



AN EXAMINATION OF THE LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR AI APPLICATIONS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

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Abstract

This study investigates the legal and ethical considerations surrounding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in public relations (PR) practice in Nigeria, with the aim of addressing three core objectives to examine the legal implications of AI in PR, analyse the ethical challenges posed by AI applications, and to propose practical guidelines for responsible and legally compliant AI integration. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Deontological Ethics and Technological Determinism, the research explores how duty-based ethical principles and technology-driven societal shifts influence PR strategies in the digital age. A qualitative research methodology was adopted, combining descriptive and exploratory approaches to uncover deep insights into the intersection of law, ethics, and technology. Data was collected through primary and secondary sources. The population of the study is 956 registered members of NIPR Rivers State Chapter. Sample size for this study was gotten through judgemental sampling which adopted 40 participants from the population and utilized critical case sampling technique. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key PR practitioners. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and strategic responses within the data. Findings reveal that AI introduces significant legal ambiguity in areas such as data privacy, intellectual property, and liability, while also posing ethical challenges related to transparency, algorithmic bias, and accountability. The study concludes by proposing a harmonized framework that integrates legal literacy, ethical oversight, and digital responsibility. These practical guidelines aim to support Nigerian PR professionals in navigating the complexities of AI adoption while maintaining public trust and professional integrity.

Keywords: Legal, Ethical, Artificial intelligence, Public Relations, Application

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the landscape of public relations (PR), offering tools that enhance efficiency, precision, and strategic communication. AI refers to the simulation of human intelligence in machines that are capable of learning, reasoning and decision-making (Russell & Norvig, 2010). In PR practice, AI applications range from automated media monitoring and sentiment analysis to content generations, chatbots, and predictive analytics (Wright & Hinson, 2021). These technologies enable PR professionals to manage large volumes of data, personalize messaging, and respond to crises in real time, thereby reshaping traditional communication models. However, the integration of AI into PR practice raises profound legal and ethical concerns. Legally, AI intersects with issues such as data privacy, intellectual property, defamation, and regulatory compliance. For example, AI systems that collect and process personal data for targeted messaging must comply with data protection laws such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Nigeria's Data Protection Act (NDPA) (Olatunji, 2023). The use of algorithms that lack transparency often referred to as "black box" systems complicates

accountability when automated decisions result in reputational harm or misinformation (Pasquale, 2015). Furthermore, the absence of clear legal precedents and jurisdiction-specific regulations for AI in communication contexts leaves PR practitioners vulnerable to litigation and ethical breaches.

Ethically, AI challenges the foundational principles of PR, which include transparency, honesty, fairness, and respect for publics. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of truthfulness and accountability in all communication efforts (PRSA, 2024). Yet, AI tools can inadvertently perpetuate bias, manipulate public opinion, or disseminate synthetic media such as deepfakes, undermining public trust and the authenticity of organizational messaging (Floridi et al., 2018). The ethical dilemma intensifies when AI systems are used to automate decisions that affect public perception without human oversight, raising questions about moral responsibility and the erosion of empathy in stakeholder engagement.

Moreover, the ethical use of AI in PR is complicated by the lack of industry-specific guidelines. While some frameworks exist for AI governance in broader fields such as marketing, journalism, and data science, PR professionals often operate without tailored resources to navigate the unique challenges posed by AI in strategic communication (DiStaso & Bortree, 2020). This gap in scholarship and practice underscores the need for a comprehensive examination of the legal and ethical implications of AI in PR, particularly in emerging markets where regulatory structures may be underdeveloped or inconsistently enforced. This study aims to critically explore the legal and ethical considerations surrounding AI applications in public relations. It will analyse current practices, identify gaps in regulation and ethical governance, and propose context-sensitive guidelines to ensure responsible and compliant use of AI technologies. By doing so, the research contributes to the development of a more transparent, accountable, and ethically grounded PR profession in the age of intelligent systems.

