

Bot Or Not? Analyzing the Strategic Use And Impact of Ai Influencers Vs. Human Influencers in Public Relations Campaigns

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Abstract

This study identifies the critical influencer attributes that drive public relations (PR) outcomes in the emerging hybrid environment where both human and artificial intelligence (AI) influencers operate. The purpose is to identify which influencer attributes (trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, similarity, interactivity, trendiness, involvement) significantly influence key PR outcomes (trust in branded posts, brand awareness, and purchase intention). Integrating the Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) framework with the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) paradigm, the study employed a cross-sectional Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis using data collected from 397 active social media users in Nigeria. Findings reveal that interaction, involvement, and trendiness are the most significant predictors of brand awareness, while trustworthiness and expertise primarily drive trust in branded posts. Crucially, trust in branded posts emerged as the strongest overall predictor of purchase intention. The study concludes that PR strategists should prioritize designing or selecting influencers regardless of whether they are human or AI based on demonstrated high engagement, consistent credibility, and acute trend sensitivity to maximize communication effectiveness.

Keywords: BOT, Not, Strategic use, Influencers Effectiveness, Age of Artificial Intelligence, Public Relations

1. Background

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, particularly those powered by natural language processing (NLP) models, is fundamentally reshaping the landscape of modern Public Relations (PR), moving beyond transactional marketing into strategic communication (Ewing et al., 2022; Capozzi & Zipfel, 2019). These technologies employ sophisticated algorithms capable of analyzing large volumes of data for instance, using sentiment analysis to gauge public opinion (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014; Liu, 2012) and transforming diverse inputs into consistent, actionable communication strategies (Van Noort et al., 2022). Bhuiyan (2024), opined that audiences increasingly appreciate AI systems for their ability to deliver personalized experiences, tailoring public communications to individual stakeholder preferences. Kovari (2024) opined that AI-based systems are generally viewed as

objective and data-driven, a stark contrast to conventional communication channels which often depend on human intermediaries, whose motives may be influenced by commercial interests. This shift towards perceived transparency and impartiality is critical in PR, reflecting a broader audience demand for credible and unbiased organizational messaging (Hooi, 2025).

The perceived neutrality of AI has become a critical factor in building audience trust and shaping public perception which is the core mandate of PR. As Vashishth et al. (2024) noted, AI's capacity to personalize insights and generate data-driven recommendations enhances its credibility, especially in contexts where skepticism toward traditional media and paid endorsements remains high. Audiences not only tend to trust AI-generated suggestions but they are also more inclined to incorporate them into their decision-making, as these recommendations often align closely with personal needs and contextual expectations. By distilling extensive datasets into relevant and tailored options, AI tools strengthen confidence in the organization's communication outputs, often surpassing the trust placed in human influencers, whose motives may be questioned due to potential financial ties (Huang et al., 2025). This growing confidence in AI allows PR practitioners to foster trust through transparent communication and data-backed narratives (Nguyen, 2024).

Contemporary research continues to examine the evolving dynamics of trust in AI compared to human influencers, with particular emphasis on factors crucial to PR such as objectivity, impartiality, and expertise. Studies have underscored AI's distinct role in cultivating trust by delivering insights that are data-driven and free from commercial manipulation. According to Yang et al (2022), this credibility is especially influential in sectors such as healthcare, technology, and consumer electronics, where precision and neutrality are essential for reputation management. Their comprehensive framework highlights that trust in AI systems is grounded in three core attributes: transparency, reliability, and impartiality, which collectively reinforce the perceived integrity of AI-driven organizational recommendations and narratives.

Furthermore, AI's capacity to analyze and present vast amounts of data in a consistent manner enables PR campaigns to deliver well-informed messages free from external bias or financial motivations. These characteristics have positioned AI systems as reliable intermediaries in shaping stakeholder perceptions across multiple industries. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in everyday life, its influence on audience behavior continues to grow, underscoring its transformative impact on traditional third-party endorsement models in PR (Petrescu et al., 2024).

