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*A New Era in The Evolution of PR: Exploring the role of AI
in relationship-building and communication*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore how artificial intelligence (AI) is currently transforming communication and relationship-building in the public relations (PR) industry. This is done through six qualitative interviews with PR professionals from different agencies. The study looks at how AI affects trust, authenticity and communication in daily work. The findings reveal that AI is being used as a tool that enhances ideas, content and research. It is rarely seen as a replacement for human expertise. It is evident that attitudes toward AI varies depending on generations and this is influencing how openly it is discussed and used. The study also shows tensions between automation and authenticity, especially in sensitive client work. By employing Principal-Agent Theory, Communication Theory and Service-Dominant Logic, the thesis argues that AI's value lies not in automation, but in how well it is embedded in relational and co-creative practices. Therefore, the study offers insights into how PR practitioners can integrate AI while preserving the emotional foundations of their work.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, PR-industry, relationships, communication, authenticity*

1. Introduction

In 2009, two Domino's Pizza employees uploaded a sort of prank video to Youtube in which they played with food in the company's kitchen. This video quickly became viral, causing public outrage and a reputational crisis for the brand (Alsubhi, 2020). In the beginning of the crisis, Dominos chose not to respond to the criticism since they were fearing that addressing the incident would only make the situation even worse. However, as the video spread across social media, the company was somehow forced to act. They responded with an apology video from the CEO along with a transparent communication campaign to regain customers' trust.

This moment became a turning point for the public relations industry (hereafter referred to as PR) (Alsubhi, 2020). It demonstrated that communication had entered a new era where traditional PR through newspapers, radio and television became a fading memory. It is now more difficult for brands to fully control what is said about them, because social media lets consumers help create and change the story in real time (Alshubhi, 2020). The PR industry as a whole had to adapt quickly to this new landscape where it was likely that a single post could go viral and damage the brand's reputation or loyalty. PR professionals were forced to shift from a one-way messaging to real-time, two-way communication in digital environments (Macnamara, 2016)

Speed, transparency, and authenticity became essential qualities for effective public relations, as PR professionals were increasingly expected to operate with responsiveness and media

awareness in dynamic, digital settings. This marked the beginning of a new era in PR, where human connection and adaptability were placed at the center of communication strategies.

More than a decade later, the PR industry faces another major transformation and this time it is driven by artificial intelligence (from now on referred to as AI) (Perangin, Angin & Mukhlisiana, 2024). In 2023, Coca-Cola launched its campaign called “Create Real Magic”, inviting consumers to create original artwork with creative assets from the archives of Coca-Cola using AI tools powered by OpenAI (Coca Cola, 2023). While the campaign initially created curiosity and positive reactions among consumers, this soon changed. The campaign was praised for how it involved the audience in the creative process. By using AI, it blurred the lines between who was creating content, if it was the consumers, brand or the machine. This new way of engaging consumers was seen as a major step forward in marketing (Marr, 2023).

However, this also raises important questions about how companies build authentic relationships when brand communication is shaped by AI. As Yue et al. (2024) highlight, when consumers can't tell whether they are communicating with a real person or with something automated, like an AI system, it can make it harder for them to trust the brand. Digital PR now relies heavily on interactive strategies that aim to build trust and relational commitment through ongoing online engagement (Tong, 2022). As AI increasingly mediates these interactions, there is a growing risk that such communication might lose its human authenticity and emotional depth. If the consumers perceive these AI-driven engagements as artificial, it could undermine the trust that they are meant to build. This creates important questions about how we can keep human values in brand communication when it's often machines and not humans that are doing the work.

This study explores how AI impacts the relationship building and communication between consumers and PR agencies with a particular focus on authenticity and trust. Since the PR industry has changed a lot in the past decade it has become even more important to understand how PR can foster trust to form genuine relationships and build credibility (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). PR-practitioners that use AI-generated messages can make them sound convincingly human and that is why it remains unclear if this type of communication can genuinely sustain trust and authenticity in the long term.

As AI technologies become increasingly integrated into communication strategies, PR professionals are once again required to rethink their roles due to this new shift. The tools have changed, but their role with their clients remain the same: building trust, maintaining authenticity, and cultivating long-term relationships.

Building on this, the purpose of this study is to bridge the gap in existing research by examining AI's impact on relationship-building and communication in a rapidly changing industry. The focus is on how AI-driven tools shape interactions between brands and customers, and how this development will continue to evolve in the future. This will be examined through qualitative interviews with different PR agencies based in Gothenburg. The research questions of the study is therefore:

- *How do PR professionals view the role of AI in managing customer relationships particularly in relation to trust, authenticity and communication?*
- *How will the role of AI in PR change or develop in the future?*

The thesis is structured to guide the reader from a broad understanding of the research field to an exploration of the findings. It begins with an introduction that presents the background and relevance of AI in the PR industry and the context of the research problem. Building on this, the literature review explores previous research across the areas: *The shift from traditional to relational PR, the rise of AI in PR practices, the impact of AI on trust, authenticity and emotional connection, and AI's influence on relationship-building strategies*. In the theoretical framework the thesis explores *Principal-Agent Theory, Communication Theory and Service-Dominant Logic* which supports the findings. In the methodology, the qualitative approach is argued for and the data collection is explained. The findings present the themes that are identified from the interviews and they are further connected to the theoretical concepts and literature. The thesis concludes with a discussion and the main contributions, managerial implications and suggestions for future research, as well as a conclusion that aims to answer the research questions.

1.1 Problematization

Digitalization and social media are two reasons that the PR industry has undergone such a significant transformation. Firstly, social media reshaped PR by enabling for instance real-time engagement and shifting narratives which required new forms of relationships (An, 2024). This created a major shift in the industry, and now the introduction of AI represents another shift, one that we have seen remains comparatively underexplored in the industry.

Previous studies have been done on business-consumer relationships, however most of these studies look at the communication between humans. With the rise of AI, this is constantly being challenged, as not all interactions are being handled only by humans nowadays (Oh & Ki, 2024). In the PR industry, companies hire PR professionals to promote their interests and enhance their public image. The relationship between customers and PR firms can be understood through a principal-agent framework which we will examine from the perspective of the agency problem (Eisenhardt, 1989). This study will later on explore this dynamic in greater detail.

Many studies highlight different advantages of AI, for example that it's enhancing efficiency and enabling data-driven decision-making, and less attention has been given to how AI affects trust, authenticity and relationship-building (Kretschmer & Winkler, 2023). Social media has enhanced interactions between humans but AI raises concerns about the risk of reducing PR to being overly automated.

Based on the research that we have found on AI and its influence on authenticity and trust, we have noticed a gap in the literature. From our reading and understanding, most literature

treats AI as a tool for automation, while the impact it has on the human side of communication is understood less. Therefore, the study aims to address that gap by exploring how AI reshapes emotional connection and trust in the context of PR. As PR to a great extent is dependent on storytelling, collaborations and emotional communication (Wang, 2021), it is important to look into whether AI supports or undermines these practices. On one hand, AI can enhance efficiency and speed, but on the other hand it is uncertain if it can preserve the emotional depth that is central to long-term relationships. By exploring how PR professionals experience and adapt to these issues, this research seeks to expand our understanding of AI's broader impact on the core values of public relations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of literature review

The literature review presents previous research of the topic discussed in the thesis. It covers four different areas, firstly the shift from traditional PR to relational communication, second the rise of AI in PR, further trust and authenticity in AI-driven communication and lastly AI and relationship building in PR practices. Together these themes give the reader an understanding on how AI is reshaping communication practices in the PR-industry.

2.2 Traditional PR to Relational Communication

According to Ries and Ries (2002), PR is the primary tool for establishing a brand in the consumer's mind since it generates credibility through media coverage. It is a planned and strategic handling of communication between stakeholders and the organization aiming to build long-term trust together with visibility. Traditionally, PR relied on mass media and one-way messaging to influence consumers (Smith, 2021). However, the digitalization of communication has reshaped the industry. According to Wang et al. (2021) social media has introduced a new era of PR that is characterized by real-time dialogue, collaborative involvement, and user-generated content. This shift gave rise to what they call social media-related PR, a research field that explores how social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have redefined the relationship between organizations and their publics. Wang et al. (2021) also emphasize that social media has changed the role of PR practitioners, from one-way messaging to dynamic, two-way communication. This is changing how trust and authenticity are built. Their study highlights the increasing importance of two-way dialogue in building trust and authenticity, with growing attention to real-time engagement and personalization.

While social media enables more human-centered interaction, AI introduces a new communicative logic in which human connection can be simulated or automated (Kretschmer & Winkler, 2023). This shift raises important questions about how trust and authenticity are maintained when communication is mediated or even generated by machines, rather than people. Research by McAllister (2012) and Romenti et al. (2014) demonstrates that social

media allowed organizations to respond with transparency and empathy during crises and reputational threats, thereby strengthening stakeholder trust. These insights highlight the critical role of emotional responsiveness in PR which may be difficult to replicate in an authentic way when using AI in communication.