Statement of the Problem

The proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies has ushered in a transformative era for public relations (PR) practice, redefining how organizations engage with stakeholders, manage reputations, and disseminate information. From automated media monitoring and sentiment analysis to AI-generated content and chatbot-driven customer service, PR professionals increasingly rely on intelligent systems to enhance efficiency, precision, and responsiveness. However, this technological evolution presents a complex web of legal and ethical challenges that remain underexplored and insufficiently addressed in both academic literature and professional practice. Moreover, the opacity of AI algorithms often referred to as “black box” systems complicates accountability when automated decisions lead to reputational harm or misinformation.

Ethically, AI challenges the foundational principles of PR, including transparency, truthfulness, fairness, and respect for publics. The potential for algorithmic bias, manipulation of public opinion through deepfakes or synthetic media, and erosion of human agency in strategic decision-making raises profound questions about the moral responsibilities of PR practitioners. Despite the growing adoption of AI tools, there is a conspicuous gap in scholarly inquiry and industry guidelines that address the legal and ethical implications specific to PR practice. This research seeks to fill that gap by critically examining the legal and ethical considerations surrounding AI applications in PR, evaluating current practices, and proposing context-sensitive recommendations that uphold professional standards while embracing technological innovation.

Objectives of the study

1. Examine the legal implications of using Artificial Intelligence in public relations practice.
2. Analyse the ethical challenges posed by AI applications in public relations, including issues of transparency, bias, and accountability.
3. Propose practical guidelines for the responsible and compliant integration of AI technologies in public relations.

Scope of the Study

This study operates at the critical nexus of law, ethics, and emerging technologies, with a specific focus on the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within public relations (PR) practice in Nigeria. It explores how AI-driven tools such as automated media monitoring, content generation, and audience analytics are reshaping strategic communication approaches among PR professionals, particularly within urban and digitally active organizational settings. The research is geographically and contextually anchored in Nigeria, emphasizing organizations that actively engage with digital media and AI technologies in their communication workflows. Ethical considerations form a central pillar of this inquiry. The research investigates key concerns such as transparency in AI-generated content, data privacy in audience targeting, the spread of misinformation through automated channels, and the risks of algorithmic bias. Instead, it seeks to develop a harmonized framework that supports PR professionals in aligning legal compliance, ethical integrity, and technological competence.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Legal Considerations in AI-Driven Public Relations

Legal considerations encompass the statutory and regulatory obligations that guide the use of AI in communication practice. These include compliance with data protection laws, intellectual property rights, consumer protection regulations, and liability for misinformation generated by AI systems. Zhong (2024) emphasized that the rapid development of AI in PR and advertising has created pressing legal challenges around data privacy and authenticity, requiring practitioners to align their use of AI with existing legal frameworks. Similarly, the Institute for Public Relations (2023) highlighted the governance role of PR professionals in evaluating communication tools for their legal implications, stressing that practitioners must guard against reputational risks by adhering to consumer protection and privacy laws. This study builds on the concept of legal considerations by examining how PR professionals in Nigeria integrate compliance into their AI-driven strategies. Unlike previous works that identified risks without empirical testing, the present study provides evidence of how practitioners manage legal obligations in everyday campaigns, thereby safeguarding organizational reputation and public trust.

Ethical Considerations in AI-Driven Public Relations

Ethical considerations refer to the moral obligations of PR practitioners when deploying AI technologies. These include principles such as transparency, accountability, fairness, and respect for human dignity. Verčič et al. (2024) defined ethical standards for AI in PR, emphasizing disclosure of AI involvement and human oversight as critical to maintaining credibility. Zhong (2024) further discussed ethical dilemmas such as prejudice, discrimination, and authenticity, noting that AI can amplify biases if not carefully managed. The Institute for Public Relations (2023) reinforced this by outlining the ethical governance role

of PR professionals, urging them to evaluate communication processes for fairness and transparency. This study extends the concept of ethical considerations by investigating how PR practitioners apply communication strategies to balance technological efficiency with ethical responsibility. Unlike earlier works that offered prescriptive guidelines, the present study provides empirical evidence of how ethical principles are operationalized in practice, filling the gap in understanding the real-world application of ethical safeguards in AI-driven PR.

