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On the Tech Trek and Industrial Revolutions: Unravelling the Impact of Generative AI on Public Relations Praxis in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study holds substantial significance as it represents a pioneering continent-wide empirical endeavor to comprehend the extent to which public relations (PR) professionals value and engage with Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) technologies and the consequential impact they exert on the praxis of the profession in Africa. The study assumes a qualitative approach with data collected from in-house and agency PR professionals across the major economic blocks in Africa. Beyond unearthing the benefits and threats, we also found practical, socio-cultural, and ethical implications of the influx of GenAI technologies, based upon which we proffered valuable recommendations for both practice and scholarly pursuits. We make a central argument that even though there is a high adoption and usage of GenAIs among PR professionals in Africa, there are currently no ethical policies guiding its usage, and this threatens the professions' quest to be transparent and accountable to their clients and publics.

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Introduction

As the world navigates the ravages and rapid innovations triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is reasonable to conclude that the pandemic altered the physical locations *(where)* of many workplaces and, specifically, how the advent of cutting-edge technological tools, most notably artificial intelligence (hereafter AI), is altering the nature *(how)* of work itself (Fu & Barbour, 2023; Keppler et al., 2023). Globally, AI has been received with a sense of awe, something worth considering and, in some cases, rebuffing as it continues to drive debates across disciplines and professions.

What cannot be disputed are the vast advantages AI generally offers humans. For the communication sciences, there is an incredible opportunity for the adoption and usage of AI tools, specifically Generative AIs (hereafter GenAIs). For instance, as communication professionals counsel their stakeholders and liaise between them and their organizations, they are more positioned to leverage GenAI tools and even shape the future of AI. In particular, the public relations (hereafter, PR) profession is heavily driven by content creation and dissemination as they churn out more written content to generate engagement with their publics.

Thus, PR professionals leverage GenAI to perform some of their most repetitive tasks, such as content generation (press releases, social media content, speeches, etc.). To that end, promotional sectors (PR, marketing, and advertising) are paying more attention to it as practitioners and, more recently, academics recognize its fruitful potential. Meanwhile, people inside and outside the technology industry are starting to worry about the effects of AI, generally on employment and specifically the PR profession (Panda et al., 2019)

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We assert that the advent of AI, especially the recent boom of GenAIs, has created considerable transformations and disruptions in the PR and communications industry. As such, it has become imperative to unearth their unique relevance and influence on the practice. A more nuanced understanding of the AI-PR link is critical because of the promising and rapidly emerging prospects in the linkage (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Logan & Waymer, 2024; Men et al., 2022; Panda et al., 2019). Indeed, PR scholarship provides very little evidence of the AI-PR relationship. There have been limited notable studies that have sought to explore this connection, as evidenced by a handful of sources (e.g., Bourne, 2019; Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Panda et al., 2019; Soriano & Valdés, 2021; Zerfass et al., 2020). These studies have predominantly utilized narratives and conceptual arguments in their investigations. Meanwhile, GenAI tools are becoming an inherent part of the PR practice, and it requires empirical scholarship to drive the conversation and shape the future of the field with practice-laden insights (Men et al., 2022).

Furthermore, while distinctions and variations exist within the realm of AI, it is noteworthy that the few studies in question adopted a comprehensive perspective on AI without specifying the particular type of AI being considered. This approach could lead to conceptual ambiguities and inconsistencies. While we acknowledge that AI applications extend to the broader context of the PR function, the advent of GenAI applications as early as November 2022 (Peres et al., 2023) creates much uncertainty for the communication industry. It presents a genuine case for investigating how PR professionals whose job functions rely heavily on content generation are navigating the explosion of the new technology and their attendant disruption.

Additionally, Africa is one of the few continents with the youngest population, attracting high economic interest globally (Pratt & Adamolekun, 2007) and a rapidly growing PR industry, making this PR-AI exploration in the African context timely and insightful. Certainly, the literature lends support to the positive correlations between young age and technology adoption (Martinez & McAndrews, 2023), in that young people (Gen X, Y, Z) are more acquiescent toward technology usage than the older generations (The lost, greatest, silent and baby boomer generations) (Priporas et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is evident that PR practice is extensively prevalent in Africa, with professional bodies such as the African Public Relations Association (APRA), Zambia Institute of Public Relations and Communication (ZIPRC), Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK), and the Institute of Public Relations Ghana (IPR), among others, actively contributing to the advancement of the profession. However, there exists a notable but gradual advancement of scholarly research on PR in the African context, as highlighted by Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023). This underscores the compelling need to explore the intersection between PR and GenAI in Africa.

Following the foregoing assertions, the study's objectives are in two major folds – first, to explore the usage, application, benefits, and threats of GenAI among PR practitioners in Africa; second, to explore ethical considerations at the individual-practitioner and corporate-industry levels and also the existence of policies or regulations that address ethical concerns and dilemmas associated with the usage of GenAI technologies. Subsequent sections of the paper address a review of the literature on AI, the PR and GenAI linkages, and PR practice in Africa. The methodological choices made, analysis of the data obtained, and discussions of the findings thereof are also presented. The study employs the technology acceptance model (TAM) and the role theory as theoretical lenses to explore the phenomenon.

Literature and theoretical review

Theoretical framework

The study draws on two relevant theories – the technology acceptance model (TAM) and the role theory to explicate GenAI adoption and usage among PR practitioners. The central role of these theories is to enhance a grounded understanding of GenAI adoption and usage among PR professionals while significantly contributing to the explanatory power of these theories (Collins & Stockton,

2018). Research findings typically make incremental contributions to theory by building upon and expanding the existing body of knowledge (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021).

Technology acceptance model (TAM)

The technology acceptance model (TAM), introduced by Fred Davis in 1989, has been instrumental in explaining technology acceptance and usage across various sectors and disciplines. Certainly, it is reasonable to claim that the theory assumes a multidisciplinary outlook as it is consistently leveraged to explain technology adoption behavior among scholars and praxeologists. Perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are the two focal constructs theorized as the main factors that cause people to accept or reject technology (Davis, 1989). The degree to which individuals utilize an application based on their perception of its capacity to enhance job performance was theorized as perceived usefulness. Even if individuals acknowledge the utility of an application, they may still find it daunting to use, leading them to believe that the effort required outweighs the potential benefits. Thus, alongside perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use also plays a crucial role in shaping users' decision to engage with a technological innovation. The TAM has been extensively employed in examining technology adoption across diverse domains, solidifying its status as arguably the most influential theory in the information systems field (Marangunić & Granić, 2014). The underlying argument of TAM is that technology users may consider the practicality, expediency, and effectiveness (perceived ease of use) of technology and its user-friendliness (perceived ease of use) to form a usage attitude and then ultimately actualize it. The TAM had undergone several modifications (TAM 2; TAM3; UTAUT) (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000; Venkatesh et al., 2003) through which other predictive variables had been included to enrich and expand the drivers of technology adoption. Leveraging TAM for GenAI adoption and usage, the assumption is that PR professionals in their line of duty may consider and ultimately engage GenAI tools based on their perceptions of their usefulness and user-friendliness.