The shift toward more collaborative communication is evident in the evolution of relational theories within PR. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) symmetrical communication model represented an early move away from one-way influence, emphasizing mutual understanding and dialogue. Expanding on this perspective, Ledingham (2003) conceptualized PR as the management of organizational relationships, where communication is not only as a strategic function but also as a foundation for trust and long-term engagement. Together, these theoretical developments highlight the importance of trust, empathy, and authenticity. These are values that are increasingly challenged by the growing integration of AI into PR practices.

2.3 The Rise of AI in PR

AI can be referred to as technologies that can perform tasks that typically would need human intelligence, such as processing natural language, recognizing patterns and supporting decision-making (Perangin Angin & Mukhlisiana, 2024). In PR, AI has transformed the industry and the work, offering new possibilities for automating tasks, analyzing audience behavior, and enhancing communication. This growing integration of AI in PR is especially relevant to this study, as it raises questions about how AI affects the emotional and relational foundations of PR.

In recent years, PR professionals have started using AI tools to make their work easier, such as creating content and targeting the right audience (Tülstoy, 2022). According to Tülstoy (2022), AI is mainly used in four main areas: understanding consumers, measuring how well advertising works, planning media and producing content. This shows a shift to using more data and to plan communication more carefully. Tahoun and Taher (2021) also explain that AI can help organizations understand how people feel, which allows them to create more personal and emotional messages. This kind of emotional targeting is different from traditional PR that focused more on general groups. Therefore, AI is not only a tool to save time, it also changes how PR builds relationships and trust.

An example of this shift is shown by Bangera et al. (2024), who explain how Spotify uses certain algorithms to create personalized listening experiences. This is based on users' behaviors and listening patterns. However, this personalization also brings ethical concerns, such as being seen as manipulation and lacking consent (Tülstoy, 2022). While AI offers benefits like speed, scalability, and efficiency, it also has shortcomings. According to Tahoun and Taher (2021), AI lacks cultural understanding, creativity, and the ability to grasp different contexts.

Perangin Angin and Mukhlisiana (2024) explain that AI can help organizations understand their audience better by analyzing emotions, spotting trends and patterns in behavior. This helps create faster and more data-based strategies. Tools like chatbots and recommendation

systems also make communication more efficient, giving PR professionals more time to focus on creative and strategic work.

However, without thoughtful implementation, this kind of automation may make human connections feel impersonal or mechanical. Looking at the bigger picture, Hillebrand and Raisch (2025) suggest that AI should not just be seen as a tool. Instead, they see it as part of a system where humans and machines work together across organizations. This shifts the focus from just automating tasks to understanding how AI affects strategy, teamwork, and long-term relationships. This view is especially important in PR, where AI is not only used to carry out communication but also helps decide how communication is planned, measured, and integrated into the organization's way of working.

Overall, these ideas show that while AI helps make communication more personal and strategic, it also raises new questions about how relationships in PR are built and maintained.

2.4 Trust and Authenticity in AI-driven Communication

Trust and authenticity are two important concepts in PR. According to Valentini and Kruckeberg (2011), trust helps people deal with all the information and uncertainty they face in today's society. PR professionals play an important role here by helping people understand organizations and by building strong relationships between them. However, using AI in PR work has created new challenges. Ward (2013) explains that real, authentic communication should feel emotionally honest and personal, something that AI has a hard time copying. Even if AI can create messages that sound human, they often lack the feeling, spontaneity, and responsibility behind real human communication. People are more likely to trust messages that feel genuine and personal, especially in emotional or sensitive situations.

Other researchers agree with this notion. Liew (2021) warns that too much use of machines and AI can make messages feel boring or fake. This makes it harder to build real emotional connections with the audience. Perangin Angin and Mukhlisiana (2024) add that to keep people's trust, AI must be used in a transparent and ethical way. They say it's important that AI is trained on fair and diverse data to avoid bias and discrimination. They also believe that PR professionals must clearly explain how AI handles people's personal data and make sure communication stays ethical and trustworthy.

2.5 AI and Relationship-Building in PR Practice

The main goal of PR isn't just to send messages, it is simply to build relationships. Ledingham (2003) states that successful relationships should be judged by trust, loyalty, and mutual understanding, not just by how much communication happens. AI can help support this kind of relationship-building. According to Yue et al. (2024), AI helps PR professionals understand their audiences better and respond faster. Tools like sentiment analysis allow them to see how people feel, predict changes in public opinion, and adjust their messages in real time to stay trustworthy.

Chanduví (2023) also highlights the value of tools that personalize content based on how people behave and what they like. This makes communication feel more relevant and engaging, helping organizations build stronger connections with different groups. Together, these studies show that AI helps move PR from just reacting to events to being more proactive and personalized.

However, there's still debate about whether AI can create real emotional connections. Zararsız (2024) warns that too much automation can make interactions feel cold or robotic. This is especially a problem in industries like fashion and lifestyle, where personal storytelling is important (Liew, 2021). On the other hand, AI might work better in areas like crisis communication or corporate messaging, where fast data analysis is more valuable (Yue et al, 2024). This challenge shows a bigger issue in digital PR, the balance between being personal and being authentic. AI can help target messages very precisely, but that doesn't always mean the communication feels real or emotional. Tombleson and Wolf (2017) argue that true authenticity comes from involving the audience and consumers in the process, letting them shape the message instead of just receiving it. This kind of shared meaning depends on trust, values, and emotional depth.

Another challenge is that AI lacks the human qualities that matter in communication such as empathy, moral judgment, and intuition. Without these, AI may treat communication as just a task, and not a relationship. While some say AI is getting better at understanding language and emotion (Perangin Angin & Mukhlisiana, 2024), others argue it still can't fully replace the human ability to understand context and behave ethically (Liew, 2021).

These issues are not entirely new. In the age of social media, audiences already started shaping messages themselves. Tombleson and Wolf (2017) showed that communication is no longer top-down but that people expect to take action. AI adds to this shift by taking over parts of communication that used to be done by humans. Because of this, PR-practitioners must now use digital tools carefully while still respecting emotions and ethics.

At the same time, AI can strengthen relationships when used wisely. Perangin Angin and Mukhlisiana (2024) explain that AI tools can help detect crises early by tracking changes in public mood. This helps organizations respond faster and more effectively which is especially important when trust is at risk.

To sum up, how AI affects relationships in PR depends on how it's used. If it helps make communication more personal and efficient, while still keeping human empathy, creativity, and responsibility then it can be a powerful tool. But if these human values are lost, AI risks weakening the very relationships that PR is meant to build.

2.6 Contribution of This Study

All four areas discussed in the literature review are relevant to this study. However, the main contribution lies in examining how AI is practically used in PR work within the studied companies, and what this means for relationship-building and trust. The first part of the

literature review, the overview of traditional PR and relational communication, mainly serves to provide necessary background for readers unfamiliar with the field's evolution. The core focus is on how AI is currently affecting trust, authenticity, and relationship-building in professional PR practice, an area where academic research remains limited.

Through this empirical focus, the study will either confirm, nuance, or challenge existing theoretical assumptions about AI's role in PR, offering an understanding of how new technologies are reshaping the PR-industry.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Overview of Theories

The theories in this study include *Principal-Agent Theory*, *Communication Theory and Service-Dominant Logic*. These theories have been chosen to provide insights into how agencies establish and maintain relationships with their clients and how communication strategies are shaped. Given that AI is currently transforming the PR industry, the theories will help examine the extent to which AI-driven tools aligns with or challenges traditional relationship-building practices.

3.2 Principal-Agent Theory

Principal-agency theory is a model that is based on the idea that principals and agents have different objectives and goals. It suggests that people often act based on their own interests and that they possess different levels of risk depending on the objective (Brown Johnson & Droege, 2004). The model is usually used to explain challenges regarding decision-making from a principal to an agent, where the agent is someone who takes on a specific task. The model highlights the importance of establishing incentives, supervision and communication, to make sure that the agent behaves in a way that is beneficial for the principal. However, there are situations where agents may not always act in the principal's best interest which can be referred to as information asymmetry (Zhou, 2023).