Empirical Review

Distaso and Bortree (2020) examined the ethical responsibilities of public relations practitioners in the context of emerging technologies, with particular emphasis on artificial intelligence. The main objective of their study was to argue that ethical PR must prioritize openness and transparency about the use of new technologies in communication practice. Their key position was that disclosure of AI involvement in content creation and decision-making is essential to maintaining credibility and public trust. Using a combination of case analysis and practitioner perspectives, the research revealed that failure to disclose technological mediation in communication could erode stakeholder confidence and damage organizational reputation. However, the study did not empirically evaluate how practitioners operationalize transparency in everyday PR campaigns or how audiences respond to disclosed versus undisclosed AI use. The present study is related because both works focus on ethical accountability in AI-driven public relations, but while Distaso and Bortree emphasized the principle of openness, they failed to provide empirical evidence of how legal considerations such as compliance with data protection and anti-misinformation laws intersect with ethical transparency in practice.

Olatunji (2023) examined the state of Nigeria's digital laws and their implications for privacy rights in the era of emerging technologies. The main objective of the study was to assess whether existing legal frameworks adequately protect citizens from violations associated with digital communication and AI adoption. The study's key position was that Nigeria's digital laws are largely reactive and fragmented, leaving significant gaps that expose individuals to potential breaches of privacy and misuse of personal data. Using legal analysis and policy review, the research revealed that while some regulations exist, they are often implemented in response to crises rather than proactively designed to anticipate technological change. However, the study did not provide empirical evidence of how these fragmented laws affect public relations practitioners who rely on AI tools in their campaigns. The present study is related because both works focus on the intersection of law, technology, and communication, but while Olatunji emphasized the inadequacy of Nigeria's legal frameworks, it failed to provide empirical evidence of how PR professionals manage these legal gaps alongside ethical responsibilities in practice.

Floridi et al. (2018) examined the ethical risks associated with artificial intelligence systems, particularly the tendency of such systems to inherit biases from their training data. The main objective of their study was to highlight how unmonitored AI applications can lead to discriminatory outcomes, thereby undermining fairness and accountability in professional practice. Their key position was that bias in AI is not merely a technical flaw but an ethical challenge that requires careful oversight and governance. Using conceptual analysis and case illustrations, the research revealed that biased algorithms can perpetuate social inequalities, especially when applied in fields like communication, law, and public relations. However, the study did not provide empirical evidence of how practitioners in PR specifically monitor or mitigate these biases in everyday campaigns. The present study is related because both works focus on ethical accountability in AI-driven communication, but while Floridi et al. emphasized the dangers of bias and discrimination, they failed to provide empirical evidence of how communication professionals integrate both ethical safeguards and legal compliance to prevent discriminatory outcomes in practice.

Theoretical Framework

Deontological Ethics (Kantian Ethics) Theory and Technological Determinism Theory

Deontological ethics, rooted in Kantian philosophy, emphasizes duty, rules, and moral obligations over consequences. It provides a normative lens for evaluating whether public relations professionals uphold ethical duties such as honesty, transparency, and respect for stakeholders when deploying AI tools (Kant, 1785/1993). For instance, using AI-generated content without disclosure may violate the duty of truthfulness, even if the outcome benefits the organization. This framework aligns closely with professional codes of conduct and legal obligations, such as data privacy laws and anti-misinformation regulations, making it highly relevant for assessing ethical accountability in AI-driven PR practice.

Technological determinism, on the other hand, posits that technology is the principal driver of societal change, shaping institutions, cultural values, and professional practices (McLuhan, 1964). In the context of AI in PR, this theory helps explain the shift from traditional, human-centered communication to automated, data-driven strategies. It raises critical questions about agency and control whether PR professionals are actively shaping AI to serve ethical and legal ends, or whether they are being shaped by the imperatives of technological advancement. This perspective is particularly useful for situating AI adoption within broader societal and cultural transformations in Nigeria's PR industry.