The role theory

According to Lattimore (2016), roles are sociological constructs that can be defined by collecting everyday activities and expectations within a given context, including the PR discipline. Broom and Smith's (1979) survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America birthed the role theory by categorizing its tasks into two major strands: technical and managerial. Whereas the technical role of PR is heavily driven by its creative dimensions, such as copywriting and editing, the managerial role is driven by providing strategic directions to communication problems that may arise. GenAI applications, with their inherent benefits, tend to change and redefine the roles and responsibilities of professionals across diverse fields. GenAI tools are revolutionizing the organizational environment by expanding the tasks computers can undertake and assist with. These tasks encompass idea generation, creative writing, and content production. The role theory is leveraged in the current study for two dominant reasons. First, to explain how the adoption and use of GenAI are changing the roles and responsibilities of PR professionals across Broom and Smith's (1979) delineated roles and second, how their perceptions of the effects of GenAI on their roles differ.

Artificial intelligence defined

AI has been defined in many ways. Nonetheless, the basic assumption underlying these definitions is that AI is human intellect expressed through machines (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018) and that using algorithms and software, computers can think and produce results as humans (W. M. Lim et al., 2023). In that regard, AI's supportive technologies could imitate the functionalities of the human mind, including learning and problem-solving capabilities (Zerfass et al., 2020). Verma et al. (2021, p. 2) capture AI's definition modestly by stating that "unlike human intelligence, artificial intelligence (AI)

is the intelligence demonstrated by the machines." AI processes human cognitive and affective characteristics, constantly learning, doing work, and producing results that match and sometimes surpass human capabilities. These distinctive AI attributes eliminate the tedium often associated with repetitive tasks, ensuring that people, especially communication professionals, are spared from experiencing monotony in their work (Huang & Wang, 2023). They depend heavily on huge amounts of data that constantly need to be collected, updated, and analyzed to the extent that humans cannot conduct such analysis. However, AI could be instructed to perform them with fewer glitches (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Although there appears to be no universally accepted definition of artificial intelligence, the field's classifications sometimes exhibit even more egregious forms of inconsistencies. For example, a recent study by Pantano and Scarpi (2022) delineated five types of AI per their correlation with the dimensions of human intelligence. They include Logic-Mathematical intelligence, Social intelligence, Visual-Spatial intelligence, Verbal-Linguistic intelligence, and Processing-Speed intelligence. It could be deduced from the arguments made justifying each dimension that the delineations hinge on the functionalities manifested in the intelligence types. Goralski and Tan (2020) describe two main types of AI: narrow artificial intelligence (NAI) and artificial general intelligence (AGI). The authors assert that all present types of AI fall under the umbrella term of NAI, which is then characterized as a less powerful version of AI, while the AGI is perceived as the superior version of AI. While largely theoretical in nature, AGI remains a source of considerable uncertainty among individuals, as it can perform at a level comparable to that of an exceptionally talented human and could take over human jobs (Goralski & Tan, 2020).

Meanwhile, Kaplan and Haenlein (2019) do not consider NAI and AGI as types but rather stages in the AI development process. The authors added another stage – artificial superintelligence (ASI), arguing that the AI development process starts from NAI and then moves to AGI and is expected to mature in ASI. The authors further classified AI into four main categories inspired by the business uses of AI: cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and artistic intelligence. The discussions above reflect the current confusion on AI classification. Nonetheless, our objective is not to introduce another classification, given that the definition of AI remains inconclusive, and hence, the various classifications continue (Goralski & Tan, 2020; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Our focus is to explore GenAI, an NAI that has taken the world by storm with the introduction of OpenAI's ChatGPT in November 2022 (W. M. Lim et al., 2023), and how it impacts the PR frontiers in Africa. With the continuous evolution of technology, society undergoes corresponding changes. Therefore, it is imperative for scholarly research to persist in exploring how emerging technologies and innovations either mold, foster, or potentially undermine the beneficial elements of societal structures (Sætra, 2023).

Generative AI

GenAI represents a category of NAI distinguished by its capacity to generate a diverse range of data forms, encompassing images, videos, audio, text, and 3D models, which can be described as its underlying elements, with notable examples being ChatGPT, MagicWrite, Eleven Labs, DALL_E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and Channel (W. M. Lim et al., 2023). These functionalities are achieved by GenAI through learning patterns from existing data and applying this acquired knowledge to create novel and distinctive outputs (Sætra, 2023). GenAI's capabilities extend to producing exceptionally realistic and intricate content that effectively emulates human creativity. This versatility renders GenAI an asset in numerous industries, including but not limited to gaming, entertainment, authoring, and product design (Peres et al., 2023). Recent advancements in the field of GenAI, exemplified by innovations such as the Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) and Midjourney, have substantially elevated its potential. These breakthroughs have ushered in a new era of opportunities for leveraging GenAI to address complex problems, fostering artistic creation, and even facilitating scientific research (Pavlik, 2023). GenAI has unquestionably made a profound impact, transforming

how we engage, collaborate, and innovate. The remarkable success of ChatGPT, boasting over 100 million users, is compelling evidence of the swift adoption and influence of this state-of-the-art technology (W. M. Lim et al., 2023). The arrival of ChatGPT by OpenAI has attracted huge attention and is noted as the fastest-growing consumer application (Hu, 2023). It is being rapidly adopted across industries and institutions. With cutting-edge innovations in language and conversational abilities like Language Model for Dialogue Applications (LaMDA) (Pichai, 2023), Google has swiftly announced their own GenAI, Bard, signaling more advancements and competitor-driven innovations akin to frontal attacks, thereby creating abundance and several options of GenAI tools to the technology consumer market.

GenAI technologies are distinguished by their use of sophisticated deep learning models to generate content that closely mimics human inventions across various media, including graphics and text (W. M. Lim et al., 2023). Thus, the prompts given to GenAI tools trigger innovative outputs with beneficial outcomes that assist human workflows for efficiency. In this context, productivity would increase since the dependence on GenAI tools would diminish the time and effort needed to generate fresh ideas or textual content. Naturally, humans would still need to allocate time for potential corrections and edits to the newly generated information. However, on the whole, tasks or projects should experience accelerated progress. As GenAI emerges as a game-changing innovation in parallel with the widespread proliferation of the internet and smartphones, a remarkable opportunity has arisen to fundamentally reshape the future of work. Anticipated collaborations between organizational workforces and advanced AI models like ChatGPT are poised for substantial growth. This study delves into the influence of GenAI tools on the forefront of work, focusing on their impact on PR practice in Africa.

