0.948; INT: Alpha = 0.940, AVE = 0.921, CR = 0.958). The structural model was characterized by the following indices indicating a good model fit: CMIN/df = 12.497/11 = 1136, the Bentler's comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.999, the normed fit index (NFI) = 0.992, and the Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.028 (Pclose = 0.666). Results (see Table 4) highlighted that perceived authenticity positively affects attitudes toward the influencer ($\beta = 0.226, p = 0.005$) but it does not exert a direct effect on intention ($\beta = -0.042, p = 0.650$). Attitude toward the influencer has a direct effect on intention ($\beta = 0.276, p = 0.001$) and mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and intention ($\beta = 0.063, p = 0.003$).

5.4 | Study 1B Results

One hundred and seventy-eight US consumers participated in the study (50.0% male, 50.0% female, median age 37 years, SD = 14.434), randomly assigned to the four conditions: high congruity high alignment (HCHA, 44), low congruity high alignment (LCHA, 43), high congruity low alignment (HCLA, 47), and low congruity low alignment (LCLA, 44). The organizations employed in the manipulation have a good level of awareness ($M_{HRC} = 4.07, SD_{HRC} = 1.88; M_{NRDC} = 3.80, SD_{NRDC} = 1.76$). According to the results of the One-Way ANOVA conducted for the manipulation check, the differences between the four scenarios are statistically significant for both congruity ($M_{HCHA} = 5.25, SD_{HCHA} = 1.35; M_{LCHA} = 4.58, SD_{LCHA} = 1.52; M_{HCLA} = 4.49, SD_{HCLA} = 1.64; M_{LCLA} = 4.55, SD_{LCLA} = 1.37; F [3, 174] = 2.602; p = 0.054$) and alignment ($M_{HCHA} = 5.34, SD_{HCHA} = 1.31; M_{LCHA} = 5.16, SD_{LCHA} = 1.46; M_{HCLA} = 4.53, SD_{HCLA} = 1.83; M_{LCLA} = 4.64, SD_{LCLA} = 1.63; F [3, 174] = 2.813; p = 0.041$). The result of the One-Way ANOVA shows that the higher the congruity between the influencer and the organization, the higher the perceived authenticity of the

influencer: $M_{HC} = 4.88, SD_{HC} = 1.59; M_{LC} = 4.66, SD_{LC} = 1.61$. Thus, H1b is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows *p* values more than 0.05. However, the between-subject effect test was found to be not significant ($F [1, 176] = 0.871; p = 0.352; \eta^2 = 0.005$). The results of the One-Way ANOVA do not provide evidence that the higher the alignment between the influencer and the issue, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{HA} = 4.72, SD_{HA} = 1.69; M_{LA} = 4.82, SD_{LA} = 1.52$. Thus, H2b is not supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows *p* values more than 0.05. However, the between-subject effect test was not significant ($F [1, 176] = 0.169; p = 0.682; \eta^2 = 0.001$). Focusing on the combination of congruity and alignment, the results of the Univariate ANOVA show that perceived authenticity is higher in the HCLA ($M_{HCLA} = 4.89, SD_{HCLA} = 1.50$) and HCHA ($M_{HCHA} = 4.87, SD_{HCHA} = 1.70$) conditions, followed by LCHA ($M_{LCHA} = 4.74, SD_{LCHA} = 1.55$) and LCLA ($M_{LCLA} = 4.58, SD_{LCLA} = 1.68$). Levene's test of equality of error variances shows *p* values more than 0.05. The between-subject effect test was found to be not significant ($F [3, 174] = 0.396; p = 0.776; \eta^2 = 0.006$). Thus, there are no significant differences across the conditions. Similarly, all the pairwise comparisons are not significant, and the multiple comparisons are not significant. To test hypotheses H3b, H4b, H5b, and H6b, we performed a SEM analysis. The measurement model presents validity and reliability (PA: Alpha = 0.967, AVE = 0.907, CR = 0.967; ATT: Alpha = 0.949, AVE = 0.905, CR = 0.950; INT: Alpha = 0.946, AVE = 0.904, CR = 0.949). The structural model was characterized by the following indices indicating a good model fit: CMIN/df = 8.993/11 = 0.818, the Bentler's CFI = 1000, NFI = 0.994, and RMSEA < 0.001 (Pclose = 0.870). Results (see Table 5) highlighted that perceived authenticity positively affects attitudes toward the influencer ($\beta = 0.688, p = 0.001$) and also exerts a direct effect on intention ($\beta = 0.353, p = 0.015$). In contrast, attitude toward the influencer does not exert a significant direct effect on intention ($\beta = -0.023, p = 0.918$) and does not mediate the relationship between perceived authenticity and intention ($\beta = -0.016, p = 0.913$).

5.5 | Discussion

Some aspects warrant further discussion. First, in line with Belanche et al. (2021) and Kim and Kim (2021), a high congruity between the influencer and the partner leads to a higher perceived authenticity in both Study 1A and Study 1B, with significant differences only in the brand partnership scenario. Thus, working with a brand may impact perceived authenticity,

TABLE 5 | Results of hypotheses testing Study 1B.

Paths	β	95% CI		SE	p value	Hypothesis
		Lower	Upper			
PA → INT	0.373	0.084	0.610	0.134	0.015	H3b supported
PA → ATT	0.688	0.537	0.792	0.064	0.001	H4b supported
ATT → INT	-0.023	-0.250	0.285	0.134	0.918	H5b not supported
PA → ATT → INT	-0.016	-0.172	0.207	0.094	0.913	H6b not supported

Abbreviations: β , standardized β weights; CI, confidence interval; SE, standard error.

Source: Authors' own work.

while collaborating with an organization might be generally perceived as more authentic, regardless of the level of congruity. Similarly, in Study 1A, higher alignment between the influencer and the issue leads to increased perceived authenticity (Pracejus and Olsen 2004). However, this effect is not observed in Study 1B, and the differences in both studies are not statistically significant. When considering the interaction between congruity and alignment, perceived authenticity is consistently higher under high-congruity conditions in both Study 1A and Study 1B. The results are closer in Study 1B, as reflected by the nonsignificant differences observed. The stronger influence of congruity over alignment is evident, as perceived authenticity tends to decrease in low-congruity conditions, regardless of alignment. In contrast, when congruity is high, perceived authenticity remains elevated, regardless of the level of alignment. These findings suggest that congruity with the brand may significantly impact perceived authenticity more than alignment with the sociopolitical issue, particularly when both factors are considered together.

Second, the perceived authenticity of influencers who collaborate with a brand to support a sociopolitical issue does not have a direct and positive effect on individuals' intention to engage in prosocial behavior, while it has a direct and positive effect on attitude toward the influencer, which positively mediates the individuals' intentions. One could speculate that in the case of collaborations between an activist influencer and a brand to promote prosocial behavior, to be perceived as authentic is relevant for the content creator to generate positive effects on attitudes and intentions. While authenticity shapes attitudes, it alone might not be enough to drive intentions. However, the perceived authenticity of influencers who collaborate with an organization to support a sociopolitical issue has a direct and positive effect on individuals' intention to engage in prosocial behavior, and it has a direct and positive effect on attitude toward the influencer. Interestingly, the mediation effect of perceived authenticity on intentions through attitudes is not significant. Contrary to a collaboration with a brand, an activist influencer partnering with a nonprofit organization could significantly impact an individual's intention to engage in prosocial behavior. In contrast to Study 1A, perceived authenticity in Study 1B directly affects attitudes and intentions. This underscores a stronger direct influence of authenticity in collaborations with organizations. Finally, since attitude does not mediate the relationship between perceived authenticity and intention in Study 1B, it suggests that, in the context of organizations, the direct impact of authenticity is more crucial than the attitude toward the influencer. These initial studies provide

intriguing insights and enrich the extant literature (e.g., Belanche et al. 2021; Lindmoser, Weitzl, and Zniva 2022; Liu, Liao, and Wei 2015; Quach, Cheah, and Thaichon 2024). However, due to the limited sample size and somewhat mixed results, the subsequent studies in this research aim to further investigate and clarify the emerging dynamics observed.

