The Adoption of Communication Technologies by the Aotearoa New Zealand Public Relations Industry: Social Media and Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

Purpose of research

This research aims to explore the factors that challenge or enable the adoption of new communication technologies by Aotearoa New Zealand's public relations industry. More specifically, it investigates the adoption of social media and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, identifying associated ethical issues. The research will use past experiences of adopting social media to provide important lessons for today's adoption of AI and highlight the importance of proactive learning, responsible experimentation, strong ethical frameworks and securing a place for public relations voices in technology policy discussions.

Design and methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to detect senior professionals' experiences and insights regarding the adoption of both social media and AI. Interviewees were selected based on their years of experience, allowing the researcher to ensure a comparison between the adoption of social media and the current adoption of AI. This meant participants had to have at least 14-15 years of experience. Based on the interviews' content, the researcher created a questionnaire, which was distributed to 3,010 Aotearoa New Zealand public relations professionals through the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand's newsletter. In addition, the researcher directly contacted 16 public relations professionals known to the researcher in Aotearoa New Zealand and posted the survey through the researcher's LinkedIn page which reached 418 other LinkedIn members.

The survey questionnaire and interviews guideline were designed to gather data on public relations professionals' initial understanding of social media, as well as their organisations' initial attitude, how their social media policy was created and how they currently used social media in their work. It also sought to understand the current adoption trends of AI by gathering information and attitudinal perceptions from the respondents' organisation, their opinions on AI, if their organisation had an AI policy, their involvement and if they had used AI in their work, as well as any future opportunities they see if adopting AI.

The major question the guide this study was:

- What are the factors that challenge or enable the adoption of new communication technologies by the public relations industry?

Findings

Social media blurred the boundaries between personal and professional identities, creating new ethical and reputational considerations for public relations professionals. Social media expanded public relations responsibilities to include real-time engagement, content creation and analytics. AI has the power to enhance productivity, however the need for upskilling and training as AI becomes more prominent in communication workflows is crucial. There are explicit knowledge and skills gaps related to AI, particularly in areas such as ethical use, content verification and integration into strategic communication. Public relations pracitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand feel underprepared for AI's rapid evolution, and there is limited access to formal training tailored specifically to public relations applications, due to organisational barriers, unclear policies and resistance to change.

Originality/value

This research is original in its dual focus on the adoption of both social media and AI in the public relations industry, using the Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory as a unifying analytical framework. While previous studies have examined these technologies separately, this research is among the first to compare their adoption patterns side by side, offering a longitudinal perspective on how public relations professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand, respond to digital transformation over time. The study uniquely highlights the parallels between past and present adoption behaviours, revealing recurring organisational hesitations, generational divides and evolving role expectations. It also contributes new insight into current AI knowledge and skills gaps, which have yet to be comprehensively addressed in existing public relations scholarship. By drawing on real-world practitioner narratives, this research adds depth to theoretical understanding and offers practical implications for how the profession can better prepare for emerging technologies.

Keywords

Diffusion of Innovation Theory; Social Media; Artificial Intelligence; Public Relations; Communications; New Zealand; Aotearoa; Adoption

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the participants who took the time to be interviewed and surveyed. Your insights were invaluable in helping to understand how the Aotearoa New Zealand public relations profession can capitalise on future information and communication technology adoption. I hope this thesis is as useful to you as your stories and experiences were to it.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The public relations industry has always been shaped and periodically reshaped by technological evolution. Each wave of innovation has required public relations professionals to re-evaluate their tools, tactics and professional norms to remain effective and credible communicators. From the early adoption of fax machines in the 1980s, to the use of the internet communication and email during the 1990s, to the seismic shifts brought on by the rise of social media platforms in the new millennium, the field has consistently demonstrated an ability to adapt, albeit at varying speeds and levels of success. Today, the industry stands on the cusp of another transformation, driven by artificial intelligence (AI), a technology that is beginning to influence communication workflows in both subtle and increasingly significant ways.

Just as the emergence of platforms like Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) disrupted traditional media relations and audience engagement strategies, AI support tools such as Grammarly and media monitoring bots, as well as generative AI options including ChatGPT and Google Gemini, are redefining how public relations professionals ideate, generate, analyse and distribute content. These tools promise efficiencies and new capabilities, but they also raise complex ethical, professional and strategic questions. As was the case with social media, AI's adoption presents both opportunity and risk. Its integration into public relations' workflows is not simply a matter of technological readiness, but also one of cultural fit, organisational support and professional values.

This thesis investigates how public relations professionals are approaching the current wave of AI integration, while also drawing lessons from a previous technological disruptor: social media. By comparing these two major adoption cycles, the study seeks to illuminate patterns in the way public relations professionals understand, trial and embed (or reject) new technologies within their practice. This comparison provides a context for assessing whether the past offers any insight into managing the present, and potentially the future, of innovation in public relations.

While there is an expanding body of commentary speculating on AI's potential to disrupt the industry, there remains a notable lack of empirical research on how public relations professionals are experiencing this shift in practice. Much of the existing literature either focuses on technical capabilities or speculated futures, often neglecting the voices of the professionals who are currently grappling with its day-to-day integration. Furthermore, few studies link the adoption patterns of previous technological innovations, particularly social media, to the present discourse around AI. This presents a critical gap in understanding, not only in terms of how AI is being adopted, but also what prior experiences of innovation can teach the industry about managing new waves of technological change.

Given the urgency with which AI is being discussed in business, media and technology spaces, public relations professionals are under increasing pressure to adapt and incorporate these tools, often in environments lacking clear guidance, professional standards or regulatory frameworks. This environment places significant responsibility on individual professionals and organisations to interpret the implications of AI adoption in real-time, making it essential to examine how experienced professionals are navigating this challenge.

The research focuses on the following main questions:

- What are the factors that challenge or enable the adoption of new communication technologies by the public relations industry?
    - What can the public relations industry learn from its experience with the adoption of social media during the early 2000s?
    - How relevant is that experience to the current process of adopting AI technologies?
    - Can the industry identify early adopters or champions who may help facilitate smoother integration of emerging technologies?
    - What are the ethical challenges shaping practitioner attitudes toward new technologies-both historically (social media) and presently (artificial intelligence)?

In addressing these questions, this study offers timely insights for public relations professionals, educators and organisations navigating today's uncertain and rapidly evolving technological

environment. By grounding the analysis in the lived experiences of senior professionals, each with over 14 years of industry experience, it elevates voices that have already weathered one major digital transformation and are now confronting another. Their perspectives, shaped by both hindsight and current engagement, offer valuable context for developing policy and educational support frameworks around the use of AI in the public relations industry.

This research is underpinned by Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory that was first published in 1962 (Rogers, 2003). Rogers' model describes how new technologies are introduced and adopted within social systems. The DOI theory outlines several key attributes that influence the rate and success of adoption, including relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability and categorises adopters along a continuum from innovators to laggards. The theory has been widely applied in media, communication and technology studies, making it especially relevant for examining how public relations professionals respond to innovation cycles.

The study employs a two-phase methodology. The first phase consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five senior public relations professionals based in Aotearoa New Zealand. Each participant brings a wealth of experience, offering a longitudinal perspective on how both social media and AI have been introduced, evaluated and implemented in their professional environments. These narrative accounts uncover nuanced insights that go beyond surface-level adoption metrics and highlight the personal, organisational and ethical dimensions of technological change.

The second phase builds on the interviews' findings to design a broader national survey. A questionnaire was distributed via social media, newsletters and email networks to identify attitudes and experiences across the public relations industry in Aotearoa New Zealand, offering quantitative data to the more detailed stories captured in the interviews. Together, these methods provide a robust foundation for understanding how the public relations industry is responding to AI, not in isolation, but as part of an ongoing journey of digital transformation.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.0 Public relations

The definition of public relations has significantly changed over the years (Johnston & Sheehan, 2020). Many advances in technology and the rise of digital communication have majorly transformed how public relations professionals connect with audiences (Phillips & Young, 2009). Traditional methods like press releases and media relations have been supplemented by social media engagement and real time analytics (Solis, 2013). It is now much easier to show the value of public relations through technology and to better connect with audiences in a more time efficient manner (An, 2024). It's also important to note the change in the news cycle over the years, from what once was a structured and scheduled flow of information tied to daily deadlines is now a 24/7 always-at-your-fingertips stream of information (Bucy, Gantz & Wang, 2007) with the invention of the internet. Technology, and more specifically the internet, radically transformed public relations professionals work, reconfiguring how they communicate, engage with stakeholders, manage reputation, measure impact and the time needed to do this work at the drop of a moment (An, 2024). This shift has required public relations professionals to adapt their approach to ensure they are effectively engaging with their many diverse audiences in real time (Bucy et al., 2007).

Prior to the internet, the public relations industry was slower to the mark, more centralised and heavily reliant on traditional media, with the invention of the printing press. Public relations was a one-way communication to stakeholders through journalists, editors and broadcasters, making media relations much more important (Solis, 2013). Public relations campaigns were planned over a longer time (months to years) and results and other documents that showed this important work took time to surface as there was no real-time feedback (Solis, 2013; Stellar, 2005). When new trends and innovations were adopted within the public relations industry, books and research articles labelled each of the new terms, explained the need for change and how this innovation will impact our audiences (Phillips & Young, 2009; Solis, 2013).

The Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) has produced a yearly demography report of those public relations professionals who are members of PRINZ (Morris & Cook, 2024). In 2024, PRINZ members were made up of 77.8% 'females', 21.6% 'males' and 0.6% 'another gender'. In 2024, there was an 11.11% increase in those 'under 30' working in public relations from 2023 and a 40.13% drop in those 'over 50' in 2023 (Morris & Cook, 2024). A little less than 25% of PRINZ members have no public relations qualification, noting that this accounts for those who have received degrees in other and/or similar faculties. Over 30% have a bachelor's degree, 11% have received a postgraduate diploma or certificate, less than 10% have a master's degree (Morris & Cook, 2024). The rest is shown in the graph below.

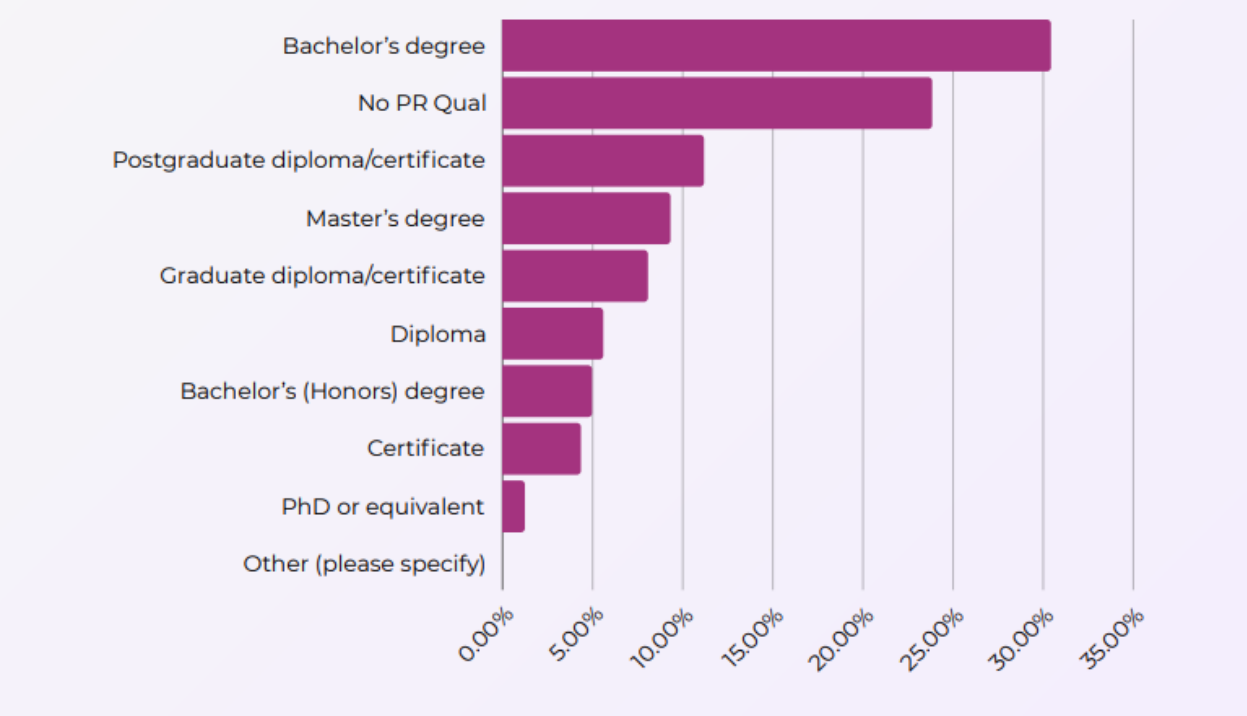

Figure 1, PRINZ Member Insights Report, 2024

Most PRINZ members from 2023 have between 20-29 years of experience (over 30%), followed by 10-19 years of experience (~29%), then 30+ years (~12%), 2-5 years (~12%), 6-9 years (10%) and less than two years (5%). 55.1% of PRINZ members were working in-house, 22.8% working in agency, 13.3% independent consultant/contractor, 6.3% 'other' and 2.53% not currently employed.

Over 60% are within a permanent, full-time role. Over half of those working in an agency, as well as those working in an in-house role work 40-49 hours per week. It's important to note as well, that members within this report are retired, however there is no clear percentage indicated (Morris & Cook, 2024). PRINZ showed that within the last year of the report, more than 40% of its members had attended a PRINZ networking event, roughly 40% had attended a PRINZ webinar – this information is necessary to better understand potential appetite for workshops on the innovations (Morris & Cook, 2024). Although there was no clear indication on the percentage of those retired, we can assume it is within the national average of 67 years old (Pelletier, 2024).

2.1 Social media

Social media is the set of applications found on the internet that facilitate creation, curation and sharing of user-generated content (Davis, 2016). The internet includes a multitude of different social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat and many more. Since the mid to late 1990s, with the advent of the internet and the launch of social media platforms, the number of platforms and users has grown significantly, making social media adoption one of the most impactful uses of the internet (Solis, 2013). As seen in Figure 2 below sourced from Our World in Data, the rate of adoption for social media platforms dramatically increased as time passed (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). It took two years for Facebook to adopt 500 million users, from 2008 to 2010 whereas TikTok adopted 500 million users in less than one year. It is important to note that this is a global graph, and not specific to Aotearoa New Zealand. It should also be noted that this graph shows personal use of social media and not organisational use. Research from Msimangira produced in 2012 suggested that only a few Aotearoa New Zealand organisations actively used social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube around this time.

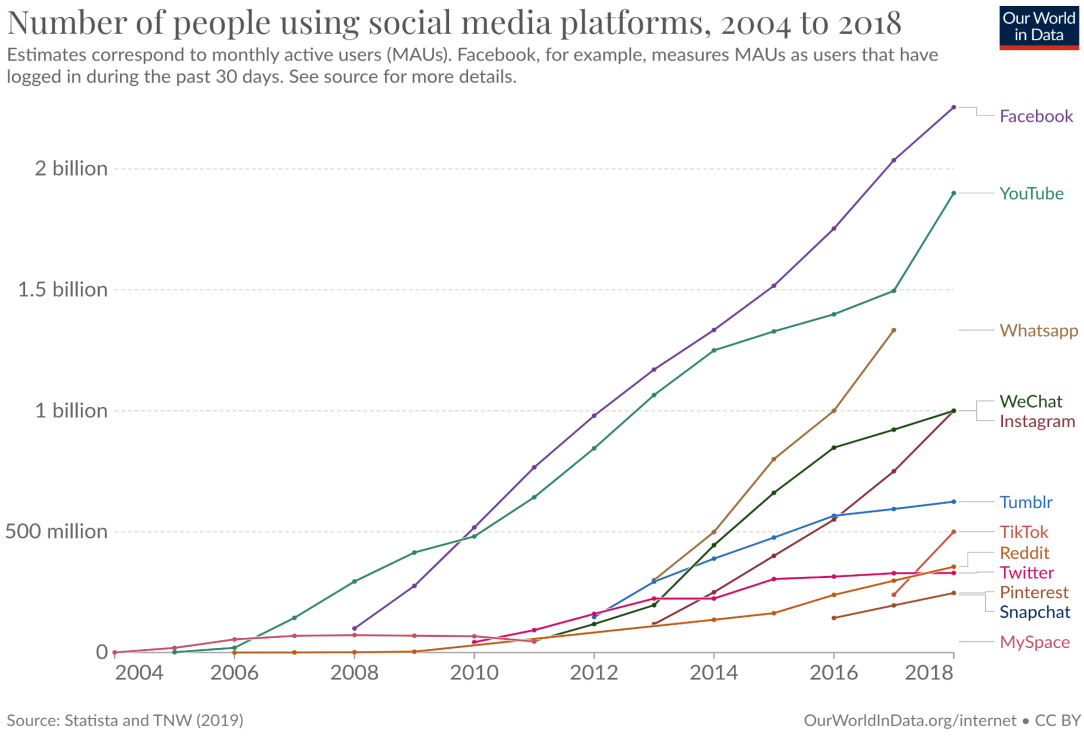

Figure 2, Retrieved from Our World in Data, 2019

2.1.0 The impact of social media on public relations

Across the world, social media's rise fundamentally reshaped public relations by shifting the focus from traditional public relations methods, like press releases to direct audience engagement through platforms such as Facebook, X (formally Twitter) and Instagram (Pranata, Valevi, Habibullah, Sari & Nofirda, 2023). No longer were public relations professionals reliant on journalists, editors and broadcasters to spread the word on their campaign. Social media empowered organisations to bypass traditional media channels and interact directly with their audiences (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011; Sharma, 2023). With social media, public relations became more interactive and real-time focused, marking a departure from one-way communication to two-way dialogue with the public (Solis, 2013). This adjusted the public relations industry completely, requiring public relations professionals to upskill and rethink their campaign strategies for managing reputation, storytelling and audience relationships.

Aotearoa New Zealand public relations professionals were slower to adopt social media compared to their international counterparts due to a combination of cultural, organisational and strategic factors. Culturally, many public relations professionals initially viewed social media as a tool for younger generations and informal interactions (Msimangari, 2012). This perception led to delays in recognising social media as a credible, strategic communication channel within the professional sphere. As a result, many professionals took a more cautious approach, which slowed the industry's adoption of these platforms. From an organisational perspective, businesses in Aotearoa New Zealand were particularly hesitant to embrace social media due to concerns on brand reputation and the risks associated with open, public engagement (Solis, 2013). Risk-averse organisations maintained stringent approval processes and relied heavily on traditional, controlled communication models. These established workflows, combined with a strong attachment to traditional practices like press releases and newspaper advertisements, further delayed the integration of social media into mainstream public relations strategies (Solis, 2013). As Solis (2013) observed, while social networks were initially developed for personal connections, they quickly became central to both the gathering and dissemination of news - a shift that was not immediately recognised by public relations professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The adoption of social media by public relations professionals was shaped by generational differences. Those referred to as ‘digital natives’, professionals who started their careers around the same time that social media emerged, were able to quickly understand and utilise the platforms to effectively reach new audiences (Ojohwoh, 2018; Wang et al., 2013). These individuals learned rapidly what worked and what did not within the social media space, contributing to a faster integration of social media into their practices (Ignacio-Criado, Pastor & Villodre, 2018). In contrast, ‘digital immigrants’, or those with more experience in traditional public relations practices, faced a steeper learning curve (Ojohwoh, 2018; Wang et al., 2013). Their established workflows, scepticism on the value of social media, and concerns about its ethical implications made the transition more challenging (Wright & Hinson, 2014). While digital natives were quicker to adopt these new tools, their rapid adoption was not without distress or ethical concerns (Ojohwoh, 2018).

In the early stages of social media, organisations and professionals also faced significant resistance to change. This resistance was largely due to a lack of understanding of the platforms and how to use them effectively (Phillips & Young, 2009). During the 1990s to early 2000s, traditional public relations hierarchies, which valued the insights of more experienced professionals, often disregarded the contributions of digital natives, creating barriers to the adoption of social media (Wang, Myers & Sundaram, 2013). Additionally, many public relations professionals and organisations were concerned about the ethical implications of adopting social media, particularly issues of transparency, message control and the potential for reputational damage due to misinformation (Phillips & Young, 2009; Toledano & Wolland, 2011). These concerns on ethicality are crucial in understanding the slow adoption process. In fact, public relations professionals who were early adopters of social media often struggled to balance the opportunities offered by these platforms with the potential risks to their organisations' reputations. As social media use became more widespread, many public relations professionals quickly learned that while social media provided direct access to audiences, it also created new ethical dilemmas and challenges around managing and controlling information (Solis, 2013; Wang et al., 2013). This is particularly evident in the adoption stages described by the DOI theory, where early adopters faced the dual challenge of learning how to use the technology effectively while addressing the potential negative consequences.

