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Identifying the Impact of Gender and Social Status on Perceptions of Credibility Regarding
Child-Centered Advocacy Efforts on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of child sexual abuse (CSA) fuels the urgent need for innovative approaches to raise awareness. Previous studies (Beier et al., 2009; Letourneau et al., 2016; Letourneau et al., 2017; Melton, 2014) have explored various methods (e.g., games, websites) to educate different age groups and shift responsibility for prevention onto individuals with greater authority.

Leveraging this mentality, this research delves into the utilization of social media as a tool for CSA awareness raising. Social media's widespread usage across diverse age demographics and its accessibility presents a promising avenue for reaching a broad audience, with the potential for a single post or video to reach thousands. However, with the influx of information on social media platforms, users are tasked with discerning the content's credibility. This thesis investigates how credibility is influenced in a social media context, by altering the gender of the advocate (man or woman) and the type of advocate (i.e., a layperson, a survivor, or a social worker). I hypothesize that participants will report 1) more positive perceptions (i.e., warmer, more competent, and credible, and less negative mental health outcomes,) for men than women, 2) survivors, compared to other types of advocates, will have more negative perceptions and 3) increased intention to provide financial support when participants perceive the advocate more positively. To test these hypotheses, we recruited participants ($N = 290$) for an online survey study. I recruited participants for an online study wherein they were exposed to fake social media that altered the identity of the advocate posting information about CSA. I collected information about participants' usage of social media and their familiarity with CSA as a topic; then, after the manipulation, participants reported their perceptions of the advocate on a variety of scales, along with a measure of behavioral intention (e.g., financial support for the cause). I found no support

for my hypothesis about gender differences, but I did find marginal differences in perceptions about survivors compared to other types of advocates. I argue that this work is particularly important given the increase in social media usage among all age groups and the opportunity this poses for researchers to develop effective preventative methods that combat the influx of user susceptibility to misinformation on social media.

Keywords: advocacy, childhood sexual abuse, gender, social status

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a disheartening and prevalent crime against children everywhere (Darkness to Light, 2021). Researchers are presently developing innovative methods to continue child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention education for all age groups (Knack et al., 2019; Mendelson & Letourneau, 2015; Patterson et al., 2022; Rudolph et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2015; Wurtele, 2009). Over time, technological advancements have made social media a viable option for awareness-raising for various social issues (Mavrodieva et al., 2019). However, social media sites have a constant influx of information varying in accuracy, leaving the users to assess the credibility of the information they are exposed to and the trustworthiness of the individual messenger (Visentin et al., 2019). This thesis will investigate factors that may influence the perceived credibility of advocates for CSA in a social media setting. Specifically, I analyze whether social identities like gender and status (i.e., their personal connection to CSA) shape impressions of CSA survivors and can, ideally, strengthen support for CSA advocacy and the protection of youth. To do this, I first highlight the prevalence and consequences of CSA. Then I shift to spotlight the importance of advocacy and who gets viewed as credible. I also examine how social media has been leveraged for advocacy and misinformation. Taking this information together, I identify a gap in the present literature. I argue that this work is vital given the increase in social media usage among all age groups and the need for innovation within child-centered advocacy efforts to combat the influx of user susceptibility to misinformation on social media (Prothero, 2023; Visentin et al., 2019).

Childhood Sexual Abuse

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines child maltreatment as anything that involves abuse and neglect that occurs to those under 18 years of age (1999). This definition encompasses abuse ranging from physical, emotional, and sexual to neglect and other forms of exploitation. Within the United States (U.S.), child maltreatment is pervasive, with an estimated one in seven children experiencing a form of abuse each year (CDC, 2022). Rates of child sexual abuse (CSA) are strikingly similar, with estimates of one in ten children experiencing CSA regardless of gender (Darkness to Light, 2021). In other words, out of the children born in the U.S. this year, about 400,000 are projected to be sexually abused before turning 18 (Darkness to Light, 2021). However, since many cases go unreported or cannot be substantiated after legal intervention, these statistics are likely underestimating the prevalence of CSA.