The rising trust in AI is closely linked to its ability to enhance audience autonomy, as AI-powered recommendations empower individuals by delivering accurate and context-specific suggestions that align with their unique needs. Shabankareh et al (2025) observed that audiences are more inclined to adopt AI services when they trust the organizations behind them, particularly when these systems provide personalized and transparent user experiences. This trust strengthens further when users feel they have control over the AI's features and understand how its decisions are made.

Additionally, AI platforms allow audiences to refine their queries, access customized options, and receive instant, data-driven insights. Unlike human influencers who often target large audiences with generic messages, AI systems tailor their outputs to the preferences of each individual, thereby promoting a stronger sense of empowerment and credibility. This autonomy enhances confidence in AI-driven tools, as users perceive decisions to stem from objective analysis rather than persuasive marketing. Kovác et al (2025) stressed that cultivating consumer trust is fundamental to realizing the full potential of AI, underscoring the critical role of ethical standards and transparency in maintaining consumer confidence.

AI's ability to gather and integrate information from diverse sources and present it in a clear, actionable format further enhances communication effectiveness in PR. Instead of navigating through conflicting opinions or biased human influencer reviews, stakeholders can now depend on AI tools that consolidate data from multiple viewpoints to deliver a balanced and objective perspective. Darnell et al (2023) emphasized that AI effectively mitigates the problem of information overload, which is a major challenge in today's digital landscape where audiences are inundated with competing messages. By intelligently filtering and curating content to match individual preferences, AI enables quicker, more accurate perception formation, ultimately enhancing audience satisfaction and confidence in the organizational narrative.

However, the core dilemma in PR is establishing the strategic trade-off: despite AI's expanding influence in shaping perceptions, the continued relevance of human influencers must be acknowledged. While AI excels in delivering data-driven and objective recommendations, human influencers retain a unique ability to forge emotional and *relational* connections with their audiences—a quality that remains particularly influential in lifestyle, community, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) contexts (De Veirman et al, 2017). Moreover, Dearle (2024) observed that human influencers continue to play a crucial role in fostering social proof and community belonging, where decisions are shaped by trust in familiar personalities and emotional resonance rather than purely algorithmic insights.

Nevertheless, as AI technologies such as ChatGPT evolve, they are expected to narrow these gaps. Future iterations of AI systems may incorporate emotional intelligence, allowing them to address not only the rational but also the emotional dimensions of stakeholder behavior. This development could further blur the boundary between AI-driven and human influence, positioning AI tools as more holistic and empathetic partners in guiding audience perception. This tension between the scalable, data-backed credibility of AI and the authentic, relational capital of humans defines the modern strategic challenge in influencer PR. While future AI advancements may narrow this gap by incorporating emotional intelligence, the current landscape presents a clear dichotomy. This paper, therefore, aims to analyze the strategic use, comparative impact, and PR-specific trade-offs between AI influencers and their human counterparts, explicitly addressing the tension between data-driven credibility and human-centered relational capital.

However, despite their growing use, there remains limited empirical understanding of how AI influencers compare with human influencers in achieving PR objectives such as trust-building,

brand credibility, audience engagement, and purchase intention. This gap in knowledge poses a strategic dilemma for organizations seeking to determine which type of influencer yields greater effectiveness and ethical alignment in digital PR campaigns. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the strategic use and impact of AI influencers versus human influencers in public relations, focusing on their relative effectiveness, audience perception, and implications for the future of brand communication.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do influencer characteristics such as expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity affect brand awareness in public relations campaigns?
2. What is the relationship between influencer characteristics (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity, trendiness, and interactivity) and trust in branded posts (TBP)?
3. To what extent do trust in branded posts and brand awareness influence consumers' purchase intention in PR campaigns?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of influencer attributes such as expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and similarity on brand awareness.
2. To evaluate the role of influencer attributes in shaping trust in branded posts.
3. To assess how trust in branded posts and brand awareness jointly affect consumers' purchase intention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Key Terms:

AI Influencers or Bots (Virtual Influencers) refer to digital personas powered and managed by Artificial Intelligence (AI) that interact with audiences on various online platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. These AI-driven entities are transforming how brands communicate and engage with consumers, offering innovative ways to influence audience perception and behavior.

