

THESIS

MAPPING AI AND PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH:
TRENDS, THEORIES, AND ETHICS

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Science

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2026

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ABSTRACT

MAPPING AI AND PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH: TRENDS, THEORIES, AND ETHICS

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping public relations (PR) through automated content production, generative language models, audience segmentation, and data-driven decision-making. While scholars highlight AI's potential to enhance efficiency and strategic capability, concerns around transparency, privacy, algorithmic bias, governance, inclusivity, and trust remain central. Despite growing attention, AI-PR research remains unevenly distributed and theoretically fragmented. This study presents a quantitative content analysis of 100 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2016 and 2026, with sustained scholarship emerging from 2018. Guided by three research questions, the study examines publication trends and topical distribution, theoretical frameworks and their integration, and ethical considerations in the literature. Articles were coded for publication year, journal outlet, geographic affiliation, methodological orientation, research design, statistical techniques, sample characteristics, theoretical perspectives, AI tools discussed, and six ethical domains, analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings indicate rapid growth since 2018, with thematic concentration in AI-mediated persuasion, relationship management, governance, adoption, and organizational transformation. Theoretical diversity exists without consolidation, and ethical engagement is uneven — trust, transparency, bias, and privacy appear frequently, while governance and inclusivity receive limited attention. The literature also remains geographically concentrated in Western academic contexts.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence (AI), public relations (PR), content analysis, ethics, governance, transparency, scholarly discourse, trust.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to give all glory and thanks to the Almighty God for His grace, strength, and guidance throughout my academic journey. His faithfulness has brought me this far, and I am deeply grateful for the wisdom and resilience He has granted me in completing this thesis.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my academic advisor, Dr. Yeunjae Lee, for her invaluable guidance, support, and mentorship throughout this process. Her contributions have been instrumental to my growth as both a student and a researcher. Through her thoughtful feedback, corrections, and constant encouragement, she challenged me to think critically and pushed me to become a better and more refined scholar. I am truly grateful for the time, patience, and dedication she invested in my work.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to my committee members for their willingness to serve on my committee and for their continuous support throughout this journey. From the proposal stage to the completion of this thesis, their insights, feedback, and encouragement have been greatly appreciated.

My sincere thanks also go to the Department of Journalism and Media Communication for granting me the opportunity to pursue my studies in the United States and for providing an environment that fostered my academic and professional development. I am equally grateful to Colorado State University for the platform and resources that made this achievement possible.

I would like to express a special appreciation to the African Graduate Students Association for creating a strong sense of community and belonging. Their support made the United States feel like home, and having a family away from home made this journey much easier. I am also grateful to the Pentecost International Worship Center Fort Collins and the

Ghanaian Ebenezer Presbyterian Church, Aurora, for their spiritual support, encouragement, and fellowship.

Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my family. I am especially thankful to my parents, my late father, Mr. Francis Teye Sewu, who envisioned me becoming a communication scholar even before I could conceive the idea myself, and my mother, Madam Rebecca Buerkor Puplampu, for her unwavering prayers, love, and support throughout this journey. Their influence, sacrifices, and belief in me have been foundational to my growth and achievements. To my siblings, all my family members and friends, thank you for your continuous encouragement, guidance, and steadfast support over these past two years and throughout the entire process of completing this thesis.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to all scholars, practitioners, and institutions across the globe working to advance ethical, transparent, and accountable communication in the age of artificial intelligence, and to bridging the evolving divide between technological innovation and public trust. Above all, this work is dedicated to the glory of God, whose grace makes all things possible.

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly transforming industries worldwide, and public relations (PR) is no exception. Communication professionals now rely on AI-enabled tools for automated content generation, generative language modeling, audience segmentation, predictive analytics, and data-driven decision-making (Kaleel & Alomari, 2024; Laskin & D’Agostino, 2024). As these technologies become embedded in communication workflows, a growing body of scholarship has begun examining how AI is reshaping PR practice and its broader theoretical and ethical implications (Bourne, 2019; Wu et al., 2024). Much of this literature highlights AI’s potential to enhance efficiency, personalization, and strategic capability in communication campaigns (Uysal & Deng, 2025; Yue et al., 2024). At the same time, researchers note that these developments introduce significant ethical challenges, including transparency in automated communication, algorithmic bias, data privacy, surveillance, governance gaps, and risks to public trust (Bourne, 2019; Bowen, 2024; Salzano & Ashby-King, 2025). These tensions reveal a central question in AI-PR research: whether artificial intelligence strengthens the strategic and relational foundations of public relations or introduces structural risks that challenge professional accountability and legitimacy.

Beyond practical and ethical debates, questions have also emerged regarding the theoretical development of research on AI in public relations. Some studies draw on established communication frameworks such as relationship management, persuasion theory, crisis communication theory, and technology adoption models to explain AI integration in PR context, while other studies engage less specifically with theory, focusing instead on emerging technologies or practical applications (Kaclová, 2025; Yue et al., 2024; Zerfass et al., 2020). This uneven engagement raises concerns about fragmentation and the field’s capacity for cumulative

knowledge development. Scholars have therefore called for greater conceptual clarity and normative reflection to better understand the relationship between technological innovation and ethical responsibility (Bowen, 2024).

Despite the rapid growth of AI-related PR research, the field still lacks a systematic synthesis of how this scholarship is distributed across topics, theories, and ethical domains. Existing discussions are often case-specific or conceptually oriented, leaving broader questions about publication trends, theoretical integration, and ethical emphasis insufficiently addressed. Without such mapping, it remains unclear whether this area of research is consolidating into a coherent domain or developing through dispersed and topic-driven trajectories.

To address this gap, this study conducts a quantitative content analysis of 100 peer-reviewed journal articles published within the 2016-2026 study window. Although the search parameters began in 2016, sustained AI-focused public relations scholarship emerged in 2018. Guided by three research questions, the study examines (1) publication trends and topical distribution, (2) theoretical frameworks and their integration, and (3) ethical considerations addressed across the literature. By systematically analyzing patterns across journals, regions, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, AI tools discussed, and ethical domains, this research provides a structured assessment of how artificial intelligence is being conceptualized within public relations scholarship.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Emergence of Artificial Intelligence in Public Relations Practice / Scholarship

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly transitioned from a futuristic concept to a significant force in public relations (PR), reshaping how communication is conceptualized, delivered, and evaluated. AI refers to systems capable of performing tasks traditionally requiring human intelligence, including natural language processing (NLP), machine learning, predictive analytics, and automation (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018). These capabilities are increasingly integrated into PR practice through tools such as chatbots for real-time engagement, NLP for social listening and media monitoring, and data analytics for audience segmentation and message customization (Men, Zhou, & Tsai, 2022; Yue et al., 2024; Laskin & D’Agostino, 2024).

Historically, the development of AI in communication can be traced to post–World War II advances in computing, particularly during the 1950s when foundational AI concepts began to take shape (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018). In public relations, however, adoption has been more recent and closely tied to the digital transformation of the media environment. Early applications largely focused on automation, such as algorithmically generated press releases and media monitoring systems (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; Laskin & D’Agostino, 2024; Yue et al., 2019). Over time, AI’s role has expanded beyond automation to include strategic decision-making, audience engagement, and ethical considerations in communication practice (Bowen, 2024). One major area of AI integration involves automated communication tools. Chatbots, for example, have become frontline communicators in customer service and crisis communication contexts. Yue et al. (2024) found that organizations increasingly adopt AI-driven tools to improve message delivery efficiency and strategic communication outcomes. Similarly, Men et al. (2022) demonstrated that chatbot-mediated conversations can enhance perceived transparency and

strengthen organization-public relationships. Research by Choi (2023) further illustrates AI's relational potential by examining AI influencers and their ability to create parasocial engagement and brand congruency.

AI has also transformed audience analysis and segmentation. Through machine learning and large-scale data analytics, PR professionals can analyze audience behavior, preferences, and sentiment more precisely than before. Laskin and D'Agostino (2024) showed that investor relations practitioners increasingly rely on AI for stakeholder analysis and communication forecasting. Likewise, Cusnir and Nicola (2024) reported growing use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT among PR professionals in Romania, where these systems support internal communication, content production, and media monitoring.

Another area where AI has expanded PR capabilities is crisis management. AI-driven monitoring systems allow organizations to detect reputational risks through sentiment analysis and misinformation tracking, enabling faster responses to emerging crises (Karinshak & Jin, 2023). Research in the African context further demonstrates that AI adoption is shaped by local professional and infrastructural dynamics. Nutsugah and Senanu (2024), drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model, show that AI adoption reflects not only technological innovation but also broader shifts in professional communication practices. The transformation of media relations and campaign planning represents another important development. Galloway and Swiatek (2018) argue that while automation in content dissemination is often emphasized, AI's broader implications for strategic communication require equal attention. Their work suggests that PR professionals must engage as informed collaborators in AI development rather than passive users. Similarly, Germinder and Capizzo (2025) emphasize the importance of

responsible AI use in strategic communication, highlighting transparency, ethical deployment, and inclusivity as key considerations.

