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Using generative Artificial Intelligence tools in Public Relations: Ethical concerns and the impact on the profession in the Romanian context

Abstract

The controversy surrounding ChatGPT has reopened the debate about the impact of new technologies in many fields of activities, including communication and PR. This study mapped Romanian PR practitioners' use of generative AI and their perception of it, placing a special focus on the ethical concerns involved and the implications for the profession itself. We took a quantitative–qualitative approach by using both a survey and semi-structured interviews. Our goal was to determine the impact of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the Romanian PR industry and to understand the reasons and challenges behind integrating generative AI in PR practice. The survey findings revealed a substantial adoption (73.5%) of AI within the Romanian PR community, with an overwhelming 91.6% of them using ChatGPT. The satisfaction level was remarkably high, with 92% expressing satisfaction with generative AI application efficacy. Benefits included timesaving, work simplification, and the reduction of repetitive tasks. Surprisingly, not only did 67.3% of respondents not perceive AI as an immediate threat to PR jobs, but 80.5% believed AI represents an opportunity for the industry. Indeed, almost all our interviewees admitted relief and satisfaction when using generative AI tools to complete their tasks. However, some concerns were expressed regarding the quality of the generative AI content and, in

particular, the need to always check this kind of content by a human editor before using it. Moreover, PR professionals' main ethical concerns are related to the issue of transparency towards their clients when using AI tools to produce different types of content.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence (AI), Public Relations, PR practitioners, PR industry, ChatGPT, ethical concerns.

1. Introduction

The controversy surrounding ChatGPT, the public tool developed by OpenAI, has also revived the debate around the use, in general, of artificial intelligence in all intellectual activities. Although ChatGPT has been hailed for its ability to understand natural language and generate human-like responses, it has also raised concerns. These usually point to ethical implications, the reproduction of harmful content, privacy violations or biased training data to name just a few. In the Romanian public space, ChatGPT has been mostly scrutinized for its entertainment capabilities, as well as in relation with concerns about its non-ethical use in an academic context.

Public relations lie among those professions that have been radically transformed by the appearance of the Internet and, subsequently, Social Media. The use of generative AI in PR activities is a new step that might prove transformative for the industry. We intend to determine its adoption, the professional perception in the PR industry about using generative AI, as well as its impact on the profession, both from ethical perspectives and concerning future jobs.

Recent research from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) has found that up to 38% of tasks performed by public relations professionals are now assisted by AI tools (CIPR, September 2023). According to this worldwide study, most public relations tasks are being infused with AI: indeed, the degree of AI assistance for each task varies from 20% to 60% on average. Data analytics and social media management possess a higher average degree of assistance by AI tools (53.4% and 53.7% respectively), while managing partnerships displays a much lower degree of assistance (13.4%) on average (CIPR, September 2023).

Using the Romanian PR professional context as a case study, our research proposes an in-depth understanding of generative AI adoption in this field, revealing experts' perceptions on these new practices and concerning their impact on the profession itself.

2. PR in Romania

Despite the relative youth of the Romanian PR industry, as compared with other developed countries (Răceanu & Pasol, 2023), it has experienced significant growth in recent years. The main drivers of this growth have been the expansion of digital tools and their use for communication practices, as well as national economic growth. Some of the most important PR companies worldwide are also present in the Romanian market and lead the charts of the most profitable organisations in the industry: e.g. Golin Romania and McCann PR (Biz, 2022). However, we lack in-depth analysis concerning this market, the main data being provided by professional associations such as Romanian PR Professionals Association (ARRP) or by business magazines (Dolea, 2017; Răceanu & Pasol, 2023).

Public relations have already seen a major transformation since the emergence of the Internet and, subsequently, Social Media. Indeed, Scott (2015) compares the impact of the internet on communication with the impact of Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. Brown (2009) shows that, in the social network era, organisations have lost control of the agenda while consumers have the ability to talk about and share their views and opinions with other consumers. Since new communication channels have emerged in the digital era, using social media is no longer a matter for debate for all PR practitioners. According to Brown (2009), the problem now is to discover which of the countless channels are the most effective and engender the most authority and influence. Thus, AI is just one more element to add to this challenge.

Our literature review considers research papers that investigate the link between AI and PR from different perspectives, namely the extent of this adoption, the strengths and weaknesses of AI uses, as well as some critical considerations about AI use in PR.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. AI definition

Although the term “artificial intelligence” (AI) dates from 1956, it has only recently become a booming phenomenon. Some AI definitions describe it as “the ability of machines to perform tasks that typically require human-like understanding” (Knowledge@Wharton, 2018, para. 1) or “a sophisticated application of technology whereby a machine demonstrates human cognitive functions such as learning, analysis and problem solving” (Valin, 2018, p. 5). Artificial intelligence in PR is conceptualised as “technologies showing humanoid cognitive abilities and performing humanoid cognitive abilities and performing functions in undertaking public relations activities, independently or together with public relations practitioners” (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018, p. 735). Abdullah (2020) considers the world of public relations is now facing a revolution caused by AI and Big Data, while some of the studies we cite in the following chapters have tried to map the adoption of AI in PR.

