ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS' KNOWLEDGE AND USE OF AI TOOLS FOR PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN IMO STATE

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Abstract
Leveraging technological devices to enhance contents for public communication such as speeches, remarks, addresses and public lectures can improve the relationship between organisations and their publics. However, despite the growing rate of misinformation and hate speech in the information ecosystem, dearth of empirical data on knowledge and usage of AI has been particularly acute in Africa including Nigeria. Hence, this study aims to assess Imo public relations professionals' Knowledge and usage of AI for public communication. The study was guided by specific objectives including to: determine level of knowledge on AI potentials, extent of usage of AI for public communications and factors that can facilitate adaptation among the PR professionals in Imo state. Technological determinism underpins the study. An estimated population of 99 registered public relations professionals were examined using the survey research method. The census principle was adopted based on the manageability of the population size. Questionnaire was the instrument for data collection designed in a modified 5-point Likert scale. Analysis of data involved frequency counts and percentage. Whereas the mean served as the statistical tool. Results indicated a high level of knowledge of AI potential for public communications at a mean of 3.7, while level of usage was found to be moderate at a mean of 2.7. Training and retraining PR officers to keep them abreast of AI technology and provision of support devices and tools to facilitate adaptation were recommended.

***Key words:** Artificial intelligence, Assess, knowledge, Public communication, Usage*

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence technology is assuming an essential role in almost every aspect of human endeavour. In public relations AI can complement human intelligence to produce captivating contents for public communications such as speech and other forms of contents (Omer, 2024). In other words the development of machine learning applications, data analytics, and natural language processing can enable organisations to collect huge amounts of information, identify trends and public sentiments and personalize communication for their various publics. The enablements which centre on

artificial intelligence can help in the efficient processing and analysis of data and providing valuable insights into public circumstances (Anani-Bossman, et al., 2024). AI capabilities for content creation can be leveraged for image management with implication for sustaining mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (Zakrzewska, 2023).

Public communication is a strategic communication that involves disseminating knowledge, message or ideas on specific issues or subjects to a group. It takes among other forms such as speeches, addresses, remarks, Public Service Announcements (PSAs), public lectures (Gonzales & Santiago, 2023). It is usually a situation where an individual addresses a large group of people for the purpose of sharing important message. Meanwhile institutions and organisations through the public relations officers can construct AI assisted messages for various occasions such as press conferences, rallies, seminars, etc. AI tools including but not limited to; Brandwatch, GPT, DeepL, Dialogflow, IBM Watson can serve to redefine and reshape these contents to influence mutual relationship between organisations and their various publics (Galloway & Swiateck, 2018; Piyumali 2024). Despite the growth of digital technology as well as the acclaimed potential of AI for improving strategic communication in public relations, there is paucity of empirical research on knowledge and adaptation of AI-enabled tools for public communications. Besides, an observation that PR professionals' lack adequate knowledge on the concept was implied to have affected its application in communication (Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence 2019; USC global report, 2019; Zerfass et al., 2020) cited in (Anani-Bossman, et al., 2024). Thus, the authors emphasised dearth of data on the knowledge and adoption of AI to be more prevalent in Africa including Nigeria than her foreign counterparts. Besides, Jeong and Park (2023) averred that several scholars have advocated for specific study on strategic communication practices while observing that most existing studies often engage in generalized perspective of AI and PR. This study will add to the body of knowledge especially in the Nigeria's context. It will contribute to the understanding and in facilitating the adaptation of AI tools in the public relations sphere in line with the digital economy drive as provided in the Nigeria Technology Innovation Policy 2022 (verraki, 2023). Besides, the imperative for a more proactive communication strategies in times of crises and at a time when misinformation and hate speech is gradually penetrating into the communication landscape justifies the study.

Statement of the Problem

The prevalence of misinformation and hate speech against individuals, groups and organisations is a serious concern that calls for improvement in public communication contents by the public relations professionals. People or organisations from time to time are faced with the issue of spreading information that can be detrimental to their image.

There are also situations where the various publics have contradicting and negative perceptions about organisations' policies or trends probably as a result of poor understanding. This becomes a problem for the concerned persons or organisations, hence the need to develop contents that can take care of the circumstances by leveraging the capabilities of AI technology for public communications. Despite the possible occurrence of these problems and other related negative developments, the level of knowledge and usage of artificial intelligence technology among public relations professionals in Imo state remains uncertain. Hence this study is aimed at assessing knowledge and usage of AI technology among public relations professionals with a focus on Imo state.