Human Influencers, also known as Social Media Influencers (SMIs), are real individuals who play a vital role in the digital ecosystem. Through strategic self-presentation and authentic engagement, they attract large followings, drive user interaction, shape trends, and influence consumer behavior. They often collaborate with brands to promote products or services directly to their audience.

Public Relations (PR) is a strategic communication process aimed at establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. It focuses on managing an organization's reputation determined by its actions, communications, and public perception with the goal of gaining understanding, support, and positively influencing opinions and behaviors.

2.2 Empirical Review

The rapid growth of influencer marketing can be attributed to several converging factors. People now consume far more digital media than print. Secondly, online audiences respond differently to advertisements; they are goal oriented when browsing the internet and therefore less receptive to direct marketing approaches. Influencers thrive on social media platforms and in turn these platforms benefit from the engaging content the influencers produce, thereby creating a mutually reinforcing relationship between the two (Meno et al., 2025).

In the digital era, user generated content has become more influential than brand created messages because it reflects authentic consumer perspectives. Audiences perceive such content as more genuine, making them more likely to trust and act upon influencer recommendations (Helme, 2023). Consequently, influencer marketing has continued to gain traction – for instance, a recent survey revealed that 39% of marketers intended to increase their spending on influencer marketing in 2018, while 19% planned to expand their overall campaign investments (Lou et al., 2019). Traditional mass media outlets like television, radio, and newspapers no longer dominate consumer information sources. Instead, social media and online communities now serve as primary channels for relationship building and information exchange (Tseng, 2023).

As opined by Kaplan et al (2019), AI seeks to enable computers to perform tasks that would typically require human intelligence. Today, emerging technologies such as blockchain, cloud computing, big data, AI, and the Internet of Things (IoT) are collectively reshaping the way individuals and organizations interact. As these innovations continue to evolve and they are expected to drive hyper automation and interconnected digital ecosystems marking the next era of business and marketing transformation.

Meanwhile, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the global business landscape, reshaping marketing strategies and operational dynamics. AI-driven marketing tools are increasingly used to enhance performance, optimize customer experiences, and refine decision making (Julian, 2025). Artificial Intelligence Marketing (AIM) aims to leverage data and technology to deliver more personalized and efficient marketing outcomes (Shanmugam et al., 2023). Through advanced data analytics have make AI bridges the gap between data science and execution allowing marketers to interpret vast datasets and automate complex marketing functions (Mahi et al., 2024).

Böhndel et al (2023), asserted that computer generated virtual influencers have emerged as a major trend in brand communication powered by advancements in artificial intelligence (AI). Although extensive research has examined the role and impact of human social media influencers, the area of virtual influencers remains relatively underexplored particularly concerning how they shape consumer perceptions. In light of this gap their study seeks to empirically assess how consumers perceive virtual influencers compared to traditional human influencers. An exploratory experiment was conducted to evaluate the influence of both types of influencers on perceived credibility, competence, likeability and purchase intention. The

findings reveal no significant differences between virtual and human influencers in most dimensions, except for likeability. While the study highlighted perceptual similarities between AI and human influencers, it did not investigate the underlying psychological mechanisms (e.g., trust, engagement, or authenticity) that drive consumer attitudes toward AI influencers. Additionally, the research was limited to surface-level perception metrics and did not explore long-term behavioral effects such as brand loyalty, retention, or word-of-mouth. There was also no exploration of contextual factors (e.g., type of product, cultural background, or industry differences) that could moderate consumers' responses to AI versus human influencers.

Lee et al (2023), opined that although influencer marketing has expanded rapidly but limited research has explored how consumers' coping mechanisms differ when engaging with AI-generated versus human influencers. Grounded in the persuasion knowledge model, action identification theory, and construal-level theory, their study reconceptualizes agent knowledge as a fundamental belief that influences consumers' perceptions of influencer autonomy. Using two single-factor between subject experiments found that consumers tend to perceive AI influencers as heteronomous agents, prompting a lower-level construal that lacks perceived higher-order intentions. Building on these insights it demonstrated that consumers' agent knowledge of AI (compared to human influencers) had a negative impact on both attitudinal and behavioral responses, sequentially mediated by source credibility and perceived persuasion effectiveness. The gap of this study is that it did not assess practical marketing outcomes such as brand awareness, engagement metrics or purchase intention.

