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Strategies Used by Public Relations and Communications Executives to Implement Ethical Use Standards for AI

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MS, Suffolk University 2005

BS, Merrimack College, 1995

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Public relations and communications (PR&C) executives' ineffective artificial intelligence (AI) strategies to develop and apply ethical frameworks for AI implementation can negatively impact organizations' brand reputation. Grounded in AI4People and stakeholder theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore the effective AI strategies PR&C executives used to develop and apply ethical frameworks for AI implementation while maintaining their organizations' brand reputations. The participants were six PR&C executives who used effective strategies to develop and apply ethical frameworks for AI implementation while maintaining their organization's brand reputation. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, public websites, and relevant public documents. Using thematic analysis, five key themes were identified: (1) Strategic and Ethical AI Integration, (2) Human-Centric Integration of AI in PR & Communications, (3) Protecting Brand Integrity Through Responsible AI Use, (4) Framework, Privacy, and Risk Mitigation, (5) Transparency and Stakeholder Communication. A key recommendation is that PR&C leaders should build human-centered governance systems before implementing AI technologies to protect ethical standards and ensure stakeholder protection. The implications for positive social change can include the potential for corporations to create information ecosystems that provide consumers, employees, and affected communities with more precise and trustworthy information while promoting equity.

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Dedication

To my wife, Anelise, thank you for being my rock through this long journey. You took on more than your share of childcare, tolerated the endless piles of printouts scattered throughout the house, and never stopped believing in me, even when I questioned myself. Your support, patience, and love were the foundation that allowed me to keep going, and I could not have done this without you.

To my son, Benjamin, you are still too young to understand why Dad spent so much time locked in his office, but you were one of my biggest motivations. Every late night and early morning was driven by the hope of showing you what commitment to learning and personal growth can look like. I pray that, by example, you will become inspired to pursue your dreams and always see them through to completion.

To my mom, Caroline, who has been my champion of academia, you were a key factor in showing me how education is transformative, and something that cannot be taken away from me. To my dad, Bryan, your love of reading and the way you emphasized the importance of keeping your mind sharp left a lasting impression on me. You gave me the tools to think critically, stay curious, and never stop learning.

To my Brazilian family, Suzana, you taught me through your own life experiences that it is never too late to pursue a new path. And Luiz, your accomplishments in both academia and your profession encouraged me to think bigger and believe that earning a doctorate and publishing my research was possible. Your inspiration came at just the right time.

And to all my family and friends, thank you for your understanding and support when I had to miss gatherings or say “next time” more often than I would have liked. Your encouragement, even from a distance, made a difference. This milestone belongs to all of you as much as it does to me.

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I want to extend a special acknowledgment to Dr. Kim Critchlow, my mentor and committee chair. What started as a challenging personality and style dynamic transformed into one of the most valuable experiences of both academic and personal growth in my life. You taught me the importance of dependability, organization, and attention to detail, and you helped me unlearn decades of business writing habits in favor of a disciplined academic structure. Your tough but fair guidance, always delivered with a mix of scholarly precision and human empathy, drove me to complete what often felt

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To the Critchlow scholars, I had the privilege of learning alongside you. Thank you for sharing your life lessons and experiences. Your insights and stories often taught me as much, if not more, than the required reading lists. And to the next wave of Critchlow students, lovingly referred to as "Critchlets," your thoughtful questions and enthusiasm have helped reinforce the journey I have been on. I wish you all continued growth and success as you navigate your paths.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools have been widely accessible and used and have transformed the public relations and communications (PR&C) industry by improving speed and efficiency with data-driven generative capabilities (Anani-Bossman et al., 2024; Biswal & Gouda, 2019). AI adoption among companies had more than doubled since 2017, with private AI funding reaching $91.9 billion in 2022 (McKinsey & Company, 2022; Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI, 2023), insinuating a trend in AI global investment patterns.

AI tools have helped PR&C professionals streamline processes such as content creation, sentiment analysis, and customer engagement, allowing companies to work more efficiently and make data-driven decisions (Nikolova, 2024). However, as business adoption of AI tools has rapidly increased, corporate policies have not kept up the pace. The issue of specific importance in PR&C roles is that the use of AI-generated content and automated interactions with stakeholders could lead to potential risks, including misinformation, bias, and data privacy concerns. Because these functions could directly impact public perception, failure to implement robust ethical guidelines for AI use might have damaged customer trust and harmed brand reputation. PR&C executives often lack effective strategies for developing and applying an ethical framework for AI implementation, leading to regulatory and ethical gaps that could negatively affect brand reputation and revenue. Without effective strategies, organizations risk brand damage, erosion of consumer trust, and potential legal issues.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that some PR&C executives lacked effective strategies for developing and applying an ethical framework for AI implementation. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore the effective AI strategies PR&C executives used to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation to maintain their organizations' brand reputations.

I used a purposive sampling method to select at least six participants. I gained access to the participants through professional networks, industry associations, and direct referrals from PR&C executives and industry professionals. I collected data using semistructured interviews, publicly available documents, artifacts, and testimonials. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks for this project included the AI4People framework, developed by Floridi et al. (2018), and stakeholder theory, introduced by Freeman (1984).

Research Question

The overarching research question was as follows: What effective strategies did PR&C executives use to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation to maintain their organization's brand reputation?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

An assumption is a self-evident belief that a researcher accepts as true without supportive empirical evidence, which helps guide the study of a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2021). I based this project on three primary assumptions. First, I assumed that

PR&C executives would be willing to participate in the interviews. Second, I assumed the participants would provide open, honest responses to the questions. Third, I assumed implementing ethical strategies would help protect brand value.

Limitations

Limitations are restrictions or constraints that may affect a study's design that are beyond the researcher's control and may impact the study's validity or findings (Miles, 2019). This project had several notable limitations. First, the number of PR&C executives interviewed may not be a full representative sample of the total, which could limit sample relevance. Second, because ethics could be inherently subjective, PR&C executives' interpretations of adverse effects and their prioritization of ethical concerns might have varied, potentially impacting the consistency of the findings. Third, due to the rapid pace of AI development, this study did not assess all available tools on the market. Instead, the findings reflect the specific tools and platforms participants reported using at the time of the interviews. As such, newer or less commonly adopted tools may present unique ethical challenges or advantages not captured in this study.

Transition

In Section 1, I established the foundation of the project, including the background of the problem, identified the business problem being researched, and the project purpose, and then discussed project assumptions and limitations. In Section 2, I present a review of academic and professional literature. Section 3 includes project ethics for consideration, the nature of the project, data collection and analysis techniques, and

reliability and validity activities. In Section 4, I discuss project findings and conclusions and their relevance to professional practice, social change, and further research.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Literature Review Opening Narrative

The professional and academic literature review served as a foundational component of this project, addressing the overarching research question: What effective strategies did PR&C executives use to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation to maintain their organization's brand reputation? The purpose of this review was to identify, explore, and synthesize scholarly and professional insights that contributed to understanding the complexities and opportunities related to ethical AI integration in the PR&C field.

Through a critical analysis of existing research, this literature review supported the application of relevant theories, concepts, and a conceptual framework that shaped the project's trajectory. This methodical process highlighted knowledge gaps, identifies commonalities and differences among studies, and uncovers emerging trends in AI usage, while providing a framework for both current and future research (see Pantic & Hamilton, 2024).

To conduct a comprehensive search, I used the following keywords: "AI ethics," "PR ethics," "ethics in communications," "brand reputation and AI," "AI transparency," "AI in business," "AI in marketing," and "stakeholder alignment in AI adoption." These keywords were designed to ensure a wide-ranging exploration of relevant literature.

Primary resources were accessed through databases such as ProQuest Central, EBSCOhost, Sage Journals, and Emerald Insight via the Walden University Library.

Supplementary searches were conducted using Google Scholar, with verification of peer-reviewed status through Ulrich's Periodical Directory. The review focused on sources published within the past 5 years to maintain recency and relevance, with exceptions for seminal works essential to the conceptual framework.

This literature review referenced a total of 75 sources, of which 65 (87%) were peer-reviewed journal articles. Among these sources, 65 were published within the last 5 years, ensuring recency and relevance, while the remaining 10 were published more than 5 years ago. These sources provided a balanced foundation of contemporary insights and established theories to inform this project. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the references used in this literature review.

Table 1

Research References Breakdown

	Total sources	Peer reviewed	Non-peer reviewed	< 5 years	> 5 years
Journal articles	75	65	10	65	9
Percentages	100%	87%	13%	87%	13%

Note. Summary of sources used for the literature review, including peer-reviewed and nonpeer-reviewed sources published within the last 5 years and beyond.

This project examined the ethical concerns related to the use of AI integrations by PR&C professionals. As AI technologies become increasingly ubiquitous, organizations increasingly faced challenges related to transparency, accountability, and trustworthiness. Addressing these challenges required the adoption of ethical frameworks that align AI use with organizational goals and societal values and pressures. Strategic communication

ethics, according to Bowen (2018), depend on transparency, maintenance, and the promotion of accountability, while keeping public trust as a priority in managing the ethical implications of AI technology. According to the author, ethical communication practices require mandatory adherence to transparency and accountability principles. There had to be ethical systems in place to detect and manage the harmful effects of AI misuse. Establishing ethical guidelines for AI systems was essential to maintaining transparency, accountability, and fairness while reducing potential dangers and promoting responsible AI usage (Cheong, 2024). This review examined how PR&C leaders navigated these complexities by balancing innovative needs with ethical responsibilities, providing usable strategies for maintaining trust and protecting brand reputation.

I explored perspectives from AI4People and stakeholder theory, which collectively encompassed the conceptual framework that served as a foundation for my project. A conceptual framework made the case for why a certain study was significant or relevant, and for how the study design, inclusive of data collection and analytical methods, purposefully answered the research question (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019). AI4People and stakeholder theory were complementary and provided a foundation that could be used by PR&C executives to address the ethical and strategic challenges associated with AI adoption in their organizations.