3.2. The extent and diversity of AI uses in PR

Organisations are integrating AI in their activities across all industries and PR agencies are no exception. As researchers have pointed out, AI is already used for some activities in the PR and marketing sphere. For example, AI capabilities are used to collect data from consumer needs research, customer feedback, or to assess the results of communication (Alawaad, 2021). AI is also used to manage and automate content on social media through tools such as Hootsuite, Tweetdeck, Sprout Social and similar applications, or even to support decision making through tools such as Google Analytics (Abdullah, 2020). Monitoring news media, social media, storytelling, and subscriber analysis, or workflow management systems are some other uses of AI in PR practices. These technologies are considered to be useful in order to help organisations manage their reputation (e.g., by sending alerts about negative stories the minute they appear) through monitoring and processing enormous volumes of data in order to help organisations to anticipate potential issues that could affect their reputation. Some other AI applications in PR include posting responses on social media in real time for the client and managing the crisis at hand, creating media lists, scheduling meetings and sending follow-up emails (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Panda, Upadhyay & Khandelwal, 2019).

Writing data-driven stories, organising and updating media lists, aiding in crisis management, converting and transcribing audio into text, following and predicting media trends and monitoring and managing social media are some other AI applications in public relations activities. AI contributes to measurements of the effectiveness of the campaigns, helps in overcoming the possible hindrances or challenges, assists in designing campaigns and can help to manage and respond to PR crises (Panda *et al.*, 2019). However, Munandar & Irwansyah (2020) found that AI usages in PR activities were (at that time) quite limited to technical and basic tasks.

3.3. Strengths and weaknesses about using AI in PR

For some researchers, AI provides new opportunities in communications and marketing practices, just as the Internet did a few decades earlier (Alawaad, 2021). In addition, AI and Big Data are seen as an opportunity to better understand stakeholders and competitors and to optimise the performance of PR practitioners (Abdullah, 2020), or for its productive potential (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018). According to Panda *et al.* (2019), mass personalization and customisation using AI are improving the effectiveness of PR activities. Gouda, Biswal and Parween (2020) also consider that these technological advancements have strengthened PR in managing one’s reputation, promoting brand values, or enhancing one’s online presence, as well as in understanding consumer needs using Google Analytics or similar monitoring tools. According to Arief and Gysomo (2020), the impact of AI in public relations can provide positive value.

AI's capacity to process large amounts of data and information is seen rather as an advantage for PR practitioners even if it leads to a discourse about automatization in the work of PR professionals (Panda *et al.*, 2019; Alawaad, 2021). However, this entails fears and concerns about the future of the PR profession or about its redefinition as some of the tasks involved are being automated (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Abdulah, 2020). Swiatek and Galloway (2022) argue that while AI offers significant opportunities to enhance professional activities and enrich theory and practice, it also raises important questions and concerns, necessitating public relations to communicate both its risks and benefits effectively. However, the above-cited authors also note the importance of maintaining a human touch in PR activities in order to ensure genuine engagement and relationship building.

3.4. Critical approach to AI use and the impact on the profession

Multiple studies have concluded that communication and marketing departments need to include people with new skills, new knowledge and training concerning AI (Alawaad, 2021; Swiatek & Galloway, 2022) and that the consequences of AI uses for people's jobs are frequently being questioned. Warnings about the robotization of professional occupations such as PR (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018) raise concern not only about jobs losses (AI is expected to affect a number of jobs to higher or lower degrees depending on the type of work), but also about ethical issues. The above-cited authors consider that practitioners should seek training regarding the key aspects of artificial intelligence and its uses and consider that one important question for stakeholders would be whether they care about interacting with a human or a human-like machine.

Apart from job losses and ethical issues, some other concerns are linked to the fear of machines controlling humans. Some PR professionals have developed AI anxiety, namely the fear of the stability and the capabilities of AI and seem to be under pressure to unlearn old manual skills and learn the new digital capabilities of AI (Panda *et al.*, 2019). According to Galloway and Swiatek (2018), rather than becoming AI experts, PR practitioners need to use AI to offer PR solutions to clients. Moreover, in a later study, Swiatek and Galloway (2022) warn us of the fact that "the current major ethical dilemmas relating to AI –including surveillance practices that limit privacy, unemployment due to automation, issues with 'autonomous things' (i.e., independently operating devices and machines), biases in AI systems, and the manipulation of human judgement" (p. 359) will grow and become even more complex in the future.

Nevertheless, Arief and Gustomo (2020) are rather optimistic about the future of the PR and consider that the human aspect will still be needed in the next five to ten years, even if people will need to improve their abilities and practices by using tools featuring AI and Big Data capabilities. Recent findings indicate that Artificial Intelligence (AI) will benefit the communication profession by providing a competitive edge to those who adopt these technologies, with its future likely to be a fusion of AI technologies and human insight (Turksoy, 2022). This optimism is not shared by all scholars, however. A recent polemical essay by Swiatek *et al.* (2024) warns of the rapid impact of AI on the PR profession and consequent job losses. The authors even issue a call to both researchers and professionals to avoid technological determinism and to remember that it is people who decide which technologies to use.

Here, we intend to fill the knowledge gaps currently present in the literature review about PR practitioners' approach to generative AI in general, and in the Romanian PR professional field in particular. Although our research will attempt to map generative AI usage, it will particularly focus on reasons explaining this adoption, in order to understand the perceived benefits and threats of this practice. We intend to further explain ethical concerns about using AI in PR, as well as its impact on the profession itself, as perceived by PR practitioners.

Our research questions comprise the following:

RQ1. What is the extent of generative AI use in PR?