Looi et al (2024), stated that the rise and profitability of influencer marketing have led to a surge in virtual influencers which is digitally created personas powered and managed by artificial intelligence. These virtual figures are believed to provide advertisers with enhanced creative control and potentially higher audience engagement compared to their human counterparts. To evaluate these claims their study examined and compared the persuasion strategies and engagement outcomes of human and virtual influencers. They used a dataset of 99,680 English-language Instagram posts from 424 influencers (both human and virtual) within the beauty, fashion, and lifestyle sectors between 2020 and 2022 was analyzed. Using dictionary-based sentiment analysis (replicated with AFINN and Bing lexicons), the findings revealed that both influencer types primarily conveyed positive sentiments. Further, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling showed that human influencers expressed opinion leadership through active self-promotion while virtual influencers focused on identity expression. A natural experiment demonstrated that human influencers generated higher engagement levels than virtual ones. Additionally, influencer tier and Instagram verification status significantly interacted to influence engagement outcomes. The study did not explore the causal relationships between influencer type, emotional engagement and consumer trust.

Gerlich (2025), explored the emerging influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in shaping consumer decision making particularly in contrast to conventional human influencers. With growing consumer skepticism toward social media influencers stemming from concerns about financial incentives and biased endorsements AI tools such as ChatGPT are increasingly

viewed as neutral and trustworthy intermediaries. The research investigates whether AI systems can effectively replace human influencers in guiding purchasing decisions and identifies the sectors where this substitution is most viable. Using a mixed-methods design their study combined quantitative data from 478 respondents all experienced in using AI tools and engaging with social media influencers with qualitative insights from 15 semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that consumers prefer AI over human influencers especially for product categories requiring accuracy and objectivity such as electronics and sporting goods. Conversely, human influencers retain their impact in emotionally driven sectors including fashion and beauty where personal connection and relatability are essential. Overall, the results suggest an evolving marketing landscape in which AI systems increasingly lead data-driven recommendations while human influencers maintain emotional engagement roles. This hybrid model underscores a major shift in consumer trust dynamics and carries strategic implications for brands seeking to adapt to the next phase of digital marketing. The research also did not measure intermediary constructs like brand awareness, perceived credibility, or trust in branded content and these are key mechanisms linking influencer type to purchase intention.

From the reviewed literature, there is no consensus on whether AI influencers can replace human influencers, particularly regarding trust and emotional engagement. Therefore, this study empirically investigates the comparative effectiveness of AI vs. human influencers in PR campaigns.

2.3. Identified Research Gap

Although existing research distinguishes between the rational credibility of AI and the emotional authenticity of human influencers, there remains limited understanding of the underlying attributes that drive effectiveness in a hybrid communication environment. Most comparative studies have not examined how these attributes interact within a unified conceptual framework to influence cognitive and behavioral outcomes in PR campaigns. Addressing this gap requires a model that captures both the psychological and behavioral mechanisms linking influencer characteristics to audience responses. To this end, the present study integrates the Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) and Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) frameworks to examine how influencer attributes collectively shape trust in branded posts, brand awareness, and purchase intention. This integration provides a structured and empirically testable basis for understanding influence in the age of human–AI collaboration.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

2.4.1. Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) Model

The Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) model provides the core input for this study, identifying the specific characteristics that define an influencer's effectiveness. The attributes drawn from this framework include Expertise, Trustworthiness, Attractiveness, Similarity, Trendiness, Interactivity, and Involvement. These attributes serve as the fundamental stimuli that an audience perceives when engaging with influencer-driven content.

2.4.2 Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Paradigm

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) paradigm explains how environmental stimuli (S) influence an organism’s internal states (O), which in turn lead to specific behavioral responses (R). In the context of influencer PR, the influencer attributes (SMIV) act as **Stimuli** (S), triggering cognitive and affective reactions – Trust in Branded Posts (TBP) and Brand Awareness (BA) – which serve as the **Organism** (O) variables. These reactions then lead to the final **Response** (R), measured as Purchase Intention (PI).

