



The influence of artificial intelligence on the strategic communication industry

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) and the continuous advancements in technology have changed how individuals live and how organisations function. The move to automation questions the need for and value of manual labour, particularly in the field of strategic communication. It has raised concerns about the future of jobs in the communication field and the role of humans in these advancements. The principles of the theory of disruptive innovation are applicable to the study. This study aims to explore the role of AI in the strategic communication industry. Semi-structured interviews with communication professionals in the South African strategic communication industry were conducted to explore their knowledge of AI and its role in the industry. Participants indicated a basic knowledge of the role of AI in the industry, agreeing that AI offers the benefits of convenience and efficiency. However, human input should remain valuable and training in AI technologies should be prioritised. This study contributes to the limited research on the role of AI in the strategic communication industry in South Africa.

Keywords

AI; convenience; human skills; strategic communication industry; training and development

INTRODUCTION

A survey by the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2023) predicted that by 2027 approximately 14 million jobs would be obsolete globally. The African Development Bank equally predicted that by 2030, 100 million youth on the African continent will not find new employment (Okoth, 2023). Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been faster adoption of AI technology (McKinsey & Company, 2023), which is evident through the surge of e-commerce, the shift to remote work, and the rise of chatbots. AI has demonstrated that it can ensure efficiency and convenience for organisations and consumers alike through reduced costs and rapid problem-solving (Huang & Rust, 2021). In the strategic communication industry, agencies use collaborative applications such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom for remote work, which have introduced AI tools such as increased cross-collaboration and personalisation (Wiggers, 2023, 2022). Moreover, the implementation and use of internal and consumer-facing chatbots with personalised features have made communication convenient (Sae, 2020). However, concerns have been raised in the industry about the perceived negative consequences of technological developments such as AI including job loss, the erosion or obsolescence of skills, the subsequent stagnation of median income, and the

growth of inequality (le Roux, 2018; Burgess & Connell, 2020), more especially in developing countries such as South Africa (SA) (le Roux, 2018). A report by In On Africa (IOA) (2023), an Africa-focused research and business consultancy group, stated that despite the growing use of ChatGPT, South Africans have expressed concern about job losses because of AI. The biggest fear about the future potential effect of AI is over-reliance on AI, undermining human intelligence and creativity. A cross-national study among 2,689 European communication practitioners by Zerfass et al. (2020) revealed that creativity, critical thinking, and relationship-building skills are key competencies that AI cannot replace. In a study about AI and communication by Sandpiper (2023) conducted on 406 communication professionals, it was revealed that "soft skills such as leadership abilities, strategic advisory, creative thinking, and relationship building" will become more important to influence stakeholders' behaviour and achieve organisational goals. The training and development of communication professionals is crucial to ensure that they remain adaptable to these technological advancements (Zirar et al., 2023). However, communication professionals in the IOA (2023) and Sandpiper (2023) reports, disclosed that there is a lack of training on AI tools, often because the industry leaders do not have a comprehensive understanding of AI. These perspectives appear to shape the role of AI in the strategic communication industry, there is thus a need to explore this phenomenon deeply. Such a study will contribute to the limited body of knowledge and provide insight to communication professionals and leaders about how to navigate the continuing technological changes in the industry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the 21st-century communication landscape, innovation is unavoidable and essential for an organisation's long-term success. Innovation can support human ideas by contributing to efficiency and enhancing how organisations connect with their consumers in the communication industry (Dawar & Bendle, 2018). Appropriately, scholars have described AI as a generative, transformative, and reshaping innovation, (Bughin et al., 2018; Haefner et al., 2021; Lu, 2019). This study thus considers AI as a disruptive innovation in the SA strategic communication industry.

Disruptive innovation, a theory developed by Clayton Christensen in 1997, elaborates that technological innovations can cause meaningful disruptions for organisations (Christensen, 2005). The theory explains that an innovative product or service can create convenience and efficiency, challenging previously expensive and time-consuming processes. Christensen (2005) identified five principles of disruptive innovation, these are: "(1) companies depend on customers and investors for resources; (2) small markets don't solve the growth needs of larger companies; (3) markets that don't exist can't be analysed; (4) an organisation's capabilities define its disabilities; and (5) technology supply may not equal market demand".

The principles of the theory of disruptive innovation highlight that even though innovations as a result of developments in technology will continue to affect industries, organisations must assess how these changes affect the industry and how the innovations can best be implemented to achieve organisational goals while acknowledging the role of humans and attempting to protect their livelihoods (Bughin et al., 2018; Haefner, et al., 2021; Lu, 2019). Similarly, applied to this study, innovations of AI should be implemented with the understanding of the needs of the stakeholders because addressing the needs of the stakeholders will likely lead to stakeholder satisfaction subsequently leading to stakeholder motivation and loyalty. Stakeholder satisfaction is identified as a critical success factor for organisations (Maqbool et al., 2020), thus for the introduced innovation to be beneficial to organisations, the technology must satisfy the needs of its stakeholders. This highlights the important role of humans in AI because the value of innovation is dependent on the needs and contributions of humans as stakeholders, more so because technological innovations do not have the human traits of emotional intelligence, contextual understanding, creativity, and adaptability (Montemayor et al., 2022; Hassani et al., 2020), which are qualities that are valued in the strategic communication industry to influence human behaviour and build relationships.

Despite the concerns that AI as a driver of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies threatens jobs because of automation, Phala (2020) states that "the innovation of 4IR technology should enhance

the interaction between humans and machines to improve productivity in the workplace". More especially in the communication industry where human skills are critical for survival. However, an inadequate understanding of strategic communication, 4IR, and AI and its influence on the strategic communication industry may reinforce fears about the role of AI, humans, and the future of work in the industry. It is therefore important to review recent literature on this subject.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to Hallahan et al. (2007), strategic communication embodies six communication disciplines including public relations, organisational communication, and business communication. The emergence of the discipline has been largely driven by technological developments, the proliferation of social media especially, has shifted power from organisations to consumers (Hou & Fountaine, 2016). The new consumer or prosumer, has the opportunity to create and engage with content desirable to them, requiring brands to be more strategic in how they engage with them (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). Strategic is a distinct feature of strategic communication, which speaks to developing, implementing, and assessing purposeful communication for internal and external stakeholders with the aim of influencing their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour (Hallahan et al., 2007). Strategic communication, according to Overton-de Klerk (2023), values "dialogue, self-organisation, bottom-up, convergence, collaboration, accountability, influence and conflict or dissent". These principles reflect the rapidly changing communication landscape characterised by demanding stakeholders who want immediate and meaningful experiences globally and locally (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). These consumers prefer interactive visual communication dominantly offered by digital media in the 4IR (Herman, 2019).

Schwab (2016) described 4IR as "a time in which everything is continuously evolving and technologies are blurring the lines between physical, digital and biological spheres" affecting almost every industry globally. The available technology has allowed organisations and humans to do more with less, thereby creating new experiences and opportunities (Shwab, 2016; Oosthuizen, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and the imposed national lockdowns accelerated the global adoption of 4IR technologies and AI (Mathe, 2021), resulting in exponential growth for e-commerce services (Tong & Ali, 2022). Globally, this resulted in consumers sourcing, procuring, and delivering goods using e-commerce (Tong & Ali, 2022). Statista (2022) in its e-commerce report of 2021, revealed that "e-commerce increased by 19% globally", led by the United States of America (USA), China, and Europe. In SA, Molewa (2021) stated that in 2021, UberEats reported substantial growth while Takealot, which Browdie (2021) identified as the leading e-commerce business in SA, gained \$238 million in net profit, and Checkers also introduced e-commerce services as a result of the increased demand for online shopping (Browdie, 2021). Due to SA's high smartphone adoption rate, e-commerce services are frequently offered through mobile applications, making the dissemination of and access to products, services, and data convenient (Sardjono et al., 2021). The use of mobile applications is not limited to e-commerce services, they are also used for recruitment.

Recruitment organisations have simplified the recruitment process by developing mobile applications, which job seekers use to search and apply for jobs (Meccawy et al., 2018). Mobile brands Apple, Samsung, and Huawei have introduced smartphones with long-lasting battery life, enhanced camera and voice features, and storage space to make the job search experience effortless (Chiwara et al., 2017) on popular websites such as Careers24, PNet, and JobMail, among others in SA (Smith, 2021). This convenience provides underprivileged individuals and groups with opportunities to join online job searches despite the high cost of data in SA (Madubela, 2019).

The demand is fuelled by the desire of new consumers for more convenience, ease, and instant gratification. Morgan (2022) explains that "modern customers want what they want, and they want it now, thus speed and convenience matter to customers more than ever, and brands that deliver instant gratification have a huge competitive advantage". Moreover, speed and convenience are not limited to shopping and delivery time but also engagement throughout the consumer journey, whereby brands that reward and tailor product information to consumers are most likely to experience repeat purchases (Jeon et al., 2021). Opportunities to directly dialogue with, review, and recommend brands also influence

consumers' repeat purchases (Lee *et al.*, 2007).

The effect that innovation and technology have on labour markets should not be limited to the advantages of simplicity, convenience, and reduced costs. Although robots are performing tasks faster and more precisely (Ade-Ibijola & Okonkwo, 2023), human skills cannot be neglected, especially in industries that are centred on relationship building (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020). In the agriculture and construction sectors, it is easier for automation to replace human jobs (Subeesh & Mehta, 2021); however, in the strategic communication industry where human interaction is important, automation would likely prove futile. This is because influencing and engaging stakeholders is fundamental to organisational success (Besley & Dudo, 2022). Meaningful influence and engagement require relationship building that can only be achieved through emotional connections which are natural to humans. Hence, some studies emphasise that technology should cooperate with humans instead of replacing them (Sandpiper, 2023). These studies term this collaboration, human-robot collaboration, the scholars explain that organisations are likely to achieve significant performance improvements when humans work hand-in-hand with machines (De Simone *et al.*, 2022; Semeraro *et al.*, 2023). Humans possess qualities that machines do not possess such as empathy, emotion, creativity, and critical thinking (De Simone *et al.*, 2022).

AI can be simply explained as simulating human intelligence into machines (Jakhar & Kaur, 2019). AI is advancing at a rapid pace, and it has the potential to bring great benefits to the economy by boosting productivity and creating new and better products and services. At the core of AI is convenience, such as managing daily life through personal voice assistant technologies such as Amazon's Alexa and Google's Home Assist (Ameen *et al.*, 2021), as well as grocery assistance AI technologies such as Checkers Sixty60 and Woolies Dash, which are popular in SA (Musakwa, 2021). AI convenience also extends to the healthcare sector with powerful surgical robots performing surgery (Montemayor *et al.*, 2022); and in terms of data privacy whereby AI cooperates with blockchain to provide more personalised and protected data (Gentsch, 2019). Despite this convenience, AI has raised the issue of job losses. Recent research by Future Workplace found that "above 60 percent of people trust robots due to their precision and "lack of bias" (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

Research conducted by CNBC states that "thirty-seven percent of workers between the ages of 18 and 24 are worried about new technology eliminating their jobs" (Douglas, 2019). In Africa, Forkuo Yeboah (2023) reports that some of the population believe that machines will make human jobs redundant in the next few years as machines and computer programs replace many jobs that are currently done by humans. These concerns are exacerbated by the fact that African citizens do not trust their governments to put strategies in place that will ensure that there are no job losses because of technology (Mbandlwa & Dorasamy, 2022), particularly critical digital skills such as data scientists and ICT system analysts (Nkanjeni, 2022). The lack of skills is often attributed to the lack of training and development of staff, Allais (2021) asserts that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this scarcity of skills. The lack of skills implies that disadvantaged groups are excluded from participating in the economy. In the marketing communication industry, professionals have complained that they do not receive frequent training to equip them with skills for the future (Forshey, 2022; Maytom, 2018). Limited organisational capital is often a major hindrance to training staff (Forshey, 2022; Maytom, 2018), particularly in the strategic communication industry.

4IR and AI have placed great pressure on traditional communication, with print-only newspapers and magazines transitioning to digital only. It has also changed how research is conducted. For instance, AI offers smart technology to assist with conducting systematic literature reviews, collecting and analysing data through inexpensive data gathering, and analysis through online data tools such as Teamscope and KoboToolBox (Muthyala, 2021). Research reveals that AI can automate approximately 80% of work (Joshi *et al.*, 2018). These AI tools accurately identify patterns in the data to draw insights, the great advantage is that the data analysis is unbiased, enhancing the credibility of the insights (Joshi *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the rise of ChatGPT, an AI-powered chatbot platform that enables human users to converse with machines, permits communication specialists to not only conduct secondary research faster but also brainstorm campaign ideas and write copy (Rivas & Zhao, 2023). Advertising has also transformed to include increased personalisation and rich media through the use of software such as Canva and Adobe,

which are used for design to ensure streamlined content creation, consistent visual identity, and easier editing (Weatherbed, 2023; Herman, 2019). Internal and consumer-facing chatbots have also become popular AI tools for instant communication and problem-solving (Sae, 2020), even though consumers report that these technologies are programmed to share limited information, lack transparency and human empathy (Jenneboer et al., 2022). The absence of human input overlooks nonverbal cues which contribute to meaningful insights. Such meaningful insights are important to influence behaviour, a key objective of strategic communication campaigns.

In SA, a country characterised by diversity, cultural nuances can only be understood through human engagement (Andrews & Human, 2018). This reinforces the importance of humanness. Organisations in the strategic communication industry need to make sure that even if they change and adopt new technologies within their operations, humanness should be protected and maintained. Training and development of employees is crucial to ensure that they possess the skills to adapt to the changes. Fleming (2020) states that while it is a certainty that AI will replace some jobs, the value employees add to remaining jobs increases. The training of these workers is important to equip them with understanding of the new technology and the critical thinking skills to function and communicate in the future workplace. More especially, in the SA context where knowledge about AI technology is unfairly distributed, mostly because of social and economic disparities as well as what Tiwari (2023) terms ignorance. However, studies by Sandpiper (2023) and IOA (2023) revealed that even though employees are increasingly using AI technologies such as ChatGPT in the workplace, leaders in the industry are apprehensive about formally introducing AI technologies. This is often because of their lack of understanding about these constant developments and fear of job losses (Sandpiper, 2023, IOA, 2023). Fleming (2020) and Verwey (2022) elaborate that training and development should start in the education sector, preparing learners and students to be future-fit. Murphy and Taylor (2023) refer to the democratisation of AI, which is explained as the participation and inclusion of all populations in AI despite their digital expertise. Thus, training will debunk the perception that understanding of AI is solely for digital specialists.

METHODOLOGY

This study was exploratory in nature, which was a suitable methodological approach to understand the research participants' experiences and knowledge of the phenomena under investigation. It is for this reason that the qualitative research approach was used in this study. Ravitch (2021) elaborates that qualitative research is a commonly used research approach in social sciences, it aims to understand human and social interaction as experienced and perceived by the participants. The main research question was: how does AI affect the industry according to strategic communication professionals? The research population consisted of SA strategic communication professionals who were recruited on LinkedIn. Using LinkedIn to recruit the participants was suitable because it is a social media platform used for business purposes, and it provides profiles about the qualifications, occupations, and skills a user has (Nations, 2020). Purposive sampling in non-probability sampling was used to draw a sample of eight communication professionals ranging in speciality and seniority. These included brand and communication strategists and a social media manager and copywriter. The participants were purposively selected because they possess the expertise needed to provide in-depth insights on AI, the influence of AI on the strategic communication industry, and the role of communication professionals in the changing industry. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to obtain detailed information about the research question. An information sheet detailing the purpose of the study was used to approach the research participants.

Ethically, the principles of informed consent and voluntary participation were adhered to, to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Consent forms were distributed and signed by each of the research participants. Thematic analysis following the Miles and Huberman (1994) three-step model was used to analyse the data. The model includes "data reduction", "data display", and "drawing conclusions" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data was reduced to codes that were translated into themes used to draw conclusions.

FINDINGS

The semi-structured interviews demonstrated that the participants as communication professionals had an understanding of how AI affects the strategic communication industry. Three main themes emerged to answer the research question. These three themes are: AI convenience; the value of human skills; and training and development of communication professionals.

Most of the participants agreed that the key advantage of AI for the strategic communication industry is convenience; convenience regarding the easing of tasks that were previously complex and tedious. *"AI has helped simplify some tasks, allowing users to bypass traditional ways of gathering knowledge/performing tasks."* – Participant 3. *"Artificial intelligence is a system that allows technology to conveniently perform tasks previously only done by humans. It can range from simpler systems (such as a mobile phone's virtual assistant) to more complex systems that are able to solve problems and run autonomously."* – Participant 4.

Despite this, most of the participants emphasised that human skills remain crucial in the strategic communication industry despite the efficiency of AI. Human skills also referred to as soft skills permit relationship building between stakeholders through empathy and understanding. *"I believe that strategic communication will continue to be increasingly important in the future. While technology is present in the industry, I think that communication roles such as copywriting will still require human copywriters"* – Participant 1. *"Communications is still a very people-centred function, one heavily reliant on behaviours, context, language and nuances that are constantly changing"* – Participant 4.

Finally, to attain the greatest value from these innovations, the participants emphasised that the training and development of communication professionals should be prioritised to enable their adaptability in the changing industry. *"Advocate for the importance of upskilling communication practitioners and the development of 'local' practitioners and practices"* – Participant 6. *"One of the biggest issues companies in general have is being able to keep track of the little things becomes tough or at least some companies find it tough to adapt quickly and move as the market is moving, i.e., digital currencies and banks"* – Participant 2.

DISCUSSION

Considering the three themes that emerged from the research findings, an in-depth discussion of each theme and its implications will be detailed below.

AI convenience

In the strategic communication industry, AI convenience is appreciated for collecting and analysing big data using online data collection tools such as Teamscope and KoboToolBox. Participant 1 stated that *"AI has brought information that would otherwise be far-reaching and has made it easier to operate, i.e., doing primary research virtually instead of travelling to the target audience"*. Collecting and analysing big data has been a concern in the strategic communication industry. This is because of the time-consuming and costly nature of collecting data and accurately analysing it. Racist campaigns by Clicks and H&M have indicated the problem of poor research in the industry (Chutel, 2018; Shangase, 2020). The convenience of AI regarding data collection and analysis can strengthen research in the industry, contributing to campaigns that positively influence audiences instead of offending them. This reinforces the theory of disruptive innovation, which asserts that the needs of the stakeholders should guide the need for innovations. Thus, the great need in the industry for more simplified and less costly ways of collecting and assessing data encourages the embracing of AI innovations. Moreover, the research participants also identified the use of AI design software such as Canva and Adobe as convenient. Participant 3 stated: *"Regarding templates, platforms like Canva are great when you have a visual idea but do not know how to put it to your graphics/creative team. You can simply go to Canva, select a template, and show them an example of what you want to create for your newsletter."* Thus, this improved software enables efficiency in terms of visual components of communication (Weatherbed, 2023), to the extent of reducing the costs of outsourcing to graphic designers. ChatGPT was also acknowledged as a convenient AI tool. Participant 3 also stated *"nowadays, if you want to formulate an idea, you do not have to start from scratch, you can*

just go to ChatGPT, tell it to draft you a press release about any topic and then you use that as a template to guide you, or you can just restructure that example." Thus, strategic communication professionals are using ChatGPT because it allows for content creation in a shorter space of time, which is beneficial to completing clients' projects on time. However, despite the research participants agreeing that convenience is the key advantage of AI, there was a lack of extensive explanation on how AI contributes to convenience in the industry in addition to research and design. The perception may be because AI is perceived as an expert skill of digital communication specialists, which are skills that are lacking in SA (Nkanjeni, 2022).