RQ2. For what PR activities do professionals use AI-generated content?

RQ3. What is PR professionals' perception regarding the quality of the generative AI tools?

RQ4. What is PR professionals' perception regarding the ethics of using generative AI in their activities?

RQ5. What is PR professionals' perception regarding the impact of the adoption of generative AI for their profession?

4. Methodology

In this study, we used a quantitative–qualitative approach, employing a survey (n=113), followed by semi-structured interviews (n=15) with Romanian PR professionals. Through this approach, we aimed to comprehensively assess generative AI usage among Romanian PR professionals and gauge their perceptions of these tools, as well as its impact on the PR profession. Quantitative approaches prioritise the use of objective measurements and statistics or other numerical techniques in order to analyse data. Such data can be gathered through methods such as polls, questionnaires, surveys, or by utilising computational methods to manipulate existing statistical data. Babbie (2013) considers survey research as the best method available to the social researcher who is interested in collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe directly. A survey involves using a standardised questionnaire as an instrument to gather data and extrapolating the results obtained to the entire population from which the sample was selected. In our case, since we cannot build a representative sample for the entire category of Romanian professionals in PR, the results cannot be extrapolated. Instead, since we have a significant number of respondents, the results obtained can be considered relevant to our research objectives.

Our questionnaire contains 24 questions, comprising 2 open-ended and 22 closed-ended questions. We looked at the usage of AI tools from an instrumental perspective, and correlated our questionnaire structure with the research questions, making sure the questions covered each research question efficiently. The two open-ended questions not only allowed respondents to suggest issues that we possibly did not anticipate in the closed-ended questions, but also to inspire our next stage of qualitative research (the semi-structured interviews). For the closed-ended questions, we considered that the answer categories should be exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

The sample for our survey included 113 PR Practitioners (n=113). Data were collected exclusively online between 9 and 25 August 2023, via Facebook, WhatsApp and LinkedIn from PR practitioners in our own network and asking them to share the survey with other colleagues, thus involving snowball sampling. Beyond the simple sharing of the call for contributions on our social media networks, we contacted key stakeholders of the industry via email, phone and WhatsApp messages and asked them to disseminate the questionnaire within their own PR networks. The questionnaire was self-administered online and was filled in exclusively by PR professionals. In addition, we included a first filter question in order to exclude anyone that would not fit in our targeted group of PR practitioners.

We balanced this quantitative approach with qualitative follow-up research mainly based on semi-structured interviews of PR professionals from PR agencies and from private or state-owned companies. The research questions and the results of the questionnaire research stage formed the base of our interview guide for the second, qualitative phase of our research. The interviews had 15 questions divided in four sections according to the following topics: one's understanding of the concept of "AI"; the adoption of AI (uses/tasks); the personal and institutional perception concerning AI adoption/the degree of satisfaction concerning AI adoption; and, finally, its impact on the PR and communication field with a special focus on ethical problems.

The survey respondents' age was quite evenly distributed between 3 main age groups, namely: 28.3% (n=32) were between 25 and 35 years old; 26.5% (n=30) were between 46 and 55 years old; and 23.9% (n=27) were between 36 and 45 years old. A smaller number (18.6%, n=21) of respondents were between 18 and 24 years old, a category we created to include students (undergraduate and postgraduate) that had already commenced employment during their studies. Moreover, 2.7% (n=3) of our respondents were older than 55 years old. We consider this to be a significant variety of age ranges in the sample.

The respondents were not evenly split between male and female participants, with a large majority of female respondents (75.2%, n=85) and only 23.9% (n=27) male respondents. However, this is representative of the feminization of the profession previously noticed in Romania (Petrovici, 2016).

The survey encompassed a wide range of PR experience, from entry-level professionals to seasoned experts: 37.2% (n=42) have more than 15 years' experience in the PR/communication field; 16.8% (n=19) have between 5 and 10 years' experience; while another 16.8% (n=19) have between 3 and 5 years' experience. Moreover, 12.4% (n=14) have less than 2 years of experience, 9.7% (n=11) have between 10 and 15 years of experience, while 7.1% (n=8) have between 2 and 3 years of experience. In addition, we observed quite an even distribution between those having less than 10 years of experience (53.1%) and senior staff with more than 10 years' experience (46.9%). The respondents represent diverse fields within PR, including corporate (27.4%, n=31), agency (37.2%, n=42), government sectors (9.7%, n=11), and freelancers (16.8%, n=19). Finally, 8.8% (n=10) occupy a different professional status than that previously listed. The survey's data were collected between 9 and 25 August 2023.

For the qualitative research, we interviewed 15 PR Practitioners (n=15), comprising those from PR agencies (n=5), private (n=3) and state-owned companies (n=3), NGOs (n=3), and one freelancer (n=1), with a wide range of PR experience, thus, from entry-level professionals to seasoned experts (see the list below, Table. 1). Five male interviewees and ten female professionals contributed to the qualitative section of the research, consistent with both the feminization of the profession cited previously (Petrovici, 2016) and with our own quantitative results. Three of the interviewed PR practitioners were in the first age category (18-24), two of them belonged to the second (23-35), four were part of the third (36-45) and six of them belonged to those 46-55 years old. This is consistent with the Romanian PR industry's recent evolution, with the first faculty to offer bachelor programmes in communication in the mid-1990s.