Furthermore, CSA brings the potential for long and short-term consequences for families, survivors, and communities. Hornor (2010) outlines extensively the potential consequences those with a CSA history can experience. Hornor started by outlining some gender differences, noting, “Girls are more likely to exhibit internalizing behaviors, such as depression and disordered eating (anorexia, bulimia, or obesity). [Whereas] externalizing behaviors such as delinquency and heavy drinking are more likely exhibited by boys” (Hornor, 2010, p. 359). The other potential consequences identified in Hornor’s article were generalized among CSA survivors. A sense of powerlessness, an increase in sexualized behaviors (kissing, sexual touching of genitals, etc.), symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse are all highlighted as projected consequences in the research (Dube et al., 2005; Hornor, 2010; Mullers & Dowling,

2008; Putnam, 2003). Experiencing CSA also heightens the risk of exposure to sexually transmitted infections (i.e., STIs) (CDC, 2021; Mullers & Dowling, 2008). Horner (2010) further explained that frequently, PTSD gets misdiagnosed as ADHD within children, allowing those at risk for or exposed to CSA to be overlooked as a PTSD diagnosis can sometimes lead to identifying and uncovering abuse among children. Therefore, while there is no universal response that people have after experiencing CSA (or any traumatic event), the potential for serious physical and psychological outcomes emphasizes a need for preventive methods so that all children can experience safety and freedom from abuse (Mullers & Dowling, 2008).

The need for preventative methods is arguably still in the research phase rather than the application phase (CDC, 2022; Knack et al., 2019). The hardest part seems to be identifying risk factors for abuse and creating a strategy that will promote more help than harm to assist kids before they are abused (Curry, 2018). Current efforts are either focused on rehabilitation for victims and perpetrators (CDC, 2022; Knack et al., 2019) – starting after the event has taken place– or educating children in fixed settings (i.e., schools) about avoiding and identifying CSA (CDC, 2022; Knack et al., 2019; Mendelson & Letourneau, 2015; Patterson et al., 2022; Rudolph et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2015; Wurtele, 2009). Although clinical treatment for victims and perpetrators is essential, and children need the knowledge to protect and support themselves, other methods may prove equally or more beneficial. For instance, establishing preventative methods that shift the responsibility from children and law enforcement to other members of the general population can be another viable option (Knack et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2022; Rudolph et al., 2018). Indeed, the responsibility of protecting children should not be placed on only children themselves. Raising awareness and reaching a large, general audience is thus a promising path toward preventing CSA.

Knack and colleagues (2019) highlighted in their research that primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention methods can be implemented to combat CSA. The primary prevention method prioritizes creating tactics for the general population. The secondary prevention method focuses on the potential perpetrator and the at-risk children, while the tertiary prevention method targets offending perpetrators and child survivors (Knack et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2022). According to Knack et al. (2019), a substantial amount of current prevention efforts sit in the tertiary zone. With the current approaches needing to be revised, it is imperative to look for new ways modern society can aid prevention efforts.

More research is incorporating methods in the primary and secondary prevention zones (Beier et al., 2009; Letourneau et al., 2016; Letourneau et al., 2017; Melton, 2014). This is an important shift because research has supported that a perpetrator may take up to 10 years before committing CSA (Piché et al., 2018) and first-time offenders have been documented to make up about 95% of CSA cases (Sandler et al., 2008). There is thus a window of time for proper and effective intervention and prevention resources to reach someone with pedophilic thoughts, potentially saving a kid from victimization. Hence, providing older kids, caregivers, and potential perpetrators with information and resources inviting them to take more responsibility and action to decrease the prevalence of CSA may be the best way to see a structured decrease in the problem. Due to technological advancements, educating the public and reinforcing the need for those in society with more agency than children to take more responsibility in identifying and decreasing CSA would not have to be a daunting task. A combination of technology and current developments in advocacy efforts may make that possible.

