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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS: A MIXED-METHODS EXAMINATION OF ETHICAL GOVERNANCE, AI AWARENESS, AND STAKEHOLDER TRUST

Hafiz Muhammad Humza[1], Mir Ahmad Feroz[2], Rooma Shahzadi[3]

[1]Lecturer, Department of Media and Communication Studies, University of Sialkot, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Media and Communication Studies, University of Sialkot, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan
[3]Associate Professor, Department of Media and Communication Studies, University of Sialkot, Sialkot , Punjab, Pakistan

[1]mhumza1098@gmail.com , [2]mirahmad33447@gmail.com [3]rooma.shahzadi@uskt.edu.pk

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Abstract

This study examines how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is applied in Public Relations (PR) practice, considering the ethical issues, AI awareness, and public trust in this context. A mixed methods research design was used, with qualitative data collected using semi-structured thematic interviews, with ten experienced PR professionals from public and private sector organizations. At the same time, quantitative survey data (N=100) was obtained from a diverse sample of demographics and analyzed in SPSS 25. Qualitative thematic analysis results show that, despite the benefits of transformative efficiency that generative AI and automated analytics can achieve, there are still a number of concerns, including the possibility of algorithmic bias, cultural insensitivity, limitations with local languages, and the danger of relying too much on unverified outputs. The importance of keeping the 'human in the loop' and context specific disclosure mechanisms to preserve the credibility of the organization is stressed. The quantitative results have high internal consistency (α=.785). Pearson correlation values and one-way ANOVA analysis shows that there is a strong, positive relationship between AI awareness and public trust (r=.648, p<.001) and it reveals that AI awareness significantly affects ethical concerns (F=3.568, p=.001). The multiple regression analysis also reveals that AI awareness (β=.232, p=.009) and gender (β=.375, p<.001) can positively predict high ethical concerns while platform use such as Twitter and TikTok negatively predicts ethical skepticism. The paper culminates in governance recommendations that can be applied in practice to ensure the ethical use of AI in strategic communication.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Public Relations (PR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are evolving together, and this swift evolution signifies a profound shift in how PR is conducted, particularly in its structural aspects (Gregory & Smith, 2025). With the capabilities of AI-driven automated content creation, media monitoring, real-time sentiment analysis, and audience segmentation, PR professionals are increasingly turning to AI to streamline their workflows and boost efficiency (Nikolova, 2024; Ömer Zararsız, 2024). Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT have become ubiquitous and are now making it easier and faster to execute communication workflows while the effective allocation of resources (Cusnir & Nicola, 2024).

But, there's a crucial paradox with this technological acceleration. Though AI tools streamline processes, their use can also have a number of consequences that are raising serious ethical concerns: algorithmic transparency, data privacy, misinformation, and authentic audience engagement (Diakopoulos, 2019; Floridi & Cowls, 2019). Deepfakes and automated content that cannot be verified can be harmful to the credibility of institutions (James, 2024). Thus, a key concern for today's public relations professionals (PRPs) is how to balance efficiency in AI usage with ethical responsibility (Chastain, 2024; Yassen, 2025).

1.2 Problem Statement & Research Objectives

There is a lack of empirical studies on how audiences' knowledge of AI directly affects stakeholder trust and perceived ethical risk despite its swift uptake of AI in PR. In addition, it is important to gain insight into how practitioners' work practices negotiate ethical limits on a regional, multi-lingual level.

The objectives of this research are:

- To explore the ethical dilemmas that lie at the heart of PR professionals' use of AI in their strategic processes.
- To examine the empirical link between audience AI awareness, demographic variables, platform usage and stakeholder trust of organizational communication.
- To assess the impact of AI disclosure under different contexts on organization authenticity.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: What are some of the key ethical challenges that PR professionals face when using AI technologies, specifically in the context of dealing with bias, transparency, accuracy, and cultural fit?

RQ2: What are the attitudes towards public trust and ethical issues of the deployment of AI in organizational communication?

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant relationship between the awareness of the use of AI in the communication of the organization and public trust.