AI4People, developed by Floridi et al. (2018), outlined a set of principles for responsible AI use, with a focus on transparency, accountability, and fairness. These principles established a foundation for maintaining AI governance consistency with

organizational values while mitigating potential risks to brand reputation and public trust. Stakeholder theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), emphasizes the importance of considering the diverse interests of stakeholders in decision-making processes, juxtaposed to just shareholders. According to this theory, organizations have to maintain a balance between their pursuit of innovation and their ethical responsibilities. Through this focus, organizations ensured that AI technology adoption addresses the needs of all stakeholders, such as consumers, employees, and the broader community.

While AI4People focused on the development and guidance of ethical AI governance, stakeholder theory emphasized the expanded responsibility of aligning AI implementation with the interests of all stakeholders. These frameworks provided PR&C leaders with complete guidance for addressing ethical challenges that emerged during AI implementation. The conceptual framework provided PR&C executives with a roadmap for tackling challenges by using AI innovations while maintaining trust and reputation.

The review of literature followed a systematic and structured approach. First, it analyzed the conceptual framework, including critical evaluations of supporting theories. Second, it synthesized research related to the identified themes and phenomena, with an emphasis on the challenges and opportunities associated with the ethical use of AI in PR&C. Finally, it compared and contrasted perspectives from recent and historical literature, evaluating how evolving practices influenced the research project's focus on ethical AI integration in PR&C.

Ultimately, this literature review aimed to provide a comprehensive synthesis of academic and professional contributions, presenting useful and actionable insights for

PR&C executives navigating the ethical complexities of AI adoption. The findings can inform how organizations could adopt generative AI tools responsibly and align technological innovation needs with ethical practices to mitigate reputational risks while maintaining public trust.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore the effective AI strategies global PR&C executives used to develop and apply an ethical framework for effective AI implementation to maintain their organization's brand reputation.

Conceptual Framework

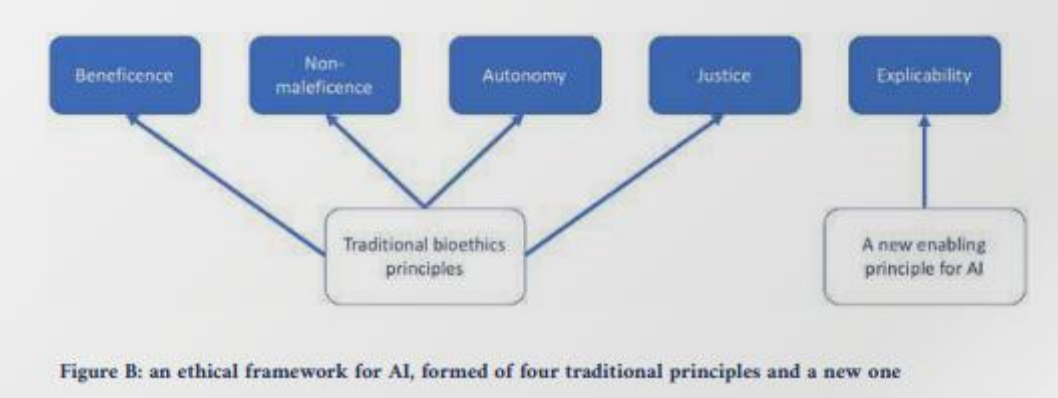
The conceptual framework for this project leveraged two approaches: AI4People by Floridi et al. (2018) and stakeholder theory by Freeman (1984). These applied frameworks established a complete basis for directing ethical AI practices in PR&C, with a focus on protecting brand reputation.

Figure 1 shows the five key principles AI4People stipulate, including beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability; these principles help establish ethical guidelines for AI applications. Beneficence focuses on AI doing good for others by helping deliver functional benefits, such as improving decision-making, enhancing consumer engagement, and enabling organizational innovations. Nonmaleficence requires PR&C executives to actively prevent harm by reducing risks related to misinformation, data breaches, or reputational damage caused by AI-generated content. Autonomy stresses the critical importance of maintaining human oversight in AI-driven

decisions. This helps to solidify human interaction instead of replacement. Justice calls for fairness and inclusiveness in AI practices. By doing so, the user could help avoid bias or discrimination in content generation targeting. Explicability covers the need for transparency and accountability, enabling PR&C professionals to communicate openly about AI usage, which builds trust among stakeholders.

Figure 1

An Ethical Framework for AI



Note: An ethical framework for AI, formed of four traditional principles and a new enabling principle. Reprinted from *AI4People—An ethical framework for a good AI society: Opportunities, risks, principles, and recommendations*, by L. Floridi et al., 2018, *Minds and Machines, 28*(4), 689–707 (https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-018-9482-5). © 2018 The Author(s), licensed under CC BY 4.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Reprinted under the terms of the Creative Commons license.

In alignment with these principles, stakeholder theory emphasizes the importance of considering the interests of all stakeholders in decision-making. These stakeholders include employees, consumers, shareholders, regulators, and the extended community. This viewpoint helps guide an AI adoption practice that transcended just profit to help address ethical, social, and reputational concerns. Stakeholder engagement requires working together with different groups to communicate and evaluate the potential risks and benefits of AI integration. Ethical inclusiveness ensures that all voices are represented. This inclusivity is important to help influence public narratives or consumer interactions. These values help leaders focus on longer-term values and relationships to establish customer trust and loyalty.

The integration of AI4People and stakeholder theory provided a conceptual framework that helped bridge the gap between technical guidelines and a human-centric approach. AI4People provided a framework for introducing ethical AI practices, while stakeholder theory helped guide the development of inclusive and transparent approaches. PR&C practitioners receive guidance through these frameworks to ensure AI strategies align with organizational values while maintaining transparency and stakeholder engagement that helps detect and respond to potential risks.

PR&C executives facing AI adoption challenges can benefit from a concrete roadmap that combines AI4People and stakeholder theory principles. These frameworks facilitated the responsible integration of AI technology by promoting stakeholder concerns alongside a brand-centered approach. It ensures that AI can help enhance organizational needs while maintaining integrity, increasing trust, and driving value.

Literature Pertaining to Potential Themes and Phenomena

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the ethical integration of AI tools in the PR&C field, this review highlights five interconnected themes: applications and strategic implications of AI in PR, AI governance and ethical considerations, transparency and trust in AI usage, development of custom frameworks for ethical AI implementation, and balancing innovation with ethical safeguards. These themes demonstrate how PR&C leaders utilize AI to drive innovation while upholding ethical standards, highlighting the complex relationship between technological progress and ethical accountability.

Applications and Strategic Implications of AI in PR

The integration of AI into PR&C has reshaped the industry by transforming the way professionals approach communications, decision-making, and operational efficiency (Anani-Bossman et al., 2024). AI-powered tools transformed PR by automating routine tasks, enhancing data-driven decision strategies, and enabling more personalized and targeted customer communications (Bilquish, 2024). By using these capabilities, professionals gained additional time for high-profile activities through effective schedule optimization. Relationship building and storytelling, combined with strategic planning activities, work together to address longstanding industry inefficiencies. One of the most significant impacts of AI on PR has been its ability to automate time-consuming tasks. What were previously manual tasks, like managing media lists, scheduling meetings, and drafting follow-up emails, were transferred to AI tools with greater speed and accuracy (Gnovis Journal, 2024). AI enhanced efficiency

and productivity in PR by automating routine tasks, enabling professionals to focus on strategic and creative functions (Jiménez & Ouariachi, 2020).

Looking beyond automation, AI's data analysis capabilities provide industry-changing benefits for PR campaign strategy and execution. AI can analyze larger datasets from all types of media, including social media, news outlets, and other online (digital) platforms. This analysis method enabled PR professionals to quickly spot trends and patterns in minutes, compared to weeks or months with traditional manual techniques, and develop faster data-driven campaigns that became more personalized. PR campaigns achieved better results through increased acceptance when these insights were applied. As an example, AI tools tailored content for specific customer segments and used data to ensure that messaging aligned with tracked audience preferences, behaviors, and values. Additionally, AI systems identified relevant influencers and created congruent messaging to maximize engagement, which addressed one of PR's most common challenges of delivering the right message to the right audience at the right time (Bowen, 2024; Everything PR, 2023).

AI's ability to monitor and analyze customer sentiments across multiple channels also supports PR professionals in managing how people perceived the brand and organizational reputation. By continuously mining for mentions of a brand or organization, AI systems provide real-time feedback on public sentiment (Taherdoost & Madanchian, 2023). This immediate feedback gave PR teams the ability to change campaigns dynamically, allowing them to adjust their strategies effectively. In addition, this monitoring became extremely useful during crisis communications, where fast action

could mitigate negative impacts (Okpala et al., 2023). Through AI-powered platforms, organizations gained actionable insights that helped prevent or respond to crises while protecting their reputation.

The strategic impacts of AI within public relations extended beyond mere operational enhancements and campaign management. Advanced AI tools enabled smaller PR agencies to challenge larger competitors by transforming traditional PR models (Jiménez & Ouariachi, 2020). By leveraging AI for tasks like content creation, sentiment analysis, and influencer engagement, smaller agencies offered high-quality services at a lower cost. This new model challenged the foothold larger agencies had in the industry. Unfortunately, this disruptive potential was not free, as there was a relatively high price in implementing advanced AI technologies. The high cost of implementing AI technologies, coupled with the need for skilled professionals who could manage and interpret AI outputs, posed significant barriers to adoption (Kar et al., 2021).

AI Governance and Ethical Considerations.

The responsible deployment of AI across all industries demanded strong governance and ethical practices, with PR&C as a notable example. The adoption of AI technology in public relations has produced ethical challenges that necessitated transparent and accountable policies aligned with both organizational values and stakeholder expectations to maintain trustworthiness (Cheong, 2024). The lack of comprehensive AI governance frameworks led to more than organizational issues, creating sustained adverse effects. Public trust in digital media platforms declined while sectors faced challenges in preserving AI integrity during implementation.

The dispute over AI-generated deepfake content highlighted the importance of AI governance. In May 2023, social media users were shown an AI-generated image of a fake explosion near the Pentagon, which led to public confusion and a brief decline in the U.S. stock market value (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023). This incident demonstrated the ripple effects of insufficient governance on both financial stability and societal trust in the technologies used to share and distribute information. Governance protocols could have mandated the use of AI-driven tools to detect deepfakes and misinformation in real-time, enabling the identification and flagging of false content before it spreads (Bontridder & Poullet, 2021).