Generative AI and PR practice

The expansion of automation and AI has been exponential, to the extent that AI-integrated tools now permeate every facet of PR tasks. The application of AI tools to PR work spans from research and stakeholder identification to channel management, content creation, and delivery, as well as monitoring and evaluation. To this extent, adopting AI-powered assistants, chatbots, and virtual reality is fundamentally reshaping the character and breadth of communication activities and the roles of practitioners (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018). As the PR field swiftly shifts its focus toward strategic functions, such as fostering two-way communication to enable the public to influence management decisions and promoting symmetrical dialogs to balance interests between management and the public, the intricacies in PR operations intensify across all levels, from the technical to managerial roles (Tam et al., 2022). Indeed, Tam et al. (2022) argue that the strategic PR management field does not eliminate traditional PR functions like media relations and information dissemination. Instead, it expands the range of communication activities, incorporating them into a framework encompassing environmental scanning, research, and active listening. According to the authors, the results are messages designed to align with the informational requirements of the public and the advocacy goals of organizations. Moreover, when viewed through the lens of integrated or promotional communications and strategies, PR is experiencing a continuous evolution both in theory and practice. This evolution is increasingly blurring the boundaries between PR, Marketing, and other functional domains (Gesualdi, 2019).

Based on these arguments, it is reasonable to conclude that the conventional workflow of a PR professional is undergoing significant change and dynamism. This transformation encourages them to adopt technology tools to remain relevant, improve efficiency, and maximize effectiveness, especially when the dominant PR theory inculcates cocreational models (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Galloway and Swiatek (2018) and Panda et al. (2019) delineated key uses of AI in PR Management, they include—

- Reputation management through AI's distinct ability to provide deep insights to mitigate reputational risks and address impending concerns.

- Assisting PR professionals in their advisory roles in their organizations during managerial brainstorming sessions.
- Leveraging AI to assist organizations in managing issues and crises more efficiently.
- Making PR practice more efficient and affordable, thereby improving an organization's bottom line.

According to Valin (2018, p. 7), human critical thinking skills "will experience the least impact from AI." However, various other abilities related to fundamental research, content creation, program assessment, issue monitoring, and numerous work processes already incorporate elements of AI. While we agree with this assertion, specificity with respect to the variations in AI tools and their respective relevance to PR practice needs to be explored. More so, with the explosion seen at the birth of OpenAI's ChatGPT, it would be farfetched to assume that Galloway and Swiatek's (2018) delineations are exhaustive, especially when context-specific conditionalities aside from organizational and individual/professional inclinations may strongly impact the adoption, usage, and malleability of tech users. Hence, even though relevant, conceptual essays or position papers like Galloway and Swiatek (2018) do not pass as empirical insights with depth and within real-life contexts.

In the extant literature, several studies have responded to the explosion of GenAI and its impact on the various facets of organizational and human life. For instance, W. M. Lim et al. (2023) assessed the impact of GenAI on the future of education in general. Pavlik (2023) also examined the implications of GenAI on journalism and media education, while Sætra (2023) examined the general implications of GenAI, discussing its limitations and huge prospects to the various facets of human life. Other authors have examined the implications of GenAI in areas including research, teaching, and practice (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Peres et al., 2023). Indeed, Pavlik (2023), in assessing the implications of GenAI for journalism and media education, coauthored the essay with the natural language processing (NLP) platform ChatGPT. Despite these growing scholarly interests, extant studies (e.g., Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Panda et al., 2019) bemoaned the general lack of empirical evidence on the relationship between PR and AI. The current study fills the void by investigating PR-GenAI linkages with empirical insights across sub-Saharan Africa.

PR practitioners' perceptions of new technologies

Exploring PR professionals' perceptions of new technologies dates back to the emergence of the World Wide Web, with scholars such as Johnson (1997) and Hill and White (2000) leading scholarships in that regard. Contrary to the postulation that people are likely to show resistance toward the adoption of new technologies because they are habitually inclined to act in that manner (Leonardi, 2009), Hill and White (2000) observed that PR practitioners perceived websites as a reflection of an organization's competitiveness which improves its reputation and heightens the practitioner's sense of professionalism. Similarly, Sallot et al. (2004) assert that PR professionals perceive the World Wide Web as an integral part of their quest to deliver value to the organization in a manner that empowers them to engage in two-way communication with their publics. This indicates that mastery of tools powered by the internet generally contributes greatly to a PR practitioner's value and will account for the high adoption rates in internet-powered technologies like GenAI.

Methodology

Based on our purpose of curating a piece of context-relevant information on GenAI technologies and their implications for PR practice in Africa, we adopted the qualitative research approach. This approach helped explore the participants' lived experiences with GenAI in a manner that is in-depth, interpretive, and socially nuanced (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To keep the study inquiry focused on the main objectives driving it, we deployed the semi-structured interview approach to elicit responses from our participants (Hayes et al., 2023). This allowed us to engage in tailored

conversations with our participants by inducing the appropriate follow-up questions. It also created flexibility in scheduling the interviews as they were conducted across varied time zones and fixed to the different work schedules of the participants. Clearly, other qualitative data collection strategies, such as focus group discussions, could not be possible due to the differences in time zones and work schedules.

Sample and procedures

To ensure that the chosen study participants accurately reflect the characteristics of the population under investigation *(PR practitioners with operational presence in Africa who use GenAI technologies in their line of duty)*, we utilized the purposive sampling technique to select informants for the interviews (Bryan, 2015). We relied on LinkedIn searches (Hayes et al., 2023) and the recommendations of several professional PR networks across the continent to reach participants for the interviews. After this process, we identified 63 PR professionals to whom we sent e-mails with a project synopsis. We attached participant consent forms in compliance with our university's ethical requirements after our university's research directorate granted us ethical clearance. We received positive responses to our e-mails from 22 of the 63 professionals, after which we took the next steps to schedule the interviews. Eventually, we conducted 19 interviews via Zoom, and they became the basis for our analysis. The interview guide was developed in advance and was pre-tested among selected colleagues and graduate students in our faculty to purge our questions of any ambiguities and misunderstandings. On average, each of the 19 interviews lasted for about 35 minutes. They were all recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed for easy analysis. To guarantee the validity of our study, we employed member-checking by sending the transcripts to our interview participants after the audios were transcribed to ensure that their opinions were accurately captured prior to the analysis.