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to assess the utilisation of AI tools for public communication among public relations professionals in Imo State The study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Determine knowledge level of AI potentials for public communication among public relations professionals in Imo state.
2. Ascertain extent of adaptation of AI tools for public communication among public relations professionals in Imo state.
3. Determine factors that can facilitate knowledge and adaptation of AI technology for public communication among public relations professionals in Imo state.

Research Questions

The following questions were raised following from the objectives of the study;

a. what is the knowledge level on the potentials of AI for Public communication among public relations professionals in Imo state?
b. To what extent has AI tools for public communication been adopted among public relations professionals in Imo state?
c. How can knowledge and adaptation of AI technology for public communication be facilitated among public relations professionals in Imo state?

Literature Review

Public Relations, Artificial Intelligence and Public Communications

Zakrzewska (2023) defined artificial intelligence as the science and engineering of creating intelligent machines, such as intelligent computer programs. While (Russell and Norvig, 2010) referred to in Bartneck et al.(2020) described Artificial Intelligence (AI) as involving machines or programs with the capacity of performing tasks that require human intellect. The authors noted that AI in a modern sense has to do with the design and development of intelligent agents that receive stimuli from the environment and take actions that affect that environment. The Chartered Institute of Public relations

(CIPR) in Suciati et al. (2021) described AI as the performance of cognitive tasks and other human functions with the aid of technology. As a planned avenue employed to convey a message on specific issues or subjects in public events, public communications have specific goals to achieve at different times (Bhazin, 2021) cited in (Gonzales and Santiago, 2023). Hence, AI can provide professionals with the strategic contents and tactics required for public presentations aimed at sustaining mutual understanding or other related goal(s) through specific contents tailored to different categories of audiences at different occasions and circumstances (Rogers & Peterson, 2019) referred to in (Nobre, 2020).

Empirical Studies

Omer, (2024) in his study explored the potential advantages, threats, and recommendations associated with the use of artificial intelligence technologies in public relations through a comprehensive literature review. The study observed that despite numerous advantages offered by the use of AI in public relations, that it also poses possible threats to relevant area of the field. The threats include data breaches, ethical challenges, disinformation and misinformation among others. Hence, to minimise these challenges suggestions were put forward by stakeholders in different organisations, academics and public relations outfits.

Piyumali (2024) investigated the various ethical challenges caused by the adaptation of automated technologies, which include issues such as transparency, authenticity, and the tendency for misinformation. The study explored industry practices and regulations using in-depth interview method to collect data from professionals in the public relations field in the context of Sri Lanka. Finding revealed that implementing ethical automated communication strategies in Sri Lanka's digital public relations industry has to do with prioritizing transparency by clearly disclosing AI involvement, ensuring that data privacy does not violate local laws, and guaranteeing the accuracy of automated messages. Displaying the right attitude in using cultural language and ensuring equitable access to information as well as considering the long-term goal aimed at sustainable, community-centric communication strategies.

Zakrzewska (2023) explored how AI is used in public relations and explained its impact on the industry's development. Using desk research method the researcher analysed the most current reports, press and academic articles relating to the use of AI tools in public relations activities in Poland. AI tools used were examined as well as ethical issues associated with the use of AI in public relations activities.

Galloway and Swiatek (2018) in their paper entitled public relations and artificial intelligence its not (just) about robot observed that task automation enabled by AI is

getting unnecessary prominence against the much more important technological, economic and societal implications.

Suciati et al, (2021) conducted a study to ascertain the acceptance of a proposed press release instant creating app for public relations referred to as Bot. The finding indicated acceptance based on perceived ease of use and high usefulness of the bot. Suciati et al., observed the scarcity of literature in terms of public relations connection with Artificial Intelligence (AI) despite experts and academics recognition of the significant potential of AI integration in the industry.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on technological determinism theory developed by Thorstein Veblen an American Sociologist (1857 – 1929). The theory was popularized by Mashall Mcluhan with his knowledge of media studies and the culture of England (Ezema & Nwosu, 2019). The emphasis on the technological determinism theory is that technology influences the way information is gathered, distributed received and interpreted. Technology also determines how people go about their life activities. It influences people and societal cultures, values and norms. For instance, the social media which is a technological innovation has changed communication patterns and social interaction has shifted from face to face to electronic messaging (Thitivesa, 2017). The theory is relevant to this based on the fact that the contents of speeches, remarks or addresses can be shaped by AI thereby influencing attitude and behaviour of the publics. Artificial intelligence technology can determine how information is package to satisfy people's aspirations or expectations. Thus, AI-assisted public communication can help to enhance understanding of organisations' programmes and decision which can help to build and sustain public trust.

