The Digital Shift in Public Relations: A Systematic Review of Social Media, Brand Management, Crisis Communication

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Abstract
The rapid expansion of social media platforms, algorithmic curation, and data-driven engagement metrics has fundamentally transformed public relations (PR) theory and practice. As organisational communication becomes increasingly platform-mediated, traditional assumptions about message control, stakeholder dialogue, and reputational management are being challenged. Despite a growing body of empirical research on digital PR, existing scholarship remains fragmented, offering limited synthesis of how core PR theories are adapting to algorithmic environments. Addressing this gap, this study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) of 300 peer-reviewed articles published in *Public Relations Review* between 2021 and 2024, guided by PRISMA protocols. The review examines classical paradigms, including Agenda-Setting, Framing, and Dialogic Communication, in relation to contemporary frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Contingency Theory, and Relationship Management Theory. Findings reveal three key transformations in PR scholarship: (1) an algorithmic turn in which visibility and legitimacy are shaped by platform architectures; (2) the continued dominance of SCCT in crisis research, increasingly integrated with affective and moral-emotional perspectives to address phenomena such as cancel culture and viral reputational threats; and (3) a methodological shift toward computational and large-scale data analytics, accompanied by persistent gaps such as Western-centric perspectives and limited longitudinal trust research. By synthesising recent theoretical and methodological developments, this review advances a coherent understanding of PR's evolution in an AI-driven communication environment and provides a conceptual roadmap for future research on digital reputation, crisis communication, and strategic relationship management.
Keywords: Public Relations, Systematic Literature Review, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Algorithmic Visibility, Relationship Management, Digital Transformation

Introduction

Public relations (PR) is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the rapid digitalisation of communication ecosystems. Social media platforms, algorithmic curation, and data-driven engagement metrics have fundamentally altered how organisations construct meaning, manage reputation, and respond to crises. Unlike traditional mass communication environments characterised by hierarchical gatekeeping and message control (Darmastuti et al., 2024), contemporary PR operates within decentralised, participatory, and algorithmically governed platforms where visibility, legitimacy, and public judgment are continuously negotiated in real time (Ji et al., 2022). This transformation has elevated digital PR from a supporting operational function to a strategic organisational capability with direct implications for brand equity, crisis resilience, and stakeholder trust.

The importance of studying this digital transformation lies in its practical consequences for organisational legitimacy and long-term survival. Brand reputation and public trust are increasingly influenced by online discourse, digital activism, and rapid cycles of public evaluation. Crises now often emerge, escalate, and persist entirely within digital platforms, where emotional responses, virality, and algorithmic amplification intensify reputational risk. Organisations are therefore under strong pressure to respond quickly, responsibly, and strategically in fast-moving and uncertain communication environments. Understanding the effectiveness of PR theories in addressing these conditions is essential not only for academic advancement but also for practitioners, organisations, and educators seeking to manage reputation and stakeholder relationships more effectively.

However, much of the foundational PR literature was developed in media environments characterised by centralised information flows, stable audiences, and human-controlled gatekeeping. Influential frameworks such as Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory were designed to explain how mass media shaped public attention and interpretation (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020), while Dialogic Communication Theory emphasised ethical two-way communication and mutuality between organisations and stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Although these theories continue to inform contemporary PR research, their underlying assumptions are increasingly limited in digital environments where visibility is shaped less by editorial judgement and more by platform algorithms and user engagement patterns. Contemporary publics are fragmented, participatory, and capable of rapidly mobilising support or opposition, often with unpredictable consequences for organisational legitimacy (Valentine & DiStaso, 2024).