Advocacy

Advocacy is using one's voice or resources to spotlight disadvantaged individuals or groups and their needs. These actions promote active participation from outsiders who feel connected to the cause and give a voice to the target population, resulting in recognition, support, or assistance (Ciszek, 2017). In the United States, advocacy is seen as a byproduct of civil rights and social reform that started in the 1960s (Morgan, 2017). During this time, people were protesting in the street, boycotting, sending letters, and raising money for issues such as the Vietnam War, children's rights, and Civil rights (ADL Education, 2017; Burnett & Peñaloza, 2022). Though these attempts were not always successful, the accumulation of supporters and innovative advocacy strategies generated the desired results over time.

Due to innovation within the technology realm creating new ways for people to communicate, advocacy continues to evolve (Kingston & Stam, 2013). Advocacy has gone from picketing and writing to local officials to viral videos and GoFundMe accounts (Kingston & Stam, 2013; Morgan, 2017; Rapp et al., 2021). These advancements in technology have almost virtually erased the idea that 'power in numbers' means supporters being physically present for change to happen. Instead, the ability to use new technology allows people to advocate invisibly and persistently from the comfort of their homes with just a few clicks, which has been labeled clicktivism or slacktivism within research (George, 2019). This kind of advocacy is often associated with low commitment, unity, and overall involvement with a cause (George, 2019). This low-level action environment, however, can still produce powerful actions for advocacy efforts. For example, social media advocacy has benefited organizations in the advocacy realm like nonprofit organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Lovejoy and Saxton

(2012) highlighted in their research how a group of 100 large-scale U.S.-based nonprofits utilized social media, specifically Twitter. Within the study, researchers noted that strategically targeted content could mobilize stakeholders, build meaningful relationships, and increase accountability as well as public trust (Lovejoy & Saxon, 2012). The research further showcased that social media needed to be analyzed as a potential tool for these organizations because nonprofits struggled in the past to use websites as an effective and engaging tool for interactive communication within organizations and involving stakeholders (e.g., Kent et al., 2003; Saxton et al., 2007). The results led researchers to categorize the types of tweets from these organizations into three categories: information, community, and action. The information category represented tweets depicting information about the nonprofits. Community tweets use language to increase community building, and lastly, the action tweets provide a call to action (e.g., engage with content, fundraise, and spread awareness). Similarly, research conducted by Kingston and Stam (2013) revealed that NGOs will link social media pages on their websites and use them to build community and spread awareness too. Moreover, NGOs use social media, emailing, and website tactics to gather and retain support for their causes (Kingston & Stam, 2013).

These studies provide evidence that human rights and advocacy-dominated organizations are actively trying to take advantage of social media to advance their missions without encountering resistance or experiencing disadvantages as a result. Further, the ability to raise awareness has been supported by past research looking at climate change and cancer (Mavrodieva et al., 2019). Social media is an integral part of the internet now, and we must consider how it can be leveraged for good while also being aware of its potential drawbacks, like misinformation.

Misinformation

Currently, advocates are fighting against well-meaning misinformation. This information is most likely no longer supported by research, inaccurate or misleading. An obstacle to decreasing and correcting this misinformation is realizing that crimes against children can be a facet of taboo culture, or the stigma that surrounds CSA. Taboo culture consists of things considered “too close to home” or too personal to discuss openly. This often leads to a culture that can be characterized by an unspoken vow of silence among its participants regarding certain issues like CSA (Dimitrov et al., 2022). The strength of this cultural norm may contribute to people’s lack of urgency to take actions that would help reduce CSA. Due to a combination of historically preserved taboos and societal views on children and family relations, CSA has drifted under the radar (Dimitrov et al., 2022). As a result, advocates today must push through this culture of silence and avoidance to give people information to activate their want to help. Put simply, it is challenging to improve the situation when people are not comfortable discussing it. Despite the prevalence of CSA, willingness to talk about this type of crime is not as prevalent. As a result, there may be a disconnect between prevention and intervention efforts analyzed in the research realm and practices put into use and promoted in the social realm. A prime example is *Stranger Danger*.

In the spirit of protecting children, the world engaged with the *Stranger Danger* Campaign of the '70s (Clever Never Goes, 2022). Despite this campaign striving to decrease child abductions, the message it sent stuck with many: fear and avoid strangers. The campaign was a large-scale preventative method that reached many. However, research has consistently and robustly shown that most CSA victims and child victims of other traumatic crimes know

their perpetrators personally (California Megans Law, n.d.); therefore, while strangers can be dangerous, the widespread Stranger Danger campaign largely missed warning of a major source of danger (e.g., families, acquaintances).