Furthermore, Zhou (2023) argues that the principal and agent's different goals and priorities can create conflicts between them. This is because an agent may behave or act in ways that benefit themselves to a greater extent. Additionally, the information between an agent and principal is often unbalanced as they have different responsibilities which makes it difficult for the principal to completely monitor the agent's actions. However, when a relationship between the principal and agents has existed for a long time and is well established, the principal will eventually learn more about the agent. This makes it easier to understand the agent's behavior over time (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Circling back to Zhou (2023) and the principal's difficulties observing the action of the agent, the principal assesses the agent's efforts based on varying situations. This might make the agent exaggerate challenges or downplay expectations in order to look more hardworking

than they actually are. In this way, the agent can hold back or manipulate information to benefit their own interests. Because of this, the efforts of the agent can be either beneficial or harmful, depending on how well their goals align with the principal. The gap between the principals and agents' different intentions can be reduced by providing different incentives to promote an alignment between the principal and agents objectives.

The principal-agent model is a theoretical framework used for evaluating decision-making in relationships between principals and agents. There is an emphasis on incentives and communication in order to align the parties' differing interests. A great variety of industries are struggling with issues like information asymmetry, and this can not only create tensions but also create a power imbalance between the parties (Zhou, 2023).

With the increasing role of AI use in the PR industry, the information that is exchanged between agencies and clients is not the same as it used to be. This creates a new dynamic between the parties which makes principal-agent theory particularly relevant to this study. It helps understand how the agencies and clients must adapt to ensure that their differing goals align, while AI continues to have a bigger role in the relationships.

3.3 Communication Theory

Looking back, PR has focused heavily on external communication by engaging with their audiences through media, crisis management and brand positioning. These have been important factors for the industry. However, more recently there has been emphasis on internal communication in order to build a strong organizational culture and to influence external brand perception. PR and internal communication shouldn't be viewed as separate entities any longer, as internal communication directly influences external brand reputation (Johansson, 2007)

According to Van Ruler (2018), it's fair to say that communication can be studied from many different viewpoints. However, it's certain to say that communication is, in its core, about understanding how people interpret words and messages when they're communicating, and how uncertainties are met and resolved. Without communication, there can be no meaning, and people continue to create meaning in their everyday interactions.

When it comes to communication, Van Ruler (2018) argues that there are three main views on how meaning is being constructed. There is something called *one-way communication*, where the sender delivers a message in order to shape the receiver's understanding of it. Further, there is *two-way communication*, where the meaning is created through interaction between two or more people that interprets the message.

Lastly, Van Ruler (2018) refers to an *omnidirectional diachronic process* which suggests that communication is continuously evolving and meaning is shaped all the time, because it's being impacted by the context. To elaborate on this, what occurs is a dynamic exchange between senders and receiver, which shapes the impact that the message has. It's therefore less about personal relationships and to a greater extent what actually matters is the

communication itself. This means that the people communicating don't need to be close to each other physically in any way (Van Ruler, 2018).

This view on communication is relevant when studying AI's impact on relationship-building as it acts as a way to understand how AI contributes to creating meaning in relationships. It helps explain how meaning is created and sustained in different environments and contexts. Communication must keep up with AI's involvement in interactions that continue to take place everyday. This will be a base to see if AI-driven communication aligns or challenges with traditional communication theories.

3.4 Service-Dominant (S-D) Logic

Service-dominant logic (S-D logic) is essentially a shift in the way that marketing is viewed. Traditionally, there has been a product-focused approach to marketing that has been questioned by a shift towards a more service-oriented approach. This is called S-D Logic and it means that value is not delivered to customers but instead co-created with them. From this view, the brand is not just a product but becomes part of an experience (Payne et al, 2009).

Relationships have also changed, where relationships between consumers and businesses are viewed as part of a network of interactions where value is co-created by both parties. Brands play a big role here as they facilitate ongoing communication and trust-building. Moreover, S-D logic highlights the growing importance of intangible resources like skills, knowledge and processes, and interaction-based aspects as essential for value creation (Payne et al, 2009).

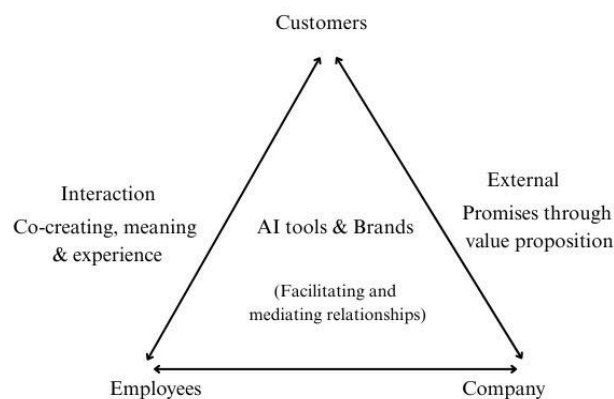


Fig 1. The extended service brand-relationship-value triangle illustrated by the authors with inspiration from Fyrberg & Jürriado (2009)

Fyrberg and Jürriado (2009) presents a figure that is called the “service brand-relationship-value triangle”. They use this to explain the network which explains how actors integrate with each other and that this leads to co-creation and value. In this thesis, the triangle has been extended, as AI nowadays can be viewed as a third party in this collaborative process.

Fyrberg and Jürriado (2009) argue that trust and power dynamics are two important things to consider in the value network, as this is important to sustain lasting relationships. Some actors in the network may have more influence than others, this can lead to a more hierarchical structure, which could hinder innovation. Maintaining a balance within the network is a key challenge when it comes to trust and power. Active participation in the network and a high number of connections may gain greater benefits compared to less engaged members. It is important that all of the participants feel like their voices are heard and that they contribute to value. Additionally, it is beneficial to take advantage of the strengths of all members in the network and to consider input from all participants. (Fyrberg & Jürriado, 2009).

Another aspect that is critical is the interactions that occur in the network. The interaction acts between parties as a glue that connects the network by facilitating the exchange of certain information, supporting collaborative decision-making, power and building trust. It is also important to keep a unified force within the network and the various actors may employ competitive strategies and have power to influence the direction of the network. Without a clear structure this could undermine the communication and hinder the effectiveness of the network (Fyrberg & Jürriado, 2009).

The S-D Logic framework is significant for this thesis as it will be a base for understanding how AI technologies introduce a change in collaboration and how it acts in conjunction with human employees.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Methodology

In order to answer the research questions and to connect to the aim of the study, the thesis adopts a qualitative approach. This was considered the most suitable for answering the two research questions of the study. As Magnusson and Marecek (2015) mentions, the purpose of a qualitative research paper is to understand how people make sense of a certain problem. It is also to understand how this is shaping their actions and future decisions. Therefore, in a qualitative paper it is significant to listen to respondents and how they describe their experiences in their own words. This has been a big focus during the interviews, to let them speak freely and express their thoughts thoroughly.

Further, the research process hasn't been following a straight path, which is something that Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) recommends. They highlight the importance of moving back and forth in the stages of the research process and to look at the research problem several times. Also it's important to refine the interview questions and then collect the data. This approach has been adopted, for instance research question two were developed in a later stage of the research process. The authors also argue for the importance of not having predetermined assumptions about the research topic but rather to pay attention to the context of the study in order to gain a deep understanding of the field. These ideas were consistently

acknowledged during the development of this paper. Therefore, a qualitative method was chosen as it enables a deeper exploration of the topic and because it captures emotions and personal insights (Patel & Davidsson, 2019).

The empirical research included six semi-structured interviews with PR consultants from PR agencies in Gothenburg. Four of the interviews took place in physical settings, while two of them were held over Teams. To ensure reliable and honest answers, anonymity was guaranteed for everyone, allowing the employees to speak without any concern, as recommended by Bryman and Bell (2019).

4.2 Data collection

As mentioned previously, the data collection consists of six different interviews that all contribute with unique insights to the study. At times, there have been discussions regarding how many interviews a thesis should have but literature shows that there is no accurate answer to this question. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) states that rather than focusing on the number of interviews, what is important is whether the information that is collected is in line with the research questions. Therefore, there were no exact number of interviews decided beforehand. Furthermore, the criteria to participate in the study's interviews were that the participants needed to work at a PR-agency and have some insights regarding AI in their work. The participants' role in the workplace was therefore less significant.

Regarding the interview structure, the interviews were semi-structured which are a type of interview where the conversation follows a determined structure, but still allows for flexibility. These interviews are used to understand a person's feelings, opinions, and motivations, rather than just facts or behaviors. Semi-structured interviews have open-ended questions and are guided by certain topics, essentially an interview guide. This guide includes key areas and sometimes sub-questions, which are based on previous research and literature. The guide is meant to be adjusted as the interviewer learns more about the topic during the research process (Busetto et al, 2020). Therefore, the interview guides were adjusted several times.

All the interviewees in this study were presented with a general set of questions, for instance *"When did you first come into contact with AI in your professional role?"* and *"How has AI changed the way you carry out your work tasks?"* but the questions were also tailored and adjusted to the specific conversations that took place. Therefore, the interviews allowed for some flexibility, which allowed different topics to come up during the conversations. This can reduce the bias that might occur in written surveys, which often only focus on what the researcher already knows (Busetto et al, 2020). The interviews were also audio recorded and later transcribed, and the audio was deleted after transcribing the interview.