Regional studies further illustrate the global expansion of AI in PR. Kaclová (2025) examined generative AI adoption among PR professionals in Central Europe and found high usage rates alongside varying perceptions of credibility and professional impact. In Turkey, Kelm and Johann (2025) identified trust in AI tools and organizational readiness as critical factors shaping adoption. Research in Nigeria by Eke and Adeyemi (2024) similarly shows how AI supports stakeholder engagement and economic recovery through strategic communication initiatives.

Evaluation and measurement longstanding challenges in PR are also being transformed by AI. O'Neil et al., (2025) identify AI-powered tools that enable real-time monitoring of campaign performance and provide deeper insights into message effectiveness and return on investment. These developments reflect a broader shift from intuition-based planning toward evidence-based communication strategies.

Across these domains, the emergence of AI in PR represents a significant shift in both capabilities and responsibilities. As Bowen (2024) argues, communicators must engage not only with AI's technical functions but also with its broader societal implications. The literature suggests that while AI offers substantial opportunities for efficiency and innovation, its integration into PR practice must be guided by ethical awareness, interdisciplinary collaboration, and responsible governance.

Understanding how AI has entered and reshaped PR practice provides the foundation for examining how scholars have studied and conceptualized these developments. The following

section reviews key trends in AI-PR scholarship, including patterns in publication growth, methodological approaches, and regional contributions.

2.2 Scholarly Trends in AI Research: Growth, Gaps, and Global Focus

Artificial intelligence (AI) has evolved from a specialized computational concept into one of the most dynamic interdisciplinary research frontiers of the twenty-first century. Across sectors such as healthcare, business, education, and communication, AI now functions as a central framework for innovation, efficiency, and data-driven transformation (Tosyal, 2021; Raj & Andrzej Kos, 2023). Its rapid expansion reflects advances in computing power alongside a growing recognition of AI's ability to model complex systems and support decision-making across disciplines. As Raj and Kos (2023) note, AI now operates as a “cognitive infrastructure” supporting developments in fields ranging from manufacturing and medicine to education and public administration. This cross-sector adoption illustrates how AI has emerged as a general-purpose technology whose influence extends well beyond individual disciplines.

Historically, AI research developed from computational modeling and algorithmic design before expanding into adjacent fields such as medicine, education, and management (Lu, 2019; Raj & Andrzej Kos, 2023). These foundations later enabled the emergence of deep learning and neural network applications that now shape contemporary research in healthcare, engineering, and information systems (Jones et al., 2018; Lu, 2019). In radiology, for example, neural networks have improved diagnostic accuracy, while in engineering they have enhanced automation and data integration (Lu, 2019). Communication studies have similarly begun to examine AI's influence on digital discourse and automated communication processes. Tosyali (2021) notes a growing scholarly interest in how AI reshapes digital communication environments, demonstrating the technology's expanding relevance across disciplines. Together,

these developments illustrate AI's cumulative and cross-disciplinary evolution as a driver of contemporary knowledge production.

Recent bibliometric analyses further demonstrate that AI research has become a global enterprise. Although early innovation was largely concentrated in North American and European institutions, contributions from Asia particularly China, India, and South Korea have increased substantially in recent years (Raj & Andrzej Kos, 2023; Lu, 2019). In communication and media research, Kaleel and Alomari (2024) similarly observe a growing diversification of research clusters, with increasing representation from the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. This international diffusion highlights both the global relevance of AI and the importance of comparative research that considers how cultural, institutional, and ethical contexts shape the development and adoption of AI technologies.

Building on these broader patterns, scholarly engagement with AI in public relations has expanded rapidly since the mid-2010s, particularly after 2018 when sustained academic attention became more visible. Early studies primarily examined automation and predictive analytics, whereas more recent research has explored ethical implications, stakeholder engagement, and the socio-technological transformation of PR practice (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018). Yue et al. (2024) note that AI was initially viewed as a technical tool for media monitoring and crisis detection but is now studied for its role in identity management, relational communication, and emotionally responsive interaction with publics. Bibliometric studies confirm this expansion. Kaleel and Alomari (2024) report a steady increase in publications addressing AI in public relations, while Laskin and D'Agostino (2024) document a shift from speculative discussions toward empirical examinations of AI integration in professional practice. Their Delphi panel findings reveal growing interest among both scholars and practitioners in the potential of AI to

reshape areas such as reputation management and investor relations. Similarly, Santa Soriano and Torres Valdés (2021) propose the concept of a “public relations strategic intelligence hybrid,” highlighting how automation and anticipatory analytics increasingly influence communication strategy. Complementing this perspective, Kelm and Johann (2025) examine organizational readiness and practitioner acceptance of AI tools, reflecting a broader shift toward applied and context-driven research.

Despite this growth and global diffusion, important gaps remain within the scholarship on AI and public relations. Much of the existing research remains fragmented, with limited theoretical integration across studies and inconsistent application of communication frameworks such as framing theory or relationship management (Yue et al., 2024; Laskin & D’Agostino, 2024). Ethical and governance-related concerns particularly transparency, algorithmic accountability, and professional trust are often discussed only briefly rather than examined systematically (Bowen, 2024; Bourne, 2019). In addition, bibliometric reviews indicate that research on AI and PR remains heavily concentrated in Western and Anglophone contexts, with comparatively fewer contributions from the Global South (Kaleel & Alomari, 2024). Finally, longitudinal analyses tracing how scholarly discourse on AI in PR has evolved over time remain limited. As a result, important questions persist regarding changes in research focus, theoretical development, and ethical engagement. These gaps highlight the need for systematic longitudinal analyses such as the present study to map trends, theoretical orientations, and ethical considerations in AI and PR scholarship within the 2016-2026 study window

2.2.1 Identifying Gaps and Justifying the Current Study

Given the growing body of scholarship on artificial intelligence (AI) in public relations (PR), a systematic content analysis of the existing literature is both timely and necessary.

Although prior studies document the expansion of AI-related research in PR, less attention has been devoted to systematically mapping how publication trends, theoretical orientations, and ethical considerations are distributed across the field. A structured assessment is therefore needed to clarify what aspects of AI-PR scholarship have been emphasized, what remains underexplored, and how scholarly attention has evolved over time.

This study addresses these gaps by examining peer-reviewed AI-PR scholarship published within the 2016-2026 study window. Rather than advancing new theoretical claims, the study maps observable patterns in publication volume, regional representation, methodological approaches, theoretical framework usage, and ethical emphasis. Through this descriptive synthesis, the study provides a clearer understanding of how artificial intelligence has been conceptualized and examined within public relations research.

Specifically, this study seeks to: (a) identify and analyze publication trends in AI-PR scholarship, including volume, regional affiliation, and methodological approaches; (b) examine the theoretical frameworks applied in AI-PR research and assess their distribution across the literature; and (c) evaluate how ethical considerations such as transparency, accountability, bias, governance, and inclusivity are addressed within AI-PR scholarship. Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1. How have publication patterns in AI-PR scholarship evolved within the 2016–2026 study window in terms of volume, regional focus, and methodological approaches?

RQ2. Which theoretical perspectives have been most frequently applied in AI and PR research, and how are they distributed across research topics?

Having established the study’s objectives and guiding questions, attention now turns to one of the most critical dimensions of AI in PR: ethical considerations. The following section

explores how issues such as transparency, accountability, bias, and governance are addressed in the literature.

2.3 Ethical Considerations in AI-Driven Public Relations

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes more integrated into public relations (PR) practices, scholars are increasingly concerned about the ethical challenges it faces. The deployment of AI in communication tasks ranging from chatbot interactions to data-driven targeting raises urgent questions around transparency, surveillance, algorithmic bias, data misuse, and the erosion of public trust. This section examines key ethical considerations found in recent literature, highlighting how these concerns shape discussions about accountability, integrity, and the future of the PR profession.

Ethical discourse surrounding AI in public relations has expanded substantially yet remains concentrated around six interrelated domains that consistently appear across recent scholarship: transparency, privacy, bias, inclusivity, governance, and trust. These dimensions were identified through a synthesis of AI and PR ethics literature (Bowen, 2024; Bourne, 2019; Logan & Waymer, 2024; Germinder & Capizzo, 2025). They represent both procedural and normative aspects of ethical responsibility in AI integration. Transparency and privacy concern data integrity and explainability; bias and inclusivity address fairness and representational equity; governance pertains to oversight and accountability; and trust relates to the moral legitimacy of AI in communication practices. Collectively, these domains provide a framework for examining how PR scholarship conceptualizes ethical responsibility in the age of automation; however, the extent to which these ethical themes are evenly emphasized across AI-PR research remains unclear.