While social media has undeniably revolutionised public relations practices, its adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand has been slower than in other parts of the world, driven by a combination of cultural conservatism, organisational resistance and ethical concerns. Understanding these dynamics through the lens of DOI theory provides valuable insights into how new technologies are embraced and integrated within professional practices but also raises critical questions about the assumptions and limitations inherent in the theory.

2.1.1 Social media members

Brands and journalists began to recognise social media as a valuable communication channel, using it to promote content and engage with audiences in novel ways. For example, promotional messages such as "Exciting opportunity coming soon… follow our Facebook page to learn more" or "Follow both me and [brand name] and tag your friends in the comments to win [prize]" became

common strategies to increase visibility and interaction (Weatherbed, 2024). Influencers also played a significant role in attracting users to social media platforms through personalised and persuasive content (Weatherbed, 2024). More recently, the introduction of Instagram's 'Threads' demonstrates how platform integration and algorithmic targeting are used to drive user adoption (Weatherbed, 2024). The Instagram algorithm identifies users' interests and strategically promotes related Threads content within the app, making the transition to downloading and engaging with Threads a seamless and often unavoidable process for active Instagram users (Weatherbed, 2024).

Public relations professionals have had to navigate the same phases of adoption but at a strategic level. Their ability to quickly adapt to emerging platforms, allowing them to craft compelling campaigns that resonate with audiences already active on these social sites (Wright & Hinson, 2014). This also includes leveraging both peer influence and influencer marketing to create momentum (Pinkerton, 2025). By aligning brands with innovators and early adopters, public relations teams ensure that their message spreads through trusted voices. And just as platforms rise and fall, public relations campaigns must evolve to meet audiences where they are migrating (JamPrime, 2024). The fall of platforms like Vine and the rise of TikTok illustrates how public relations professionals must be adaptable and forward-thinking, continuously learning new platforms and tools to maintain brand presence (Phillips & Young, 2009). With the growth in social media use across the world and in Aotearoa New Zealand, and new platforms being created every day, public relations professionals must monitor new platform launches closely. This proactive engagement with emerging platforms exemplifies how public relations relies on social influence factors in shaping audience behaviour (Breakenridge, 2025).

2.1.2 Social media integration: Opportunities, challenges and evolving practices

The proliferation of internet access, coupled with the rise of social media as a free and widely accessible tool, has significantly impacted the adoption of these platforms by public relations professionals. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Reddit have become essential to the field (Lipschultz, 2018; Wright & Hinson, 2014; Xie, Niell & Schulster, 2018) with some scholars even likening the significance of social media to the invention of the printing press (Macnamara, 2010). Wright and Hinson's (2014) longitudinal study revealed that traditional mainstream media usage weakened for three consecutive years, highlighting social media's lasting

influence. Supporting Macnamara's claim, others argue that such a transformative shift has rarely occurred in the history of public relations (Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012).

Despite its clear benefits, however, the adoption of social media was not immediate. Digital natives (those who grew up with technology) embraced social platforms more readily than digital immigrants, who often resisted due to established workflows and scepticism around social media's value (Kitchen & Panopoulos, 2010; Martens, 2020; Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2011). This resistance was further compounded by traditional organisational hierarchies that privileged experience over digital fluency (Bernard, Swanson & Project, 2010). A loss of message control became a pressing concern, as public users could now engage with organisational content or generate their own narratives, elevating the importance of peer influence and requiring public relations to engage more strategically and responsively. Some platforms achieve long-term success, others fade into redundancy, and many are disregarded entirely (Ng, 2020). Even within popular platforms, user behaviour and demographics continue to shift; TikTok is currently dominated by Generation Z, Instagram is most used by millennials and Facebook remains popular among baby boomers (Duarte, 2025; Sheikh, 2025; Slipkus, 2025). For public relations professionals, understanding these shifts is crucial for effectively targeting diverse audiences. Wright and Hinson (2014) found that Twitter had at the time, overtaken Facebook in usage. However, its landscape has changed dramatically following Elon Musk's acquisition of the platform (now renamed X). Musk's ownership has brought substantial ethical concerns, particularly regarding relaxed content moderation and the reinstatement of previously banned users (Carr, 2023; Hutchinson, 2023; Hutchinson, 2024; Ingram, 2024). As Ingram (2024) notes in his NBC article (p. 1), "Under Musk's ownership, X has relaxed content moderation rules that previously limited hateful content, such as white supremacist imagery," causing many users to deactivate or abandon the platform altogether. This transformation has not only altered the platform's audience but has also disrupted strategic planning for public relations professionals.

Historically, public relations relied heavily on journalists and print media to share messages. Over time, relationships between public relations professionals and journalists evolved, and advancements in technology, such as the television, internet and eventually social media, transformed the industry into a dynamic, multifaceted field (Lloyd & Toogood, 2015). It is noted

in Lloyd and Toogood's research that this does not mean that public relations professionals do not see the value in working and building relationships with journalists. However, with the rise of social media and other technological advances, public relations transitioned from being storytellers to becoming analytical strategists and news experts (Bayford, 2024; Wang, Cheng & Sun, 2021; Wright & Hinson, 2014). They now must master each platform: knowing when and how often to post, which times and days yield the best engagement and how to tailor content to different audiences (Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012; Watson, 2012). Social media has introduced new guidelines and provided unprecedented insights into public relations professionals' communities, empowering professionals with more intuition, influence and vitality in their work (Bayford, 2024). Some researchers have found that even though social media can be used as a two-way line of communication to their audiences, instead Aotearoa New Zealand public relations professionals are using it as a "one way broadcasting channel" (Martens, 2020, p. 121). Martens suggests that the reasoning behind this is because of the encroachment of other fields like marketing into the public relations space, suggesting that professionals who do not have public relations experience are taking on public relations responsibilities and prioritising promotional content over relationship building.

Another challenge to using social media is staying on top and up to date with each platform, while ensuring each of the public relations professionals are not overcommitting themselves or not following work-life-balance approaches their organisations promote. As well as staying in-the-know with social media, public relations professionals must ensure all their moves are thinking about the potential future outcomes. Public relations professionals often utilise tools such as SWOT analysis and SMART goals to guide their strategic planning (Gürel & Tat, 2024). A SWOT analysis helps identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats associated with a project or organisation, while SMART goals provide a clear structure for defining objectives and ensuring they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely (Gürel & Tat, 2024). These tools are fundamental to strategising process in public relations. Without such knowledge and foresight, public relations risks becoming less effective and falling short of its potential, even if it occasionally achieves success (Martens, 2020). One example of this strategic foresight is recognising the cost-effectiveness of using social media in public relations campaigns. Social media platforms became a powerful tool for strategy, not only allowing for targeted and

measurable engagement but also providing a budget-friendly means of reaching diverse audiences, making them an essential component of modern public relations strategies (Komodromos, 2014).

In addition to cost-effectiveness, one of the significant advantages of using social media is the provision of real-time results and feedback (Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012). Unlike newspapers and articles, you can see the effectiveness of the post immediately. Now, with the use of social media, public relations professionals can demonstrate results to their clients and in-house leaders, providing a case-by-case benefit in real-time. Social media offers public relations professionals direct feedback and insight into their audiences through data analytics (Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012). If they are unsure how their audience may take a story or news angle, the internet and social media provided public relations professionals with a plethora of information to base their research and decision-making processes on (from Reddit posts to Facebook Groups). Before the use of social media and the internet, public relations professionals would show their worth through media clippings, event attendance and market research (Watson, 2012). In his research, Watson explains the timeline of how public relations professionals evaluated their work starting in the 1950s with limited time and effort spent on evaluation and feedback of public relations efforts, to the 21st century using social media and internet analytics. Social media has enabled public relations professionals to assess the impact of their work in real time through two-way communication. This interaction can occur via posts shared on organisational social channels or through direct messages from audiences. Social media platforms provide clear indicators of return on investment (ROI), such as engagement metrics, audience reach and sentiment analysis (Bayford, 2024; Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012; Watson, 2012).

Two-way communication also fosters community building (Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012), which can significantly help improve an organisation's relationship with its various audiences. Additionally, social media enhances crisis management capabilities by allowing organisations to control their narratives and respond promptly to emerging issues (Roshan, Warren & Carr, 2016). However, this immediacy presents risks when social media accounts are managed by individuals lacking proper training, increasing the potential for crises due to miscommunication or unintended posts (Laufer, 2019). This was prevalent in the birth of social media when public relations

professionals were still figuring out how to effectively use social media, and which processes were necessary in safeguarding their organisation and/or clients.

As social media gained prominence, traditional tools, like the press release, were adapted to fit to blend into a traditional public relations-social media format (Phillips & Young, 2009; Breakenridge, 2025). This transition demonstrated how public relations professionals could leverage social media's collaborative features to enhance community building and facilitate global, real-time engagement (Breakenridge, 2025). In a semi-structured interview with public relations professionals conducted by Martens (2020), a respondent suggested that "it's [social media] where you find breaking news now, whereas previously people relied on journalists and the traditional news media. So now, they have got Twitter" (Martens, 2020, p. 68). The adoption of social media was also determined by its ease of use (Breakenridge, 2025). Each social platform is made to be accessible to all types of users, their interfaces and navigation is simple, clear and user-friendly interfaces, layouts are clean and easy to understand, and the platforms are easy to use across a range of devices like a cellphone, tablet or computer (Khanom, 2023). Social media gave public relations professionals opportunities to experiment with their work, including A/B testing on platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Metzler & Garcia, 2023).

One of the main barriers to social media adoption was the lack of resources for management and evaluation, absence of resources for maintenance and the culture of their organisation (Ignacio-Criado et al., 2018; Ma, 2016). Meaning there was not enough support in understanding social media, which led to public relations professionals not being provided the tools to use it effectively and the hierarchies and/or traditions within the organisation did not support the use or adoption of social media (Ignacio-Criado et al., 2018; Ma, 2016). Other adoption barriers included the logistics of using social media - if public relations professionals had support from their organisation, did they have the number of team members to properly look after their social media channels including after hours? Or the time to stay up to date with the latest social media trends and updates? You could have all the support for the technicality of social media and the potential uses of said ICT, however social media adoption goes beyond that and a continuous effort to stay in the know is paramount with the everchanging social media platforms (Martens, 2020; Roth-Cohen and Avidar, 2022; Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012).

Other adoption barriers including the ethical considerations of using social media such as misinformation and disinformation (Aïmeur, Amri & Brassard, 2023; Wu, Morstatter, Carley & Lio, 2019; Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). Misinformation can be defined as spreading false or inaccurate information *unintentionally*, where disinformation is spreading false or inaccurate information *intentionally* (Wu et al., 2019). The potential for misinformation and disinformation being spread has grown in percentage over the years and looking at the current state of social media platforms (X – formally Twitter, and Threads), platform management is putting less time into fact checking and ensuring information shared through their platforms are accurate (Gibson, 2025). In 2020, an interviewee that participated in Martens' research responded to the risks of social media saying that "it's horizontal communication, and open to anybody. Anybody can become a commentator. So, your company's position is debated very quickly, especially if you have an issue going on. There is nowhere to hide. You have to have a conversation. That's what it is. It's social." (Martens, 2020, p. 68). Most public relations professionals understand that our job can require us at any time, especially with the prevalence of social media (Martens, 2020).

In research undertaken by Ignacio-Criado et al., (2018), they uncovered some of the potential motivations for sustained adoption and use of social media from a governmental perspective, suggesting that three of the major motivations for social media use within the governmental organisation are (1.) provision of information, (2.) promotion of transparency and (3.) promotion of participation. They suggest the main motivation can be related to relationship building with the government's citizens and various audiences, as well as a growing concern of transparency.

2.1.3 Social media adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand public relations

The initial rise of social media began in the early 2000s (Solis, 2013), aligning with the innovator and early adopter stages of the DOI theory. It wasn't until mid-2011, however, that social networks surpassed the 50% adoption threshold globally, marking the critical mass necessary for social media to become mainstream (Solis, 2013). This shift also coincided with significant events in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as the 2011 Christchurch Earthquakes, which spurred an increase in social media use, particularly to connect people quickly during moments of crisis.

Although social media saw increased usage during crises like the 2011 Christchurch Earthquakes, its full integration into professional communication strategies did not occur until later. Public relations professionals initially viewed social media with scepticism, unsure of its long-term value, which delayed adoption (Michaelidou et al., 2011). It wasn't until the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, however, that the early majority fully embraced social media, as businesses shifted to remote work, necessitating a pivot to digital marketing and communication strategies (Oksa, Kaakinen, Savela, Hakanen & Oksanen, 2021). Statistica's worldwide survey found a 20% increase in social media use during and post-Covid-19 (Alkhawaldeh & Alkayid, 2024; Dixon, 2024) highlighting how businesses and public relations professionals adapted to a predominantly digital landscape. However, even as social media adoption reached a broader audience, its sustained relevance is uncertain. The pandemic accelerated usage, but post-adoption behaviours, such as platform abandonment or shifts in preferences, remain a critical factor in the ongoing evolution of social media (Amoah, Khan, Wood & Knight, 2021).

2.1.4 The Diffusion of Innovation theory and social media

Social media significantly changed public relations professionals' job responsibilities and day-to-day tasks. The channels used to better understand social media were mostly through word-of-mouth and observability. Many public relations professionals stayed in-the-know and up to date with the trends, despite their organisation's criticisms of social media. The adoption by Aotearoa New Zealand's public relations practice took longer than most other western countries, however it did not stop or halt Aotearoa New Zealand from using and adopting social media altogether, as Rogers suggests adoption does not happen all at once but is a gradual process.

- **Relative advantage:** Social media offered the public relations industry real-time communication, two-way engagement, increased reach and visibility of its audiences, was cost-effective and offered organisations a direct way to control their brand because of the reduced dependency on journalists (An, 2024). On top of that, it offered public relations professionals' instant connection and instant results and feedback (An, 2024; Solis, 2013). In the same breath, two-way communication was a concern for public relations professionals, as it meant organisational messages could be responded to, reshaped or resisted in ways public relations professionals could not control (Butler & Selbom, 2002).

It increased reputational risks, meaning one mistyped message or insensitive post could lead to media attention or public backlash (Butler & Selbom, 2002).

- **Compatibility:** Social media aligned well with public relations but also clashed with a lot of the public relations professional values. It supported storytelling and content creation, relationship building and dialogue with stakeholders and created a shift toward digital-first strategies (An, 2024; Martens, 2020). However, increased use of social media in public relations professionals' day-to-day responsibilities meant there was less of a reliance on relations with journalists, editors and broadcasters. It also misaligned with agencies and organisations who had a hierarchical structure or rigid brand protocols, making it harder for the public relations professionals to adopt and implement (Martens, 2020; Morris & Cook, 2024).
- **Complexity:** There was a learning curve to using social media, while setting up accounts and posting was easy, understanding strategic direction, managing reputational risks including misinformation and disinformation, interpreting the new suite of analytics and algorithm is complex (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2019; Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). On top of that, the social media platforms are continuously and rapidly evolving, requiring continuous learning and ultimately led to the creation of jobs including social media advisors and managers (Martens, 2020; Roth-Cohen & Avidar, 2022; Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012). This is where many public relations professionals had to use trial and error teaching to better understand what worked for the audiences, but also for the organisations and those managing their social channels (Martens, 2020; Roth-Cohen & Avidar, 2022; Distaso & Mccorkindale, 2012).
- **Trialability:** Unless public relations professionals' organisations had a policy against social media, there was a low barrier to use and trial it. Free to low-cost access to channels like Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram and many more are free to join and use (An, 2024). This made it easier for public relations professionals to set up and test content strategies with minimal financial risks (Breakenridge, 2025). Additionally, because of the intuitive interfaces, there was little to no need for prior experience to be able to set up social media campaigns (Breakenridge, 2025). Additionally, public relations professionals could start with small-scale campaigns to show their worth (Solis, 2013). Even without support

from the organisation, public relations professionals were able to use social media channels through personal use or side projects (Martens, 2020). As mentioned previously, there was instant feedback loops, results including likes, comments, shares, engagement stats were easy to attain and understand (Solis, 2013).

- **Observability:** Social media's results were significantly observable; likes, shares, follower growth and engagement were all publicly visible (Breakenridge, 2025; Solis, 2013). Successful campaigns were easy to copy or benchmark and analytical tools made social metrics more accessible and easier to understand (Solis, 2013).

2.2 Artificial Intelligence

2.2.0 AI and its global rise

The term 'artificial intelligence' was coined by John McCarthy in the 1950s (Karjian, 2023; Luitse & Denkena, 2021), as well as the beginning of the subtopic natural language processing (NLP) (Johri, Khatri, Al-Taani, Sabharwal, Suvanov & Kumar, 2024). However, the first of the large language models (LLMs), such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology's ELIZA began in 1966 (McDonough, 2024). ELIZA was programmed to respond to health-related questions as a psychotherapist would (Killgrove, 2025) and was recently resurrected for the first time in almost 60 years (Killgrove, 2025). Since ELIZA though, LLMs advanced astronomically thanks to the world wide web that LLMs like ChatGPT were able to be trained on (Zhao, Zhan & Ma, 2024). OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November 2022, and the world buzzed. ChatGPT quickly redefined the standards of AI and chatbots (Marr, 2023). Stories and samples of what this new AI tool could do went viral – and within five days ChatGPT had acquired over one million users (Marr, 2023). After ChatGPT, other search engines and internet sources published their own version like Google's Gemini (originally named Bard) (Pichai & Hassabis, 2023). Microsoft created a LLM that could work across its suite of tools called CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025). Big businesses are seeing the value in LLMs and Generative AI and are finding ways to connect them to their users

AI comes in many forms, resulting in a broad and often generic definition. IBM defines AI as "Technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity and autonomy," (Stryker & Kavlakoglu, 2024, p. 1).

Copeland defines it as “the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings” (Copeland, 2025, p. 1). TechTarget explains it is a “simulation of human intelligence processes by machines, especially computer systems” (Craig, 2024, p. 1), Nasa explains it as “computer systems that can perform complex tasks normally done by human-reasoning, decision making, creating, etc.” (May, 2024, p. 1). There are many types of AI, including computer vision, natural language processing, machine learning and generative AI (AI New Zealand, n.d.). AI New Zealand, a New Zealand-based IT services and consulting group that focused on the education of ethical AI use, describes AI as “one of the most transformative technologies of our time, revoluntionising industries and reshaping our daily lives” (AI New Zealand, n.d., p. 1). Simply put, AI is already present in most aspects of our daily lives (Bewersdorff, Zhai, Roberts & Nerdel, 2023). However, despite the widespread presence, there remains significant misunderstanding and confusion about AI and its development, creating fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation (Bewersdorff et al., 2023; de Saint Laurent, 2018; Leufer, 2020).

AI New Zealand, categorises AI in four major types:

1. **Machine Learning:** Which “focuses on creating systems that can learn and improve from experience without being explicitly programmed”. According to AI New Zealand, the key types of machine learning are:
    a. supervised learning (“learning from labelled data to make predictions on new, unseen data”),
    b. unsupervised learning (“algorithms discover hidden patterns in unlabeled data”)
    c. and reinforcement learning (“trial and error – receiving rewards and/or penalties for their actions”)
2. **Computer Vision:** Which enables computer to get a high level of understanding from images and/or videos (i.e., image classification, object detection and recognition, facial recognition, scene reconstruction)
3. **Natural Language Processing (NLP):** Which “focuses on the interaction between computers and human language”. It includes speech recognition, machine translation, sentiment analysis and text summarisation.

4. **Generative AI:** Which is AI systems that can create new content through text, images, music or code
   (AI New Zealand, n.d., p. 1).

2.2.1 The impact of AI on public relations

While the adoption of AI in public relations is still in its early stages, it is already being integrated into various aspects of the industry (Rodsevich, 2025; Mahler, 2024; Kiely, 2024). It is widely accepted that AI will significantly reshape the public relations industry (Yang, 2024).