As mentioned, the interview guide was updated multiple times. For instance, a section on "ethics" was removed after further research on the subject revealed that it would require more time and effort than we had within the timeframe for this thesis. Therefore, as the theoretical

framework evolved and was refined, the interview questions were adjusted to align with these changes (Busetto et al, 2020).

Regarding the participants of the study, the respondents have been employed at their agencies for periods ranging from 2 to over 10 years. In the findings and analysis section the interviewees will be referred to as Respondents 1 through 6.

Table 1: Overview of Study Participants

Company	Position	Description	Respondent
Company A	CEO & Senior PR Consultant	This agency has a focus on PR, digital marketing, brand strategy, crisis communication, and employer branding, especially with B2B clients	Respondent 1
Company B	Content Creator & Art Director	This is a communication agency within public relations, brand strategy, and marketing	Respondent 2
Company C	PR-Consultant	This is a PR agency specializing in strategic communication, media relations, and building strong brands	Respondent 3
Company D	PR- Consultant	This is a PR agency specializing in strategic communication, media relations, and building strong brands	Respondent 4
Company E	PR-Consultant	This PR agency that specializes in, for instance, lifestyle and interior design	Respondent 5
Company F	Project Leader, Account Manager	This agency specializes in strategic PR, influencer marketing and social media. It focuses on industries such as health and lifestyle.	Respondent 6

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4.3 Data Analysis

The data that was collected was further analyzed using a thematic analysis approach which is a widely used method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility and its ability to capture nuanced perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017).

The analysis followed an inductive approach (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), allowing themes to emerge from the data that was collected rather than from pre-existing frameworks. An inductive approach is suitable for studies that explore new or emerging phenomena as in this case with AI in the PR-industry, since it allows findings to emerge naturally from the participants' experiences (Bell et al, 2022).

The data that was collected from the interview was read several times in order to analyze it and to be able to code it. When several rounds of reading the interview transcripts were done, relevant segments and quotes were highlighted manually and coded with each code representing a specific category or observation. These codes were later grouped into its own category based on the recurring patterns. From these categories themes were then developed to structure the findings.

The following key themes emerged from the data: *AI as a colleague, Trust and Transparency in AI-Enhanced PR Work, Generational Approaches to AI Integration, AI as part of Teamwork, Co-creation and Communication and Future outlook: The evolving role of the PR-profession.*

4.4 Quality of the study

To ensure the quality and the trustworthiness of the study several aspects have been considered including ethical considerations, credibility and transparency. Firstly, ethical considerations have been a central part throughout the research process. All participants participated voluntarily and they were informed about the purpose of the study, how their data would be handled and also their right to withdraw at any time. Further, anonymity was guaranteed to create a safe environment for the participants to speak freely. This was particularly important since it is a sensitive topic for some to discuss AI in the context of their professional work.

To strengthen the credibility of the study all interviews were transcribed and reviewed several times. A thematic analysis was conducted inductively meaning that themes emerged from the data itself rather than being pre-defined as mentioned in the data analysis part. Codes and themes were systematically developed and constantly compared to the data to ensure consistency. As Bryman and Bell (2019) note, credibility in qualitative research can be

enhanced through a transparent, well-documented analysis process and by making clear how interpretations are rooted in the data.

Transparency has been a guiding principle in documenting and describing methodological choices. The interview guide was updated and refined, and new themes in the literature were integrated as the study progressed. As recommended by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), the research process was not strictly linear but rather a continuous reflection and adjustment to gain a deeper understanding of the topic.

It is also important to be transparent about the tools used during the writing process. AI-based tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly were used to improve and support the language and clarity of the thesis, to make it easier for the reader to follow. In addition, the tools were used to help translate the interviews from Swedish to English. However, we carefully revised the translations to make sure they stayed true to what was actually said. These tools also helped with idea generation when we got stuck, mostly in the early phases of the project. While they supported parts of the writing process, they did not replace our own critical thinking or original analysis.

4.5 Limitations

This study is geographically focused on PR-agencies based in Gothenburg which limits the scope of the findings to a specific region. This limits the generalizability of the findings in the work. The study also specifically investigates how AI influences relationship-building, trust, authenticity and communication between brands and consumers within the PR sector in the companies interviewed.

Given that the research is based on qualitative interviews, the findings provide rich and in-depth insights into the experiences of PR-professionals. However, the findings and conclusions from the study are not intended to be generalizable to the entire PR industry in Gothenburg. Instead, they reflect the perspectives and opinions of the specific individuals interviewed within the selected companies in the study. It is also important to note that the conclusions drawn are not representing the entire organization's view, only the ones that were interviewed.

5. Findings & Analysis

From the interviews with different PR-firms, six main themes have been identified which will be discussed in this chapter. In this part, the themes will be discussed and understood in connection to the theoretical framework and literature review presented earlier in the study.

5.1 AI as a Colleague

All the PR agencies that were interviewed reported using AI in their daily work in various ways. Despite differences in the extent and manner of integration, a recurring theme was that AI is primarily regarded as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for human expertise.

Across the interviews, respondents emphasized that AI is used to increase efficiency, generate ideas and assist in structuring content, but it is never relied upon to produce final outputs without human intervention.

"We rather see it as a support tool, we would never use anything straight from it without reviewing it first, but rather as a colleague to brainstorm with" - Respondent 3

This view was echoed by others, describing AI as a "colleague" rather than an autonomous creator.

"AI is a colleague, a very fast and knowledgeable one but it needs guidance and review" - Respondent 4

"I never take a text directly from AI. It's always a collaboration. AI is a support tool, not a replacement for my work" - Respondent 2

"AI is good at research and structure but it's only as good as the instructions it receives. It's a support tool, not a replacement" - Respondent 1

"AI is definitely not something that creates a final product. It's more like a tool you brainstorm with and a tool in the initial phase" - Respondent 5

These responses show a shared understanding of AI as a non-autonomous tool, one that supports but does not replace the creative and relational work of PR professionals. Several interviewees emphasized that human review, judgment and adaptation are necessary to ensure quality, relevance, and trust in the final message. AI is thus integrated into early phases of communication work but it is not used without oversight.

By applying Van Ruler's (2018) communication theory, we can understand how AI in PR work is shaped by human meaning-making rather than technological output. Through this lens we can see that while AI can support content generation and provide structure in different ways, it lacks the capacity to create meaning. When respondents describe AI as a "colleague" or a "support tool", it becomes clear that communication in PR-work still depends on human interpretation. AI-generated content only becomes valuable when people review and adjust it to make sure it feels right for the situation. By using the insights from Van Ruler (2018) we can understand this collaboration as part of an ongoing process where meaning is shaped over time, through active human involvement. This highlights that while AI enhances efficiency, the core of authentic communication, and relationship-building, continues to rely on human insight and interaction. This reflects Tahoun and Taher (2021), insights that AI lacks the contextual understanding, creativity, and cultural sensitivity that human communicators bring to strategic communication. As a result, outputs remain incomplete without human intervention. Similarly, Theunissen (2014) points out that identity and meaning in digital communication are fluid and situational, making it difficult for AI systems to respond appropriately without human insights.

These findings may suggest that while AI can make PR work more efficient, the respondents use it in ways that prioritize human judgment. However, this study also adds nuance to previous research by showing that PR professionals are not simply resisting AI, but actively shaping its role as a collaborative partner. Rather than rejecting AI or handing over communicative control, PR professionals position AI as a tool for initial brainstorming and structuring.

5.2 Generational Approaches to AI Integration

Another repetitive pattern, or theme, in the interviews was that attitudes toward AI varied significantly across generations and levels of professional experience. While some agencies used AI as a regular tool, others were more hesitant or unsure, often depending on how senior they were and how comfortable they felt with digital tools.

One respondent described how AI has been integrated into daily work practices through an open and collaborative approach. AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, are used often and internal discussions about best practices and developments occur on a regular basis.

"We have a group called the AI group where we talk about AI every now and then, update each other and share new insights that we have learned with the whole team" - Respondent 3

This mindset reflects a culture where AI is seen not as a threat, but as a tool that enables the agency to stay at the forefront of digital innovation. Several interviewees emphasized that ignoring AI would be a strategic mistake with a risk falling behind especially in an industry undergoing rapid change.

"Everyone has an open approach and wants to learn. We don't see AI as a threat but more like a tool that can be used in our job. It would be silly not to take advantage of it and treat it as an asset" - Respondent 4

"I see it more as a tool and an asset than something to be worried about" - Respondent 5

This perspective aligns with Hillebrand and Raisch's (2025) integrative view of managing AI, where human-AI interaction is framed not in opposition but as a systemic relationship across multiple organizational levels. Rather than replacing human expertise, AI tools are introduced to extend and enhance it, supporting decision-making as well as managerial control. Through this lens, the participants in this study described AI as a resource that promotes learning and creativity which are core values in an adaptive and changing organizational culture. By taking an active role in defining how AI is used, the professionals showed a mindset toward experimentation rather than fear or resistance to technological advances.

However, the interviews also highlighted a generational divide in AI adoption. In several cases, younger employees were often described as more open and proactive in experimenting with AI tools, while older employees were more cautious or even resistant.

"Most of my colleagues are older women, super competent and structured but I don't think they use AI at all. We younger ones might sneak it in sometimes for simple tasks, just to speed things up, but never for doing the actual work we're assigned" - Respondent 5

This contrast demonstrates that technological adoption is not solely policy-driven but deeply rooted in generational attitudes toward technology. Familiarity, perceived risk, and confidence often corresponded to age, shaping how employees positioned themselves in relation to AI. Younger employees, having grown up with rapid technological change, often approached AI with a mindset of exploration. Older employees, by contrast, showed stronger adherence to established practices, partly out of caution toward perceived risks of automation.

From a Principal-Agent Theory perspective (Zhou, 2023), these findings reveal how information asymmetries and differences in initiative emerge internally. In environments where AI use is openly discussed and encouraged, transparency reduces the risk of hidden practices and aligns employee behavior with organizational goals. In contrast, when AI use remains informal and uncoordinated, employees may quietly adopt new tools without managerial oversight. This creates not only potential gaps in quality and consistency but also challenges the principal's ability to evaluate performance and ensure ethical use of AI. Through this lens, AI adoption becomes more than a technical issue since it highlights the importance of clear communication, oversight, and trust within the principal-agent relationship. Without these mechanisms, organizations risk misalignment between individual and organizational objectives, as well as unintended consequences related to autonomy and responsibility.

Using the lens of Service-Dominant Logic (Fyrberg & Jürriado, 2009), this approach can be understood as a co-creative process where value is generated not through isolated expertise, but through interaction, shared learning, and trust across roles and generations. According to respondent 4, AI is not framed as a disruptive force, but as a shared resource that is integrated through collaboration. This reflects an organizational culture where open communication acts as a resource, enabling employees to jointly shape how AI contributes to their work. Through this perspective, we see how value is not embedded in the technology itself, but emerges through how people engage with it together. This case illustrates how a strong communication culture, with openness and mutual respect, can act as a foundation for successful and inclusive AI integration.

Beyond age, professional experience also plays a significant role in how AI is integrated into PR work, not in terms of how often it's used, but how effectively. One respondent emphasized that the ability to critically assess and apply AI-generated content develops over time.

"I believe how long you've worked in the industry really influences how well you can use AI. It still can't tell whether a text is truly good or bad, that kind of judgement comes from experience" - Respondent 1

This perspective highlights that AI is not a substitute for professional judgment but a tool that must be guided by it. While less experienced professionals might use AI more frequently or

rely on it more, experienced consultants are better positioned to evaluate when and how to use it. The value of AI in communication work therefore depends on the user's ability to critically interpret and adapt its suggestions. Using the insights provided by Perangin Angin and Mukhlisiana (2024), we can understand this as a question of ethical and reflective practice. Their framework helps us see how AI integration requires not only technical skill, but the ability to make informed and responsible choices, something that develops with professional experience. From this view, experienced professionals are not just more effective at using AI, they are better equipped to manage its risks and limitations in complex communication work.

The respondent further reflected on how experience influences interactions with clients and the role of professional judgment.

"Some clients trust us completely and just make minor adjustments if needed. Others think they know communication better and rewrite everything. In doing so, they often remove the professional touch we bring" - Respondent 1

This illustrates how expertise is not only important for using AI effectively, but also for maintaining the quality of the final output. Experienced consultants do not treat AI as a shortcut, but as a complement to their own judgment. However, when clients lack trust in that expertise, even human-produced or human-edited, content may be undermined. This reinforces the idea that trust, both in people and processes, is central to AI integration. Without it, the benefits of AI risk being neutralized.

Generational and professional experience differences not only affect how people use AI in their PR work but also how confident and open they feel about it and talk about it. Some representatives in the study approach AI with a willingness to learn together with curiosity, while others are more cautious, especially if they don't fully trust the technology or feel confident enough to use it. These differences shape how AI is integrated into daily PR-work and how it is combined with human expertise.

Using Ledingham's (2003) perspective on relationships, we can understand that trust, both within teams and between clients and consultants, becomes especially important during moments of technological change. Without this foundation, even well-planned AI use may face resistance or reduce the quality of collaboration. While some agencies have created open and futuristic environments that support cross-generational learning and shared use of AI, others still struggle with traditional mindsets and hesitation. Organizations that foster dialogue and shared learning across experience levels are better equipped to use AI in ways that strengthen, rather than weaken, communication quality and value.

This theme shows that both generation and experience shape how AI is understood, accepted, and used in PR. These differences affect not just individual attitudes, but also how open, coordinated, and confident AI use becomes inside the organization, directly influencing transparency, innovation, and collaboration.

5.3 Trust and Transparency in AI-Driven PR Work

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was how the agencies navigate client relationships when integrating AI into their work processes. Since PR-agencies are often hired for their human expertise, the use of AI can raise questions around trust and authenticity. A key insight, therefore, is how agencies choose to communicate their use of AI to clients and how this transparency affects client perceptions.

Some agencies emphasized the importance of full transparency about AI use, underlining that openness is important in maintaining trust.

"We are always transparent with our clients that we use AI as a support tool during the idea phase, never to create finished text for them" - Respondent 4

This commitment to transparency can be understood through Perangin Angin and Mukhlisiana's (2024) perspective on AI-mediated communication. Their framework helps us see that openness is essential for maintaining trust and authenticity when communication is supported by AI. Respondent 4 chooses to be transparent with their clients in order to clarify the role of AI and ensure that the communicative outcome remains relational and emotional.

However, other agencies described a more selective approach, choosing when to disclose the use of AI based on the situation.

"We don't always proactively bring up that we use AI, unless it's relevant to the project. It can create unnecessary concern" - Respondent 3

"If clients ask directly, we explain it openly. But otherwise, we focus on the results, not how we get there" - Respondent 6

This approach reflects a desire to maintain client trust by avoiding unnecessary worry or skepticism around AI. In practice, being selectively transparent can in some situations help keep relationships smooth in the short run.

However, if we look at this situation using Principal-Agent Theory (Zhou, 2023), it becomes clear that there is an underlying tension. In this case, the agency (acting as the agent) chooses not to fully tell the client (the principal) how AI is being used in the work. At first this might seem harmless or even smart as it can help run things smoothly. But over time, this lack of openness can create problems, especially if the client later finds out and feels left out of important decisions. From this perspective, being only partly transparent can be seen as a way to avoid conflict in the short term. However by hiding the role of AI, agencies risk damaging trust in the long term if their clients start questioning their honesty.

This balancing act was, however, less relevant for agencies with long-standing client relationships, where trust had already been established through years of collaboration. In these specific cases, the integration of AI was not seen as a threat but rather as an extension of current practices.

“Our clients have been with us for many years and they trust us. We have never had a client asking how we use AI because they know how we work and what we stand for. AI doesn’t change the trust we have built up for several years nor how we deliver our work - Respondent 5

“We’ve had long-term relationships with most of our clients. They know the quality they can expect and that technology doesn’t replace our engagement” - Respondent 3

These agencies are also well-established in the industry, with strong reputations built over time. For many long-term clients, the value of working with a trusted PR partner goes beyond content creation. It includes strategic guidance, credibility, and positioning that strengthens their own visibility in the market. As a result, AI is not perceived as a cheaper alternative, but as a tool that the agency uses to enhance the expertise and partnership the client already benefits from. In this context, the presence of AI does not disrupt the relationship because the perceived value of the agency’s role remains high.

This can also be interpreted through the lens of S-D Logic (Payne et al, 2009). In PR agency client relationships, this means that trust, credibility, and shared understanding are intangible yet essential resources developed over time. As Fyrberg and Jürjado (2009) argue, maintaining balance in trust and power dynamics is crucial for long-term collaboration. Agencies that are transparent about their methods, including AI use, are more likely to sustain client engagement and co-create value. When trust is already established, AI becomes another component in the collaborative process rather than a disruption to it.

Further, using the insights from Ledingham (2003), the stability of these agency-client relationships can be understood as the result of trust built through consistent, human-centered interaction over time. These relationships are not transactional. Rather they are grounded in mutual understanding, reliability, and shared strategic goals. From this perspective, the introduction of AI does not disrupt the partnership, as the agency’s core value remains rooted in human judgment, long-term collaboration, and professional integrity.