Due to the disconnect between the circulation of information based on research and information that spreads through everyday communication, people may still hear that phrase today despite research debunking its effectiveness (Clever Never Goes, 2022). For instance, the concept of stranger danger has captivated many people and may even be reinforced in schools. As a result, adults, and children alike struggle to understand that relatives and family friends are more dangerous to children than strangers are (Darkness to Light, 2023). A similar paradox exists for victims of sexual assault in college, who are more likely to be assaulted by someone they know than by a stranger but are often warned against the latter. Nevertheless, the danger of strangers is a common theme throughout advocacy targeting children's rights. Often, information about the identity of perpetrators and communication with victims is based on long-held beliefs rather than facts, even when researchers provide new information (Saywitz & Faller, 2002).

Deconstructing taboo culture takes time and allows misinformation to thrive. To combat it, advocates need to promote the most accurate and up-to-date research-based information using social media as a tool. Therefore, a healthy amount of the proper information may penetrate those not easily accessible and even those who feel suffocated and isolated by taboo culture.

Perceptions of Advocates

If social media is going to be an effective tool in decreasing misinformation and increasing CSA prevention, research must analyze what factors affect perceptions of credibility.

Since social media allows for a certain amount of invasiveness and the human rights sector of advocacy tends to be very person-centered, understanding whether sex or social status affects their and advocates credibility is important. Currently, minimal research has looked at whether someone's gender or social status affects their credibility on social media.

However, a past study did highlight that men advocating for women-based issues are perceived more positively than women advocating for those same issues (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Although child sexual abuse does not have any direct correlation to women solely, due to society-wide gender constructs, women are perceived as responsible for children. Therefore, there remains a possibility that children's issues can be seen as women's issues and women's issues can be seen as children's issues. Whether this mentality transfers to child-centered advocacy, needs to be uncovered and addressed as another potential roadblock for advocates in addition to their social status within society.

Perceptions of Trust

Trust is something that has been researched for years due to its vital role in the human experience. Svare et al. (2019) note in their research that a large portion of existing research analyzes what increases or decreases a person's trust. They elaborated that trust can be altered based on someone's status, nationality, gender, and even their fears of social exclusion (Svare et al., 2019). Further, perceptions of trustworthiness have been examined through the ability, benevolence, and integrity (ABI) model created by Mayer et al. (1995). A breakdown of this model highlights that people are most likely to trust those they perceive as having high *ability* (intelligent, competent, capable), high *benevolence* (kind, caring, empathic), and high *integrity*

(consistent, principled, and ethical) (Svare et al., 2019). These factors each appear in the various scales used within this study. Based on these findings, the results of this research could be very informative as our field continues to investigate what affects source credibility within the social media realm.

Chapter 2

Methods

Participants

This study received approval from Penn State's Institutional Review Board, I recruited 290 student participants for an online study through our university subject pool. Participants received 0.5 credits for participating in this research. Before the analysis, I excluded ($n = 4$) participants who provided incomplete surveys. 76 participants were also excluded for failing to appropriately identify the gender and/or social status of the advocate.

The final sample included ($N = 214$) participants. Our sample was predominantly women ($n = 164$), with the remaining portion identifying as men ($n = 48$), with a single nonbinary participant and another who did not disclose their gender. The average age of the sample was 19 years old ($SD = 3.33$).

The sample had 160 European American/White participants, 13 Asian American/Asian participants, 11 Latino/a, 7 African American/Black participants, 7 identified as multiracial, 1 Middle Eastern American/ Arab, and 16 participants did not disclose their race. In terms of sexual orientation, 186 identified as heterosexual, 21 participants identified as bisexual, 4 identified as queer, and 3 identified as gay or lesbian. The sample was also slightly liberal leaning ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.37$).