Despite their differences, both frameworks share important similarities. They each provide a normative foundation for evaluating AI in PR: deontological ethics stresses moral duties, while technological determinism highlights the structural influence of technology on professional practice. Both recognize that AI adoption cannot be divorced from broader questions of responsibility and accountability. However, they diverge in focus: deontological ethics is prescriptive, asking whether actions conform to moral and legal duties, while technological determinism is descriptive, analysing how technology itself drives change and potentially redefines ethical boundaries. Together, these frameworks are most suitable for the present study because they complement each other.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research method to investigate the legal and ethical considerations surrounding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in public relations practice in Nigeria. The qualitative approach utilized both descriptive and exploratory. This study adopts a purposive sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method. Data was collected through two complementary methods. First, document analysis was employed to examine existing legal and ethical instruments relevant to AI in PR. These documents were analysed to assess their relevance, clarity, and adequacy in regulating AI-driven communication practices. The population of the study is a total of 956 registered members of NIPR Rivers State Chapter. The sample size for this study was gotten through judgemental sampling which adopted 40 participants from the population, and utilized critical case sampling technique. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of key PR practitioners. The interviews were designed to elicit in-depth perspectives on how AI is being integrated into PR workflows, the ethical tensions it introduces, and the extent to which legal compliance is prioritized or challenged. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility in probing emerging themes while maintaining consistency across interviews. For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and insights within the qualitative data.

Discussion Of Findings

The study revealed that the legal implications of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in public relations (PR) practice in Nigeria are both multifaceted and underdeveloped. Through document analysis and interview with twenty carefully selected PR professionals a narrative emerged that highlighted the tension between innovation and regulation. One of the most prominent themes was the absence of AI-specific legal frameworks. Participants consistently expressed concern that while Nigeria has foundational laws such as the Cybercrimes Act, the Nigerian Broadcasting Code, and the Nigeria Data Protection Act, these instruments were not designed with AI in mind. They were created to address broader digital communication issues and are now struggling to keep pace with the rapid evolution of intelligent technologies. This legal gap leaves PR practitioners operating in a grey zone, where the rules are either unclear or inconsistently enforced. A large number of the interviewees admitted that they often rely on organizational discretion or informal ethical judgment when deploying AI tools, especially for tasks like automated content creation or audience profiling.

The issue of data privacy surfaced repeatedly. AI systems in PR often rely on large datasets to personalize communication and predict audience behaviour. However, the study revealed that many practitioners are either unaware of the full scope of Nigeria's data protection laws or unsure how to apply them in AI contexts. Several participants acknowledged that consent mechanisms are often bypassed or poorly implemented, particularly when using third-party AI platforms. This finding echoes the concerns raised by Olatunji (2023), who noted that Nigeria's digital laws are reactive and fragmented, leaving room for potential violations of privacy rights. Another layer of complexity emerged around legal accountability. When AI-generated content leads to reputational damage, misinformation, or even defamation, the question of liability becomes murky. Participants struggled to identify who should be held responsible the developer of the AI system, the organization using it, or the individual PR practitioner overseeing its deployment. This ambiguity reflects what Pasquale (2015) describes as the "black box" problem, where the inner workings of AI systems are opaque, making it difficult to trace decisions or assign blame.