2.3.1 Transparency and the “Black Box” of AI

One of the central concerns in AI-driven PR is the opaqueness of algorithmic processes. Transparency, the principle that communication should be open and clearly attributable, becomes problematic when AI systems operate as “black boxes,” making decisions that are neither observable nor easily explained. Several studies illustrate this issue. For instance, Salzano & Ashby-King (2025) critique the lack of explainability in proposed generative AI integrations within PR workflows. They argue that opaque AI tools may obscure the sources and reasoning behind communication outputs, thus undermining transparency and accountability.

Similarly, Yang et al. (2025) found that public trust in AI correlates with perceptions of transparency; individuals were more skeptical of AI use when it was unclear how decisions were made, or data were processed. The issue of transparency is particularly relevant in the context of disinformation, where AI- created content is becoming increasingly convincing and difficult to distinguish from human- generated content. This suggests that disinformation management strategies may need to extend beyond detection mechanisms, as AI enables the automated production of increasingly realistic content. Instead, organizations must focus on content influence rather than volume, as AI enables the automated production of highly realistic content. This "black box" problem also extends to how AI-powered tools manage social media interactions, where the automated generation of updates and responses by bots can obscure the organizational source, raising questions about authenticity and accountability.

2.3.2 Privacy, Data Exploitation, and Algorithmic Bias

AI’s dependence on large datasets raises ethical questions about data privacy and consent. In PR, AI is often used to analyze audience sentiment, behavior, and preferences sometimes without individuals’ informed consent. A study of Romanian PR professionals’

documents growing concern over the unethical use of personal data by AI tools, especially generative systems that collect and reprocess user-generated content. Bourne (2019) offers a broader critique, positioning AI-enabled PR within the framework of surveillance capitalism. She argues that PR practitioners risk becoming complicit in systems that commodify human behavior through constant data extraction and predictive profiling. According to James (2024), the ethical and legal implications of using big data and AI in PR campaigns in the United States are a significant concern.

The risks extend to how AI systems are trained and what datasets are used. Algorithmic bias resulting from flawed or non-representative training data is a recurring issue. The article by Yang et al. (2025) highlights that AI systems often reflect and reinforce societal biases, particularly in politically polarized contexts. This not only threatens fair representation but also undermines the credibility of AI-mediated PR messaging.

Logan & Waymer (2024) in their study specifically explores the intersection of AI, public relations, and race, contributing to theory building on the social, cultural, and ethical implications of AI. They examined cases such as Microsoft's chatbot Tay and a Facebook topic recommendation feature to illustrate how racial dynamics are at play in AI technologies. To address this, they propose an Inclusive, Responsible, Communication in Artificial Intelligence (IRCAI) framework, designed to help the PR field navigate these complex issues.

2.3.3 Ethical Frameworks and Professional Guidelines

While ethical concerns are well documented, fewer studies offer robust frameworks to guide ethical AI use in PR. However, efforts are emerging. Salzano & Ashby-King (2025) call for participatory AI design principles that involve diverse stakeholders in the development and deployment of PR technologies. They argue that ethical AI integration must move beyond

compliance with proactive inclusion and accountability mechanisms. Bowen (2024) goes further by advocating for a dual role of PR in both using AI responsibly and actively shaping ethical standards for its deployment. Her article critiques the “tech inevitability” narrative, the assumption that AI will be adopted regardless of consequences and urges the profession to push back against harmful AI applications. The guidelines cannot introduce empathy or conscience into a machine, but they can make decisions more intelligent as they are prioritized on moral-philosophical principles. This generates heightened responsibility and rigorous ethical outcomes.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Code of Ethics is often cited as a baseline, especially for principles such as advocacy, honesty, and fairness. However, scholars argue that these codes must be adapted to address the unique challenges of AI. For example, a study by Yue et al. (2024) shows that many professionals lack clear ethical guidelines when implementing AI tools, leading to inconsistent practices and potential reputational risks. Additionally, a cross-national study by Zerfass, Hagelstein, & Tench revealed that communication professionals have a limited understanding of AI and identify a lack of individual competencies as a key challenge and risk for implementation (Zerfass et al., 2020). These findings highlight the need for communication managers to educate themselves and their teams, and to treat the implementation of AI as a leadership issue. Despite these challenges, professionals are largely optimistic, with a study on Romanian practitioners showing a high adoption rate of generative AI and a belief that it is not an immediate threat to jobs. Many also advocate for openness and engagement in discussions about ethical AI use in public relations to address fears and uncertainties.

2.3.4 Inclusivity and Diversity in AI and PR Research

Inclusivity and diversity have become increasingly important ethical dimensions in the discourse on AI and public relations, reflecting broader societal debates about representation, fairness, and global participation in technology design. Within PR scholarship, discussions of inclusivity often center on how algorithmic decision-making may reproduce systemic inequalities, particularly through biased data sets and culturally narrow models (Bowen, 2024; Bourne, 2019). Kaleel and Alomari (2024) emphasize that AI applications in PR frequently prioritize Western-centric data infrastructures, potentially marginalizing voices from the Global South and underrepresented publics. Similarly, Yue et al. (2024) note that

AI's role in emotional and relational communication requires greater sensitivity to cultural diversity and ethical pluralism to avoid reinforcing dominant narratives of professionalism and technological "neutrality." By incorporating inclusivity as a core ethical consideration, this study examines how equity and diversity are represented within AI-PR scholarship, allowing for systematic assessment of their visibility and distribution across the literature.

2.3.5 Governance and Accountability in AI Integration

Governance and accountability constitute another crucial strand of ethical inquiry in AI and PR scholarship. As AI systems increasingly shape decision-making, transparency in governance structures both organizational and regulatory becomes essential for maintaining public trust and professional legitimacy (Bowen, 2024; Salzano & Ashby-King, 2025). Bourne (2019) argues that PR professionals and institutions must assume a proactive role in establishing standards for ethical AI use, emphasizing accountability mechanisms that ensure fairness, accuracy, and public interest alignment. Salzano & Ashby-King (2025) further call for

participatory governance models that integrate diverse stakeholder perspectives in AI policy and implementation, framing accountability not merely as compliance but as an ethical commitment to shared responsibility. In the context of PR, governance also extends to internal organizational oversight ensuring that AI-driven communication strategies are monitored for bias, misinformation, and unintended social harm (Yue et al., 2024). By treating governance and accountability as distinct coding categories, this study systematically examines how institutional oversight and public responsibility are represented within AI-PR scholarship.

2.3.6 Trust, Accountability, and Professional Integrity

Trust, arguably the cornerstone of PR, is highly vulnerable in the context of AI adoption. As algorithms mediate more public-facing communication, the ability of stakeholders to discern authenticity and hold organizations accountable diminishes. In their study on AI use by political actors, Karinshak & Jin (2023) demonstrate that the use of AI-generated visuals can distort public perceptions and create manipulated realities, raising ethical alarms about authenticity and democratic discourse. In a similar vein, Bourne (2019) warns that AI may erode the relational foundation of PR if practitioners prioritize technological efficiency over meaningful engagement.

Research by Oh & Ki (2024) provides empirical evidence for this concern, finding that organizational messages communicated by a human agent generated significantly higher perceived "control mutuality" among participants in a Twitter setting than those communicated by an AI agent. This suggests that message source (human versus AI) may influence perceptions of organization-public relationships (OPRs).

Accountability also becomes diffused when machines are involved in decision-making. Several scholars call for "human-in-the-loop" models, where final responsibility remains with human practitioners, even when AI systems are used. This approach supports the preservation of

professional integrity, ensuring that PR does not devolve into a set of automated outputs devoid of ethical scrutiny.

2.3.7 Toward an Ethical Future of AI in PR

Taken together, these studies illustrate ongoing calls within PR scholarship for the development of AI-specific ethical standards and accountability mechanisms. While AI presents transformative opportunities for strategic communication, scholars consistently note the importance of aligning technological adoption with the profession's foundational values of the profession. Discussions emphasize transparency, inclusive design, stakeholder dialogue, and continued ethical reflection as recurring themes in the literature. More broadly, ethical AI in PR extends beyond compliance frameworks and is frequently framed in relation to public trust, democratic values, and the relational foundations of communication. As Bowen (2024) asserts, the PR industry has a moral responsibility to ensure AI serves the public interest, not just organizational efficiency. These ethical discussions highlight that questions of transparency and explainability are not only technical issues but also central to how AI's role in PR is evaluated. Building on this, the next research question (RQ3) focuses specifically on how themes of transparency and explainability relate to the scholarly assessment of AI's contribution to PR practice.