Common applications of AI in the public relations field includes:

- Writing news releases, leaflets, reports, strategic plans and more
- Media monitoring and analysis
- Automated content creation
- Predictive analytics and trend forecasting
- Sentiment analysis
- Media list creation
- Chatbots (though more common in marketing)
- Advanced audience targeting
- Crisis management
- Competitor analysis.
  (Salzano and Ashby-King, 2025; Yang, 2024):

AI can also assist in international communications by translating press releases, summarising content, generating content ideas, monitoring trends and media in real-time and preparing timely responses to emerging issues (Salzano & Ashby-King, 2025). Effective use of AI can ultimately reduce costs and time for businesses (Kiely, 2024).

2.2.2 AI integration: Opportunities, challenges and evolving practices

A worldwide survey conducted by Gartner suggests that 80% of professionals expect to employ AI tools by 2026 (Perri, 2023). Agencies and in-house teams are increasingly using AI to support their work (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018). Prowly conducted a survey and report called 'The State of Public Relations Technology' (2024). It found that 67.8% of public relations professionals stated they are already utilising AI in their work including using generative AI to help stimulate ideas and creativity for designing messages. However, in Prowly's report shown below, there was a decrease in usage in idea generation and content creation from 2023 to 2024, with an increase in research, monitoring analysis and reporting. Prowly noted "public relations teams are starting to use AI for data processing and its analytical capabilities, rather than helping out with creative tasks" (Prowly, 2024, p. 40).

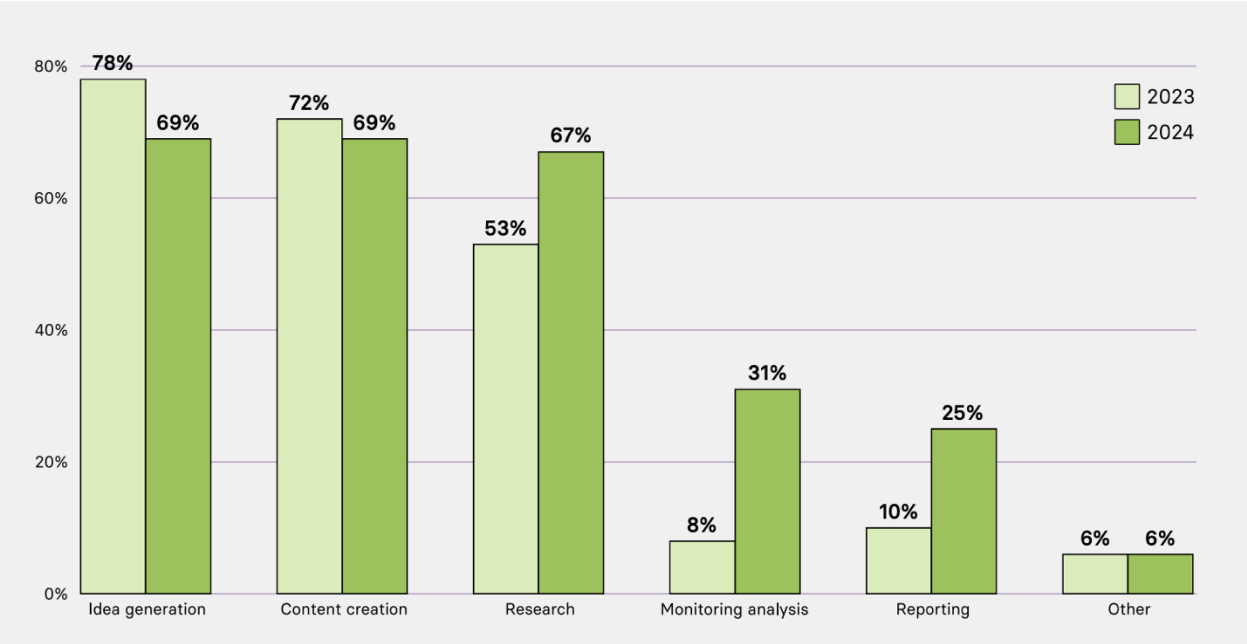

Figure 3, Responses to "What do you use AI-driven tools for at work?", retrieved from The State of Public Relations Technology 2024 by Prowly PR Software

Prowly's 'The State of Public Relations Technology' report (2024) noted a massive increase in fear that AI is "stripping away the human-touch (up sharply from 56% in 2023 to 80% in 2024)" (Prowly, 2024 p. 43). Public relations professionals are also anxious over the uptick in misinformation produced by AI and content overload, raising major concerns on the usage and ethicality of AI (Prowly, 2024). An increase in concerns included the "bias and discrimination",

"lack of transparency", and "cybersecurity and privacy concerns" factors (Prowly, 2024, pp. 43-44). However, as we can see in Figure 4, there was a downward turn for "Unification and lack of creativity", as well as "displacement of human workers", meaning public relations professionals are generally using AI to understand data trends and analytics rather than support getting through creative blocks (Prowly, 2024, p. 42).

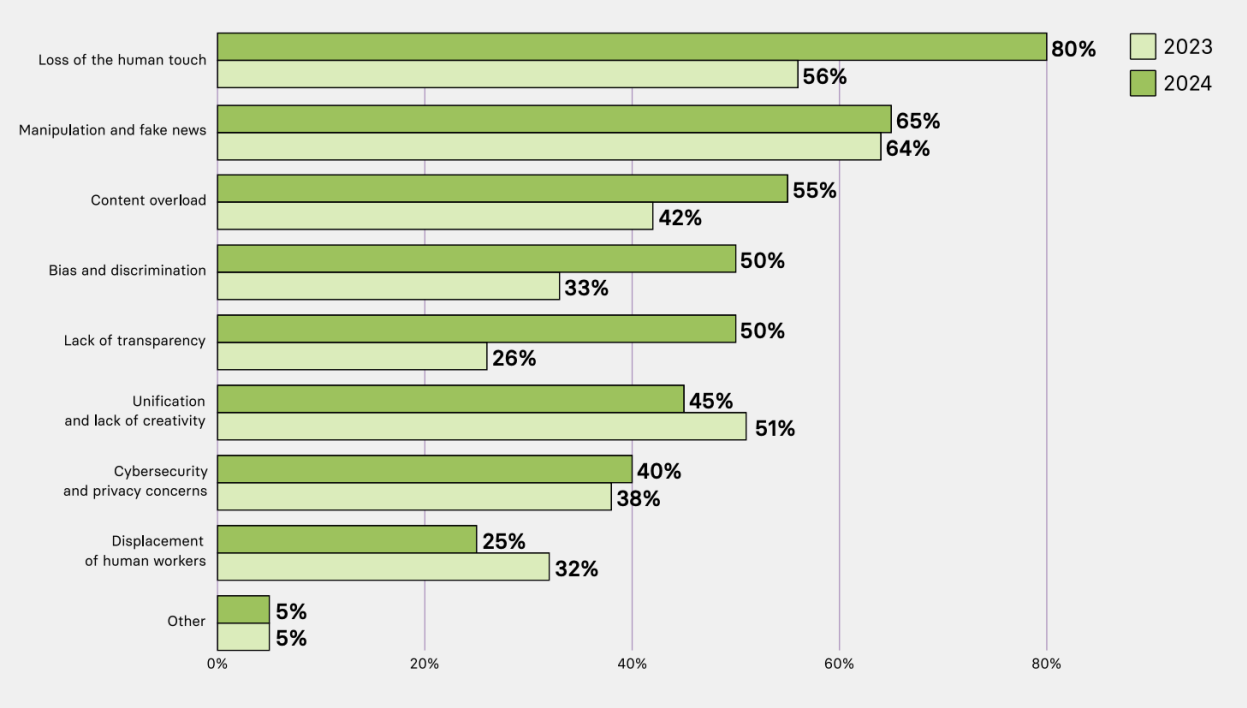

Figure 4, Responses to "What are the biggest threats posed by AI to the Public Relations industry?", retrieved from The State of Public Relations Technology 2024 by Prowly PR Software

Some of AI benefits that the public relations respondents to Prowly's survey (2024) suggested were data-driven perks including enhanced measurement and reporting, and streamlining research (Prowly, 2024). Interestingly, only three factors rose in percentage on the 'biggest perks of introducing AI to the public pelations industry' - "Faster and easier research" (from 59% in 2023, to 61% in 2024), "Better measurement and reporting for public relations activities" (from 28% in 2023 to 40% in 2024) and "Enhanced media monitoring" (from 28% in 2023 to 37% in 2024) (Prowly, 2024, p. 44). All other 'perks' saw a downward trend including "Automation of repetitive tasks, freeing up time for more strategic work" (from 77% in 2023 to 75% in 2024), "Increased efficiency and productivity" (from 61% in 2023 to 55% in 2024), "Improved and automated

content creation" (from 42% in 2023 to 36% in 2024) and "Reduced costs and resources required for public relations activities (from 44% in 2023 to 35% in 2024) (Prowly, 2024, pp. 44-45).

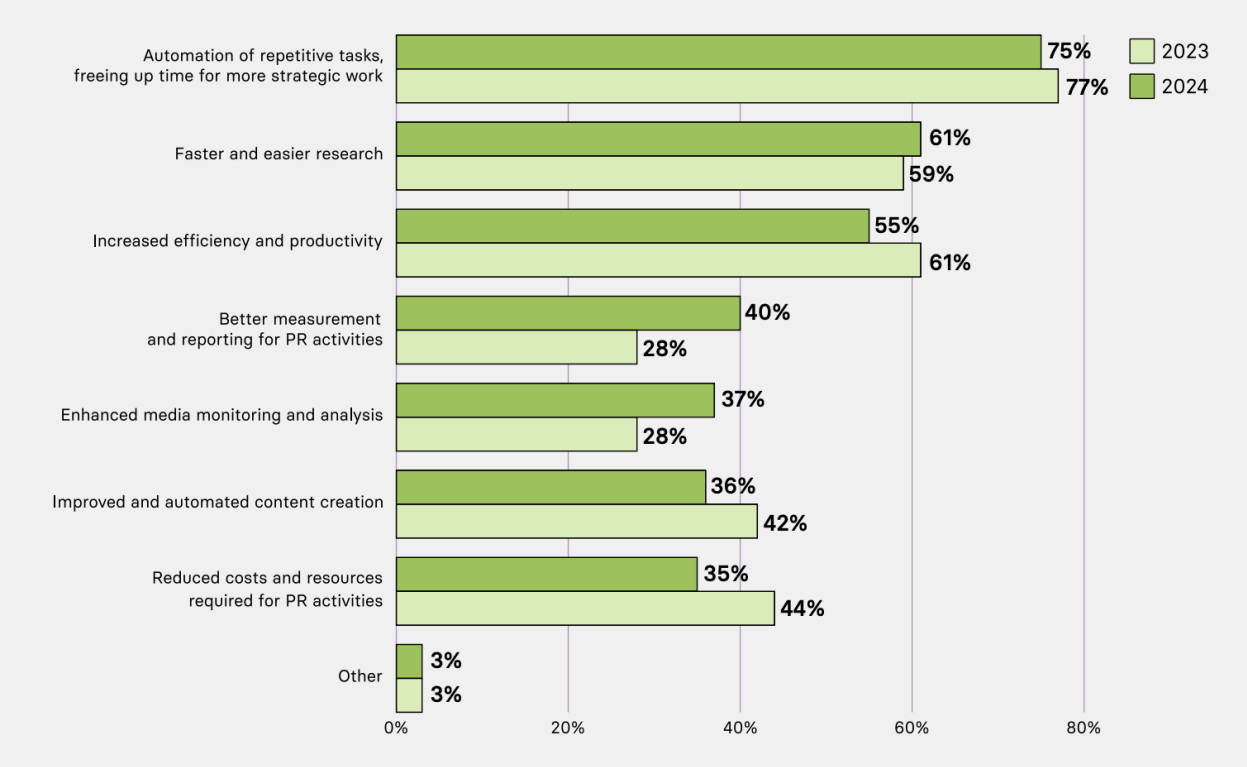

Figure 5, Responses to "What are the biggest perks of introducing AI to the public relations industry?", retrieved from The State of Public Relations Technology 2024 by Prowly PR Software

Finally, the report covered the AI skills needed within the public relations industry. The report suggested that there is a "growing reliance on AI to handle data analysis" (Prowly, 2024, p. 48). According to the Prowly report (2024) public relations professionals are shifting their work and responsibilities to uniquely human skills that AI cannot replicate including critical thinking, adaption to learn new technology quickly, editing and storytelling skills, creative thinking and ideation, emotional intelligence and empathy for building relationships (Prowly, 2024).

In 2023 the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) published on its website a document titled: *The Ethical Use of AI For Public Relations Practitioners: Guidance from the PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS)*signed by a group of experts. The guidelines state that "it is incumbent upon public relations practitioners to know how and when to ethically use

them [AI technologies]" (Staley, Dvorak, Ewing, Hall, Hoeft & Myers, 2023, p. 3). The PRSA even goes into the association's code of ethics to make a clear roadmap for professionals to navigate responsibilities and obligations to the organisations, clients and their stakeholders (Staley et al., 2023). The PRSA guidelines suggest that public relations professionals should uphold high standards of ethics as public relations professionals are "obligated to consider the impact of our actions and decisions on the greater good, as well. Without due diligence, the use of AI tools to improve a campaign's results, for example, may end up doing harm by exposing proprietary or personal data, perpetuating biases or similar unforeseen consequences." (Staley et al., 2023, p. 3).

The concern around ethical conduct was also confirmed in Mccokindale's (2024) 'Generative AI in Organizations' report, as well as research conducted by Bowen (2024) and Zhao et al., in 2020. The PRSA's report suggests that at least five Code of Ethics Provisions relate to the use of generative AI including the free flow of information, competition, disclosure of information, safeguarding confidences and enhancing the profession.

AI New Zealand (2024) also goes into some of the major adoption barriers to AI, such as bias and fairness, privacy and data protection, transparency and explainability, job displacement and autonomous systems and accountability. Finally, the PRSA guidelines covers the opportunities, the risks and/or ethical challenges of using AI and how to mitigate it, including the use of generative AI: acting as a personal editor, providing support in research and generating content (Staley et al., 2023; Mccorkindale, 2024). Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ), does not provide its members with a detailed report similar to the PRSA's Ethical use of AI for Public Relations s.

PRSAs comments on ethical issues in public relations professionals' use of AI raise wider concerns around AI use, particularly the AI impact on the environment. Research on the uses of AI by the public relations industries hardly discusses AI environmental impact. Growing research on the environmental impacts of AI suggests that although AI can help tackle some of the world's biggest environmental emergencies, it has a negative impact. (UN Environment Programme, 2024). The article covers the data centres that house AI servers and their production of electronic waste, its consumption of water, reliance on "critical minerals and rare elements, which are often mined

unsustainably" and the amount of electricity used, adding to the emission of greenhouse gases. On top of this, the UN's report explains that "There is still much we don't know about the environmental impact of AI but some of the data we do have is concerning... we need to make sure the net effect of AI on the planet is positive before we deploy the technology at scale" (UN Environment Programme, 2024). According to researchers at OpenAI, an American-based AI organisation that aims to develop safe AI tools, the amount of energy used to train AI models has doubled every 3-4 months since 2012 (OpenAI, 2018). By 2040, the emissions from the Information and Communications Technology (OCT) industry are expected to reach 14% of the global emissions, particularly data centres and communication networks (Kanungo, 2023).

AI systems are not inherently neutral, their biases often stem from the data these systems have been trained on, the algorithms that process the data and the assumptions made by those who designed them (Holdsworth, 2023). AI uses the large datasets it is trained on, mostly historical or real-time sources, and replicates or even amplifies existing cultural, social or institutional normalities. This is something that public relations professionals need to be aware of if they are using AI in their day-to-day work, as media analysis, content creation, messaging and much more can be skewed based on the information the AI programme was trained on (Holdsworth, 2023). Being aware of these biases is a beginning step to mitigating these concerns, but our own inherent biases may also not pick up on the potential biases AI is producing (Holdsworth, 2023).

With the presence of biases in AI systems, a critical area of concern in the Aotearoa New Zealand context is the protection of Māori Data Sovereignty. As outlined in the public relations section above, understanding and meaningfully engaging with all stakeholders and community members, particularly those indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand is a vital aspect of a public relations practitioner's role (Love & Tilley, 2014; Trenwith, 2014). When using AI into the public relations space, professionals must be aware of the implications for their organisation, industry and the potential consequences for stakeholders and communities (Pinto & Bhadra, 2024). This includes acknowledging how potential biases and data governance decisions may impact tangata whenua, and ensuring that Māori rights, perspectives and values are respected throughout as intended by Te Tiriti o Waitangi The Treaty of Waitangi (Love & Tilley, 2014; Monahan-Riddell, 2020; Trenwith, 2014).

Māori Data Governance is defined as "the principles, structures, accountability mechanisms, legal instruments and policies through which Māori exercise control over Māori data." (Kukutai, Cassim, Clark, Jones, Mika, Morar, Muru-Lanning, Pouwhare, Teague, Huria, Watts & Sterling, 2023, p. 3). As the Government page has put it "Māori representatives hold diverse views on Government use of GenAI (generative AI) systems. There are concerns among Māori, Pacific peoples and other ethnic community groups about possible discrimination resulting from the use of GenAI" (Māori, Pacific Peoples, ethnic communities & GenAI, 2025, p. 1). Data Sovereignty is ensuring that Māori have control over their own data, which includes components such as the collection, ownership, storage and usage of said data (Kirkby-McLeod, 2023; Kukutai et al., 2023). This work is a beginning to address the historical theft and colonialism of indigenous people's cultures and is vital in ensuring the protection of said culture. Professor Te Taka Keegan from the University of Waikato explained that while trialing ChatGPT in te reo Māori, he was surprised how accurate its translations were. This was back at the beginning of 2023 so still innovator-early adopter member (Kirkby-McLeod, 2023). Looking to the future and being a professor in machine learning, he was able to suggest that "sooner or later the language itself could shift from a traditional reo to a ChatGPT version" (Kirkby-McLeod, 2023, p.1) thus, infringing on Māori Data Sovereignty. A need for a Māori trained and owned and controlled at an iwi level would maintain sovereignty and could be used as a tool for New Zealanders (Kirkby-McLeod, 2023).

The dual nature of AI, both simple in use but complex and vast in scope means that its ease of use is both straightforward and challenging. Efforts made to make AI more understandable to the public, acknowledging that while basic concepts can be conveyed, the full breadth of AI's capabilities remains complex (Lacerda-Queiroz, Ferrentini-Sampaio, Lima & Machado-Vieira-Lima, 2022). Lacerda-Querioz et al., (2022) suggests that by demystifying AI through practical activities related to the development of learning machines and through observation, they can provide subjects with skills that contribute to making them "insightful actors in debates and decisions involving the adoption of AI mechanisms." (Lacerda-Querioz et al., 2022, p. 1).

Just like social media, regular training is important for the use of AI tools effectively and efficiently (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Marino, 2024). There are many opportunities to trial AI, from content

generation to audience research and community management (Marino, 2024). Some of the barriers to trialing, as mentioned before, are ethical concerns but also lack of support from management (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Marino, 2024).