Methodology

The survey research method was adopted to examine Imo public relations professionals' Knowledge and Usage of AI for public Communications. Population of the study consisted of all the registered public relations professionals in Imo state with an estimated nominal roll of 99 members (NIPR, Imo chapter secretariat, 2024). The census principle will be adopted based on the manageable size of the population of the study. Data Collection was done using the structured questionnaire designed in a modified Likert scale format. The instrument was subjected to face validation by an expert Communication researcher. Method of Administration of instrument involved the use online distribution using monkey survey online application. Tabulation, frequency counts and simple percentage was adopted for data presentation and analysis. Whereas the mean formed the statistical tool.

Analysis and Discussions

The researchers distributed hard copies and soft copies of the questionnaire to 114 respondents rather than 99 being the population of the study. The essence of which was to get a number of responses close to or equal to the population. However, only 81 responses were recorded and which was considered valid for the data analysis.

Demographic Data

Table 1: Sex

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Male	45	56%
Female	36	44%
Total	**81**	**100%**
Educational Qualification		
HND/B.Sc/B.A/B.Ed	22	27%
Masters	43	53%
Ph.D	12	15%
Others	4	5%
Total	**81**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Result in table 1 showed that 56% representing the majority of the respondents are male Public relations professionals. Besides, most of the respondents (53%) are masters in their disciplines.

Psychographic Data

The Psychographic data was analysed based on the objectives of the study as follows:

Objective One

Table 2:

Level of Knowledge on AI potentials for public communication.

Items	**Options**													
	SA		**A**		**PA**		**D**		**SD**		**Total**		**Mean**	**Decision**
I understand AI Potentials For creating contents such as speeches, PSA, press release etc.	F 27	% 33 %	F 39	% 48 %	F 13	% 16 %	F 2	% 3 %	F 0	% 0 %	F 81	% 100	4.1	Accepted
I am acquainted with AI capability for constructing personalized messages	22	22 %	31	38 %	21	26 %	5	6 %	2	3 %	81	100	3.8	Accepted
I am familiar with AI potential for monitoring sentiments and analyzing big data	20	25 %	23	28 %	31	38 %	7	9 %	0	0 %	81	100	3.6	Accepted
I have in-depth knowledge on AI strengths and drawbacks with respect to public communication	14	17 %	19	23 %	33	41 %	12	15 %	3	4 %	81	100	3.3	Accepted
Average Mean													3.7	Accepted

Source: Field Survey 2024

Decision rule: Criterion mean = 2.5; whereas the following will guide the interpretation of the result. Given the mid-point of 2.5, if the calculated mean is below 2.5, the decision is rejected. If the calculated mean is equal to or great than 2.5 the decision is accepted. The level of response is determined thus; very low; 1-1.80, low: 1.81-2.60 moderate; 2.61 – 3.40, High: 3.41-4.20, very high; 4.1-5.00.

The result in table 2 revealed that the respondents have high knowledge on the potential of AI for public communication. This is evident in the mean of 3.7 as indicated in the relevant table.

Objective Two

Table 3:

Extent of adaptation of AI for Public Communication.

Items	**Options**													
	SA		**A**		**PA**		**D**		**SD**		**Total**		**Mean**	**Decision**
I use Brand 24 and dialog flow AI tools to observe and analyse public opinions	F 0	% 0 %	F 4	% 4 %	F 19	% 25 %	F 35	% 43 %	F 23	% 28 %	F 81	% 100	2.0	Rejected
I employ IBM Watson AI tool for public segmentation	0	0 %	6	7 %	17	21 %	37	46 %	21	26 %	81	100	2.0	Rejected
I have adapted other AI tools for developing captivating contents for press conferences and other public speeches	16	20 %	28	35 %	33	41 %	4	4 %	0	0 %	81	100	3.6	Accepted
I use AI assisted tools for creating content for media presentation and campaign.	13	16 %	21	26 %	27	33 %	15	19 %	5	6 %	81	100	3.2	Accepted
Average Mean													2.7	Accepted

Source: Field Survey2024

Finding in table 3 indicated moderate usage of AI for public communication. This is evident in 2.7 mean of the respondents on the level of usage of AI for public communication.