RQ3. How have ethical considerations such as transparency, accountability, bias, governance, and inclusivity been addressed in AI-PR scholarship within the 2016-2026 study window?

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Study Scope

This study employs a quantitative content analysis design to systematically examine patterns within scholarly discourse at the intersection of artificial intelligence and public relations. Quantitative content analysis is well suited for identifying distributional patterns across large bodies of texts while enabling transparent and replicable measurement of conceptual variables (Krippendorff, 2020; Neuendorf, 2017). The method allows for structured analysis of publication characteristics, theoretical frameworks, ethical considerations, research topics, and AI-related technologies discussed within the literature.

The study examines publications within the 2016-2026 January study window. Although the search parameters began in 2016, sustained AI-focused public relations scholarship did not appear until 2018, which marks the earliest year in which eligible studies were identified. The broader search window was retained to ensure comprehensive coverage and to confirm the temporal development of the field.

The analysis adopts a descriptive orientation. Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the study identifies observable patterns across variables using frequency distributions, percentages, and cross-tabulations. This approach is consistent with established applications of quantitative content analysis in communication research and aligns with prior systematic reviews examining field development and theoretical patterns within public relations scholarship (e.g., Kaleel & Alomari, 2024; Nutsugah & Senanu, 2024).

3.2 Unit of Analysis and Sampling Procedures

The unit of analysis for this study is the individual peer-reviewed journal article. Because the research examines scholarly discourse rather than practitioner behavior or audience

responses, each published article serves as a discrete analytical unit. This design enables systematic comparison of how artificial intelligence is conceptualized, theorized, and ethically framed within public relations scholarship.

Articles were drawn from nine peer-reviewed journals in public relations and strategic communication: *Public Relations Review*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *International Journal of Business Communication*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, and *Public Relations Journal*. These journals were selected to capture established outlets publishing research on public relations theory, practice, strategic communication, and media-related scholarship (Kaleel & Alomari, 2024), consistent with purposive sampling strategies in content analysis (Krippendorff, 2020). The journals selected are widely recognized as core outlets for public relations and strategic communication scholarship (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Stacks, 2016). *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research* are considered flagship journals in the field, publishing foundational and cutting-edge scholarship (Sisco et al., 2011; Ertem-Eray & Ki, 2021). Outlets such as *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* broaden the scope by capturing communication scholarship that has historically contributed to PR theory-building and methodological innovation (Rogers, 1999; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). This selection also aligns with prior systematic reviews of PR scholarship that have focused on established journals to ensure quality and comparability of findings (Austin & Pinkleton, 2015; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2020). Coverage of ethics-focused outlets further ensures the dataset captures scholarship at the intersection of AI, governance, and accountability concerns central to this study's objectives (Bowen, 2008).

The target population consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles published within the 2016-2026 study window that substantively examine artificial intelligence in relation to public relations theory, practice, or ethics. Although the search parameters began in 2016, sustained AI-focused public relations scholarship emerged in 2018. The broader window was retained to ensure comprehensive coverage and to confirm the temporal development of AI engagement within the field.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure consistency and replicability. As Meline (2006) and McCrae & Purssell (2015) emphasize, transparent inclusion and exclusion criteria are central to the reliability and validity of systematic content analyses, as they enhance replicability and ensure the dataset remains focused on the specific research problem. Sataloff et al. (2021) further caution that poorly defined eligibility criteria introduce ambiguity and interpretive bias, underscoring the necessity of precise operational rules. Articles were included if they (a) were published in one of the nine selected journals, (b) substantively addressed artificial intelligence in relation to public relations, and (c) constituted empirical or conceptual scholarly contributions. Articles were excluded if they were editorials, book reviews, commentaries, or if artificial intelligence was referenced only tangentially without substantive engagement with public relations.

The sampling strategy combined purposive journal selection with systematic keyword search procedures (Krippendorff, 2020). Searches were conducted using combinations of the terms "artificial intelligence," "AI," "machine learning," "chatbot," "automation," and "public relations." Retrieved articles were screened in three sequential stages: title review to remove clearly irrelevant items, abstract review to confirm substantive AI-PR focus, and full-text review to verify compliance with all inclusion criteria. This staged screening process ensured both

precision and comprehensiveness. Although purposive sampling provides conceptual precision, additional methodological considerations support its appropriateness here. Hester and Dougall (2007) highlight the efficiency of constructed week sampling in content analyses of media texts, while Kim et al. (2018) demonstrate that systematic approaches are well suited to longitudinal studies of digital communication content. Drawing on these insights, this study employs systematic purposive sampling across journals and years to ensure comprehensive coverage while maintaining feasibility. The final dataset comprised 100 peer-reviewed journal articles meeting all eligibility requirements.

3.3 Coding Instrument and Variable Operationalization

Data were collected using a structured coding sheet developed according to established content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2017). The coding instrument translated constructs identified in the literature review into measurable variables. Coding categories were derived deductively from prior AI-PR scholarship and refined through pilot testing to improve clarity and consistency. The coding scheme captured variables across several sections. Publication characteristics included year of publication, journal outlet, topic, and the geographic region of the first author's institutional affiliation, allowing analysis of temporal development and regional distribution within AI-PR scholarship and AI tools discussed. Research topics/focus areas were coded separately to capture the primary substantive focus of each article. Each study was assigned to one primary topic category based on its central emphasis, including areas such as AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects, Relationship Management & Engagement, AI Ethics & Governance, Organizational Transformation & Strategic Adaptation, AI Adoption & Acceptance, Crisis Communication & Reputation, Workforce & Professional Capability Development, Communication Measurement & Analytics, and other emerging topics.

Methodological characteristics were coded to assess research design trends. Each article was categorized according to methodological orientation (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, or conceptual), research design (e.g., survey, experiment, interviews, case study, systematic review), statistical techniques employed, and sample characteristics. Theoretical frameworks were coded to determine whether articles explicitly applied a guiding theory and to identify the specific theories referenced. Because some studies employed multiple frameworks, theoretical perspectives were coded as a multiple-response variable. Ethical considerations were operationalized across six domains frequently discussed in AI-PR scholarship: transparency, privacy, bias, inclusivity, governance, and trust. Each domain was coded only when explicitly addressed in the text to ensure conservative and consistent measurement.

Finally, the coding scheme documented AI technologies discussed in each article, including large language models, generative AI systems (e.g., ChatGPT, GPT-4), chatbots, predictive analytics, automation tools, image-generation technologies, and algorithmic management systems. Because many studies referenced multiple technologies, AI tools were also coded as a multiple-response variable.

3.4 Coding Procedure and Intercoder Reliability

The coding was conducted through an iterative process to ensure clarity and consistency. A pilot test of the coding instrument was first conducted on a subset of articles to evaluate category definitions and identify potential ambiguities. Based on the pilot results, operational definitions and decision rules were refined prior to full coding. Two independent coders then coded the data. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha, which is appropriate for nominal and categorical variables in content analysis (Krippendorff, 2020). A reliability threshold of $\alpha = .80$ was established as the minimum acceptable level of agreement,

consistent with methodological standards in communication research (Neuendorf, 2017). Categories falling below this threshold were revised and clarified before final coding was completed.

3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

The coded data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify structural patterns within AI-public relations scholarship. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to examine distributional trends across publication characteristics, research topics, theoretical frameworks, ethical dimensions, methodological features, and AI tools discussed. These measures provide a systematic overview of how AI has been represented and conceptualized within the field over time. Cross-tabulations were conducted to assess the distribution of ethical considerations and theoretical frameworks across research topic categories.

The analysis is intentionally descriptive in orientation. Rather than testing causal relationships, the study maps observable patterns across variables to assess thematic concentration, theoretical dispersion, and ethical emphasis within the corpus. This approach is appropriate given the study's objectives, which focus on documenting the structural development of AI-public relations scholarship rather than explaining behavioral outcomes.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Although this study does not involve human participants, ethical responsibility remains central to methodological rigor and scholarly integrity. Quantitative content analysis carries important obligations related to transparency in sampling, consistency in coding procedures, accurate statistical reporting, and interpretive neutrality (Krippendorff, 2020; Neuendorf, 2017). A key ethical safeguard in this study concerns transparency in the research process. All inclusion and exclusion criteria, journal selection procedures, search terms, and coding categories are

clearly documented to support replicability. The finalized codebook, including operational definitions and coding decision rules, is also provided to ensure methodological clarity and reproducibility

Coder neutrality and reliability were carefully maintained. To minimize interpretive bias, coding decisions were guided by clearly defined operational categories derived from the literature review. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha, with a minimum threshold of 0.80 established to ensure acceptable agreement. Categories falling below this threshold were refined prior to final coding. This procedure ensured that findings were based on consistent and systematically verifiable coding decisions.