These theoretical challenges became particularly evident during the 2021–2024 period. In the post-COVID-19 context, digital communication shifted from a supplementary function to a core strategic necessity. Organisations faced heightened expectations to communicate transparently and responsively on complex social, environmental, and political issues, including climate change and social justice (Gaither et al., 2022). At the same time, scholars increasingly highlighted the growing influence of platform algorithms, artificial intelligence (AI), and data analytics in shaping communication outcomes, a development described as an "algorithmic turn" in public relations (Dhanesh & Baker, 2022). Under these conditions, communication success is often evaluated through metrics such as reach, engagement, and emotional resonance, which may conflict with established normative ideals of dialogue, trust-building, and ethical responsibility.

The effects of algorithmic mediation are particularly visible in crisis communication and brand management. Reputational threats now develop under conditions of heightened speed, emotional intensity, and public scrutiny (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). At the same time, the growing use of AI-based tools, including automated monitoring, sentiment analysis, and predictive analytics, has further altered PR practice by influencing how organisations identify, interpret, and respond to stakeholder discourse. While established frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Contingency Theory are frequently applied in these contexts (Jin et al., 2023), prior studies often focus on isolated cases, specific platforms, or single crisis events. This has limited theoretical integration and reduced the accumulation of coherent knowledge across the field.

Despite the rapid expansion of empirical research on digital public relations, a clear research gap remains. Existing studies are fragmented across theories, methods, and thematic areas, and there is a lack of systematic synthesis examining how PR theory as a whole is evolving in response to platformisation and algorithmic governance. Without such synthesis, PR scholarship risks theoretical fragmentation and reduced relevance for practice.

To address this gap, systematic literature reviews (SLRs) offer a rigorous approach for consolidating existing findings, identifying dominant theoretical patterns, and highlighting persistent limitations in the literature (Moher et al., 2009). Accordingly, this study conducts a systematic review of 300 articles published in *Public Relations Review* between 2021 and 2024.
Guided by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocols, this review aims to:
1. Identify dominant and emerging theoretical frameworks in recent digital public relations research.
2. Examine methodological trends, including the increasing use of data-driven and computational approaches.
3. Assess the implications of algorithmically mediated communication for crisis communication and brand management research.

By systematically synthesising recent scholarship, this study contributes to a clearer understanding of the evolving theoretical foundations of public relations and provides valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and educators navigating an increasingly algorithmic communication environment.

Literature Review
Public relations (PR) is a multidisciplinary field concerned with the dissemination of information, audience interaction, and the broader impact of communication on society. As globalisation accelerates and digital technologies reshape communicative practices, the theory and practice of PR continue to evolve in significant ways, shifting from message dissemination to strategic relationship management. Scholars and practitioners increasingly navigate complex communication environments shaped by digital platforms, fragmented publics, and algorithmic visibility. According to Dhanesh & Baker (2022), theoretical frameworks are not merely explanatory tools, they actively shape how communication is conceptualised, practised, and evaluated.

Traditionally, PR scholarship was grounded in mass communication theories such as Agenda-Setting, Framing, and Dialogic Communication Theory. These models offered critical insights into how media prioritise issues, construct meaning, and engage audiences (Kent & Taylor, 2022). However, their assumptions based on one-directional communication flows and centralised media gatekeeping are increasingly challenged by participatory and networked media environments. With the rise of social media, meaning is no longer controlled by organisations alone; instead, stakeholders actively co-create, contest, or transform organisational narratives.

The rise of digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped communication patterns, transforming PR from a sender-receiver model to an interactive, participatory, and data-driven practice. Social media facilitates two-way dialogue where audiences co-create meaning, challenge organisational narratives, and rapidly influence public reputation. This shift necessitates the rethinking of PR as relational, adaptive, and real-time rather than merely persuasive.

Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Influence in Public Relations
Social media platforms now function as core infrastructures for organisational communication, shaping how publics encounter, interpret, and respond to organisational messages. Early PR scholarship approached these platforms primarily from an instrumental perspective, examining their potential to support dialogue, transparency, and relationship building. Dialogic Communication Theory was widely applied to assess whether organisations adhered to principles such as mutuality, openness, and responsiveness in online environments.