2.2.3 Current AI adoption trends in Aotearoa New Zealand public relations

Research has shown that AI is becoming more and more critical for those who are time-bound to their work, needing to send outputs out quickly and effectively (Yang, 2025; Morris & Cook, 2024; Eng, 2025). AI tools support public relations professionals in in-house roles as well in agencies (Morris & Cook, 2024). (Eng, 2025). A recent study produced by Aotearoa New Zealand's Public Service Association (PSA) found that 55 percent of the 900 respondents to their survey used AI in their work (PSA, 2025). Interestingly, the report also found that although many public organisations are using AI, controls and training measures were not in place for its "safe and effective use" (PSA, 2025). In fact, only 12 percent of respondents said their organisation had a policy on the use of AI at work. In PSA's research as well, 94 percent of those who use AI said they do so by choice, and not because it is required in their work responsibilities (PSA, 2025). It's important to note the Aotearoa New Zealand Government has mentioned recently that their first AI strategy will be released over the coming months (due June 2025), which will guide responsible use of AI in the public service to "improve productivity and service delivery" (Palmer, 2025, p. 1). Datacom, an information Technology consultancy, conducted a survey of around 200 business leaders throughout Aotearoa New Zealand in 2024 and were able to produce insights into organisation's adoption of AI. Their research suggested that although Aotearoa New Zealand has the appetite to use AI, the rapid growth and change of it means we cannot successfully move forward without clear guidelines, policies and a clear strategy. Datacom's study found that 48 percent of business leaders were already using AI at this point, however a similar study conducted in Australia suggests that was too slow, with 72 percent of Australian organisation's already using AI (Datacom, 2024). In 2023, 47 percent of business leaders explained that they were excited about AI, 35 percent explained that they did not know much about AI, but were interested in learning more, 17 percent explained they knew about AI but were not interested in learning more and two percent were not interested and did not support AI (Datacom, 2024). The major concerns organisations had with the use of AI was security, safety, ethics and biases (Datacom, 2024) and an astounding 60 percent of respondents explained that they did not feel well educated on the risks

of AI from a security standpoint. The findings from Datacom (2024) were concerning, only 53 percent of those organisations have an AI policy and 47 percent host staff awareness trainings. As Datacom suggests (2024), the foundation for effective use of AI is lacking, especially in areas of audit assurance (13 percent saying they have/completed) and legal guidelines (24 percent have legal guidelines). What was particularly shocking was 91 percent of the organisations did not have targets around the use of AI. This makes the adoption process a lot harder as it becomes difficult to measure the organisation's successes in adopting AI (Datacom, 2024). In the report as well, 82 percent of respondents believe that the government should bring in specific legislation and/or controls around the use of AI in government and public sector organisations.

Another survey conducted by the global accounting agency PwC (short for Price waterhouse Coopers), in 2024 revealed a gap between the intention and adoption of generative AI. Asia-Pacific CEOs understand and anticipate the generative AI will enhance efficiency of their organisation's time (65 percent), Many also understand the need for their employees to acquire new skills in response to AI (76 percent), however only 41 percent of CEOs have not adopted generative AI across their companies in the past 12 months (PwC, 2024). PwC explains that this is because AI changes quickly, the lack of practical understanding on generative AI, it's potential and how it can be used in the organisation itself. Out of the list of countries included in Asia-Pacific territories, Aotearoa New Zealand is the third equal highest adoptee at 39 percent with India, following Australia (63 percent) and Japan (50 percent) (PwC, 2024).

2.2.4 The Diffusion of Innovation theory and AI

According to currently published reports AI has the power to significantly change public relations industry and change the professionals' day-to-day tasks (Berryman, 2025; Pinto & Bhadra, 2024; Yang, 2024). AI's potential to be adopted can be observed through the main elements and characteristics of the DOI theory:

- **Relative advantage**: Public relations professionals can increase their efficiency and productivity with the adoption of AI (AI New Zealand, n.d.; Prowly, 2024; Yang, 2024). It can be used for repetitive tasks including media monitoring, reporting, scheduling or sentiment analysis (Salzano & Ashby-King, 2025; Yang, 2024). It supports a faster

turnaround time, and it can process and synthesize large data sets quickly, making it easier for public relations professionals to read through and understand data analytics. Early adopters are given a competitive edge. Agencies that embrace AI may be seen as more agile and forward-thinking (Ali et al., 2024; Eng, 2025). AI can also help with strategy, offering recommendations for content, timing and how to optimise campaigns (Salzano & Ashby-King, 2025; Yang, 2024). With these relative advantages come risks though, including misinformation, bias, inaccuracy, lack of transparency and environmental concerns (Holdsworth, 2023; UN Environmental Programme, 2024). Misuse or poor implementation can lead to reputational risks and the concern that reliance on AI for writing or analysis may erode human creativity, judgement or strategic input (Humphreys, Koay, Desmond & Mealy, 2024). This is particularly concerning for juniors in the workforce that have not gained enough experience to nurture their gut feelings and strategic lens, also known as 'cognitive offloading' (Elmquist, 2024; Jackson, 2025; Knapp, 2025).

- **Compatibility:** The public relations industry can be extremely data driven, aligning well with AI. Embedded with familiar software, many AI tools can feel like a natural extension to existing workflows (Nowak, 2025; Ohana, Khan & Upadhyay, 2024). As mentioned in the relative advantage, AI can support public relations professionals to meeting time-pressured deadlines. However, the compatibility of AI does have limitations, including ethical concerns around transparency, disclosure, bias and misinformation (Holdsworth, 2023). Among more traditional public relations professionals, there may be a lack of digital literacy or resistance to adopting AI, as it feels incompatible with their current skill set. Finally, a lack of compatibility may come from a misalignment with the organisation and its culture, as well as Aotearoa New Zealand's indigenous culture, following iwi recommendations will be paramount to using te ao Māori insights and te reo Māori in AI (Holdsworth, 2023; Kirkby-McLeod, 2023; Māori, Pacific Peoples, ethnic communities and GenAI, 2025).
- **Complexity:** AI's interface is not inherently complex, however the perception of complexity, especially without proper training or onboarding can dissuade adoption (Yang, 2024). Many AI tools require knowledge of how to accurately write a data input, prompt or understand its algorithmic behaviour (Yang, 2024; Eng, 2025). There is an overload of

tools, making integration complex as there is not a clear understanding of which AI tools are more accurate or ethical to use (Feng & Elzerman, 2025).

- **Trialability:** Many tools are free or have a low-cost fee, they can be considered safe to use in low-stakes scenarios (trialing with your personal life) (Kiely, 2024; Prowly, 2024). However, for privacy and data concerns, public relations professionals and organisations should use AI tools that protect their data, which does come at a cost (Kiely, 2024). AI can be easily adopted into current workflows, beginning with simple tasks like summarising and/or transcribing your meetings, improving the tone of your written copies and public relations professionals can receive real-time feedback, supporting their learning journey (Nowak, 2025; Ohana et al., 2024). AI tools can offer instant results, and this gives public relations professionals the ability to refine and test their prompts and see improvements in real-time (Pinto & Bhadra, 2024). However, it is important to note that while trialing AI tools like ChatGPT, it does not mean public professionals are easily able to figure out the most effective prompt or use for the tool, as with AI there are layers of prompting strategies, ethical considerations and best practice behind usage (Yang, 2024). Trialability may be hindered depending on the organisation's understanding and support of these tools, a lack of organisation permission, training or backing can impact the rate of adoption and trialing (Yang, 2024).
- **Observability:** A major point for observability is peer learning and showcasing, which is how many public relations professionals learn of new trends and tools (Precisely, 2025; Splunk, 2024). Public relations professionals, especially in agencies who have time reports, can easily show how much time was cut-out with the support of AI tools. However, many public relations professionals use AI quietly as they may be going against their teams or organisations stance on AI, making its effectiveness less observable (Berryman, 2023; Claytor, 2024; Cousins, 2024).

2.3 The Diffusion of Innovation theory

Evert Rogers 1962 seminal work on the DOI theory defines "Diffusion" as "the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 2003). It is a type of communication that focuses on new ideas. DOI explains

how, why and at what rate new ideas, technologies or practices spread through a population or social system over time (Rogers, 2003). There are four main elements in the DOI theory (Rogers, 2003), (1) the innovation: what is the new idea, practice or object being introduced? (2) channels: how is the information about the innovation being shared person-to-person, or organisation-to-organisation (media, word-of-mouth, industry associations…) (3) Time: Rogers explains that adoption is not instantaneous, and individuals can deviate from the standard adoption phases. Time can also be explained as the length it takes for an individual to cycle through the innovation-decision process by firstly learning that the innovation exists, forming a thought or attitude on the innovation, choosing to adopt or reject it, using the innovation and finally confirming the decision based on experiences or feedback. Finally, the time element is also understood as the time it took for the innovation to diffuse through the social system, the theory investigates how the channels and social norms have impacted the pace of adoption for the innovation (Rogers, 2003). Finally, the members (4) refer to the group of individuals, organisations or units who are potential adopters. Innovations with strong opinion leaders or social cohesion can see diffusion faster if they adopt early. Alternatively, controlled adoption or conservative systems might resist the innovations longer, drawing out the adoption process. The members of the DOI theory are defined by their rate of adoption within the lifecycle of the innovation and is segmented as: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority and Laggards. The members are segmented so researchers can understand the differences between innovators and early adopters to late majority and laggards. The elements of the DOI theory are inter-connected to each other, both successful and unsuccessful adoption trends will show the necessity for each of the elements (Rogers, 2003). The elements are also closely linked to five main characteristics of innovations:

1. **Relative advantage:** How much better is the innovation compared to what it is replacing? What are the benefits to using this new system?
2. **Compatibility:** Is the innovation meeting the needs of its intended adopters? Can it smoothly integrate with existing values?
3. **Complexity:** How difficult is it to understand?
4. **Trialability:** How easy is it to experiment with? Can users play around with the innovation through trial and error?

5. **Observability:** How visible are the added benefits? Visible success stories drive word-of-mouth and support adoptability.
   (Rogers, 2003, pp. 28-29)

Understanding the five main characteristics to each innovation is crucial, as they are the explaining factors for why some innovations succeed and spread faster than others that are ignored or adopted slowly The characteristics of the DOI theory shape the perceptions of the members and can help predict adoption rates; Rogers explains that these factors explain 49-87% of the variance in adoption rates (Rogers, 2003). These characteristics can also be helpful for the creators of the innovations, helping guide strategy to build better products, communicate the product or idea more effectively, or be able to identify and address potential complications or resistance from the DOI members.

When using the DOI theory, it's also important to note its own potential limitations. Many researchers criticise the DOI theory for its assumptions (Lyytinen & Damsgaard, 2001; Bordenave, 1976; Botha & Atkins, 2005; Goss, 1979; Lundblad, 2003; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis & Davis, 2003), suggesting that it holds a pro-innovation bias. This bias assumes that the adoption of the innovation is positive, desirable and beneficial for all its adopters (Lyytinen & Damsgaard, 2001; Botha & Atkins, 2005). Where not all innovations have this power of positivity, in fact most innovations have their set of specific limitations. So, in some cases, resisting an innovation may be more beneficial decision. Because the DOI theory can hold a pro-innovation bias, it then tends to overlook situations where the innovation fails or creates unforeseen negative consequences (Botha & Atkins, 2005). Additionally, many of the scholars mentioned above argue that the diffusion theory places an emphasis on 'individual blame' on the decision-making process for adopting an innovation. Referring to the way the model often suggests non-adoption and/or slow adoption to the failings of individuals rather than examining broader systemic or structural barriers. An example of late or non-adoption can be affordability or organisational constraints, making it difficult for the individual within that organisation to attend workshops or memberships that would have supported their adoption process (Goss, 1979). Another common critique is the "possibility that people will reject an innovation even if they fully understand it" (Botha & Atkins, 2005, p. 9). Botha and Atkins explain that even though some may see the full potential of the innovation, they

can still decide to not adopt the innovation, something Rogers had not noted in his theory. Additionally, the DOI theory is set up in a way that treats the innovations as stable, static entities, failing to acknowledge that innovations often evolve during the process of adoption based on the users' adaptions, reinterpretations and usage (Botha & Atkins, 2005). Lyytinen and Damsgaard go even further to suggest that the DOI theory uses two modes of explanation: the supply-push and the demand-pull theories. As the names suggest, the supply-push theory infer that specific features of the innovation can be seen as a technological fix for organizsation's supply-chain problems, while the demand-pull theory suggests the innovation is a growing demand for an individual or organisation (Lyytinen & Damsgaard, 2001). However, in Lyytinen and Damsgaard's research, they found that these theories are not a predictor for adoption, with a variance that continuously remained under 40%. What they did find was adoptions could be easier explained through communication or hierarchical strategies (opening the conversation up to the organisation before deciding on adoption) (Lyytinen & Damsgaard, 2001). Many of the criticisms suggest the following things to consider when using the DOI, including learning what the innovation is – understand the intensive features of the technologies, understanding the role of the market and institutional structures that shape the adoption, understanding the differences between each of the members and why they are within specific categories.

With each of these main elements and characteristics, we can look at how public relations professionals perceived social media, make notes of what was seen as opportunities versus limitations in its early life and how those opinions changed or remained the same overtime. This information can help us better understand the current adoption and perception that public relations professionals have on AI. By comparing these innovations, we can begin to better understand the adoption process itself within the public relations industry and highlight opportunities for improvement. The study used the DOI theory to outline the innovation, the channels used to promote the innovation, generally the time it took for public relations professionals to adopt said innovation and who those members are. It also outlines the perceptions of the innovation through the five characteristics outlined by Rogers' model.

Chapter 3: Research

Major question:

- What are the factors that challenge or enable the adoption of new communication technologies by the public relations industry?

Sub questions:

1. What can the public relations industry learn from its experience with the use of social media in public relations practices during the first decade of the millennium?
2. How relevant is the social media experience for the current process of adopting to artificial intelligence?
3. Can the industry identify early adopters that might help public relations professionals deal with new communication technologies?
4. What are the ethical challenges that impact public relations professionals' attitudes towards new technologies? (Comparing ethical challenges involved in the adoption of social media to the ethical challenges presented by artificial intelligence).

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.0 Research design

This study, with granted permission by the University of Waikato Ethics Committee, adopted a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative data (survey questionnaire) to explore the adoption of social media and AI in the public relations industry in Aotearoa New Zealand. The interviews findings helped design the survey questions and enable the study to focus on issues experienced by the public relations industry. This design brought a nuanced understanding of professionals' experiences, attitudes, perceptions and practices, as well as a broader snapshot of trends across the industry.

Grounded in the DOI theory (Rogers, 2003), the research aimed to learn from the historical adoption of social media and its significance for the adoption of the emerging AI technology. The combination of interviews and a survey provided both depth and breadth, enabling the study to capture the lived experiences while also identifying broader patterns.

4.1 Participant recruitment

Interviews

To find answers to my major question and sub questions, I created a small guideline to my research interviews (seen in Appendix E). I reached out to each of the interviewees via email or LinkedIn with a similar message (seen in Appendix B). Each email and LinkedIn message contained the consent form and the participation information sheet outlining their involvement and the research itself.

Once a signed consent form was received, interviews were scheduled. Each interview was laid out to be half an hour-long over Teams. There was a total of eight potential participants that were approached, however only six were available and/or wanted to contribute. The interviewees had at least 14 years of experience, this was necessary in creating an understanding on how the

adoption of social media and the adoption of AI shared similarities and differences. Before each interview I re-confirmed they were comfortable with the recording and storing of information, I also reminded them they had two weeks to contact me if they wanted to rescind any information shared during the interview.

The interviews were guided by a flexible interview schedule designed to explore participants' experiences with, and perceptions of, adopting both social media and AI in the public relations industry. The interview guide (Appendix E) was developed based on key elements of DOI theory, with questions aligned to the concepts such as relative advantage, trialability, complexity, compatibility and observability. The guide was structured into three parts:

- **Warm up and context-setting**: Participants were asked about their current roles and their years of experience.
- **Social media adoption**: Questions explored how social media had been adopted in their (at the time of social media's inception) organisation, what influenced its uptake, challenges or resistances they faced and the impact it had on their professional practice.
- **AI adoption**: Participants were asked about their awareness and use of AI tools, perceived opportunities and threats, organisational attitudes towards AI and what support or guidance was available (if any). Where relevant, comparisons to social media were encouraged.
- **Comparing social media adoption with AI adoption**: Finally, participants were asked to compare the adoption of social media with the current adoption of AI. Could we learn from social media adoption and use that with AI? What did we do well or potential limitations with the adoption of social media that we can bypass in the adoption of AI?

The semi-structured format allowed consistency across interviews while also giving participants space to expand on experiences and raise topics they felt were important. Probing questions were used as needed to clarify responses or encourage elaboration. The tone of the interviews was conversational, but purposeful, aiming to create a comfortable environment for open and honest discussion.

Here is a small description of each of the participants:

- **Participant A**: 25 years of experience in the public relations industry in Aotearoa New Zealand, early career Participant A was a journalist as well, which they account for in their years of experience.
- **Participant B**: 19 years of experience in the public relations industry, a mixture of both in-house and agency work, in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- **Participant C**: 14 years of public relations experience, mainly in agency, in the communications industry in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- **Participant D**: 35 years of experience in an in-house role in the public relations industry in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- **Participant E**: 30+ years of experience in agency and education/training in the public relations industry in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Survey

Following the qualitative interview phase, a nationwide online survey was conducted to complement and extend the insights gathered from public relations professionals for roughly three weeks, from Thursday 1 May to Saturday 24 May 2025. The survey aimed to capture a broader cross-section of experiences, attitudes, and levels of engagement with both social media and AI tools among public relations professionals across Aotearoa New Zealand. The survey was designed using Qualtrics, a secure online platform. It was distributed through multiple professional networks, including industry newsletters (PRINZ, reaching 3,010 public relations professionals), social media platforms (such as LinkedIn, which reached 400+ LinkedIn members) and direct email invitations. The estimate number of public relations professionals that received the invitation to participate in the survey was 3,425. Participation was open to public relations professionals working in Aotearoa New Zealand, with no restriction on level of experience.

The survey was structured in four sections:

- **Social media adoption**: Respondents were asked to reflect on their organisation's early experiences with social media, the perceived benefits and challenges, and the process by which these tools were adopted (or resisted).
- **AI adoption**: This section focused on current awareness and use of AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Grammarly, media monitoring bots), perceived implications for the profession, organisational support, and ethical concerns.
- **Comparative reflection**: Several questions asked participants to compare their experiences with AI adoption to the earlier period of social media integration.
- **Demography**: Including role, sector (public, private, non-profit), location, years of experience, and level of seniority.

A mix of Likert scale questions, multiple-choice items and open-text responses were used. Open-ended responses were especially valuable in revealing personal reflections and emerging tensions that mirrored or diverged from interview themes. In total, 34 completed responses were anonymised and analysed using thematic coding for quantitative entries and basic descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, cross-tabulations) for closed-question data. The survey findings were then compared with interview data to identify points of convergence, divergence, and broader trends across the profession.

Makeup of respondents was as follows:

- In-house, corporate made up 39% of respondents,
- In-house, government/public sector made up 28%,
- In-house, non-profit made up 11%,
- Freelance/independent made up 11%,
- Consultancy/agency made up 6%,
- And 6% selected other (professional training, education and consultancy for public relations and communications).

	Percentage
0-2 years	6%

3-10 years	67%
11-20 years	17%
21+ years	11%

Table 1, Years of experience among survey respondents

Most respondents were mid-level in their career (56%), followed by senior (33%), junior (6%) and executive leadership (e.g., CEO, partner) (6%).

4.2 Data collection

Interviews

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and followed a semi-structured guide (see Appendix E), allowing for consistency across participants while also creating space for individual perspectives and elaboration. Interviews lasted a maximum of 30 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed automatically and checked for accuracy.

Survey

The online survey included both closed and open-ended questions (see Appendix F). It aimed to explore attitudes, perceived challenges and levels of adoption related to both social media and AI, comparing the respondent's organisation's attitudes with the respondent's own attitudes.

4.3 Data analysis

Interviews

Interview data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2008). Braun & Clarke (2008) argue that thematic analysis offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data. Transcripts were read multiple times and coded inductively to identify key patterns and themes. These were then refined and organised around the core components of the DOI theory (e.g., relative advantage, trialability, complexity, compatibility and observability).

Surveys

Survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics (for quantitative questions) and thematic categorisation for open-ended responses. This allowed for a comparison between qualitative insights and broader survey patterns.

4.4 Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee (Appendix A). All interview participants were provided with a participation information sheet (Appendix C) and consent form (Appendix D) prior to taking part. Interview and survey participants could withdraw at any time, and all data was stored securely. Survey participation was anonymous.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.0 Interview findings

The interview findings are based on the participants verbal language, general tone and sentiment and body language perceived by the researcher over the Teams video calls. Each of the participants' videos were on throughout the whole interview.

