

Provisional title: The role of artificial intelligence (AI) in developing public relations (PR) services in Saudi media companies

Introduction

Public relations (PR) is an intricate and strategic communication discipline that revolves around cultivating and nurturing a positive reputation and meaningful relationships between organizations, individuals, or entities and the broader public. At its core, PR involves a delicate balance of art and science, skilfully managing information dissemination, shaping perceptions, and orchestrating interactions to influence public opinion and maintain a reservoir of goodwill (Ferguson, 2018). The overarching objective of public relations is to construct and uphold a favourable image and reputation for the subject it represents. This pursuit entails a multifaceted approach encompassing various tactics and strategies, all aimed at conveying carefully crafted messages, adeptly navigating crises, and fostering mutual understanding and engagement with target audiences (Smith, 2020). PR professionals serve as the bridge that connects organizations with the public, translating intricate narratives, proliferating information, and facilitating meaningful dialogues (Ferguson, 2018).

At the heart of PR lies the realm of media relations. These professionals work in tandem with journalists and media outlets, meticulously striving for accurate and positive coverage of their clients or organizations (Sadow, 2017). They draft press releases, orchestrate well-timed press conferences, and nurture relationships with journalists, all with the intention of generating favourable media attention. In times of crisis, PR plays a pivotal role in crisis communication (Garnham, 2020). This entails the art of managing unforeseen adversities and addressing potentially ruinous situations that could wreak havoc on an organization's reputation. Skilful crisis communication hinges on swift, transparent, and forthright responses, designed to mitigate adverse impacts and restore eroded trust. Publicity campaigns form another cornerstone of PR endeavours (Gregory, 2020). These meticulously designed campaigns are tailor-made to raise awareness and promote a specific product, service, cause, or event. Leveraging an arsenal of communication channels spanning traditional media, social media, and digital platforms, PR campaigns endeavour to resonate with the intended audience, leaving a lasting impact (Grunig, 2020).

In media companies, PR plays a pivotal role in shaping the public perception of these organizations by facilitating effective communication between the company and its audiences. It involves managing media relationships, crafting compelling narratives, and strategically disseminating information about the company's activities, products, and editorial perspectives (Johnston, 2020). Additionally, PR professionals in media companies are crucial in managing crisis situations, ensuring accurate reporting, and maintaining ethical standards, all while navigating the rapidly evolving landscape of

digital media and social platforms. Through skilful PR efforts, media companies can foster credibility, build audience trust, and establish themselves as authoritative sources of information and entertainment (Johnston, 2020).

In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, PR emerges as a pivotal force that shapes the narrative and perception surrounding this transformative national initiative. Saudi Vision 2030 is a comprehensive agenda designed to steer the Saudi Arabian economy away from oil dependency, promote economic diversification, and enhance the overall quality of life for its citizens. In this intricate landscape, PR takes on a fundamental role in effectively conveying the mission, progress, and significance of the diverse initiatives to both local and global audiences (Grand and Wolff, 2020).

PR serves as the connective tissue that bridges the visionary objectives of Saudi Vision 2030 with the public's understanding and expectations. Through strategic information dissemination and the crafting of compelling stories, PR professionals become instrumental in moulding public opinion and garnering support for the multifaceted pursuits of the vision (Khan & Khan, 2020).

One of the critical roles of PR within the scope of Saudi Vision 2030 is to raise awareness. PR experts shoulder the responsibility of generating widespread recognition about the vision's aims, strategies, and the advantages it brings forth. Through a blend of mediums such as traditional media, social media platforms, and curated events, they ensure that the public is well-versed in the essence of the vision and the strides being taken to realize its objectives (Alqahtani, 2023). Furthermore, PR endeavours within this framework extend to crafting an internationally appealing reputation. Saudi Vision 2030 seeks to position Saudi Arabia as a desirable destination for investments and tourism on a global scale. Here, PR initiatives come into play, projecting an affirmative international image that showcases not only economic reforms but also cultural advancements and attractive avenues for global investments (Alharbi, 2021). Engagement with stakeholders forms another cornerstone of PR's role. This encompasses fostering meaningful dialogues among various stakeholders, ranging from government bodies to private sector entities and the general populace. Through these interactions, PR serves as a conduit for aligning interests, addressing concerns, and fostering collaboration that harmonizes efforts toward the achievement of Saudi Vision 2030's overarching goals (Alkathiri, 2020).