The value of human skills

Despite the accuracy and unbiased features of AI, developing insights that encourage relationship building require human skills which cannot be accurately replicated by AI. Participant 5 stated that *"the strategic communication industry is way more than just technical, it's intrinsically human based too"*. Participant 4 further stated that *"being a human helps you understand what other humans want to read. While technological advances can help streamline the process, I believe that this field will require people in it"*. Through strategic thinking, creativity and emotions, communication professionals have created communication that positively influenced behaviour and saved lives; for example, health communication campaigns. The human ability to understand and empathise with fellow humans contributed to communication insights that led to these impactful campaigns. Moreover, participant 3 stated that *"current industry gurus are not even touching AI, they still believe in doing things the traditional way, and if I sent content using AI, they would most probably accuse me of laziness"*. This shows that despite the time-consuming nature of traditional ways of conducting research and developing campaigns, some communication professionals value the human interaction that goes with manually performing these tasks. This is also supported by the critique in literature that chatbots lack a human touch, these are qualities that are not characteristic of AI technologies. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the value of human skills in the advent of AI. This aligns with the theory of disruptive innovation, which states that technological innovations do not have the human skills of flexibility and adaptability therefore, even though AI can identify patterns that reveal insights at a point in time, cultural nuances can only be understood through human engagement.

Training and development

Training and development in AI technology should equip communication professionals with the technological expertise to understand and cooperate with these advancements. Participant 6 explained that *"not having enough resources to ensure support is being offered at all points where the need has been identified"*. Participant 3 agreed that *"I think organisations need to prompt more of their employees to be practitioners and at the forefront of change, they need to know what's happening and the only way to truly achieve that is by simply doing. This is a practice/action first industry and theory later...that's just how things move in this world"*. This reinforces that there is a lack of adequate training and development in the communication industry to prepare communication professionals for the rapid technological and organisational changes. The lack of training means the professionals cannot build their competitive advantage to compete and contribute to the local and global economy. Participant 3 highlighted that *"training and development would be very important, especially for older, senior industry professionals who often have less expertise about the new technology"*. This speaks to the knowledge gaps in the industry which are likely to cause low morale and worsen the unemployment rate in SA. This is exacerbated by leaders in the industry who are not aware of the benefits and risks of using AI technologies in the industry (Sandpiper, 2023). Verwey (n.d.) argues that training and development should not be exclusive to the industry and in the workplace but start from the education level. This aligns with the theoretical framework of disruptive innovation because for the innovations to be embraced, the organisation needs to understand the needs of its stakeholders in terms of providing them with the required training. Also, development must be prioritised to ensure that some organisational processes, particularly those that require human input, remain in place. Although limited organisational capital is the main reason for the

lack of training and development, online training and library systems can be used.

CONCLUSION

Although this study cannot be generalised to represent the views of all communication professionals in the SA industry, it does show that AI has influenced how strategic communication professionals are planning for, developing, and disseminating communication to consumers in the 21st century. To answer the research question, the sampled communication professionals who formed part of this study, highlighted that in the strategic communication industry, AI is chiefly embraced for its convenience, in particular, AI data collection and analytic tools have made previously tedious and costly processes convenient and low cost. Yet despite this, human skills remain very valuable in strategic communication and cannot be replaced by AI. Thus, instead of disregarding human skills for AI innovations, strategic communication should draw on the benefits of artificial and human intelligence to create meaningful communication. However, the training and development of communication professionals should be prioritised to survive the technological changes. The recommendation is to conduct a comparative study on strategic communication campaigns that relied on AI-developed insights and human-developed insights to determine where the value lies, and how best strategic communication professionals can be trained to fully embrace AI technologies.

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