Design and Procedure

Participants completed an online study on Qualtrics for course credit. After providing informed consent, participants answered questions about their social media usage and experience with social media advocacy. Participants were then asked an open-ended knowledge check question to gauge how much they knew about CSA. This is followed by a series of questions meant to analyze participants' opinions of CSA as an advocacy issue.

Before viewing the social media post, participants were informed they should analyze it, as they would be asked to recall information later. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of six conditions: a faux social media post depicting either a male/female social worker (paid advocate), a male/female CSA survivor (previous victim), or a male/female layperson (control). The participants were not informed whether the conditions were real or fake. The faux social media posts were identical except for the descriptive, demographic information about the target. These targets were intended to depict different channels of advocacy linked to CSA as a social issue and to represent varying degrees of connectivity to the CSA and levels of credibility. For example, the female survivor may be conceptualized as a highly credible source as they have a direct connection to CSA or as a biased source because of the personal connection. Also, basic understandings of social work may work to support ideas that a male social worker can and has encountered CSA on the job. Using the timer feature in Qualtrics, I asked participants to review the faux social media post for at least 60 seconds, though they were informed they could spend as much time viewing the post as they wanted.

After viewing the post, participants responded to four questions to assess their memory and attention regarding the condition. Participants were also asked to identify the race and sexual

orientation of the advocate, despite that information not being provided. Next, participants in all conditions completed measures of perceived credibility, perceived likability, and perceived mental health stability. Participants then answered a question that measured behavioral intention to raise the governmental budget for CSA prevention and intervention efforts. This was followed by a standard battery of demographic questions. Questions throughout the survey were strategically worded to avoid influencing participant perceptions, and questions were ordered in a way to start broad and gradually become more specific, highlighting participants' perceptions of the advocate present in their CSA social media advocacy post. By designing the survey this way, the questions allow for a range of answers while also prompting intrinsic bias from participants.

Materials and Measures

Social Media Post

We randomly assigned participants to view one of six conditions of social media posts created within the lab. These faux social media posts described three types of advocates and their connection to CSA (i.e., their social status): paid advocate, survivor, and control. I selected one stereotypically gendered name (i.e., Caleb) for the male conditions and (i.e., Nicole) for the female conditions; these were kept constant across all conditions. In the control post, either a male/female layperson described hearing about CSA five years ago and their desire to share this knowledge with others. In the paid advocate post, either a male/female social worker discussed having five years of experience and witnessing the effects of CSA firsthand. In the survivor post,

either a male/female survivor detailed speaking about their abuse publicly five years ago and knowing the severeness of CSA personally. The profile pictures and hashtags differed for each of the three advocate types but were consistent across gender. No other details varied between the conditions. The posts were made to look realistic using popular social media interfaces, such as Instagram story (see Appendix A).

Perceived Credibility Scale

Adapted from Lock and Seele (2017), participants rated the extent to which they believed each of the items was representative of the advocate they were exposed to on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Participants also rated their ability to comprehend the information shared in the faux social media post. This measure contained four subscales: Truth (5 items; e.g., “I think that the claims made in the text are correct”), Sincerity (3 items; e.g., “I think that the advocate’s intentions correspond with the text”), Appropriateness (2 items; e.g., “As a reader of this CSA awareness post, I feel that the text addresses CSA issues well”), and Understandability (5 items; e.g., “The text is written in an understandable way”). However, I used the average of the overall scale as it had good internal consistency (Cronbach α of .929). Higher overall scores indicated participants rated the advocate to have a greater level of credibility.

Perceived Competence and Warmth Scales

I used the Warmth and Competence scale from Fiske et al. (2002). Participants rated their impressions of the advocate they were exposed to on ten traits. I used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). This measure contained two subscales: Competence (5 items, e.g., “Competent”, “Intelligent”), and Warmth (4 items, e.g., “Good Natured”, “Sincere”). We averaged item scores to create an overall score, with higher overall scores indicating participants perceived the advocate to have a greater level of likeability because they were competent and warm. Cronbach’s alpha is used to measure reliability within scale items and all, but one scale met the 0.70 suggested threshold for having good internal consistency. The scale measuring warmth had a Cronbach α of .689.