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in public relations within media companies has ushered in a transformative era, revolutionizing the way communication strategies are devised and executed. AI is being harnessed to analyse vast amounts of data, enabling PR professionals to gain actionable insights into audience preferences, sentiment trends, and media coverage (Galloway and Swiatek, 2018). By automating the process of data analysis, AI empowers media companies to make informed

decisions, refine messaging, and tailor their PR campaigns to resonate more effectively with their target demographics (Buhmann and White, 2020).

Furthermore, AI-driven tools are reshaping media monitoring and analysis. AI algorithms can swiftly sift through an array of online and social media platforms, identifying mentions, trends, and conversations related to the media company and its content. This real-time monitoring not only keeps media professionals informed about their brand's perception but also aids in identifying potential crisis situations as they emerge, allowing for quicker and more precise response strategies (Biswal, 2020). The application of AI also extends to content creation. Automated writing tools can generate press releases, news articles, and even social media posts, saving time for PR teams to focus on more strategic tasks. However, while AI-generated content can streamline processes, ensuring that the content aligns with the company's tone, values, and objectives remains a crucial human oversight (Chan-Olmsted, 2019).

Personalization of communication is another area where AI shines. Media companies can leverage AI algorithms to analyse user behaviour and preferences, tailoring content and communication strategies to individual audience segments. This personal touch enhances engagement, as audiences receive content that resonates with their interests and needs, fostering a stronger connection between the media company and its audience (Alawaad, 2021). Moreover, AI-driven chatbots are revolutionizing customer interaction. In media companies, these chatbots can handle inquiries, provide information, and guide audiences through content offerings. This enhances user experience by providing immediate responses and assistance, contributing to a positive brand perception and customer satisfaction (Cheng & Jiang, 2022).

The primary aim of this study is to comprehensively explore and analyse the utilization and impact of AI in the field of PR within Saudi media companies. By investigating the integration of AI technologies in PR practices, the study aims to shed light on the evolving landscape of communication strategies, decision-making processes, and audience engagement dynamics within these companies.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To evaluate the extent to which Saudi media companies have integrated AI technologies into their PR practices
2. To investigate how the use of AI tools has influenced the formulation and execution of PR communication strategies
3. To analyse the effectiveness of AI-driven tools in enhancing audience engagement
4. To examine the role of AI in crisis management within Saudi media companies

5. To assess the efficiency and quality of content creation processes through AI-powered automated writing tools

Problem statement

The integration of AI into PR practices has become increasingly prevalent, revolutionizing communication strategies across various industries. In the context of Saudi media companies, where the landscape of PR is evolving rapidly, there exists a gap in understanding the extent to which AI technologies are adopted, the implications for communication strategies, and the challenges and opportunities they present. While AI offers potential benefits such as data-driven insights, enhanced audience engagement, and streamlined content creation, the nuanced cultural and ethical considerations of its application in a Saudi context are relatively unexplored. Thus, this study aims to address the gap by investigating the role of AI in PR within Saudi media companies, examining its impact on communication strategies, audience engagement, crisis management, content creation, and the dynamics of human-AI collaboration. Through a comprehensive exploration of these facets, the study seeks to contribute to the knowledge base on AI's evolving role in communication within Saudi Arabia and provide valuable insights for both practitioners and researchers navigating the intersection of AI and PR in the media landscape.

Literature review

AI has found many uses in present-day situations. Despite this, studies on the use of AI specifically in the development of PR services in media institutions are limited. Most studies conducted previously have analysed the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in PR. Some studies have also focused on the challenges experienced by PR teams in incorporating new digital technologies in their work (Wigley & Zhang, 2011).

The impact of AI in the PR sector was first analysed by Gregory (2004) who discussed how electronic communication and the internet had impacted PR. The PR teams of various types of organizations have started using AI to improve their work (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018). Navarro et al. (2017) reported that most PR professionals create content for social media based on their own perceptions rather than what the public wants. In contrast, the key to effective communication and maintaining healthy public relations is to understand the expectations of the public and try to fulfil those expectations (Kent & Saffer, 2014; Moreno et al., 2015).