H2: The results demonstrated that there is a positive correlation between audience awareness of AI and the ethical concerns they have regarding the communication by organizations.

H3: There is a strong relationship between the usage of social media platforms and demographic factors with differences in individual ethical concerns towards AI.

1.5 Scope and Significance

This research incorporates macro-level perspectives of AI mediated strategic communication as well as micro-level practitioners' insights in this evolving landscape. Practically, it is a combination of qualitative practitioner stories and quantitative survey data (N=100). From a practical standpoint, the results provide valuable information for strategic decision-makers, communications executives and

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ethics committees looking to create comprehensive AI governance policies that don't stifle technological innovation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study combines two theories namely, Ethical Decision-Making Models (Rest, 1986; Haidt, 2013) and Trust Theory (Mayer et al., 1995; Madupati, 2022) and provides a dual theory foundation.

Ethical Decision-Making Models: Explicitly represent how practitioners recognize the moral issues (e.g., algorithmic opacity, hallucination, data security), make intentions and take responsible communication decisions. These models will draw attention to speed/automation vs. human oversight.

Trust Theory: views trust as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that involves feelings of competence, integrity, benevolence and transparency. Perceived authenticity and disclosure are very critical in stakeholder trust in strategic communication. This interaction is crucial, and can be threatened by unannounced AI use, while human verification keeps company reputations intact.

2.2.1 AI's journey in Strategic Communications

AI in communication has gone from simple rule-based automated response systems (known as automated response systems or ARSs) (Ben Artzi, 2023) to sophisticated multi-modal generative systems (Ee, 2021) and machine learning. In recent years PR departments have been using LLMs to monitor almost real-time for media, generate campaigns, synthesize press releases, and target potential behaviour very accurately (Hammers, 2025; Matúsová & Načiniaková, 2023).

2.3. Ethical dilemmas: The "black box," bias and misinformation

AI's integration brings difficulties to the structure. One main issue is the 'black box' problem, that is, practitioners and stakeholders can not explain the logic behind the decision making of a complex neural network (Zerfass et al., 2020). In addition, systemic social bias in training datasets may result in a training model that will generate discriminatory results or cultural insensitivities if it is not moderated by humans (Mwinto, 2025; Nobre, 2020). The creation of misinformation, hallucinated biographical data, and deep fakes by AI technologies are critical reputational risks to which robust human verification is required (Ewing, 2019; Tuong-Minh & Le, 2025).

2.4: Governance and Institutional Codes of Conduct

But professional organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) have highlighted the importance of transparency, stringent human supervision, adherence to data privacy laws, and regular ethics education to reduce risks in operations (Pay Shabangu, 2024; Al-Zoubi et al., 2024). Corporate case studies show that companies that form a specific AI Ethics Board and that compliance is a mandatory issue inside the company, have a higher level of credibility from external stakeholders (Keiper, 2023; Arief & Gustomo, 2020).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods empirical design was used in this study; both a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with practitioners and a quantitative survey general audiences were used.

3.2 Qualitative Method

Ten (N=10) senior PR practitioners from agency, corporate (FMCG, startups and tech), NGO and public sector organizations were interviewed, using a telephonic and in-depth semi-structured approach. The work experience of the participants ranged from 2-25 years in the industry. The interviews discussed operational integration of AI, ethical considerations and boundaries, and

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policy strategies for disclosure. Reflexive thematic analysis was performed with 6 phases of analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) which are: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, theme definition and reporting.

3.3 Quantitative Method & Data Collection Quantitative method and data collection were employed in this study.

The data collection was done using quantitative research, in which a cross section of the population (N=100) was randomly sampled from different age groups and educational levels. Scale items in the survey instrument were operationalized measuring:

- AI Awareness: Knowledge of AI use in their organizations, AI recognition of brand communications, and firsthand experience of AI brand communications.
- Trust in Organizational Communication: Perceptions of organizational credibility, authenticity and message reliability.
- Ethical Issues: Scale measuring issues of privacy, misinformation, algorithmic bias and transparency.