Mental Health and Wellness Scale

Participants also completed an adapted version of the Systems and Assets Screening scale from Downs et al. (2013). This measure has six subscales; for this study, I used three subscales: Substance-Problems (5 items, e.g., “The advocate... has trouble limiting their drinking”), Well-being/Assets (5 items, e.g., “The advocate... feels good about self”), and Negative Affect (3 items, e.g., “The advocate experiences insomnia”). I used a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not true) to 3 (certainly true). While each of these subscales had good internal consistency on their own, with each subscale having a Cronbach α above 0.70, I condensed this scale to a single overall score (Cronbach α of .798), with higher scores indicating an increased perception of mental health issues.

Behavioral Support of CSA Advocacy

Inspired by Benson-Greenwald et al. (2023), a single item was used to measure how much participants would support CSA advocacy efforts by allocating federal funding to this issue. Specifically, I asked each participant to choose a number from 0 to 10 on a sliding scale (each number representing a million dollars) based on how much they would increase the governmental budget for CSA prevention and intervention.

Chapter 3

Results

I used SPSS to conduct an analysis of variance (ANOVAs) to measure the 2 x 3 relationship of gender and social status on perceptions of advocates. I report those findings below. All means and standard deviations for the ANOVAs can be found in Table 1.

I also conducted analyses to learn more about my sample and their online social behaviors and general attitudes and connections to CSA. These descriptive analyses revealed that, about half the time participants use social media, they see posts about social issues ($M = 2.72$; $SD = .90$). However, most participants (60.9%) report not engaging with those posts and that they are not using social media as a tool for social advocacy (61.4%). Moreover, half of participants reported not knowing someone who has experienced CSA (50.2%), with remaining participants about equally reporting that they did know someone who experienced CSA or that they were unsure. Further, participants agreed that CSA is a prevalent and serious problem globally and, in the U.S., (all means between 4.49-5.67; SD between .70-.83). Additionally, on average, participants thought that it would take 11-15 years for someone to “recover” from CSA (i.e., have a substantial psychological improvement in processing the traumatic events) ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.40$), but with clinical intervention, they estimated it would take 6-10 years ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.39$). These analyses provided me with deeper insights into the sample’s relationship to CSA and possibly some stereotypes that they may hold about CSA and survivors.

Table 1*Means and Standard Deviation for Dependent Measures*

Measure	Women						Men					
	Layperson		Social Worker		Survivor		Layperson		Social Worker		Survivor	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Credibility	4.21	0.63	4.15	0.65	4.30	0.57	3.95	0.68	4.15	0.67	4.35	0.64
Warmth Traits	3.88	0.73	3.89	0.68	3.92	0.77	3.86	0.64	4.11	0.79	3.77	0.81
Competency Traits	3.59	0.52	3.72	0.77	3.66	0.70	3.38	0.68	3.74	0.73	3.63	0.66
Mental Health	2.05	0.44	2.00	0.36	2.15	0.41	1.90	0.44	1.94	0.41	2.10	0.45
Budget	5.52	2.54	6.03	2.56	5.50	2.76	5.77	2.82	5.68	2.24	5.08	2.49

Perceived Credibility

A two-way ANOVA examined how gender and social status affect perceptions of Credibility. There was not a significant interaction of gender and social status, $F(2, 212) = 1.274, p = .282, \eta^2_p = .012$. There was no main effect of gender, $F(1, 213) = .710, p = .401, \eta^2_p = .00$. The main effect of social status was approaching significance, albeit the effect was small, $F(2, 212) = 2.98, p = .053, \eta^2_p = .028$.

Perceived Warmth

A two-way ANOVA examined how gender and social status affect perceptions of an advocate's warmth. There was not a significant interaction of gender and social status, $F(2, 212) = 1.142, p = .321, \eta^2_p = .006$. There was no main effect of gender $F(1, 213) = .028, p = .868, \eta^2_p = .00$. Additionally, there was no main effect of social status, $F(2, 212) = .875, p = .419, \eta^2_p = .01$.