2.5. Integrated Conceptual Model

Combining SMIV and SOR, this study conceptualizes influencer characteristics as stimuli triggering trust in branded posts (organism), which subsequently influence brand awareness and purchase intention (response).

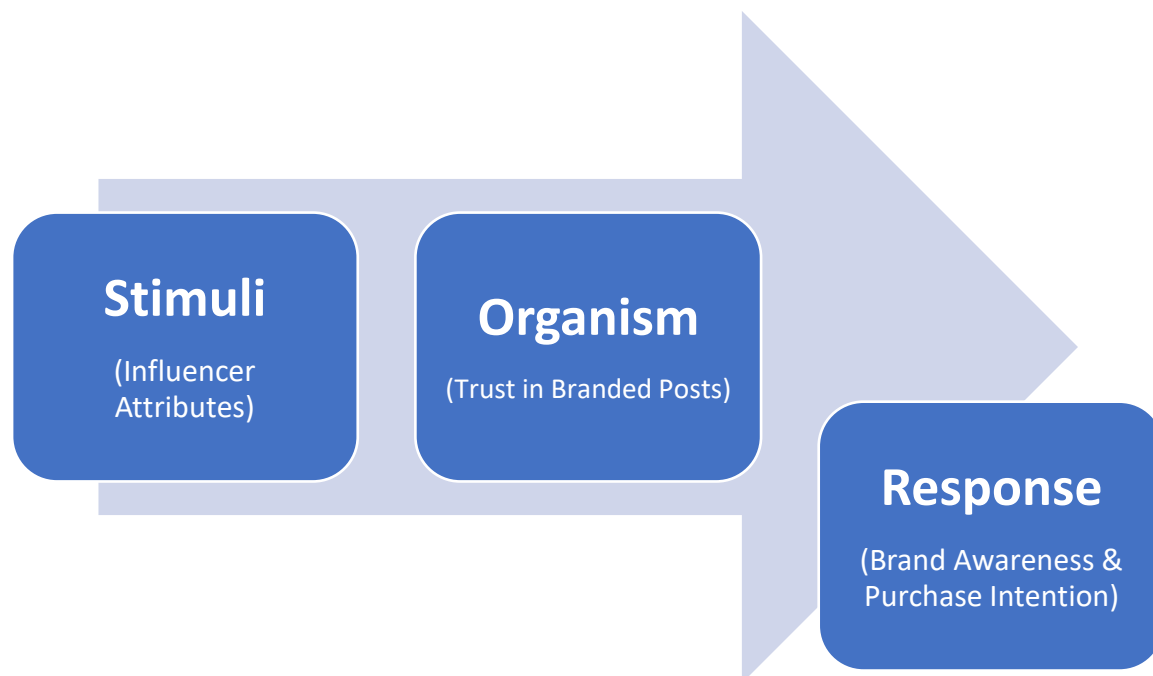


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Hypotheses Development

Building on the theoretical framework, the following hypotheses test the causal chain from perceived influencer qualities to consumer response within PR campaigns:

H1: Influencer attributes (Expertise (H1a), Trustworthiness (H1b), Attractiveness (H1c), Similarity (H1d), Trendiness (H1e), Involvement (H1f), and Interactivity (H1g)) positively affect brand awareness.

This hypothesis tests the direct impact of an influencer's perceived qualities on the audience's ability to recall or recognize a brand, assessing whether exposure through a compelling influencer translates directly into increased brand salience.

H2: Influencer attributes (Expertise (H2a), Trustworthiness (H2b), Attractiveness (H2c), Similarity (H2d), Trendiness (H2e), and Interactivity (H2f)) positively influence trust in branded posts.

This hypothesis examines whether the core attributes that define an influencer's value (such as expertise and trustworthiness) are sufficient to generate credibility specifically toward the promotional content they share.

H3: Trust in branded posts positively affects brand awareness.

This tests the mediating role of trust, proposing that content perceived as credible and reliable will be more easily retained and integrated into the audience's knowledge base, thus strengthening brand recognition.