There are mixed opinions regarding the use of artificial intelligence in the PR sector. According to Valin (2018), the Chartered Institute of Public Relations has reported that AI will be able to perform only a few PR tasks. Therefore, PR professionals can leave the simple tasks to AI and focus on more advanced tasks such as critical thinking and

strategizing (Yaxley, 2018). Moreover, the senior PR professionals need to remember that they are communicating with the younger public, which means that they need to customize the content to suit the requirements of the current generation (Cismaru et al., 2018).

AI has been used to monitor news media coverage by employing natural language processing approaches (Pavlik, 2007). Panda et al. (2019) carried out a qualitative exploratory study using semi-structured interviews to identify the attitudes and opinions of PR professionals towards application of AI in the industry. The study found that according to PR professionals, AI application in the industry was still in its early stages. Although the adoption of AI in the PR sector is slow, there are some tasks which are slowly becoming impossible without the help of AI. Some specific applications mentioned by the participants were designing campaigns, automating tactical tasks, providing insights, tailoring content, generating personas, identifying and responding to crisis, and managing relations with the public.

A review by Nobre and Gil (2020) discussed the various AI-powered algorithms that were growing in importance in the fields of journalism, PR, and communications. Artificial Intelligence Algorithms (AIAs) are now capable of developing content as journalists and they are able to result in greater information flow, coverage of wider areas, supervision of more activities and agents, and providing a platform for a larger number of citizens to voice their opinions. In the domain of PR, PR-bots have been developed which perform activities such as exchange of messages, management of agendas, follow-up, profiling of stakeholders, clipping, targeting, designing pop-up campaigns, and sensing crises. Advanced AI algorithms include context-aware chatbots, politically persuasive artificial agents, and socially sensitive machines. Algorithms for advancing various propaganda have also been developed such as interfering in public debates, moulding public opinion, distributing fake (or real) news, fostering reputations, and interfering with political campaigns.

In PR, tasks that specifically help predict media trends and monitor activities on social media are increasingly performed by AI (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018). Moreover, tedious and repetitive tasks such as writing articles based on facts, organization and update of media lists, transcribing audio interviews into text, and crisis management are performed by AI (Panda et al., 2019). The use of AI allows PR professionals to process data and statistics much faster (Rogers, 2019). According to Bourne (2019), PR robots could work continuously in exchanging messages with the public and giving importance to the voice of business interests. AI can perform tasks based on facts, data, and trends rather than on intuition which increases the accuracy of the tasks (Peterson, 2019).

In an attempt to identify the use and impact of AI in the PR sector, a single case study has been carried out in Indonesia in the form of online surveys and semi-structured

interviews. According to the participants in this study, jobs such as writing news clippings, monitoring media, building media relationships, managing content and its distribution, editing photos and videos, and preparing presentations are largely being replaced by AI. Several studies have also focused on the use of chatbots for strengthening public relations. Chatbots have been programmed to have a conversational voice to mimic humans while conversing with the public. Men et al. (2022) tested their theoretical model of using chatbots for organizational listening, transparency, and public relations by inviting participants to have a short conversation with a chatbot. Another study by Cheng and Jiang (2022) explored the role of chatbot marketing on PR and reported that chatbots directly enhanced the conversation quality and indirectly improved PR and customer response.

Limited literature exists regarding the role of AI in the field of PR in various industries in Saudi Arabia. Basri (2019) explored the use of AI in social media marketing in small and medium business start-ups in Saudi Arabia. This study found that current-generation businesses are more likely to use AI-driven social media marketing strategies for their businesses. Aljohani and Albliwi (2022) studied the role of AI on decision-making in the Saudi private sector finding that the use and impact of AI were high in current-generation businesses. Youssef (2022) explored the application of big data for strategic communication in the PR sector for Saudi companies. Baabdullah et al. (2021) tested a conceptual model based on the technology-organization-environment framework to analyse the impact of the use of AI practices on business-customer interactions. Arabia (2022)'s study revealed that the human resource managers in Saudi Arabia were ready to integrate AI-enabled practices in their departments. Althiabi (2022) recommended the use of neural networks and hybrid machine learning strategies to detect and prevent the spread of fake news and misinformation on social media platforms.

Proposed methodology

This study will adopt a descriptive research design which provides an overview of a phenomenon as it unfolds in a natural uninterrupted environment (Burns & Grove, 2003). The top-down or the deductive approach will be used wherein hypotheses will be developed on the basis of existing theories and attempts will be made to verify these theories (Burney & Saleem, 2008). A mixed-methods approach will be adopted for data collection and analysis where both qualitative and quantitative strategies will be used.