Additionally, social media platforms and news outlets could have been required to implement content verification processes to ensure that AI-generated visuals or videos were validated before amplification (Sadiq et al., 2023). Watermarking AI-generated media, when combined with blockchain traceability systems, strengthened accountability and prevented widespread damage from harmful content. The European Commission and UNESCO both emphasized that unified ethical standards were essential to resolve these challenges.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Commission played significant roles in shaping ethical AI practices at a global level. The ethical AI framework provided by UNESCO served member states by offering a comprehensive guide to developing policies that ensured AI systems operate with transparency, responsibility, and fairness, while protecting human rights and freedoms (Morandín-Ahuerma, 2023). The European Commission launched

the Artificial Intelligence Act, which created a groundbreaking legal structure that minimized risks from AI systems by enforcing strict testing protocols and requirements for transparency and accountability (European Commission, 2021). Through these initiatives, the importance of ethical AI governance became clear because they created advantageous frameworks that helped PR&C industries achieve transparency and public trust while meeting international standards.

Similarly, ethical integration in marketing provided lessons for PR&C professionals. AI-driven marketing strategies were studied and found to enhance consumer engagement and business performance, but they also demanded meticulous data governance to ensure ethical application (Kopalle et al., 2022). For PR&C leaders, these studies highlighted the importance of embedding privacy legislation and data governance frameworks into their AI strategies. Effective governance protected consumer trust while allowing AI tools to enhance brand integrity rather than harming it (Lahusen et al., 2024).

Together, these findings revealed that governance extended beyond procedural necessity to become a critical strategic element. Leaders in PR&C needed to build frameworks that balanced AI innovation with ethical standards to establish systems that focused on transparency and accountability while building trust among stakeholders. The application of workforce training regarding AI ethics, together with the implementation of emerging self-auditing AI models, improved governance practices (Hernández, 2024). As an example, a governance framework for AI in marketing, as outlined by Informatica, highlighted the importance of ensuring visibility into AI models and their underlying

processes to build stakeholder trust and promote data reliability (Informatica, 2024). The partnership of policymakers along with AI developers and PR&C experts enabled the creation of universal ethical standards. The implementation of governance models served the dual purposes of risk mitigation and best practice enhancement as AI tools and their use continued to evolve.

Transparency and Trust in AI Usage

Transparency in AI usage was essential when considering the ethical integration of generative AI in the field of PR&C. As AI tools became more available, ensuring stakeholders understood the role and scope of AI in content creation and decision-making processes was mission-critical. Research showed that PR&C professionals struggled with transparency issues, which became especially apparent when they needed to reveal their use of AI tools (Cuartielles et al., 2024). The ability to detect misinformation through AI proved essential, while inconsistent transparency regarding its use could result in public distrust. The European Commission, alongside UNESCO, supported standardized methods that required transparent disclosure of AI participation in information creation and distribution. AI systems had to adopt these measures to maintain their trustworthiness and ethical standards.

Transparency became even more critical in circumstances where reputational management was at risk, which was ultimately the responsibility of PR&C leaders. Research indicated that AI-generated news, while considered faster and more efficient, tended to be viewed with less trust than human-created content (Wischnewski & Krämer, 2024). The absence of trust became more pronounced with polarizing topics that required

emotional involvement and genuine expression. AI-produced personal stories were unable to reach the complex emotional depth found in human-authored works, according to studies by Grysman et al. (2024). PR&C professionals encountered significant obstacles when they used AI tools to create authentic human-like content. The application of these AI tools demonstrated the requirement for robust transparency standards and ethical frameworks to resolve these challenges.

In addition, the use of AI in PR crisis management demonstrated why transparency remained critical. AI systems quickly evaluated public sentiment across many communication platforms during crises, which enabled organizations to deliver fast and efficient responses. Stakeholders doubted the credibility of responses provided by AI systems during PR crises if transparency about their operation was lacking, as well as their alignment with organizational values (Okpala et al., 2023). Organizations established trust through transparency about their AI usage during critical situations while utilizing technology to manage crises in a proactive way. Organizations strengthened transparency and accountability by implementing blockchain-based content verification alongside AI-generated content watermarks to differentiate real materials from artificial ones, as previously discussed (Dixon, 2024).

PR&C professionals needed to evaluate the ethical aspects of deploying AI tools during consumer interactions. AI systems offered valuable insights through consumer sentiment analysis and campaign customization, yet the absence of transparent data collection and processing methods created concerns about privacy and trust (Taherdoost & Madanchian, 2023). Stakeholder trust required clear communication regarding data

collection practices as well as their analysis and application (Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Ensuring consumers were aware of AI's role in shaping their online experiences helped mitigate perceptions of manipulation and increased their trust in the brand (Dezao, 2024).

Organizations tackled transparency challenges by establishing compulsory disclosure rules that required visible labeling of AI-generated material together with communication disclaimers. Companies showed dedication to ethical operations while meeting consumer demands for responsibility in AI through this approach. Also, including transparency measures within broader AI governance frameworks ensured that these efforts were consistent and systematic across all levels of PR&C operations (Informatica, 2024).

Custom Frameworks for Ethical AI Implementation

The increased prevalence of AI in PR&C roles had increased the need for custom frameworks tailored to address unique regional and contextual needs. Custom ethical frameworks became essential for addressing challenges arising from varying socioeconomic, cultural, and legislative environments. Research had shown that using localized frameworks helped organizations address both legislative barriers and AI resistance. A research examination of Lesotho’s socioeconomic environment highlighted the need for tailored solutions to local challenges, while providing PR&C leaders with a template for regional market adaptation (Batani et al., 2024). The concept of "glocalization" described how global strategies should be customized to address local requirements, and this principle had gained support through studies focused on AI

marketing techniques across different cultural settings. Such strategies demonstrated the importance of managing ethical concerns around data privacy, consumer trust, and human-machine interactions through regionally sensitive frameworks (Kopalle et al., 2022).

Ethical principles such as transparency, accountability, and fairness were essential components of these custom frameworks (Cheong, 2024). Research has shown that embedding these principles into AI use and governance can mitigate risks, such as the misuse of data generated and the biases seen in algorithms. These issues were particularly detrimental in industries such as PR&C, where stakeholder trust was paramount (Adarsh et al., 2023). When leaders implemented such frameworks, they both secured the adoption of ethical AI and trained stakeholders on the technology's implications, thereby building an organizational culture that valued ethical responsibility.

Custom frameworks are necessary to anticipate and address emerging problems that arise. A study on healthcare AI adoption indicated that tailored frameworks were essential for reducing resistance and addressing technology access inequalities (Sadiq et al., 2023). The knowledge gained from this research was applied to PR&C leaders who developed custom frameworks to remove obstacles to AI adoption while maintaining ethical and equitable standards. Marketing campaign research highlighted the need for region-specific strategies, as European data privacy regulations differed from Asia's emphasis on rapid deployment (De Jonge, 2024; Duan et al., 2020). The differences between regions highlighted the need for frameworks that integrated global standards alongside specific local regulatory requirements.

As a result, customized ethical frameworks were no longer a nice-to-have but had become a need-to-have. These frameworks dramatically affected the PR&C profession, where the rapid availability and integration of AI demanded a delicate approach to evolving ethical complexities. Tailored approaches that incorporated regional sensitivities, anticipated potential risks, and provided transparency and accountability were essential for maintaining trust while leveraging AI's transformative potential (Batani et al., 2024; Kopalle et al., 2022). When organizations implement ethical principles, such as transparency and accountability, in AI governance, they prevent risks associated with data misuse and algorithmic bias (Adarsh et al., 2023). Organizations used ethics-based auditing tools to proactively ensure compliance with ethical standards (Mökander & Floridi, 2021).

By implementing these measures, organizations maintained public trust while establishing themselves as ethical leaders within their respective industries. Research from regulated industry sectors has demonstrated that stakeholder trust depends on accountability mechanisms, such as blockchain traceability solutions (Sadiq et al., 2023). Through the adoption of proactive measures and regionally tailored frameworks, PR&C leaders ensured that their AI applications upheld ethical standards while satisfying organizational and societal concerns.

Balancing Innovation with Ethical Safeguards

The increased and rapid adoption of AI in PR&C disciplines had identified both opportunities and challenges. Balancing AI's innovative potential with ethical safeguards was critical to ensuring that AI adoption did not adversely affect creativity, harm

employee well-being, or compromise organizational values. AI integration within organizational processes sometimes suppressed employee creativity, particularly when over-reliance on automated systems decreased individual opportunities for innovative problem-solving or critical thinking. This effect was amplified if organizational leadership failed to create an environment that supported creative risk-taking and adaptation, potentially leading to disengagement or diminished morale among employees (Jeong & Jeong, 2024). The study revealed how AI functions both as a catalyst for innovation and an obstacle to it, while highlighting the need for strategic oversight to manage these conflicting effects.

The dual perspective introduced by researchers highlighted AI's dual impact on employee innovation. While AI tools enhanced productivity and provided data-driven insights, they could also limit employee (human) creativity by creating an environment of over-reliance on automated systems. This duality was particularly significant in PR&C fields, where creative and strategic issues collided with data-driven decision-making. AI systems needed appropriate structure because they otherwise diminished human creativity and generated employee workspaces that hindered rather than empowered people. Employees faced psychological strain when they had to change their workflows to use AI tools effectively because of their over-dependence on AI systems (Zang et al., 2024).

By understanding human decision-making tendencies, AI predicted consumer responses, which then helped build targeted and effective campaigns. Predictive models that operated without transparency or consumer consent generated distrust and caused

reputational damage. The implementation of ethical oversight in AI systems reduced potential risks while maintaining alignment with stakeholder expectations and societal standards (Wang & Wu, 2024).

Responsible AI practices were vital for reducing risks, including data privacy breaches and algorithmic biases, which were particularly concerning in PR&C roles. These risks damaged consumer trust and brand reputation. For example, sentiment analysis tools without ethical safeguards increased biases, which led to false conclusions and unsuccessful campaigns. Ethical AI use in PR&C required comprehensive governance frameworks (Siricharoen, 2024).