Statistical reporting was conducted conservatively and transparently. The analysis relies on descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations, to identify patterns in the dataset. No inferential claims are made beyond the observed distributions. This approach aligns with best practices in quantitative content analysis and helps prevent overinterpretation of the results.

Finally, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. Given the normative and sometimes contested nature of AI discourse, particular care was taken to avoid imposing evaluative judgments on the data. Ethical dimensions such as transparency, bias, governance, and trust were coded only when explicitly referenced in the articles rather than inferred by the researcher.

CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS

This study analyzed 100 peer-reviewed journal articles examining the intersection of AI and public relations (PR). Although the search window covered publications from 2016-2026, no eligible studies were identified for 2016 or 2017. The earliest articles in the dataset appeared in 2018, indicating that sustained scholarly engagement with AI in public relations began during this period. The findings are organized according to the study's research questions. Section 4.1 presents publication trends, including journal distribution, publication year, regional distribution, and methodological approaches and AI tools discussed. Section 4.2 reports the theoretical frameworks used in AI-public relations scholarship and the topic distribution and focus areas, while Section 4.3 examines how ethical considerations are addressed in the literature.

4.1 Publication Trends in AI-Public Relations Scholarship

4.1.1 Journals

To address RQ1, the distribution of AI-public relations scholarship across academic outlets was examined. See (Table 1). Results show that 100 analyzed articles were distributed across nine peer-reviewed journals. *Public Relations Review* accounted for the largest proportion of publications (22%, $n = 22$), followed by *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (20%, $n = 20$) and the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (16%, $n = 16$). Together, these three journals comprised 58% of the total sample, showing a strong concentration of AI-focused scholarship within a small grouping of core public relations outlets. Additional contributions were published in the *Journal of Communication Management* (11%, $n = 11$), *International Journal of Business Communication* (9%, $n = 9$), and *Public Relations Inquiry* (8%, $n = 8$). Smaller proportions appeared in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* (7%, $n = 7$), *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (5%, $n = 5$), and *Public Relations*

Journal (2%, $n = 2$). The distribution demonstrates that AI-PR research remains focused within established disciplinary journals, with *Public Relations Review* emerging as the most prominent outlet during the study period.

Table 1. The frequency and percentage of articles published in each journal.

Journal	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Public Relations Review	22	22.0
Corporate Communications: An International Journal	20	20.0
International Journal of Strategic Communication	16	16.0
Journal of Communication Management	11	11.0
International Journal of Business Communication	9	9.0
Public Relations Inquiry	8	8.0
Journal of Public Relations Research	7	7.0
Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly	5	5.0
Public Relations Journal	2	2.0

4.1.2 Year of Publication

The temporal distribution of publications demonstrates a clear growth trajectory (see Figure 1). The publication volume remained minimal between 2018 and 2022, with 2018 ($n = 2$), 2019 ($n = 3$), 2020 ($n = 2$), 2021 ($n = 6$), and 2022 ($n = 3$) showing a developmental phase in AI-focused PR scholarship. Beginning in 2023 ($n = 12$), however, publication activity increased substantially, followed by further growth in 2024 ($n = 22$). The number of studies peaked in 2025 ($n = 42$), representing the highest concentration of AI-PR research during the study window. The 2026 count ($n = 8$) reflects articles available at the time of data collection and represents just one month in the year rather than a decline in scholarly attention. Overall, the pattern suggests that AI-related public relations research has moved from initial emergence to a phase of sustained expansion during the early 2020s.

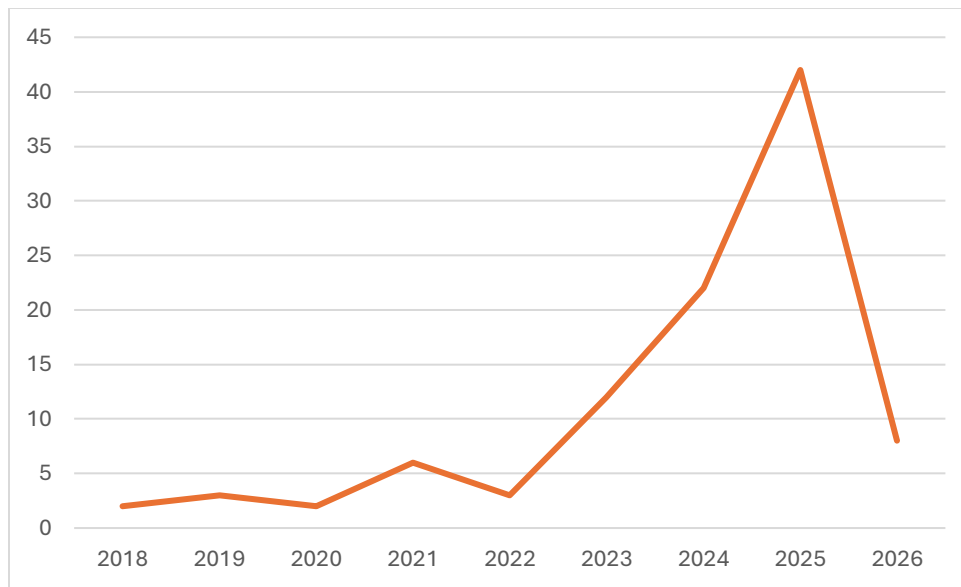


Figure 1. Number of AI-Public Relations Articles Published by Year (2018 - 2026)

4.1.3 Regional Distribution

To examine the geographic attention of AI-public relations scholarship, articles were categorized based on the first author's institutional affiliation and grouped into broader regional categories, including the United States, Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania, and South America. The regional distribution of articles by first-author affiliation is presented in Table 2. More than half of the analyzed articles came from institutions in the United States (52%), showing a strong focus of AI-public relations scholarship within US-based academia. European countries collectively accounted for 30% of the sample, representing the second-largest regional contributor, including institutions from Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Spain, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Turkey, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Croatia, Greece, and Norway. Asian institutions contributed 10% of publications and included affiliations from Singapore, Hong Kong, India, China, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Korea. Oceania accounted for 5% of the sample, represented by Australia and New Zealand. African affiliations were limited to Ghana (2%), while South America was represented by Brazil (1%).

Taken together, articles in the United States and European contexts accounted for 82% of all publications, indicating that AI-related public relations research remains heavily concentrated in Western academic contexts.

Table 2. Regional distribution of articles by first author affiliation.

Region	Frequency	Percentage
United States	52	52%
Europe	30	30%
Asia	10	10%
Oceania	5	5%
Africa	2	2%
South America	1	1%
Total	100	100%

4.1.4 Methodological Approaches

- **Methods**

The methodological approaches used in the analyzed articles are presented in Table 3. The results shows that quantitative approaches were the most prevalent, accounting for 43% of the sample (n = 43). Qualitative methods closely followed, representing 34% of the articles (n = 34). Mixed-method designs accounted for 10% of the sample (n = 10). Additionally, 13% of the studies (n = 13) were classified as conceptual or theoretical, as they did not involve the collection or analysis of primary empirical data.

Table 3. Summary of the methodological approaches used in the analyzed articles.

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Conceptual	13	13.0%
Mixed Methods	10	10.0%
Qualitative	34	34.0%
Quantitative	43	43.0%
Total	100	100%

- **Research Design**

The research designs section presents the distribution of primary research designs across the 100 articles analyzed in this study (see Table 4). Eight distinct research design categories were identified. Specifically, for quantitative, experiments (22%), and surveys (21%) were the most frequently used approaches, collectively accounting for 43% of all studies. Interview-based studies were the most frequently employed design for qualitative studies (24%). Together, these three research designs comprise 67% of all studies included in the analysis. Other designs included conceptual or theoretical research (13%), content analysis (6%), systematic reviews (6%), case studies (4%), and Delphi studies (2%).

Although 10 studies were classified as mixed method at the methodological orientation level (Table 3), each article was assigned one primary research design to maintain mutually exclusive categorization. Thus, the total frequency equals the total number of analyzed articles (N = 100). Overall, 87% of the articles employed empirical research designs, indicating a strong empirical orientation within AI-PR scholarship.

Table 4. Distribution of Research Designs in AI and Public Relations Scholarship

Research Design	Frequency	Percentage
Case Study	4	4.0%
Conceptual / Theoretical	13	13.0%
Content Analysis	6	6.0%
Delphi Study	2	2.0%
Experimental	22	22.0%
Interviews	24	24.0%
Survey	21	21.0%
Systematic Review	6	6.0%
Total	100	100%

- **Statistical Analysis**

Among quantitative and mixed-method studies (see Table 5), mediation and moderation analysis were the most frequently employed statistical technique, appearing in 34.6% ($n = 18$) of the quantitative and mixed-method studies ($n = 53$). These analyses were commonly used to examine indirect effects and interaction relationships among variables in studies exploring audience responses and communication outcomes. ANOVA/MANCOVA/ANCOVA procedures were the next most frequently reported techniques at 28.8% ($n = 15$), typically applied to compare differences across experimental conditions or participant groups. Descriptive statistics were also reported in 28.8% ($n = 15$) of the studies and included measures such as means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions used to summarize sample characteristics and response patterns.

