

Will Artificial Intelligence Replace Public Relations Professionals, Or Make Them More Strategic? A Critical Conceptual Review of AI Adoption in Sub-National Nigerian Public Relations Practice, With Reference To Akwa Ibom State

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically reviews the ongoing debate over whether artificial intelligence (AI) will displace public relations (PR) professionals or elevate them into more strategic roles, using sub-national Nigerian PR practice — illustrated with reference to Akwa Ibom State — as an analytical lens. Rather than reporting primary survey data, the paper synthesizes the substitution and augmentation theses in AI-communication scholarship with the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology to develop a structural account of why AI adoption in infrastructural constrained, sub-national settings is likely to stall at clerical rather than strategic use. The paper argues that the central risk facing such contexts is not job displacement but strategic stagnation: practitioners may use generative AI tools for routine drafting while structural deficits — unreliable power and broadband, absent institutional training, and the lack of licensed analytical software — foreclose access to AI-enabled predictive analytics and crisis simulation. The paper concludes with a capacity-building framework and a set of empirically testable propositions intended to guide future field research on AI adoption among PR practitioners in comparable developing-economy settings.

KEYWORDS

artificial intelligence; public relations; strategic communication; Technology Acceptance Model; UTAUT; digital divide; Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

The global landscape of professional communication is undergoing rapid change driven by the diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI). Tools capable of automated sentiment analysis, real-time crisis monitoring, and hyper-personalized content generation are reshaping the operational parameters of public relations (PR) practice internationally (Weller & Lock, 2024). This technological disruption has produced two competing theoretical positions in the scholarly literature: a substitution thesis, which anticipates the eventual automation of core PR functions, and an augmentation thesis, which holds that the relational and ethical core of PR work is resistant to automation.

This paper situates that debate within a sub-national African context, using Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria's South-South region as an illustrative case. As the state expands its industrial, tourism, and public-infrastructure footprint, demand for sophisticated public relations has grown, yet the conditions under which practitioners in such regional markets adopt AI differ substantially from the well-resourced, urban, and often multinational settings that dominate the existing literature (Ntuk et al., 2022). The central argument advanced here is that in infrastructural constrained sub-national markets, the more pressing risk is not that AI will replace PR professionals, but that structural constraints will confine AI to clerical rather than strategic use — a condition this paper terms strategic stagnation.

It is important to state the scope and limits of this contribution clearly: this is a conceptual and critical review that synthesizes existing theory and secondary literature; it does not report new primary survey or interview data from Akwa Ibom practitioners. The propositions developed in Section 6 are offered specifically to guide the primary empirical research that this literature currently lacks.

II. THE SUBSTITUTION–AUGMENTATION DEBATE IN AI–PR SCHOLARSHIP

Two dominant paradigms structure the literature on AI's implications for PR practice. The substitution thesis holds that advances in natural language processing and predictive analytics will progressively automate tasks long considered the preserve of human communicators, from media pitching to elements of crisis response (Weller & Lock, 2024). The augmentation thesis, by contrast, argues that AI lacks the emotional intelligence, ethical judgment, and cultural reflexivity required to manage complex stakeholder relationships, and can therefore only assist rather than replace human practitioners (Bourne, 2019).

Recent empirical work situates most organizations somewhere between these poles. A structural equation modelling study of PR and AI in reputation management found that AI use was associated with measurable gains in competitive value and behavioural outcomes, but only where it was integrated into broader communication strategy rather than deployed as a standalone tool. Similarly, research on AI usage and public relations practice in Malaysia found that the ethical framing of AI adoption — rather than adoption itself — mediated its effect on practice outcomes (Khalid et al., 2025). A systematic review of automated communication research further concludes that most existing studies treat AI as either a

passive tool or an autonomous agent, with comparatively little empirical attention paid to the infrastructural and institutional conditions that determine which of these roles AI actually occupies in a given organization.

This last point is the gap this paper addresses. Much of the augmentation-versus-substitution debate implicitly assumes a baseline of reliable digital infrastructure and institutional capacity. That assumption does not hold uniformly across the markets in which PR is practiced globally, and research situated in African and other developing-economy contexts has begun to make this explicit. A case study of AI use in integrated marketing communication in Ghana, for instance, found that adoption was concentrated in content generation and customer engagement functions, with limited evidence of AI-supported strategic planning. A pattern consistent with the strategic-stagnation argument advanced here.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TAM AND UTAUT

This paper draws on two complementary and empirically well-established models of technology adoption: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT).

TAM holds that individual acceptance of a technology is driven by two cognitive judgments: Perceived Usefulness (PU), the degree to which a person believes a technology will enhance their job performance, and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), the degree to which the technology is perceived as free of effort (Davis, 1989). TAM plausibly explains the rapid uptake of conversational generative-AI tools among PR practitioners: such tools combine high PEOU, owing to simple natural-language interfaces, with immediate, visible PU for routine copy production.

UTAUT extends this individual-level account by introducing structural and social determinants of technology use, organized around four constructs: Performance Expectancy, Effort Expectancy, Social Influence, and Facilitating Conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Facilitating Conditions — the organizational and technical infrastructure available to support a system's use — is the construct most directly implicated in the argument this paper develops: where reliable power, broadband, and licensed enterprise software are absent, high Performance Expectancy on the part of individual practitioners cannot translate into systemic, strategic AI use. Table 1 summarizes how the presence or absence of enabling conditions across the four UTAUT constructs is theorized to shape adoption outcomes.