The integration of blockchain technology into AI systems mitigated cybersecurity risks by providing transparent and tamper-resistant records, ensuring data integrity and compliance (Ramos & Ellul, 2024). Similarly, blockchain technology's decentralized ledger created secure transaction records that enhanced AI decision-making transparency and facilitated audits and ethical compliance (Lüthi et al., 2020). The potential of blockchain technology to improve both accountability and trust within AI systems became evident, especially in communication-focused fields where transparency remained essential (Lüthi et al., 2020). Failing to balance AI innovation with ethical safeguards led to severe consequences. The use of AI-driven hiring tools was found to perpetuate gender and racial biases due to flawed training data. For instance, one study revealed significant racial, gender, and intersectional bias in how large language models ranked job applicants' names, favoring white male-associated names over others (University of Washington, 2024). This human resources problem illustrated risks for

PR&C because biases in AI systems led to stereotypical public messaging or content creation, which caused reputational damage and financial losses through consumer backlash.

Another example of AI misuse was the ad-serving algorithm used by Facebook, which represented a case of AI misuse in targeted advertising due to its discriminatory behavior against different genders and races. Studies showed that the algorithm selectively delivered advertisements without demographic targets from advertisers, which resulted in unintended discriminatory effects (Simonite, 2019). PR&C leaders needed to introduce complete governance plans that featured continuous ethical reviews coupled with employee education and stakeholder collaboration to tackle these challenges. These actions supported the creation of AI systems that maintained innovative capabilities while staying true to both organizational values and societal expectations.

Relationship to Previous Research

This research project explored various perspectives on AI usage in PR&C, examining how geographical locations, regulatory frameworks, and cultural distinctions influenced its implementation and outcomes. Research by Campbell et al. (2019) and Kopalle et al. (2022) highlighted the differing ways AI could alter brand perception in Western versus Eastern markets and stressed the importance of developing AI strategies that accounted for cultural differences. Similarly, Brewer et al. (2024) proposed blockchain as a means to verify AI applications, but traditional frameworks such as AI4People emphasized transparency and accountability without adopting decentralized control mechanisms from blockchain (Floridi et al., 2018). The combined research

demonstrated that AI applications were evolving from theoretical ideas into practical solutions designed for specific regional requirements.

When compared to historical research, current studies demonstrated a clear evolution in the understanding and application of AI in decision-making. Earlier research often explored the potential of AI systems in structured environments. Contemporary studies, however, highlighted the role of AI in unstructured and complex environments, focusing on human-AI collaboration and empirical decision-making frameworks (Lai et al., 2021).

Early expert systems were designed to work within specific, well-defined domains with a heavy reliance on programmatic "if-then" rules and structured knowledge bases to replicate human expertise. The expert system functioned as an automated assistant that delivered recommendations and insights to users. These systems evaluated medical symptoms to propose possible diagnoses, which helped healthcare professionals make decisions more quickly. Expert systems operating in the critic role assessed human decisions and offered feedback while identifying mistakes. In engineering, this technology was used to compare structural designs with predefined safety standards. Finally, as automation tools, expert systems performed repetitive, rule-based decision-making tasks without human input, such as controlling manufacturing processes or adjusting production parameters.

However, unlike today’s AI, these systems displayed significant limitations because they could not adjust or respond to new or unforeseen circumstances. These systems became incompatible with dynamic environments because of their reliance on

structured knowledge bases and rule-based logic. The systems operated effectively in their designated functions, yet their inflexible structure underscored the need for more flexible AI systems that could manage complex decision-making tasks. The foundational insights generated by early expert systems enabled advancements in AI, which led to the development of sophisticated systems that combined machine learning with adaptive algorithms to overcome previous limitations.

Through advancements in the fields of Big Data and machine learning, AI has evolved from fixed, rule-based systems to dynamic, scalable solutions (Almanasra, 2024). Modern AI systems have surpassed the limitations of older systems by processing unstructured data and adapting to changing environments, enabling them to handle complex decision-making tasks. Modern AI systems analyze broad datasets to identify patterns and make predictions, generating insights that surpass traditional capabilities.

The inclusion of AI in modern business environments helped researchers understand how AI moved beyond basic task automation to provide cognitive enhancements for human-AI collaboration in strategic, tactical, and operational decision-making (Mühlhoff, 2023). The research supported the view that AI had evolved from static rule-based systems into dynamic platforms that solved intricate real-world problems (Almanasra, 2024).

These advancements were particularly relevant in the PR&C industry, where AI had to navigate the dual demands of creativity and data-driven decisions. While historical systems offered limited adaptability, today's AI tools provided advanced and dynamic capabilities for content creation, sentiment analysis, and audience targeting. However,

past challenges showed that unchecked AI use still posed serious risks, such as bias, ethical issues, and difficulties managing unpredictable situations.

This project evaluated AI development throughout history while analyzing current PR&C AI applications in a broader framework. The project demonstrated that effective governance frameworks had to simultaneously handle early system challenges and modern AI complexities. The shift from rigid, rule-based systems to flexible, collaborative AI showed why it was essential to include ethical safeguards and cultural awareness in AI strategies. This helped PR&C leaders use AI's potential for innovation while minimizing risks and staying true to organizational values and societal expectations.

Summary

AI technology has revolutionized public relations through task automation and data analytics, producing customized campaigns while allowing communications experts to dedicate more time to strategic planning and relationship building (Gnovis Journal, 2024; Jiménez & Ouariachi, 2020). Despite AI advancements in public relations, the industry faces ongoing obstacles, including high expenses and the demand for professional expertise (Kar et al., 2021).

To protect against damaging misinformation and bias issues that threatened trust and reputation, strong ethical frameworks were essential. An AI-generated deepfake depicting a Pentagon explosion in May 2023 sparked public bewilderment and economic turmoil, underscoring the need for misinformation-fighting technologies (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023). Governance models that emphasize

transparency, accountability, and fairness are key to maintaining stakeholder trust (Cheong, 2024).

Regionally and culturally specific ethical frameworks, such as those created for Lesotho, helped solve issues related to data privacy and consumer trust while advancing AI adoption (Batani et al., 2024). The implementation of safeguards alongside AI potential helped prevent risks such as biased algorithms and reputational harm, while blockchain technology ensured better transparency and accountability (Lüthi et al., 2020). Recent research examined how AI systems, built on Big Data and machine learning technologies, solved complex problems but required ethical frameworks to enable PR.

Transition

In Section 2, I reviewed the professional and academic literature on the ethical integration of AI in public relations and communications (PR&C). I highlighted key challenges, including transparency, privacy, and organizational accountability, and explored two frameworks that served as the foundation for this project. Additionally, I analyzed and synthesized relevant literature to provide a comprehensive context for the project.

In Section 3, I outline the methodological framework, including the role of the researcher, adherence to ethical standards such as the Belmont Report, and measures to protect participant confidentiality, consent, and data security. I describe the strategies for participant recruitment, sampling, and consent, as well as the procedures for participant withdrawal. I also explain the research design, population, sampling strategy, and the rationale behind these choices. Next, I will discuss the phases of data collection and

analysis, which were grounded in semistructured interviews and thematic analysis. These methods were designed to provide deeper insights while ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings. I ensure an ethical and credible research process by addressing key concerns, including confidentiality, transparency, and bias mitigation.

In Section 4, I systematically present and evaluate the findings, demonstrating how they supported, contradicted, or expanded existing knowledge. I correlate the results with the conceptual frameworks and identified contributions to professional practice. In conclusion, I explore the potential impact these contributions have on social change and provide suggestions for upcoming research initiatives. I provide additional context and support by including appendices and a table of contents.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

Project Ethics

As the researcher, my role was to collect and analyze primary and secondary data in a responsible manner. The primary duty of a researcher is to ensure that data collection is conducted ethically, accurately, and systematically, in alignment with research best practices (Okori et al., 2024). I have professional experience with the research topic through my work with AI in public relations. However, I did not have any existing relationships with the proposed participants. I adhered to the Belmont Report's ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (1979) established these principles to ensure ethical research practices. I maintained respect for individuals through obtaining informed consent, supported beneficence by reducing risks and increasing benefits, and ensured justice through fair participant selection. I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before beginning data collection to ensure adherence to these principles and compliance with ethical research protocols. The IRB approval number is 03-25-25-1135845.

I implemented multiple measures to ensure confidentiality and data security, protecting participants and upholding ethical research standards. Participation in this project was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time by providing verbal or written notice via email or phone, without needing to provide an explanation. If a participant chose to withdraw from the project, any data collected from them was excluded from analysis and not used in the final project. No financial or material incentives were offered for participation in this study.

Participants had the opportunity to ask questions before signing to ensure they fully understood the project and their rights. I masked participants' identities using pseudonyms (e.g., PRC1, PRC2), and I removed all identifying details from transcripts, reports, and presentations. All collected data, including interview recordings and transcripts, were encrypted and stored in a password-protected digital environment. Data will be stored securely for 5 years, after which it will be permanently deleted.

Nature of the Project

I employed a qualitative research method, which was suitable for exploring the challenges that PR&C executives faced in making ethical decisions regarding AI integration. Qualitative research is well-suited for examining socially influenced behaviors and perspectives shaped by organizational, cultural, and societal contexts, as it allows for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena (Busetto et al., 2020). Given the subjective and nuanced nature of ethics, qualitative methods enable an in-depth understanding that numbers alone cannot provide (Saunders et al., 2019).

I chose a pragmatic inquiry research design to support this research, focusing on solving real-world problems and generating actionable insights. Pragmatism allows flexible research methods, enabling adaptation to emerging themes while maintaining structured analysis (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020; Morgan, 2014). By integrating qualitative methods with a pragmatic approach, this project provided valuable insights into ethical AI practices within PR&C, benefiting both academic literature and industry applications.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The population for this project consisted of PR&C executives responsible for developing and applying ethical frameworks for AI implementation while maintaining brand reputation. Participants were required to have direct experience in developing and overseeing AI-driven PR&C initiatives, including establishing ethical guidelines, developing policies, managing AI-related PR campaigns, and providing insights into practical strategies for implementing an ethical AI framework. Establishing clear eligibility criteria was crucial, as participant selection directly influenced the quality and credibility of the qualitative research (see Su et al., 2023).