Participant demographics

To guarantee a good representation, we ensured that interview participants were sampled from Africa's four major economic blocks *(East Africa, West Africa, South Africa, and Central Africa)*. Specifically, data was collected from participants in South Africa, Botswana, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, and Rwanda. There was also a fair balance across genders, career ranks, years of work experience, and levels of education. In all, we interviewed 10 women and nine men. For the level of education, we had four diploma holders, six first degrees, and nine postgraduate qualifications. In terms of ranks, seven of them classified themselves as entry-level professionals, nine as mid-level professionals, and three as managerial-level professionals.

Regarding work experience, eight had 0–5 years, seven had 5–10 years, three had 10–15 years, and one had over 15 years. Again, 14 participants (74%) work in in-house departments, and the remaining five work in agencies. In consonance with ethical standards, we pseudonymized the participants to grant them privacy (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019). Therefore, the names provided in the analysis are not the participants' real names.

Analysis and results

The coding and thematic analysis were conducted using the MaxQDA software. It is a computer-assisted qualitative analysis tool for comprehensive and rigorous qualitative data analysis, such as text, videos, sound, and images. Aside from examining the descriptive statistics of the coded data to assess the frequency of coded content, the analysis also involved examining the co-occurrences of parent and subcodes (themes). Following the strategy of Mensah et al. (2023), both parent and subcodes were considered significant if they occurred at least three times in our data, setting a threshold for code occurrences. Any code co-occurrences below the threshold of three were considered insignificant for our analysis and excluded. This approach was taken to maintain analytical simplicity and clarity, avoiding many incidences in the analysis process.

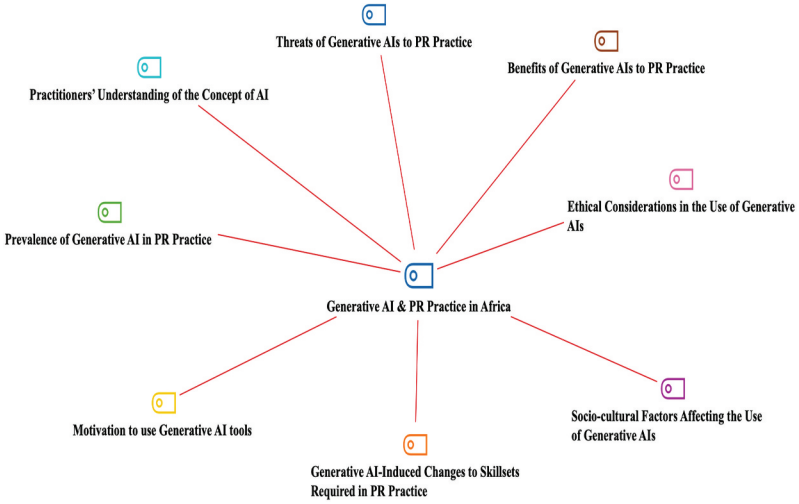

Figure 1. Model showing dominant themes generated. Source: Authors' own creation.

To achieve intercoder agreement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the researchers exchanged their individual coding sheets to satisfy themselves that the codes generated were a true reflection of the data collected. This led to the development of the themes depicted in Figure 1 above, which formed grounds for our analysis.

Practitioners' understanding of the concept of AI

One of the key areas of interest in this study is exploring the PR practitioners' understanding of the concept of AI. This is necessitated by the widely held opinion that an individual's perception and understanding of a concept (especially new technologies) heavily shapes their attitude and usage behavior toward it (Sallot et al., 2004). All the participants have demonstrated a good understanding of what AI is, per the definitions and explanations provided in the literature (Meng & Dai, 2021; Shehab et al., 2020). They have mainly perceived AI in a positive light, describing it as a technology-enabled tool that is a substitute for human intelligence and aids in performing tasks much easier. These core descriptive codes that the participants used to describe AI are depicted in Figure 2 below. As can be gleaned from the figure below, the participants' most prominent understanding, perception, and description of AI is how it aids humans in performing their tasks with much more ease than if they were doing so manually.

This predominant perception and understanding of AI could explain why PR professionals in Africa have high adoption and usage rates. Kofi, one of the in-house practitioners, said:

> So, I think I look at artificial intelligence strictly as computer-enabled or computer-based tools that help you perform your tasks in an easier manner. I consider AI the same way I look at internet technology or any kind of technology, basically. Basically, helping to make the jobs and the tasks of humans much easier.

Another professional, Imani, insists that AI is a companion that can be relied on by offloading certain tasks to it.

> I think that for me what excites me the most about AI is that it allows professionals like myself to encode, decode, and outsource certain tasks that we get bogged down with so that we can pay attention to the more strategic things and aspects of our job.

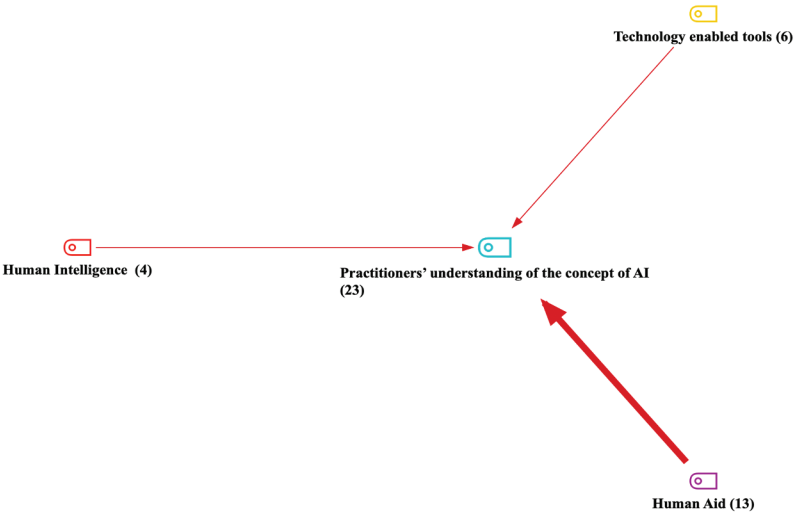

Figure 2. Codes describing the understanding of AI. Source: Authors' own creation.

Prevalence of generative AI in PR practice

Another point of interest is understanding the extent to which the PR professionals used the GenAI tools in their daily line of duty. We found that all but two participants often used GenAI technologies to perform several communication functions in their line of duty. The other two claim they have been careful and comparatively slower to its adoption and use. One of the two professionals claims that the slow pace of adopting and using GenAI technologies is because they are still learning to use them, and the other claims it is because they are still used to writing their content manually. Those who use it frequently claim it helps them brainstorm, generate text, edit, and develop skeletal outlines for content, paraphrasing, and creative designs. Tumelo, one of the agency professionals, talks about the various things he uses the GenAI tools for.