6 | Study 2

6.1 | Stimuli Development

To extend the results of Study 1, Study 2 aims to investigate specific prosocial actions rather than analyzing the intention to engage in generic prosocial behaviors. To this purpose we identified different forms that prosocial behavior can take, inspired by previous literature (e.g., Ahmad, Guzmán, and Kidwell 2022; Cammarota et al. 2024; Korschun, Martin, and Vadakkepatt 2020; Minton and Rose 1997) and real brands and organizations activities (e.g., Human Rights Campaign, Patagonia). Relevant examples include gathering information and raising awareness about a specific issue, subscribing to a newsletter, or signing a petition to support a cause. Employing *getresponse.com*, we designed nonindexed landing pages for each of the three real actions identified (namely *information and resources*, *newsletter*, and *petition*). The landing pages closely mimic real web pages and are all identical to each other except for the specific content referring to each prosocial action, as shown in Appendix C. The images extracted from these landing pages were used as materials for Study 2, while the actual landing pages were employed for Study 3, as detailed in Section 7. The influencer's Instagram profile and the posts' manipulations were the same as in Study 1.

6.2 | Procedure

Study 2 comprises Study 2A, which addresses partnerships with brands, and Study 2B, which focuses on partnerships with organizations. Each of them is a 2 (high congruity vs. low congruity) \times 2 (high alignment vs. low alignment) between-subjects online experiment. This study was conducted in May and June 2024 in collaboration with a nationally prominent Italian nonprofit organization, which is a network of associations, social cooperatives, movements, and groups working for social justice, among other issues. In compliance with the organization's privacy policy, surveys were directly

administered by the organization to the members in Italy. Fielding was stopped after reaching 150 participants for each experimental condition. The data were provided in anonymous and aggregate form. Analysis was carried out using SPSS 29 and AMOS 23.

At the beginning of the experiments, all participants were instructed to view an Instagram profile of an activist influencer and, after that, one of her posts, following the same procedure of Study 1. We randomly assigned participants to one of the conditions: high congruity high alignment (HCHA), low congruity high alignment (LCHA), high congruity low alignment (HCLA), and low congruity low alignment (LCLA). After viewing the stimulus, each participant completed a questionnaire to assess both the manipulation checks and the constructs of interest, similar to the procedure in Study 1. However, instead of measuring the intention to engage in generic prosocial behavior, participants were shown images extracted from the landing pages (see Appendix C). Each participant viewed only one of three identified actions, randomly assigned, and was requested to express their level of agreement or disagreement

(7-point Likert scale) with specific statements. For the *information* and resources webpage, the statements were: “I am willing to get more information about this issue”; “After seeing this post, I am willing to get more information about this issue.” For the newsletter webpage, the statements were: “I would like to subscribe to this newsletter”; “After seeing this post, I want to subscribe to this newsletter.” For the petition webpage, the statements were: “I would like to sign this petition”; “After seeing this post, I want to sign this petition.” The manipulation checks were the same as in Study 1. Table 6 provides a summary of the demographics of the samples of Study 2A and Study 2B.

6.3 | Study 2A Results

Six hundred Italian consumers participated in the study, randomly assigned to the four conditions: high congruity high alignment (HCHA, 150), low congruity high alignment (LCHA, 150), high congruity low alignment (HCLA, 150), and low congruity low alignment (LCLA, 150). For each of the four conditions, 50

TABLE 6 | Demographic of Study 2A and Study 2B.

	Study 2A	Study 2B
Gender		
Male	287 (47.8%)	295 (49.2%)
Female	313 (52.2%)	305 (50.8%)
Age		
18–24	92 (15.3%)	119 (19.8%)
25–34	170 (28.3%)	153 (25.5%)
35–44	196 (32.7%)	180 (30.0%)
45–54	116 (19.3%)	115 (19.2%)
55–64	26 (4.3%)	33 (5.5%)
Education level		
Less than high school diploma	—	1 (0.2%)
High school diploma	200 (33.3%)	225 (37.5%)
Specialization/professional/technical training	97 (16.2%)	90 (15.0%)
Bachelor's degree	72 (12.0%)	68 (11.3%)
Master's degree	231 (38.5%)	216 (36.0%)
Occupation		
Student	102 (17.0%)	137 (22.8%)
Working student	11 (1.8%)	9 (1.5%)
Employed	338 (56.3%)	332 (55.3%)
Freelancer/entrepreneur	123 (20.5%)	122 (20.3%)
Unemployed (seeking employment)	26 (4.3%)	—
Instagram profile		
I do not have an Instagram profile	—	—
I have an Instagram profile, but I don't use it	10 (1.7%)	20 (3.3%)
I have an Instagram profile but I do not use it regularly	225 (37.5%)	64 (10.7%)
I have an Instagram profile and use it regularly	365 (60.8%)	516 (86.0%)

Source: Authors' own work.

respondents were then assigned to the *information and resources* webpage, 50 to the *newsletter* webpage, and 50 to the *petition* webpage. The brands employed in the manipulation have a similar good level of awareness ($M_{\text{Tinder}} = 4.94$, $SD_{\text{Tinder}} = 0.92$; $M_{\text{Uniqlo}} = 5.05$, $SD_{\text{Uniqlo}} = 0.81$). According to the results of the One-Way ANOVA conducted for the manipulation check, the differences between the four scenarios are statistically significant for both congruity ($M_{\text{HCHA}} = 5.25$, $SD_{\text{HCHA}} = 0.85$; $M_{\text{LCHA}} = 3.00$, $SD_{\text{LCHA}} = 0.92$; $M_{\text{HCLA}} = 5.16$, $SD_{\text{HCLA}} = 0.84$; $M_{\text{LCLA}} = 2.82$, $SD_{\text{LCLA}} = 0.84$; $F [3, 596] = 355.797$; $p < 0.001$) and alignment ($M_{\text{HCHA}} = 5.27$, $SD_{\text{HCHA}} = 0.88$; $M_{\text{LCHA}} = 5.29$, $SD_{\text{LCHA}} = 0.76$; $M_{\text{HCLA}} = 3.05$, $SD_{\text{HCLA}} = 0.82$; $M_{\text{LCLA}} = 2.81$, $SD_{\text{LCLA}} = 0.83$; $F [3, 596] = 414.935$; $p < 0.001$). The result of the One-Way ANOVA shows that the higher the congruity between the influencer and the brand, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{\text{HC}} = 4.84$, $SD_{\text{HC}} = 0.84$; $M_{\text{LC}} = 4.32$, $SD_{\text{LC}} = 0.84$. Thus, H1a is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values more than 0.05. The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [1, 598] = 56.852$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.087$). The results of the One-Way ANOVA provide evidence that the higher the alignment between the influencer and the issue, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{\text{HA}} = 4.72$, $SD_{\text{HA}} = 0.88$; $M_{\text{LA}} = 4.44$, $SD_{\text{LA}} = 0.85$. Thus, H2a is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values more than 0.05. The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [1, 598] = 15.519$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.025$). When it comes to the combination of congruity and alignment, the results of the Univariate ANOVA show that perceived authenticity is higher in the HCHA ($M_{\text{HCHA}} = 4.99$, $SD_{\text{HCHA}} = 0.86$) and HCLA ($M_{\text{HCLA}} = 4.69$, $SD_{\text{HCLA}} = 0.79$) conditions, followed by LCHA ($M_{\text{LCHA}} = 4.45$, $SD_{\text{LCHA}} = 0.81$) and LCLA ($M_{\text{LCLA}} = 4.20$, $SD_{\text{LCLA}} = 0.84$). Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values more than 0.05. The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [3, 596] = 25.139$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.112$), thus there are significant differences across the conditions. All the pairwise comparisons are significant. All the multiple comparisons are significant, except for the HCLA and LCHA conditions (Turkey 0.063; Bonferroni 0.079; Games-Howell 0.053). To test hypotheses H3a, H4a,