I secured access to participants by reaching out to professional networks, engaging with industry associations, and obtaining direct referrals from PR&C executives and industry professionals. I established initial contact via email invitations and LinkedIn messages, ensuring potential participants understood the project's purpose and voluntary nature. I established a working relationship with participants by providing pre-interview briefings that explained the project's objectives, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. I emphasized that participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time by providing verbal or written notice via email or phone, without needing to provide an explanation. If a participant chose to withdraw, any data collected from them up to that point were excluded from analysis and not used in the final project.

I used a purposive sampling method to select at least six PR&C executives, ensuring alignment with the project's focus on identifying effective strategies for

developing and applying an ethical AI framework while maintaining brand reputation. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research because it enables the selection of participants based on their knowledge and experience relevant to the research topic (Su et al., 2023). I justified a sample size of six because qualitative research prioritized depth over quantity, allowing for a detailed exploration of participant experiences. Data adequacy was assessed through data saturation, which occurred when additional data no longer yielded new themes or insights (see Saunders et al., 2019). I monitored data saturation by conducting iterative data analysis, and if no new themes emerged from additional interviews, I conducted one more interview to confirm data saturation.

All collected data, including interview recordings and transcripts, were encrypted and stored in a password-protected digital environment. These measures are aligned with best practices for data security in qualitative research (Racine et al., 2023). Data will be securely stored for 5 years, after which they were permanently deleted in accordance with IRB guidelines.

Data Collection Activities

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument. The researcher served as the primary data collection instrument in qualitative studies and was responsible for conducting, analyzing, and interpreting the research (Byrne, 2021). I utilized semistructured interviews as the primary data collection method. Semistructured interviews enabled a thorough investigation while maintaining consistency across interviews (Ruslin et al., 2022). I followed a structured interview protocol to ensure

transparency and systematic data collection. The interview protocol included an introduction, a defined set of open-ended interview questions, and a standardized closing to ensure consistency across all interviews (Ruslin et al., 2022). Open-ended research questions were designed to elicit detailed insights into participants' experiences, strategies, and decision-making processes regarding the development and application of ethical frameworks for AI implementation in PR&C roles.

I used an interview protocol for the entire data collection process. The interview protocol provided a step-by-step guide for conducting each interview, ensuring uniformity in how data was gathered and recorded. During the interviews, I followed the protocol while allowing time for participants to share their perspectives in depth. This approach ensured that all participants were asked the same core questions while allowing follow-up discussions based on their responses. Systematic and well-defined data collection protocols were essential for maintaining methodological rigor and producing reliable research outcomes (Busetto et al., 2020).

I conducted virtual interviews using Microsoft Teams or Zoom, which were audio-recorded with the participant's consent, which had already been obtained in the informed consent form. The interview protocol began with an introduction that explained the project's purpose and procedures, followed by open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences and strategies. Follow-up prompts were used to encourage more in-depth responses, and each interview concluded with a standardized closing that thanked participants and provided the next steps. The interview protocol

outlined the complete set of research questions, follow-up prompts, and procedural steps and was included in Appendix B, listed in the Table of Contents.

I used member checking and transcript review to enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection process. Member checking was a recognized technique in qualitative research that enhanced trustworthiness by reducing misinterpretations and minimizing researcher bias (Saunders et al., 2019). In addition, I reviewed interview transcripts to confirm accuracy and identify emerging themes. Through the member checking and transcript review process, I ensured the data accurately reflected participants' perspectives, reinforcing the accuracy of the project's conclusions.

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you used to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation in PR&C?
2. How do you ensure that AI-driven PR&C strategies align with ethical standards and corporate values?
3. What challenges have you encountered when implementing AI in PR&C while maintaining brand reputation?
4. How did you address these challenges, and what strategies were most effective?
5. What role does leadership play in ensuring ethical AI implementation in PR&C?
6. How do you measure the success of AI-driven PR&C initiatives in terms of ethical compliance and brand reputation?

7. What best practices would you recommend to other PR&C executives for maintaining brand integrity while integrating AI?
8. Do you have any other strategies you used to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation in PR&C that we have not already discussed?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

I maintained high reliability and integrity in this research through the use of systematic data organization and tracking methods. I stored password-protected audio, video, and text files on an encrypted digital drive to ensure secure data management. I labeled each file with unique identifiers corresponding to participants' pseudonyms to facilitate structured access and retrieval. I also maintained a reflexivity journal and research log documenting emerging insights, tracking patterns, and reflecting on analytical processes following systematic qualitative data management principles (Kuckartz, 2019). I organized transcripts, audio recordings, and notes using an indexed system to enhance data organization and ensure efficient retrieval. Proper data management was essential for maintaining research integrity and accessibility (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020).

I used thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns within the data for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry. Thematic analysis provided a structured and flexible framework for analyzing qualitative data (Byrne, 2021). I used this method to identify effective strategies PR&C executives used to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation while maintaining brand reputation. I conducted an in-depth data

review to explore the themes thoroughly. Data immersion involved researchers gaining deep insights into their data by continuously reading and re-reading material, which helped them identify patterns and themes that improved their understanding of the research topic (Fuchs, 2023). Additionally, I engaged in ongoing reflection and refinement throughout the analysis to ensure a well-grounded interpretation of the findings. Reflexive thematic analysis emphasized the role of continuous researcher reflection in shaping data interpretation (Byrne, 2021).

I followed a structured and systematic approach to data analysis. First, I reviewed and transcribed interview recordings verbatim to ensure accuracy. Next, I coded the data by identifying meaningful sections, categorizing key ideas, and grouping similar responses. I grouped these codes into key themes that directly aligned with my research question, guiding framework, and relevant studies through a repeated process of reviewing and refining. The identified themes were correlated with existing studies, including new research published since my proposal, to ensure the findings remained current and relevant.

The coding process and identification of themes were made possible using Microsoft Excel. The use of Excel provided a clear system for structuring qualitative data, enabling transparent categorization and comparison, which led to the identification of visible patterns across participant responses. The study maintained analytical precision and traceability through this approach while also preserving the ability to adapt and refine developing codes and themes as new insights emerged. I securely stored all raw data, including transcripts, recordings, and notes, on an encrypted drive for five years. After

this period, I permanently deleted all files to ensure participant confidentiality and compliance with IRB guidelines.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are essential for producing high-quality research that others can trust. In qualitative studies, reliability refers to the consistency of findings across time and researchers, while validity concerns the accuracy and truthfulness of the data and interpretations. These concepts were addressed through the principles of dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (see Saunders et al., 2019). I implemented systematic research practices in my project on how PR&C executives developed and applied an ethical framework for AI implementation while maintaining brand reputation. These practices included maintaining detailed documentation, conducting member checking to verify interpretations, and triangulating data sources to enhance credibility and confirmability.

Reliability

I established dependability by using member checking to verify my interpretations of participant responses and ensure they accurately reflected participants' perspectives. This process enabled participants to confirm that my findings aligned with their intended meanings, thereby reducing misinterpretations and enhancing the credibility of the research. I maintained a detailed research log to document important decisions regarding data collection and analysis. Maintaining a research log is a standard practice in qualitative studies, as it improves transparency and enables others to follow the research process (see Saunders et al., 2019). Finally, I used a structured interview protocol to

maintain consistency across all interviews and minimize variations in data collection. Following a standardized process ensured that each participant received the same set of open-ended questions and follow-up prompts, improving the reliability of the data collected (see Ruslin et al., 2022).

Validity

I ensured credibility by using member checking and triangulation. Member checking involved asking participants to review my interpretations and confirm that their views were accurately represented. Triangulation involved comparing data from semistructured interviews and industry reports to cross-verify findings and reduce bias (see Kumar et al., 2023). I also kept a reflexivity journal to monitor my thoughts and biases while documenting my analytical choices to preserve objectivity.

I enhanced transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting, methods, and participant characteristics. Detailed descriptions enable others to determine whether findings may be applicable in different contexts (Ahmed & Ishtiaq, 2021). I clearly explained how I identified and analyzed themes to help readers understand the basis of my conclusions and assess their relevance to other settings.

I ensured confirmability by documenting all steps in the research process, using reflexive notes, and asking follow-up questions during interviews to clarify participant responses. Comparing data from diverse sources helped verify my findings and ensured that conclusions were based on collected data rather than personal bias. In qualitative research, confirmability was strengthened through transparent documentation and systematic data verification (see Yin, 2018).

Finally, I continued conducting interviews until no new themes emerged, ensuring data saturation. Once I reached data saturation, I interviewed one more participant to confirm that no new data emerged. Data saturation was reached when additional data collection no longer provided new insights, ensuring that findings were comprehensive and reflected broader experiences (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2021).

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I explained the steps I took to collect and analyze data for this project. I described my role in the research, my ethical responsibilities as outlined in the Belmont Report, and how I managed participant withdrawals. I also covered how I protected participants' confidentiality and securely stored the data. I detailed the methods I used, including semistructured interviews and triangulation, and explained how I obtained informed consent. Additionally, I discussed how I ensured the reliability and validity of my data collection tools and processes.

In Section 4, I summarize the project's findings after completing data collection. This section provides an overview of the main themes identified from the data and a discussion of how the findings align with, challenge, or augment existing research on AI ethics and PR&C usage. I will also discuss the practical implications of the findings and explain how they contribute to positive social change, providing recommendations for future research and best practices. The section ends with reflections and conclusions about the overall project.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative, pragmatic study was to explore how PR&C executives developed and applied ethical frameworks for implementing AI to maintain brand reputation. The overarching research question was as follows: What effective strategies did PR&C executives employ to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation, thereby maintaining their organization's brand reputation? Thematic analysis of the semistructured interview responses from six participants revealed five key themes that represent the effective strategies PR&C executives used to develop and apply ethical frameworks for AI implementation while safeguarding their organizations' brand reputations. Within these themes, similar patterns emerged around the need for team training, human oversight, and alignment between AI use and organizational policy. The themes were as follows: (a) strategic and ethical AI integration, (b) human-centric integration of AI in PR & communications, (c) protecting brand integrity through responsible AI use, (d) framework, privacy, and risk mitigation, and (e) transparency and stakeholder communication.