Regression analysis appeared in 25.0% ($n = 13$) of the studies and was often used to examine relationships between predictor and outcome variables. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized in 23.1% ($n = 12$) of the studies and typically involved testing measurement and structural relationships among multiple constructs. Measurement validation procedures, including reliability testing and exploratory factor analysis, were reported in 13.5% ($n = 7$) of the studies to assess the validity of survey instruments and measurement scales. T-tests were also observed in 13.5% ($n = 7$) of the studies, while correlation analysis appeared in 9.6% ($n = 5$) of the sample. Chi-square tests and computational/network analysis were each reported in 5.8% ($n = 3$) of the studies. Less frequently reported techniques included post-hoc tests (3.8%, $n = 2$), cluster analysis (1.9%, $n = 1$), and contrast analysis (1.9%, $n = 1$). The total number of statistical responses ($N = 102$) exceeds the number of quantitative and mixed-method studies because multiple analytical techniques were often employed within individual articles.

Table 5. Statistical techniques used in Quantitative and Mixed-Method in AI and Public Relations Scholarship (n = 53)

Statistical Technique	Frequency	Percent of Cases (%)
Mediation/Moderation Analysis	18	34.6%
ANOVA/MANCOVA/ANCOVA	15	28.8%
Descriptive Statistics	15	28.8%
Regression Analysis	13	25.0%
Structural Equation Modeling	12	23.1%
Measurement Validation	7	13.5%
T-tests	7	13.5%
Correlation Analysis	5	9.6%
Chi-square Tests	3	5.8%
Computational / Network Analysis	3	5.8%
Post-hoc Tests	2	3.8%
Cluster Analysis	1	1.9%
Contrast Analysis	1	1.9%

Note. Statistical techniques were coded only for quantitative and mixed-method studies reporting inferential analyses (n = 53). One mixed-method study did not use statistical techniques. Percentages are based on cases, and totals exceed 100% because multiple techniques could be used within individual studies.

- **Sampling Strategies**

The sampling strategies show that purposive sampling was the most frequently reported sampling strategy, appearing in 42.3% of the empirical studies (n = 41). Convenience sampling accounted for 14.4% (n = 14), followed by panel-based sampling at 10.3% (n = 10) and snowball sampling at 9.3% (n = 9). Stratified sampling and quota sampling each appeared in 7.2% of the studies (n = 7). Random sampling was reported in 3.1% (n = 3), while saturation-based sampling appeared in 1.0% (n = 1). Sampling strategies were not reported in 18.6% of the empirical studies (n = 18). (see Table 6). Percentages are based on empirical studies (N = 97), and totals exceed 100% because some studies reported multiple sampling strategies.

Table 6. Sampling strategies used in the scholarships (N = 97)

Sampling Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Purposive Sampling	41	42.3

Convenience Sampling	14	14.4
Panel-Based Sampling	10	10.3
Snowball Sampling	9	9.3
Stratified Sampling	7	7.2
Quota Sampling	7	7.2
Random Sampling	3	3.1
Saturation-Based Sampling	1	1.0
Sampling Not Reported	18	18.6
Total Responses	110	113.4

Note. Percentages are based on empirical studies (N = 97). Total percentage exceeds 100% because some studies reported multiple sampling strategies.

- **Sample Size Characteristics**

Among the empirical studies included in this analysis, 74 articles directly reported sample size information. Across the 100 articles analyzed in this study, professional and practitioner populations (e.g., public relations practitioners, communication professionals, and corporate communication managers) had the most frequently examined sample type, representing 35% of the collection (n = 35). General public or consumer samples accounted for 24% of the studies (n = 24). Employee samples comprised 7% of the articles (n = 7), while student populations represented 4% (n = 4). Executive or leadership-level respondents were examined in 2% of the studies (n = 2).

Conceptual or theoretical contributions accounted for 13% of the total sample (n = 13) and did not involve empirical data collection. In addition, 15% of the articles relied on non-human data sources, including secondary or archival datasets such as peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and news content (9%, n = 9), organizational or website content (2%, n = 2), official documents or statements (1%, n = 1), AI-generated content (1%, n = 1), digital or virtual environments (1%, n = 1), and case-based analyses (1%, n = 1).

Finally, regarding the examples of AI studied in PR research, results showed that generative AI and large language model (LLM) based systems were the most frequently

discussed technologies, appearing in 52% of the articles (n = 52). Tools such as ChatGPT, GPT-3/4, Claude, Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot reflect a clear shift toward AI systems that generate communicative content. Chatbots and conversational agents were also prominent (32%, n = 32), highlighting continued interest in AI-mediated stakeholder interaction. Other commonly referenced technologies included automation (21%, n = 21) and natural language processing (18%, n = 18), while synthetic and visual AI tools such as DALL·E, Midjourney, and deepfakes appeared in 17% of the studies (n = 17). In contrast, predictive analytics (9%, n = 9), machine learning (8%, n = 8), and big data-driven approaches (3%, n = 3) were less frequently discussed. Notably, 37% of the articles (n = 37) did not specify AI tools, suggesting that a substantial portion of the literature engages with AI at a broad conceptual level rather than through clearly defined technological applications.

4.2 Theoretical Perspectives

4.2.1 Explicit use of theoretical frameworks

To address RQ2, articles were examined for the explicit use of theoretical frameworks. Among the 100 articles analyzed, 90% (n = 90) specifically referenced at least one theoretical framework, while 10% (n = 10) did not identify a guiding theory. Theoretical frameworks were coded as a multiple-response variable because many studies referenced more than one framework. Only frameworks appearing at least twice were reported individually in the frequency table, while single-appearance frameworks were grouped under the category “other” for analytical clarity. As a result, totals do not sum to the number of theory-specified studies (n = 90).

The results indicate that the most frequently applied frameworks were Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), each appearing

in 9% (n = 9) of the sample. SCCT was primarily applied in studies examining AI in crisis communication, reputation management, and automated response strategies, while TAM was predominantly used in research investigating practitioner adoption of AI technologies, perceived usefulness, and organizational readiness for AI integration.

A second group of relatively represented frameworks included Diffusion of Innovation (5%, n = 5), Organization-Public Relationship (OPR) theory (5%, n = 5), and Excellence Theory (5%, n = 5). These frameworks were commonly applied in studies examining innovation diffusion, stakeholder relationship management, and strategic communication effectiveness in AI-mediated environments. Relational and dialogic perspectives, including Relationship Management Theory (3%, n = 3) and Dialogic Theory (3%, n = 3), also appeared recurrently. In addition, human-AI communication perspectives such as the Computers Are Social Actors (CASA) paradigm (3%, n = 3) and Source Credibility Theory (3%, n = 3) were used to examine audience responses to AI-generated communication.

Additional frameworks including Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) (2%, n = 2), Framing Theory (2%, n = 2), Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (2%, n = 2), Social Presence Theory (2%, n = 2), Media Richness Theory (2%, n = 2), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (2%, n = 2) were used less frequently across the analyzed studies

4.2.2 Distribution of Research Topics/Focus Areas

In relation to research topics (see Table 7), the most frequently examined topics in AI-public relations scholarship were AI-mediated persuasion & effects (15%) and relationship management & public engagement (15%). Studies within AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects mostly examined how AI-generated communication influences audience perceptions, including

research on the persuasive impact of AI-generated corporate apologies, automated crisis responses, and conversational AI agents (e.g., Oh & Ki, 2024; Wu et al., 2024). Research categorized under Relationship Management & Engagement focused on AI-enabled interactions between organizations and publics, which includes the use of chatbots in customer communication, virtual influencers in stakeholder engagement, and AI-supported relationship management systems (e.g., Choi, 2023; Men et al., 2022). Other prominent research areas included critical & macro perspectives on AI in PR (13%), AI ethics & governance and public perceptions of trust (13%), and organizational transformation & strategic adaptation (11%) (e.g., Huang & Zhou, 2025; Lim et al., 2025; Tosyali, 2021). These studies examined broader societal implications of AI, ethical concerns such as bias and transparency (e.g., Lim et al., 2025), and the impact of AI on organizational structures and communication strategies (e.g., Huang & Zhou, 2025). AI adoption & acceptance (10%) (e.g., Yue et al., 2024; Kaclová, 2025; Kelm & Johann, 2025) and AI and crisis communication (10%) (e.g., Prahla & Goh, 2021; Karinshak & Jin, 2023; Ray et al., 2025) were also identified as key research areas. Adoption studies typically investigated factors influencing practitioner acceptance of AI technologies, including perceived usefulness, ease of use, and organizational readiness, while crisis-related research examined AI-generated apologies, automated response systems, and reputational consequences of algorithmic failures. Smaller clusters of research examined Workforce & Professional Capability Development (6%, n = 6) and Communication Measurement & Analytics (4%, n = 4), focusing on professional skill development, ethical training in AI use, and the use of automated analytics tools such as sentiment analysis and social listening systems. A small number of studies addressed emerging areas including AI as Research Methodology, PR Education & Professional