Each of the core variables was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Uncertain, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Demographic indicators (Gender, Age, and Education) were collected as categorical/binary variable and social media platforms used were collected as categorical/binary variable. The data were analyzed statistically with the program SPSS 25.

4. Results

The qualitative profile of participants is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Interview Participants

Participant ID	Organization Type	Gender	Experience (Years)
Zuhaib	PR Agency	Male	8
Ayaz	Syntax Communication	Male	11
Fareed Khan	PR Agency	Male	5
Hassan Zuberi	Momentum PR	Male	25
Moeed	B Digital	Male	7
Sibghatullah	B Digital	Male	4
Anam	FMCG	Female	10
Bilal Khan	Sematic Digital	Male	6
Nida	Tech Startup	Female	2
Waqas Jamil	NGO	Male	9

Two dominant themes emerged from the thematic analysis:

Theme 1: Operational Ethics Accuracy & Cultural Localization

All participants recognized the benefits of the efficiency of AI tools and saw these as complementary.

Human Oversight as an Imperative: This

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was strongly agreed upon by practitioners and concerns the issue of uncritical over-reliance. Fareed Khan saw AI as being a 'supporting hand, not the full arm' – the emphasis must remain with professional instinct and human subjectivity when it comes to dissemination. Moeed echoed this, saying that automated content, without editorial oversight, poses a huge strategic risk.

Algorithmic Bias and Training Data Opacity: Ayaz pointed out that prompt outputs can often be structurally biased due to the biases in the training data, and the 'black box' nature of the process means that it is difficult to audit prompt outputs for bias: ‘We need to be ever vigilant about the output of the prompts, as they may unwittingly promote offensive stereotypes. Fareed Khan empirically showed this difference by sending the same political prompt to various LLMs, and observing that there were different opinion orientations that would need to be triangulated by humans.

Regional Nuance, Slang, and Multi-lingual Translation Accuracy: Hassan Zuberi and Anam pointed out the need for LLMs to tackle regional nuances, slang usage, and multi-lingual translation accuracy in Pakistan's diverse media landscape. A particular example Anam pointed to was when an AI-generated text provided unverified rumors about a professional athlete's biographical information, which could only have been verified by the athlete himself and not by the AI.

Theme 2: Public trust and context dependent disclosure

Practitioners reported that high standards of quality control and transparency in situations promote public trust.

The public signal of quality assurance: Anam pointed out that the mandatory human editorial loops are an editorial quality signaling. Fareed Khan explained the multi layered internal fact checking process needed to be followed before giving out press material to journalists.

Internal Governance vs. External Mandates: Waqas Jamil said that his organization has a requirement to keep track of the use of AI for compliance purposes, even though it does not necessarily require the disclosure of this usage on the front end. Public disclosure, Moeed said, is not always required; it depends on the circumstances, as disclosure builds trust but isn't always necessary unless it’s directly related to ethics, privacy or factual sensitivity.

At high-stakes critical communications, Bilal Khan said the AI generation is “deliberately avoided” in the public sector because the credibility of citizens is much more important than speed: 'Our department does not use AI for official press releases because for us, it is more important to maintain citizen credibility rather than being quick.

4.2 Quantitative Results

4.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the sample (N=100) are detailed in Table 2. Mean values for AI Awareness (X=3.86, SD=0.71) and Trust in Organizational Communication (X=3.84, SD=0.75) reflect high overall agreement. Ethical Concerns yielded a mean score of X=3.52, SD=0.75, indicating substantial baseline ethical awareness. The sample composition was 53% female, heavily skewed toward younger cohorts (Age X=0.17), with strong educational attainment (Education X=1.48). Social media participation was high (99%), dominated by Instagram (88%) and YouTube (53%).