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the study's findings. Table 2 outlines the demographics of the six participants, including their pseudonyms, gender, industry, years of experience, and job role. Table 3 provides a summary of the major themes that emerged during the thematic analysis, the number of participants who referenced each theme, and the total number of supporting references.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Industry	Years of experience	Role
PRC1	Male	Manufacturing	30	Head of global PR
PRC2	Male	Cyber-Security	10	Managing director communications
PRC3	Female	Cyber-Security	11	Co-CEO
PRC4	Female	Technology	8	Founder
PRC6	Female	Lifestyle, authors	15	Founder
PRC7	Female	Technology	20	Head of PR

Table 3

Major Theme References

Theme	Participants	References
Theme 1: Strategic and ethical AI integration	6	35
Theme 2: Human-centric integration of AI in PR & communications	6	26
Theme 3: Protecting brand integrity through responsible AI use	6	24
Theme 4: Framework, privacy, and risk mitigation	6	27
Theme 5: Transparency and stakeholder communication	6	17

Theme 1: Strategic and Ethical AI Integration

The first emerging theme, strategic and ethical AI integration, refers to choosing the right AI tools that support both innovation and ethical standards. It includes making sure tools are appropriately vetted, align with company values, and do not introduce risks to brand credibility or decision-making. This theme reflects how PR&C executives now

consider the strategic use of AI tools necessary to maintain ethical standards while supporting innovation.

Participants described the use of tested tools that helped achieve organizational goals, inspired teamwork, and reduced ethical dilemmas. Developing an ethical AI strategy requires selecting suitable tools and being aware of their inherent limitations. In alignment, Floridi et al. (2018), in the AI4People framework, highlighted “beneficence” and “non-maleficence” as essential principles and demonstrated that tool choice and settings influence both fairness and transparency in results.

Participants consistently evaluated the effects of their AI strategies on various stakeholders, which aligns with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) because this consideration included clients, internal teams, and media partners. The PR&C executives' ethical commitment extended beyond their organizations when they selected secure tools and established usage frameworks to protect all groups affected by their communication results. Participants demonstrated their ethical commitment through AI tool selection and vetting which stood out as a crucial subtheme showing their balance between innovation and maintaining stakeholder trust and brand protection.

Subtheme: Tool Selection and Vetting

Tool selection and vetting refer to the intentional process by which PR&C executives evaluate, test, and approve AI platforms for use in their organizations. This process involved assessing each tool’s ethical implications, data handling policies, brand fit, and ability to generate accurate, relevant, and brand-aligned content consistently. Participants emphasized that ethical AI integration required scrutiny, not just of features

and performance, but of how each tool aligned with organizational values and reduced reputational or decision-making risks.

Enterprise-grade tools, such as ChatGPT Enterprise and Jasper AI, as well as custom NLP tools, received the highest preference among five participants for ensuring content quality and brand protection. PRC6 implemented their own internal frameworks, which consisted of approved phrase libraries and tone guidelines to ensure AI-generated content aligned with brand standards. The organization considered this approach vital to preserve consistent brand messaging across different channels and to make sure AI content properly translated their values. The need for originality meant producing novel content suitable for target audiences while avoiding repetitive elements and plagiarism because participants identified these issues as risks to reputation when employing general-purpose AI solutions.

PRC1 stressed the need to instruct AI systems on appropriate content selection and rejection through the development of pre-configured agents or prompt templates that ensure ethical outputs. The selection strategy demonstrated through these approaches represents a focused choice of tools based on ethical standards and organizational compatibility, rather than user convenience or price factors.

The research conducted by Cook (2024) revealed that large corporations are establishing chief AI officers for ethical guidance, whereas startups employ AI technology swiftly to maintain competitive edges. According to McKinsey & Company (2025), findings showed that more than 75% of companies utilize AI for at least one business function, and CEO supervision results in better performance outcomes.

The priority participants place on choosing appropriate tools and conducting ethical evaluations shows their commitment to protecting stakeholder interests. These executives supported Freeman's view on leadership by preventing ethically dubious or incorrect AI-generated content from reaching public or client communications, ensuring they considered the potential impacts on all stakeholders.

Subtheme: Brand Integrity and Risk Management

PR&C leaders acknowledged the potential damage to their reputation from content that lacks originality or contains misleading elements and relies too heavily on AI output. Participants reported that while AI improves PR workflow efficiency, it also presents risks to authenticity due to unchecked outputs. PRC1 warned about the dangers of excessive dependence on AI in public messaging since generic machine-generated content leads to "the temptation has overrun us." PRC3 leveraged a team-centric content vetting process to prevent the unintentional sharing of compromised messaging, while PRC6 identified misinformation as a significant concern. In total, their concerns reinforce the need for internal guidelines to guide output integrity.

Participant concerns align with those of Nair et al. (2025), who recommended assessing AI models for bias, participation, and demographic impact when evaluating ethical risks. Kirk and Givi (2024) further found that when consumers perceive emotionally charged content as AI-generated, they deemed it less authentic, potentially triggering negative emotional responses, such as moral discomfort, that harm brand integrity. As participants emphasized, maintaining human review and strategic oversight is essential to protect brand credibility.

Subtheme: Align With Organizational Values

The study participants repeatedly emphasized that AI technologies and results should reflect their organization's ethical standards and brand essence. PRC4 indicated that they accomplished alignment through usage guidelines and output reviews, which maintained tone, inclusivity, and factual accuracy. PRC6 described comparing internally generated AI-driven strategies with external work to ensure the information was both timely and accurate, to align with company values. PRC7 emphasized the need for deliberate and considered use while warning against practices that could clash with organizational values. PRC2 revealed that their agency confines AI applications to research functions to maintain the originality of their thought leadership and client-facing messages.

Academic research supports this approach. Patole (2024) found that organizations that integrate clear ethical guardrails into their AI workflows gain greater trust from both internal stakeholders and external audiences. Nair et al. (2025) reported that consumers are more likely to penalize brands when AI-generated materials fail to align with the brand's stated values. PR&C participants sought to mitigate these risks by creating guidelines, conducting fact-checks, and maintaining human oversight throughout all phases of content development.

Theme 2: Human-Centric Integration of AI in PR & Communications

PR&C executives emphasized that successful AI adoption hinges on keeping human creativity, oversight, and ethical alignment at the center of communication workflows. Rather than viewing AI as a replacement for humans, participants viewed it

as a necessary augmentation tool. When used ethically, these tools can improve storytelling, consistency, and productivity, but still require safeguards to maintain authenticity and align with organizational values. Their approach embodies an intentional, human-first approach to preserving authentic communication in public relations, where brand reputation and high emotional awareness are critical. Stakeholder theory supports this human-centric approach by emphasizing the need for brand communication to connect with important stakeholders such as customers and employees, as well as the public, through authentic messaging that builds trust and emotional bonds

Subtheme: Preserve Creativity and Original Thought

The necessity to preserve human creativity and original thought when creating communications assets was a unanimous concern for respondents. Over-reliance on AI was also elevated as a concern because it could limit creativity and authenticity. Experts have noted that excessive reliance on AI can limit creative growth, diminishing intuitive expression and clarity of authorship, especially during imaginative and spontaneous activities (New York University School of Professional Studies, 2023). For example, PRC4 shared, "One challenge that I had very early on in encountering and dealing with the implementation of AI was balancing efficiency with authenticity." PRC3 explained that AI sometimes "creates some kind of a writer's block… it stops spontaneous brainstorming and creativity when writing guest posts." Participant experiences suggest that while AI can enhance repetitive tasks, it requires careful management to mitigate adverse impacts on human creativity and emotional expression.

Academic research reinforces the concerns raised by participants. According to Nwodo (2024), AI systems can replicate emotional tones, but they fail to fully understand the true meaning of emotions, which necessitates human oversight to maintain the integrity of communication. Oritsegbemi (2023) demonstrated that the subjectivity of human communication remains unmatched by AI-generated content, specifically in emotionally sensitive scenarios, which underscores the necessity for consistent human monitoring.

Subtheme: Human-Led Strategy and Editorial Monitoring

Participants discussed developing workflows that prioritize human decision-making. PRC2 clarified, "We do not lead with AI. Instead of leading with it, we use it as a supporting tool," emphasizing that strategy development begins with original thinking. PRC6 noted the value of "an editorial process," underscoring the importance of reviewing AI outputs for tone, factuality, and contextual relevance. PRC1 similarly stressed that "as PR gets more automated… the good things we get from PR, namely the storytelling and the personality, get lost" without human review.

The emphasis on maintaining human editorial content aligns with Getchell et al. (2022), who found that human editorial input is crucial in guiding AI-generated content toward maintaining authenticity and fostering meaningful engagement. Their study confirms that editorial checkpoints safeguard both the quality and ethical standards of AI-generated content.

Subtheme: Include Ethical Judgment in Team Practices

Participants emphasized the role of human ethics in guiding the implementation of AI. PRC7 said, “I feel more comfortable putting my own words into ChatGPT… at least it is using my original thoughts and my original point,” highlighting the importance of human origin in communication. Others described using internal checklists and team dialogues to assess whether outputs align with company values. These practices demonstrate the integration of ethical reasoning into daily workflows.

Academic studies have confirmed the value of ethical embedding. According to Patole (2024), integrating transparency and fairness at each stage of the AI lifecycle enhances team dynamics and minimizes ethical blind spots. Similarly, Nair et al. (2025) found that stakeholder engagement and team education were central to maintaining integrity in AI-supported communication.

Theme 3: Protect Brand Integrity Through Responsible AI Use

Brand integrity and, ultimately, customer trust were key concerns for the respondents. PR&C leaders acknowledged the benefits of AI tools for repetitive tasks and enhanced efficiency, but only when human monitoring was embodied in the process to help maintain authenticity. Participants prioritized ethical issues related to unoriginal content and misinformation when arguing for human communication voices. Participants’ worries align with the AI4People concepts of “explicability” and “non-maleficence” (Floridi et al., 2018), as they focus on transparency and avoiding unintended harm.