Development, Public Perceptions & Trust in AI, and Critical Political Economy of AI & Public Relations, each representing 1% of the sample (n = 1)

Table 7. Topic Category used to group the scholarships

Topic Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage
AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects	15	15%
Relationship Management & Engagement	15	15%
Critical & Macro Perspectives on AI in PR	13	13%
AI Ethics & Governance	12	12%
Organizational Transformation & Strategic Adaptation	11	11%
AI Adoption & Acceptance	10	10%
Crisis Communication & Reputation	10	10%
Workforce & Professional Capability Development	6	6%
Communication Measurement & Analytics	4	4%
AI as Research Methodology	1	1%
PR Education & Professional Development	1	1%
Public Perceptions & Trust in AI	1	1%
Critical Political Economy of AI & Public Relations	1	1%
Total	100	100%

4.3 Ethical Considerations in AI and Public Relations Research

To address RQ3, this study examined how ethical considerations are defined within AI-focused public relations research. Ethical issues were operationalized through six areas identified in both AI governance and public relations literature: transparency, privacy, bias, inclusivity, governance, and trust. Each article was coded using a binary approach to show whether a given ethical area was specifically discussed, which allowed for a single article to be coded under multiple categories where applicable.

4.3.1 Trust

Trust was the most frequently referenced ethical area in the data, appearing in 88% of the analyzed articles (n = 88). Cross-tabulation analysis showed that trust was consistently stressed across nearly all research topics. Crisis Communication and Reputation and Digital

Transformation & Internal Communication showed universal engagement (100%). In these areas, trust was commonly discussed in relation to organizational credibility during crises, confidence in automated messaging systems, and the reputational implications of AI deployment. High levels of engagement were also observed in AI Ethics & Governance and AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects (91.7%), where studies frequently examined stakeholder perceptions of AI-generated communication, credibility of automated communicators, and audience acceptance of AI-enabled messaging systems. Organizational Transformation & Strategic Adaptation (86.4%) and Relationship Management & Engagement (85.7%) similarly stressed on trust in relation to stakeholder perceptions and organizational legitimacy.

4.3.2 Transparency

Transparency was referenced in 61% of the analyzed articles ($n = 61$), though its prominence varied across research topics. It appeared most frequently in Organizational Transformation & Strategic Adaptation (81.8%), AI Ethics & Governance (75%), and AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects (75%). In these studies, transparency was primarily discussed in relation to disclosure of AI use, explainability of algorithmic processes, and organizational communication regarding the use of automated systems. Relationship Management & Engagement studies also showed notable engagement (64.3%). However, transparency appeared less frequently in Critical & Macro Perspectives on AI in PR (35.7%), Digital Transformation & Internal Communication (33.3%), and Communication Measurement & Analytics (25%). Crisis Communication studies demonstrated moderate engagement (50%), typically discussing transparency in relation to disclosure practices and stakeholder awareness of AI-assisted communication.

4.3.3 Bias

Bias was directly referenced in 58% of the analyzed articles (n = 58). Bias-related concerns were most mentioned in AI Ethics & Governance (91.7%) and Organizational Transformation & Strategic Adaptation (90.9%). In these contexts, studies frequently discussed issues related to algorithmic discrimination, representational imbalance in training data, and potential inequalities reproduced through automated communication systems. Moderate engagement was observed in Critical & Macro Perspectives on AI in PR (57.1%), where bias was often discussed in relation to broader structural concerns surrounding technological power and institutional inequalities. Lower levels of engagement were observed in AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects (41.7%) and Crisis Communication (40%), while Relationship Management & Engagement (21.4%) and Communication Measurement & Analytics (25%) referenced bias less frequently

4.3.4 Privacy

Privacy was referenced in 51% of the analyzed articles (n = 51). It appeared most frequently within Organizational Transformation & Strategic Adaptation (77.3%) and AI Ethics & Governance (75%). In these studies, privacy was typically discussed in relation to data protection, user consent, and the collection and use of large datasets in AI-enabled communication systems. Moderate engagement was observed in Crisis Communication (40%) and Digital Transformation & Internal Communication (44.4%), where privacy concerns were often linked to data monitoring and analytics practices. Lower levels of engagement appeared in AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects (33.3%), Relationship Management & Engagement (28.6%), and Critical & Macro Perspectives on AI in PR (28.6%).

4.3.5 Governance

Governance-related ethical considerations were referenced in 18% of the analyzed articles ($n = 18$). Governance was most frequently discussed in Digital Transformation & Internal Communication (33.3%) and Crisis Communication (30%). In these areas, governance was commonly associated with organizational policies, accountability structures, and oversight mechanisms guiding AI deployment. Organizational Transformation & Strategic Adaptation demonstrated moderate engagement (22.7%), typically addressing governance in relation to implementation oversight and internal decision-making structures. Lower levels of engagement were observed in AI Ethics & Governance (16.7%), Critical & Macro Perspectives on AI in PR (14.3%), and AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects (16.7%).

4.3.6 Inclusivity

Inclusivity was the least referenced ethical area, appearing in only 10% of the analyzed articles ($n = 10$). Slightly higher levels of engagement were observed in Organizational Transformation & Strategic Adaptation (18.2%) and AI Ethics & Governance (16.7%). In these contexts, inclusivity was typically discussed in relation to equitable access to AI technologies and representation within algorithmic systems. Limited attention was observed in Critical & Macro Perspectives (14.3%) and Crisis Communication (10%), while several research areas, including AI-Mediated Persuasion & Effects, Digital Transformation & Internal Communication, and Communication Measurement & Analytics, contained no explicit discussion of inclusivity.

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions and existing literature on artificial intelligence in public relations. The discussion focuses on three key themes: the growth of AI-public relations scholarship, the theoretical foundations guiding this research, and the ethical considerations surrounding AI in communication practice.

5.1 Growth and development of AI-public relations scholarship

This current study improves public relations research on artificial intelligence by providing a systematic overview of how research in this area has developed over time. By examining publication patterns, research topics, and methodological approaches, the study offers a clearer picture of how AI-related research is evolving within the field. The findings show that research on artificial intelligence in public relations has increased substantially in recent years, particularly after 2023, reflecting growing academic interest in the role of AI technologies in communication practice. This expansion aligns with earlier observations that AI in public relations initially focused on automation and monitoring functions but has increasingly shifted toward communicative and relational applications (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Yue et al., 2024).

But beyond growth in publication volume, the study also identifies several dominant research themes shaping the literature. These include AI-mediated persuasion and message effects, relationship management and stakeholder engagement, organizational transformation, AI adoption and acceptance, and ethical governance. These topics together shows that current research is largely focused on understanding how AI technologies influence communication processes, organizational practices, and stakeholder relationships.

Methodologically, the findings show that the literature is largely driven by empirical research. Interviews, experiments, and surveys are the most frequently used research designs,

suggesting that scholars are increasingly examining both practitioner perspectives and audience responses to AI-enabled communication (Men et al., 2022). At the same time, the geographic distribution of publications reveals that most AI-public relations research comes from institutions in the United States and Europe, showing that knowledge production in this area remains concentrated within Western academic contexts. This pattern implies the need for broader geographic representation in future AI-PR research. These findings together contribute to public relations scholarship by clarifying how AI research in the field is expanding, what topics scholars are prioritizing, and how these issues are being studied.

5.2 Theoretical Foundations of AI-Public Relations Scholarship

This study contributes to public relations scholarship by providing a clearer understanding of the theoretical foundations that guide research on artificial intelligence within the field. The findings show that AI-public relations research draws on a variety of theoretical perspectives rather than relying on a single dominant framework. Scholars frequently apply theories from crisis communication, technology adoption, persuasion, and relationship management to examine different aspects of AI in public relations practice. For instance, crisis-related studies often use Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to examine how AI-mediated communication affects organizational reputation during crisis situations. Research focused on technology adoption commonly draws on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and related frameworks to explore how practitioners perceive and adopt AI tools. Similarly, relational research frequently uses Organization-Public Relationship (OPR) theory and dialogic communication frameworks to analyze how AI technologies influence stakeholder engagement and communication processes. In addition to these recurring frameworks, many studies also

relied on theories that appeared only once in the dataset, which reflects the broad range of conceptual approaches used to examine AI-related issues in public relations.