Perceived Competence

A two-way ANOVA examined how gender and social status affect perceptions of competency personality traits. There was not a significant interaction of gender and social status, $F(2, 212) = .587, p = .557, \eta^2 = .01$. There was no main effect of gender, $F(1, 213) = .601, p = .439, \eta^2 = .00$. Additionally, there was no main effect of social status, $F(2, 212) = 2.237, p = .109, \eta^2 = .02$.

Mental Health and Wellness

A two-way ANOVA examined how gender and social status affect perceptions of an advocate's mental health. There was not a significant interaction of gender and social status, $F(2, 212) = .323, p = .724, \eta^2 = .00$. There was no main effect of gender, $F(1, 213) = 2.16, p = .143, \eta^2 = .01$. The main effect of social status was small and approaching significance threshold, $F(2, 212) = 3.00, p = .052, \eta^2 = .03$.

Budget for Supporting CSA Advocacy

A two-way ANOVA examined how gender and social status affect perceptions of competency personality traits. There was not a significant interaction of gender and social status, $F(2, 212) = .364, p = .70, \eta^2 = .00$. There was no main effect of gender, $F(1, 213) = .231, p = .631, \eta^2 = .00$. Additionally, there was no main effect of social status, $F(2, 212) = .848, p = .430, \eta^2 = .01$.

Chapter 4

General Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable initial insights into how gender and social status influence perceptions of an advocate's credibility regarding child-centered advocacy efforts on social media. While the hypotheses anticipated certain outcomes, data analysis revealed nuances in participant perceptions that warrant further exploration.

Contrary to the hypothesis that men would be more positively perceived (e.g., higher ratings of competency, creditability, and lower rating of mental health concerns) than women as CSA advocates, there were no significant gender differences for any of the perceptions. These findings challenge previous research suggesting gender biases in advocacy contexts (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). These findings could indicate a shift in societal attitudes towards the importance of gender or an increased acceptance of gender equality. Alternatively, these results may stem from the topic being child-centered advocacy, where the severity of the issue may overshadow gender biases altogether. It is also possible this result stems from the vast majority of participants being women, meaning they did not see men advocating on this issue as uniquely different from women.

Similarly, the hypothesis that survivors would be perceived more negatively in comparison to laypeople and social workers was partially supported. In terms of credibility, I found that perceptions differed slightly between the types of advocates. The means revealed that survivors were perceived as slightly more credible than laypeople, with no significant differences emerging between social workers and survivors. This suggests that personal experience with CSA, as indicated by survivor status, may increase credibility to some extent. However, the lack

of distinction between social workers and survivors highlights the importance of considering the multi-layered nature of credibility assessment, which likely involves factors beyond just personal experience, such as perceptions of accountability and empathy. It suggests that while personal experience may enhance credibility, it does not necessarily overshadow other factors, such as perceived professionalism or expertise, particularly when comparing survivors to trained professionals like social workers.

Further, the survivors were also perceived as having slightly more mental health and wellness issues than both social workers and laypeople, suggesting that the participants viewed survivors past trauma as impeding their ability to manage their mental wellbeing. The means revealed that participants gave survivors higher ratings on negative mental health outcomes (5 items, e.g., “The advocate... has trouble limiting their drinking”) when compared to the two other social statuses. There were no significant differences emerging between perceptions of mental health for social workers and laypeople. These results may appear unintuitive with the finding of credibility (i.e., if someone is not seen as mentally well, they would be seen as less credible); however, it may suggest participants may see survivors' mental health issues as a result of abuse, not poor judgment, or something they contributed to. That could explain why poor mental health did not affect credibility. It could suggest that participants did not perceive advocates' mental health status as a significant factor in determining credibility, perhaps prioritizing other things such as competence and sincerity.

Additionally, manipulations to gender and social status did not produce any large significance within many of the perception scales. Therefore, it is unlikely that these factors influenced participants' willingness to increase the budget. This may suggest that a sensitive cause like CSA is worth supporting regardless of the source.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study sheds light on important aspects of advocate credibility in the context of social media, there are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Unfortunately, after data collection, the sample size decreased from (n= 290) to (n= 214) due to survey completion errors and participants incorrectly answering knowledge checks after exposure. Following the removal of those participants, the study was underpowered which bars us from drawing strong conclusions from these findings. Additionally, the sample for this study was drawn from a university subject pool, which may not fully represent the broader population (i.e., WEIRD sample; Rad et al., 2018). Further, participants were exposed to a single faux social media post, which may not fully capture the complexity of how advocate credibility is perceived over multiple exposures or in different social media contexts. People's perceptions and reactions to advocates may vary depending on the content, timing, and platform of the posts they encounter. The participants were used to seeing posts related to advocacy but not particularly engaging with them. Future work could focus on how to increase meaningful engagement with advocacy posts.