Participant feedback reinforces stakeholder theory by demonstrating how ethical errors in AI usage undermine trust among stakeholders, resulting in reputational damage

and disengagement from media entities, consumer bases, and business partners. PR&C leaders considered protecting brand credibility as their duty to the company, alongside all stakeholder groups, by maintaining transparent and personal communication.

Subtheme: Overreliance and Generic Messaging

Participants described how excessive dependence on AI-generated content can lead to generic or easily identifiable machine-generated language, which may damage brand credibility. PRC1 warned, “We will also know that if we start doing that solely in PR, then the temptation has overrun us… It is a clear challenge.” Comments from PRC3 aligned with this viewpoint and explained how their team reviews AI content before distribution to ensure it meets standards for originality and tone. These insights suggest that human-led review processes are essential for ensuring brand messaging remains distinct, intentional, and aligned with audience expectations.

Topical academic studies support the participants’ concerns regarding the risks of unauthentic AI-generated content. Kirk and Givi (2024) found that audiences perceive AI-generated emotional marketing content as inauthentic, which leads to adverse reactions, including moral disgust. Similarly, Nair et al. (2025) argued that assessing AI tools requires a focus on their efficiency, as well as their integrity and inclusivity, throughout implementation.

Subtheme: Message Accuracy and Relevance

Participants considered the accuracy and relevance of communication materials to be significant issues, as they worried about the spread of outdated or incorrect information. PRC6 highlighted the reputational risk of misinformation, noting that it

creates substantial problems while emphasizing the need to verify facts and maintain editorial standards to build public trust. Participants confirmed their use of internal verification methods, along with team-based evaluations, to ensure AI-generated material complies with current brand standards and public narratives. As Floridi et al. (2018) pointed out, it is crucial that people can understand how AI systems work, especially in consumer-facing roles. If no one is double-checking the details, even minor mistakes in PR content can quickly escalate into larger problems that harm the brand.

Subtheme: Authentic Emotions and Human Tone

Participants often emphasized the importance of maintaining the emotional depth and storytelling that makes communication truly effective. While AI can be efficient, they felt it still falls short when it comes to the context and creative instincts needed to make messages connect on a human level. PRC6 described using AI only for structural support and brainstorming, not as a replacement for original content creation. PRC7 elaborated, “I feel more comfortable putting my own words into ChatGPT… at least it is using my original thoughts and my original point.” This view is strongly supported in current academic literature. Nwodo (2024) argued that while AI can simulate emotional tone, it cannot comprehend emotional meaning, making human oversight essential for protecting message integrity. Oritsegbemi (2023) further contended that AI systems are incapable of reproducing the nuanced subjectivity required in human communication, which is vital when conveying sentiment, empathy, or moral reasoning in brand messaging.

Theme 4: Framework, Privacy, and Risk Mitigation

The increasing integration of AI tools into PR&C work demands that participants establish clear rules while maintaining safeguards and accountability structures. Participants worked to create initial guardrails along with adaptable frameworks that could develop alongside technological advancements. Organizations demonstrate their approach to managing AI-related practical and ethical risks as they address issues of client trust and data protection, promoting responsible AI use. This method effectively upholds stakeholder theory by ensuring organizations safeguard the rights and interests of all individuals impacted by their operations. The focus of participants on data privacy alongside transparency and regulatory compliance demonstrates their wider responsibility towards stakeholders, including clients, regulators, and the general public.

Subtheme: Early Adoption Frameworks

All participants agreed that implementing a structural framework from the start is important, even if it is not perfect. PRC6 highlighted how building frameworks can direct teams and leaders in their AI application, both within the organization and with external clients. PRC2 proposed that forthcoming contracts would likely contain precise terms regarding AI functions to ensure legal protection for both the agency and the client. These initial steps demonstrate a forward-thinking strategy that balances control over uncertainties with the promotion of innovative developments. Scholars have supported this flexible mindset. A recent article by the MIT Sloan Management Review warned that organizations relying on third-party AI systems face increased risk unless

they implement structured oversight and internal controls from the start (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2023)

Subtheme: Data Privacy and Security Concerns

Participants repeatedly expressed, during interviews, their primary concern about safeguarding sensitive information when using generative AI. PRC7 explained they were extra cautious when entering unreleased or proprietary information into AI tools: “I ensure absolute caution when selecting information to reveal.” These cases demonstrate PR&C teams implementing measures to protect client information from unauthorized access, a practice supported in scholarly journals.

Academic research has underscored the importance of striking a balance between AI adoption and the implementation of ethical safeguards and regulatory compliance. Feretzakis et al. (2024) posited that organizations need to find a balance between the generative capabilities of AI and both privacy and legal rights. To accomplish this, the authors recommended adopting a privacy-by-design approach to ensure compliance.

Subtheme: Ethical Oversight Process

Several participants reported using both formal and informal strategies to ensure their AI systems were performing ethically. A vetting checklist created by PRC4 enables the company to assess vendors' data practices for alignment with its organizational values. Some participants emphasized the importance of routinely evaluating AI tool results by their organization's ethical standards. The management and monitoring of AI impact indicates that AI ethics has extended beyond the tool's usage functions. Deepfake technology has directly challenged ethics, particularly in terms of bias, accountability,

and regulatory gaps. Golda et al. (2024) emphasized the need for developers to bear an ethical responsibility for this technology, prioritizing transparency, consent, and accountability. This also aligns with the AI4People framework, which emphasizes the need for human involvement to ensure that ethical principles, including transparency, accountability, and privacy, are considered for responsible AI utilization (Floridi et al., 2018).

Theme 5: Transparency and Stakeholder Communication

Participants emphasized the importance of being transparent about how AI is used in both client-facing and internal communications. As AI becomes more integrated into content creation and strategy, participants agreed that ethical communication mandates acknowledging where and how AI contributes. Transparency not only builds trust but also reinforces the credibility of human expertise, guiding the application of AI. These practices reflect the intent of stakeholder theory, which holds that ethical communication involves openness with all relevant parties. By disclosing AI involvement, participants demonstrated respect for their stakeholders' right to clear, accurate, and trustworthy information.

Subtheme: Client-Facing Disclosure

PRC4 described the importance of being upfront with clients about the agency's AI use: "It is important to maintain that transparency and honesty, that credibility…This is how we use AI…and we are not relying on it to get things done." The respondents believed that this level of openness up front was essential for managing expectations and maintaining client trust in a human-centric strategy, even when AI was used in support.

Subtheme: Internal Transparency Practices

The interviews highlighted participants' demands for explicit communication regarding AI functions and the proper recognition of the results generated by these functions. PRC7 asked a reflexive question, whether they were acknowledging their use of AI technology. The question "Am I not admitting that I'm using it?" highlights the ethical dilemma associated with claiming AI-generated work as personal output. Team members needed to disclose their use of AI in their work processes to maintain accountability and professional integrity. Similarly, PRC6 shared, "I find that it is the most effective to tackle it head on and be very transparent about the fact that AI is a super integral and helpful tool that we are using," emphasizing the value of open dialogue around AI usage.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The project findings offer critical contributions to professional practitioners, organizational leaders, and the academic community. Business leaders navigating the current use or future integration of AI in PR&C can utilize experiential insights from other leaders to refine or formulate their strategy. The primary learning from this research is the need to adopt a balanced, ethical, and human-centered approach when implementing AI within a business unit. Drawing on the actual experiences of PR&C executives, the results showed that a deliberate strategy, transparency, and ethical alignment with organizational values were essential for leveraging AI responsibly and effectively. Analysis of these findings suggests that following the learnings will give

business leaders a direct line of sight to enhance brand integrity and protect stakeholder trust.

A primary contribution encompasses the strategic and ethical integration of AI tools. Participants consistently emphasized that AI adoption must be intentional and accompanied by robust vetting practices. Organizations benefit most when they adopt enterprise-grade tools that align with their specific communication goals and brand standards rather than chasing innovative trends without careful consideration. As reflected in Floridi et al.'s (2018) AI4People framework, the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence are best represented when AI tools are evaluated for fairness and transparency. Recent professional and scholarly articles from McKinsey and Company (2025) and Cook (2024) support these findings, highlighting that organizations with executive oversight of AI initiatives are better prepared to manage the accompanying risks. The findings also indicate that business leaders who implement AI-related internal policies and monitoring practices are more likely to experience the ethical and responsible use of this innovative technology.

Another significant insight from the study is the importance of human-centric integration of AI. The adoption of AI was not viewed as a threat to in-house personnel but rather as an augmentative tool that enhances creativity, efficiency, and consistency under the helpful guidance of human oversight. Participants described AI's value in accelerating workflows but expressed caution about its potential to diminish human creativity and originality if over-leveraged. This concern is echoed in current academic studies by Nwodo (2024) and Oritsegbemi (2023), which emphasized that while AI can

mimic human tone, it lacks the depth and contextual understanding necessary to convey genuine human emotion. Therefore, for business leaders, maintaining editorial control and incorporating ethical decision-making into team practices becomes mission-critical. Doing so helps foster a culture that can embrace innovative technology, maintain creative ownership, and protect the integrity of communications, ultimately preserving the brand.

The project also contributes to our understanding of protecting brand integrity through the responsible use of AI. Participants provided examples of generic messaging concerns, factual inaccuracies, and tone-deaf outputs when AI was used without sufficient oversight. These risks directly threaten brand trust and audience perception, particularly in emotionally dependent communications. A study from Kirk and Givi (2024) provided context to this concern, sharing that consumers react negatively when they believe content to be AI-generated. This negative connotation is heightened when the communications are emotionally charged. Therefore, business leaders need to implement explicit rules for AI-generated content to ensure client communications remain transparent while using human storytelling as the backbone to create unique brand engagement opportunities.