H5a, and H6a we performed a SEM analysis. The measurement model presents validity and reliability (PA: Alpha = 0.870, AVE = 0.691, CR = 0.870; ATT: Alpha = 0.758, AVE = 0.620, CR = 0.765; INT: Alpha = 0.820, AVE = 0.703, CR = 0.825). The structural model was characterized by the following indices indicating a good model fit: $CMIN/df = 19.473/7 = 2.782$, the Bentler's CFI = 0.994, NFI = 0.990, and RMSEA = 0.055 (Pclose = 0.352). Results (see Table 7) highlighted that perceived authenticity positively affects attitudes toward the influencer ($\beta = 0.651$, $p < 0.001$) but it does not exert a direct effect on intention ($\beta = -0.111$, $p = 0.079$). Attitudes toward the influencer have a direct effect on intention ($\beta = 0.656$, $p < 0.001$) and mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and intention ($\beta = 0.427$, $p < 0.001$).

Finally, Table 8 presents detailed results for each prosocial behavior. The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [11, 588] = 7.058$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.117$).

The intention to consult information and resources webpage is higher in the high congruity conditions than in the low congruity ones. The effect of alignment seems to be weaker. A similar phenomenon is observed for the intention to sign a petition. However, the case of the newsletter is somewhat different, as the same pattern is observed except for the HCLA condition, which shows the lowest result.

6.4 | Study 2B Results

Six hundred Italian consumers participated in the study, randomly assigned to the four conditions: high congruity high alignment (HCHA, 150), low congruity high alignment (LCHA, 150), high congruity low alignment (HCLA, 150), and low congruity low alignment (LCLA, 150). For each of the four conditions, 50 respondents were then assigned to the *information and resources* webpage, 50 to the *newsletter* webpage and 50 to the *petition* webpage. The organizations employed in the

TABLE 7 | Results of hypotheses testing Study 2A.

Paths	β	95% CI		SE	p value	Hypothesis
		Lower	Upper			
PA → INT	-0.111	-0.254	0.011	0.068	0.079	H3a not supported
PA → ATT	0.651	0.561	0.735	0.044	$p < 0.001$	H4a supported
ATT → INT	0.656	0.529	0.798	0.068	$p < 0.001$	H5a supported
PA → ATT → INT	0.427	0.325	0.566	0.060	$p < 0.001$	H6a supported

Abbreviations: β , standardized β weights; CI, confidence interval; SE, standard error.
Source: Authors' own work.

TABLE 8 | Results for the analyzed prosocial behaviors Study 2A.

Prosocial behavior	HCHA	HCLA	LCHA	LCLA
Information and resources	4.89 (1.07)	4.82 (0.74)	4.54 (0.77)	4.58 (0.79)
Newsletter	5.01 (0.85)	3.93 (0.88)	4.76 (0.73)	4.40 (0.80)
Petition	5.08 (0.79)	4.83 (0.97)	4.69 (0.70)	4.64 (0.60)

Note: Standard deviation in parenthesis.
Source: Authors' own work.

manipulation have a similar good level of awareness ($M_{HRC} = 3.92$, $SD_{HRC} = 0.89$; $M_{NRDC} = 3.88$, $SD_{NRDC} = 0.79$). According to the results of the One-Way ANOVA conducted for the manipulation check, the differences between the four scenarios are statistically significant for both congruity ($M_{HCHA} = 5.35$, $SD_{HCHA} = 0.89$; $M_{LCHA} = 3.81$, $SD_{LCHA} = 1.15$; $M_{HCLA} = 5.28$, $SD_{HCLA} = 0.82$; $M_{LCLA} = 2.93$, $SD_{LCLA} = 0.96$; $F [3, 596] = 225.684$; $p < 0.001$) and alignment ($M_{HCHA} = 5.05$, $SD_{HCHA} = 0.86$; $M_{LCHA} = 3.70$, $SD_{LCHA} = 1.05$; $M_{HCLA} = 3.15$, $SD_{HCLA} = 0.90$; $M_{LCLA} = 2.79$, $SD_{LCLA} = 1.11$; $F [3, 596] = 150.559$; $p < 0.001$). The result of the One-Way ANOVA shows that the higher the congruity between the influencer and the organization, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{HC} = 4.85$, $SD_{HC} = 0.77$; $M_{LC} = 4.19$, $SD_{LC} = 0.81$. Thus, H1b is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values more than 0.05. The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($IF [1, 598] = 104.531$; $p < 0.01$; $\eta^2 = 0.149$). The results of the One-Way ANOVA provide evidence that the higher the alignment between the influencer and the issue, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{HA} = 4.75$, $SD_{HA} = 0.85$; $M_{LA} = 4.30$, $SD_{LA} = 0.80$. Thus, H2b is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values more than 0.05. The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [1, 598] = 46.032$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.071$). Concerning the combination of congruity and alignment, the results of the Univariate ANOVA show that perceived authenticity is higher in the HCHA ($M_{HCHA} = 5.07$, $SD_{HCHA} = 0.77$) and HCLA ($M_{HCLA} = 4.63$, $SD_{HCLA} = 0.70$), followed by LCHA ($M_{LCHA} = 4.43$, $SD_{LCHA} = 0.79$) and LCLA ($M_{LCLA} = 3.96$, $SD_{LCLA} = 0.76$). Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values more than 0.05. The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [3, 596] = 56.153$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.220$), thus there are significant differences across the conditions. All the pairwise comparisons are significant. All the multiple comparisons are significant, except for the HCLA and LCHA conditions (Turkey = 0.096; Games-Howell = 0.126). To test hypotheses H3b, H4b, H5b and

H6b we performed a SEM analysis. The measurement model presents validity and reliability (PA: Alpha = 0.846; AVE = 0.652, CR = 0.848; ATT: Alpha = 0.765, AVE = 0.652, CR = 0.769; INT: Alpha = 0.787, AVE = 0.652, CR = 0.790). The structural model was characterized by the following indices indicating a good model fit: $CMIN/df = 19.332/11 = 1.757$, the Bentler's CFI = 0.996, NFI = 0.990, and RMSEA = 0.036 (Pclose = 0.803. Results (see Table 9) highlighted that perceived authenticity positively affects attitudes toward the influencer ($\beta = 0.546$, $p < 0.001$), but it does not exert a direct effect on intention ($\beta = 0.009$, $p = 0.887$). Attitude toward the influencer has a direct effect on intention ($\beta = 0.852$, $p < 0.001$) and mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and intention ($\beta = 0.465$, $p < 0.001$).

Finally, Table 10 presents detailed results for each prosocial behavior. The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [11, 588] = 5.403$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.092$).

The intention to consult information and resources webpage is higher when the congruity or the alignment is high. Similarly, the intention to subscribe to a newsletter is higher when the congruity or the alignment is high. However, the case of the petition is somewhat different, since the intention to subscribe is higher in the HCHA condition, followed by the LCLA one.