The study also uncovered concerns related to intellectual property rights. AI-generated content whether text, images, or video raises questions about authorship and ownership. Nigerian copyright law protects original works created by humans, but it remains silent on content produced by machines. PR professionals who rely on AI to generate press releases or social media posts are often unsure whether they own the content or if it could be subject to legal disputes. This uncertainty aligns with Gervais (2020), who argues that global copyright regimes are not yet equipped to handle the implications of machine-generated works. Overall, the findings paint a picture of a legal environment that is struggling to keep pace with technological innovation. While AI offers powerful tools for enhancing PR practice, its use introduces significant legal risks that are not yet adequately addressed by existing Nigerian legislation. The study underscores the need for updated legal frameworks and clearer professional guidelines that reflect the realities of AI-driven communication. Without these, PR practitioners may continue to operate in a space where innovation outpaces regulation, leaving both organizations and publics exposed to unintended consequences.

The findings show that AI applications in public relations present a range of ethical challenges, particularly in the areas of transparency, bias, and accountability. The findings from this study, supported by both document analysis and interviews with 20 key stakeholders, reveal that while AI offers strategic advantages, its ethical implications are often overlooked or misunderstood by practitioners. One of the most pressing concerns is transparency. Interview participants consistently highlighted that AI-generated content such as automated press releases, social media posts, and chatbot responses is frequently disseminated without disclosing its non-human origin. This lack of transparency undermines the ethical principle of honesty, a cornerstone of professional PR practice as outlined by the Public Relations Society of America

(PRSA, 2024). Several practitioners admitted that their organizations do not have formal policies requiring disclosure of AI involvement, which can mislead audiences and erode trust. This concern is echoed by Distaso and Bortree (2020), who argue that ethical PR must prioritize openness about the use of emerging technologies.

Algorithmic bias also emerged as a significant ethical issue. Participants described instances where AI tools misinterpreted local languages, cultural expressions, or demographic data, resulting in skewed sentiment analysis or exclusionary targeting. One PR Practitioner noted, “Our AI system flagged a campaign as negative simply because it didn’t recognize the slang used by our target audience.” This reflects the findings of Floridi et al. (2018), who warn that AI systems often inherit biases from their training data, which can lead to discriminatory outcomes if not carefully monitored. In Nigeria’s diverse linguistic and cultural environment, such biases can have serious reputational consequences. The issue of accountability was also a recurring theme. Many interviewees expressed uncertainty about who should be held responsible when AI-generated communication causes harm whether through misinformation, reputational damage, or ethical breaches. Some organizations lack clear oversight mechanisms, leaving PR practitioners to make judgment calls without adequate support. As one participant stated, “There’s no protocol for reviewing what the AI produces. If something goes wrong, it’s unclear who takes the fall.” This aligns with Pasquale’s (2015) critique of the “black box” nature of AI, where opaque algorithms make it difficult to trace decision-making or assign responsibility.

In addition to these core themes, the study uncovered broader concerns about the erosion of human judgment and empathy in PR practice. Several participants worried that over-reliance on AI could lead to a mechanistic approach to communication, where data-driven decisions replace relational and context-sensitive strategies. This sentiment supports Wright and Hinson’s (2021) observation that while AI enhances efficiency, it must be balanced with human oversight to preserve ethical integrity. In conclusion, the ethical challenges posed by AI in public relations are substantial and multifaceted. Transparency, bias, and accountability are not just technical issues they are ethical imperatives that demand deliberate attention. The findings suggest that Nigerian PR professionals need clearer ethical guidelines, on-going training, and organizational support to navigate the complexities introduced by AI technologies. Without these safeguards, the profession risks compromising its credibility and the trust it seeks to build with the public.

The findings from this study reveal a strong consensus among public relations professionals on the urgent need for practical guidelines to govern the responsible and legally compliant use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in PR practice. While enthusiasm for AI’s potential is widespread, participants repeatedly emphasized that its deployment must be guided by clear ethical standards and legal safeguards to avoid reputational, regulatory, and societal risks. One of the most frequently proposed recommendations was the establishment of transparency protocols. Interviewees stressed the importance of disclosing when AI tools are used to generate content, analyse audience sentiment, or automate engagement. Several practitioners noted that their organizations currently lack formal policies on AI disclosure, which can lead to ethical lapses and public mistrust. This aligns with DiStaso and Bortree’s (2020) call for transparency as a foundational principle in ethical PR, especially when emerging technologies are involved.