All interviewees were contacted via email or phone, directly by the research team. Their selection involved balancing the positive responses with rejections (mainly due to time constraints) in order to maintain the relevance and diversity of the selected cohort. This meant that if a top management person was unavailable another similarly positioned PR specialist was contacted. The data were collected between February and March 2024. The quantitative data was analysed using Google Forms, the graphics were created using Excel, while the semi-structured interviews were analysed manually.

Table 1. 15 PR professionals who responded to our semi-structured interviews.

Identification	Category	Years of experience	Sex	Age	Title
R1	Agency	24	F	45	Managing Director
R2	NGO	22	F	51	Executive Director
R3	Public Institution	21	F	44	Head of Office
R4	NGO	6	F	27	Project Manager & Communications Officer
R5	Corporate	3	M	24	PR Specialist
R6	Freelancer	4	F	24	Freelancer
R7	Public Institution	24	F	49	Head of the Press Office
R8	Corporate	21	F	46	Head of Communication CEE
R9	NGO	2	F	25	Project manager digital communication
R10	Agency	2	M	23	PR Specialist
R11	Public Institution	17	F	39	Communication Specialist

R12	Corporate	16	F	43	Internal Communication Manager
R13	Agency	15	M	43	Head of Innovation
R14	Agency	25	M	49	Managing partner
R15	Agency	8	M	36	Copywriter

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Findings

This section will outline the outcomes of our survey in order to address our research inquiries. The survey's quantitative findings were complemented with the interviews' comprehensive results. Initially, we will provide a summary of the discoveries concerning the integration and utilisation of generative AI in PR operations in order to respond to our first two RQs. Furthermore, we will focus on the key advantages that PR professionals associate with this usage.

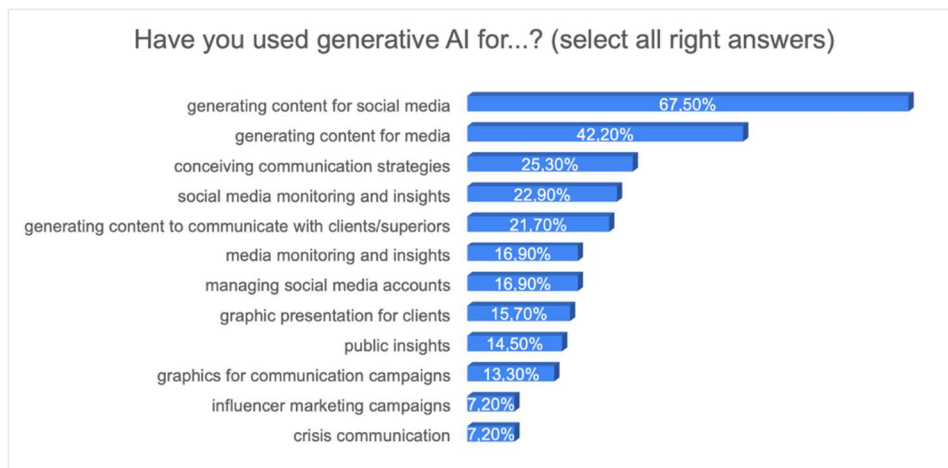
In the second section, our attention will be directed towards the opinions and perceptions of PR professionals regarding AI utilisation (RQ3), whether they already use it or have not yet done so. Subsequently, we will elaborate on the central findings concerning perceptions of ethics (RQ4), as well as the influence of AI on the future of the PR industry (RQ5).

5.1. Generative AI adoption and usage in PR activities

Our survey includes firstly a question about the adoption of generative AI tools in general, followed by a more specific one concerning the use of ChatGPT.

A majority of the respondents (73.5%, n=83) reported employing generative AI in various PR activities, while 26.5% said they do not use AI. The most common PR tasks that generative AI was utilised for (see Fig. 2) included generating content for social media (67.5%, n=56), for mass media (42.2%, n=35) and conceiving communication strategies (25.3%, n=21). The next most popular activities where Romanian PR specialists use generative AI are social media monitoring and insights (22.9%, n=19), generating content to communicate with clients/superiors (21.7%, n=18), mass media monitoring and insights (16.9%, n=14), managing social media accounts (16.9%, n=14), preparing graphic presentations for clients (15.7%, n=13), gaining public insights (14.5%, n=12), preparing graphic content for communication campaigns (13.3%, n=11). PR experts also use generative AI, albeit in a smaller proportion for influencer marketing campaigns (7.2%, n=6), and for crisis communication (7.2%, n=6). As this question included an open option to be filled in with other activities than those we listed, our respondents also suggested "writing questions for clients," "research," "images for promotion content," "rewriting content," and "terms of reference for photo/video/design services."

Figure 2. Bar chart presenting the usage of generative AI in PR tasks.



Source: Own elaboration.

It should be noted that, despite the large-scale adoption of generative AI tools in their work, a significant proportion of respondents (77.9%, n=88) had not received formal training in AI before participating in the survey, although more than 70% of respondents admitted to using generative AI in their practice. Only 20.4% (n=23) of the respondents said they already attended training or courses concerning the usage of AI tools.