Over time, this optimistic view has been tempered by growing recognition of structural constraints embedded within digital platforms. Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises social media not as neutral communication channels but as algorithmically governed systems that privilege engagement, emotional intensity, and content circulation. This process, commonly referred to as platformisation, alters the conditions under which organisational communication occurs by introducing non-human actors: algorithms, analytics systems, and platform policies into meaning-making processes. Within this context, the notion of an "algorithmic turn" in public relations reflects a shift in how visibility and influence are produced. Communication outcomes are no longer shaped primarily by organisational intent or journalistic gatekeeping. Instead, algorithmic systems determine which messages are amplified, which publics are reached, and which narratives persist. This shift challenges the assumptions of classical theories such as Agenda-Setting, which presuppose relatively stable media agendas controlled by professional institutions. In algorithmically curated environments, agenda-setting becomes contingent and decentralised, shaped by platform logics that may favour emotional, polarising, or highly shareable content.

To address these dynamics, PR scholars have introduced concepts such as algorithmic publics, networked visibility, and mediated engagement. These concepts emphasise the instability of contemporary publics, whose attention and affective responses are continuously shaped by curated content flows. Theoretically, this raises questions about organisational control and accountability. When organisational messages are reshaped by users, platforms, and automated systems, traditional models of strategic communication require adaptation. The

algorithmic turn also complicates the normative foundations of PR theory. Dialogic communication, long positioned as both an ethical standard and a strategic objective, is increasingly difficult to sustain in environments that reward speed, conflict, and emotional intensity. As a result, dialogue is being reconceptualised not as a universal moral ideal but as a practice constrained by platform affordances and power asymmetries. This shift reflects a broader movement in PR theory toward structurally informed and context-sensitive models of communication.

Brand Management and Organisational Legitimacy in Digital Media
Brand management is another domain in which digital transformation has reshaped PR theory and practice. Earlier research emphasised identity construction, message consistency, and reputation building through controlled communication. Brands were largely treated as symbolic assets managed through strategic narratives and stakeholder engagement. While these concerns remain relevant, recent scholarship increasingly focuses on legitimacy, values alignment, and moral evaluation in digitally mediated environments. Social media have transformed brands into sites of public scrutiny and contestation. Organisations are now expected to take positions on social, environmental, and political issues, often in highly polarised contexts. This development, commonly described as brand activism or corporate social advocacy, has prompted renewed theoretical attention to how organisations negotiate legitimacy across diverse stakeholder groups.

Legitimacy theory has therefore gained prominence as a framework for understanding brand communication under digital conditions. Legitimacy is no longer secured solely through institutional compliance or alignment with dominant norms. Instead, it is continuously negotiated through public discourse, stakeholder interactions, and symbolic performances across platforms. Digital media intensify this process by enabling rapid feedback, collective mobilisation, and public accountability, increasing reputational volatility. Within this environment, PR scholars increasingly describe brand communication as operating within a legitimacy gap, the distance between organisational claims and stakeholder perceptions. Social media amplify this gap by facilitating counter-narratives, moral critique, and public exposure of perceived inconsistencies. Consequently, brand management has shifted from identity projection toward legitimacy management, requiring organisations to demonstrate alignment between stated values and observable actions.

This shift has significant implications for PR theory. Relationship Management Theory, traditionally focused on trust and mutual understanding, has been extended to account for value-based and moral expectations. Stakeholder relationships are no longer grounded solely in functional considerations but are increasingly shaped by ethical judgments. In digital environments, perceived hypocrisy can rapidly erode trust and trigger reputational crises. Moreover, reputation itself has become less stable under platform conditions. Rather than a cumulative asset, reputation functions as a dynamic and reversible resource, fluctuating in response to ongoing online discourse. This condition aligns with the concept of reputational liquidity, highlighting the need for PR theory to address the temporal and affective dimensions of legitimacy in networked communication environments.