H4: Trust in branded posts and brand awareness jointly predict purchase intention.

This final hypothesis tests the critical behavioral step, asserting that a favorable decision to purchase is a result of both audience familiarity with the brand (awareness) and confidence in the message source (trust).

3. Methods

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and utilized a structured questionnaire to collect data from respondents. The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale to measure all items, with responses ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was applied because this technique enables the simultaneous analysis of multiple relationships among independent and dependent variables (Albahri, et al., 2022).

Primary data were collected through the survey method. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the first captured respondents' demographic details, while the second and third sections contained items measuring the study constructs. The sampling process combined purposive and snowball techniques. Purposive sampling ensured that participants had relevant knowledge and experience concerning the research topic whereas snowball sampling facilitated the distribution of the questionnaire among individuals with similar characteristics.

All participants were informed about the study's objectives and procedures and verbal consent was obtained prior to participation. In addition, participation was entirely voluntary. The study was classified as low-risk with no expected psychological, legal, or social harm to respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained with all data securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

A total of 397 valid responses were collected for analysis. Following the recommendations of Bentler et al (1987) and Nunnally et al. (1994), a minimum of 10 responses per item was required. Given the 34 items in the instrument then the calculated minimum sample size was 340. Moreover, Kline (2015) suggested that at least 200 responses are necessary for SEM analysis. Therefore, the obtained sample size of 397 exceeded both thresholds, ensuring adequate statistical power and representativeness for the study.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The demographic results confirm the focus on a young, highly engaged cohort of social media users, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
GENDER	Male	243	61.21%
	Female	154	38.79%
	Total	397	100%
AGE	Below 18	5	1.26%
	18–30	358	90.18%
	31–40	20	5.04%
	Above 40	14	3.52%
	Total	397	100%
EDUCATION LEVEL	Secondary	12	3.02%
	Undergraduate	198	49.87%
	Graduate	152	38.29%
	Postgraduate	35	8.82%
	Total	397	100%
OCCUPATION	Student	361	90.93%
	Government Employee	5	1.26%
	Private Employee	15	3.78%
	Self-employed	16	4.03%
	Total	397	100%
SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE (PER DAY)	Less than an hour	69	17.38%
	1–2 hours	84	21.16%
	2–3 hours	118	29.72%
	More than 3 hours	126	31.73%
	Total	397	100%

NUMBER OF INFLUENCERS FOLLOWED	1	65	16.37%
	2–3	84	21.16%
	4–5	34	8.56%
	More than 5	214	53.90%
	Total	397	100%

4.2. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was evaluated by examining the significance of the path coefficients using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples. The model's explanatory power was strong, explaining 52.8% of the variance in Brand Awareness ($R^2 = 0.528$), 49.6% in Trust in Branded Posts ($R^2 = 0.496$), and 65.3% in Purchase Intention ($R^2 = 0.653$).

The results of the hypothesis testing are summarized in the table below:

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing (Structural Model Assessment)

HYPOTHESIS	T STATISTICS (O/STDEV)	P VALUES	DECISION
H1A: EX -> BA	0.490	0.659	Not Supported
H1B: TW -> BA	0.763	0.474	Not Supported
H1C: AT -> BA	0.495	0.897	Not Supported
H1D: SI -> BA	0.786	0.372	Not Supported
H1E: TR -> BA	2.609	0.004	Supported
H1F: IN -> BA	2.504	0.000	Supported
H1G: IT -> BA	2.617	0.000	Supported
H2A: EX -> TBP	3.600	0.004	Supported
H2B: TW -> TBP	5.257	0.000	Supported
H2C: AT -> TBP	0.823	0.303	Not Supported
H2D: SI -> TBP	3.646	0.001	Supported
H2E: TR -> TBP	0.338	0.450	Not Supported
H2F: IT -> TBP	5.768	0.000	Supported
H3: TBP -> BA	3.704	0.000	Supported
H4A: TBP -> PI	8.447	0.000	Supported

H4B: BA → PI	5.305	0.000	Supported
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Key Findings Interpretation:

Hypothesis H1 was partially supported: only Trendiness (TR), Involvement (IN), and Interaction (IT) significantly predicted Brand Awareness (BA). This suggests that audience recall is primarily driven by dynamic, engaging content rather than static personal qualities. Attractiveness no longer drives awareness (H1c not supported), suggesting audiences now prioritize engagement and relevance over visual appeal.