Interviewee attitudes towards social media and AI

- **Participant A**: 25 years of experience, in journalism and in-house roles. Initial attitude of social media was supportive; organisation's initial attitude was opposed. Initial attitude of AI was supportive, however after attending workshops and online tutorials had cut back on usage and is very intentional when and where to use any AI tools. Current organisation is opposed to the use of AI.
- **Participant B**: 19 years of experience, both in-house and agency roles. Initial attitude to social media was passive, only used it when necessary to communicate with friends. Organisation's attitude and Participant B's colleagues were more supportive of its use. Initial attitude of AI was supportive, especially because they worked in a fast-paced environment (agency). However, after moving to an in-house role, Participant B cut back on AI usage and is now unfamiliar with most of its abilities. Organisation is neither strongly supportive nor opposed to AI usage.
- **Participant C**: 14 years of experience, all agency roles. Initial attitude towards social media was highly supportive. Their organisation was also highly supportive of its adoption and usage and even prided itself on its ability to quickly use it to drive powerful results (agency). Participant C's initial attitude towards AI was like their attitude towards social media, highly supportive. Now head of agency, Participant C prides their team and work on their effective use and implementation of AI. They have created a policy for its use and distributed it to their clients for review.
- **Participant D**: 35 years of experience, all in-house roles. Participant D was supportive of social media and so was their organisation. Participant D was also able to use members

from their organisation to better understand social media and leverage it to their advantage. Participant D's initial response to AI was opposed, however within a year their attitude switched to supportive and figuring out how to use it with their team effectively.

- **Participant E**: 30+ years of experience, agency and educational training. Participant E was an innovator of both social media and AI. They are highly knowledgeable in both areas and trained many public relations professionals on how to use both effectively. In both social media adoption and AI adoption, Participant E was mainly a freelancer. They supported other organisations in their adoption of both innovations and building quality policies.

Social media adoption

- Adoption of social media was often led by the practitioner, rather than the organisation.
    - Two of the five participants noted organisational resistance, however the participant or the participant's team pushed back on the organisation which led to adoption.
    - Of those participants whose organisations were supportive of social media adoption, the practitioner still tested the boundaries through trial and error learnings rather than organisation and/or industry workshops.
- Trial and error learning dominated social media adoption.
    - In early adoption of social media, mistakes were common. Each participant used those as learning opportunities.
    - Policy development was a result of trial and error efforts, from the processes for junior staff access to social media accounts, blurred work-life boundaries and unclear content rules.
- Crisis events accelerated the adoption of social media.
    - Events like the 2011 Christchurch Earthquakes made the need for real-time, clear communication. Many of the participants noted the Christchurch Earthquakes as a turning point in recognising the full width of social media's value.
- Public relations moved from one-way to two-way communication.

    - Four out of five of the participants noted loss of control of the message as a significant factor in a slower social media adoption.
    - However, the move from one-way to two-way communication gave public relations professionals more control of community engagement and visibility.
- Career opportunities for professionals who adopt early with consideration of the ICT.
    - Participants C and E understood social media early and used it effectively, both leading the public relations field of social media communication work.
- Public relations professionals shared similar ethical considerations.
    - Shared concerns among the public relations participants were:
        - privacy,
        - reputation,
        - transparency and
        - loss of message control.
    - These concerns have persisted since adoption, meaning participants have to continuously stay up to date on their knowledge of platforms.

AI adoption

- AI adoption is inconsistent and still in early stages across the industry.
    - Two of the five participants use AI regularly, three participants use it occasionally or selectively for ethical reasons (Participant A and B) and/or lack of depth in knowledge (Participant D).
- Understanding and education are key enablers to AI adoption.
    - Professionals who understand how AI works (especially A, B and E) are more thoughtful and confident users.
    - As mentioned above, those who use AI occasionally lack training.
- Policy gaps and fear-based reaction are slowing adoption.
    - Only one organisation (a small consultancy) had a finalised AI policy, developed collaboratively and shared with clients.

    - Each of the participants called for public relations professionals to be involved in AI policy creation alongside representatives from all other departments including IT, legal, human resources, etc.
    - One organisation banned AI entirely after a senior leader shared confidential information into a non-secure large language model (Chat-GPT).
- Consultancies and agencies are leading early adoption.
    - Driven by productivity and efficiency pressures, consultancies and agencies are more proactive in exploring and adopting AI tools and technologies.
    - This was expressed with Participants B and C. Participant B who had recently moved from agency to an in-house role noted using AI tools regularly in their agency work, but selectively in their in-house role due to time pressures. Participant C noted how effective and selective use of AI that builds on existing skills supported task-efficiency.
- Ethical and environmental concerns are emerging, but not mainstream.
    - Shared concerns included:
        - misuse,
        - data privacy and
        - transparency.
    - Only one participant noted its environmental impact.

Comparisons between social media and AI adoption

The interviews revealed several key <u>similarities</u> between the social media and AI adoption experiences:

- Learning style and adoption process
    - Learning by trial and error and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing were critical to adopting both technologies.
    - Formal training opportunities were scarce or underutilised during the early stages of both adoptions.
    - Participants emphasised practical experimentation as crucial points for understanding the innovations.

- Organisational influence and policy development
    - Initial organisational resistance was common, with early adopters often needing to prove the value of new technologies through action and results.
    - Early policy development often lacked clarity and evolved over time based on trial and error experiences.
    - Policy development was eventually seen as crucial, both to protect employees and to create frameworks for responsible, sustainable use of the technology.
- Adoption curve and user roles
    - Consultancy and agency participants adopted both innovations quicker than those in public sector roles.
- Ethical concerns
    - In both cases, ethical concerns quickly became prominent, including worries about message control, privacy, misinformation, work-life balance and, more recently with AI, environmental sustainability (understanding how much energy is used when prompting large language models, etc.).
    - Participants showed a preference for responsible, informed use over blind adoption.
- Innovations were most appreciated and utilised when urgency and efficiency were required.
    - Christchurch Earthquakes, Covid-19, in time-bound work (most specifically in agency work).
- Perceptions of necessity versus voluntary use
    - Of those who use social media and AI in their work, participants saw social media and AI as tools that enhance the public relations industry, rather than replacing traditional public relations practices.
    - Early adopters and leaders in both adoption phases explained that the ethical use of social media and AI are necessary to integrate in successful public relations work.
    - Participants agreed that both innovations could be used selectively depending on role and context.

Some of the major <u>differences</u> included:

- Learning style and adoption process:

    - Social media adoption was more forgiving, humour was sprinkled into the conversation. Professionals and organisations saw social media as unprofessional in the beginning stages of adoption, as explained by Participant B. Where AI learning and adoption seemed to be taken more seriously and has been framed with more fear and uncertainty, especially regarding privacy and data. Each of the participants appeared more serious in the AI adoption conversation (arms crossed, less smiling).
    - AI adoption errors had more serious consequences (data breaches, environmental concerns), which both led to stricter organisation backlash.
    - AI adoption saw more proactive restriction and risk-averse behaviour (blocking tools).
- Organisational influence and policy development
    - Social media policies evolved from practical issues like work-life balance and comment moderation, while AI policies are suggested to focus on data security, potential technical setbacks and ethical risks.
    - Social media policies also emerged reactively after early missteps, where AI policies are absent from all but one participant's organisation.
    - Social media use, even without policy, continued and expanded, where AI usage was sometimes entirely banned after a single mistake.
- Adoption curve and user roles
    - Social media had more universal appeal, even late adopters found ways to use it (passively by monitoring what others were saying about their organisation and/or client etc.).
    - AI still sees hesitation even from some early adopters, due to its complexity, uncertainty and ethical implications.
    - Participant B was passive in social media adoption but became more proactive with AI (at least initially), reflecting a shift in how professional tools are and have been perceived as well as potential hindsight/experience of the practitioner.
- Ethical concerns

    - Social media ethics focused more on tone, timing and judgement in communication, where AI ethics focused on technical risks like data misuse, environmental impact and over-reliance.
- Perceptions of necessity versus voluntary use
    - Social media has become more ingrained and expected in public relations practices over time, even if once considered optional, where AI is still largely viewed as optional, with more resistance and limited mainstream integration.

One interviewee summed up the adoption of social media and AI well: “The difference [between the adoption of social media and AI] is that with social media, people could pick and choose whether they used it or not… but with AI, my life may be affected by AI, regardless of whether I’m using it or not. And that’s the difficulty, we had the digital divide emerge with the advent of social media, but now we have got the digital chasm.” Ultimately, the experiences of adopting social media provide important lessons for today's AI integration process: the importance of proactive learning, responsible experimentation, strong ethical frameworks and securing a place for public relations voices in company policy discussions.

5.1 Survey findings

The survey findings are based on the participants written language. There were 24 total respondents, with ranging years of experience and roles (agency, in-house, freelance).

Social media adoption

- Support and hesitancy among employees and employers.
    - Respondents were generally far more supportive (88% of respondents indicating ‘supportive’ or ‘highly supportive’) than their employers (62.5% of respondents indicating their employers as ‘supportive’ or ‘highly supportive’) in adopting social media, though many organisations eventually followed their lead.
- Trial and error was the primary learning method.
    - 86% of the respondents learned to use social media through trial and error, other learning methods included:

        - colleagues/word-of-mouth (38%)
        - university study (33%)
        - workshops/training or online tutorials (19%)
        - other, e.g., volunteer or personal use (10%).
- Cautiousness coexisted with openness to use.
    - 66% said they and their employers were cautious of social media use, despite this 77% of respondents said their employers were supportive to highly supportive of experimenting with social media.
- Public relations professionals played an active role in pushing social media adoption, despite organisational resistance.
    - 88% openly experimented with social media, even those working for their self-reported cautious organisations (66%).
    - Of those with resistant organisations:
        - 29% actively advocated for social media use,
        - 14% adopted it anyway,
        - 43% took a passive role to social media adoption,
        - 14% indicated they were both advocates and facilitators of change.
- Key risks were cultural and practical
    - Early barriers were less about the technological aspects of social media, but the organisational discomfort with transparency and decentralised communication.
    - Respondents were concerned over risks such as:
        - Public miscommunication and/or sharing inaccuracies
        - Fear of informal dialogue with stakeholders
        - Difficulty maintaining brand voice with multiple users
        - Constantly evolving algorithms that had the power to make work obsolete.
- Social media use became normalised across key public relations functions
    - Despite original pushback and resistance, social media shifted into a mainstream practice within public relations:
        - 75% used social media regularly in the work,
        - 45% used it for media relations and publicity,

        - 55% used it for research, ideas and consultation,
        - 50% used it for stakeholder communications/dialogue.
- Public relations professionals are change agents
    - 66% participants said they had to introduce social media to their organisation themselves, or influence in the adoption of social media, where around 33% took a 'passive role' and waited for others to initiate adoption.

AI adoption

- High level of support for AI adoption, but concerns remain
    - 68.18% of respondents' and 73.9% of employers' initial attitudes in adopting AI were supportive to highly supportive.
    - However, there is a strong level of caution (73.68% of organisations being 'cautious' to 'highly cautious' and respondents averaging 68.42%). Respondents and their employers were particularly concerned around misinformation, environmental impact and control of information.
        - "Social media showed us the power of misinformation, AI (without legislation/guidelines/policies by the government and organisations) will do the same but at a much higher rate. It will make our jobs much more pointed to fact checking and less on the stories." – direct quote from a respondent.
        - "I'm concern about AI's impact on the spread of fake news and misinformation" (88.8% agreed or strongly agreed)
        - "I'm concerned about AI's impact on the environment" (77.7% agreed or strongly agreed)
        - "I'm concerned about AI's impact on the ethical practice of public relations (e.g., lack of transparency)" (88.8% agreed or strongly agreed)
- AI learning is mirroring social media, with a trial and error approach dominating
    - Just like social media, professionals are teaching themselves through trial and error and through discussions with colleagues.
- Employers and public relations teams are mostly in sync when it comes to adopting AI tools in the public relations work, but not in avoidance.

    - 59% of respondents explained the employers and organisation managers were driving the use of AI in their organisation, and 29% answered their employers and their public relations team were on the same page in an effort to adopt AI tools for public relations work,
    - None of the respondents believed their organisation and public relations team were not on the same page in their decision to avoid the use of AI for public relations work.
- AI is saving time
    - 85.7% agree to strongly agree that AI is a time-saver, with 57.1% agreeing to strongly agreeing to using AI for research, ideas and consultation. 23.8% of participants agree to strongly agree to using AI in stakeholder communication.
- Policy creation is limited
    - A high percentage of respondents are not involved in the development of AI policy for their employing organisation and/or clients (82%). For the 18% that are involved in the development of their organisation's AI policy, these were some of the responses to the biggest challenges in developing said policy:
        i. "The biggest challenge is to get everyone on board and understanding the unknown essentially. AI is moving at such a rapid pace that the policy is likely going to have to be adjusted often."
        ii. "Cautious approach – took too long."
        iii. "Varies from organisation to organisation, great deal of reluctance and fear, trying to control rather than enable, but gradually open to discussion."
- Leadership often lags staff knowledge
    - "I believe this should be a responsibility of managers as part of normal professional development and training. However, I have found that my managers are less knowledgeable than I am (as an intermediate-level practitioner) and look to me for guidance on adoption of technologies." – direct quote from a participant.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

AI saves Public Relations (PR) practitioners time	38.8%	44.4%	11.1%	5.5%	0%
The use of AI for writing PR texts requires more time for verifying data	27.7%	38.8%	27.7%	0%	5.5%
AI makes PR practitioners' writing skills redundant and risks PR jobs	16.6%	22.2%	16.6%	22.2%	22.2%
Employers of PR practitioners should provide training in the use of AI	55.5%	38.8%	5.5%	0%	0%
PR associations have major responsibility for supporting PR practitioners in adopting to new technologies	66.6%	22.2%	11.1%	0%	0%
I'm concerned about AI's impact on the spread of fake news and misinformation	72.2%	16.6%	11.1%	0%	0%
I'm concerned about AI's impact on the environment	72.2%	5.5%	11.1%	11.1%	0%
I'm concerned about AI's impact on the ethical practice of PR (e.g., lack of transparency)	61.1%	27.7%	11.1%	0%	0%

I'm concerned about the loss of control over AI tools	55.5%	5.5%	22.2%	16.6%	0%
AI is destabilising democratic systems	22.2%	22.2%	44.4%	0%	11.1%
The marketing industry is more advanced in the use of AI, PR should catch up	5.5%	22.2%	55.5%	5.5%	11.1%
Currently, the industry relies on less experienced juniors for AI jobs	11.1%	50%	27.7%	5.5%	5.5%
AI is changing work rapidly, faster than the social media change	38.8%	44.4%	11.1%	5.5%	0%
PR professionals that do not use AI intensively will not survive in the profession within the next 2 years	5.5%	11.1%	33.3%	38.8%	11.1%

Table 2, 24 PR professionals responses to the survey's Likert scale questions

Comparisons between social media and AI adoption

This section has pulled responses, including direct quotes and written responses, from open-ended questions.

- Trial and error learning is common
    - "It's [AI] similar to social media, in that you need to test and just give things a try – they might not all work/be successful, but you can't ignore it."

    - "Adoption does not equal mastery. Just using a tool isn't enough. Success comes from understanding and integrating AI strategically."
- Human oversight and authenticity are still valued
    - Social media: Concerns were raised on maintaining authenticity and tone when posting on behalf of organisations.
    - AI: Respondents noted that AI content still needs human editing for tone and sincerity.
        - "Authenticity still wins. Human tone and cultural nuance still matter. AI content must be edited to feel sincere and genuine."
        - "Speed = Risk. AI boosts speed but can drive mistakes. Human oversight is essential."
- Concerns about speed and risk
    - Social media: Early adopters warned that speed of work increased pressure and risked miscommunication.
        - Many noted 'speed' in terms of after-hours work and needing to be 'ready' and 'on' 24/7.
    - AI: Speed of content creation is seen as risky as can lead to misinformation or factual errors.
- Need for policies and strategic alignment
    - Social media: Participants highlighted the need for clear boundaries and alignment on their organisations' values and public voice.
        - "Identifying and maintaining a corporate voice at a time when organisational accounts were accessed and utilised by a number of staff (basically everyone at the organisation who was interested in helping the organisation run social media)"
    - AI: Respondents noted a lack of robust AI policies and called for alignment with organisational values, they also noted the need for an industry-set of guidelines to using AI.
        - 83.3% agree to strongly agree that employers should provide training in the use of AI,

        - 75% agree to strongly agree that public relations associations have major responsibility for supporting professionals in adapting to new technologies
- Professional bodies and managers were expected to guide adoption
    - Social media: 66% complemented their 'trial and error approach' with workshops and facilitations from professional bodies including universities and public relations associations.
    - AI: 94.3% expect managers to lead training, 83.2% expect public relations associations to support and guide best practice.
        - "The profession doesn't have a 'process' for adoption - it is notoriously bad at doing so. Tertiary establishments offering degrees are mostly way behind the times even on social media and professional associations play catch up. Nearest process is the Global Capability Framework and where that has been adopted by professional associations, they generally have some provision but it is still very hit and miss. It is a key issue that needs to be addressed."

Grouping by years of experience

Two years of experience or less, 2 respondents

- Because they were not yet in the workforce during the initial adoption of social media in public relations, they selected "not applicable" in response to the question, "Were you involved in the adoption of social media for public relations tasks about two decades ago (e.g., Bebo, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)?" As a result, no data was collected regarding their initial attitude or their organisation's stance on social media adoption at that time.
- However, like the majority of respondents, they reported learning how to use social media for public relations tasks through trial and error, word of mouth from colleagues, and online tutorials. They agreed to strongly agreed with using social media regularly for public relations tasks including media relations and publicity and research, ideas and consultation. They both disagreed to using social media for dialogues with the organisations' stakeholders.
- Interestingly, these two respondents were very opposite in their initial attitudes on AI apart from caution:

    - Participant 1 was highly opposed (rating a 9 out of 10, Participant 2 rated their opposition a 3 out of 10), where Participant 2 was supportive (rating a 7 out of 10, Participant 1 marked a 1 out of 10) of using AI in public relations tasks.
    - Both indicated a 2 out of 10 on the cautious scale.
    - Participant 1 marked a 3 out of 10 on openness to experimenting, where Participant 2 marked an 8 out of 10.
    - Participant 1 agreed to using AI in developing strategic plans, and disagreed to strongly disagreed to using AI:
        - regularly,
        - for writing and media release,
        - for research, ideas and consultation
        - dialogues with the organisation's stakeholder
            - Participant 2 agreed to strongly agreed with the using AI for the public relations tasks above.
- Their key areas of concerns were the environmental impact, the Aotearoa New Zealand public relations industry lagging behind other industries like marketing, and it changing the public relations landscape – faster than social media.

Respondents with 3-10 years of experience (junior to senior level), 12 respondents

- Interestingly, a couple of respondents answered affirmatively to the question, "Were you involved in the adoption of social media for public relations tasks about two decades ago (e.g., Bebo, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)?" despite having no more than ten years of professional experience, potentially due to slow uptake or the ongoing evolution of social media. Both of their organisations were described as supportive yet cautious toward social media adoption. One respondent noted that their organisation initially viewed social media as a significant distraction that consumed staff time. Nevertheless, both respondents themselves expressed supportive attitudes and a willingness to experiment with social media during its early adoption phase.
- All but one respondent reported learning how to use social media through trial and error. The sole exception noted that they had not used social media in their public relations work.

- Notably, 10 out of the 12 respondents in this group either agreed or strongly agreed that they use social media regularly for public relations purposes.
- A majority in this group expressed supportive or highly supportive attitudes toward the use of AI in public relations tasks, with an average support rating of 6.3 out of 10 (where 10 indicates highly supportive). This is closely aligned with their organisations' initial attitudes toward AI, which averaged slightly higher at 6.4 out of 10.
- However, respondents in this group demonstrated slightly more opposition (average 4.91 out of 10), greater caution (6.92 out of 10), and a stronger openness to experimentation with AI (7.27 out of 10) compared to their organisations, whose respective averages were 3.41 (opposition), 6.07 (caution), and 6.84 (openness to experimentation).
- All but one in this group are discussing the uses of AI for public relations tasks with their employing organisations, with 63.63% explaining the employers and organisation managers are driving the use of AI in the organisation and 36.36% stating the employers and public relations team are on the same page in their effort to adopt AI tools for the public relations work.
- Only one practitioner in this group reported involvement in developing their organisation's AI policy, underscoring that broad-based buy-in and shared understanding of AI's implications remain significant challenges.

Members of the 3–10 years' experience cohort generally mirrored the broader sample in their levels of agreement or disagreement with statements about AI's risks and opportunities. However, three concerns stood out as significantly higher in this mid-career group:

- **Destabilisation of democratic systems**: On the statement regarding AI's potential to destabilise democratic systems; 33% of this group agreed or strongly agreed, 58.3% neither agreed nor disagreed and 8.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In contrast, the wider sample was evenly split: 44% agreed or strongly agreed, 44% neither agreed nor disagreed and 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- **Fake news and misinformation**: While 88.8% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were concerned about AI's role in spreading fake news and

misinformation, this concern was unanimous (100%) among the 3–10 years' experience group.