6.5 | Discussion

Several key findings emerge from the analysis. First, consistent with Studies 1A and 1B, high congruity between the influencer and the partner significantly enhances perceived authenticity, aligning with previous research (e.g., Belanche et al. 2021; Kim and Kim 2021). Additionally, a stronger alignment between the influencer and the issue also significantly increases perceived authenticity, supporting earlier literature (e.g., Pracejus and Olsen 2004). When considering the combination of congruity and

TABLE 9 | Results of hypotheses testing Study 2B.

Paths	β	95% CI		SE	p value	Hypothesis
		Lower	Upper			
PA → INT	0.009	-0.101	0.106	0.054	0.877	H3b is not supported
PA → ATT	0.546	0.441	0.639	0.051	$p < 0.001$	H4b supported
ATT → INT	0.852	0.752	0.954	0.052	$p < 0.001$	H5b supported
PA → ATT → INT	0.465	0.363	0.590	0.058	$p < 0.001$	H6b supported

Abbreviations: β , standardized β weights; CI, confidence interval; SE, standard error.
Source: Authors' own work.

TABLE 10 | Results for the analyzed prosocial behaviors Study 2B.

Prosocial behavior	HCHA	HCLA	LCHA	LCLA
Information and resources	4.59 (0.97)	4.56 (0.64)	4.70 (0.70)	4.52 (0.76)
Newsletter	5.14 (0.81)	4.17 (0.84)	4.63 (0.77)	4.28 (0.85)
Petition	4.99 (0.75)	4.59 (0.96)	4.61 (0.76)	4.69 (0.63)

Note: Standard deviation in parenthesis.
Source: Authors' own work.

alignment, perceived authenticity is notably higher in conditions of high congruity across both studies. The consistent pattern observed in Studies 2A and 2B (HCHA > HCLA > LCHA > LCLA) further emphasizes that congruity has a greater impact than alignment. This suggests that consumers may prioritize the perceived fit between the influencer and the partner over the alignment with the issue. Second, as observed in Study 1A, perceived authenticity in Study 2A does not directly and positively influence individuals' intention to engage in prosocial behavior, while, in line with Thomas and Fowler (2023), it has a direct and positive effect on attitude toward the influencer, which positively mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and individuals' intentions to engage in prosocial actions (Nguyen et al. 2023; Zniva, Weitzl, and Lindmoser 2023). This contrasts with findings from studies such as Quach, Cheah, and Thaichon (2024), who found a direct effect of authenticity on prosocial behavior, such as a donation. These results support the notion that in brand collaborations, being perceived as authentic is essential for influencers to positively impact both attitudes and intentions. However, while authenticity plays a key role in shaping attitudes, it may not be always necessary to drive individuals' intentions (Andonopoulos, Lee, and Mathies 2023). However, the perceived authenticity of influences who collaborate with an organization to support a sociopolitical issue presents some differences compared with Study 1B. It does not directly and positively affect individuals' intention to engage in prosocial behavior, while it has a direct and positive effect on attitude toward the influencer, as in Study 2A (Quach, Cheah, and Thaichon 2024; Thomas and Fowler 2023). Moreover, the mediation effect of perceived authenticity on intentions via attitudes is significant in Study 2B, as the positive and direct effect of attitude on intentions (Nguyen et al. 2023; Zniva, Weitzl, and Lindmoser 2023). Interestingly, the effect of the two latter paths is stronger compared with Study 2A, reinforcing the importance of authenticity in partnerships with organizations. In summary, the path analysis of Study 1A, Study 2A and Study 2B present similar results, thus only Study 1B has some discordances. Third, when closely analyzing specific prosocial behaviors across both studies, intentions to consult information and resources webpage, subscribe to newsletters, and sign petitions were generally higher in the HCHA condition, while patterns differ for the other scenarios. Interestingly, for the *information and resources*, a higher intention is observed in the LCHA condition compared with the HCLA condition in Study 2B, suggesting that alignment may have a stronger effect when partnering with organizations. For *newsletter*, the drop in intention in the HCLA conditions of Study 2A and Study 2B suggests that while congruity is important, alignment may be particularly critical for an ongoing commitment, like newsletter subscriptions. Finally, the *petition* shows that congruity seems more important in the brand partnership than in the organization. However, despite encouraging results, the main limitation of this study remains the measurement of intentions, albeit referring to specific prosocial behaviors.

7 | Study 3

7.1 | Stimuli Development

To strengthen the results of Study 1 and Study 2 and deepen consumer response beyond intentions, Study 3 employed a proxy of actual prosocial behavior. The main difference with

Study 2 is that respondents were redirected to real, nonindexed landing pages, thus reachable only through the survey, employing *getresponse.com*. The landing pages closely mimic real web pages and are all identical to each other except for the specific content referring to each prosocial action, as shown in Appendix C. Users could freely navigate the web pages, but none of the elements were interacted with, except for content directly related to the three identified actions (*information and resources*; *newsletter*; *petition*). The links on the *information and resources* webpage were redirecting to actual webpages containing information about the topic. *getresponse.com* allowed us to collect several data, such as the number of clicks and completed forms.

7.2 | Procedure

Study 3 is composed of Study 3A, which addresses partnerships with brands, and Study 3B, which focuses on partnerships with organizations. Each of them is a 2 (high congruity vs. low congruity) × 2 (high alignment vs. low alignment) between-subjects online experiment. This study was conducted in collaboration with a nationally prominent Italian nonprofit organization in May and June 2024, as for Study 2. The data were provided in anonymous and aggregate form. Analysis was carried out using SPSS 29. The procedure is the same as in Study 2. However, instead of measuring the intention to engage in prosocial behavior, participants were redirected to the different landing pages. Table 11 summarizes the demographics of Study 3A and Study 3B samples.

7.3 | Study 3A Results

Six hundred Italian consumers participated in the study, randomly assigned to the four conditions: high congruity high alignment (HCHA, 150), low congruity high alignment (LCHA, 150), high congruity low alignment (HCLA, 150), and low congruity low alignment (LCLA, 150). For each of the four conditions, 50 respondents were then assigned to the *information and resources* webpage, 50 to the *newsletter* webpage, and 50 to the *petition* webpage. The brands employed in the manipulation have a similar good level of awareness ($M_{\text{Tinder}} = 5.15$, $SD_{\text{Tinder}} = 0.64$; $M_{\text{Uniqlo}} = 5.19$, $SD_{\text{Uniqlo}} = 0.58$). According to the results of the One-Way ANOVA conducted for the manipulation check, the differences between the four scenarios are statistically significant for both congruity ($M_{\text{HCHA}} = 5.37$, $SD_{\text{HCHA}} = 0.86$; $M_{\text{LCHA}} = 2.84$, $SD_{\text{LCHA}} = 0.94$; $M_{\text{HCLA}} = 5.27$, $SD_{\text{HCLA}} = 0.84$; $M_{\text{LCLA}} = 2.73$, $SD_{\text{LCLA}} = 0.84$; $F [3, 596] = 425.829$; $p < 0.001$) and alignment ($M_{\text{HCHA}} = 5.39$, $SD_{\text{HCHA}} = 0.89$; $M_{\text{LCHA}} = 5.27$, $SD_{\text{LCHA}} = 0.83$; $M_{\text{HCLA}} = 3.05$, $SD_{\text{HCLA}} = 0.82$; $M_{\text{LCLA}} = 2.77$, $SD_{\text{LCLA}} = 0.86$; $F [3, 596] = 410.274$; $p < 0.001$). The result of the One-Way ANOVA shows that the higher the congruity between the influencer and the brand, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{\text{HC}} = 5.02$, $SD_{\text{HC}} = 0.61$; $M_{\text{LC}} = 4.73$, $SD_{\text{LC}} = 0.46$. Thus, H1a is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values less than 0.05 ($p < 0.001$). However, the results of robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) for the equality of means are significant (p value < 0.001). The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [1, 598] = 42.867$; $p < 0.001$;

TABLE 11 | Demographic of Study 3A and Study 3B.