The most popular AI tool among Romanian PR professionals is, by far, ChatGPT used by 90.4% (n=75) of respondents already using generative AI. However, a significant proportion also uses AI functions from Canva (31.3%, n=26), Midjourney (26.5%, n=22) and DeepL (21.7%, n=18). Some other applications used are Brandwatch (4.8%, n=4), Cleanup.Pictures (2.4%, n=2), TLDR This (2.4%, n=2). A large number of respondents reported using ChatGPT in their activities for “generating content for social media” (72.4%, n=55), “research” (48.7%, n=37), “generating content for media” (35.5%, n=27), “generating ideas for clients/superiors” (27.6%, n=21), “communicating with clients/superiors” (15.8%, n=12). Respondents added “brainstorming” and “improving communication” structure among the activities where ChatGPT is used.

The perceived benefits of using ChatGPT were similar to those invoked for using AI in general, as this AI tool was already cited as the most used AI application by the Romanian PR professionals surveyed. Users of ChatGPT appreciated its assistance in “saving time” (93.4%, n=71), “making their work easier” (73.7%, n=56), “taking over redundant tasks” (39.5%, n=30), “providing more creative solutions” (23.7%, n=18), “improved results” (19.7%, n=15), and sourcing “more precise data” (9.2%, n=7). Indeed, more than 90.8% (n=69) of those who used ChatGPT expressed satisfaction with its effectiveness in aiding PR tasks.

In the interviews, the highest level of polarisation and dispersion occurs when talking about the types of activities for which respondents use generative AI-based tools. In fact, for the same type of activities there are both respondents who have maximum confidence in such tools and respondents who do not use them at all because they do not consider them useful for that type of activity. For example, some of the respondents openly admit using generative AI for all kinds of activities such as generating content for social media, mass media, research or ideas for pitches and presentations (“From basic copywriting to presentations, PowerPoint slides, photo recommendations. For example, we had a pitch presentation where we proposed a campaign made with AI and even the presentation posters were designed with AI [...] It also does good research, good summarizing” –R1, the first interviewee based on Figure 1). Others exclude some of the same activities, such as research or social media content, from the list of AI-assisted tasks (“I tried to use ChatGPT for research, but it didn’t give me accurate results or invented authors in titles. I wouldn’t use it even as a starting point in a research” –R5, “Social media posts generated by ChatGPT are very long and don’t respect at all the principles of a post we need in this century. It seems to me that it rather causes you problems and doesn’t suggest original ideas either” –R4).

Among the types of activities our respondents listed as assisted by generative AI tools, are: documenting, creating content for Social Media, creating content for other PR activities, summarising and rewriting text, strategizing or validating the strategy created by the professional, and creating visuals: “If we are talking about documenting, we use generative AI for about 70% of our tasks. For creating content, it represents 30-40% and it’s increasing” –R2, “Generating discourses and some other types of texts” –R3, “For copywriting, researching, comparative analysis or for re-writing in a catchy way. And also for creating visuals, like a logo” – R7. One type of activity that turns out to be outside of AI’s reach right now is networking: “What AI cannot do is the networking, the one-to-one interaction, the media relations activity that implies proposing to a journalist to have a coffee together” –R1.

We noted a strong correlation between the degree of creative/design tasks in the interviewee’s job, and the diversity of AI tools they use. For example, interviewees with responsibility in creative departments, such as R13 or R15, mention more generative AI tools (namely Perplexity AI, MidJourney, Dalle, Microsoft Copilot, Adobe Firefly, Canva AI, Storyboard, Pika

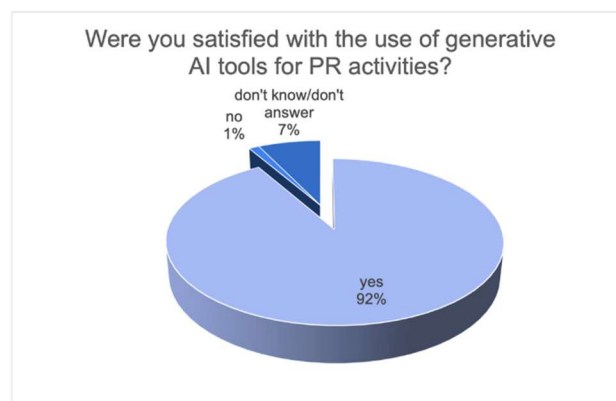
Labs), as compared with interviewees that predominantly have content creation tasks or those with managerial positions. They also mention tools that are more varied, while the others focus on products that immediately come to mind such as ChatGPT or Microsoft Copilot.

Interviews confirmed the list of generative AI tools provided by the survey, adding some more, namely: ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Adobe Firefly (“If I want something to sound professional, I use ChatGPT. For visualisation, I use Adobe Firefly, for example to make quick sketches. I use Chat GPT to structure my ideas for a presentation” –R13; “On the graphics side I use a lot of what Adobe has integrated. Adobe Photoshop, for example, is mainly used in our office” –R13); TomeApp (“TomeApp makes presentations. You explain what presentation you need and it delivers it with the whole content” –R1); Canva AI, Dalle (“All my team uses Canva AI and Dalle for generating images” –R1); Midjourney (“When talking about static visuals, MidJourney is the best for now” –R15); Coverage Book (“It does the media coverage, a combination between AI and Internet data collection. You put the media articles’ links there and it generates reach, engagement, the whole report” –R1); Remix (“I used it to generate ideas for logos, you can even make the ideas public and get reactions” –R7); Grammarly (“The texts that it generates are so accurate, interesting and attractive that I realise that, for business language, these AI tools will become more convincing and efficient than those written by humans” –R8); and, finally, Storyboard (“For €10 we used Storyboard to save €500 we usually spend on making a film” –R13).