However, not all agencies interviewed had exclusively long-standing, loyal clients. Skepticism among clients regarding AI’s ability to handle sensitive or nuanced communication tasks was still common.

“There is still some skepticism from clients when it comes to using AI for sensitive tasks. They want someone who understands nuances and can read between the lines” - Respondent 2

“Clients expect us to understand context and emotions, things that AI can’t fully grasp yet” - Respondent 6

Through the lens of Zararsız (2024) and Theunissen (2014), these client concerns can be seen as reactions to what AI still cannot do. Although AI can make communication faster and help tailor content on a basic level, it cannot understand emotional tone, ethical nuance, or the deeper meaning behind what is said. These are all essential in trust-based communication. This helps explain why many clients still prefer human involvement, because they are not just

looking for content, but for someone who can truly understand their context, needs, and intentions.

Although strong, long-term relationships can help reduce concerns about AI, such reassurance is not automatic. As Ledingham (2003) reminds us, trust is built through consistent interaction, and clients without that relational history may feel less confident about how communication is managed. In these cases, the importance of transparency and relational depth becomes even more apparent. As noted by Perangin Angin and Mukhlisiana (2024), authenticity in AI-mediated communication is not just about disclosure, but about fostering emotional connection and shared understanding.

According to these findings, trust and transparency are central to how PR agencies integrate AI into client relationships. In long-term relationships, trust can help ease the risks of AI use and reduce the demand for full disclosure. However, when such trust is not yet established, selective transparency may backfire, reinforcing information asymmetries and weakening the client relationship. From these findings, the success of AI integration in PR is not only about the technology's capacity, but about the relational base already in place and how it is actively maintained.

5.4 AI as part of Teamwork, Co-creation and Communication

Several respondents stated that teamwork is important on an everyday basis while also emphasizing that projects are rarely handled by only one person. Projects are often a collective effort and a shared responsibility between several team members at the agency. This is reflected further in the following statements:

“There’s always more than one of us who review the work before we send it to the client. It’s really important that we work in teams at all times, so I would say that most of the time. I work as part of a team” - Respondent 5

“For every client, there are at least two of us involved. That’s because we work from two perspectives, one strategic and overarching perspective, and one operational perspective” - Respondent 1

By applying S-D Logic to the respondents' insights, that sees relationships as a collaborative force, we can interpret this as a form of co-creation between colleagues (Payne et al, 2009). However, a new dimension of this network is introduced to the co-creation processes through the involvement of AI as an active participant in daily work tasks. In S-D Logic, co-creation is a process between two human actors. When AI is introduced, it assists a third party in the value creation network and value is instead produced by both humans and AI (Payne et al, 2009). This is significant as it challenges traditional ways of viewing co-creation. The interplay between human employees and AI suggests a shift towards a more complex model of collaboration. Instead, value is being shaped through the collaborative effort of both PR professionals, AI tools and sometimes their clients.

AI being a third party can introduce some tensions, certainly when discussing the topic of trust. AI is being a part of PR work in many ways, but its role seems to be highly dependent on the context and often lacks the level of trust that human employees can offer in a collaboration. This was illustrated by respondents who noted that AI is less trusted when it comes to, for instance, translating text into other languages:

“Sometimes we write press releases in different languages. When I started working here, I thought we were the ones translating the text into Norwegian, but my colleagues said absolutely not, don't use AI. Instead we pay a lot of money to an agency that specializes in this” - Respondent 5

If, for example, we need to translate something into Finnish, we always have a native Finnish speaker review it first” - Respondent 1

These examples show that AI is embraced in some parts of the work, but is not used in situations where trust and accuracy are of great importance. This shows that, according to these respondents, trust in AI tools is still evolving. In high-stakes and sensitive tasks, like communication across languages, human collaboration is still very much preferred. This aligns with findings by McAllister (2012) who argues that communication is significant in high-pressured situations, where accuracy and transparency is important for maintaining trust. Translating texts into another language is seen as a task where accuracy and understanding of the language is crucial. In these situations, any mistakes could not only weaken the message but also damage client relationships and harm the agency's reputation.

As shown by these respondents, while AI tools are available, agencies choose to outsource the task of translating text to native speakers in order to ensure quality and trust. This reflects a hesitation towards AI but also shows that they prioritize relationships and integrity at the firm. These insights are further supported by research by Tombleson and Wolf (2017) who argue that authentic co-creation depends on participatory processes between humans, where meaning is developed through relational depth. According to the authors, AI can risk undermining this as AI-generated communication doesn't have the emotional depth that is often required for maintaining authenticity. While AI may increase efficiency, its role also challenges existing notions of authenticity and trust.

Being selective in AI usage also shows implications for internal communication. As Johansson (2007) states, internal and external communication shouldn't be treated as separate entities. Therefore, internal discussions around how AI is used directly influences how the organization is perceived externally. Regarding how much AI was discussed at the workplace, the respondents have different experiences. Respondent 5 particularly stated that it was not discussed at all:

“My experience is that there isn't much talk about AI or ChatGPT in my workplace, so I don't really know if my colleagues use it” - Respondent 5

This can be understood from a Principal-Agent Theory perspective. Not being open around how AI is used could show a issue of information asymmetry. According to this theoretical

lens, when agents face unclear expectations and little oversight, they may engage in behaviors that align more with their own preferences than with the principal's (Zhou, 2023). In this particular case, the lack of internal communication around AI shows a lack of guidelines at the firms. This results in employees using AI without revealing it to others, or completely avoiding AI. According to Fyrberg and Jürjado (2009), hierarchies at a workplace could restrict innovation. Therefore, it could be argued that having strict and hierarchical structures where AI is not openly discussed, could eventually lead to less innovation at the workplace, potentially causing them to fall behind. This can further be connected to the study done by Liew (2021) who argues that relying too much on AI when it comes to, for instance, communication, can lead to lack of trust and authenticity, which could create even more hesitation around AI.

Many of the respondents have stated how important it is to not fall behind and be updated in the latest innovations of AI, respondent 4 particularly stated:

“I think it's more important for an agency not to be afraid of using AI and to actively try to develop within that area. Otherwise, there's a risk of being outcompeted by other agencies that know how to use AI in a way that allows them to work more efficiently and therefore become more attractive to clients. I think it's super important to keep up in order to remain a relevant and attractive agency in the industry” - Respondent 4

Another respondent agreed with this, describing how their agency strives to stay informed and up to date with technological developments:

“I would say that the whole agency is very up to date when it comes to the latest developments in AI. And it's considered really important. You almost have to be updated nowadays in order to keep up with everything” - Respondent 3

These insights show that in these cases, AI is not only seen as a tool for efficiency but should be a broader part of strategic positioning, both internally among teams and externally towards clients. This relates to Valentini and Kruckeberg (2011) who notes that trust is essential in complex societies, where people are constantly being exposed to uncertainties and a lot of overwhelming information. Therefore, it is especially important for the respondents to reduce this complexity and foster meaningful relationships. As today's society is increasingly divided and fast-paced, this becomes even more vital.

As both respondents and literature suggests, the impact AI has on relationships, whether among colleagues or with clients, depends on how well it is embedded in trust and openness.

5.5 Changing Nature of Relationships in the Age of AI

Throughout the interviews, it has been clear that with the introduction of AI, the nature and structure of relationships have changed. The principal-agent model helps explain some of the conflicts that arise in the relationships between PR-firms and their clients (Zhou, 2023). We have seen that PR-professionals have specialized knowledge in for instance the media landscape and communication, expertise that their clients don't typically have. This means

that clients must rely on the firm's recommendations when hiring them for a project. From this point of view, the relationship between the two parties can be understood to be affected by information asymmetry. As Zhou (2023) states, there is usually a power imbalance between the two parties that could affect their relationships. As previously mentioned, some respondents have several long-term customers which makes trust a cornerstone of their relationships.