While this study examined the influence of advocate gender and social status on credibility perceptions, there are other factors that could also play a role, such as race, age, or the content of the advocacy message. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable initial insights into how advocate credibility is perceived in the context of social media advocacy for child sexual abuse awareness. Future research could expand on the variables examined in this study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of advocate credibility on social media. Additionally, future research could address some of these limitations by gathering more diverse

samples, using real advocacy content, and incorporating a stronger manipulation within the conditions. A stronger manipulation could be opposing advocacy messaging from two different advocates varying in gender and social status. This kind of manipulation may force participants to truly decipher between credible information and “fake news”.

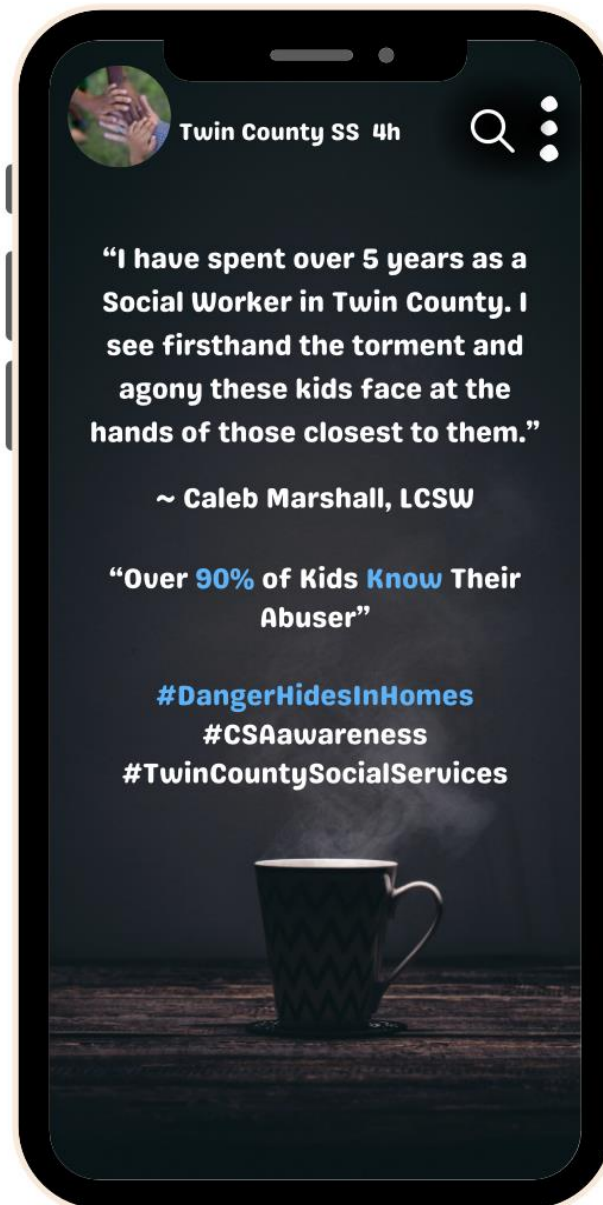
Chapter 5

Conclusion

This study sought to contribute to understanding how people engage CSA knowledge advocacy efforts; particularly how the identities of the advocates themselves could influence perceptions. By exploring how gender and social status influence these perceptions of credibility, mental health, and other person perception measures, we gain valuable insights into how to craft more effective advocacy campaigns. While the findings offer some initial guidance for future advocacy strategies, there's still much to explore. This ongoing inquiry is essential for refining advocacy approaches and ensuring they are effective and resonate with diverse audiences.

Appendix A

Example of Social Media Advocacy Post



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