	Study 3A	Study 3B
Gender		
Male	305 (50.8%)	287 (47.8%)
Female	295 (49.2%)	313 (52.2%)
Age		
18–24	114 (19.0%)	135 (22.5%)
25–34	154 (25.7%)	145 (24.2%)
35–44	169 (28.2%)	175 (29.2%)
45–54	115 (19.2%)	108 (18.0%)
55–64	48 (8.0%)	37 (6.2%)
Education level		
High school diploma	243 (40.5%)	221 (36.8%)
Specialization/professional/technical training	101 (16.8%)	147 (24.5%)
Bachelor's degree	49 (8.2%)	58 (9.7%)
Master's degree	207 (34.5%)	174 (29.0%)
Occupation		
Student	121 (20.2%)	160 (26.7%)
Working student	3 (0.5%)	1 (0.2%)
Employed	333 (55.5%)	319 (53.2%)
Freelancer/entrepreneur	124 (20.7%)	112 (18.7%)
Unemployed (seeking employment)	19 (3.2%)	8 (1.3%)
Instagram profile		
I do not have an Instagram profile	—	—
I have an Instagram profile, but I don't use it	17 (2.8%)	—
I have an Instagram profile but I do not use it regularly	223 (37.2%)	222 (37.0%)
I have an Instagram profile and use it regularly	360 (60.0%)	378 (63.0%)

Source: Authors' own work.

$\eta^2 = 0.067$). The results of the One-Way ANOVA provide evidence that the higher the alignment between the influencer and the issue, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{HA} = 4.98$, $SD_{HA} = 0.58$; $M_{LA} = 4.78$, $SD_{LA} = 0.52$. Thus, H2a is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows one p value more than 0.05. However, the results of robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) for the equality of means are significant (p value < 0.001). The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [1, 598] = 19.807$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.032$). When it comes to the combination of congruity and alignment, the results of the Univariate ANOVA show that perceived authenticity is higher in the HCHA ($M_{HCHA} = 5.15$, $SD_{HCHA} = 0.63$) and HCLA ($M_{HCLA} = 4.89$, $SD_{HCLA} = 0.56$) conditions, followed by LCHA ($M_{LCHA} = 4.80$, $SD_{LCHA} = 0.45$) and LCLA ($M_{LCLA} = 4.66$, $SD_{LCLA} = 0.45$). Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p -values less than 0.05. However, the results of robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) for the equality of means are significant (p value < 0.001). The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [3, 596] = 22.692$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta p^2 = 0.103$), thus there are significant differences across the conditions. All the pairwise comparisons are significant, except for the HCLA and

the LCHA conditions (0.148). All the multiple comparisons are significant, except for the HCLA and LCHA conditions (Turkey 0.469; Bonferroni 0.885; Games-Howell 0.436) and the LCHA and LCLA (Turkey 0.131; Bonferroni 0.180; Games-Howell 0.054). By observing the individuals' behavior on the landing pages, the number of completed actions is always the highest in the HCHA scenario, followed by the HCLA, LCHA and LCLA scenarios, as summarized in Table 12.

7.4 | Study 3B Results

Six hundred Italian consumers participated in the study, randomly assigned to the four conditions: high congruity high alignment (HCHA, 150), low congruity high alignment (LCHA, 150), high congruity low alignment (HCLA, 150), and low congruity low alignment (LCLA, 150). For each of the four conditions, 50 respondents were then assigned to the *information and resources* webpage, 50 to the *newsletter* webpage, and 50 to the *petition* webpage. The organizations employed in the manipulation have a similar good level of awareness ($M_{HRC} = 5.01$, $SD_{HRC} = 0.67$; $M_{NRDC} = 5.11$, $SD_{NRDC} = 0.62$). According

TABLE 12 | Results for the analyzed prosocial behaviors Study 3A.

Prosocial behavior	HCHA	HCLA	LCHA	LCLA
Information and resources ^a	(49)	(50)	(50)	(45)
Link 1	49	42	38	31
Link 2	48	42	38	30
Link 3	48	42	37	31
Link 4	46	42	37	30
Link 5	45	40	38	31
Newsletter ^b	44 (50)	40 (50)	39 (50)	35 (50)
Petition ^c	47 (50)	42 (48)	37 (50)	39 (47)

Note: ^anumber of clicks; ^bnumber of subscriptions to the newsletter; ^cnumber of subscriptions to the petition; () number of unique visitors to the landing page.

Source: Authors' own work.

to the results of the One-Way ANOVA conducted for the manipulation check, the differences between the four scenarios are statistically significant for both congruity ($M_{HCHA} = 5.24$, $SD_{HCHA} = 0.80$; $M_{LCHA} = 2.83$, $SD_{LCHA} = 0.92$; $M_{HCLA} = 5.24$, $SD_{HCLA} = 0.75$; $M_{LCLA} = 2.69$, $SD_{LCLA} = 0.84$; $F [3, 596] = 444.970$; $p < 0.001$) and alignment ($M_{HCHA} = 5.31$, $SD_{HCHA} = 0.72$; $M_{LCHA} = 5.22$, $SD_{LCHA} = 0.78$; $M_{HCLA} = 3.06$, $SD_{HCLA} = 0.85$; $M_{LCLA} = 2.77$, $SD_{LCLA} = 0.87$; $F [3, 596] = 431.235$; $p < 0.001$). The result of the One-Way ANOVA shows that the higher the congruity between the influencer and the brand, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{HC} = 5.10$, $SD_{HC} = 0.68$; $M_{LC} = 4.75$, $SD_{LC} = 0.51$. Thus, H1b is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values less than 0.05 ($p < 0.001$). However, the results of robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) for the equality of means are significant (p value < 0.001). The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [1, 598] = 52.174$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.080$). The results of the One-Way ANOVA provide evidence that the higher the alignment between the influencer and the issue, the higher the perceived authenticity of the influencer: $M_{HA} = 5.05$, $SD_{HA} = 0.65$; $M_{LA} = 4.80$, $SD_{LA} = 0.57$. Thus, H2b is supported. Levene's test of equality of error variances shows one p value less than 0.05. However, the results of robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) for the equality of means are significant (p value < 0.001). The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [1, 598] = 25.329$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.041$). With regard to the combination of congruity and alignment, the results of the Univariate ANOVA show that perceived authenticity is higher in the HCHA ($M_{HCHA} = 5.28$, $SD_{HCHA} = 0.70$) and HCLA ($M_{HCLA} = 4.93$, $SD_{HCLA} = 0.61$) conditions, followed by LCHA ($M_{LCHA} = 4.83$, $SD_{LCHA} = 0.51$) and LCLA ($M_{LCLA} = 4.67$, $SD_{LCLA} = 0.51$). Levene's test of equality of error variances shows p values less than 0.05 ($p < 0.001$). However, the results of robust tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe) for the equality of means are significant (p value < 0.001). The between-subject effect test was found to be significant ($F [3, 596] = 28.862$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta p^2 = 0.127$), thus there are significant differences across the conditions. All the pairwise comparisons are significant, except for the HCLA and the LCHA conditions (0.132). All the multiple comparisons are significant, except for the HCLA and LCHA conditions

TABLE 13 | Results for the analyzed prosocial behaviors Study 3B.