> I personally have found ChatGPT to be very good when I'm brainstorming. At times, I have some ideas that don't make sense, just the way I'm thinking about it. But what I've learned to do over time is to just drop it in bits and pieces like that, and then give it to ChatGPT, and then it gives you a semblance of how it can work, and then you now do the strategic thing by adding some more context, nuance to it, do some research around some of the ideas, then create something that actually would work. So, I find ChatGPT very useful, even in terms of creating content from scratch.

From our observations, it is safe to say that the use of GenAI tools is very pervasive among PR professionals in Africa, with text generation and brainstorming being the most prominent functions of PR for which they utilize these tools.

Motivation to use generative AI tools

We explored the motivations that drive PR professionals in Africa to use GenAI tools, recognizing that people's continuous use of technologies is usually predicated on their individual motivations. Figure 3 below depicts the various motivations our participants associated with using GenAIs. Most participants claim that saving time and cost are the most prominent push factors for using these tools. Other factors include convenience, the quest to be excellent and efficient, and satisfying their curiosity.

One of the professionals, Thabo, made the following pronouncement about what motivates him to use GenAIs.

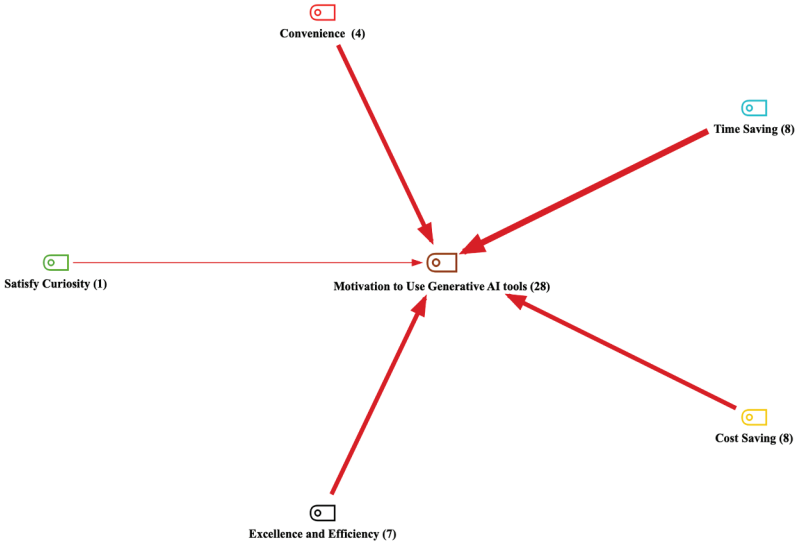

Figure 3. Motivations for the use of generative AIs. Source: Authors' own creation.

> . . . if you spend a lot of time having to do certain tasks manually, it will mean that you are not operating optimally to the benefit of the client and yourself. You're using time that should have been spent offering strategic insights. You're using it to do repetitive tasks. So, the question is, do you want to use Excel, or do you want to open up a physical ledger and write in rows and lines in the book? So, these tools just really help you speed up certain things. It collapses time. For example, if it's going to take you 30 minutes to create a copy or to write an article manually, with AI, that reduces the timing to, say, 15 minutes.

With developing countries battling the ravaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant financial difficulties (Aduhene & Osei-Assibey, 2021), it is no surprise that professionals will become even more price-conscious. This could explain why cost is one of the most articulated motivations for using GenAI. Adebayor, one of the in-house professionals, claims that the recent adoption of GenAI tools has helped his organization save costs associated with editorial services.

> I think one of the most important blessings of AI tools is saving the cost of doing our work. COVID-19 has unsettled our budgetary allocations, so anything that will help us save money, we will appreciate it. Because if I wanted to get an editor on the team to do our copy editing from brainstorming to writing, I'd pay the person, right? But now, I have a certain tool that I pay maybe a minimal cost every month or nothing at all, and it will do the same thing.

Generative AI-induced changes to skillsets required in PR Practice

We also explored the changes that have occurred in the skillsets required for the PR profession in Africa due to the emergence of GenAI technologies. This conversation is particularly important to inform academia, new entrants, and even existing professionals on which skills to acquire or polish to remain relevant in the evolving industry. Participants have claimed that not much has changed regarding the skills required in the PR field, including writing, digital media, and research skills. Nonetheless, they accounted for a few changes in skills that have occurred in their routines, including what many of them described as GenAI Prompting *(how to send the appropriate prompt to GenAI to elicit the appropriate response)*, the ability to humanize GenAI-generated content, and the ability to contextualize the content retrieved from the GenAI. Most of the participants claim that the content that is generated by the GenAIs is generic and sometimes socially alien to the African context and, as such, requires the

intelligence of the professional to make it more specific and context-relatable. Latifa makes the following remarks in response to this phenomenon.

> I think the skills professionals need to do their work effectively continue to change each day; it's like we have to learn everything each day. The core skills and competencies of PR will not change. But, these new skills in knowing how to use these AI tools effectively will change, especially for professionals who want to remain competitive. This is because a lot of AI tools out there do not put the African experience and context into consideration, so we need to learn how to always add human nuance and cultural context to the text generated.

Another professional, Mawuli, added that, in his opinion, one of the most striking skills required to stay above the curve in the face of the influx of these GenAI tools is prompting.

> Let me say that prompting is actually going to be the new major skill. Unfortunately, prompting is not as easy as people might think. I have worked with a number of practitioners, and I have realized that they are not necessarily as good at prompting as you may expect them to be. So, PR practitioners would have to learn how to prompt, but that means that they themselves must learn what kind of logical sequence their outputs should have before they even go for those tools.

Okechukwu, who is also one of the agency practitioners, corroborated Mawuli's claims above by saying the following.

> PR practitioners have to become extremely strategic. The PR practitioner who can't think logically and strategically will be wiped out very soon because prompting requires very high levels of strategic organization. One has to have a very strong sense of what kind of structure and output they need to have because the flip side is they might generate content, not using the most accurate prompts and think that they have quality content only to submit it to their client or to use it to realize that maybe they have actually messed up simply because some of the key prompts were missed.

Socio-cultural factors affecting the use of generative AIs

We observed that several socio-cultural factors influence the adoption and use of GenAI technologies within the African context, with most participants claiming that these factors limit how they adopt and use the technologies. Some of the factors they mentioned include language barrier, stigma toward the new technology, digital access and literacy, lack of cultural relevance, poor research attitude, and superstitions. Regarding the language barrier, the participants claim that most of their PR campaigns are done in the local dialects, yet many of the GenAI tools either cannot produce content in these languages or churn out erroneous content. Again, Africa is one of the contexts fraught with a wide digital divide, poor digital literacy, high cost of internet data, and poor internet connectivity. As such, the participants argue that these factors hamper their quest to maximize the utility of GenAIs. One of the most intriguing perspectives shared by the participants is the social stigma attached to using GenAI tools to curate professional pieces. Mukuka, one of the very experienced PR professionals, encourages her colleagues in the PR field to live above the stigma.