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Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Selected Variables

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
AI Awareness	100	1.00	5.00	3.8667	.71696	.514
Trust ogc	100	1.00	5.00	3.8467	.75570	.571
Ethical Concerns	100	1.75	5.00	3.5200	.75518	.570
Gender	100	0	1	.5300	.50200	.252
Age	100	0	3	.1700	.49300	.244
Education	100	0	3	1.4800	.59400	.353
Social Media Use	100	0	1	.9900	.10000	.010
Preferred Platform Pref	100	0	1	.3900	.49000	.240
Use Instagram	100	0	1	.8800	.32700	.107
Use_Twitter	100	0	1	.2100	.40900	.168
Use_TikTok	100	0	1	.1200	.32700	.107
Use_YouTube	100	0	1	.5300	.50200	.252

4.2.2 Scale Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha method was used to check the scale internal consistency. The instrument had a 10-items and was found to be reliable with .785 which is above the standard .70 reliability level in academic field as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.785	10

4.2.3 Bivariate Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was used to determine relationships amongst important constructs (Table 4). There was a strong positive correlation between AI Awareness and Trust in Organizational Communication (r=.648, p< .001) which was statistically significant. AI Awareness also had a positive correlation with Ethical Concerns (0.283, 0.002). In addition, there was a moderate positive correlation with Organizational Trust (r=.345, p<.001) and Ethical Concerns.

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Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Measure	AI_Awareness	Trust_OGC	Ethical_Concerns
AI_Awareness	1.000	.648** (p=.000)	.283** (p=.002)
Trust_OGC	.648** (p=.000)	1.000	.345** (p=.000)
Ethical_Concerns	.283** (p=.002)	.345** (p=.000)	1.000

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA):

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) method was used to analyze the data.

One-Way ANOVA tests were performed to see the variance among groups Table 5:

- The main effect of AI Awareness on Trust in Organizational Communication was very significant (F8,91=15.252, p<.001).
- AI Awareness on Ethical Concerns: Confirmed that AI Awareness has a significant impact on the ethical concerns (F8,91=3.568, p=.001).
- Education Level on Ethical Concerns: Found that there was a significant difference in the level of education in ethical concerns (F3,96=2.928, p=.038)

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Table 5: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Results

Model Dependent & Factor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Trust_OGC (by AI_Awareness)					
Between Groups	32.385	8	4.048	15.252	.000
Within Groups	24.153	91	.265		
Total	56.538	99			
Ethical_Concerns (by AI_Awareness)					
Between Groups	13.482	8	1.685	3.568	.001
Within Groups	42.978	91	.472		
Total	56.460	99			
Ethical_Concerns (by Education)					
Between Groups	4.734	3	1.578	2.928	.038
Within Groups	51.726	96	.539		
Total	56.460	99			

4.2.5 Multiple Regression Analysis

Using AI awareness, the demographic variables and the indicators of the social media platforms a multiple linear regression was performed for the prediction of Ethical Concerns. The overall model was statistically significant ($F_{9,90}=6.973$, $p<.001$), accounting for 41.1% of variance ($R^2=.411$, Adjusted $R^2=.352$). This relationship is summarized in Table 6, and detailed in Table 7.

Table 6: Regression Model Summary & ANOVA for Predictors of Ethical Concerns

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate	Durbin-Watson	F	Sig.
1	.641	.411	.352	.60796	.916	6.973	.000

Note. Predictors: Constant, Age, Gender, Education, AI_Awareness, Preferred_Platforms, Use_Instagram, Use_Twitter, Use_TikTok, Use_YouTube.

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Table 7: Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Ethical Concerns

Model Predictor	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized β	t	Sig. (p)	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
(Constant)	2.388	.386	—	6.191	.000	[1.621, 3.154]
AI_Awareness	.245	.091	.232	2.689	.009	[.064, .426]
Gender	.565	.133	.375	4.257	.000	[.301, .829]
Use_Twitter	-.440	.157	-.239	-2.803	.006	[-.752, -.128]
Use_TikTok	-.774	.225	-.335	-3.444	.001	[-1.220, -.327]
Education	-.074	.107	-.058	-.687	.494	[-.287, .139]
Use_Instagram	.244	.197	.106	1.238	.219	[-.147, .635]
Use_YouTube	-.028	.146	-.018	-.189	.851	[-.318, .263]
Age	.100	.143	.065	.698	.487	[-.184, .384]

Note. Dependent Variable: Ethical_Concerns.