This diversity of theories observed in the dataset propose that scholars are actively drawing on existing communication frameworks to study developing AI-related issues in public relations. Recent research has also described AI-public relations scholarship as an evolving area of study in which researchers are still exploring appropriate conceptual approaches (Laskin & D'Agostino, 2024; Yue et al., 2024). In this sense, the variety of theoretical perspectives reflects the interdisciplinary nature of AI-PR research and the effort to understand technological change through established communication theories.

Similarly, the findings reveal that theoretical frameworks are often applied within specific research areas. Crisis communication studies, adoption research, persuasion studies, and relationship-focused studies tend to rely on different theoretical traditions. This pattern helps explain how scholars are currently conceptualizing AI in public relations and shows the range of theoretical perspectives being used to study AI-enabled communication in the field.

5.3 Ethical Considerations in AI-Public Relations Scholarship

The findings of this study provide insight into how ethical issues are currently addressed within AI-public relations scholarship. Across the analyzed articles, ethical discussions frequently centered on issues of trust, transparency, bias, and privacy. The prominence of these themes reflects the central importance of credibility, accountability, and responsible communication in AI-mediated public relations practice.

In many studies, trust was discussed in relation to stakeholder perceptions of AI-generated communication and the potential impact of automated systems on organizational credibility. Similarly, transparency was often framed in terms of disclosure and explainability,

particularly regarding whether organizations clearly communicate the use of AI in message production or decision-making processes. Concerns related to bias and privacy were also frequently discussed, particularly in relation to data collection, algorithmic decision-making, and the ethical use of audience data in AI-driven communication strategies. These findings align with broader discussions in the literature emphasizing the importance of maintaining trust and ethical responsibility in AI-enabled communication environments (Bowen, 2024; Bourne, 2019).

The analysis shows that governance and inclusivity appeared less frequently in the dataset. While some studies discussed organizational policies or responsible AI principles, just a few numbers of articles examined issues such as regulatory frameworks, institutional oversight, or social implications of AI deployment in communication contexts. Similarly, discussions of inclusivity, which includes questions of representation, equity, and the potential impact of AI systems on marginalized communities, appeared less frequently within the analyzed literature. This pattern shows current ethical discussions in AI-public relations research are largely centered on operational concerns related to trust and transparency, which offers understanding into how scholars and practitioners are currently approaching the ethical implications of AI in communication practice. In that sense, current research appears ethically attentive, but not yet fully developed in its focus on governance and inclusion.

5.4 Implications

The study's findings have important implications for the development of artificial intelligence research within public relations. First, the results contribute to theoretical discussions by showing that although AI-public relations research frequently draws on established communication theories, the field remains theoretically disconnected. Frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the Technology Acceptance Model

(TAM), Organization-Public Relationship (OPR) theory, and persuasion-based models appear across the literature. While these theories remain analytically valuable, many were originally developed to explain human-mediated communication processes. As AI technologies increasingly function as communicative agents capable of generating content and interacting with stakeholders, existing theoretical frameworks may require reconsideration or adaptation to account for AI-mediated communication environments (Yue et al., 2024; Laskin & D'Agostino, 2024).

The findings also highlight several ethical and practical implications for public relations practice. Ethical discussions within the literature are strongly centered on trust, transparency, bias, and privacy, showing that AI deployment in public relations is often framed as an issue of credibility and reputational risk. For practitioners, this suggests that stakeholder trust remains a central benchmark when organizations integrate AI technologies into communication activities. At the same time, the relatively limited attention to governance and inclusivity suggests that ethical discourse within AI-public relations research remains focused primarily on operational concerns rather than questions of regulatory oversight or structural accountability.

In addition, the study reveals important global and methodological implications. AI-public relations scholarship remains geographically concentrated within Western academic contexts, specifically the United States and Europe, showing that knowledge production in this area is shaped largely by Western institutional environments and research infrastructures. Expanding research across diverse geographic contexts may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how AI is adopted and studied in different settings (Kaleel & Alomari, 2024). Methodologically, the literature demonstrates strong empirical engagement, with most studies

relying on quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method designs, particularly experiments, surveys, and interviews.

5.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in a selection of leading public relations and strategic communication journals such as *Public Relations Review* and *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* Within the 2016-2026 study window. These journals represent some of the most established scholarly outlets in the field and provide insight into how artificial intelligence is being examined within core PR scholarship. However, this focus means that research published in other venues including conference proceedings, book chapters, industry reports, dissertations, or journals from adjacent disciplines was not included. As a result, the findings reflect the development of AI scholarship within mainstream public relations literature rather than the full range of discussions surrounding artificial intelligence in communication practice.

Also, the study employed quantitative content analysis to identify patterns in research topics, theoretical frameworks, ethical discussions, and methodological approaches. While this method allows for systematic comparison across a large body of literature, coding decisions were based on explicit textual references within the articles. As a result, implicit theoretical connections or ethical assumptions that were not clearly articulated may not have been captured. In addition, categorizing research topics and theoretical frameworks required analytical grouping, which involves a degree of interpretive judgment. Finally, the literature analyzed in this study is geographically concentrated in Western academic contexts, particularly the United States and Europe. This regional concentration may limit the generalizability of the findings to

other parts of the world where technological infrastructure, governance systems, and communication practices may differ.

5.6 Suggestions for Future Research

An increasing body of AI research, drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives and methodologies, has not only reshaped scholarly attention and research directions in the field but has also established itself as a major area of public relations scholarship. Based on the findings, the following suggestions for future AI research are made.

First, the results suggest a need for stronger theoretical integration within AI-public relations scholarship. Although many studies draw on established communication theories, the field currently lacks an integrative framework that explains how AI functions within communication processes. As AI systems increasingly generate content, mediate engagements, and influence stakeholder perceptions, future research should explore how existing theories can be adapted or combined to better explain AI-mediated communication. For example, while prior studies have begun applying relationship management theory to examine how publics interact with AI agents such as chatbots or virtual influencers, and Situational Crisis Communication Theory to compare stakeholder responses to AI-generated versus human-generated crisis messages (Laskin & D'Agostino, 2024; Yue et al., 2024), future research could further investigate how these theories may need to be refined to better account for AI-mediated communication contexts, particularly in cases where AI functions as an active communicator rather than a passive tool.

Second, additional research is needed to further develop ethical discussions surrounding AI use in public relations. While current scholarship frequently focuses on issues such as trust, transparency, bias, and privacy, comparatively less attention has been given to governance and

inclusivity. Future studies could examine how organizations develop internal AI governance frameworks, how communication professionals navigate ethical decision-making in AI-driven campaigns, and how AI systems may reinforce or mitigate inequalities in communication practices. For instance, research could explore how biased datasets shape organizational messaging or how inclusive AI design influences engagement with diverse publics.

Third, greater geographic diversity in AI-public relations research would strengthen the field's global relevance. The current literature remains heavily concentrated in the United States and Europe. Expanding research in underrepresented regions such as Africa, South America, and parts of Asia would provide valuable insight into how AI technologies are adopted, governed, and interpreted in different social, institutional, and regulatory environments. For example, future studies could examine AI use in public sector communication, crisis response strategies in emerging economies, or stakeholder engagement practices in resource-constrained contexts.

Finally, methodological variation may further enhance AI-public relations research. While many studies rely on surveys, interviews, and experiments, future research could incorporate longitudinal designs, cross-national comparisons, and studies that examine organizational decision-making and leadership perspectives regarding AI adoption. For instance, longitudinal studies could track how stakeholder trust evolves following the implementation of AI tools, while cross-national studies could compare how cultural contexts shape public perceptions of AI in communication.

5.6 Conclusion

This study examined the development of artificial intelligence scholarship within public relations between 2016 and 2026 through a quantitative content analysis of 100 peer-reviewed journal articles. By analyzing publication trends, theoretical frameworks, research topics,

methodological approaches, and ethical considerations, the study provides an overview of how AI-related research has evolved within the field. The findings indicate that AI-public relations scholarship has expanded rapidly in recent years but remains uneven in its development. While the literature shows strong empirical engagement, it lacks theoretical consolidation, with studies drawing on diverse frameworks rather than a dominant theory. Ethical discussions are largely centered on trust, transparency, bias, and privacy, while governance and inclusivity receive comparatively less attention.

These findings together suggest that AI-public relations scholarship is still developing as an area of inquiry. The field demonstrates growing scholarly interest and methodological activity but remains fragmented across theoretical perspectives, research topics, and ethical discussions. And by mapping patterns across the existing literature, this study contributes a clearer understanding of how AI research is evolving within public relations and highlights the importance of continued theoretical integration, ethical reflection, and broader global engagement as artificial intelligence increasingly shapes communication practice.

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