Prosocial behavior	HCHA	HCLA	LCHA	LCLA
Information and resources ^a	(49)	(50)	(48)	(45)
Link 1	49	39	38	31
Link 2	49	39	37	29
Link 3	48	38	37	29
Link 4	47	38	35	28
Link 5	48	37	38	28
Newsletter ^b	46 (50)	41 (50)	38 (47)	37 (50)
Petition ^c	48 (48)	40 (48)	37 (45)	37 (47)

Note: ^anumber of clicks; ^bnumber of subscriptions to the newsletter; ^cnumber of subscriptions to the petition; () number of unique visitors to the landing page.

Source: Authors' own work.

(Turkey 0.433; Bonferroni 0.791; Games-Howell 0.393) and the LCHA and LCLA conditions (Turkey 0.100; Bonferroni 0.132). By observing the individual's behavior on the landing pages, the number of completed actions is always the highest in the HCHA scenario, followed by the HCLA, LCHA, and LCLA scenarios, as summarized in Table 13.

7.5 | Discussion

The results of these two studies reinforce previous findings and introduce intriguing new insights for further discussion. First, in line with studies 1A, 1B, 2A, and 2B, both studies confirm that higher congruity between the influencer and the partner (brand or organization) significantly enhances perceived authenticity, as well as does the alignment between the influencer and the issue (Belanche et al. 2021; Kim and Kim 2021; Pracejus and Olsen 2004). When examining the combination of congruity and alignment, the highest scores for perceived authenticity are achieved in high congruity conditions, followed by the LCHA and LCLA conditions.

Second, the studies further demonstrated that perceived authenticity positively influences actual prosocial behaviors consistently across studies. The highest levels of engagement, measured by individuals' clicks on the different type of landing page presented in the experiment, were observed in the HCHA conditions, followed by HCLA, LCHA, and LCLA conditions. The consistent pattern found in both Study 2A and Study 2B (HCHA > HCLA > LCHA > LCLA) reinforces the finding that congruity has a stronger impact than alignment. One could speculate that consumers prioritize the perceived congruity between the influencer and the partner over the alignment with the issue, making them more likely to take concrete actions. Finally, looking in detail at the results of individual actions, we observe that the pattern is not only evident in relative terms (i.e., the ratio of actions taken to the total number of leads) but also in absolute terms (i.e., the total number of actions taken). This suggests that high congruity and, to a lesser extent, high alignment, not only generate more interest in actual prosocial behavior (in this case, in terms of leads), but also result in a higher

level of conversion, in terms of actions taken, such as consulting information and resources webpage on the issue, subscribing to a newsletter, and signing a petition.

8 | Study 4

8.1 | Procedure

Study 4 examines how individuals perceive prosocial Instagram posts shared by activist influencers in partnership with brands or organizations. Using Instagram's search function and search engines, we identified 14 activist influencers, who dealt with different issues and targeted audiences of different sizes.

We then systematically gathered users' comments from a sample of the posts showing a partnership with a brand or an organization, using the web platform Apify. These collaborations were generally characterized by influencer-partner congruence and influencer-issue alignment. For example, an influencer who advocates body positivity, antiracism, and inclusiveness in outdoor activities usually promotes hiking-related products, while an environmental influencer encouraging sustainable living partnered with a packaging industry organization to debunk some eco-friendly packaging beliefs.

To reduce noise, the text corpus was cleaned and preprocessed in Python 3.11.10 by removing numbers, nonword characters,

and non-English comments. The cleaned data was saved as a PDF and imported into InfraNodus, a tool that leverages NLP and network analysis to extract insights from unstructured text (Paranyushkin 2019). InfraNodus allowed us to identify the terms with the highest betweenness centrality metric, prominent topical clusters, and user sentiment toward the influencers and their content. This latter analysis was performed using the Bert AI model.

8.2 | Study 4 Results

According to the results of the text network analysis, "love" (0.685), "amazing" (0.174), "work" (0.164), and "changing" (0.077) are the nodes with the highest centrality. Table 14 shows the results of the topic modeling. The "source of inspiration" cluster (43% influence) is the most significant, followed by the "social impact" cluster (31% influence), the "socially engaged lifestyle" cluster (15% influence), the "positive vibes" cluster (8% influence), and the "personal and social fulfillment" cluster (2% influence). The sentiment analysis results showed that most users' comments were predominantly positive (87%). Negative sentiment was detected in 12% of the comments, while the remaining 1% were neutral. Focusing on the negative comments, it is worth noting that a relevant term is "greenwashing," such as the following excerpts demonstrate: "don't love the greenwashing that [brand] does but oh well" and "This is peak greenwashing... yikes."

TABLE 14 | Topical clusters.

Influence (%)	Total nodes	Percentage of entries (%)	Category	Keywords
43	26	25	1. Source of inspiration	love, beautiful, girl, person, wow, post, happy, young, woman, fantastic, initiative, color, cat, miss, glad, week, congratulation, gorgeous, outfit, absolutely, inspiration, rock, dress, show
31	40	31	2. Social impact	amazing, work, change, world, climate, brand, making, good, bring, create, incredible, action, future, social, planet, impact, difference, sustainable, hope, inspiring, awareness, real, care, passion, powerful, organization, inspired, platform, environmental, working, positive, partnership, commitment, part, buy, sustainability, support, page, collaboration, important
15	35	27	3. Socially engaged lifestyle	time, make, barrier, live, outdoors, people, feel, option, fun, city, year, community, thing, enjoy, big, lot, grow, bag, area, folk, nature, seed, ago, space, company, small, trip, talk, product, plastic, find, hear, kid, black, day
8	28	13	4. Positive vibes	great, cool, sharing, nice, job, awesome, check, message, super, back, book, made, meet, cute, learned, comment, video, hair, home, guy, pretty, wonderful, friend, idea, excited, sound, wait
2	21	5	5. Personal and social fulfillment	park, almond, water, life, place, share, tree, give, state, true, access, start, fruit, food, car, found, farm, god, money, dream, waste

Source: Authors' own work.

8.3 | Discussion

The findings of Study 4 demonstrate the effectiveness of prosocial Instagram posts shared by activist influencers in collaboration with brands or organizations. The analysis revealed that user sentiment is generally positive. Particularly, followers tend to support or admire the influencers' initiatives. This highlights the potential for such partnerships to enhance the influencer's personal brand and create a favorable perception of the associated partners. These findings align with previous research that emphasizes how influencers shape consumer behavior through trust, authenticity, and emotional connections, which in turn enhance brand engagement (Lou and Yuan 2019). Furthermore, the identification of key terms such as "love," "amazing," and "work," along with the dominance of the "source of inspiration" and "social impact" clusters, underscores the significant role of emotional engagement and social relevance in shaping user reactions. Emotional cues like these have been shown to play a relevant role in how followers respond to influencer content, especially when such content carries social relevance (Ki and Kim 2019). These results suggest that prosocial messaging delivered through trusted influencers can foster meaningful connections with audiences and potentially drive positive brand associations (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2021). Additionally, activist influencers may have the potential to influence consumers' attitudes, decisions, and purchasing behavior (Gao et al. 2024). Influencer collaborations based on shared values can influence consumer behavior (Belanche et al. 2021). This is reflected in user comments that highlight how these influencers' values resonate with their audience. For instance, one user wrote: "Thank you for sharing this background as it helps when choosing brands", while another shared, "I bought their plus-size backpacking pack. It is the first pack ever to actually fit me, and I feel so much gratitude!" Such an example emphasizes the important impact of relevant partnerships between influencers and organizations on consumer preferences and decisions. Other users expressed inspiration and appreciation with comments like, "I'm constantly inspired by how you align your values with brands and organizations. You're showing the world how real change happens!" and "I'm so inspired by your commitment to making the world a better place! The way you collaborate with like-minded organizations is exactly what we need for a sustainable future." These reactions underscore the profound effect that authentic, value-driven influencer activism can have in shaping consumer choices and strengthening positive brand associations.