As shown in Table 7, AI Awareness positively, and significantly predicts ethical concerns (B=.245, β=.232, p=.009). H2 was supported by a unit increase in AI awareness which was associated with a 24.5% rise in ethical concerns reported.

Gender is a significantly positive predictor (B=.565, β=.375, p<.001) which means that women respondents were significantly more likely than men to have a higher level of ethical concern for the use of AI than men.

Platform Usage Effects: Inverse relationships were shown for the platform usage of micro-blogging and short-form video. The use of Twitter (B=-.440, β=-.239, p=.006) and TikTok (B=-.774, β=-.335, p=.001) were negatively associated with ethical concerns, suggesting that there was platform-specific normalization of automated content. There was no significant difference among age, education level and the overall platform preference (p>.05).

5. Discussion

The study analysed the empirical and operational aspects of the adoption of AI in PR, focusing on the systemic interconnections of the perceptions of AI awareness, ethical risk assessment and trust in stakeholders.

There is evidence of the ability to relate to theoretical frameworks or models:

The quantitative findings are supporting the main tenets of the Trust Theory (Mayor et al. 1995; Madupati 2022). The strong positive correlation (r=.648) and ANOVA significance (F=15.252) achieved show that the use of AI does not automatically result in loss of audience trust. Audiences who are more AI-literate and who think that organizations are transparent, however, tend to trust them.

But, the results also favor the Ethical

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Decision-Making Models (Rest, 1986). Increase in critical scrutiny (β=.232, p=.009) is associated with an increase in AI awareness. The more stakeholders know about the capabilities of generative, the more they are aware of algorithmic bias, data harvesting and synthetic hallucinations.

5.2 Making sense of qualitative and quantitative data

The qualitative thematic data were used to understand these quantitative effects:

Quantitative results indicate that increased awareness fosters moral awareness: this is the Human-in-the-Loop Necessity. Qualitative narratives tell of how practitioners work to remove this risk, notably through human editorial control ('a supporting hand, never the full arm'). Humans are a guardrail to prevent hallucination and bias in the organization.

Platform and Demographic Sensitivities: The regression model found that platform use affects ethical sensitivity, as Twitter and TikTok users had a lower ethical sensitivity towards AI. Qualitative interviews say this is because of the fast paced and high volume of the short form feeds of social media, in which automated aggregation is the norm. Institutional forms (e.g. official public sector announcements) on the other hand require human oversight in order to avoid erosion of reputation.

Strategic recommendations and conclusion

6.1 Conclusion

Overall, this research highlights the potential of Artificial Intelligence as a powerful tool in the field of public relations, with ethical governance being a crucial element in its strategic application. Adopting AI helps simplify content creation and media analysis, but there's a critical need for human editorial judgment, context, and cultural sensitivity. Evidence shows that it is important to have audience awareness of AI, as this raises confidence as well as ethical criticism. In conclusion, the use of AI in public relations and corporate communication agencies should be done with transparency, understanding, and a human-centric approach to ensure responsible governance.

6.2 Policy and practice recommendations for the future.

- Implement Mandatory Human-in-the-Loop (HITL) Protocols – It is important that all organisations have rules that ensure that AI-generated content, press releases and strategic messages are reviewed by senior communications professionals before being released externally.
- Adopt Context Dependent Disclosure Standards: For high-stakes communication, crisis management and public policy campaigns, there should be a mandatory requirement for transparency in disclosure.
- An Audit Algorithmic Models for Regional and Cultural Bias, Communications teams in multi-lingual situations need localized validation processes to identify linguistic inaccuracies and cultural insensitivities before dissemination.
- Establish and maintain internal policies and procedures: PR agencies should implement internal AI governance guidelines based on international norms and practices (e.g., recommendations from PRSA and IPRA), and have regular training sessions on data privacy, copyright compliance, and verification processes.

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