- **Ethical practice in public relations:** Similarly, 100% of mid-career public relations professionals agreed or strongly agreed that AI poses challenges to the ethical practice of public relations, compared to 88.8% agreement in the overall sample.

11-20 years of experience, 4 respondents

Several noteworthy themes emerged from the 11–20 years of experience group:

- Of the four respondents in this group, three rated their organisation's openness to experimenting with social media as 9 out of 10, and the fourth as 3. This was mirrored in their organisation's openness to experimenting with AI (averaging 8 out of 10).
- Despite this openness to social media, their organisations expressed concerns about the reputational risks and the practical challenges of maintaining consistent 24/7 updates.
- Three out of the four respondents were highly open to experimenting with social media (two rating 10 out of 10, the third a 7 out of 10), while the fourth expressed hesitance, citing potential inaccuracies and uncertainty around responses.
- Respondents' personal attitudes toward AI were more cautious: supportiveness scores were 4, 0, 7 and 7 (average 4.5), and openness to experimentation rated at 6, 0, 7 and 10 (average 5.75).
- When asked about risks associated with AI, all four strongly agreed that AI presents serious environmental concerns, higher than the 77.7 percent agreement rate among the overall sample.
- They also unanimously and strongly agreed that AI is changing the nature of work more rapidly than social media.
- **None of the four participants reported being involved in the development of their organisation's and/or client's AI policies.**

21+ years of experience, 2 respondents

- Both respondents were highly supportive of using social media in public relations, each rating their support as 10 out of 10.

- While one respondent's organisation had also been highly supportive of social media adoption (10 out of 10), the other reported their organisation had initially been highly opposed (also marked as 10, indicating strong opposition).
- Despite their organisation's attitudes over the use of social media, both respondents personally advocated for the organisation to adopt. A similar pattern emerged in relation to AI: each respondent's organisation mirrored its earlier stance on social media adoption, with one being highly supportive (10 out of 10) and the other highly opposed (marked 9). In contrast, both respondents themselves were highly supportive of AI adoption (10s) and very open to experimenting with it (also 10s).
- Their views aligned closely across most of the survey; however, they differed significantly on a few statements, most significantly on the issue of AI destabilising democratic systems, again, one strongly agreed and the other strongly disagreed.

5.2 Comparisons between interview and survey responses

General attitudes towards social media and AI adoption

- Both the interview and survey data reveal a growing recognition of AI as a powerful force in the public relations industry, though each group approaches it with slightly different emphasis.
- Interview participants, all senior to executive public relations professionals, expressed cautious optimism on AI, acknowledging its value in improving efficiency, particularly for tasks like content drafting, research and monitoring. However, they also voiced concerns around ethics, misinformation and losing creative control. Their reflections often referenced prior disruptions caused by social media and highlighted the importance of staying ahead of the curve while remaining critically aware of the implications.
- Survey respondents, on the other hand, were generally supportive of AI experimentation, particularly among mid-career professionals (3-10 years' experience).

Perceived ethical challenges

- Ethical concerns emerged as a consistent theme across both data sets. The interviewees highlighted the risks of AI-driven misinformation, the lack of transparency around how tools operate and the challenges of ensuring accountability when automation is involved.
- One participant noted AI could undermine trust if not handled carefully, especially in media relations and stakeholder communications.
- The survey responses supported this concern: 88.8% of participants reported anxiety about AI's role in the spread of misinformation, indicating that these ethical considerations are widely shared across experience levels. However, the depth of discussion in the interviews added further layers, such as concerns about AI reinforcing biases, contributing to environmental harm or displacing ethical judgement. Together, these findings indicate that while ethical anxiety is high across the board, senior professionals are particularly attuned to the long-term and systemic implications of AI use.

Social media and AI adoption journeys

- A notable point of difference between AI and social media adoption lies in the visibility of each technology. Interview participants consistently described social media as a public-facing innovation that disrupted communication norms in a highly visible manner. It required a shift in voice, tone and audience engagement, and was subject to intense public scrutiny. AI was characterised as a more "invisible" tool, operating quietly in the background to generate drafts, analyse data or manage workflows. This distinction was reflected in the survey as well: while many respondents noted that social media adoption initially faced scepticism from their employers, they also described AI as less disruptive in terms of outward communications, yet harder to assess because of its hidden nature.
- Interviews brought out this contrast more vividly, suggesting that AI's lack of public visibility may delay its integration in organisations, as its strengths are less recognisable for organisations than social media's immediate interactions with publics.

Role of experience in adoption

The influence of professional experience emerged as a critical factor shaping how new technologies are perceived and adopted:

- The mid-career professionals appear to be simultaneously enthusiastic and cautious, willing to test AI tools but mindful of their limitations and risks, while junior professionals were significantly less cautious on using AI than any other experience group.
- Professionals with more than 11 years of experience in the survey were more hesitant, mirroring some of the caution found in the interviews.

Policy involvement and organisational support

- Across both interviews and survey data, a gap emerged between practitioner enthusiasm for AI experimentation and the level of formal policy development or organisational guidance around its use.
- Interviewees noted that while AI tools are increasingly present in daily workflows, few organisations have developed comprehensive policies or frameworks for responsible use. Several participants expressed concern that public relations are "behind" other industries in setting boundaries or leading ethical conversations. This was reinforced in the survey, where only a small percentage of respondents reported being involved in their organisation's AI policy development. Not enough information was supplied to better understand which organisations were more likely to write and/or involve public relations professionals in the development of their organisation's AI policy.
- While both groups acknowledged the importance of guidelines and training, there was a sense that the public relations industry lacks a proactive strategy for navigating this change.

Job security and evolving skill sets

- When asked about the implications of AI for job security and professional skills, both interview and survey responses revealed a nuanced blend of concern and confidence.
    - Interview participants tended to downplay fears of job loss, instead positioning AI as a complementary tool that can enhance, rather than replace human capabilities such as relationship-building, ethical judgement and creativity. While they acknowledged that certain entry-level tasks may become automated, they suggested

this could elevate the profession by enabling more focus on strategic thinking and advisory roles.

- Survey responses, however, were more divided. Some respondents expressed anxiety that AI may devalue core skills like writing or reduce public relations professionals to editors of machine-generated content, while others saw opportunities to upskill and reshape their professional value.

5.3 Gaps uncovered

1. Across both historical and current adoption patterns, one consistent issue is the lack of industry infrastructure to support public relations professionals during technological transitions. While social media was eventually supported by training, guidelines and professional communities of practice, these supports only emerged after much trial-and-error. A similar gap currently exists currently with AI and public relations professionals believe that trial and error will not suffice in learning AI and mostly likely, future technological advances.
2. While there is growing academic and industry discourse on AI, much of it is speculative or focused on the extremes, either overly optimistic or pessimistic. Few studies appear to explore the lived experiences, practical concerns and everyday realities of public relations professionals currently experimenting with AI tools. This represents a critical gap in both scholarly research and professional development, as the discipline looks to integrate new technologies without compromising its values or effectiveness.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This study set out to explore the factors that challenge or enable the adoption of new communication technologies by Aotearoa New Zealand's public relations industry. More specifically, it investigates the adoption of social media and AI technologies, identifying associated ethical issues.

The results indicate that the adoption of social media blurred the boundaries between personal and professional identities, creating new ethical and reputational considerations for public relations professionals. Professionals recognised social media's value before their organisations, industry associations and tertiary environments did, leading them to rely on a trial-and-error approach to learn its full capabilities. Interview and survey participants noted very similar concerns and opportunities throughout the study, even though most had no formal training. This suggests that peer-driven, practice-based learning models such as case studies, simulations and reflective practice could effectively support professional development in the case of AI, as it supported many professionals through social media adoption.

However, applying the same trial-and-error approach to emerging technologies like AI may pose serious challenges. Unlike social media, AI tools increasingly rely on complex datasets and algorithmic decision-making, which carry higher stakes in terms of privacy, misinformation, bias and environmental impact. Without proper training, knowledge of AI and its complexities and policy in the organisations, public relations professionals and others using these tools significantly increase the potential for misuse. Because of this complexity, participants in this study widely agreed that AI adoption requires a more structured and precautionary approach. Training provided by the organisation, providing the time it takes to better understand the innovation and best-practice guidelines were seen as essential to support this process. The DOI's noted barriers to adoption: a lack of institutional support, limited financial resources and insufficient time to learn new technologies (Butler & Selbom, 2002) are present and shaping AI adoption, and were also present in the rollout of social media. Exploring why these barriers persist is also important, as

they often reflect deeper organisational resistance or a lack of strategic focus, rather than just practical limitations.

As such, there is a growing need for organisations to co-develop AI policies with input from employees, including public relations teams, and for industry associations to establish clear standards to guide responsible AI integration. Most participants stressed the importance of involving representatives from each department in policy development, given that the impacts of AI vary significantly across functions.

This is particularly significant for the future of the public relations industry, as findings from this study suggest a decrease in caution when adopting and using new communication technologies among less experienced professionals (those with less than two years of experience). A similar trend was observed during the adoption of social media, where junior employees often demonstrated lower levels of caution, therefore increasing the potential for misuse (Ojohwoh, 2018). This pattern indicates that professional experience creates greater awareness and care, reinforcing the need for structured support, training and policy to guide the ethical use of emerging technologies like AI in this cohort.

The fact that the two survey respondents with less than two years of experience expressed almost polar opposite attitudes toward AI (one very supportive and the other opposing), further highlights the volatility within this group. Given that their understanding of public relations has largely been shaped by academic theory or influenced by mentors, there is an even greater need for industry-led, peer-reviewed support systems for this growing cohort. This was also evident during social media adoption, as many interview and survey participants emphasised the importance of establishing work-life balance protocols and formal approval processes to ensure their junior staffers were not burning out or putting the organisation at risk for mistakes or misuse of the technologies.

However, since this study received limited data from professionals with less than two years of experience, further research is needed to determine whether these concerns and support mechanisms are essential for junior employees to develop a strong strategic lens.

Importantly, using the DOI theory in this study illuminated how the adoption process is shaped not just by individual attitudes, but also by organisational culture, leadership openness and industry norms. This theory helped highlight where adoption bottlenecks currently exist in the public relations industry, why some professionals feel left behind and how targeted interventions (such as peer-to-peer learning or clearer communication about risks and benefits) might accelerate adoption without sacrificing ethical or professional standards.

The ongoing shifts in platform ownership, user demographics and ethical standards prompt critical questions for public relations professionals:

- How can they ensure they are using information and communication technologies (ICTs) in a practical, efficient, and ethical manner?
- Who is leading the conversation and developing the frameworks that public relations professionals can rely on?

In a field where effectiveness depends heavily on strategy, public relations risks being undervalued unless professionals remain aware, adaptable and intentional in their use of ICTs (Andersson, 2023; ImpactPR, n.d.; Publicity for Good, 2024).

So, who are the innovators we should be paying attention to when it comes to adopting new communication technologies? Evidence suggests that mid-career professionals (3-10 years of experience) often lead the way in striking a balance between caution and experimentation in both social media and AI adoption. In both cases, this group showed a strong understanding of the potential impacts these technologies could have on the public relations industry, and they took the time to learn or test their own theories to better understand and navigate these changes. In both adoption cycles, mid-career professionals were looked to for guidance and support. This positions them as influential change agents in their organisations, capable of bridging the gap between early enthusiasm and the long-term, sustainable integration of new tools. Their ability to evaluate emerging technologies critically, while remaining open to innovation, makes them a key resource in shaping how these tools are adopted ethically and effectively.

Interestingly, when asked about AI's potential to destabilise democratic systems, 33% of survey respondents in the mid-career category (3-10 years of experience) agreed or strongly agreed, while 58.3% neither agreed nor disagreed. In comparison, the average responses from the wider sample were evenly split, with 44% agreeing or strongly agreeing, and 44% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This finding highlights the importance of educating public relations professionals on how emerging technologies can impact democracy, particularly the risks posed by authoritarian powers. When democratic systems are destabilised, the general public become increasingly vulnerable to manipulation, misinformation and authoritarian influence. It is in the best interest of the profession to understand how such systems may affect Aotearoa New Zealand more broadly, and to uphold democratic values (including freedom of expression) through the ethical use of new technologies. However, it would pay to understand if the higher percentage of 'neither agree nor disagree' among mid-career professionals reflects greater awareness of AI's complexity and its uncertain long-term implications. It may indicate a more cautious, considered stance suggesting this group is aware of the possible risks, but is withholding judgment due to a lack of sufficient evidence or lived experience of those impacts in practice.

Senior professionals continue to play a vital role in shaping the broader conversation and offering critical oversight, drawing on their experience to help ensure strategic alignment and long-term impact. This peer-reviewed approach to adoption decision-making also reduces the risk of pro-innovation bias. Understanding the five main points of the DOI theory (relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability) and critically examining an innovation's practical and ethical implications will be especially important in ensuring the industry, or certain sectors within it, do not adopt new tools uncritically.

Another important lesson from social media adoption cycle relates to its timing. During the early days of social media, professionals often spent time trying to understand these tools, but widespread, effective usage only occurred when major events, such as the Christchurch Earthquakes or the Covid-19 pandemic, demanded it. What is the cost of waiting for these events to drive adoption of these ICTs? Responsive tactics or adoption patterns means public relations professionals will miss critical points and ethical concerns, it will drive mistakes and being paired with a crisis event, can deliver drastic results that could impact how the public views the

organisation. Being proactive gives public relations professionals time to acknowledge ethical concerns, potential misuses and understand the innovation critically. This reactive model of adoption raises concerns on whether the public relations industry is prepared to adopt AI and future ICTs in a more proactive and informed manner. The key challenge will be ensuring that the industry remains critical of adoption trends, avoiding a pro-innovation bias, while also ensuring it is not left unprepared for the potential transformations ahead.

How can public relations professionals and researchers predict which innovative communication technologies might become entrenched in society, and which will quickly fade away? In an era of rapid technological advancement, how can we ensure the time and training invested in newly adopted tools remains valuable within the evolving public relations landscape? These questions are increasingly relevant as platforms and technologies like social media and AI continue to transform communication practices at pace. Professionals in this study reflected on the challenge of dedicating time to mastering trends or features that may soon become obsolete.

As this study and many similar studies suggest (Morris & Cook, 2024; Prowly, 2024), the adoption trend of AI is placing less significance on its ability to write and has become more focused on strategy, analysis and decision-making. With that in mind, could AI be used as a key enabler in helping professionals adopt emerging technologies more efficiently and be a solution to concerns of time-waste and lack of training?

While social media adoption might be viewed as a success, its volatility raises valid questions about long-term sustainability. Although the public relations industry has adapted by creating roles such as social media managers and digital advisors, DOI largely neglects what happens after adoption - specifically, the potential for users to disengage or abandon platforms altogether. This limitation becomes particularly evident in the case of Twitter, where shifting ownership, changing user dynamics and fluctuating ethical standards have contributed to significant drop in usage.

Reflecting on how the public relations industry adapted to the rise of social media (and anticipating the likely emergence of increasingly complex and disruptive information and communication technologies) there is a growing case for the creation of dedicated ICT integration roles in

organisations. These roles become particularly important if industry associations are unable to keep pace with providing clear guidance, training frameworks and resources for future ICTs. These dedicated ICT integration roles could help ensure that professionals' time is not wasted navigating tools that may prove ineffective or short-lived. More importantly, when efficient, ethical and strategically valuable technologies do emerge, having an established integration lead or team could enable professionals to 'hit the ground running,' enhancing both productivity and the industry's capacity for innovation.

Among interview and survey participants who had received training or had more experience using AI in their professional responsibilities, adoption levels varied significantly - from not using it at all, to using it selectively, to continuously exploring new ways to embed it into their workflows. This variation suggests there is no clear consensus within the public relations industry about whether adopting AI aligns with the industry's best interests. If there were more education and training opportunities, or accessible public guidelines to clarify AI's contextual features (which many participants expressed concern about), would this accelerate or delay its adoption? Alternatively, could a deeper understanding of AI enable the industry to establish strategic policies that elevate PR's role and relevance within corporate environments?

One of the major differences between social media and AI is their impacts. While social media dramatically changed the way public relations professionals worked, the concerns and ethical standards raised among its adoption was manageable and public relations professionals were able to see and create clear guidelines from their learnings. However, with the complexity of AI, comes an increase in risk in usage. Deepfakes, environmental impacts and confirmation biases are not just operational concerns, they raise broader questions on transparency and the unintended consequences of automation. These risks are harder to foresee, regulate or respond to with simple policies. And the participants showed that in their responses through the interviews and surveys, noting that in the interviews social queues were noted among three of the five participants that showed they were more serious in the AI adoption conversation (smiles disappeared, crossed arms, longer pauses). AI adoption will require a more strategic, cross-disciplinary approach (particularly including AI and data experts) to ethical governance in the public relations industry. AI and future technologies impacts will continue to broaden and is something public relations professionals need

to be aware of, especially if their work in in an industry that directly correlates to the wider population (governmental organisations where community member information is held and/or environmental organisations where using technologies could contradict the values of the organisation) than just the impacts in public relations field. Additionally, from an Aotearoa New Zealand-specific perspective, a key consideration is the impact of AI and future internationally owned ICTs, particularly those hosted on the world wide web and less subject to local governmental control, on indigenous communities and regulations such as data sovereignty.

These findings are significant as they highlight a gap between the pace of technological advancement and the industry's ability to respond with cohesive, future-focused support. As communication tools become more complex and intertwined with issues of ethics, regulation and cultural responsibility, the need for clear, proactive infrastructure (whether in the form of industry-led frameworks or dedicated ICT integration roles) becomes increasingly urgent. Without this, professionals may continue to rely on informal, ad hoc learning that increases risk for their organisations. At a time when public relations have the opportunity to lead on ethical innovation and digital literacy, empowering professionals to adapt confidently and critically to new technologies is not just beneficial, it is essential for the sector's credibility, relevance and long-term sustainability.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the evolving adoption of emerging technologies, namely social media and artificial intelligence (AI), in the public relations profession in Aotearoa New Zealand. Guided by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory, this research examined how public relations professionals have historically approached social media, how they are currently responding to AI and the similarities and differences in these adoption processes.

Through in-depth qualitative interviews with industry professionals, this study aimed to provide a grounded understanding of the practical, cultural and strategic dimensions of technological change in the public relations industry. In doing so, it contributes to the limited but growing body of research on AI in public relations, particularly in the unique bicultural and regional context of Aotearoa.

7.0 Summary of key findings

The findings of this study reveal that social media adoption, while initially met with hesitation, eventually became widely integrated into public relations practice by the mid-2010s, particularly as its strategic value became apparent. In contrast, AI adoption is still emerging, with varying degrees of understanding and confidence across the profession. Many participants expressed both curiosity and caution toward AI, citing ethical concerns, lack of training and uncertainty about its role in creative and relational aspects of public relations.

The study also found that digital natives, those who started their careers around the same time the digital innovation emerged, were generally more comfortable navigating technological transitions than digital immigrants, though institutional support and leadership played a critical role in adoption outcomes regardless of age. Importantly, the DOI theory proved useful in understanding both historical and current adoption trends, helping to map out where professionals fall on the innovation curve and what factors influence movement toward or away from adoption.

7.1 Theoretical implications

By applying the DOI framework to both historical and current technological adoption, this study extends its relevance into new territory. While DOI has traditionally been applied retrospectively, this research demonstrates its applicability as a diagnostic and predictive tool in understanding the present uncertainty surrounding AI. The theory helped identify critical inflection points in both adoption narratives and illuminated how peer influence, perceived value, trialability and organisational culture shape professional behaviours toward new technologies.

7.2 Practical implications

For public relations professionals and leaders, the findings underscore the need for proactive education and strategic integration of AI tools and future ICT adoptions. They also highlight the importance of educating professionals on how emerging technologies can impact democracy, particularly the risks posed by authoritarian powers. When democratic systems are destabilised, the general public become increasingly vulnerable to manipulation, misinformation, and authoritarian influence. It is in the best interest of the profession to understand how such systems may affect Aotearoa New Zealand more broadly, and to uphold democratic values (including freedom of expression) through the ethical use of new technologies.