“Our clients are mostly companies that have been loyal to us for many years. AI is still relatively new, and we’ve had some customers for over 10 years. We work on the same things and know what they want, and over the years the collaboration has only grown to be better and better” - Respondent 5

As access to AI tools can be available for more and more people, it offers new opportunities for reducing the information gap between PR firms and their clients. Clients can now, easier than ever, access and analyze information about the work that is performed on their behalf. This can increase transparency and act as a support tool in making more informed decisions. From this point of view, AI can be understood to reduce information asymmetry which is a core issue in principal-agent relationships (Zhou, 2023). However, it seems like it does not eliminate the need for expertise from professionals. Respondent 3 states:

“Many times the clients turn to us because they either don’t have the time or they want our expertise” - Respondent 3

Therefore, the agent's role is still important and, from this view, rather than replacing the agent, AI is reinforcing the agent’s work. This places an emphasis on the importance of expertise and knowledge in a more transparent decision-making environment that we have today. However, as it is easier than ever to access information, it has given more power to the clients and this has sometimes resulted in them making use of this power. Respondent 5 describes how some clients want to take advantage of AI themselves and rewrite the agency’s professionally written texts:

“Some clients want to remake what we have done in a project in order to suit their perspective or apply it to something they have found on the internet” - Respondent 5

This is an example of how information asymmetry impacts the relationships between PR professionals and their clients, and that their differing views can create conflicts. This shows that AI can support the clients to write their own texts and plan their own content, but as the previous statement shows, it cannot replace the strategic judgment and expertise that professional PR consultants can offer, which is supported by Kretschmer and Winkler (2023). However, Eisenhardt (1989) argues that relationships that have existed for a long time can reduce these tensions. Trust is built through a relationship that is well sustained, as emphasized by respondent 1:

“I want to meet my clients as much as possible, because that’s my main tool for building a relationship with them” - Respondent 1

In this situation, face-to-face interaction is seen as a crucial part of relationship-building, an observation consistent with Theunissen's (2014) emphasis that identities should be co-constructed and that empathy and ethical reasoning are important elements. This also reflects the notion of Tomblason and Wolf (2017), that authenticity in PR depends on participatory processes. This shows that, when having the opportunity to meet clients, firms have the opportunity to build a strong foundation of trust. This might make clients more reliant on the PR firms, trusting that they are valuable and that they need them to do the work.

Interestingly, respondent 1 mentioned that they counteract clients that argue that they can do the work themselves by positioning AI as a strategic differentiator. This is done by promoting efficiency and cost-effectiveness. This shows how AI not only reshapes the production of certain work, but also the value proposition in client relationships. This is done by renegotiating what services are offered, how they are priced and how quality is perceived.

“We do tell our clients that we use AI. And we do. Not for all production but for almost all production, because it allows us to produce faster. And that also makes it cheaper for the client to use our services” - Respondent 1

In summary, PR-professionals from these findings don't see AI as a single force that's changing relationships on its own. They use AI carefully and thoughtfully, as it can make their work faster and create a larger impact on their clients' audiences. As respondent 1 stated:

“The client's perspective is usually, this is what we want to say, whereas our perspective, as a PR agency is, how can he make this message have a strong impact and reach?” - Respondent 1

Therefore, from this point of view, AI's impact on relationships depends on how it's embedded within value propositions and how it is argued for when it comes to maintaining the relevance of PR professionals and their work.

5.6 Future outlook: The evolving role of the PR-profession

As AI continues to evolve and become integrated into everyday work of PR professionals, it's not only the profession itself that is being reconfigured but also the roles of those working at the firms, whether it is as PR consultants, CEO's or art directors. As respondent 1 noted, the profession has already experienced major shifts in the recent decades:

“If we go back 30 years, it was enough to be able to write a good article or a solid press release to work as a PR consultant. Today, you need to know how to use various CMS platforms, understand how a search engine works and how to do image and video editing. The demands on this profession have already increased enormously. What used to be five or eight separate roles has now become one, and this will only continue” - Respondent 1

This reflection highlights that the PR industry has already undergone a significant shift, long before AI was introduced to the industry. Just as PR consultants have had to adapt to learning new skills, AI represents yet another layer of competences that professionals are expected to

have in order to meet the rising demands. However, as Kretschmer and Winkler (2023) points out in their literature, while social media platforms emphasize human-to-human interaction, AI introduces a new communicative logic where human connection is being automated. The growing role of AI may enhance efficiency but it also challenges the industry to balance efficiency and authenticity and to adapt to one of the actors not being human.

When AI is being thoroughly implemented in day-to-day work, it has the potential to enhance the value and quality of the services that are being offered:

“When AI is used correctly, it can reduce stress. We don’t have to start from scratch every time and can focus more on quality and creativity. But it has also sparked discussions around professional role and the future, which creates both curiosity and a certain sense of concern”
- Respondent 6

While some respondents expressed uncertainty around AI, others embraced it as it’s becoming an obvious part of the industry, while also emphasizing the importance of human creativity, competences and emotional connections:

“I don’t think we should be afraid that AI will take over. Instead, the question should be how we can use AI and work together with it. As I said, I believe human connection, competence and creativity are important to people” - Respondent 4

Applying Service-Dominant logic to this reasoning offers a useful lens to conceptualize this. Rather than replacing PR-professionals, AI expands the network of collaborators by offering tools for doing research, generating content and ideas. From the perspective of Fyrberg and Jürriado (2009), AI can be seen as a collaborator when it comes to assisting in tasks, like for instance producing texts and pictures. AI acts as a creative collaborator that together with humans contribute to value, not only by producing texts but also by creating images and visual content, which has in some cases reduced the demand for traditional illustrators. As one of the respondents pointed out, the human element remains essential, and will remain important in the future. Despite AI’s growing role, most of the respondents believe that the profession itself is not threatened:

“I still think we will need for example illustrators, even if I can ask ChatGPT to create an illustration. Or at least I believe we will continue to need illustrators. Especially when you think about social media where you talk about people wanting authenticity and for the content to feel genuine” -
Respondent 2

“Of course we don’t want AI to take over all of our work which I don’t think will happen, because so much of what we do comes from human interaction and personal relationships” -
Respondent 6

“In the beginning, there was a lot of talk about AI taking over all jobs, especially in PR. And of course, there was a bit of concern about that. But pretty quickly, it felt like we moved past that worry and started to embrace it. At least that’s how it’s been for us” - Respondent 3

This presents an important lesson for the future, maintaining the emotional core of PR while embracing the technological advances of AI. This is supported by Perangin Angin and Mukhlisiana (2024) who argue that AI, together with the human touch, can enhance trust-building.

In contrast to the view from respondent 4, that AI will become an integrated part of PR work, respondent 2 expressed a more skeptical viewpoint, suggesting that the current praise for AI may take another turn in the future. Rather than AI being integrated into the industry, the respondent believes there will be a reversal trend in the future:

“I think AI will be so overused that people will get tired of it and feel like they’ve had an overdose and think that this is no longer trendy, now we want something else. I believe that is more likely than AI completely taking over” - Respondent 2

This view aligns with Zararsız (2024) who states that relying too much on AI and automated tools may result in a disengagement, and that interactions become too robotic. Because of this, people might desire more human forms of communication and as the respondent suggests, the future of AI in PR may not be defined by a continuous expansion of its use, but rather by a shift in attitudes. With these different perspectives, it becomes clear that the future of AI is not easily predicted, at least not in the PR industry. While much theories and literature point toward a world where humans and AI coexist and collaborate, the pace and direction that it will go, according to these findings, likely depend on evolving expectations. As one of the respondents concluded:

“I find it very difficult to predict where we’re heading. I tend to think more short-term, trying to adopt new technology and make use of it as best as possible, all the time” - Respondent 1

6. Discussion

6.1 Concluding Discussion

This study set out to explore how PR professionals view the role of AI in managing customer relationships with a particular focus on trust, authenticity, and communication. While much of the previous literature views AI primarily as a tool for automation, this research highlights a more nuanced version of AI, primarily as a supportive tool that must be thoughtfully implemented.

The findings contribute to theoretical insights regarding, for instance, S-D Logic. It shows that AI can be viewed as a third party in a complex value-creation network but that the AI tool itself does not automatically enhance relationships. The value from the relationships continues to depend on collaborative processes and emotional intelligence which requires the need for human traits.

Further, principal agent theory is relevant and the insights from information asymmetry, where some agencies selectively reveal their usage of AI to clients. However, the findings show that the authenticity and trust that is built over long term relationships can mitigate the risks that come with not sharing this information. This confirms previous research but also shows that once trust is established, it can reduce the negative reactions of its use. Newly established relationships require more careful communication which confirms insights from Principal-Agent Theory, where information asymmetry can impact trust and collaboration. PR professionals who are more transparent are able to align their goals more closely with their clients, which establishes trust and minimizes conflicts.

Furthermore, the findings show a generational divide in how much AI tools are used as a collaborative force, this further provides knowledge in practice. Younger employees have been shown to be more open to AI, while older employees show a more cautious attitude, reflecting a gap that may continue to shape the future development of the field. This adds the observation that organizational culture is important, especially open dialogues, as this influences how effectively AI is integrated at the workplace. In contrast to prior concerns that AI might take over and reduce authenticity, this thesis suggests that PR practitioners are not accepting this outcome, but actively are working against it. They are continuously reshaping the meaning and role of AI by adapting to it and using it to deliver more efficient and creative outcomes to their clients.