> Among my colleagues, there is a stigma around discussing these AI tools. People feel like, oh, no one should know that the content we generated was done by AI; otherwise, they will think we're not creative enough, or we don't own the content. Well, but I don't see it like that. I don't think there should be any stigma involved in this at all. It's a technology that will make our lives easier. We don't know how powerful it will be in the coming years. So I think it's better we learn how it works so that even if there are risks, we can see how they are mitigated.

Again, many of the participants claim that superstition will derail their AI integration efforts. Moshoeshoe reiterated this point in the following words.

> I'm not so sure of how to put this and not sound stereotypical, but superstition will actually affect the use of AI by some of the professionals in our field. The question of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable by people must be addressed because there are some of my colleagues who've always felt this is too much, this is too

> intrusive, and this is not applicable in our context, but I'm confident that things will change. It is just that these tools are still quite new, and so everyone must adjust.

Ethical considerations in the use of generative AIs

The ethical considerations and implications of using AI tools have been on the research agenda for some time now, and we are of the strong opinion that ethical considerations must be at the forefront of PR professionals' quest to use GenAIs looking at the magnitude of effects and influence they have on their numerous publics. We asked our participants to detail their ethical considerations regarding using the various GenAI tools. We observed that the majority of our participants had not considered ethical issues much in their dealings with GenAIs, both at the individual and organizational levels. All participants have confirmed that their organizations are yet to formulate any ethical policy framework to regulate the use of GenAIs, even though they acknowledge that an ethical policy will play a crucial role in their line of duty. Jomo, one of the in-house practitioners, explains why his organization does not yet have a policy to regulate the use of AI.

> It's more or less like an informal policy which is not written. But I think it is something we need to consider and try to incorporate into our work policies going forward. The technology is quite new, and ethical issues are some of the key threads that I see around because people are generally concerned about privacy issues. Anything can be leaked these days, so I feel it's important to come up with a policy.

However, the few that have made some ethical considerations in using these GenAIs have mentioned issues such as privacy, honesty to clients, and plagiarism as some of the ethical points they note in using these AI tools. Regarding privacy, two of the participants said that because they could not guarantee where the input ends up in the AI tools, they are careful about certain prompts that will give away information about the content and campaigns of some of their clients. They assert that they respect the privacy of their clients and are selective about which content to seek GenAI's assistance with. Kofi said the following regarding clients' privacy.

> If your client shares a brief with you, and you run with it to AI, you are potentially opening them up to the risk of a leak. Maybe the client doesn't want anybody to know that they are launching a new product yet. So, there's also that privacy angle as well, which is very unethical. This is just like when we are briefing influencers. Until we have a non-disclosure agreement signed, a lot of times, we do not give the influencers that much information. This is just to ensure that there's some layer of control over the information until we're ready to go into business.

Kissama, one of the very experienced professionals, said,

> One of the major ethical issues is when we are not transparent enough to our clients. Think about it. Your client is paying you for your time, for your insights, for your experience, and for your professional skills. It would be unethical for you to use AI to cheat them out of that. If your client is paying you to help them write press releases and blog content and stuff like that, it will be unethical for you to just go and dump something on ChatGPT and get it out. We've seen a couple of contents that you can easily tell that they were written by AI. While I believe that AI can be very useful in terms of doing the preliminary work and helping you structure your thoughts, 100% reliance on AI to do your client's work is very unethical, in my opinion.

Fatimata also commented on the need for issues of plagiarism to be regarded in the professionals' quest to utilize GenAI tools.

> . . . in terms of ethical consideration, I would say that it's important for professionals to reference the sources of the work that they produce constantly and to be able to avoid plagiarism of any sort. In cases where it's a direct lifting, it must be referenced. Because it could be discovered, and professionals shouldn't take full ownership for the work that is not originally theirs.

Benefits of generative AIs to PR practice

We inquired about the benefits of the influx of these GenAI tools in the PR profession, and all participants agreed that it has been beneficial in several ways. They claim that their ability to do proper measurement and evaluation to show return on investment, curate tailored messages for their publics, and perform repetitive tasks have been greatly enhanced. Most of the participants also claim that in PR departments where the teams are stretched, GenAI comes in handy as an additional member who carries the tasks of multitudes. Sundiata, an entry-level practitioner, recounts some of the benefits of GenAIs.

> I think these tools have become a blessing to us, especially those of us who play the technician roles. Now, if some brands want to reach Generation Zs, it is just a matter of keying a specific prompt, say, maybe I'm 35 years old, and I want to communicate with people that are 18 to 20 years old; how do I present it to people of this age bracket? What are the elements I need to include so that they can accept this information and find it fun? Then, you will receive a tailored message that is specifically curated for these cohorts.

The issue of GenAI's ability to show return on investments is of key interest to this research as many practitioners depend on measurement and evaluation to show value for the continuous existence and possible promotions in organizations. Kissama, one of the very experienced professionals, claims that using GenAI has lessened the burden of doing media monitoring almost manually.

> Recently, I got training on Amazon Comprehend and the experience has been amazing so far. It is able to extract some key phrases and expressions online and perform sentiment analysis in a simple and fast manner. This has helped ease the pressure on the unit in charge of social media monitoring and evaluation. It also pulls everything together in one place for you and just with a glance, you can see how people feel about your organization in real time.

Threats of generative AIs to PR practice

We also asked our participants about the threats of the influx of GenAIs, especially the safety of their jobs. The majority of the entry to mid-level participants were confident that their jobs were not threatened in any way. However, some senior-level professionals feared that entry-level professionals might be affected because they play the communication technician roles where many repetitive tasks like copywriting are performed. Leyla, one of the senior-level professionals, said, "*You may be tempted to hand over some lower-level work that you would have given to an intern to do and pay them to GenAI, so we may have some potential job losses.*" Sekou, another senior-level professional, corroborated Leyla's claims.

> I think many people are consoling themselves, thinking, Oh, you know, GenAIs will not replace humans, but they will replace certain human functionalities at the lowest level. So, they are a big threat to early career professionals because they tend to perform very mundane tactical tasks like writing press releases, writing articles, or at least originating and generating them. Now, you have a tool that can do that much faster and efficiently. So, this could be a big problem for the young professional who's not strategic enough to know how to prompt and explore these tools.