5.2. Generative AI perception

Whether they use generative AI or not, a significant portion of respondents had a positive view of AI’s potential in enhancing PR practices (71.7%, n=81), while 11.5% (n=13) do not think so and 16.8% (n=19) stated they either did not know or chose not to answer this question. We can see that the proportion of those having a positive view of AI’s potential in PR is similar to the proportion of those declaring they use it already in their activities (73.5%, n=83). Among the PR professionals already using generative AI, the satisfaction level was remarkably high, with 92% (n=76) expressing satisfaction with generative AI efficacy for PR activities (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Pie chart presenting generative AI usage satisfaction.



Source: Own elaboration.

When asked in the interviews to explain what they understand by generative AI tools in their activity, our respondents prefer to explain this through the functions these tools perform. Emphasis is placed both on their efficiency and their dimension of complementarity with human work. There is almost unanimity in defining AI in PR use as a tool that helps simplify repetitive tasks and increase one’s speed of response: “In our agency, AI is somehow assimilated as easy work, done quickly. We are open to using it” –R10; “It is a tool that helps us do things faster. I mean, it’s simply just another tool” –R13; “These are some tools or technologies to help us [...]” –R3; “At the moment, I just see it as a tool which can really make your job easier” –R12;

“A useful tool to prepare your groundwork [...]. Just like we use Google to search for things, we use AI to take the first steps for whatever we have to do” –R14. Most often, respondents associate AI tools with instruments that help with repetitive tasks and creating ideas in moments where inspiration is lacking. They also perceive the tools as something helpful that makes their jobs easier. For many respondents, there is an overlap between AI and ChatGPT especially in the area of copywriting: “ChatGPT seems to become the representation of AI” –R10; and “My favourite? ChatGPT” –R1.

Among the advantages of using generative AI tools in their professional activities, our respondents cited saving time, providing ideas and helping validate the ideas they already have, helping with documentation, summarising texts and documents, helping to edit or create visuals: “I think it’s a tool that helps you be more efficient, stop wasting time gathering information, writing is done faster. You can generate a prompt in which you tell it what you want, i.e. it structures your information the way you want it” –R13; and “It’s positive because it can make your work more efficient. It relieves you of repetitive tasks and you can focus on others” –R1. Weaknesses cited by our interviewees include the need to always proofread/check, “you can’t rely on it,” encouraging intellectual laziness, being less creative than human beings, providing low-quality text: “It helps a lot in terms of time, but lowers quality” –R10; and “Rather than waiting an hour to prompt, it’s better to write it yourself” –R14. PR practitioners also claimed to have a low level control over such tools and insufficient knowledge about them: “The main disadvantage would be that, on the surface, it is very convenient to use, but in reality, however, it requires a high level of knowledge and skills for you to be able to decide whether, in fact, what it delivers is not only aligned with your goals, but if there is an element of novelty there” –R8.

A constant factor of the analysed interviews is the distrust expressed by the respondents in the quality of the final product resulting from the use of AI tools and the fact that they cannot be used without human intervention on them: “We need to filter all this information (provided by generative AI). It’s very helpful, but it cannot be used without human intervention, that’s why AI cannot replace a human resource” –R9; “You need to re-check, to correct and to adapt, but it saves you a lot of time” –R7; “I think that everywhere we need a human resource intervention” –R11; “It demands a high level of knowledge and competencies to decide if what is provided really respond to your needs” –R8; and “As long there is a need to prompt in order to get something from AI, there will be a need to have a human being to prompt and to check what the AI is giving” –R10. This may also be one of the reasons why the general perception of the danger AI represents for the PR labour market is not very imminent (see also 5.3.).

Despite the weaknesses listed above, data collected through interviews has also shown a high degree of satisfaction regarding the AI tools available. In fact, this is one of the few aspects where users unanimously agree: “I am very satisfied, yes, 80%, just with some adjustments on my part” –R5; “On a scale of 1 to 10, somewhere around a 9. Especially on the visual side. That means you still have something to do” –R7; and “I am very pleased” –R13.

Most users admit feeling relief or satisfaction after using generative AI. Few of the respondents confessed to feeling guilt, mostly because they feel like the tool has done their job: “Relief – 100%, guilt – never. Sometimes, maybe, a little of impostor syndrome” –R10; and “Not at all guilty. I encourage the team to use [...] Use it, bro! It makes it easier for you. It’s a tool that can make work easier” –R12.

5.3. AI impact on the PR field and ethics concerns

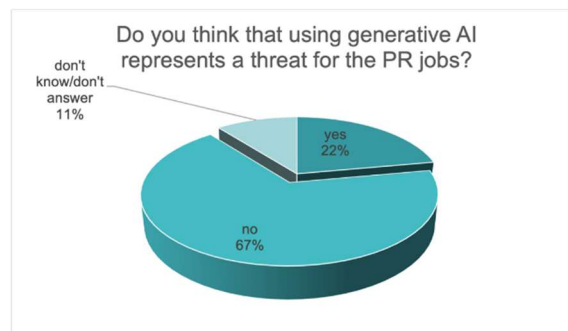
The survey’s respondents predicted that generative AI’s influence would likely expand further in PR (84.1%, n=95). Moreover, 61.9% (n=70) of the respondents consider that using AI in their activities is ethical, while 13.3% (n=15) disagree and 24.8% (n=28) chose not to respond to this question. We observe that the proportion of those considering AI use does not imply ethical problems is smaller than the proportion of respondents declaring using AI in their activities (73.5%, n=83).

The interviews allowed us to better understand practitioners' position regarding the ethical concerns. Official restrictions from their employers on the use of AI are rather rare ("We don't have restrictions" –R1; "There are no restrictions using it" –R2; "Who is going to explain how you got the copy? You assume it. Nobody told us to use it or to not use it. The important thing is the result" –R4; and "Not only are there no restrictions, but there is encouragement to use it everywhere. We have integrated it into almost everything" –R14). These are mostly related to private data or data of clients that are yet unreleased: "The first months after the release of ChatGPT, the site was blocked on the company's device. [...] Now, there still is a restriction to upload only public documents on ChatGPT" –R5; and "There was an email saying to take care not to use clients' information that is not public within ChatGPT" –R4.

Our respondents did share some fears related to transparency of generative AI usage in relation with clients ("Do I or don't I tell the client that I'm using AI for their social media posts? The client will say that they are not paying an agency to do what they can do themselves with ChatGPT" –R1; "The problem of ethics intervenes: we see these things as easy work for us, but it is not qualitative. [...] but we only use them internally, precisely because of this lack of quality and to promote transparency regarding the client" –R10); intellectual property rights ("Yes, it raises ethical issues, one, because it's natural to state where a text is 100% yours or where it's a contribution of such a tool" –R8; "Ethically, it seems to me that you clearly shouldn't be using ChatGPT, I mean, it seems like cheating to me" –R6); or even concerns related to the real authorship of the content produced (human or artificial) – ("It is natural to indicate if a text is 100% yours or if there is an AI tool contribution" –R6).

Regarding the impact of using generative AI in the profession, most respondents (67.3%, n=76) did not perceive it as an immediate threat to PR jobs. However, 22.1% (n=25) did perceive it as a threat, while 10.6% (n=12) chose not to answer (see Fig. 4). The majority (80.5%, n=91) believed that AI represents an opportunity for the PR industry. Opinions were mixed regarding AI product quality compared with that created by humans, with some seeing AI as complementary rather than replacing human work. Even if they do commonly use AI in their activity, PR professionals do not think AI results are better than human-created results (68.1%, n=77). This also appears to be one of the main reasons for not perceiving the usage of AI as a threat to the profession, as our interviews showed. Only 11.5% (n=13) believe AI can do a better job than humans in the PR field. A notable percentage of respondents (80.5%, n=91) indicated a need for IT training tailored to PR specialists in order to better understand and use AI tools effectively. Only 12.4% (n=14) do not think such training is necessary. "A respectable agency doesn't write its press releases with ChatGPT. It can be used for generating content in social media, which juniors usually do, but in PR it is more complicated," one respondent said in an open-ended question of our survey, showing that help from ChatGPT is not always considered to be as valuable as human work.

Figure 4. Pie chart presenting the percentage of PR professionals considering generative AI as a threat to PR jobs.



Source: Own elaboration.

Our interviews proved that the danger to the profession is perceived differently depending on the level of management and the type of the institution, namely: there is a greater threat to the profession and urgent need for workflow integration perceived in social media/digital/marketing agencies etc. (“It will end up having absolutely everything from A to Z. It is my vision that will happen in the next five years” –R13); a middling threat to the profession and rather personal need to become familiar with the tools – at the corporate/client level; and a minimal threat to the profession (“I don’t think it’s something that can put jobs at risk” –R4; “It still can’t replace man’s work” –R12; “Not a threat at all. I see AI tools as an opportunity” –R5); and a perception of almost no need to integrate into the organisation’s workflow at institutions with higher adoption inertia such as government institutions (“I believe that everywhere there should also be a human resource component” –R11 and “The branding component will be replaced, but the copy, probably not. That’s where you still need a human touch from time to time” –R7).

However, there is unanimous agreement in the interviews that there will be a pressing need for regulation, with the perception being that regulation must be implemented at a national or even international level: “It must be fully regulated” –R1; “Everything related to artificial intelligence should be regulated. [...]” –R4; “I believe that every company will create a kind of manual for the responsible use of AI software and train employees so that they know what they can communicate with AI and it will generate business opportunities” –R5; “It will probably be necessary that in certain sectors, as in the communication sector, to have a self-regulation” –R8; and “It should be regulated so you don’t appropriate content that doesn’t belong to you. But I don’t see how at the moment” –R9.

6. Discussion

Although our research confirms the widespread adoption of AI tools, and especially generative AI tools, shown in the recent CIPR report (CIPR, 2023), our outcome explains why this is happening and gives voice to professionals both to explain this phenomenon and give their perspective on this development. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods (with the qualitative part following the quantitative stage) allowed us to explain and interpret some of the data through the comprehensive approach of semi-structured interviews. In this sense, the high level of enthusiasm in adopting AI generative tools is explained by Romanian PR professionals through the benefits of this adoption, namely: time saving, work simplification and reduction of repetitive tasks. Respondents also recognized AI’s role in fostering creativity and yielding better results. While the adoption of generative AI tools is almost unanimous, we noticed polarised opinions when talking about the types of activities for which respondents use generative AI-based tools. Our findings confirm previous studies conducted on a global scale (CIPR, 2023) that activities excluded from an AI tool component are those involving networking and one-to-one interactions (PR experts with journalists, for example). The tasks in which AI is employed, as cited by our survey participants, align closely with those highlighted by Alawaad (2021), Abdulah (2020), Galloway and Swiatek (2018), and Panda *et al.* (2019). This correlation underscores the fact that Romanian PR professionals are in line with the broader industry trend.