In a broader sense, this study contributes with insights regarding the shift that AI introduces to the industry and how the industry understands the role of AI. AI is continuously being integrated into day-to-day work in ways that support and enhance the work of PR professionals. This insight is especially relevant for companies trying to stay competitive in a rapidly transforming communication landscape.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The intersection between AI and PR is still in its early stages of academic exploration. While the literature is rapidly expanding, most existing studies have primarily focused on technological capabilities or automation potential, often neglecting the relational and communicative aspects of AI integration in PR practice. This study contributes to bridging this gap that we noticed by combining a theory-driven analysis with insights from recent literature, grounded in qualitative interviews with PR professionals.

From a theoretical standpoint, we employed different theories such as, the Principal-Agent Theory, Communication Theory, and Service-Dominant Logic to interpret how AI is affecting communication, trust, authenticity and relationship building in the companies. Our findings largely support the continued relevance of these frameworks, but also suggest several extensions. Firstly, the Communication Theory is enriched by our findings, whereas earlier studies (e.g., Yue et al., 2024; Zararsız, 2024) warned of declining authenticity in AI-generated communication, our respondents described AI as enhancing creativity and

enabling better audience targeting. Thus, we propose a more collaborative view of human and AI communication than what is typically portrayed in the literature.

With regard to Service-Dominant Logic, we show that co-creation processes are evolving to include AI as a participant in the value-creation chain. This implies a shift toward collaborative interaction models between agency, client, and AI systems, an area not yet fully developed in the literature.

In addition, looking at the literature review, the relationship management theory, which traditionally emphasizes trust and human interaction, is extended through our study. We show that AI tools, when applied thoughtfully, can support rather than hinder relationship-building by enabling more personalized and responsive engagement. In this way, AI can contribute to the development of meaningful client relationships.

Furthermore, our findings show the everyday integration of AI in PR which remains underexplored. While previous research often has discussed ethical dilemmas, eventual risks or a potential loss of authenticity, our study shows another dimension of it. It shows a more collaborative perspective where AI is not viewed as a threat or replacement for human expertise but rather a tool that enhances creativity and relationship management.

Taken together, the study contributes to theoretical development by confirming key elements of existing theories while suggesting important extensions that account for AI's role in modern digital communication. Simultaneously, it enriches the empirical literature by offering insights into how AI is used in the daily PR work and by reframing AI as a relational and strategic asset in the evolving landscape of public relations.

6.2 Managerial Implications

In the findings, we have seen a gap in how AI is talked, or not talked about in the workplace and between employees. The number of courses or training offered to employees around AI differ from agency to agency, sometimes resulting in a sense of insecurity around the topic and daily work tasks. A key takeaway from these insights is that managers should promote open communication around the usage of AI. This is crucial in order to create clear guidelines to foster transparent AI use and trust at the company. If this isn't done, it could create tensions and in the long run risk undermining professional growth.

Building on this, it is also an important lesson externally towards clients. While this study has shown that long term clients often trust their agencies regardless if AI is used, a selective dialogue around AI can potentially create unnecessary risks and jeopardize relationships with clients. Therefore a suggestion of an implication is that the PR-agencies should adopt a proactive approach to build trust and show what value AI could bring, in order to stay relevant in the industry. This could be done by having an open discussion and show that AI can be a tool that enhances human craftsmanship and creativity.

These implications could potentially be seen as important for other industries as well, as AI is something that is very powerful and affects many industries. However, if it's not handled properly, this study shows that it could have a negative impact on relationships and trust. These implications could therefore, potentially, be applied to other industries as well, even if it's not certain that the results would be the exact same.

6.3 Future Research

The research only included PR agencies operating in Gothenburg to obtain useful information from the interview respondents at those specific agencies. The study's focused approach allowed for meaningful comparisons but restricted the ability to generalize its findings.

Future research needs to include PR agencies from Stockholm and other parts of Sweden to achieve better generalization of the study. Stockholm has numerous PR agencies which focus on fashion, lifestyle, influencer marketing and entertainment services. Research on how these agencies implement AI in their client work would reveal important information about how these sector-specific differences affect AI use on trust and relationship building.

The development of AI will transform how people trust each other and maintain authentic relationships while changing their communication methods. The current study provides a view of AI functions in PR but future research needs to use a time-based research design. The study of influencers' development alongside AI effects on this field would provide valuable insights about future changes in this industry. The same agencies studied over time would show how their attitudes toward AI change as they mature or transform in different organizational settings. Research studies about AI integration would provide essential knowledge about how trust and relational strategies evolve throughout time.

Another valuable direction for future research is to complement the perspective of this study with a focus on the client side. While our findings offer rich insights into how PR professionals engage with AI, future studies could explore how clients perceive AI-driven communication services. In this case, quantitative research methods could be more useful in identifying patterns in client trust and expectations, providing a more balanced understanding of AI's impact from both sides of the PR relationship.

7. Conclusion

The study set out to explore two key questions: *How do PR professionals view the role of AI in managing customer relationships, particularly in relation to trust, authenticity and communication? and How will the role of AI in PR develop or change in the future?*

The findings show that PR professionals view AI as a valuable collaborative tool, rather than a threat. It is seen as something that enhances efficiency and creativity during projects. The human touch remains essential for ensuring that the work of PR professionals still resonates with the audience. When thoughtfully applied, AI tools help professionals and enhance their

work. This, in turn, strengthens client relationships. However, if poorly integrated or applied without any reflection, AI risks undermining the qualities that make PR effective and could damage relationships. In long-term client relationships, there were less concerns regarding transparency around its use. Looking at newly established business-client relationships, there was greater importance of having open communication to avoid undermining trust between them. While some agencies encourage openness and collaborative learning around AI, others show signs of hesitation or generational divides.

Looking forward, the future role of AI in PR is expected to evolve not as a replacement for professionals, but as a complementary force that reshapes workflows and expectations. PR professionals should continue to navigate the development of AI technologies alongside traditional communication practices. In the upcoming years, the findings show that AI is likely to be less shaped by the technology itself and more by the attitudes or shifting expectations around its use and the ability to balance these innovations with relevance and meaning.

In conclusion, a competitive and forward-looking PR agency must adopt an open-minded and adaptive approach. Viewing AI as an asset enables agencies to grow together with technological advancements. By aligning AI usage with professional values and continuously learning from it, agencies can ensure that AI supports rather than compromises the quality of their work and their relationships.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

The interview questions are translated in English

Introduction:

- Describe your workplace and your role at your workplace
- How long have you worked in PR/communication?
- What are your primary work tasks in your role as a PR professional?
- Do you mostly work alone or in teams?

AI at the workplace:

- When did you first come into contact with AI in your professional role?
- What AI tools do you usually use in your day to day work?
- In what parts of your work do you use AI?
- What experiences do you have when it comes to using AI in your work?
- Did you get a course in AI usage, if you did, can you explain what course it was?
- How has AI changed the way you carry out your daily work tasks?
- Do you think that AI makes your tasks more complicated or easier?
- How do you adapt to the AI-tool to get correct information that you can use?
- Do you have any opinion on if your colleagues use AI in their daily work?

AI and relationship building:

- What kind of relationship do you and your agency have with your clients?
- In which way has AI enhanced or complicated your relationships with your clients?
- How has AI affected the ways that you interact with your customers? Has it ever affected your reputation?
- Is there any specific AI tool that has led to resistance amongst your customers?
- How do you work with AI in order for it to still feel authentic?
- How has the usage of AI affected the communication with your firm and your customers?
- Do you feel like AI has changed the perceived authenticity when communicating with customers?
- Do you see any practical benefits or problems with using AI in your work?
- Have you noticed any changes in trust from the customers when AI is used in daily work or communication?
- What possibilities and challenges do you see when it comes to building relationships with clients through AI?
- How do you handle AI in relation to keeping the personal touch in regards to communicating with clients?

- Do you see any difference in how AI affects internal and external tasks in relation to your customers?

Experiences/attitudes:

- What are your experiences when it comes to using AI at your workplace?
- Has your trust regarding AI technology changed since you started using the tool yourself? If so, in what way?
- Do you experience AI as a trustworthy tool to use? Why/why not?
- In what way has AI tools affected your work role as a PR professional?
- Have you experienced that AI has affected your working environment?
- Have you experienced that AI has changed communication in this industry? If so, how?
- What is your view on the fact that more and more agencies are using AI?
- Do you have any viewpoint on if AI has changed the requirements needed to be able to work as a PR consultant?

Futuristic perspective:

- How do you view the future of AI in the PR industry, especially in relation to relationship building and communication?
- What do you think the development of AI will mean for the future of the PR industry and relationships between agencies and clients?

Concluding questions:

- Do you have any concluding thought on how AI and the PR industry will continue to develop together?
- Do you see any risks or possibilities in the future regarding the fact that more and more PR-agencies and businesses use AI in their communication and work?
- Is there something you would like to add that you feel like you haven't said already?