Trial and error learning alone is no longer sufficient for ensuring professionals fully understand the ethical, strategic and societal implications of new technologies. As ICTs become more complex and their consequences more far-reaching, experimentation risks not only inefficiency but reputational harm and ethical missteps. To meet this challenge, industry associations must take a leading role in developing clear, accessible frameworks that guide the responsible adoption (or intentional rejection) of emerging technologies. Crucially, cross-sectional, peer-based workshopping of such policies and guidance, drawing on diverse expertise and lived experience across the profession and experience levels, can play a vital role. This kind of collaborative knowledge-building supports informed, context-sensitive decision-making and ensures new frameworks are both adaptable and widely trusted.

The creation of dedicated ICT integration roles may also support professionals in navigating new technologies efficiently and ethically, ensuring that their time is not wasted trailing ineffective tools and enabling them to 'hit the ground running' when valuable innovations emerge.

The profession is currently in a space where innovation is occurring, but not evenly. Agencies and organisations that prioritise digital upskilling, ethical leadership, and open dialogue around emerging tools are likely to experience smoother transitions and greater practitioner confidence. Similarly, professional bodies and educators in Aotearoa New Zealand can play a critical role in shaping AI literacy and policy frameworks that reflect local values, bicultural priorities, and professional ethics.

7.3 Originality and contributions

This research makes several original contributions. Firstly, it provides a rare qualitative insight into how public relations professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand understand and experience AI, a topic that has seen limited exploration in this regional context. Secondly, it offers a comparative lens that situates AI alongside social media, enabling clearer analysis of what has changed (or remained the same) in the profession's relationship with technology. Finally, it offers a practical demonstration of the continued value of DOI theory for understanding evolving digital behaviours in public relations.

7.4 Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the findings of this thesis are contextually grounded and may not be generalisable to all public relations professionals or organisations. The sample was limited to public relations professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand, and although efforts were made to include diverse voices, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of underrepresented groups or those working outside of traditional agency or in-house environments.

Most interview participants were in the early to mid-stages of their careers during the initial adoption of social media. As such, when drawing comparisons between that earlier adoption cycle

and the current uptake of AI, there is an absence of perspectives from individuals who were in senior or late-career positions during the social media adoption cycle. It is also important to acknowledge that participants are reflecting on these two technological shifts from different career vantage points. As a result, their comparisons are shaped not only by professional experience but also by contextual factors outside their control.

It is also noted that not many junior or early-career public relations professionals offered their insights in the survey questionnaire, hindering some of the potential understandings of AI and its adoption trends.

Additionally, the rapid evolution of AI tools means that some insights may quickly become outdated, highlighting the need for continuous study in this area.

This thesis involved the use of generative AI tools, including Grammarly and ChatGPT (paid version), to support the writing process. These tools were used for tasks such as improving clarity, refining grammar and exploring ways to articulate complex ideas. All conceptual contributions, analysis and interpretations are the author's own, and all efforts were made to maintain academic integrity.

7.5 Future research directions

Future research could build on this study by including a broader range of participants across different cultural, geographic and industry contexts. Longitudinal studies that follow public relations professionals over time would also be valuable in capturing how perceptions and practices evolve as AI becomes more embedded in communication workflows.

Further exploration of how Māori perspectives shape or resist technological adoption in public relations would offer rich, culturally specific insights.

Further exploration is also needed into how industry associations and professional bodies can facilitate more proactive adoption models, moving away from reactive responses to external events and towards strategic, planned integration of new tools.

Finally, comparative international studies could help situate Aotearoa New Zealand's adoption patterns in a global context and identify areas of alignment or divergence.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval

Human Research Ethics Application:

Introduction

Before applying for approval applicants must familiarise themselves with the Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations in the University Calendar

https://calendar.waikato.ac.nz/research-assessment-graduation

Note: As this form changes periodically please ensure you use the current version at

https://www.waikato.ac.nz/research-enterprise/ethics/human-ethics *and not earlier forms.*

Applicant Checklist

A positive answer to one or more of the questions below means your application must be reviewed by the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee (Health)(HREC). This committee is accredited by the New Zealand Health Research Council.

Submit collated pdf application by email to: humanethics@waikato.ac.nz

Yes ☐ No ☐ Are you investigating a topic related to one or more of health, disability or well-being?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Are you using an instrument intended to assess health, disability or well-being?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Is referral to a health service provider anticipated as a potential outcome of participation?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Are participants being recruited in their capacity as DHB employees?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Are you intending to collect tissue samples (e.g. bloods, saliva, urine) from healthy individuals?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Are you intending to utilize exercise and/or nutrition interventions for health-related

outcomes?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Are you intending to only use publicly available data sets?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Are you intending to work with participants under the age of 16?

Submit this application form when the checklist and the Application Cover Sheet is complete and has been signed. Review and complete the following checklist:

Yes ☐ No ☐ Personal details (on Application Cover Sheet)

Yes ☐ No ☐ Academic Details (on Cover Sheet)

Yes ☐ No ☐ Participant Information Sheet (attached)

Yes ☐ No ☐ Signatures (where required)

Yes ☐ No ☐ Participant Consent Form (attached)

Yes ☐ No ☐ Research Instruments (attached)

Any staff and students doing research must gain approval for any such research prior to the collection of any data from human participants.

NB: BEFORE SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION TO HREC: Use the file naming convention as follows: YEAR_LASTNAME_HRECApplication.pdf

eg: 202_Wright_HRECApplication.pdf

Ensure all documents are collated as one pdf file before sending. Ensure all pages are in the correct order

Information provided to participants includes the approval of the HREC noting the application number and the Committee details for any contact, concerns or questions of an ethical nature.

Research Ethics Application – Cover Sheet

Principal Investigator:	Isabel Leeming
Division / School / Faculty / Institute:	Waikato Management School
Email address:	isabelleeming@gmail.com
Preferred phone number: Office phone number (if applicable):	021535242
Student ID (if applicable):	1324521
Proposed start date of data collection/field research: Proposed project end date:	Expected start date: 24 March Expected end date: 13 June
This is an application for approval of: (indicate all that apply)	Staff research project: Yes ☐ No ☐ PhD research: Yes ☐ No ☐ Masters research: Yes ☐ No ☐ Other: Yes ☐ No ☐
Name of degree/paper (if applicable):	Masters of Management Studies in Public Relations PUBRL594
Supervisor name:	Margalit Toledano Margalit.toledano@waikato.ac.nz

Supervisor's approval signature:	
Funding sources (if applicable):	
Project sponsors (if applicable - eg equipment):	
Research locations (if outside UOW facilities):	Zoom/Teams video
Associated/linked Applications (provide other applications' approval code and title):	N/a
Has the application received approval from other institutions? If so, please talk to the HREC Chair before proceeding as this Committee may only need to ratify the already approved application.	No

I request approval for this research or related activity and attach all relevant documentation necessary for evaluation under the Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations. https://calendar.waikato.ac.nz/research-assessment-graduation/ethical-conduct

I have read and complied with the University's Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations.

Principal Investigator's signature: _____Date: _____

Project Overview

Please provide the following information about your project

1. Project Title: The process of adopting new communication technologies by the PR industry:

From social media to AI.

2. Briefly outline the research topic, research questions and/or research objectives (boxes will expand as you write)

Research topic (20-50 words)	The adoption of communication technology by public relations practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand.
Research questions (bullet point)	Major question: What are the factors that challenge or enable the adoption of new communication technologies by the PR industry? Sub questions: 1. What can the PR industry learn from its experience with the use of social media in PR practices during the first decade of the millennium? 2. How relevant is the social media experience for the current process of adopting to AI? 3. Can the industry identify early adopters that might help PR practitioners deal with new communication technologies? 4. What are the ethical challenges that impact PR practitioners' attitudes towards new technologies?
Research objectives (bullet point)	• Examine how the PR industry in Aotearoa New Zealand adopted social media in the early 2000s and the key lessons learned from this experience. • Investigate how PR practitioners are currently adapting to AI technologies and compare this process with the adoption of social media. • Identify key influencers and early adopters - Determine whether specific individuals or organisations act as early adopters and how they influence the broader industry's approach to emerging communication

	technologies. • Evaluate ethical considerations in tech adoption - Compare the ethical concerns that arose during social media adoption with those emerging around AI, analysing their impact on PR professionals' decision-making. • Understand enabling and hindering factors - Identify the main challenges and drivers influencing the adoption of new communication technologies in Aotearoa New Zealand's PR industry.

3. What specific research activities are you planning to undertake? *Briefly* respond to this question by LISTING research activities. Please note this application focuses on Human research. You will be asked to provide further details under Q.18. NB: delete examples

Research activity	Brief comment (10-30 words per item)
Survey	Based on the findings from interviews I'll conduct a survey of public relations and/or communication professionals on their experiences in the industry including the adoption of AI and social media into their day-to-day responsibilities and their thoughts on ICTs like AI and social media.
Semi-structured interviews	I will use semi-structured interviews with five public relation and/or communication professionals.

4. Justify your project. Provide a summary of the research, its methods, anticipated academic benefits, value and/or contribution to the field.

(a) Research summary (under 300 words)	This study examines the adoption of communication technology in Aotearoa New Zealand's public relations (PR) industry, focusing on the factors that enable or challenge the integration of new tools such as artificial intelligence (AI). By analysing past and present technological shifts, this research aims to provide insights into how PR professionals adapt to emerging digital trends. A key aspect of this study is understanding the industry's experience with social media adoption and how these lessons apply to the current

	AI integration. By drawing comparisons between the two, the research will identify patterns in technology adoption, ethical considerations and the role of early adopters in influencing industry-wide change. This study also explores the ethical dilemmas involved in the use of new technologies, comparing the concerns that arose with social media to those associated with AI. Additionally, it investigates the impact of early adopters and how their experiences can serve as a guide for PR practitioners navigating new technological landscapes. This research is based on the Diffusion of Innovation theory and the findings will add to the PR body of knowledge that relate to this theory. It will also provide practical recommendations for PR professionals and the professional associations, helping them make informed decisions about integrating new communication technologies.
(b) Methods summary (under 300 words)	The data collection will begin with semi structure interviews with five established PR professionals. The findings from the interviews will inform the questions for a survey of a wider group of PR professionals. The survey's questionnaire will be distributed to a representative sample of approximately 150 Aotearoa New Zealand-based PR professionals via email in March-April 2025. The sample will include practitioners from in-house roles, agencies and freelancing positions, ensuring a diverse representation of the PR industry. The survey participants will have varying levels of experience.
(c) Anticipated academic benefits/value/ contribution to the field summary (max	By analysing the adoption of social media and comparing it to the current integration of AI, this study will provide valuable insights into patterns of technological adaptation, challenges and opportunities. The findings will help PR associations to develop support systems for

200 words)	their members and help them navigate the challenging shift to new technologies. It will also help the PR industry build resilience for future shifts. In particular, the research findings will offer a deeper understanding of the ethical implications associated with emerging technologies. It will help PR association review and update their codes of ethics. By identifying early adopters and their role in shaping industry-wide adoption, this study will highlight best practices that can be leveraged by PR professionals to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Academically, this research will contribute to the Diffusion of Innovation theory and technology adoption models in the context of public relations, offering a localised perspective on global trends. Ultimately, it will provide both scholars and practitioners with actionable insights to better understand and manage the intersection of technology, ethics and communication in PR.

The Researcher(s)

Please tell us about you and/or your research team

5. LIST all members of the research team and briefly describe their roles in your research project.

Name	Role
Isabel Leeming	Researcher

Margalit Toledano	Supervisor

6. OUTLINE (250 words max) relevant qualifications to undertake this research.

Qualifications and Prior experience	Bachelors in Communication, majoring in PR with a specialisation in events management (2019), six years PR/comms experience. Managed client relationship with a NZ AI research group for a year.
Training/expertise in relevant research methods	Completed Research Methods paper. Have surveyed/interviewed clients and community members through my industry experience, which also included workshop training through IAP2 (I am IAP2 certified).
Personal knowledge of topic/area of interest	Day-to-day use of social media and AI.
Other…	

7. What, if any, discipline-specific codes of ethics or professional standards will guide your research? Outline here:

N/a

Your intended participants

Please provide the following information about your intended participants:

8. Broadly, who will your participants be? (Indicate the broad target population: e.g. approx. 30 young adults (20-25 years old) men and women from Waikato rural communities). *Offer estimates if exact numbers are uncertain. Do not include individuals' names.*

- Approx. 40% of respondents are NZ PR/Comms professionals with 10 years of experience.
- Approx. 20% of respondents are NZ PR/Comms professionals with 10-15 years of experience.

- Approx. 40% of respondents are NZ PR/Comms professionals with 15-25 years of experience.
- Approx. 65-70% of respondents are female, 30-35% are male.
- I will also make sure respondents are not clustered to one area in Aotearoa New Zealand, hoping to get responses spread across cities and the north and south islands.

9(a) How will you recruit participants? Summarise your process as a list of actions, in chronological order (no more than 200 words)

- Will reach out to the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) in support of getting the survey out to professionals, as well as Telum Media. I will also post the survey through my LinkedIn.

9(b) Do you need permission from any person or organisation to recruit participants prior to recruiting participants? If so, please describe this process.

- Yes, through PRINZ and Telum, I will need their approval and support in using their platforms. I will email my contacts from both organisations, describe my thesis and the intentions of the research and request they share the survey through their platforms.

10. How will you inform them about the project and their involvement in it? Summarise your process. Link to relevant attached appendices (e.g. *recruitment emails, posts, posters, information sheets...)*

I will provide a summary of my research, including its purpose, to all potential participants (see Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet). This document will outline their role in the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

For interview participants, I will first contact them via email or another appropriate channel (see Appendix 2: Recruitment Email). This initial communication will briefly introduce the research and invite them to take part. If they express interest, they will receive the full Participant Information Sheet, outlining details such as the purpose of the interview, expected duration, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Before the interview begins, I will go over the consent process and answer any questions they may have (see Appendix 3: Consent Form).

For survey respondents, the information sheet will clarify that all responses will remain anonymous, and data will be securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Before completing the survey, participants will be required to give informed consent, acknowledging that they understand their participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time.

By following this process, I aim to ensure transparency, respect, and informed participation throughout the research.

11. Are the participants vulnerable? Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, then:

(a) in what ways are they vulnerable? Outline

(b) Why do you need to involve them in your research? Outline

(c) How will you protect them from harm? Outline

12. Will you select participants on the basis of:

Unless there is an overwhelming majority of male responses, I will not need to consider gender of the respondents.

Ethnicity:	Yes ☐ No ☐	Iwi:	Yes ☐ No ☐
Culture:	Yes ☐ No ☐	Disability:	Yes ☐ No ☐
Gender	Yes ☐ No ☐	Ethical belief:	Yes ☐ No ☐
Religion	Yes ☐ No ☐	Sexuality:	Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes to any of the above:

(a) State how you will inform participants about the selection criteria.

(b) Are your participants likely to come from a particular ethnic group or other distinct population even if you are not selecting them on that basis? If so, please discuss the implication of this for your research.

(c) What cultural and other competencies do you have to work with your selected participant group (e.g. language, membership, professional training)?

13. Do you have any type of relationship with your participants already (e.g. employer/employee, supervisor/worker, personal relationship)? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, then you will have a dual role in the research, both as researcher and, for example, as friend or family member. Therefore:

How will your pre-existing relationship affect your role as a researcher? Outline and address potential ethical issues associated with your pre-existing relationship in relation to your project.

14. Will participants receive any form of compensation or incentive for participation? (See guidelines on compensation and note that reimbursement for travel expenses can be stated, but does not need justification) Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, what will they receive? (e.g. vouchers, prizes, shared refreshments, course credits etc.) Outline.

Consent

Please provide the following information about consent processes:

15. How will you gain informed consent from your participants? Outline methods for this consent process

(a) Who will gain consent from participants? *Note that where dual roles exist (Q.13 above), coercion to participate may be avoided by asking a third party to undertake the informed consent process.* The main investigator will gain consent from the participants parents and gain participant assent.

(b) At what point do participants give their consent? *NB: Ensure you attach a copy of participant consent forms. If you intend to seek oral consent, include a procedure sheet to describe the process by which consent will be negotiated.*

(c) If vulnerable, are your participants able to give informed consent? Yes ☐ No ☐ If no, then, how will you obtain consent from their proxy?

At the beginning of the interview and the start of the survey questionnaire, I will provide a run-down on how the information the participants would provide will be used, confirm the level of anonymity they prefer (varying levels from complete anonymity to name and title). I will make it clear throughout the whole process they are able to back out at any point or change their level of anonymity. They will not have to provide an answer to every question if they choose not to. During the interviews, I will reinforce the consent process at the beginning of meeting with them. I will ensure any recording is approved by the interviewee.

16. With the exception of participants who are anonymous to the researcher, participants have the right to withdraw entirely or in part from the research. Please explain how and by when participants are able to withdraw: (*e.g. three weeks after data collection, or receipt of a transcript*) and ensure this is consistent with what is included in the Participant Information Sheet and Participant Consent Form.

Participants are able to withdraw their consent in one week of them completing the survey and two weeks of them meeting for the interview. This will be outlined at the beginning and end of both the survey and interviews. Contact details will be provided so they can reach out and let me know if they choose to withdraw.

17. Data collection activities may be planned for off-campus locations. Please list all non UOW locations where you will engage in data collection.

Most collection activities will be done online via Zoom or Teams. I do not plan to collect information anywhere else other than online and on the University of Waikato locations.

(a) If you need consent or permission from any organisation, community representative, and/or anyone other than the individual participants Please list the required permissions, consents, and/or approvals in chronological/process order.

(b) How and when will you gain these permissions, consents and/or approvals? *Ensure you attach any statements, letters, or emails of permission or approval that have been secured in advance of your application to the Human Research Ethics Committee.*

Research design

18(a) Please outline what you intend your participants to do *e.g. semi-structured interviews of 12 FASS academic staff members about their experiences of xxx e.g. anonymous online survey of all University of Waikato staff members about xxx ...*

NB: *Attach to the end of the application as part of a single pdf, all research instruments that you intend to use to collect data. (e.g. interview schedules, questionnaire/survey items). Indicate whether the research instruments are drafts or final versions. Later final versions of research instrument versions must be lodged with the committee prior to data collection.*

(c) How will participants benefit from their involvement in the research?

Both the interviews and surveys are designed to allow participants to reflect on the history of social media adoption and how those lessons might inform their attitudes toward AI.

The interviews will be conducted with approximately 5 PR professionals working in various sectors, with each interview lasting around 30-60 minutes. Participants will be asked about their experiences with adopting new technologies, the challenges they faced and the ethical considerations they encountered.

The interviews findings will inform the survey questions. Attached here is a draft of the survey questionnaire that includes tentative questions.

18(b) Benefits to Participants

Participants will be offered an opportunity to read the final report on this study if they would request to read it. The findings might be very useful, especially for PR professional associations that provide training to their members and support the shift of the industry to new technologies.

Participants will benefit from their involvement in the research by contributing to the development of a deeper understanding of how new communication technologies are adopted in the PR industry. By sharing their experiences and insights, they will help shape future practices and inform others in the field about potential challenges, strategies for overcoming barriers, and ethical considerations when integrating new technologies.

The findings from this research will assist PR professionals in anticipating future technological shifts, providing them with valuable knowledge to stay ahead in a competitive and rapidly changing industry. Participants may also find the process of reflecting on their own experiences with new technologies to be professionally rewarding, as it offers them the opportunity to engage

critically with their practice.

19(a) Could participants be harmed in your research? Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, please outline all potential harms to your participants with brief commentary. Use the table to help you be succinct:

FORESEEN HARMS	LIKELIHOOD OF HARM OCCURRING	HOW YOU INTEND TO MINIMISE THE RISKS	DESCRIBE IN SOME DETAIL WHAT YOU WILL DO IF A PARTICIPANT IS HARMED
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			

(b) Could concerns arise regarding the health and wellbeing of anyone participating in your project?
Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, briefly explain how this will this be managed:

20. How will you analyse participant data?

Will your research involve comparing one group to another? Yes ☐ No ☐

Not directly, but if there are trends with years of experience or type of organisation they work for, it will be noted.

(a) If yes, then explain the process for this comparison, addressing:
  (i) How the participants are categorized into specific groups
  (ii) Why is it important to do this?

21. Does your research involve any deception of participants? Yes ☐ No ☐

(a) If yes, then describe the deception.
(b) Why is it necessary to deceive participants?
(c) How and when will participants be told of the deception?