Table 1. UTAUT Constructs and Predicted Adoption Outcomes in Infrastructural Constrained Settings

UTAUT Construct	Enabling Condition Present	Enabling Condition Absent (Predicted Outcome)
Performance Expectancy	Practitioner adopts AI for both routine and strategic tasks	Adoption limited to routine tasks despite belief in AI's potential
Effort Expectancy	Low-friction tools are used consistently across workflows	Usage confined to free-tier, conversational tools only

Social Influence	Institutional leadership models and endorses AI use	AI adoption remains an individual, unsanctioned practice
Facilitating Conditions	Reliable power, broadband, and licensed enterprise software	Strategic AI functions (analytics, simulation) remain inaccessible

IV. STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON STRATEGIC AI ADOPTION IN SUB-NATIONAL NIGERIAN PRACTICE

Nigeria's broader digital divide literature offers a plausible structural explanation for why AI adoption in a sub-national market such as Akwa Ibom State would be expected to concentrate in clerical rather than strategic use. Documented barriers to ICT adoption in Nigeria include unreliable electricity supply, constrained broadband infrastructure outside major urban centres, and comparatively low institutional investment in digital literacy and specialized software licensing. None of these constraints is unique to PR practice, but each maps directly onto the Facilitating Conditions construct in UTAUT, and each would be expected to disproportionately affect advanced, infrastructure-dependent AI applications — predictive analytics, automated sentiment mapping, and crisis simulation — while leaving low-infrastructure generative tools comparatively unaffected.

This asymmetry generates the theoretical prediction at the centre of this paper: that PR practitioners in markets such as Akwa Ibom State are likely to exhibit high awareness and use of free-tier conversational AI tools for drafting and administrative tasks, while remaining largely excluded from AI-enabled strategic functions — not because they reject AI, but because the infrastructural and institutional preconditions for strategic use are absent. This is a testable empirical claim, not a documented finding, and Section 6 proposes how it could be tested directly.

V. FROM CLERICAL TOOL TO STRATEGIC ASSET: THE RISK OF GENERIC AI USE

A second risk compounds the infrastructural constraint described above. Where organizations lack structured AI usage policies, generative tools may be used without adequate human duration, producing communication output that is generic and stripped of local cultural and institutional context (Weller & Lock, 2024). In a market such as Akwa Ibom State, where PR work depends heavily on navigating relationships with host communities, traditional institutions, and regional government structures, such de-contextualized output would plausibly undermine rather than support stakeholder trust. This risk is best understood as a governance failure rather than a technological one: it arises from the absence of institutional policy on AI use, not from any inherent property of the tools themselves.

VI. TOWARD STRATEGIC ELEVATION: A CAPACITY-BUILDING FRAMEWORK

If the constraint on strategic AI adoption is primarily structural rather than attitudinal, the appropriate response is institutional rather than individual. This paper proposes three components of a capacity-building framework for sub-national PR markets:

Infrastructure investment: organizations should prioritize reliable power and broadband provision alongside licensed, enterprise-grade communication software offering analytics and monitoring capability beyond free-tier conversational tools.

Structured professional development: professional bodies such as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, in partnership with tertiary institutions, are well placed to develop continuing-education modules in digital literacy, AI-assisted strategy, and ethical AI deployment.

Institutional AI governance: PR departments and agencies should adopt internal policies mandating human oversight, fact verification, and cultural contextualization of AI-assisted output, to guard against the generic, de-contextualized communication risk described in Section 5.

VII. PROPOSITIONS FOR FUTURE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

As a conceptual contribution, this paper does not test the relationships it proposes. The following propositions are offered to guide the primary data collection — structured surveys and practitioner interviews — that this literature currently lacks:

- PR practitioners in infrastructural constrained sub-national markets will report high Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use for generative AI tools, but low usage of predictive or analytical AI tools, consistent with a Facilitating-Conditions bottleneck.
- The relationship between Performance Expectancy and strategic (as opposed to clerical) AI use will be moderated by the availability of Facilitating Conditions, such as reliable power, broadband, and licensed software.
- Organizations that provide structured AI training and internal governance policies will show a higher proportion of strategic AI use relative to clerical use than organizations without such provisions.
- Practitioners' perceived threat of job displacement by AI will be inversely associated with their perceived strategic (as opposed to clerical) use of AI tools.
- The absence of institutional AI governance policy will be positively associated with reduced cultural and contextual specificity in AI-assisted communication output.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The question of whether AI will replace PR professionals cannot be answered independently of the infrastructural and institutional conditions under which practitioners operate. This paper has argued that in sub-national, infrastructural constrained markets such as Akwa Ibom State, the more pressing risk is not displacement but strategic stagnation: AI functioning as an efficient typewriter rather than a strategic advisor, not because practitioners resist the technology, but because Facilitating Conditions.

In the UTAUT sense — remain largely absent. The human core of PR practice — cultural fluency, ethical judgment, and relational trust-building — is unlikely to be automated in the near term. The more consequential and currently untested question is whether targeted infrastructural investment and institutional governance can close the gap between clerical

and strategic AI use — a question this paper has translated into propositions for the primary empirical research that should follow it.

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