Objective Three

Table 4

How adaptation of AI can be facilitated for public communication

Items	**Options**													
	SA		**A**		**PA**		**D**		**SD**		**Total**		**Mean**	**Decision**
Training and retraining of PRO officers to keep them abreast of AI available and emerging tools	F 30	% 37 %	F 44	% 54.3 %	F 5	% 6.2 %	F 2	% 2.5 %	F 0	% 0 %	F 81	% 100	4.1	Rejected
Provision of support devices and tools as enablement	29	36 %	46	57 %	6	7 %	0	0%	0	0 %	81	14.2	2.0	Accepted
Show casing dividends of the use of AI tools for public communication	21	26 %	37	46 %	20	24 %	3	4%	0	0 %	81	100	3.9	Accepted
Average Mean													4.0	Accepted

Source: Field Survey 2024

Finding in table 4 revealed at a mean of 4.0 that adaptation of AI can be facilitated through human and material powers as well as by showcasing the already achieved benefits of adapting AI in speech, addresses, and remarks contents.

Level of Knowledge on AI potentials for public communication.

Result in table 2 showed that respondents have high knowledge of AI potential for public communications. The implication is that there is tendency to adopt AI in developing their content for speeches, remarks or etc. The finding is in consonance with Suciati et al. (2021) that observed that experts and academics recognition of the significance Al for industry. It contradicts Anani-Bossman, et al., (2024) which implies that lack of knowledge of AI concept affects its application in communication. Thus respondents understand that AI can be used to create speech contents, personalised messages, and also used for analysing big data.

Extent of adaptation of AI for Public Communication

Finding revealed that the extent of usage of AI for public communications among the respondents is moderate. The implication of the result is that many of the respondents have not adapted AI in developing their public communication contents. The finding is not in line with the Suciati et al. (2021) finding that an AI app for content creation was accepted based on perceived ease of use. The moderate usage of AI may be linked to some ethnical issues associated with the use of AI for PR activities as revealed in Zakrzewska (2023).

Facilitating AI Adaptation for Public Communication

Result showed at an average mean of 4.0 that training and retraining of respondents of PR professionals, provision of enabling tools and showcasing benefits of AI can help to facilitate adaptation by PR professionals. Training and retraining of PR officers have implications for making the professionals understand that AI is not a threat but a tool for public relations professionals to become more effective and efficient in their various jobs as indicated in Suciati et al. (2021). Besides, implementing ethical automated communication strategies in digital public relations industry as suggested in Piyumali, (2024) has a connection with providing enabling tools to facilitate adaptation of AI in PR public communication contents. The finding is also consistent with Omer (2024) who explored the potential advantages of AI technology in public relations. The finding is related to technological determinism theory in the sense that provision AI devices and tools was found to be among the factors that can facilitate the adaptation of AI for enhancing public communication contents.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In an era in which ArtificiaI Intelligence is changing what and how contents are created, organisations, companies or groups are taking advantage of this Innovation to build and sustain mutual understanding with its publics in order to remain visible in their business. The result of this study has shown that despite the level of familiarity of PR professionals on AI potential for public communication, adaptation of AI tools for public communication is still unsatisfactory and may not be able to achieve the purpose of the innovation. The research has focused on providing information geared towards accelerating understanding and adaptation of AI particularly for designing public communication contents capable of influencing perceptions and correcting misconceptions about individuals, groups and/ or organisations. The findings of the study have implications for public relations practice and policy advancement. In line with the findings of the study, recommendations are made thus;

1. Imo PR professionals should endeavour to improve on their level of knowledge regarding AI potential by attending workshops, seminars, conferences and other non-formal educational fora.

2. Public relations professionals in Imo state should optimise their adoption and adaptation AI tools for public communication.
3. Organisations should support the PRs officers by creating enabling environment for the adaptation of AI for the relevant contents.

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