The satisfaction level when using generative AI tools is remarkably high, with a significant portion (71.7%) of respondents viewing AI’s potential in PR positively, without perceiving it as an immediate threat to PR jobs (67.3%). Even when they are asked to give a definition of these tools, emphasis is placed on efficiency in their definitions, as well as on the dimension of complementarity with human work. These findings show professionals do not perceive the same negative impact on the profession and the danger of job losses previous studies have emphasised (Swiatek *et al.*, 2024). In our assessment, Romanian PR professionals are currently experiencing a honeymoon period with AI utilisation, displaying a lesser emphasis on the critical perspective highlighted in other research studies (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Panda *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, the fact that nearly a quarter of our respondents remain uninvolved in AI usage suggests the need for deeper exploration into the motivations behind this decision.

A constant factor in the analysed interviews is the distrust expressed by the respondents in the quality of the final product resulting from the use of AI tools and the fact that they cannot be used without additional human intervention. Even if they do commonly use AI in their activities, PR professionals do not think AI results are better than human-created results. We think that this is a key point of our findings which firstly, rejoins previous researchers' statements about the need of maintaining a human touch in PR activities (Arief & Gustomo, 2020; Galloway & Swiatek, 2022), and, secondly, explain why they do not perceive it as a threat to the profession itself.

Our study reveals that PR practitioners' main ethics concerns are related to transparency towards their clients and, in general, towards the transparency when using AI tools to produce different types of content. Other concerns are related to intellectual property rights and to the distinction between human and AI content. Thus, these findings only partially confirm previous research on this topic (Panda *et al.*, 2019; Galloway & Swiatek, 2022).

7. Conclusions and limitations

In summary, the survey revealed an important level of AI adoption and rather positive perceptions about its potential benefits. While concerns do exist, the prevailing sentiment was that AI could be harnessed as a valuable tool for enhancing PR practices, with careful attention devoted to proper training and integration.

We believe the primary findings from our survey can be summarised as follows:

- **Extensive Adoption of AI:** Our survey revealed a widespread embrace of AI among Romanian PR professionals, with ChatGPT emerging as being particularly favoured.
- **Positive Perception:** A prevailing positive attitude was noted towards AI tools, perceived as an avenue of opportunity rather than a threat to the industry's dynamics.
- **Discrepancy in AI's Efficacy:** While the overall attitude towards AI was optimistic, the perception was that AI-generated work does not currently match the quality of human-created content, which explains the fact that they do not perceive it as a threat to the profession.

These findings showcase the substantial integration of AI in the PR sector, underlining the prominence of ChatGPT. Moreover, they highlight the industry's forward-looking perspective on AI's role and its ability to complement, rather than surpass, human capabilities.

The interviews allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of Romanian PR professionals' enthusiastic adoption of generative AI tools in their activities. This large-scale adoption of different generative AI tools mentioned above is motivated by the fact that using them saves time, replaces repetitive tasks, generates new ideas, and mainly facilitates PR-related tasks.

Almost all our interviewees admitted relief and satisfaction when using generative AI tools to complete their tasks. However, some concerns were expressed regarding the quality of the generative AI content and, especially, the need to always have this kind of content checked by a human mind before releasing it. PR professionals' main ethics concerns are related to transparency regarding their clients and, in general, regarding transparency when using AI tools to produce different types of content. The impact on the profession is perceived differently according to the position our respondents have in their organisation. The most dramatic impact, that anticipating that AI would replace almost all jobs in this sector, is rather present in digital agencies and is far less present in the corporate or public sphere.

Romanian PR practitioners express unanimous agreement that there will be a pressing need for regulation. There is also unanimity regarding the fact that the impact of AI on the PR profession will increase over the next few years. While agency employees seem really concerned about the impact of AI on their jobs, a large majority of those surveyed considers AI tools cannot replace humans at this moment in time.

We view one of the main strengths of our research in its pioneering effort in mapping AI adoption and perception within Romanian PR professionals, our chosen case study. This

significance was acknowledged by PR practitioners who inquired about the publication timeline and platform. Many remarked that the study's timeliness closely resonates with the dynamics of their professional landscape.

Prior research has concentrated on the general application of AI within the public relations (PR) profession and industry without considering the transformative impact of generative AI that has emerged over the past two years. There is a dearth of research specifically examining the application of generative AI in PR, as well as a limited understanding of the motivations behind its adoption. This study addresses these gaps by looking at the benefits associated with generative AI in PR and exploring PR practitioners' perceptions of AI adoption within the profession. The findings of this research open new directions for scholarly inquiry into the application and impact of generative AI in the PR industry.

Further research can include comparative studies with other professional contexts or observing the dynamics of this topic for the industry. It is therefore worth investigating the further impact on workflow, job tasks, but also on client-agency relationships, as well as the impact on the educational curriculum.

Although the limitations of our study are mainly related to the specific particularities of our case study, namely the Romanian PR industry, this case study also allows us to conduct an in-depth exploration of this specific context. Some other limitations include the sample representation, both for the survey and interviews.

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