Another key guideline that emerged was the implementation of human oversight mechanisms. Participants agreed that AI should not operate in isolation, particularly when crafting messages that represent an organization’s voice. One respondent stated, “AI can draft, but a human must review before it goes out.” This sentiment reflects Wright and Hinson’s (2021) recommendation that AI tools in PR should be supervised by trained professionals who understand both the technology and its ethical implications. Human oversight ensures that content is contextually appropriate, culturally sensitive, and aligned with organizational values. The study also highlighted the need for bias auditing and ethical review procedures. Given the risk of algorithmic bias especially in Nigeria’s linguistically and culturally diverse environment

participants suggested that organizations should regularly audit their AI systems to identify and correct discriminatory patterns. This recommendation is supported by Floridi et al. (2018), who advocate for ethical governance structures that monitor AI outputs and ensure fairness in automated decision-making.

Legal compliance was another area where practical guidance is urgently needed. Interviewees recommended that PR teams receive training on relevant digital laws, including the Nigeria Data Protection Act, the Cybercrimes Act, and advertising regulations. Many practitioners admitted to limited legal literacy, which increases the risk of non-compliance when using AI for data-driven communication. Olatunji (2023) emphasizes that legal awareness is essential for ethical AI deployment, especially in jurisdictions where regulatory frameworks are still evolving. Finally, the concept of digital responsibility emerged as a unifying theme. Participants advocated for a values-based approach to AI use, where decisions are guided not just by efficiency or innovation, but by a commitment to public trust, inclusivity, and accountability. This perspective encourages PR professionals to view AI not merely as a tool, but as a strategic partner whose use must reflect the ethical standards of the profession.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that while AI is increasingly integrated into PR workflows particularly in urban, digitally active organizations there is a significant gap in legal frameworks that specifically address its use. Existing laws such as the Cybercrimes Act, the Nigerian Broadcasting Code, and the Nigeria Data Protection Act provide only partial guidance. PR professionals often operate in legal uncertainty, especially regarding data privacy, intellectual property, and liability for AI-generated content. This legal ambiguity exposes organizations to potential regulatory breaches and reputational risks.

The study found that AI tools are frequently used without disclosure, raising concerns about honesty and audience trust. Additionally, algorithmic bias especially in sentiment analysis and audience targeting was identified as a recurring issue, with some AI systems misinterpreting local dialects or reinforcing stereotypes. The lack of clear accountability structures further complicates ethical oversight, as many organizations do not have formal review processes for AI-generated communication. These findings underscore the need for ethical governance mechanisms that prioritize fairness, inclusivity, and professional responsibility.

Based on insights from interviews and document analysis, the study recommends a harmonized framework that integrates legal awareness, ethical standards, and technological fluency. Participants emphasized the importance of human oversight, regular audits for bias, and transparency in AI use. There was also a strong call for professional training and the development of industry-specific codes of conduct. These guidelines are essential for ensuring that AI enhances rather than undermines the credibility, accountability, and effectiveness of PR practice in Nigeria's evolving digital landscape.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Legal Literacy and Compliance:** PR professionals and organizations should receive targeted training on Nigeria's digital laws, including the Cybercrimes Act, Data Protection Act, and advertising regulations. Regulatory bodies should also develop AI-specific guidelines to clarify legal responsibilities in AI-driven communication.
2. **Establish Ethical Oversight Mechanisms:** Organizations should implement transparency protocols for AI-generated content, conduct regular audits to detect algorithmic bias, and create internal ethics committees to oversee AI use. These structures will help uphold the core values of honesty, fairness, and accountability in PR.

3. **Develop a National Framework for Responsible AI in PR:** Stakeholders including PR associations, legal experts, and technologists should collaborate to create a unified code of digital responsibility. This framework should guide the ethical and strategic use of AI in PR, ensuring alignment with both professional standards and societal expectations.

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