22. Will the true identity of the researcher(s) be concealed from participants at any time during the research? (Such research is called 'covert research'.) Yes ☐ No ☐

(a) If yes, then describe the concealment and explain why it is necessary
(b) How and when will participants be told of the concealment? If never, then, explain why the concealment will not be disclosed to participants.

Cultural safety

Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato, the University of Waikato, through its official *Charter,* has an explicit commitment to partnership with Māori, to kaupapa and tikanga Māori, and to the interests of New Zealand- born and Island-born Pacific people.

The *Ethical Conduct and Human Research and Related Activities Regulations* stipulates that researchers are required to respect the cultural, social and language preferences and sensitivities of participants. Therefore, you apply for ethical approval, you should demonstrate an awareness of social and cultural difference, consult advisors regarding the appropriate conduct of your research, and present the outcome of any consultation in your ethics application.

Two resources important to refer to when undertaking research at the University of Waikato are:

- *Te Ara Tika – Guidelines for Māori Research Ethics*
- *Pacific Health Research Guidelines*

23. Does the research project have particular relevance or potential implications for Māori, and/or other social and/or cultural groups? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, then please provide the following information about your consultation processes, Use the table to outline relevant information:

ITEMS TO ADDRESS	DETAILS
1. List the relevant stakeholders (*i.e. groups to consult)*:	

2. Identify outcomes of your consultation *to date (e.g. describe advice taken on appropriate procedures and approaches to research, decisions made about appropriate ways to return research findings*):	
3. Do you have at least one cultural advisor for this project? **4.** Provide their name(s) and specific role(s):	Yes ☐ No ☐

24. Outline how you will show respect and sensitivity towards participants (*such as: inviting their support persons to be present during interviews; using interpreters if you are not fluent in the participant's language; being vouched for by elders; using appropriate gestures and greetings; dressing appropriately; participating in cultural ceremonies or rituals...)*:

Most interviews will be conducted online and full respect and gratitude will be provided to participants. All interview participants will be given the option to bring a support person if they wish. Prior to the interview, I will discuss with participants whether additional support, such as an interpreter, is required to ensure they can fully express their perspectives. I will approach each interview with an open, non-judgmental attitude, ensuring that participants feel comfortable and respected in sharing their experiences.

To create a welcoming and inclusive environment, I will be mindful of appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication, using respectful language and active listening techniques. If participants come from diverse cultural backgrounds, I will take the time to understand any relevant customs or protocols, such as appropriate greetings and dress, to demonstrate cultural sensitivity.

Confidentiality and informed consent will be prioritised, ensuring participants fully understand the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time. The interviews will be conducted in a setting that makes participants feel safe and comfortable, whether in-person (at the University of Waikato) or online. By taking these measures, I aim to foster a respectful and supportive research environment where participants feel valued and heard.

25. How will participants' identities (and their communities and/or organisations where relevant) be represented in the research?

Is it important to maintain the confidentiality of participants (and their communities/organisations where relevant) in the research reporting?	Yes ☐ No ☐
If yes, outline how you intend preserving	Depending on the participants' preference

confidentiality:	of level of anonymity, names and locations will not be described in the responses. Varying levels of experience will be disclosed, however they will be categorised (ie early career 0-10 years experience, mid-career 10-20 years experience, late career 20+ years experience).

26. In addition to the researcher(s) listed on this application, who else will see information that participants provide?

Will anyone else see participants' data?	Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, add names here:
Outline why they need to see it:	N/a
Will any shared information be linked to participants' names?	Unless the recipient are comfortable with their name being shared and they are a well known PR/Comms professional in New Zealand, Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, outline reason here:

Will data/names be anonymised before sharing? *It may be appropriate to ask additional parties (e.g. student researchers, transcribers) to sign a confidentiality agreement. Attach the confidentiality agreement that you intend to use.*	Explain here: Yes, there will be varying levels of confidentiality though. Some of the respondents may want to share they partook in this research and can then share their understanding and experiences afterwards through social media. However, those who prefer to stay anonymous will be respected as such.

27. Transcription of interviews
(a) If the interviews are being transcribed, who will be undertaking this work and are there implications for confidentiality?

(b) Will participants have the opportunity to view their transcripts and if so, describe this process.

How and where will the data be stored and protected during the research project?

How:	If the interviews are being done over Teams, Teams automatically transcribes meetings when they are recorded. I will make sure to get consent of transcription and recording before doing so. Participants will not have the opportunity to view their transcripts. Interviews done outside of teams (ie on Zoom or in person), will be transcribed by myself.
Where:	Through Teams and on my personal computer.

Research Reporting

28. Identify all the anticipated research outputs for the project

Thesis	Yes ☐ No ☐
Conference papers	Yes ☐ No ☐
Journal articles	Yes ☐ No ☐
Book chapters	Yes ☐ No ☐
Media releases	Yes ☐ No ☐
Teaching and learning materials	Yes ☐ No ☐
Other	Yes ☐ No ☐ List:
Sharing outcomes with participants	
Outline how you provide participants with this information:	Each participant will receive a copy of the thesis via email upon request.

29. Research data must be stored for a minimum of 5 years after the completion of a research project. Where and how will you store your data after the project has been completed? NB: *Supervisors are responsible for storing research data on behalf of their students.*

Where you will store it	Online in the study's files
How you will store it	online
Archiving after 5 years: Where? Under what conditions?	After 5 years the specific files of this study will be deleted
Choosing to destroy data after 5 years. Outline how this will be done safely	*Delete the online files.*

Legal Issues

30. Ownership of Human Research Data

It is usual to state that participants own the data that they provide, and that the researcher will use the data for the specified purposes, with the consent of participants. Please explain any variation from this arrangement.

There is no variation from this arrangement.

31. Copyright

The researcher's ownership of scholarly publications and other forms of research outputs is governed by the University of Waikato's Intellectual Property Rights Policy. Crucially the policy states in Clause 8 that, *"the University recognises and endorses the traditional academic freedom of staff to publish research and scholarly documents and to produce creative and artistic works without restriction; the University does not assert ownership of copyright of such works (e.g. books, journal articles, conference papers, art works and musical recordings) unless specified in clauses 12- 18 of [the] policy."* Please explain any variation from this policy.

No variation.

Clause 9 states: *"When dealing with intellectual property that includes Mātauranga Māori, and in the context of the WAI262 claim report, the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi will be applied by the University".*

(a) Is any intellectual property related to this project subject to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi?

Yes ☐ No ☐

32. Other legal or ethical issues. Describe any other legal or ethical issues related to this project. Consider particularly relationships between members of the research team, and project funders, sponsors, or other stakeholders.

N/a

List any references here (there should be no more than 5)

Appendix B: Email / LinkedIn message requests for interview

Kia ora (name),

My name is Isabel, I'm a master's student at the University of Waikato conducting research on the adoption of new communication technologies by the Aotearoa New Zealand public relations industry with my supervisor Dr Margalit Toledano.

I value your expert opinion and experience and would like to invite you to participate in my study and to be interviewed by me on the topic.

The interview will take about 30 minutes and will be conducted via Teams.

Once you agree to be interviewed by responding to this email, I could set time for a Teams meeting.

Please find attached the Participant Information Sheet and a consent form. It will be great if you could email me back the consent form signed.

Thanks in advance, your contribution and insights would be greatly appreciated and useful to PR practitioners around Aotearoa New Zealand.

Ngā mihi,
Isabel Leeming

Appendix C: Interview participation information sheet

Title of Research Project: The Adoption of Communication Technologies by the Aotearoa New Zealand Public Relations Industry

Researcher: Isabel Leeming, supervised by Dr Margalit Toledano

Institution: University of Waikato

Contact Information: [redacted]

The researching team: My name is Isabel Leeming, I am a Public Relations Masters student and have over six years of experience in the industry. My supervisor, Dr Margalit Toledano is an Associate Professor at the University of Waikato with over 20 years of experience in the industry.

Purpose of the Study: This research aims to explore the factors that challenge or enable the adoption of new communication technologies by Aotearoa New Zealand's public relations industry. Specifically, it will investigate the adoption of social media and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and identify ethical issues.

What is Involved in Participation: I value your expert opinion and industry experience and would like to interview you for my MA thesis. The interview will take about 30 minutes and will be conducted via zoom or Teams. I will set a convenient time for our online meeting via email. I'll be happy to send you a copy of my thesis once it is complete if you are interested. I'll appreciate your permission to record the interview to enable me to analyse the answers.

Confidentiality: I will keep your identity anonymous unless you give me permission to mention your professional identity for the sake of the research report credibility. The data collected will be stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time during the interview. After responses have been collected, you will have two weeks to withdraw your answers. Afterwards, all responses will be accepted as is. Should you choose to withdraw any information you have shared during the interview or survey stages, please reach out to me via email at [redacted]

Risks and Benefits: There are no significant risks involved in participating. Your input will contribute to the academic understanding of technology adoption in the PR industry in Aotearoa New Zealand and will help inform future practices.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at [redacted] or [redacted] or my supervisor Dr. Margalit Toledano at [redacted].

Appendix D: Consent form

Consent to Participate in Research Study

Research Title: The Adoption of Communication Technologies by the Aotearoa New Zealand Public Relations Industry

I, the undersigned, confirm that I have been given information about this research project.

I understand the purpose of the study and my involvement in it.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without consequence.

I understand that my responses will remain anonymous and confidential unless I give Isabel Leeming permission to mention my name and/or years of experience and job title in her research report.

I consent to the use of my responses for research purposes.

I understand that the data I provide will be securely stored and only used for the purposes outlined in the Participant Information Sheet.

I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions regarding my participation and have had them answered to my satisfaction.

By signing this form, I consent to participate in the study.

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendices E: Interview guide

- How many years of experience do you have in the communications/public relations industry?

Social media adoption and usage

- Can you please tell me about your personal experience adopting social media in your PR practice (more than 20 years ago)?
    - Can you remember how you started to use social media for your PR tasks?
    - At what stage did you realise the potential of social media to become a major communication tool for organisations?
    - Were you a pioneer, early adopter or did you wait to learn from other practitioners' experiences?
    - Did you hesitate about the use of social media? If so – why?
    - What were your concerns around the use of social media for work?
    - Did you share your concerns with other PR practitioners? With colleagues at the workplace?
    - What helped you to start using social media?
    - Did you use help from PRINZ? If so, were PRINZ workshops and communication about social media helpful at the time?
    - How long did it take you to feel comfortable in the use of social media for work?
    - Were you ahead of the PR industry or a late adopter?
- What do you remember about the PR industry's response to the new tool of social media?
    - Can you remember colleagues' responses to social media? How did the PR industry feel about it at the time?
    - What support did practitioners get for using social media during the early years?
    - Were PR practitioners in NZ ahead of the market in their use of social media? (Compared to marketing practitioners, managers, and other professionals)
    - What were the concerns around social media then and now?

    - Were ethical challenges a factor in the process of adopting social media as a PR tool? Do you remember what the ethical concerns were?
    - Did ethical concerns slow the use of social media?
- Your organisation's adoption of social media.
    - What was the position of your organisation around the use of social media? Did management require you to use it or were they reluctant and cautious?
    - Did you play a role in educating management, your organisation employees, or clients about the use of social media once you knew about it?
    - Did you set or help set policies for your organisation around the use of social media? If not you – who did?
    - Do you think that PR practitioners should have led the use of social media in organisations they served? If not – who should have done it?

AI adoption and usage

- Current responses to the new technology of AI
    - Are you using AI in your PR practice?
        - If not, - why not?
        - If yes – when did you start using AI?
        - What are the PR tasks that you complete with the help of AI?
        - Do you like using AI tools?
        - Has the use of AI tools changed your work significantly?
    - Is the impact of AI on your work positive or negative? Why? Does it save time or require more time?
    - Did you get any training in the use of AI in your PR practice? By whom? Was it useful?
    - Do you feel that you need more training in the use of AI? Who do you think should train you?
    - Do you feel confident in the use of AI for work?
    - Do you have concerns about the use of AI in your work? If so, what are they. And if not, why not?

    - Do you identify ethical risks in the use of AI for PR tasks? What are the risks? What do you do about it?
    - Do you feel resistance from your organisation's management or clients about the use of AI?
    - Have you developed a code of conduct for your organisation or clients regarding the use of AI? If not – why not? Should organisations have such a code? Who should develop this code?

AI and Social Media

- Do you think that the PR industry can draw conclusions from the process of its adoption of social media for the process of adopting AI for PR tasks?
    - If so – what lessons can the PR industry draw?
    - What, in your opinion, is the role of PR practitioners in organisations regarding the adoption of AI tools by other employees? Or clients?
- Where do you see AI making the biggest impact in public relations?
- What will be the impact of AI on the PR industry in future years?

Appendix F: LinkedIn message for survey questionnaire

Adoption of social media and AI in the NZ PR industry

Kia ora *name*,

My name is Isabel. I am currently a master's student at the University of Waikato, supervised by Dr Margalit Toledano. I'm researching the adoption of social media and comparing it to the current adoption trends of AI.

For my research, I do need to hear from public relations and communication professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand. I would be very grateful if you could spare 10-20 minutes to complete the survey, and even more grateful if you were to share the link with anyone you find relevant in the Aotearoa New Zealand public relations and communications industry.

The results will share insights into the decision-making process of public relations and communication professionals, as well as offering insights into the current trajectory of artificial intelligence in Aotearoa New Zealand's public relations and communications industry.

If you have any questions, or would like to hear more about the research, please reach out as I am more than happy to chat them over. Also more than happy to share my findings with you and your team once completed.

Thanks so much, survey link below.

https://waikato.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0AOOCn0VeFNOtYG

Ngā mihi,
Isabel

Appendix G: Survey questionnaire

The Adoption of Communication Technologies by the Aotearoa New Zealand Public Relations Industry

Researcher: Isabel Leeming, supervised by Dr Margalit Toledano
Institution: University of Waikato

About the researching team: My name is Isabel Leeming, I am a Public Relations Masters student with over six years of experience in the industry. My supervisor, Dr Margalit Toledano is an Associate Professor at the University of Waikato with over 20 years of experience in the industry.

Purpose of the study: This research aims to explore the factors that challenge or enable the adoption of new communication technologies by the Aotearoa New Zealand's public relations industry. Specifically, it will investigate the adoption of social media and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and identify ethical issues.

What is involved in participation: I would appreciate your contribution to my study and your answers to my survey questionnaire. Answering it should not take more than 20 minutes. I'll be happy to send you a copy of my thesis once it is complete if you are interested.

Confidentiality: All responses to my questionnaire will remain anonymous. Only me and my supervisor will see the findings. The data collected will be stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Any identifying information will be removed during analysis.

Voluntary participation: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time during the survey. After responses have been collected, you will have two weeks to withdraw your answers. Afterwards, all responses will be accepted as is. Should you choose to withdraw any information you have

shared during the interview or survey stages, please reach out to me via email at isabelleeming@gmail.com.

Risks and benefits: There are no significant risks involved in participating. Your input will contribute to the academic understanding of technology adoption in the PR industry in Aotearoa New Zealand and will help inform future practices.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at isabelleeming@gmail.com or 021535242 or my supervisor Dr. Margalit Toledano Margalit.toledano@waikato.ac.nz

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Section 1: Social media

1. Were you involved in the adoption of social media for public relations tasks about two decades ago (e.g., Bebo, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Not applicable

2. How would you describe your employers or organisation's initial attitude toward the use of social media for PR tasks? (please mark your observation on the scale – 0 being not at all, 10 being definitely)
    - Highly supportive (1-10)
    - Cautiously optimistic (1-10)
    - Reluctant/resistant (1-10)
    - Strongly opposed (1-10)

3. What was the major risk your employers or organisation identified in the use of social media two decades ago?

4. How would you describe your own initial attitude toward the use of social media for PR tasks? (please mark your observation on the scale – 0 not at all, 10 definitely)
    - Highly supportive (1-10)
    - Cautiously optimistic (1-10)
    - Reluctant/resistant (1-10)
    - Strongly opposed (1-10)

5. What was the major risk or challenge you identified in the use of social media two decades ago?

6. If your employers or organisation's initially resisted the use of social media, did you (please select one option from the following list):
    - Agree and avoided the use of social media
    - Take a passive role and wait for others to initiate the change
    - Actively Advocate for its adoption
    - Adopt it despite your employer's resistance
    - Other (please specify)

7. How did you learn to use social media tools for PR tasks when they were first became available? *(Select all that apply)*
    - Trial and error
    - Colleagues/word of mouth
    - Workshops and training (please specify the organizer and/or teacher, if you remember)
    - Online tutorials
    - University study
    - I have not been using social media for my PR work
    - Other (please specify)

8. Were you involved in the development of social media policy for your employing organisation or clients?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Not applicable

9. If yes, can you please comment on this experience? What were the challenges in developing a social media policy? What did the policy include?

10. Please mark in each row the box that represents your situation most accurately:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disgree
I use social media in my work on a regular basis					
I use social media in my work mainly for media relations and publicity					
I use social media in my work mainly for research, ideas, consultation					

I use social media for dialogues with the organisation's stakeholders					

Section 2: Artificial Intelligence (AI)

11. How would you describe your employers or organisation's initial attitude toward the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for PR tasks? (please mark your observation on the scale – 0 being not at all, 10 being definitely)
    - Highly supportive (1-10)
    - Cautiously optimistic (1-10)
    - Reluctant/resistant (1-10)
    - Strongly opposed (1-10)

12. How would you describe your own attitude toward the use of social media for PR tasks? (please mark your observation on the scale – 0 being not at all, 10 being definitely)
    - Highly supportive (1-10)
    - Cautiously optimistic (1-10)
    - Reluctant/resistant (1-10)
    - Strongly opposed (1-10)

13. Are you discussing the use of AI for PR tasks with your employing organisation(s)?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Not applicable

14. If yes, who is driving the use of AI in the organisation(s) you serve as a PR practitioner?

- The employers, the organisation managers
- The PR team
- Myself
- The employers and the PR team are on the same page in our effort to adopt AI tools for PR work
- The employers and the PR team are on the same page in our decision to avoid the use of AI tools for PR work

15. Please mark in each row the box that represents your situation most accurately:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I use AI in my work on a regular basis					
I use AI in my work mainly for writing and media relations					
I use AI in my work mainly for developing strategic plans					
I use AI in my work mainly for					

research, ideas, consultation					
I use AI for dialogues with the organisation's stakeholders					

16. How do you learn to use AI tools for PR tasks? *(Select all that apply)*
    - Trial and error
    - Colleagues/word of mouth
    - Workshops and training (please specify the organiser)
    - Online tutorials
    - University study
    - I'm not using AI tools in my work
    - Other (please specify)

17. What are the risks and opportunities you identify in the use of AI for PR tasks? Please mark in each row the box that best represents your opinion:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
AI saves PR practitioners time					
The use of AI for writing PR texts requires					

more time for verifying data					
AI makes PR practitioners' writing skills redundant and risks PR jobs					
Employers of PR practitioners should provide training in the use of AI					
PR associations have major responsibility for supporting PR practitioners in adapting to new technologies					
I'm concerned about AI's impact on the spread of fake news and misinformation					

I’m concerned about AI's impact on the environment					
I’m concerned about AI's impact on the ethical practice of PR (e.g., lack of transparency)					
I’m concerned about the loss of control over AI tools					
AI is destabilising democratic systems					
The marketing industry is more advanced in the use of AI, PR should catch up					
Currently, the industry relies on less experienced					

juniors for AI jobs					
AI is changing work rapidly, faster than the social media change					
PR professionals that do not use AI intensively will not survive in the profession in the next 2 years					

18. Are you involved in the development of AI policy for your employing organisation and/or clients?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Not applicable

19. If yes, can you please comment on this experience? What are the challenges in developing an AI policy?

20. What, in your opinion, are the lessons from the early adoption of social media that might be applicable to the current adoption of AI tools for PR tasks?

21. Who should be responsible for training and supporting PR practitioners in the current process of adopting new information technologies?

Section 3: Respondent profile

22. What is your current employment type?
    - Consultancy/Agency
    - In-house, corporate
    - In-house, government/public sector
    - In-house, non-profit
    - Freelance/independent
    - Other (please specify)

23. How many years have you worked in the public relations and communications industry?
    - 0-2 years
    - 3-10 years
    - 11-20 years
    - 21+ years

24. What is your current level?
    - Junior
    - Mid-level
    - Senior
    - Executive leadership (e.g., CEO, partner)

25. If you have any comment to add to this study on the PR industry's process of adapting new information technologies, please write it here.