According to the results of content analysis, we finally discovered that influencers are becoming more conscious of the significance of selecting the right partners. For instance, an environmental educator influencer featured on Instagram outlines the criteria for choosing collaborations. They prioritize working with brands that align with their values, emphasizing that "there is no room for error when it comes to content creators."

9 | Overall Discussion

This research provides important insights into the role of influencer activism in shaping perceived authenticity, attitudes,

and prosocial behaviors in both brand- and organization-related collaborations. The results across multiple studies indicate that congruity between influencers and their partners, as well as the influencer alignment with sociopolitical issues, are key drivers of authenticity and audience engagement. While findings confirmed most of the expected outcomes, some interesting patterns emerged, particularly when comparing collaborations with brands and nonprofits.

Studies 1A (influencer-brand partnerships) and 1B (influencer-non-profit partnerships) examined the effects of congruity and alignment on perceived authenticity. Both studies confirmed that high congruity between influencers and their partners positively affects perceived authenticity (H1a, H1b). This finding supports prior research suggesting that congruence enhances credibility and trustworthiness (Belanche et al. 2021; Kim and Kim 2021). Consumers are more likely to accept messages from influencers when their values are congruent with those of the brands or organizations they represent, reinforcing the notion that perceived authenticity is critical for effective influencer marketing.

An intriguing observation is the differential impact of alignment with sociopolitical causes. In Study 1A, high alignment significantly increased perceived authenticity (H2a), whereas in Study 1B, this effect was less pronounced (H2b). This divergence can be understood through the lens of consumer expectations. In commercial partnerships, consumers may actively seek to verify the association of brand values with the influencer's persona, thereby amplifying the importance of congruity. Conversely, with nonprofit partnerships, consumers might assume an inherent authenticity, which diminishes the perceived impact of alignment.

Further analysis showed that perceived authenticity directly influenced attitudes toward influencers (H4a, H4b). However, in brand partnerships, this effect was mediated by attitudes toward the influencer, leading to the conclusion that authenticity influences consumer engagement indirectly (H5a, H6a). This aligns with Nguyen et al. (2023), who emphasized that a positive perception of the influencer strengthens consumer engagement.

In nonprofit partnerships (Study 1B), perceived authenticity had a direct effect on prosocial behavior (H3b), indicating that when consumers perceive an influencer as genuinely committed to a cause, they are more likely to engage in related prosocial actions. This suggests that in commercial partnerships, authenticity alone is not sufficient to drive action; it must first foster positive attitudes toward the influencer. This finding aligns with the notion that brand partnerships may be viewed with more skepticism, requiring the formation of positive attitudes before authenticity can be translated into behavior (Gao et al. 2024).

Study 2 extended the investigation to specific prosocial behaviors—seeking information, signing petitions, and subscribing to newsletters—demonstrating that high congruity and alignment consistently enhance perceived authenticity in both brand (Study 2A) and nonprofit (Study 2B) partnerships (H1a, H1b). This confirms earlier research on the importance of congruity in driving authentic perceptions (Audrezet, De Ker-viler, and Moulard 2020).

In both studies, higher alignment with sociopolitical causes increased perceived authenticity, particularly in commercial contexts (H2a). However, the weaker effect in nonprofit contexts suggests that consumers may operate under different expectations for authenticity when engaging with organizations, as they generally view them as inherently more trustworthy. This distinction aligns with the findings of Vredenburg et al. (2020), who discussed the societal expectations placed on nonprofits to align closely with their stated missions.

Moreover, while perceived authenticity positively impacted attitudes toward influencers (H4a, H4b), its effect on specific prosocial behaviors varied. In brand partnerships, the relationship was mediated by attitudes, suggesting that engagement behaviors are more complex and require positive feelings toward the influencer to translate into action (H5a, H6a). In contrast, in nonprofit collaborations, the direct effect of perceived authenticity on prosocial behavior (H3b) highlights the importance of genuine advocacy in driving consumer engagement.

Studies 3A and 3B provided deeper insights by tracking actual behaviors, leveraging on nonindexed landing pages, rather than just intentions. The findings supported that high congruity and high alignment enhance perceived authenticity, leading to increased consumer engagement in actions. Using real-world proxies like petition signings and newsletter subscriptions provided a richer understanding of consumer response. The study reinforced the notion that high congruity and high alignment significantly drive action in both brand (Study 3A) and nonprofit (Study 3B) partnerships. This suggests that consumers are more likely to act when they perceive both the influencer's cause and their partnership as authentic. This finding is consistent with Kapitan et al. (2022), who argued that consistent signaling of authenticity through congruence and alignment leads to more meaningful consumer actions.

The qualitative insights from Study 4, which analyzed user comments on influencer activism posts, further validate the experimental results. The predominance of positive sentiment aligns with the experimental findings that showed higher perceived authenticity driving positive attitudes toward influencers in both brand and nonprofit contexts (e.g., Quach, Cheah, and Thaichon 2024; Thomas and Fowler 2023). Moreover, the identification of negative terms such as “greenwashing” in a small percentage of comments further highlights the importance of genuine congruity and alignment, which our earlier studies showed were key drivers of authenticity. Therefore, the results of the content analysis support and enrich the experimental findings by revealing real-world user reactions that mirror the theoretical patterns of engagement observed in controlled settings.

10 | Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

10.1 | Theoretical Contributions

In a global scenario characterized by social and environmental challenges, marketing can play a key role in encouraging prosocial behaviors in civil society and meeting the pursuit of the common good (Branca, Grosso, and Castaldo 2024; Chandy

et al. 2021; DeBerry-Spence et al. 2023; Mende and Scott 2021). This research centers on influencer activism, a topic that has recently garnered academic attention, by exploring the role of influencers as agents of social change. It contributes to the emerging literature on influencer activism by showing how influencers can effectively advocate for sociopolitical issues and inspire prosocial behaviors among their followers. We intend to expand the extant knowledge in several ways.

First, in line with previous papers (e.g., Thomas and Fowler 2023), we contribute to the literature by examining how activist influencers can cultivate an authentic perception in the eyes of social media users. However, we extend the previous contributions by focusing on the following factors: influencer-partner congruity and influencer-issue alignment. Particularly, this research integrates social influence theory (Kelman 1958; 1961) and signaling theory (Rynes, Bretz, and Gerhart 1991; Spence 1973) to extend the application of these theories to the influencer marketing field. We suggest that in the social context individuals can be inspired by activist influencers when there is congruence between the values and image of the activist influencer and their sponsor. This identification can enhance the likelihood of social influence, as individuals are more likely to be persuaded by those they identify with. Similarly, when the activist influencer is aligned with the sociopolitical issue, they foster a sense of shared values and concerns. This shared identification increases the potential impact of the influencers' advocacy on the beliefs and attitudes of their audience. Incorporating congruity between influencer-partner and alignment between influencer-issue into the social influence theory and signaling theory helps advance the understanding of how interpersonal dynamics and relationships contribute to social influence processes and the adoption of specific prosocial behaviors.