Hypothesis H2 was partially supported: Expertise (EX), Trustworthiness (TW), Similarity (SI), and Interaction (IT) were significant drivers of Trust in Branded Posts (TBP). This confirms that credibility remains essential for validating promotional content. Conversely, attractiveness and trendiness alone are insufficient to build trust.

Hypotheses H3 and H4 were fully supported, confirming the critical role of TBP. Trust in Branded Posts (H4a) was the strongest predictor of Purchase Intention (PI), and TBP also positively and significantly predicted Brand Awareness (H3).

5. Discussion

5.1. Thematic Interpretation: Navigating the Hybrid Ecosystem

The findings provide critical insight into the dynamics of the hybrid AI–human influencer ecosystem, revealing that effectiveness is determined by the **functionality** of the attribute rather than the **form** (human or AI) of the influencer.

The non-significance of expertise on brand awareness (H1a) suggests that technical knowledge alone is insufficient for salience; it may have become an expected baseline, especially in an AI-saturated media environment. Its true value lies in building *trust* (H2a supported), not awareness. As AI systems become ubiquitous, audiences may perceive expertise as an easily replicable attribute, making it no longer distinctive enough to independently strengthen brand recall.

Conversely, the strong significance of Trustworthiness (TW) on TBP (H2b) highlights that human-like authenticity and reliable content remain critical. Whether delivered by a human or engineered into an AI persona, this attribute validates the source's integrity.

Finally, the significance of Interactivity (IT) and Involvement (IN) (H1f, H1g, H2f) confirms that both AI and human influencers must simulate two-way engagement and foster genuine community to build brand awareness and validate credibility.

5.2. Strategic Implications for PR

The results offer direct guidance for PR managers operating in the AI era:

- **AI Influencers:** designed for high responsiveness, ethical transparency, and acute contextual trend awareness. AI's core value should be leveraged to deliver objective credibility and scalable, targeted interaction, rather than simply mimic human aesthetics.
- **Human Influencers:** emphasize emotional connection, credibility disclosure, and authentic storytelling. Their value is retained in areas where emotional resonance and perceived similarity (H2d supported) translate into high trust in branded messaging.
- **Hybrid Strategy:** focus on hybrid strategies – using AI for scalable, data-driven credibility in product categories requiring objectivity, and deploying humans for relational capital in sectors dependent on emotional connection and community building.

5.3. Theoretical Implications

The study advances PR theory by empirically validating an integrated SMIV–SOR model in the context of emerging markets and digital communication. By demonstrating how credibility and engagement dimensions jointly mediate consumer response, the findings provide a robust framework for understanding and predicting stakeholder behavior in hybrid human–AI communication ecosystems.

Thus, the line between AI and human influence is not defined by identity but by the shared ability to embody credibility, responsiveness, and emotional resonance.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study has two primary limitations. First, the sampling bias toward a young, educated, and highly digitally active demographic limits the generalizability of the findings to older or less engaged audiences. Second, the cross-sectional, non-experimental design means the study identifies correlations among attributes but does not directly test the causal efficacy of an AI-generated post versus a human-generated post. Future studies should therefore experimentally compare AI and human influencer posts to measure attribute salience and emotional response across different product contexts and demographic segments.

5.5. Conclusion

In an age where both human and AI influencers strategically shape public perception, effectiveness depends less on the influencer's physical identity or technological form and more on their core attributes. Specifically, interactivity, involvement, and trustworthiness. These qualities, rather than expertise or attractiveness alone, are the essential drivers of brand awareness and purchase intent. PR campaigns should therefore select or engineer influencers, regardless of form, around these core qualities to build effective, credible, and sustainable digital relationships. By shifting focus from the influencer's identity to the attributes that drive trust and engagement, this study contributes to redefining influence in the era of algorithmic communication.

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