Another contribution lies in the area of framework development, data privacy, and risk mitigation. The participants emphasized the importance of implementing flexible frameworks during the initial stages of AI development to guide its deployment. Organizations should establish vendor review processes that control the exposure of sensitive information and set up monitoring committees to oversee the impacts of AI. Feretzakis et al. (2024) advocated for a "privacy by design" approach, which the

participants' practices mirror, especially in cases where legal or reputational risks are elevated. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2023, April 20) also stressed that organizations relying on third-party generative AI must implement internal controls to mitigate exposure. Business leaders should understand the critical role that privacy, security, and ethical oversight play in establishing a foundation for building trust and achieving long-term business value.

Ultimately, the project underscores the vital importance of transparency in stakeholder communication. Participants agreed that communicating AI's role in content creation, both internally among teams and externally with clients, builds credibility and sets accurate expectations. Patole (2024) emphasized the importance of transparency in stakeholder communication, demonstrating that brands that are transparent about their AI usage tend to enjoy higher levels of trust among consumers and partners. PR&C professionals must establish disclosure practices that acknowledge AI's role while preserving the importance of human contributions. The responsibility of business leaders includes creating transparency through team training programs, as well as internal documentation and client disclosures, that uphold ethical standards and demonstrate accountability.

In summary, the project provides an analysis based on PR&C industry leaders on how to integrate AI systems both ethically and strategically. Business leaders should view AI as a powerful tool that demands careful management and clear communication while ensuring alignment with human input. Organizations can mitigate reputational damage and misinformation, as well as avoid ethical issues, through proactive planning

and active human oversight, combined with a commitment to authentic storytelling. These findings offer new research opportunities centered on AI ethics and practical workflows for academic researchers. Upcoming research should investigate perceptions of authenticity in AI messaging systems while also measuring the impact of ethical checklists and analyzing trust patterns among various stakeholder communities. Organizations must connect ethical theory with applied communication practice to develop more responsible and resilient structures within the AI era.

Implications for Social Change

The project is significant in that it contributes to the field of PR&C by offering actionable insights for PR and communications professionals on integrating AI ethically into their strategies while protecting brand reputation. It aims to bridge a critical gap in current professional practices by identifying AI governance strategies, enabling the development of policies that balance innovation with ethical responsibility. This project can directly enhance professional practice by guiding PR&C leaders in understanding the complexities of AI, ensuring that the early adoption of AI technologies does not compromise ethical standards or legal integrity.

This project investigated the risks posed by AI applications if used unethically. Chatterjee et al. (2022) highlighted how autonomous AI technologies can threaten human rights and disrupt essential societal systems. The results offer operationally tested strategies to reduce organizational legal liabilities and protect their reputations by strengthening AI oversight and governance. By encouraging business leaders to adopt AI practices that are both innovative and ethically sound, the project supports efforts to

protect social values while maintaining public trust in the organizations that use these technologies.

The responsible use of AI in PR&C holds meaningful potential to contribute to positive social change. Organizations that embed AI systems with ethical governance and human-centered approaches and maintain transparency successfully address misinformation and biased messaging problems, issues that threaten public trust and societal discussions. By promoting ethical standards in the adoption of AI tools, PR&C leaders help ensure that communication remains accurate, emotionally intelligent, and inclusive.

Participants stressed the essential role of transparent operations alongside editorial checks and values alignment as they incorporated AI into communication processes. These measures enable trustworthy and equitable communication which boosts organizational trustworthiness alongside public access to dependable information. Human-in-the-loop systems and disclosure practices protect democratic engagement while minimizing polarization and promoting informed community decision-making during periods of rapid viral spread of false or manipulative content.

Utilizing AI ethically has a societal impact that extends beyond the communications industry. When fairness, privacy, and authenticity become foundational concerns of an organizational strategy, company cultures can be built which honor human dignity and accountability. Internal adoption of best practices by organizations generates norms that promote responsible behavior throughout related sectors, including journalism and healthcare. Organizations show respect for user autonomy by integrating privacy

protections and inclusive design into AI applications, which safeguard communities that face digital exploitation and algorithmic bias.

When organizations use AI in a responsible way that upholds emotional intelligence and ethical transparency while maintaining integrity, they can build a society that is more equitable and informed. Organizations show their dedication to human dignity through these practices, which help establish a trusting relationship of respect between content creators and viewers. The project outlined methods for businesses and institutions to create socially responsible innovations through human-centered solutions, as AI will determine future communication practices.

Recommendations for Further Research

Given the limitations identified in this project, several opportunities for future research emerge that could expand understanding and improve professional practice in the field of PR&C. Future studies should consider incorporating a larger and more diverse participant pool across industries, organization sizes, and geographic regions. Doing so would enhance the representativeness of the findings and provide a broader view of how PR&C executives approach the integration of ethical AI. A more expansive sample could also help identify sector-specific challenges or best practices that were beyond the scope of this project.

Ethics can be subjective in nature; therefore, future researchers may benefit from a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative insights with quantitative assessments. Surveys of ethical decision-making could help to measure consistency in how ethical priorities are enacted across organizations.

Due to the rapid evolution of generative AI technologies, this study necessarily focused on tools and platforms reported by participants at the time of the interviews. As AI systems continue to advance, emerging tools may present new ethical challenges or innovations not captured here. Future researchers should evaluate how newly adopted or less common AI platforms influence ethical considerations, especially in terms of data privacy, authenticity, and brand communication.

Conclusion

This pragmatic qualitative inquiry project explored the effective AI strategies that PR&C executives used to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation, thereby maintaining their organizations' brand reputations. The project involved semistructured interviews with six PR&C professionals, each with direct experience navigating AI integration within their organizations. Using Excel to support thematic analysis, five key themes emerged: strategic and ethical AI integration, human-centric integration of AI in PR & communications, protecting brand integrity through responsible AI use, framework, privacy, and risk mitigation, and transparency and stakeholder communication. These findings were interpreted through the lens of the AI4People ethical framework (Floridi et al., 2018) and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), providing a foundation for understanding the responsible use of AI in PR&C contexts.

All participants agreed on the importance of human supervision, emotional understanding, and ethical transparency when utilizing AI systems to enhance performance and achieve results. The research demonstrated that AI becomes a valuable

asset when organizations use it strategically. Without proper supervision, AI can pose a threat to both creativity and originality, as well as brand trust. The research verified that PR&C executives were actively developing internal policies alongside editorial checkpoints and ethical vetting practices, which help AI tools meet organizational values and stakeholder expectations. In doing so, they seek to preserve technical integrity and the authenticity of their brand communications.

To adopt AI responsibly, organizations must combine technical expertise with a strong commitment to their values, while maintaining transparency with stakeholders through ongoing oversight. The implementation of responsible AI requires technical expertise, ethical organizational practices, and transparent stakeholder communication, all of which necessitate ongoing supervision. The findings suggest that business leaders should view AI as a tool that requires human judgment to guide its development and control, rather than treating it as a substitute for human decision-making. Organizations can safeguard their reputation and preserve customer confidence while upholding brand integrity by adopting ethical practices and maintaining transparent communication with stakeholders in today's digital technology environment.

These findings provide practical guidance for communications professionals and business leaders seeking to adopt AI in a manner that is both innovative and ethically grounded. They also contribute to the academic understanding of applied AI governance in professional practice. As AI continues to evolve, future research should explore how ethical frameworks adapt to new technologies and cultural contexts, ensuring that PR&C professionals are prepared to meet emerging challenges with integrity and transparency.

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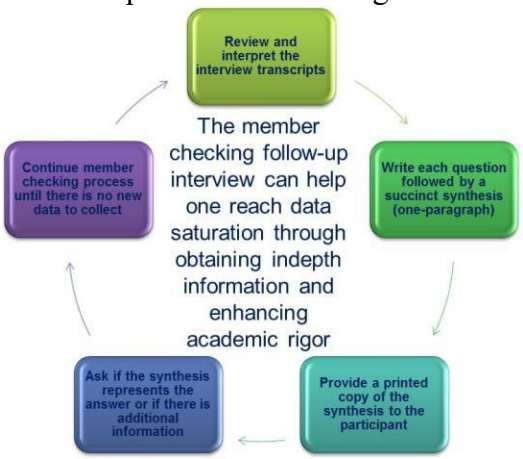
Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview thereby setting the stage.	Hello, my name is Karl Bateson. I am a Doctoral Candidate with Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify and explore the effective strategies PR&C executives use to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation while maintaining brand reputation. I am going to ask you eight questions to which I would like your responses to. Then, I will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions?
Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth	Interview Questions: 1. What strategies have you used to develop and apply an ethical framework for AI implementation in PR&C? 2. How do you ensure that AI-driven PR&C strategies align with ethical standards and corporate values? 3. What challenges have you encountered when implementing AI in PR&C while maintaining brand reputation? 4. How did you address these challenges, and what strategies were most effective? 5. What role does leadership play in ensuring ethical AI implementation in PR&C? 6. How do you measure the success of AI-driven PR&C initiatives in terms of ethical compliance and brand reputation? 7. What best practices would you recommend to other PR&C executives for maintaining brand integrity while integrating AI? 8. Do you have any other strategies you used to develop and apply an

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>ethical framework for AI implementation in PR&C that we have not already discussed?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Wrap up the interview thanking participant.</td><td>Thank you for participating in the interview, an integral part of my research project.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Schedule a follow-up interview to perform member checking with the participant.</td><td>I will contact you in a week or so to schedule a time for us to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses. Will that work for you? Thank you. Goodbye.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Follow-up Member Checking Interview
 

Graphic adopted from DBA Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry Research handbook (2023). Not needed in proposal or research project. A visual reminder during proposal stage when creating interview protocol</td></tr>
<tr><td>Introduce myself and purpose of the follow-up interview to set the stage.</td><td>Hello Interviewee,

Thank you for taking this time to meet with me again to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual questions.
Bring in probing questions related to other information that I found – note the information must be related so that you are I am probing and adhering to the IRB approval.</td><td>I will read the questions one at a time and my interpretations of your responses to them and ask you if my interpretation is correct.</td></tr>
<tr><td>1. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed</td></tr>
</table>

Walk through each question, read the interpretation, and ask: Is my interpretation correct? Did I miss anything? Or Would you like to add anything?	2. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed