# Generating a New Reality of Public Relations

A Qualitative Study on Public Relations Consultants' Engagement with
Generative Artificial Intelligence

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# Foreword

*We would like to thank our supervisor, Ilkin Mehrabov, for sharing his excellent knowledge, inspiring us to challenge ourselves, and guiding us during the writing process.*

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*We confirm that our contribution to this study has been equal.*

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# Abstract

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**Generating a New Reality of Public Relations**

The entrance of generative artificial intelligence has brought new implications for today's organizations. A prominent field in regards to this is public relations, as the technology can assist many features of the practice. The study aims to examine how Swedish public relations consultants engage with generative artificial intelligence in their work role. Using a qualitative approach, we conduct ten semi-structured interviews with public relations practitioners from five different agencies. The interviews are analyzed through thematic analysis, where the identified themes structure the analysis. By applying the sensemaking theory to the empirical material, the analysis reveals nuanced insights into how public relations consultants engage with generative artificial intelligence. The findings reveal the multifaceted nature of generative artificial intelligence in public relations, highlighting the variations among practitioners. Through discussion, we expand on central findings. Furthermore, the insights provide implications for the future of generative artificial intelligence in public relations. The conclusion is that public relations consultants engage with generative artificial intelligence in various ways. Primarily, it assists with operational tasks, but the engagement depends on multiple factors. How generative artificial intelligence is utilized is determined by both individual and contextual factors.

*Keywords:* generative AI, technology, public relations, practitioners, consultants, agencies, organizations sensemaking, engagement.

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# 1. Introduction

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*The section provides a background of generative AI and public relations before presenting the problem definition. This is followed by the aim and research question. We then clarify the delimitations.*

## 1.1 Background

Throughout history, substantial changes have taken place as a result of new technology affecting contemporary dynamics (Lalic et al., 2020). The introduction of new digital technologies has the potential to impact organizations by improving their competitive processes (Laia, 2022). One of these is artificial intelligence (AI), which, due to fast-paced developments and industries' adaptation to it, has been recognized as an essential part of the fourth industrial revolution (Grant & Meadows, 2020).

AI is a highly applicable technology in a range of situations, as it can learn from and process data in order to perform tasks appropriately (Getchell et al., 2022). The analytical capabilities of AI can increase the efficiency among businesses and enable AI to generate multiple forms of content (O`Neil et al., 2023; Richards, 2023). Generative AI can lead organizations to a stronger position due to the technology´s highly productive ability (Husain, 2023). Due to its developments during the last decade, the interest and impact of generative AI have grown.

Generative AI enables increased business value and is applicable to various forms of strategic communication (Communication Trend Radar, 2023). One of the distinguished subfields within strategic communication is Public Relations, where the effects of generative AI have been noticed significantly. The Chartered Insitute of Public Relations (CIPR) formed the first AI panel in communication in 2018, marking a significant step forward for public relations in exploring this technology. This indicates relevance for strategic communication to further investigate how public relations navigates through the changes caused by AI.

Generative AI has the capability to perform tasks that were previously only executed by humans (CIPR, 2023a; Iaia, 2023). This implies a new way for organizations to manage

work as generative AI can be used collaboratively when performing tasks. Panda et al. (2019) discusses how the introduction of AI in public relations has caused effects on both an overall and specific task-related level. Even if it can bring several benefits, it also raises questions and doubts about what future developments in the technology will mean for the profession (Swiatek & Galloway, 2022).

## 1.2 Problem Definition

As previously mentioned, AI has entered the field of Public Relations and brought new implications. The opportunities the technology brings have and will continue to transform the practice. For example, practitioners are equipped with improved possibilities for precise communication with key audiences, as well as writing, due to the extensive text production capabilities of generative AI. Along with the possibilities the technology poses, determining new jobs and skills will be needed (CIPR, 2023b).

Generative AI will play a significant role in public relations the upcoming years. With this in mind, it is crucial that new technology is adopted to prevent the field from failing to keep up with the developments (CIPR, 2023a; ICCO, 2022). The pace of accepting and adopting AI in public relations was previously noticed to progress at a slow pace. However, a turning point in this process took place in 2022 as more accessible generative technologies, such as ChatGPT, increased the interest significantly (CIPR, 2023a).

Technology with multiple possible applications means that the adaptation can be carried out in multiple ways (Bansler & Havn, 2006). In addition, this enables several interpretations (Weick, 2001). The fact that generative AI has various areas of use and brings both challenges and benefits creates a situation of uncertainty in how the industry and practitioners should approach it. Situations characterized by this cause a need to search for meaning through sensemaking (Weick, 2001). Furthermore, Zulu and Saad (2023) present how sensemaking can foster engagement with new innovation and add that previous studies connecting sensemaking with digital technology are limited.

In relation to generative AI´s increasingly important role in Public Relations, the study will investigate how Swedish consultants engage with the technology in their work. As generative AI enables multiple applications, it is essential to understand how this is reflected in their engagement. Furthermore, the turning point of the profession's acceptance in 2022, in

combination with quick developments, strengthens the necessity to get insight in the engagement today.

## 1.3 Aim and Research Question

This qualitative study aims to examine how public relations consultants in Sweden engage with generative artificial intelligence in their work role. The research provides knowledge about the contributing factors underlying the engagement. By applying the Sensemaking Theory, the study offers a deeper understanding of the determinants influencing the use of generative AI. To fulfill the aim, we will answer the following research question

- How do public relations consultants in Sweden engage with generative artificial intelligence as a work tool?

## 1.4 Delimitations

To ensure the quality of the study, it was limited to public relations consultants in Sweden. The public relations profession does not have formal recognition; thus, everyone can claim to be a public relations practitioner. Therefore, we strived to find a source with established practitioners. As a result, we turned to Sweden's association for public relations, whose members are consultant agencies. This means that practitioners who operate in-house automatically were excluded from the study.

# 2. Previous Research

*The next segment presents previous research about the central areas of the study. First, we will clarify the concepts of AI and generative AI. Then, we compile the core features of the field of public relations and its practitioners. Lastly, a presentation of current research relating the fields of generative AI and public relations will be presented.*

## 2.1 AI

Artificial Intelligence is an overarching term that includes technology such as machine learning, deep learning, and natural language processing (Getchell et al., 2022). The first property mentioned, machine learning, is expressed in how experience is used to guide the performance of tasks (Getchell et al., 2022). Another property of the technology is natural language processing, which seeks to build comprehension around practical purposes that can be fulfilled by computers through text or speech. This is, however, not a new feature, and the objective of the processing is now to integrate contexts and nuances of meaning in the computer's understanding. By doing so, the technology becomes useful in various professional settings since the text is adjusted to fit the specific context (Getchell et al., 2022). AI tools that use these kinds of properties currently perform best for more specific tasks.

Artificial intelligence offers many opportunities. AI tools can be used to monitor sentiments among stakeholders in different channels, to enable timely responses from professionals. Other examples include detailed data analysis to develop insights about essential audiences, campaign planning, and predictions to serve as foundational facts for efficient businesses (O`Neil et al., 2023). Simultaneously, there are also challenges related to the increased use of AI. Because of the broad capabilities of the technology, it can change how businesses are run, what tools are required and the demand for employees. While some positions will be phased out or replaced, others will simultaneously emerge as part of the development (Santana & Fernandez, 2022).

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### 2.1.1 Generative AI

The broad media landscape of today's society creates a need for contextual relevance, which can be achieved through AI by applying various analyses when generating content (Richards, 2023). The creation of content is a central trait of generative AI, which is a sub-category of AI. According to International Business Machines Corporations, "Generative AI refers to deep-learning models that can generate high-quality text, images, and other content based on the data they were trained on" (2023). It uses large amounts of data during the training process, which enhances the ability to create relevant content (Marr, 2024). One specific tool is ChatGPT, which interacts with the user in a conversational manner (OpenAI, 2022). The substantial text production capabilities of ChatGPT have gained recognition to such an extent that it has nearly become synonymous with generative AI (Marr, 2024).

Among the broad spectrum of new technologies, generative AI provides a way to sustain competitiveness and foster innovation. The extensive potential of generative AI implies a strong motive for management to evaluate its use. (Husain, 2023) Apart from increased productivity due to the automatization of reoccurring tasks and developed decision-making through predictive analyses, it can also contribute to increased innovation through unexpected designs and enhance customer experiences through personalization (Husain, 2023).

## 2.2 Public Relations

There are multiple definitions of the field of public relations. The image of public relations and the practical elements of the profession have evolved with history and in various settings. Even today, modern public relations take several different forms, which is reflected in the diverse roles among practitioners (O'Donnell, 2023; Roberts-Bowman, 2021). Still, there is a shared foundation in the communication field. Public relations is one of the academic disciplines rooted in communication science and has previously been studied in various combinations with related fields (Lock et al., 2020). Some researchers relate public relations and corporate communication (Salmon et al., 2019), others add marketing, advertising, and public relations together to one cluster (Hallahan et al., 2007), and some distinguish public relations as a separate sub-field of communication (Botan & Taylor, 2004; O'Donnell, 2023). In practice, there is no set place for the public relations function at an organization, and where

it operates in relation to other parts of the organization differs. For example, public relations have often been assumed to be a function of marketing (O'Donnell, 2023). However, O'Donnell states that public relations is independent from marketing as they have different ways of contributing to the organizational goals. Marketing focuses on immediate sales, while public relations centers on the organization's long-term reputation.

There is no consensus on one single definition of public relations. Hence, researchers employ various explanations of the field (Roberts-Bowman, 2021). In this study, we apply the definition provided by The Chartered Institute of Public Relations, a worldwide professional organization for public relations practitioners.

> "Public Relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with
>
> the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion
>
> and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and
>
> maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation
>
> and its publics." (CIPR, n.d)

Even though the definition varies, some keywords are frequently applied to describe public relations. Previous literature and researchers emphasize public relations' connection to two-way communication, organizations and their publics, reputation, and relationships (Botan & Sommerfeldt, 2023; CIPR, 2023b; O'Donnell, 2023). It is critical that organizations uphold two-way communication and relationships with stakeholders since it enables the organization to create a long-term positive reputation (Jonkman et al., 2019; O'Donnell, 2023). How people view an organization's image highly impacts the organization's revenue and is, therefore, significantly valuable (Dowling, 2000; O'Donnell, 2023). Thus, building relationships and reputation is one of the primary ways the field contributes to the organization and why brands work with public relations (O'Donnell, 2023; Roberts-Bowman, 2021).

Public relations practitioners can help organizations improve their reputations in several ways. The three main categories of public relations are corporate PR, consumer PR, and public affairs. The first focuses on telling a story about the brand, the second emphasizes the product or service, and the third concerns policy change (O'Donnell, 2023). Within these categories, a public relations practitioner can work on an operational and strategic level and undertake various tasks to benefit the organization's image. Day-to-day work can, for

example, include supporting organization leaders, analyzing public behavior, communicating with the publics, designing campaigns, crisis communication, writing press releases and attending press conferences, corporate social responsibility, lobbying, and media relations. On a strategic front, work tasks can be to develop two-way communication strategies, overall PR strategies and sustain long-term relationships with publics and clients (O'Donnell, 2023; Panda et al., 2019). Public relations practitioners can operate in various settings. The two main ones are in-house or as consultants through a PR agency (O'Donnell, 2023).

### 2.2.1 Generative AI and Public Relations

Research examining the use of AI in public relations has increased during the last few years. In 2018, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) formed the first panel exploring the impact of AI in the public relations profession, the #AIinPR panel (CIPR, 2018). Since then, they have released several annual reports focusing on different topics. Additionally, scientific journals have published research examining AI in public relations in various contexts. The field advances rapidly, and continuous research has been and will continue to be necessary.

Previous research has addressed several tasks of public relations practitioners where generative AI has been applied. In 2023, 40 percent of the 21 identified public relations tasks were supported by AI tools (CIPR, 2023a). Both operational and strategic activities were reported, but CIPR (2023a) states that it primarily assists low-level tasks. Today, generative AI supports public relations practitioners with transcription, basic research and fact-checking, storytelling, and creating written content for pitches, press releases, and social media. Additionally, high-level tasks are also supported, such as crisis management, media relations, and content creation (CIPR, 2023b; Panda et al., 2019; Swiatek & Galloway, 2018, 2022). However, the level of assistance by AI varies depending on the task. In the report "Humans needed more than ever" by CIPR (2023a), they specify the percentage of support for each task. On average, the level of help by AI varies between 20 percent and 60 percent, meaning that no task is entirely replaced by AI. There are several AI tools that public relations practitioners can use. Toteva (2023) states that ChatGPT is the most commonly employed AI tool by public relations practitioners. However, in February 2023, the AIinPR panel reported that there are 6000 AI tools applicable for public relations practitioners (CIPR, 2023a). For

example, generative tools such as Dall-E 2, Midjourney, Jesper AI, Syntesia, and Stable Diffusion (Communication Trend Radar, 2023; CIPR, 2023b).

A recurring theme in previous research is the debate surrounding the potential of AI replacing public relations practitioners. Several researchers have reached the consensus that AI will not substitute human workers within the field of public relations. However, neglecting AI is not a choice since practitioners will have to collaborate with the technology across a diverse range of tasks (Communication Trend Radar, 2023; CIPR, 2023b; Swiatek & Galloway, 2018). Rather than replacing public relations practitioners, AI will change their role (CIPR 2023a; Liew, 2021; Toteva, 2023). There are various reasons why researchers do not believe AI can fully displace practitioners. Some explain that it cannot perform strategic tasks as satisfactory (CIPR, 2023a), while others emphasize that elements, such as nuanced ethical judgment, consideration of context, human critical thinking, empathy, trust, and storytelling, rely on human touch (CIPR, 2023a; Liew, 2021). Toteva (2023) expresses that generative AI is not as creative as humans since their responses are data-driven. Liew (2021) explains that public relations is a "human" industry that depends on relationships with various publics. One report from CIPR (2023a) even holds that humans will be needed more than ever.

> "Casual use of AI, particularly ChatGPT, without oversight by humans can
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> be catastrophic. That is why we still need to steer the ship and not let software
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> run unsupervised. Indeed, humans are needed more than ever to govern the
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> use of AI tools, avoid the ethical pitfalls inherent with many of them, such as
>
> bias and hallucination, and to provide guidance to organisations using these
>
> technologies." (CIPR, 2023a, p. 5)

Generative AI is changing the field of public relations in various ways, but the overarching effect is the increased efficiency of the work process (CIPR, 2023a; Liew, 2021; Panda et al., 2019). Studies by CIPR (2023) conclude that, due to AI tools, public relations practitioners can be 15 percent to 25 percent more productive on average. Some users of AI even concede that the time saved for certain tasks is 70 percent to 75 percent (CIPR, 2023a). By being able to perform mundane tasks, mass customization, and access data more efficiently, public relations practitioners can spend more time on strategic work (CIPR, 2023a; Liew, 2021; Panda et al., 2019).

Generative AI tools and the adoption of new technology can be considered both threatening and empowering for the public relations profession (CIPR, 2023b; Communication Trend Report, 2023). CIPR (2023b) explains that practitioners embracing generative AI believe it will help them prioritize their expertise in producing more valuable content. In the study by CIPR (2023a), practitioners reported that the time saved, which allows them to focus on strategic tasks, are the main opportunities offered by the technology. In the future, it is anticipated that AI will support strategic tasks to a greater extent. In one way, by assisting operational tasks even more efficiently and, therefore, free up time for strategic planning and fostering relationships (Panda et al., 2019). In addition, by directly assisting strategic tasks such as evaluation, planning, and producing more advanced reports in improved ways (Communication Trend Radar, 2023). From an organizational perspective, AI is implemented to improve the overall business value and gain a competitive position (Communication Trend Radar, 2023). Even though Panda et al. (2019) conclude that the majority of public relations practitioners are optimistic about the implementation of AI in the industry, previous research has also considered negative aspects.

Alongside the increased adoption of AI, the challenges and possible threats within public relations have also grown. The overall introduction of technology has created a more complicated climate for practitioners to handle relational and reputational damage since trust is not achieved as easily (Johnston & Glenny, 2020). The establishment of generative AI has intensified this issue due to the increased number of deep fakes and fake news (Swiatek & Galloway, 2022). Public relations, together with other fields, are confronted with challenges regarding security, bias, and privacy when using generative AI (CIPR, 2023b; Toteva, 2023). Furthermore, one of the main threats with generative AI for public relations practitioners is the decreased level of personal contact with stakeholders. With public relations emphasis on maintaining long-term relationships, it is essential for practitioners to maintain the ability to engage with them (CIPR, 2023b). Additionally, there are challenges regarding ethical considerations when using generative AI. There is no consensus on ethical guidelines, and it is a complex field to navigate (CIPR, 2023a). Previous research has drawn attention to ethical and legal issues such as how transparent public relations practitioners must be when using generative AI, fact-checking and the potential spread of misinformation, and copyright issues when generating images (CIPR, 2023b).

To summarize, one conclusion that can be found across various previous research is that AI is reshaping the role of public relations practitioners. CIPR (2023b) emphasizes that

AI is advancing rapidly and that we cannot know exactly how AI will influence public relations. However, AI is guaranteed to impact the profession (CIPR, 2023b). Whether adopted consciously or not, the emergence of generative AI is changing both work tasks, workflows, and the skills required for the public relations profession (Communication Trend Radar, 2023; CIPR, 2023a; Swiatek & Galloway, 2022). According to the Communication Trend Radar (2023), one of the five main trends within communication for 2024 will be augmented workflows due to the collaboration between humans and AI. This will influence how public relations practitioners accomplish tasks, reduce human error, and improve decision-making and productivity (Communication Trend Radar, 2023). As stated previously, the current adoption of AI in public relations is 40 percent but this is expected to increase to 50 percent within three years (CIPR, 2023a).

# 3. Theoretical Framework

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*This section defines the Sensemaking Theory applied to the study. In addition, it deepens the understanding of how the theory´s features can be applied to technology.*

## 3.1 Sensemaking Theory

In the specific context of workers reacting to digital changes, sensemaking is a useful theory to apply since it explains the process "through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations" (Goto, 2022, p. 78). Adoption of new technologies naturally is characterized by a learning curve, and the sensemaking process is crucial for the transformation to reach an acceptable level (Zulu & Saad, 2023) This is further emphasized by the statement that the process "can facilitate learning, creativity, and innovation in organizations." (O'Neil et al., 2023, p.3).

Sensemaking is a process among organizational members, which includes several social aspects. The interactions between individuals enables interpretations of the environment, the creation of common meaning that improves comprehension, and a united response to events  (Weick et al., 2005). To build an understanding of the process of sensemaking, research addresses numerous components. Studies offer an explanation of dynamics that are involved in creating an overall meaning in social contexts and explore how this is affected by changes in the environment (Zulu & Saad, 2023). Various contextual factors have been highlighted that shape the sensemaking process. Goto (2022) mentions the social positions of actors, their backgrounds, and what groups they belong to as examples.

Central characteristics of the sensemaking process are the emphasis on equivocality and enactment (Weick et al., 2005). The former reflects people's drive to find meaning as an effect of uncertain situations, where they want to find a sense of understanding. At the same time, the actions that are taking place are central in this process since they affect how the environment responds and what opportunities for future actions will emerge. This specific process describes enactment (Bansler & Havn, 2006).

Based on the various perspectives that Weick (1995) presents, he identifies seven characteristics of the sensemaking process that accentuate its nature. These characteristics serve multiple purposes that structure the discussion about sensemaking. Weick (1995) refers

to how they include the aspects of action and context that are central in sensemaking, and they constitute a sequential process that reflects the stages that may take place over time. Furthermore, they can be seen as a framework to increase the comprehension of the process in the way that they "suggest what sensemaking is, how it works, and where it can fail." (Weick, 1995, p.18). The characteristics are presented below with a brief explanation and additional perspectives from other researchers.

### 1. Grounded in identity construction

Individuals strive to reach clarity around their identity, and the sensemaking takes place to validate their preexisting beliefs or to adjust them in a scenario where they don´t develop an understanding. Weick et al. (2005) explain how this sensemaking characteristic, from an organization's perspective, refers to how a perceived identity influences the actions and interpretations. Ultimately, this will shape the perceptions among external parties and their actions toward the organization, resulting in a reinforced or more fragile identity.

### 2. Retrospective

The retrospective characteristic is reflected in the aspiration to make sense of lived experiences. Weick (1995) explains how this begins from an individual's current situation, which affects what past experiences are chosen to be part of the sensemaking. Li et al. (2016) expand this definition through a different perspective, by discussing how lived experiences also influence the individual's current comprehension.

### 3. Enactive of sensible environments

Weick's (1995) explanation of the sensemaking process implies that it is not exclusively related to external events. Individuals actively create parts of the context they meet through their actions, which later affect the sensemaking. Weick expresses how "they act, and in doing so create the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face." (1995, p. 31).

### 4. Social

There are several social factors influencing the sensemaking process. Bansler and Havn (2006) refer to conversations among people, established behaviors, and power dynamics as

examples. This points to the fact that making sense of something is not a process happening individually. It is a social process.

5. Ongoing

The process is continuous without a distinguishable start or end, which makes it open to influences from emotions or interruptions when trying to understand something (Weick, 1995). To clarify, the valence of emotions in experienced situations will influence which ones will be used in a current sensemaking process, as they tend to correlate with the current emotional state (Kaur et al., 2022).

6. Focused on and by extracted cues

In the sensemaking process, the extracted cues work as a guide to understanding a broader concept (Kaur et al., 2022). They can be defined as "simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (Weick, 1995, p.50). Kaur et al. (2022) address the importance of context since it influences what cues are noticed and how they are understood.

7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy

The sensemaking process does not concern established perspectives that are proven to be true. It is rather about the continuous efforts to adjust a story taking shape in order to make it more understandable and solid by including observations (Weick, 2005).

### 3.1.1 Sensemaking of Technology

According to Weick (1990), technology is characterized by equivocality. This enables several different perceptions among organizational members, which subsequently affect how the technology is received and used (Li et al., 2016). Among the seven characteristics of sensemaking presented by Weick, there are various perspectives on how they relate to approaching new technology.

From the perspective of *identity construction*, Barrett and Walsham (1999) discuss how the identity of individuals in an organization can be influenced when adopting IT. One effect could be anxiety over the necessity of the individual role, based on the capabilities of the new technology. It could also have an empowering effect, since it would lead to learning

new skills. According to Li et al. (2016)*,* the *retrospective* aspect of sensemaking can be recognized in the way previous experiences or events influence the understanding of IT and its potential. They also address *enactment* and how views affect actions involving technology, while their actions similarly affect the perceived value of it. To exemplify, the degree of investments in technology is correlated to how valuable it is considered (Li et al., 2016).

The *social* aspect of sensemaking plays an important role in the pursuit of making sense of technology. While Li et al. (2016) refer to social interactions and their effect on organizational members' interactions with IT, Fulk (1989), along with Gopal and Prasad (2000), further elaborate on this. Apart from collecting information about the technology from social occasions, they bring up how the reaction to *collected cues in the environment* are part of the sensemaking process. However, the information used when comprehending IT and its effects is not always processed and evaluated extensively. Instead, it is sometimes affected by the individual's choices of information (Tallon & Kraemer, 2007), which reflects the *plausibility* of sensemaking. Lastly, the *ongoing* characteristic of sensemaking is reflected in how technology can be approached in various ways during the progress of adoption (Li et al., 2016). According to Bansler and Havn (2006), the characteristics of *social*, *identity construction* and *plausibility* are especially important when observing the mediation of technology use.  This involves making sense of the technology to enable a more appropriate adaption in the setting where it is introduced.

# 4. Methodology

*The upcoming section will present the research methodology and thorough descriptions of how the study was conducted. To start, the qualitative- and scientific approach is clarified before explaining each step in the research process. The section will guide the reader through the purposeful sampling strategy used to sample the public relations consultants. This is followed by an explanation of how our data collection was performed using semi-structured interviews and how we analyzed the empirical material with thematic analysis. Lastly, we review our methodological choices and ethical practices.*

## 4.1 A Qualitative Approach

To align with the research question, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Qualitative research gives detailed descriptions of participants' own experiences, which allows us to achieve an in-depth understanding of the specific issue we are studying and produce new knowledge within the research field (Björklund & Paulsson, 2014; Hennink et al., 2020; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how public relations practitioners engage with generative AI as a work tool and thus add further insights to findings from previous quantitative research. Iaia et al. (2023) specifically request more in-depth studies within AI and communication. Furthermore, Hennink et al. (2020) emphasize that qualitative research is suitable when contributing new knowledge to complex fields, such as AI.

One of the most prominent aspects of qualitative research is the allowance to embrace the participant's perspective. This enables the researcher to fully comprehend their beliefs and actions while acknowledging the context in which the participant operates (Hennink et al., 2020). This was essential to our research since there are several contextual factors that possibly could influence a public relations practitioner's use of generative AI. Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how the population interprets and applies meaning to their experiences. By applying the Sensemaking theory, we could analyze this in a systematic manner.

The logical reasoning we worked according to throughout the research was abduction, as it allowed us to connect and generate ideas from both our empirical material and theoretical framework (Reichertz, 2014). It is a systematic way to create new concepts and thoughts. Abduction allows the researcher to gather environmental data, interpret it, and, based on the results, draw meaningful conclusions (Reichertz, 2014).

## 4.2 Scientific Approach

The researchers in this study adopted a social constructionist perspective. Everyone has assumptions about reality, and interpretation is necessary to comprehend qualitative data (Björklund & Paulsson, 2014; Willig, 2014). Depending on the researcher's views, the data, interpretation, analysis, and conclusions will be influenced (Björklund & Paulsson, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Hence, it is essential to be transparent with the scientific approach.

The ontological perspective is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed (Björklund & Paulsson, 2014; Silverman, 2013). The social constructionist approach accepts that the context an interview participant is a part of will influence the individual's beliefs and behavior (Hennink et al., 2020). We do not believe that one objective reality exists but that an event has several realities and interpretations. Thus, the reality and knowledge presented in this study are based on subjective interpretations from the researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The epistemological view recognizes that knowledge evolves with a deepened understanding, which is done in the observer's subjective reality (Björklund & Paulsson, 2014; Willig, 2014). Even though the social constructionist view acknowledges interpretation as a critical aspect of research, we were aware of the importance of not addressing the empirical material in ways that favored our research and staying critical by analyzing the same material multiple times (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015).

## 4.3 Population and Qualitative Sampling

The population examined in this study is public relations consultants in Sweden. To sample respondents within the population, we combined two purposeful sampling strategies. Patton (2002) emphasizes that purposeful strategies can be mixed to achieve the specific sampling strategy that will provide the most representative result. Our purposeful sampling strategy started with purposeful random sampling, followed by criterion sampling.

To start the sampling process, we needed to ensure we were sampling among valid practitioners. However, there is no formal recognition or compiled list of all public relations consultants. To guarantee the sampled participants were genuine practitioners and not simply self-proclaimed, we only sampled practitioners employed by public relations agencies connected to Precis, which is Sweden's association for public relations companies. "Precis nurtures the common industry standard and is a quality brand for its members" (Precis, n.d). By using a purposeful sampling strategy, we were able to sample information-rich cases within Precis rather than the entire population, allowing us to gather in-depth information from legitimate public relations consultants (Emmel, 2013).

The first strategy, purposeful random sampling, was used to sample among the 26 public relations companies connected to Precis. Purposeful random sampling is applied to studies that aspire to randomize the selection for a smaller sample, which is the case for qualitative research and this study ( Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020; Emmel, 2013). Randomization is a systematic way to collect data, where participants are selected without the researcher's impact or being aware of possible outcomes in advance (Emmel, 2013). Patton (2002) states that a randomized sample significantly increases credibility. To randomize which public relations companies to sample practitioners from, we used an online number generator and asked for five numbers between 1 and 26. These five numbers were then used to sample agencies from Precis's webpage, which we had previously assigned one number each.

To sample which specific practitioners to interview from each public relations agency, we used purposeful criterion sampling. Our aim was to sample two practitioners from each of the five different public relations agencies. We aspired to have ten interviews since that is a common benchmark for when saturation is fulfilled with qualitative interviews ( Emmel, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, the number of interviews that need to be conducted to fulfill the aim of the study is individual for each research (Emmel, 2013; Kvale

& Brinkmann, 2009). Thus, we evaluated the number of interviews during the data collection. By interviewing two people from each agency, we could gain a deeper understanding of whether their perspective on how AI is adapted is on an individual or organizational level. Additionally, we wanted to get insights from one person in a senior role and one in a junior position since we considered it to deepen the analysis. By sampling practitioners through criterion sampling, we could identify individuals depending on which role they entail (Emmel, 2013). After the respondents were sampled based on their role, we could conclude that the age among the respondents varied from 23 to 48 years old. 30 percent of the respondents were female, and 70 percent were male. We are aware that the outcome of the study could have differed if the age and gender distribution were different.

## 4.4 Data Collection

We performed ten semi-structured interviews to gather our data. Interviews are preferred when researchers wish to analyze someone else's perspective to gain a deeper understanding of a specific topic (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). Iaia (2023) emphasizes that in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of communicators' adaption of AI, we need to share learnings within the field, and interviews are a unique way to gain access to others' knowledge and experiences (Eksell & Thelander, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews were the most suitable form of interview for our study. By engaging in this form of interviews, we could prepare an interview guide while still leaving room for broader discussions about topics and add follow-up questions where it was necessary to gain a better understanding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We found it essential to be able to adapt to each specific occasion since our interview participants had different perspectives and reflections about generative AI. By adopting a semi-structured approach, we could efficiently exploit the thoughts that emerged during the interview, which contributed to new discoveries (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Before the interviews, we prepared an interview guide that supported the conversations. A well-planned interview guide is crucial since it enables the researchers to use the time efficiently and ensure the quality and relevance of the material for the analysis (Eksell & Thelander, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Before the interviews, the interview guide was tested to ensure the time consumption and clarity of the questions.

When we compiled the interview guide, we were mindful of what types of questions to include and avoid, how to formulate them, and in which order they were presented. The questions are grounded in our abductive approach, which allowed us to integrate established theoretical knowledge with new ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2013). See the interview guide in Appendix 1, together with a clarification of which questions are inductive and deductive. The guideline for all questions was to keep them simple and short since it makes it easier for the interviewee to respond to what the researchers are truly asking (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews started with opening questions to capture important background information. This was followed by questions related to public relations and generative AI, and we finished by asking if they wished to add anything and briefly summarized the discussion. All interviews were approximately 50 minutes long and conducted in Swedish between April 17th and May 9th, 2024.

Before asking questions, it is beneficial for researchers to start the interview with an introduction since it increases the probability of respondents answering more thoroughly (Eksell & Thelander, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We clarified that the interviews would be recorded, how the material would be handled afterward, and that their and the organization's name would be anonymous in the report. We also emphasized that we were interested in their personal experiences and not their representation of the organization. Additionally, we explained that we aspired to truthfully understand how they use AI and that we are not searching for right or wrong regarding generative AI. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) emphasize that the first minutes of the interview are crucial and that the participants should be encouraged to respond based on their own perceptions and experiences.

All interviews were performed through Teams, as we did not want our geographical location to limit possible participants. It was important to conduct the interviews via video call since it enabled us to connect better with the participants and notice body language (Brett & Wheeler, 2022). Both researchers attended all interviews, which improved the possibility to incorporate new questions and interpret answers that appeared during the interview. One researcher followed the interview guide, while the other focused on listening and adding questions where necessary. Active listening is essential to achieve a high-quality interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The most important research tool in an interview-based study is the interviewer. They are the primary component to ensure a high-quality interview, which is critical for the data

quality (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). During this study, the researchers conscientiously considered various factors to facilitate insightful interviews. For example, we made sure to have high knowledge about the topics, apply a structured research approach, and listen openly to our interviewees while still asking critical questions (Eksell & Thelander, 2014; Hennink et al., 2020; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

## 4.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data. It is a systematic approach used to identify themes across the data, analyze those themes, and report the uncovered patterns. It is a well-established analysis method within the social sciences that allows the researcher to detect similarities and differences in the empirical material, which we desired to do (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Compared to other analysis methods, it is a structured method to define the data and get a deeper understanding of the data and theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014; Kozinets, 2020; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015).

We began our analysis by transcribing the recorded interviews. This is a central step in the analysis process, as the written text of the interviews is the foundation for the analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Kowal & O'Connell, 2014). The transcription was done through the AI tool Good Tape, which generates a detailed text including all words, laughing, pauses, fillers, and false starts.

The next step was to construct the coding frame, which was used to analyze the data and identify themes. The codes were produced abductively, which allowed the researchers to identify inductive codes based on the interviews and deductive codes from theoretical ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kozinets, 2020). The deductive codes were based on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which consists of constructs determining the acceptance and use of new technology. The codes are rooted in the four main constructs of UTAUT: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). To achieve a more systematic coding frame and approach in a complex field, we found it beneficial to start from clearly defined aspects of technology acceptance. For the inductive codes, we began to take notes and identify codes during the interviews. Later, additional inductive codes were added during the coding. The codes in the coding frame are structured according to categories. The coding frame can be

found in Appendix 2 and includes the categories, the name of each code, its number and definition, and whether it is an inductive or deductive code. Disclosing precise definitions enables other researchers to use the codes and achieve an equivalent result.

Coding is the most crucial step in a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kozinets, 2020). When coding, researchers relate one or several codes to a segment of text, which facilitates the identification of patterns and specific statements (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). By using the coding frame and identifying patterns, overall themes where discovered. The themes were then used to gain in-depth insights of the data and theoretical framework (Kozinets, 2020; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The data was coded by both initial coding, where we closely read the material, and secondly, by focused coding, when we interpreted the data to develop themes (Charmaz, 2014). Both types of coding were done multiple times, separately, by both researchers. It is essential to code the same data multiple times as it contributes to new insights (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015; Wästerfors et al., 2014). It improves the researcher's ability to reproduce the participant's answers and interpret them, eventually enabling more informed conclusions (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). That is one of the many reasons both researchers were involved throughout the entire research process. By coding separately, we could better ensure the credibility of the coding frame and results as it reduces coding bias (Kozinets, 2020). See all identified themes and their related codes in the section "5.1 Themes and Related Codes".

The last step in the analysis was to present the material. However, reducing the material is unavoidable in qualitative research as it is impossible to display all the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). We worked according to thematic- and illustrative reduction to reduce our data and ensure we presented representative material. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) explain that combining these approaches allows an open strategy to provide possible answers to the research question. Thematic reduction implies that the material presented in the analysis is related to the identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The themes are presented at the beginning of the analysis section.

Illustrative reduction was applied to choose which material to present from each theme. By identifying key incidents in a specific theme, we could demonstrate the findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The quotes later used in the analysis are translated from Swedish to English. Eksell and Thelander (2014) explain that translation always includes changes to the original saying, which implies that researchers can add their interpretations.

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## 4.6 Methodological Reflections

To strengthen the credibility of the study's findings, we have systematically reported the methodological selections and been transparent about the research process. Qualitative data can be interpreted in various ways. By providing information about our scientific approach and detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis, we can better assist the reader in evaluating the results and applied interpretations (Björklund & Paulsson, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, credibility is improved by being transparent about how the codes are constructed (See Appendix 2) and how codes are related in the thematic analysis (See "5.1 Themes and Related Codes"). To enhance credibility, we would have preferred to use triangulation, but due to the time and resources available, we prioritized ensuring the quality of the interviews and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

We are aware that our study depends on contextual factors and that the results would have been different with other respondents. However, qualitative research does not aim to generalize findings. Despite this, qualitative studies can be helpful and transferable to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By specifying our research to generative AI and public relations consultants, others can more easily notice if the findings apply to them. Furthermore, the transferability and credibility of results are improved by our purposeful random sampling strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the research, we have been aware of the importance of reflexivity, and have critically reflected upon our methodological decisions (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

When performing interviews, there are several ethical considerations to be mindful of (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Firstly, the respondents participated with informed consent and could withdraw from the study at any point. Secondly, all respondents and organizations were kept anonymous as we wanted them to feel comfortable sharing truthful answers. All respondents were notified about the anonymity and aim of the study by the first request. Moreover, we started each interview by clarifying the anonymity, how the material would be used, and that we were the only ones with access to the recording. Thirdly, the respondents knew that another person from the same organization would be interviewed, but we did not say who or answer questions regarding which other agencies were a part of the study.

# 5. Analysis

*The following section presents the result and thematic analysis of the interviews with ten public relations consultants. The analysis is structured according to the identified themes that emerged during the coding. We start by presenting an overview of identified themes and their related codes. Secondly, we analyze how various actors influence the individual practitioner's engagement with generative AI. Thirdly, we delve into how public relations practitioners use generative AI today and provide a deeper understanding of the contributing factors. Lastly, the respondents' notions about the future of generative AI in public relations are presented. Throughout the section, the Sensemaking theory is applied. To guide the reader, the characteristics of sensemaking will be italicized.*

*The organizations are named from one to five. Practitioners with a senior role are referred to as a, and practitioners with a junior role are referred to as b. For example, respondents 1a and 1b are from the same organization, where 1a holds a senior position and 1b a junior position. To further maintain anonymity, the pronoun they/them is used.*

## 5.1 Themes and Related Codes

The figures below provide an overview of the themes and their related codes. We present each identified theme together with its subthemes. Additionally, we clarify which codes relate to each subtheme. During the analysis that follows, we continuously provide citations from the interviews and specify which codes are demonstrated in that specific text segment.

| ACTORS | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Organization** | **Industry** | **Customer** |
| **Codes** | **Codes** | **Codes** |
| 12 - Frequency of Use | 23 - Industry Perspective | 4 - Reliability |
| 22 - Organizational Approach | 25 - Scope of Discussion | 29 - Transparency towards Customers |
| 12 - Frequency of Use | 26 - Tone of Discussion | 30 - Conversations with Customers |
| 24 - Management Perspective | | 35 - Policy |
| 25 - Scope of Discussion | | |
| 33 - Internal Education | | |
| 34 - Subscription | | |
| 35 - Policy | | |
| 43 - Size of Agency | | |
| 26 - Tone of Discussion | | |
| 27 - Displaying Use | | |

Figure 1: The theme - Actors

| CURRENT USE OF GENERATIVE AI | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Assistance by Generative AI** | **Enhanced Efficiency** | **Refrain From Generative AI** |
| **Codes** | **Codes** | **Codes** |
| 1 - Expected Usefulness | 3 - Expected Benefits | 1 - Expected Usefulness |
| 4 - Reliability | 9 - Tasks assisted by generative AI | 2- Expected Effects of Usage |
| 8 - Generative AI tools | 10 - Tasks where generative AI is not applicable | 4 - Reliability |
| 9 - Tasks Assisted by Generative AI | 13 - Efficiency in task excecution | 7 - Expected Effort |
| 10 - Tasks Where Generative AI is not applicable | 14 - Freed-up time | 15 - Duality |
| 12 - Frequency of Use | 20 - Knowledge | 17 - Resons for Non-Usage |
| 17 - Reasons for Non-Usage | | 20 - Knowledge |
| 35 - Policy | | 20 - Interest |
| 44 - Public Relations Tasks | | 36 - Impact on Professional Skills |
| | | 46 - Years of Professional Experience |
| | | 37 - Replacement |

Figure 2: The theme - Current Use of Generative AI

| THE FUTURE´S IMPACT ON CURRENT ENGAGEMENT | |
|---|---|
| **Billing Rate** | **Replacement** |
| **Codes** | **Codes** |
| 1 - Expected Usefulness | 4 - Reliability |
| 15 - Duality | 28 - Customer Attitude |
| 17 - Reasons for Non Usage | 37 - Replacement |
| 28 - Customer Attitude | 40 - Threats |
| 31 - Billing Rate | 41 - Flaws |
| 39 - Challenges | 44 - Public Relations Tasks |
| 41 - Flaws | 36 - Impact on Professional skills |

Figure 3: The theme - The Future's Impact on Current Engagement

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## 5.2 Actors

A central theme throughout all interviews was the multiple approaches of generative AI that the respondents addressed, apart from their own. This correlates with the equivocality surrounding technology, where multiple meanings tend to co-exist (Weick, 1990). Similarly, it connects to Li et al. (2016), addressing how *social* interactions influence how we interact with technology and give opportunities to gather information about it. Therefore, the different perspectives covered during the interviews will be presented in more detail in the following section.

### 5.2.1 The Organization

All respondents perceived their organization's approach to generative AI as positive, which was noticed through various aspects. Initially, the multiple organizations discussed the technology during weekly meetings. However, the scope of discussion has gradually decreased. Several of them discussed realizing its importance and an encouraging mindset from management to explore the tools. This was noticed through the resources offered at each workplace. The most mentioned were internal education and enterprise subscriptions to generative AI tools. In addition, policies concerning the use of generative AI were also brought up by all respondents. The specific contents concerned everything from guidelines on specific ways to use the tools to which ones are not allowed, and how to address the use of generative AI towards consumers. Bansler and Havn (2006) emphasize the characteristics *social, identity construction,* and *plausibility* as important when adapting to new technology in a local context. By having policies, the organizations can more easily create conditions for an appropriate adaption.

Since a majority of the respondents shared how their organizations took action based on their positive approach, the resources mentioned also align with the *enactment* characteristic of sensemaking. Generative AI´s permanent role in the field onwards, highlighted by Liews (2021), motivates the resources facilitated by the organizations, which simultaneously indicates its perceived value (Li et al., 2016). Respondent 5a (personal communication, April 17, 2024) expressed that he cannot recall anything that has gotten as many investments during the last decade. The actions taking place are central to the

sensemaking process since they affect how the environment responds and what opportunities for future actions will appear (Bansler & Havn, 2006).

Respondents from the two largest organizations in the study, both belonging to an international network, expressed that they have more resources available for engaging with generative AI. One said, "It 's really a huge advantage to belong to a large corporation in these times." (1a, personal communication, April 19, 2024; code 43) when adding that they have more opportunities to invest in the technology. These opportunities were expressed in the availability of self-developed AI tools, as well as a dedicated AI group working with questions concerning the technology.

## 5.2.2 The Industry

To get a broader perspective of generative AI, the respondents were asked about their perceptions of the industry´s approach to the technology. Respondent 3b (personal communication, April 22, 2024) described public relations as a unique industry in many ways and exemplified by addressing the need to foresee trends. This future-oriented aspect of the field, in relation to generative AI, was common in the interviews. Four respondents stated that using AI is necessary to not fall behind in the competition or be seen as outdated (1a; 2b; 3b; 4b). Communication Trend Radar (2023) states how using generative AI can enhance business value and competitiveness. "We're an industry where everyone wants to be ahead of the curve. That applies to all questions." (2b, personal communication, April 17, 2024; code 23).

Despite the general impression among the respondents that the industry is enthusiastic about the use of generative AI, two respondents highlight a discrepancy between what is said and actually done, reflecting how the use is not as extensive as it appears to be. "In reality, I believe that very few actually use it in any meaningful way or to any significant extent" (1a; code 12, 23), "When managers and decision-makers at PR agencies get questions about AI, I notice that they don't really delve into the answers. They roughly know what to say, but there isn't any clarity on what they've actually done." (3a, personal communication, April 23, 2024; code 23, 24). From the perspective of *plausibility*, the possibilities that the technology offers create an ambition to increase understanding and adjust their own story taking shape in relation to it (Weick, 2005).

### 5.2.3 Customers

As mentioned in the segment "2.2. Public Relations", two core features of the public practitioner role are two-way communication and relationship-building with clients. In light of generative AI, the relationship with customers was covered in several responses. While a few discussed customers' own usage of generative AI and whether that could question the necessity of consultants' services in the future, most did not have a clear impression of customers' thoughts about generative AI. Many connected this to the fact that neither they nor customers often initiate a discussion about it. Respondent 5a explained that currently, there is no need to bring it up, but if generative AI becomes better, "then we'd need to have that discussion, but now it's still the consultant's work in the end" (code 29, 30).

A central point in terms of using generative AI was whether the consultants were transparent about it when communicating their work. As mentioned in section "5.1.1. The organization", some organizations' policies require the consultant to share when generative AI has been used. Some respondents said that this is unnecessary, considering the constant need for real people to finalize the results and the fact that if it is used, it is primarily done in the initial phase. Respondent 4a (personal communication, May 6, 2024) emphasizes that it is the end result and satisfaction of the client that matters, not if generative AI has been used. Participant 2a (personal communication, April 18, 2024) explained how transparency was more important during the first period of generative AI before it became common to use among more actors. 1a compares it to Google and says that it is not necessary to mention that it has been used.

The two respondents, 4a and 2a also addressed another approach concerning customers' expectations and needs. They discussed how their role and the agency's responsibility is to support customers in the process of understanding the technology. Both highlighted the necessity of the proactive approach in the industry, as increased general usage will require them to eventually offer services to support customers' own use of generative AI. 4a concluded that an agency cannot prevent clients from using generative AI themselves but instead help them to achieve better results on their own.

# 5.3 Current Use of Generative AI

The results from our interviews state that it is no longer a question of whether public relations practitioners use generative AI but rather to what extent and when. According to previous research, generative AI has become a commonly used work tool in public relations. In our study, all respondents use generative AI but to various extents and in different situations. Reports from CIPR (2023a) state that it is used as an assistance and that no task is fully replaced by AI, which aligns with the results of our research. None of the respondents have a specific task that is entirely substituted with generative AI. Respondent 5a said, "...this is a tool. Not a replacement" (code 1, 37), and 5b (personal communication, May 9, 2024) said, "AI can't do everything, but it certainly can do some parts" (code 1, 4). The following section will analyze the application of generative AI in public relations and explore how, when, and why it is employed.

## 5.3.1 Work Tasks With or Without Assistance by Generative AI

According to previous research presented in section "2.2.1 Generative AI and Public Relations", several tasks in public relations can be assisted by generative AI, while for some, AI is currently not useful. According to our interviews, the most reoccurring area of use was in the initial phase of a new project. Whether it be to brainstorm ideas, get a first rough text draft, or get insights into a new industry where their clients operate. However, it was always emphasized that the ideas and texts generated by AI are not good enough to use and have to be rewritten. Respondent 1b (personal communication, April 18, 2024) stated that "I use it as a starting point" (code 1, 9). Participant 1a explained that even though the ideas generated by AI are not creatively fulfilling, they can be useful because a bad idea often leads to other thoughts.

In addition to using generative AI at the beginning of a work process, the interviewees said that they use generative AI for operational tasks. For example, translation, research, summarizing and reformulating texts, structuring texts, deciding headings, finding spelling errors and synonyms, generating bullet points for meetings, adjusting and generating images, transcribing texts, getting thoughts for a PR-plan, and elaborating ideas. The frequency of usage varied among the participants. While some employ it once a week, others use it daily. Various factors explained the reason for this difference. While one person was referring to the

age and experience of some colleagues, another respondent reasoned about a lack of interest. A third reason was the specific type of role, where the departments with a more creative focus were perceived to use it to a larger extent, especially with image generation. One pattern we could identify based on the answers was that the two respondents from the same organization often applied generative AI to the same extent. This reflects the reasoning of Li et al. (2016), covering how interactions with IT within organizations are affected by the *social* interactions taking place.

The AIinPR panel has reported 6000 useful AI tools for public relations practitioners (CIPR, 2023a). The generative AI tools referenced during the interviews were Chat GPT 3.5 or 4.0, Midjourney, DeepL, Microsoft Copilot, Dall-E, Adobe Firefly, Perplexity, and Leonardo. Chat GTP was the AI tool that reoccurred the most, was always the first AI tool to be mentioned, and was the first contact with generative AI for most respondents. Toteva (2023) states that ChatGPT is the most commonly used AI tool among public relations practitioners, and according to Marr (2024), it has nearly become synonymous with generative AI due to its text production capabilities.

The interviews also showed that there are tasks where generative AI is not applicable. One issue discussed during several interviews was the limitation of using generative AI when handling confidential information about customers, which is common among agencies. Since most generative AI tools are open source, practitioners are restricted to not adding information about their clients. 4a explained that their policy consists of guidelines such as "...avoid sharing sensitive information and do not add client information. It's a lot about confidentiality." (code 17, 35). This is an aspect that, to our knowledge, has not been discussed in previous research. Furthermore, the study implies that generative AI is not fully useful in text production since it is insufficient in terms of tonality and linguistic proficiency in both English and Swedish. It was also stressed that generative AI cannot produce content suitable for direct use for images or information (4b, personal communication, April 18, 2024). Respondent 3b emphasized that AI cannot conduct relationship-building tasks, which is crucial for public relations (CIPR, 2023a; Roberts-Bowan, 2021).

To summarize, the applicable tasks reported by the respondents correlate with the low-level- and operational tasks that previous research states can be assisted by generative AI. Respondent 2a explained that generative AI is easier to use for operational tasks. Although previous research emphasizes that generative AI mainly assists routine tasks, some

researchers also include high-level- and strategic tasks where it has been helpful (CIPR, 2023b; Panda et al., 2019; Swiatek & Galloway, 2018, 2022). According to our interviews, generative AI cannot directly be applied to strategic tasks. 4b stated, "Generative AI can't produce a strategy in the way a human can" (code 10, 41). This aligns with CIPR's research, which addresses how "Strategy remains the domain of human judgment,..." (2023a, p.6). However, respondent 3b said that they can use generative AI as a sounding board to discuss questions that might be of interest for a strategy. Participant 5a explained that generative AI is only helpful for strategic work when generating initial ideas, but no more than that. This was clarified by addressing that this is a personal experience and that the specific public relations roles a practitioner entails will affect which tasks generative AI is applicable for.

### 5.3.2 Enhanced Efficiency

With the confirmation that the respondents use generative AI for various work tasks, the study aspired to deepen the understanding of the benefits of using generative AI. The result shows that the greatest outcome of generative AI is increased efficiency. Previous research also concludes that efficiency is the primary outcome of generative AI in public relations (CIPR, 2023a; Liew, 2021; Panda et al., 2019). 4b declared, "But I'd say that time efficiency is the number one greatest benefit" (code 3, 13). The participants expressed various aspects of the increased efficiency. For example, respondents 1b, 4b, and 5a declared that it saves time in the initial thought process and when processing texts. 3a explained that tasks that previously took three hours now take ten minutes with the assistance of generative AI.

Everyone except two participants stated that using generative AI has made their work process more efficient. Respondents 1a and 2b understood this possibility but had not experienced it personally. However, both recognize that in a couple of years, they most likely will once AI tools are more developed and they have more knowledge about how to use them. 2b clarified the lack of efficiency with the fact that they still learn how to use generative AI and, thus, have to spend time learning instead of being able to use it right away. The rest of the respondents had personal experiences when generative AI had improved efficiency. The *retrospective* characteristic of sensemaking captures both perspectives. The previous experiences of efficient task execution through generative AI, or the lack of them, shape how the potential of the technology is understood (Li et al. 2016).

The freed-up time that public relations practitioners gain thanks to the assistance of generative AI is allocated in diverse ways. The interviews point out that it can either increase quality or quantity. Respondents 3a and 4b explained that it improves the end results for that task or other tasks because the time saved can be spent improving quality. Participants 1b, 3b, and 5a stated that the quality of the result is the same, but the practitioners have time for more tasks or clients. 4b explained that the extra time enabled the agency to focus its human resources on more strategic work. Thus, even though the study shows that generative AI has not directly assisted at a strategic level, the time saved on operational tasks can be used to put more human effort into strategic work. This corresponds to research made by CIPR, which states, "A major benefit of using AI tools to increase efficiency is that the time released can be used to be 'more strategic'" (2023a, p.6). Regarding generative AI enabling practitioners to accomplish more, respondent 5a explained that it might not be something to aspire for. If the occupancy rate is correct, the agency might not prioritize adding clients. On a personal level, the interviewee clarified that boosted efficiency also can lead to an increased workload as there is always something else to do.

### 5.3.3 Choosing to Refrain From Generative AI

While many respondents explained how they used generative AI for various tasks, some also addressed how they actively choose not to use AI tools even when they can be applied. One re-occurring reason was that the quality of the generated material is still not satisfactory enough to use as a final product. For example, 5b addressed this, saying, "It does not generate a good end result" (code 4, 17, 41). Several respondents expressed that they do not rely on generative AI in that aspect. However, the results show that even though the material generated by AI is useful, there are other reasons the practitioners actively choose not to use generative AI. As Weick (1995) expresses, preexisting beliefs influence the sensemaking process and the search for clarity in uncertain situations. In relation to the practitioner's *identity construction,* refraining from generative AI is validated by the belief that the role needs to maintain high-quality work and competence.

One argument that several respondents repeated was the fear of deteriorating their public relations skills, which previous research has not highlighted as a reason for refraining from generative AI. 2a explained that their skills would get worse if using generative AI for all tasks. "Even if what it produced would be top-notch, it would mean that I lose my own

ability" (2a; code 2, 15, 17, 36). Respondent 1b expressed no interest in developing competence in AI tools, based on the belief that relying on generative AI too much will result in losing one's edge in the public relations industry. Participant 5a stated that a part of today's public relations skills is complementing generative AI but has already noticed how that competence is decreasing.

> "It's about the concern that there might be a risk in not practicing
>
> enough when using simplifying tools. And it doesn't matter much
>
> for that specific task where you're using the tool. However, that task
>
> might be the practice you need to perform at something else." (5a; code 36).

Respondent 2b did not mention that generative AI would lower their own skills. Instead, it was explained that they only use generative AI to a certain level because there is professional pride in what is delivered to clients. 1a highlighted that there can be a difference between junior and senior practitioners. They emphasized that, specifically, senior practitioners have better craftsmanship in public relations than AI. The interviewee exemplified this by explaining that some new co-workers have creative ideas on level one, which generative AI also does.

Another reason the respondents chose not to use generative AI is that it does not generate new creative ideas, which multiple interviewees mentioned as a crucial part of public relations. Respondent 3a has experienced that both pictures and texts generated by AI easily become uniform, which does not align with how "PR revolves around breaking through the noise" (3a). Toteva (2023) explains that a flaw with generative AI is its limited creativity. Additionally, respondent 1a emphasized that AI only generates obvious results, while a public relations practitioner's job is to deliver new, interesting, and creative ideas. The interviewee still considers humans to be better than AI in this regard but believes that AI will become more advanced in this field. This resonates with Hussain (2023), who predicts that generative AI will contribute to increased innovation and unexpected ideas in the future. In contrast, 4b does not think that generative AI will ever be able to replace human creativity.

Respondent 2a offered an additional perspective when explaining that the biggest reason for not employing generative AI to a greater extent, is the desire to not let AI replace the most enjoyable parts of the job. Furthermore, the interviewee stated that generative AI is

not sufficient enough to execute what they consider boring tasks, such as administration. Instead, it lessens the work they appreciate the most, for example, writing, "I am not trying to seek help on the parts I actually find enjoyable" (2a; code 17).

The two respondents who indicated that they use generative AI least frequently were 1a and 2b. As previously mentioned, they are also the only respondents who have not personally experienced generative AI increasing their work efficiency. That result amplifies the analysis that increased efficiency is one of the primary reasons for adopting generative AI. Thus, since they have not experienced that effect, they use generative AI less. Furthermore, our result shows that there are additional arguments as to why they do not utilize generative AI more. Both respondents explained that they had noticed challenges in breaking old habits and that AI tools were not a natural resource to use (1a; 2b). "I just postpone using it" (1a; code 7). Respondent 1a highlighted not having time to experiment and, thus, does not increase the understanding of the tools, which limits the application of generative AI. 2b also emphasized that their low level of knowledge about generative AI and specific tools is a contributing factor to the lower use frequency. Despite the other respondents' higher frequency of use, the recurring reflection was that more knowledge about generative AI would drive increased use.

## 5.4 The Future's Impact on Current Engagement

The developments of generative AI have taken place at an increasingly high speed, where available tools go through improvements constantly (Grant & Meadows, 2020). As several respondents reasoned, this may change how they use generative AI in their work in the future. This corresponds to how environmental changes affect the creation of meaning in social contexts (Zulu & Saad, 2023). Similarly, some addressed how the usage has changed since they initially got familiar with generative AI tools. Another change that has been seen is on the industry level, where some state that agencies have gone from being secretive with their use of generative AI to showing off their plans with the technology.

Two respondents specifically addressed this changing aspect of the technology in relation to the investments made by their organization. 3b discusses how the organization evaluates to develop their own generative AI tool, but the uncertainty of where the developments will take the field within months has delayed the decision. Respondent 1a

made a similar reasoning and concluded that investment in the technology is "An incredibly challenging thing that constantly needs adjustment and reassessment." (code 39). This reflects the *ongoing* aspect of sensemaking, which acknowledges how the pursuit of reaching a common meaning is a continuous process without an identifiable end (Kaur et al., 2022). In the context of new technology, this means that it can be dealt with in different ways during adoption (Li et al., 2016). With this perspective as a starting point, the following section will go through themes that connect to the evolving nature of generative AI and some implications of what this could mean for the public relations field in the future.

### 5.4.1 Billing Rate for Public Relations Agencies

One interesting perspective that emerged during several interviews was the impact that the use of generative AI can have on the billing rate. Since this is not addressed in previous research, it adds a new perspective to the comprehension of the usage of generative AI among public relations professionals.

Based on the amount of financial resources clients spend on consultants' expertise, three respondents agreed that using generative AI for their work would not be justified. 1a addressed how clients probably would not appreciate the fact that this technology was used. In addition, 1b clarified that it is the specific competence of humans that clients pay for. Respondent 2a summarizes this view by describing ChatGPT as follows: "I don't think that, linguistically and stylistically, meets the standard one might expect from a consultant with a relatively high hourly rate." (code 17, 28, 41). In contrast, 3b presents a more positive attitude regarding the use of generative AI, with the background that time is equal to money in the public relations industry. Instead of clients opposing the use of it, the respondent had experienced a client who asked them to use it in order to save time. This shows two different sides of engagement with generative AI in relation to the financial aspect. Concerning this topic, 2b said, "We're facing a new issue in the consulting industry." (code 39) while giving an example of a billing situation: "If I use AI now, and it perhaps takes half an hour. Does the work cost 1000 or still 2000:-?" (code 15, 31, 39). As an extension of the reasoning, respondent 5a reflects on how every service will gradually be worth less money since customers will understand AI to a larger extent. In the end, this may require a more extensive set of tasks to maintain employment at the organization.

### 5.4.2 Will AI Replace Public Relations Practitioners?

Several researchers in the field of public relations and AI have concluded that AI will not replace human practitioners (Communication Trend Radar, 2023; CIPR, 2023b; Swiatek & Galloway, 2018). This agrees with the results of our study since none of the respondents believe that AI will take their jobs. However, the answers in the interviews gave us more nuanced insights into this statement.

Even though all respondents reached the conclusion that, at least for the moment, they are not afraid of being replaced, the level of certainty in that statement varied. While some expressed feelings such as "I don't believe AI will take my job" (2b; code 37) and "I believe AI never will be able to replace humans, especially the creative aspect" (4b; code 37, 41), others were a bit more open to the possibility. For example, 2a said, "The risk exists, no doubt. But I don't see it. I don't go around worrying about it" (code 37, 40). However, even respondents who were confident about their work position often added that they cannot know for sure how AI will develop and that it might affect their thoughts in the future.

The research shows that the two primary reasons why the respondents do not believe AI will replace them are because of the inadequate quality of the generated material and the fact that public relations is a profession dependent on the human factor. According to the analysis in the section "5.2.3 Choosing to Refrain From Generative AI", insufficient quality is a factor that impacts practitioners to refrain from generative AI today. Many respondents hold that generative AI must significantly progress to match practitioners' work. Thus, it has to become considerably better in order to replace them. 5a asserts that when or if AI replaces practitioners, it is a scam because it cannot perform tasks with comparable proficiency. Furthermore, respondent 2a expressed, "I see that I have a value that can't be replaced with AI" (code 37).

Several respondents highlight that even if the quality of generated material would become satisfactory, the public relations profession still depends on the human touch. However, they emphasized reasons that previous research, presented in section "2.2.1 Generative AI and Public Relations", has not. Respondents 1a and 1b stated that generative AI will never be as creative as humans, and 1b clarified by saying: "It goes without saying that it will be very difficult for an AI to do it. Even if it advances. Because it also involves a

lot of emotions and many other human factors" (code 41). Additionally, 1b stated that customers pay for the human factor and not for content produced by generative AI, "Since we're consultants, they really do pay us for our advice and expertise" (1b; code 28). However, the key aspect of why public relations depends on humans is because it involves building relationships. In accordance with Roberts-Bowan (2021), the respondents highlight that building relationships with various publics is an essential part of public relations. 5a clarified, "It's my craftmanship to have a good relationship with the customer" (code 44), and respondent 3b believes that building relationships will be complicated for AI to replace.

Liew (2021) asserts public relations as a "human industry" since it depends on relationships with various publics. 3b emphasized that once generative AI is more advanced, relationships will become increasingly important, and stakeholders will better understand the true value of the contacts a public relations consultant has. During the interviews, respondent 3b was the only one who asserted that instead of replacing practitioners, AI will make the human factor even more essential in public relations. This aligns with a report by CIPR (2023a), which asserts that humans will be needed more than ever. However, the results of this study and CIPR (2023a) present different reasons for this. While CIPR (2023a) states that it is mainly because humans need to govern the use of AI tools, respondent 3b asserts that various publics, such as customers and journalists, will wish to communicate with another person, not a robot. "I believe the human factor will be more in focus and that we'll be even closer in some way" (3b; code 36).

As stated in the previous research, various researchers believe that rather than replacing public relations practitioners, AI will change their role. Our study shows the same result as all respondents indicated that the role of public relations practitioners will change. 5a explained that depending on which tasks a person is responsible for, their role will change in various ways. Even though respondent 1a, who entails a senior role, does not fear AI can replace them, they expressed, "Of course there is a fear inside me that my expertise and knowledge won't be as valuable in the future" (code 37). Furthermore, they believe that rather than deteriorating practitioners' skills, which other respondents emphasized, what is viewed as great skills will change. Respondent 4b, who is younger, said that they had decided to join the agency's AI group since they believe that practitioners who can employ generative AI in a beneficial way will be desired in the future.

The results of our interviews showed a contradiction among the respondents. Even though they are not afraid of being replaced by AI themselves, multiple respondents mentioned that the number of public relations practitioners will decrease. Both because of increased efficiency and because customers will be able to do more work themselves. Some respondents expressed that their personal public relations role is valuable enough to keep, while others will be replaced by AI. For example, 4b stated, "It's not that someone will replace my role, but there won't be a need for as many practitioners, there will be a smaller workforce in the future." (code 37). Who they assume will be replaced varies. While some state that practitioners who are ambitious and skilled will remain (1a), others emphasize that it depends on the specific public relations role (2b) or that those who can handle AI best will keep their jobs (3b; 4b). Furthermore, 3b clarified that they expect young people to be better at using AI and that older practitioners might fall behind. According to Barret and Walsham (1999), adopting new technology can affect employees' *identity construction.* For example, by experiencing anxiety. However, the results of the interviews indicate that the respondents currently do not feel direct anxiety about being replaced by generative AI.

# 6. Discussion and Conclusion

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*The section starts with the discussion. We then finalize the report by clarifying our conclusion and offering suggestions for future research.*

## 6.1 Discussion

The study examined *How do public relations consultants in Sweden engage with generative artificial intelligence as a work tool?* The results revealed the multifaceted nature of the answer to the question, as the engagement took various forms. By applying the Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995), the study highlights several factors that manifest how public relations practitioners engage with generative AI.

The equivocality of generative AI is evident in the findings presented in the analysis. While many respondents aligned with each other on several themes, diverse perspectives emerged during the interviews, highlighting the coexistence of multiple meanings. This underscores the complexity of the sensemaking process surrounding generative AI and how it depends on several sensemaking characteristics. The engagement of generative AI varies in terms of frequency, which tools, for what tasks, in which ways, and reasons for usage or refraining from it. The process of making sense of generative AI occurs in parallel among all practitioners. It is influenced by individual factors such as social context, seniority, knowledge, age, and anticipations of future possibilities and challenges.

The Sensemaking Theory emphasizes that several social factors influence the sensemaking process. Simultaneously, the applied meaning and utilization of generative AI are considerably dependent on individual factors. The analysis accentuates several occasions where various stakeholders' views of generative AI are not reflected in practitioners' use. For example, the public relations industry's progressive attitude toward generative AI is not reflected in personal engagement. We believe the industry's approach can influence practitioners to start employing the new technology, as they feel obligated to do so in order to stay relevant. However, the practitioners often became negative about using it extensively when experiencing flaws in current tools. In the context of the organization, another example was that several respondents witnessed that their colleagues' descriptions of how much they

apply generative AI do not mirror their actual utilization. While some indicate that they use it a lot, perhaps to appear up-to-date, some respondents did not believe their co-workers truly use it as much. Others stated that colleagues most likely use it more than they display, as they do not want to be seen as incompetent. This demonstrates an interesting imbalance between how perceptions around new technology are counteracted by practical usage.

The responses in our interviews demonstrate that consultants' current engagement with generative AI is influenced by their perception of current and future challenges. To our knowledge, some of these new implications have not been addressed in previous research. We believe these key findings have, and will continue to greatly impact practitioners' engagement with generative AI.

One of those findings is the complex situation with billing rates presented in section "5.3.1 Billing Rate for Public Relations Agencies". As generative AI becomes increasingly incorporated into the consultants' work and more acknowledged by customers, we assume that the billing rate for public relations services will be affected. This finding specifically relates to consultants, compared to practitioners working in-house, since they depend on the billing from various clients. This raises the question: if generative AI increasingly assists consultants, will the value of their services decrease? Or will they become even more valuable since the human touch and public relations work becomes more evident when everyone can operate with the same AI tools?

Another finding relates to how AI tools handle confidential information. A consultant cannot add all information about a client to an open-source tool, which limits the practitioners' use of generative AI. To enable public relations to engage with generative AI to a greater extent, tools where confidential information can be included need to be developed. If larger agencies can afford to develop tools where their customers' confidential information can be added, it will be harder for smaller competitors to maintain the same efficiency. We fear that if this happens, a greater division between larger and smaller agencies could emerge. Thus, smaller, local firms might struggle to survive. However, the result of our study also shows that other aspects than efficiency are essential for public relations.

A newfound contradiction was the relation between developing new skills and maintaining existing ones. Some respondents expressed a perceived need to use generative AI to stay relevant and develop new skills for improved utilization of the technology. Others underscored that not using generative AI can protect the skills that differentiate them from

generative AI. Thus, one perspective is that practitioners need to learn about working with generative AI, and another is that extensive usage is not worth the risk of deteriorating their skills.

Lastly, a key finding is that being able to personally perform enjoyable parts of the job can be prioritized over engaging with AI, even though it increases efficiency or contributes to other benefits. On the one hand, generative AI could possibly assist with what some consider tedious tasks, which frees up time for more rewarding work. On the other hand, it might replace parts of the job that practitioners find enjoyable. Hopefully, practitioners have chosen to work in public relations because they think it is an exciting job. Thus, one can question why practitioners would like to use a tool that removes enjoyable parts of the work.

## 6.2 Conclusion

In summary, public relations consultants engage with generative AI primarily for assistance with operational low-level tasks, resulting in increased efficiency. The engagement is influenced by the current technological capabilities of generative AI tools, the challenges and opportunities they present, and various contextual factors like the social environment. From a bigger perspective, there is no standard of how the technology is used on an organizational or industry level. Individual factors play a central role in how each practitioner utilizes generative AI, contributing to the engagement's multifaceted nature. Generative AI has become present in public relations and encompasses both current and future challenges that need to be considered. Overall, even though the engagement with the technology varies, AI is generating a new reality of public relations.

## 6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Generative AI in public relations is evolving rapidly. AI's constant developments require continuous research as the technology provides new possibilities and applications. Future research is critical, as AI undoubtedly will have practical implications for public relations practitioners and the research field.

This study was centered on public relations consultants employed by agencies. To better understand the whole public relations industry, we encourage future researchers to study practitioners working in-house for a company. Some challenges for generative AI in public relations presented in our study indicate a possible difference in how consultants and in-house public relations practitioners engage, which calls for further research. Additionally, our study emphasizes that the social surroundings impact how public relations consultants use generative AI. This finding motivates further investigation to learn which actors affect the engagement, to which degree, and how.

We believe the qualitative approach has been beneficial when exploring AI and communication and that additional qualitative studies are necessary to deepen previous quantitative research further. As this study examines Swedish practitioners, supplementary research in other geographical locations is essential in understanding whether and how geographical and cultural differences influence engagement with generative AI.

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# Appendix 1: Interview Guide

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The interview guide was written in Swedish. Thus, this is a translated, English, version of the original interview guide.

**Introduction**

Before we start with the questions, we would like to briefly outline how the interview will proceed and what we are investigating here today.

- The purpose of this study is to understand how public relations practitioners engage with generative AI as a work tool
- This does not imply that there is a right or wrong way to use it; rather, we encourage you to be honest about how much you use it, in what manner, and why..
- It is also important for us to hear your personal perspective. We will ask some questions about your organization as well, but our main focus is to learn more about public relations and generative AI in relation to your personal experiences.
- There are different types of AI, but to clarify, we are specifically interested in generative AI. Generative AI refers to deep-learning models that can generate high-quality text, images, and other content based on the data they were trained on.

Now onto some more practical details

- The interview will be recorded, we are the only ones with access to the recordings.
- In the report, your and your organization's names will be anonymous.
- Both of us will be present during the interview. I will be responsible for leading the interview, but X will also be present to listen, take some notes, and possibly ask some follow-up questions.

Do you have any questions before we start?

**Introductory Questions**

- Tell us about (company name) and the services you offer. (Inductive)

- Describe your role at the company. (Inductive)
- What are your main responsibilities? (Inductive)
- How long have you been working in public relations? (Inductive)
- How long have you been employed at your current company? (Inductive)

**Introductionary questions about generative AI**

- When did you first encounter generative AI? (Inductive)
- What was your initial reaction when you heard about generative AI? (Inductive)

**Their personal use of generative AI as a work tool**

- Do you use generative AI in your role today? (Inductive)
- If yes: How do you use generative AI in your role today? (Inductive)
- What factors contribute to your current use or non-use of generative AI? (Inductive)
- Do you think your use of generative AI is influenced by your level of knowledge of how to use the tools? (Deductive)
- How do you perceive the difficulty of using generative AI? (Deductive)
- What generative AI tools do you use? (Inductive)
- Do you have previous experience using artificial intelligence at any of your previous workplaces? (Inductive)
- How often and how much do you use generative AI? (Inductive)
- In what contexts do you use generative AI in your work? (Inductive)
- Give an example of a scenario in which you use generative AI in your work. (Inductive)
- Which of your work tasks has been most affected by the use of generative AI? (Deductive)
- Do you primarily use generative AI for operational or strategic tasks? (Deductive)
- Do you think generative AI has made your work more efficient? (Deductive)
- Can you provide examples of how generative AI has made your work more efficient? (Deductive)
- If so, how do you prioritize the freed-up time? (Inductive)
- For which tasks do you feel that generative AI is not useful? (Deductive)

**The organizations use of generative AI as a work tool**

- How do you perceive your organization's general attitude toward generative AI? (Deductive)
- How do you work with generative AI within your organization? (Deductive)
- To what extent do you discuss generative AI within your organization? (Deductive)
- Do you have specific guidelines regarding the use of generative AI? (Deductive)
- Have you conducted any internal training on generative AI at your workplace? (Deductive)
- What resources does your workplace offer to enable you to work with generative AI? (Deductive)
- Are you encouraged by your managers to use generative AI? (Deductive)

**The use of generative AI as a work tool from the public relations industry and customer perspective**

- How do you perceive the industry's attitude towards generative AI? (Deductive)
- How do you perceive your customers' views on AI? (Deductive)
- Is generative AI something your customers expect you to use? (Deductive)
- Have you experienced that your customers are against the use of generative AI? (Deductive)
- Is your usage of generative AI something you discuss with your customers? (Deductive)
- Are you transparent regarding which parts of your work you may have used generative AI for? (Inductive)

**Opportunities and benefits of generative AI in public relations**

- What benefits do you see in using generative AI in public relations? (Deductive)
- What opportunities do you see in using generative AI in public relations? (Deductive)

- Have you thought of areas in public relations where generative AI could have been applied if it was more advanced? (Inductive)

**Risks and challenges of generative AI in PR**

- What challenges have you encountered with generative AI in public relations? (Deductive)
- What risks do you believe exist with generative AI in public relations? (Deductive)
- How do you handle ethical issues that may arise from using generative AI? (Deductive)
- Have you ever felt concerned that AI may replace you in your work role? (Deductive)

**Closing questions**

- Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience using generative AI in public relations? (Deductive)
- Do you have any additional thoughts or reflections on the topic? (Deductive)

If there is anything else you would like to add afterward, please feel free to contact us.

# Appenxid 2: Coding Frame

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<table>
<tr><td colspan="4"><b>Performance Expectancy</b><br>Deductive category - UTAUT<br>The expected benefits to performance when using generative AI</td></tr>
<tr><td><b>Code</b></td><td><b>Code number</b></td><td><b>Definition</b></td><td><b>Inductive or deductive code</b></td></tr>
<tr><td>Expected usefulness</td><td>1</td><td>The expected usefulness of generative AI as a work tool</td><td>Deductive code</td></tr>
<tr><td>Expected effects of usage</td><td>2</td><td>The expected effects due to the usage of generative AI</td><td>Decuctive code</td></tr>
<tr><td>Expected benefits</td><td>3</td><td>The expected benefits of using generative AI</td><td>Deductive code</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reliability</td><td>4</td><td>Whether the outputs from generative AI are reliable for use or not</td><td>Inductive code</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4"><b>Effort Expectancy</b><br>Deductive category – UTAUT<br>The level of difficulty in using generative AI</td></tr>
<tr><td><b>Code</b></td><td><b>Code number</b></td><td><b>Definition</b></td><td><b>Inductive or deductive code</b></td></tr>
<tr><td>Difficulty</td><td>5</td><td>The difficulty of using generative AI</td><td>Deductive code</td></tr>
</table>

| Easy use | 6 | The ease of using generative AI | Deductive code |
|---|---|---|---|
| Expected effort | 7 | The expected effort to using generative AI | Deductive code |

| **The Use of Generative AI** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inductive category | | | |
| The use of generative AI by public relations practitioners | | | |
| **Code** | **Code number** | **Definition** | **Inductive or deductive code** |
| Generative AI tools | 8 | Generative AI tools used for work tasks | Inductive code |
| Tasks assisted by generative AI | 9 | Public relations tasks where generative AI is applicable | Inductive code |
| Tasks where generative AI is not applicable | 10 | Public relations tasks where generative AI is not considered useful | Inductive code |
| Potential assistance by generative AI | 11 | Tasks where generative AI would be useful if it was more developed | Inductive code |
| Frequency of use | 12 | How often generative AI is used | Inductive code |
| Efficiency in task excecution | 13 | Whether generative AI has made the work process more efficient or not | Inductive code |
| Freed-up time | 14 | How public relations practitioners use the | Inductive code |

| | | freed-up time gained by using generative AI | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Duality | 15 | Two contrasting aspects of using generative AI | Inductive code |

<br>

| **The Respondents Approach** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inductive category | | | |
| The respondent's approach to using generative AI and how it has changed over time | | | |
| **Code** | **Code number** | **Definition** | **Inductive or deductive code** |
| Reasons for usage | 16 | Reasons why the respondent use generative AI | Inductive code |
| Reasons for non usage | 17 | Reasons why the respondent do not use generative AI | Inductive code |
| Initial opinion | 18 | The initial opinion when hearing about generative AI or trying it the first time | Inductive code |
| Current opinion | 19 | The respondent's current opinion about generative AI | Inductive code |
| Knowledge | 20 | The level of knowledge about using generative AI | Inductive code |
| Interest | 21 | The interest in exploring generative AI | Inductive code |

| | | **Social Influence** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Deductive category - UTAUT | |
| | | How the respondents perceive important others' approach towards generative AI and their social expectations | |
| **Code** | **Code number** | **Definition** | **Inductive or deductive code** |
| Organizational approach | 22 | How the respondent perceive the organization's approach to generative AI | Inductive code |
| Industry perspective | 23 | How the respondent perceive the industry's approach to generative AI | Inductive code |
| Management's perspective | 24 | How the management adress generative AI | Inductive code |
| Scope of discussion | 25 | The frequency of discussing generative AI in the organization | Deductive code |
| Tone of discussion | 26 | How the employees in the organization discuss generative AI | Deductive code |
| Displaying use | 27 | The willingness among colleagues to be open with their use of generative AI | Inductive code |

| Customers | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Deductive category - UTAUT | | | |
| Generative AI in the relationship between the agency and customers | | | |
| **Code** | **Code number** | **Definition** | **Inductive or deductive code** |
| Customer attitude | 28 | How the respondent perceive customers approach to generative AI | Inductive code |
| Transparency towards customers | 29 | How the use of generative AI in work tasks is communicated to customers | Inductive code |
| Conversation with customers | 30 | The conversation about generative AI with customers | Inductive code |
| Billing rate | 31 | The use of generative AI and its impact on billing rate | Inductive code |

| Facilitating Conditions | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Deductive category – UTAUT | | | |
| The perceived availability of resources to support the implementation of generative AI | | | |
| **Code** | **Code number** | **Definition** | **Inductive or deductive code** |
| Time | 32 | The time available to learn and explore generative AI | Deductive code |
| Internal education | 33 | The organization providing internal | Deductive code |

| | | education about generative AI | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Subscription | 34 | The organization offering subscriptions for generative AI tools | Deductive code |
| Policy | 35 | Policy documents covering the use of generative AI | Deductive code |

| **The Impact of Generative AI in Public Relations** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inductive category | | | |
| The respondent's assumptions of how generative AI will impact the public relations profession | | | |
| **Code** | **Code number** | **Definition** | **Inductive or deductive code** |
| Impact on professional skills | 36 | How the use of generative AI impact the skills of public relations practitioners | Inductive code |
| Replacement | 37 | Generative AI's possible replacement of public relations practitioners | Inductive code |
| Possibilities | 38 | Future possibilities for public relations provided by generative AI | Inductive code |

| Critical Thoughts | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inductive category | | | |
| Critical thoughts about using generative AI in public relations | | | |
| **Code** | **Code number** | **Definition** | **Inductive or deductive code** |
| Challenges | 39 | The challenges posed by generative AI to the public relations field and profession | Inductive code |
| Threats | 40 | The threats posed by generative AI in the pubic relations field and profession | Inductive code |
| Flaws | 41 | Current flaws of generative AI tools | Inductive code |

| Context | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inductive category | | | |
| Background information about the respondent and the agency | | | |
| **Code** | **Code number** | **Definition** | **Inductive or deductive code** |
| Agency offerings | 42 | The services offered by the agency | Inductive code |
| Size of the agency | 43 | The size of the agency. Including number of markets, employees and locations | Inductive code |
| Public relations tasks | 44 | What work tasks the respondent has | Inductive code |
| Level of work experience | 45 | The level of work experince. For | Inductive code |

| | | example, if you hold a junior or senior role | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Years of professional experience | 46 | Years of experience in the public relations field | Inductive code |
| Years of experience with generative AI | 47 | Years of experience using generative AI | Inductive code |