According to the Saudi Arabia business directory (saudiayp.com), there are over 100 media companies in Saudi Arabia including PR Media, Eburr, Elite Design Studio, Lavender Creative Media Agency, Studio52 Time Lapse, Jeddah Soft, ORYX News, Alef Publishing and Media, and Camel Club. A simple random sampling method will be used to select around 20 to 25 media companies in Saudi Arabia for the study. Professionals working in the PR sectors of these companies will be contacted and

invited to participate in the study. Primary data will be collected through online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The online questionnaire will be prepared as a Google form and the link will be shared with the participants via email and/or Whatsapp. A pilot study will first be conducted by distributing the questionnaire to a small subset of participants to gauge their comprehension of the questions and whether they were able to successfully complete the questionnaire. Once the validity and reliability of the tool is confirmed, the questionnaire will be distributed to all the participants.

The questionnaire will comprise of four parts. The first part will contain questions regarding demographics such as age, gender, educational qualification, and professional status. The second part will comprise of questions pertaining to functional information such as experience in the industry, reliance on AI strategies at work, and level of training done to apply AI at work. The third part will have questions regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of using AI for PR. The fourth part will comprise of questions regarding the impact of AI in their industry. Measurements will be made using the 6-Likert scale which will include: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree, and 6 – not applicable. The construct validity of the questionnaire will be checked using Pearson correlation coefficients and the reliability of the questionnaire will be assessed using the Cronbach's alpha test. Data analysis will be carried out using the IBM SPSS software through linear and multiple regression analyses, and ANOVA.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with each of the participants either online or offline based on mutual convenience. Semi-structured interviews will allow the collection of qualitative data for the study and will enable the participants to provide more insights into how AI has been incorporated in their work, and its positive as well as negative impacts. Each interview will be around 45 minutes to 1 hour long. The interviews will be audio recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed to text so that there is no loss of data. The data collected from the interviews will be analysed by the thematic analysis method.

Secondary data will be collected from the company's annual reports, customer data, management information, feedback from customers, company's social media handles, and company's website. This data will also serve as a basis for understanding the application of AI in the PR sector in media companies. In order to achieve the objectives outlined above, areas such as media monitoring, sentiment analysis, content creation, and personalized communication will specifically be targeted to achieve the study objectives. The application of AI for targeting specific audience segments, tailoring messaging, and optimizing content delivery for maximum engagement will be analysed. Metrics such as interaction rates, click-through rates, and user feedback in response to AI-customized content will be measured to understand the effectiveness of AI-based

tools. AI's role in crisis management will be analysed by studying how AI-driven sentiment analysis and real-time monitoring contribute to proactive crisis identification and effective response strategies.

Research significance

This study holds substantial significance in both academic and practical contexts, contributing to the understanding of the evolving dynamics between AI and PR within Saudi media companies. At an academic level, this study will extend the body of knowledge concerning the integration of AI into PR practices, particularly within the context of Saudi Arabia. As AI technologies continue to reshape communication strategies, investigating their implementation in the unique cultural and professional environment of Saudi media companies will offer novel insights. By delving into this underexplored area, the study will enrich academic discussions surrounding the synergy between AI and PR, aiding in the development of theoretical frameworks and models that can be applied in diverse contexts.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study will hold significant implications for PR professionals, media practitioners, and decision-makers within Saudi media companies. The study's insights into the utilization of AI tools for media monitoring, sentiment analysis, content creation, and personalized communication will be able to guide professionals in optimizing their PR strategies to align with the dynamic media landscape. Additionally, by addressing the ethical considerations inherent in AI-driven communication, the study will equip practitioners with a nuanced understanding of responsible AI integration.

By shedding light on the evolving role of AI in PR within Saudi media companies, this study will contribute to the overall growth and development of the media industry in the country. It will provide a platform for industry stakeholders to comprehend the benefits and challenges of AI adoption, facilitating informed decision-making in adopting AI technologies that can enhance communication strategies, improve audience engagement, and ensure effective crisis management. The study's findings will serve as a foundation for policy-makers and regulators in the media sector. As AI adoption becomes more prevalent, regulatory frameworks may need to be adapted to ensure data privacy, transparency, and ethical AI practices. The study's insights will be able to inform the formulation of guidelines that balance innovation with responsible AI usage within the Saudi media landscape.

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