Nonetheless, all the participants think that the core skills required to practice PR will remain the same and that these tools are only enhancers and cannot be substituted for their roles. In addition to the aforementioned threats, most of them claim that professionals are likely to become lazy and may lack the ambition to read and discover new ideas on their own, knowing that GenAI tools are available to do the work for them. Another threat they mentioned is that GenAI tools may prevent them from building genuine and authentic relationships with their publics as the content churned out is not originally based on how they sincerely feel or think. They also spoke about the possibility of GenAI tools churning out false or inaccurate information that may hurt the brands they work for. They also admonished professionals to hasten slowly and always cross-check their facts.

Discussions and implications

The study explored the usage, application, benefits, and threats of GenAI among PR practitioners in Africa. Furthermore, we explored the existence of ethical policies and guidelines associated with utilizing GenAI technologies. Through a qualitative research approach, we derived insights from practicing PR professionals in Africa. Our participants exhibited a good grasp of the technology, providing a reasonable foundation for inferring that PR professionals in Africa appreciate GenAIs and their pertinence to PR practice. The results imply that the bedrock to the application and usage of GenAI – perceptively understanding their relevance, is evident in the African context.

Despite the African continent primarily receiving new technologies rather than originating them, current dynamics within the global economy and the highly competitive business environment underscore the significance of cutting-edge technologies as essential tools for gaining a competitive advantage and ensuring long-term viability. Consequently, in light of these factors, and notwithstanding the inherent obstacles, Africa can be characterized as an early adopter of technology, owing to its active engagement with the diffusion of technological innovations. As the world takes on the fourth industrial revolution, where technology and innovation continue to play pivotal roles in shaping operational activities, it is noteworthy that PR practitioners in Africa exhibit a reasonable understanding of GenAI and its significance in their profession.

However, it is instructive to note that all the participants mentioned ChatGPT almost as a substitute for GenAI when, indeed, there are other very useful GenAI tools that could benefit the practice. This finding indicates that practitioners possess a restricted understanding of GenAI in the tech market, its diverse variations, and brands beyond the popular ChatGPT. The market for AI tools within the PR field is experiencing significant growth. According to industry data on the popularity of these technologies, at least 120 distinct AI tools are used in PR (Waddington, 2023). The limited awareness of alternative GenAI brands inherently limits African PR professionals from benefiting from the diversity and distinctiveness offered by the various brands. They must avert their minds to other GenAI tools and make the best of the explosion. This can be achieved through personal research endeavors and self-learning. At the organizational level, the professionals could be trained and exposed to the various GenAI tools and their respective relevance to the profession. Additionally, by way of policy and human resource development strategy, company-wide policies such as subscriptions and procurement of these technologies should involve expert recommendations to be exposed to varied and relevant options and, ultimately, obtain value for money.

Curiosity, convenience, timesaving, pursuit of excellence and efficiency, and cost-saving are the primary motivations driving African PR professionals to use GenAI tools. The finding partially validates existing theories for technology adoption (Technology Acceptance Model- TAM (J. S. Lim & Zhang, 2022), as their underlying assumptions find expression in the current finding. Recurring tasks that require, for instance, content generation for activities such as press briefings, social media content, speeches, editorial roles, research, and planning, among others, when deployed with assistance from GenAI tools, obviously enhance workflow. The finding impels organizational leaders to invest in GenAI tools as their decipherable and proven significance to PR professionals is unearthed. In the grand scheme of things, the findings corroborate industry forecasts and studies, showing that PR professionals see AI tools as a net positive since they allow them to work more swiftly and with heightened intelligence (Panda et al., 2019). PR professional associations, academic institutions focusing on PR through research and pedagogy, governments, and development partners should actively adopt these advancements and integrate them into their planning and strategic efforts to achieve broader acceptance. The lack of collective and coordinated endeavors that emphasize and purposefully integrate the beneficial aspects of AI into its usage motivations could potentially undermine the advancements achieved thus far, particularly within the African PR professional domain. This is because, while PR professionals increasingly recognize the importance of Generative AI, affiliated institutions and organizations may still lag in acknowledging and incorporating these tech advancements. By way of strategy, human resource

managers and leaders of in-house PR or agency leads must initiate company-wide conversations on these motivations and upskill the professionals to enable them to fully derive and experience the benefits of these hyper-enabling technologies.

The study also sought to unearth possible changes and, therefore, new skillset for PR practitioners occasioned by the adoption of GenAI. Even though almost unanimously, the participants did not see any drastic changes in skillset, a significant finding was the participants' reflections on skills required to give customized instructions to GenAI-powered platforms to generate valuable outputs that are insightful and precise. The participants disclosed that the outputs occasioned by this set of customized instructions still require some level of editorial work in order to humanize the content, ensure precision, reduce verboseness, bring relevance, inculcate professional tones, and in so doing, generally personalize contents and experiences with GenAI. Just like with humans, the quality of GenAI outputs comes down to the quality of the briefs. For PR professionals to frame a customized set of instructions that generates relevant and unputdownable content, organizational training, and self-learning through exploring the features and programmed functionalities of these GenAI tools could be some of the potential approaches to upskill PR professionals in that regard. It is worth noting that the curiosity factor, as part of the previously mentioned motivational drivers, predisposes and inherently inclines African PR professionals toward embarking on the suggested GenAI exploration journey. Failure to embrace technological advancements could result in other business functions, such as management consultancy and digital marketing, encroaching upon the PR domain.

Socio-cultural factors affecting the use of GenAIs, such as language and translation challenges, were also unearthed. There is also social stigma attached to the usage of GenAI as it is perceived to be a lazy approach to work and under the assumption that all work must be done by the professional and that ceding work to a technological alternative indicates a lack of creativity. These socio-cultural issues are unsurprising as several societies recognize writing as a quintessential human skill and a revered professional practice. As such, GenAI presents a significant challenge to the conventional perception of writing. Consequently, if the demonstration of literacy ceases to rely on conventional writing, it will become difficult to accommodate within a culture. The rapidity of GenAI proliferation and its adoption across sectors has not undergone cultural assimilation and, at this juncture, fulfills many cultural biases and inclinations. As these technologies enable a broader spectrum of individuals to produce high-quality written content, they instigate a transformative shift in societal values. This transformation extends beyond evaluating the merit of written compositions; it fundamentally alters how individuals are assessed in various contexts, signaling a profound paradigm shift in progress. It is important to note that research and commentaries around GenAI and culture are almost non-existent in the extant literature, and the finding gives compelling reasons for scholarship to start examining the links between socio-cultural norms and the advent and continuous rapid transformation of GenAI tools.