Second, this research contributes to the literature on social influence theory (e.g., Hazari, Talpade, and Brown 2023; Kelman 1958; 1961) by demonstrating that the evaluation of influencers is contingent upon the nature of their collaborations (i.e., brand or organization). Specifically, informed by insights from feminist literature, such as Scharff (2023), we can argue that it is possible to be an activist and an influencer who creates content to earn money if they make judicious decisions about the collaborations. Moreover, leveraging on the signaling theory (Rynes, Bretz, and Gerhart 1991; Spence 1973), this research informs us that influencer activism is perceived as authentic when the receivers have correctly interpreted specific signals, such as the congruence between the influencer and the partner brand or organization and the alignment between the influencer and the social cause that they promote.

Third, analyzing the mechanisms underlying these results, perceived authenticity emerged as a critical factor influencing consumer attitudes and intentions across several studies. This underscores the importance of authenticity in influencer marketing and provides empirical support for the role of authenticity in enhancing influencer credibility and effectiveness and prosocial behaviors (Cammarota et al. 2023; Nguyen et al. 2023; Quach, Cheah, and Thaichon 2024; Thomas and Fowler 2023; Wellman et al. 2020; Zniva, Weitzl, and Lindmoser 2023).

Fourth, the studies highlight the differential impact of congruity (between influencer and brand/organization) and alignment

(between influencer and sociopolitical issue) on perceived authenticity and prosocial behaviors. The stronger impact of congruity over alignment suggests that consumers may prioritize the perceived fit between the influencer and the partner over the alignment with the issue. While congruity consistently had a stronger impact, alignment seems particularly crucial for ongoing commitments like newsletter subscriptions, especially in partnerships with nonprofit organizations (Thomas and Fowler 2023).

Fifth, influencers are evaluated by virtue of the complex cognitive and affective components expressed by the followers. The positive attitudes formed by followers, which may include feelings of trust, admiration, and alignment with the influencer's values, contribute to a more favorable environment for engagement in prosocial activities. This suggests that the influencer's impact extends beyond the specific content they create, and the audience's attitudes play a relevant role in shaping their willingness to support or participate in the advocated prosocial causes actively. The research demonstrates that influencer activism can effectively drive not only prosocial intention but also actual prosocial behaviors, such as seeking information on an issue, subscribing to newsletters, and signing petitions (Quach, Cheah, and Thaichon 2024). This finding contributes to the literature on prosocial behavior by showing that influencer marketing can extend beyond commercial outcomes to promote social change (Thomas and Fowler 2023).

Finally, the studies reveal context-specific effects, where the nature of the partnership (brand vs. organization) influences the pathways through which perceived authenticity affects consumer behavior. In brand partnerships, authenticity impacts behavior indirectly through attitudes, whereas in nonprofit partnerships, authenticity may have a more direct effect. This finding highlights the importance of context in influencer marketing strategies and suggests tailored approaches for different types of partnerships (Kapitan et al. 2022).

10.2 | Managerial Implications

Based on the findings of the present study, there are some actionable insights that can assist influencers in effectively engaging in activism and supporting sociopolitical issues, and brands or organizations in selecting content creators to partner with.

First, the study underscores the importance of authenticity. Influencers should strive to maintain genuine and sincere expressions of support for sociopolitical issues. Authenticity fosters credibility and the audience's trust, enhancing the influencer's impact. As an example, an influencer known for civil rights advocacy could demonstrate authenticity by consistently participating in related activities and sharing these experiences with their audience. Such actions reinforce the influencer's commitment to the cause and enhance authenticity. Shifting quickly to an issue that is not usually dealt with by the influencer, for example for circumstantial reasons or mere opportunity, could undermine the relationship with followers and erode the unique influencer-audience relationship.

Second, if activist influencers decide to engage in a collaboration, they should be selective in choosing partners. Therefore, influencers should collaborate with brands or nonprofit organizations

that are congruent with their values and support causes consistent with their sociopolitical advocacy. This ensures that influencer-sponsor collaboration serves to strengthen rather than compromise their activism endeavors. For instance, a health-conscious influencer might collaborate with a brand that produces organic or sustainable products, while a partnership with a brand that produces highly processed or environmentally harmful products could undermine the influencer's credibility and have repercussions for the activist message as well.

Our findings can also be useful for marketing practitioners who want to employ influencer marketing to drive social change, not only for product promotion. Particularly, brands should pay attention to the nature of the activist influencer. This means that collaborating with influencers who are perceived as inauthentic can dilute the brand image. Conversely, by associating with an influencer who is genuinely passionate about sociopolitical issues, a brand can enhance its authenticity and credibility. A company like Patagonia, which has a strong environmental stance, might benefit from partnering with an influencer who has a proven track record of environmental activism. This association suggests a sincere commitment to meaningful causes and can lead to more effective campaigns.

Furthermore, activist influencers typically have a strong and loyal following that often aligns with the influencer's values. Partnering with such influencers can help a brand reach a broader and more engaged audience, increasing brand visibility and resonance. Brands can leverage the influencer's advocacy to promote specific sociopolitical causes. This collaboration can amplify the brand's message, raising awareness and encouraging action among the influencer's audience. A campaign by Ben and Jerry's, for instance, in collaboration with an influencer advocating for racial justice, could leverage the follower base to amplify the brand's message, also raising awareness and inspiring action among the audience. Moreover, our findings suggest that it is important for brands to approach these collaborations authentically and genuinely, ensuring that their values are congruent with the influencer's and that the partnership is built on a shared commitment to making a positive difference.

Finally, the research provides insights about several digital tools, such as petitions, newsletters, and information pages. While influencer-partner congruity is crucial, influencer-issue alignment also plays a significant role, especially for ongoing commitments like newsletter subscriptions. For example, an influencer working with a nonprofit organization to promote awareness about sexual freedom could use newsletters to keep followers engaged over time, providing continuous updates and calls to action that align with the influencer's and the nonprofit's values.

10.3 | Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

By empirically validating the constructs of influencer congruity with brands/organizations and influencer alignment with sociopolitical issues, this research aims to provide a framework for future studies. It offers experimental evidence that can be used to explore these constructs in various marketing contexts further. However, the article has limitations that can provide avenues for future research.

The first concerns the generalizability of the results. Although we have tried to measure a proxy for actual behavior, more field studies are needed (Viglia, Zaefarian, and Ulqinaku 2021).

Second, the consumers' response could be influenced by the type of issue promoted by the activist influencer and cultural and/or personal factors, such as country, political orientation, religion, and emotions (Wannow, Haupt, and Ohlwein 2023), not addressed in this paper. For example, while the issue of gun control might be particularly heartfelt or divisive in the United States, it might have less relevance in other countries. Similarly, individuals may be more sensitive to the LGBTQIA+ community rights than to the cannabis legalization issue (Cammarota et al. 2023). While we focused on a specific sociopolitical issue, future research could explore these aspects, increasing our knowledge of how influencer activism works.

Third, subsequent research should delve deeper into the distinctions between partnerships with brands and organizations. For example, it might be interesting to understand consumer reaction to other types of prosocial behavior with a transactional component, such as, for example, purchasing a product or service to support an issue.

Fourth, this research does not aim to encompass all potential variables that may interact with influencer-perceived authenticity and subsequent consumer response. We acknowledge the possibility of other elements influencing our model and encourage future research to explore this aspect further. As an example, consumers' evaluation could be influenced by the presence of any conflicts of interest (or perceived as such) between the influencer and the partner or by the credited honesty of the influencer based on his or her track record.

Finally, if an influencer becomes involved in a scandal related to a partnership, it would be valuable to understand whether the consequences are irreparable. In other words, beyond legal implications in sponsorship, the influencer can be condemned by the market. Therefore, future research could measure the consequences of this market condemnation and explore how the affected party might recover from it.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.