To navigate these socio-cultural conundrums, organizations are encouraged to develop policies and procedures for using GenAI tools to enhance cultural adaptation. This could be done by scrutinizing practitioner and industry developments as these technologies emerge and evolve. Continuous data collection on employee perceptions of GenAI tools versus their cultural inclinations would be a starting point to moderate, influence, and shape users' techno-cultural perceptions of GenAI tools and reduce their socio-culturally inclined prejudices. This, in turn, may raise several pertinent questions:

(1) How do practitioners perceive GenAI tools as they evolve and impact work and human life?
(2) Which PR professional or staff, and to what extent, may resist these tools or endeavor to transform deeply entrenched societal values that hinder the adoption of AI?
(3) Can GenAI tools assist and clarify matters for employees who face language proficiency and creativity challenges?
(4) Might GenAI tools be viewed as a means of promoting social change and bridging the divide between creativity and literacy?
(5) Is it possible to regard GenAI tools as collaborative aids that enhance team efficiency and overall productivity?

The answers to these questions through continuous industry and organizational engagements may trigger an incremental behavioral change and a socio-cultural adaptation of GenAI beyond policies and frameworks to guide its usage.

Plagiarism, privacy, and non-disclosure of absolute reliance on AI to clients were key ethical issues unearthed. There was also, largely, the absence of ethical policy frameworks to guide the usage of GenAI tools among the practitioners. This is not surprising as the technology and its application remain nascent. These ethical dilemmas are closely linked to the socio-cultural discussions and are discussed in some recently published works on GenAI. For example, in their recent work, Dwivedi et al. (2023) have highlighted a series of ethical concerns stemming from ChatGPT and similar AI bots, including issues related to discrimination and biases, the potential for generating vulgar content, copyright infringement risks, plagiarism concerns, the generation of fabricated content, and the dissemination of fake information. These concerns have gained prominence, particularly with the popularity of OpenAI's ChatGPT. Existing literature suggests that ethical guidelines are not necessarily the sole foundation for individual ethical decision-making (Hagendorff, 2020). This is particularly pronounced when ethical standards lack robust reinforcement mechanisms, and deviating from such principles carries no consequences. Thus, organizations must grasp, effectively handle, and reduce the risks arising from ethical dilemmas associated with GenAI adoption. To achieve this, it is crucial to integrate ethical reviews and bias screening into their practices.

The study also unearthed some threats of GenAI to the PR profession. The results revealed that job relevance is contingent upon an individual's professional rank within the organizational hierarchy, particularly considering the proliferation of GenAI. Prior industry papers provide an optimistic perspective on the impact of AI on employment within the communication sector (Valin, 2018; Waddington, 2023). This view underscores the significance of qualities such as creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to nurture trusted relationships with stakeholders, which set human professionals apart from machines, as Galloway and Swiatek (2018) emphasized. It is essential to state that the fears of entry-level professionals (PR technicians) losing their relevance to GenAI may be valid as the four-role concept delineated by Broom and Smith (1979) and emphasized in Broom and Smith (1979, p. 215) states that "as a technician, the public relations person is mainly concerned with producing communication materials such as brochures, videotapes, newsletters, news releases, and so forth." They play a pivotal role in implementing communication programs but typically do not partake in the strategic decision-making process that shapes them. Upskilling in terms of further education and job training, especially on GenAI usage with specific skills in curating relevant commands to GenAI to derive significant contents and the humanization of same may help in that general regard. Reluctance, the lack of ingenuity and creativity, the possible lack of humanized content, and fact-checking were other plausible threats highlighted by the professionals. Indeed, Soriano and Valdés (2021) assert that technologies mostly centered on AI are only useful when they complement human capabilities. To that end, GenAI, per the theoretical underpinnings of the PR praxis, could be largely assistive, not entirely fail-safe, and overwhelmingly reliable. Thus, training and retraining, self-learning, and organizational-wide efforts at keeping pace with trends in GenAI are all required to minimize the inherent risks and threats in using these new technologies.

Theoretical contributions

Two major theories, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Role Theory, were employed as theoretical frameworks explicating GenAI adoption, usage, and its influence on the roles and responsibilities of PR professionals in Africa. The findings from the study confirm the contemporary relevance of these theories in the context of PR practice, validating the synchronicity between theory and practice. Two dominant assumptions of the TAM were found relevant as PR practitioners found GenAI useful and user-friendly in their line of duty, and this ultimately could be the reason for its high adoption and usage rates among African PR professionals. However, these specific drivers; *curiosity, the pursuit of excellence, and the quest to save cost*, even though they were found to be some of the

primary motivations for the adoption and use of GenAI among PR professionals in Africa, do not find expression in the core assumptions of TAM and its modifications and extensions such as UTAUT. Therefore, these drivers found in the current study extend the core assumptions of TAM in the context of adopting and using GenAI in the PR praxis. This gives room to future theorization, especially in other disciplines.

What is more, our study confirms the core postulations under the Role Theory, which is the delineation of core activities and expectations among communication technicians and managers. We found that the adoption and use of GenAI and the perceived impact on the PR profession vary across the two major roles. Whereas the communication technicians find GenAI to be a blessing because it reduces the daunting nature of their repetitive tasks, the communication managers perceive the emergence of GenAI as a threat to the communication technicians because their jobs could be replaced. The implication is that without applying the role theory in this study, the complexities and variations in the interplay between technology adoption and PR roles would not have been unearthed.

Conclusion

The study's findings are profound in many ways as they answer the basic questions and objectives it sought to address from the onset. In that regard, the understanding and application of GenAI in PR in the African context are unearthed. Again, the benefits, threats, GenAI-induced adaptations to core PR skills and functions, and the motivation for its usage have all been empirically uncovered. This is a significant contribution to the PR-AI literature as, to the best of our knowledge, the study assumes an early empirically driven insight into the phenomenon away from the conceptual discussions and narratives that abound. It also provides specificity with respect to the type and nature of AI interrogated. PR professionals in Africa are increasingly embracing, valuing, and effectively employing GenAI tools to facilitate and elevate the quality of their PR endeavors. However, we aver that the high adoption and usage rates are without any ethical policies at the individual and corporate organizational levels, and this is detrimental to the tenets of the profession in terms of transparency and accountability.

In light of these challenges, we offer pertinent and actionable recommendations in our discussion to assist practitioners in navigating this terrain more effectively. Even though some of the insights provided in this study may generally apply to other contexts, we urge practitioners and academics to proceed on that tangent with caution due to the methodological limitations imposed by the qualitative research paradigm.

Further research could assume a quantitative, longitudinal approach and extend the context to include other continents and relevant professional fields to access the interdisciplinary influence of GenAI. The measurement of return on investment on GenAI adoption and the technical skills and knowledge required to use GenAI tools to fully obtain its benefits effectively are all avenues for further studies.

Disclosure statement

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