Crisis Communication in Digital Media

Crisis communication remains a central area of PR scholarship, with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) continuing to serve as the dominant analytical framework. SCCT offers a systematic approach to understanding responsibility attribution and selecting appropriate response strategies, and its continued use reflects its conceptual robustness across diverse crisis contexts. However, the nature of crises has changed significantly in digital environments. Contemporary crises are characterised by speed, emotional intensity, and participatory dynamics that challenge the assumptions of traditional models. Social media enable crises to emerge and escalate rapidly, sometimes without clear organisational wrongdoing. These events, often described as paracrises, originate within online discourse, where perceptions, rumours, and moral evaluations can generate substantial reputational harm.

In response, scholars have extended SCCT to incorporate affective and moral dimensions of crisis communication. Emotions such as anger and outrage play a central role in shaping stakeholder reactions, particularly in cases involving perceived value violations. Recent research therefore emphasises emotional framing, authenticity, and moral positioning alongside traditional considerations of responsibility and corrective action. The concept of affective publics further develops crisis communication theory by highlighting how emotions circulate and intensify in networked environments. These publics actively shape crisis narratives through sharing, commenting, and mobilisation, complicating organisational response efforts. Crisis management thus involves addressing not only informational needs but also emotional and moral expectations.

Digital crises also challenge temporal assumptions embedded in classical crisis models. Rather than discrete events with clear endpoints, online crises may persist, re-emerge, or evolve as content is recirculated and reinterpreted. This requires theoretical models that account for prolonged reputational exposure and ongoing relationship repair. Taken together, these developments suggest that crisis communication theory is being recalibrated rather than replaced. Foundational frameworks such as SCCT remain relevant but are increasingly supplemented by insights from affective science, moral psychology, and platform studies. This hybridisation reflects broader efforts within PR scholarship to adapt established theories to algorithmically mediated communication environments.

Methodology

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the evolution of public relations (PR) theory in the context of digital and algorithm-mediated communication between 2021 and 2024. SLRs provide a structured and replicable approach for synthesizing empirical evidence, identifying dominant theoretical trends, and revealing knowledge gaps (Moher et al., 2009). To ensure methodological transparency and rigor, the review follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, which offer a standardized protocol for article identification, screening, and inclusion. This approach is particularly suitable for investigating the theoretical and methodological shifts associated with the "algorithmic turn" in PR research, encompassing crisis communication, brand management, and stakeholder engagement.

The review focuses on peer-reviewed articles published in *Public Relations Review*, selected for its reputation as a leading journal reflecting contemporary disciplinary developments. Inclusion criteria required that articles: (1) address PR theory, crisis communication, brand management, or social/digital media practices; (2) employ empirical or conceptual methodologies grounded in theoretical frameworks; and (3) be published in English between 2021 and 2024. Exclusion criteria included editorials, commentaries, practitioner-focused notes without theoretical grounding, and articles outside the specified timeframe.

A systematic search was conducted through Elsevier Scopus and ScienceDirect, using Boolean combinations of keywords such as "public relations" AND "social media," "crisis communication" AND "algorithm," "brand management" AND "digital platforms," and "PR theory" AND "computational methods." The initial search yielded 452 articles, which were screened for duplicates, relevance, and methodological rigor, resulting in a final sample of 300 articles for full analysis.

Data extraction involved coding key information from each article, including publication year, authorship, theoretical frameworks, research design, digital platforms studied, and key findings relating to algorithmic communication, crisis management, and brand strategies. This coding facilitated both quantitative aggregation of trends such as the frequency of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) applications and computational methods and qualitative synthesis, enabling conceptual mapping of emergent ideas, including the "algorithmic turn," reputational liquidity, and integrative theoretical frameworks.

Analysis combined descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation. Descriptive statistics identified publication patterns, methodological approaches, and dominant theoretical frameworks, while thematic analysis examined how classical PR theories—Agenda-Setting, Framing, and Dialogic Communication are reinterpreted in digitally mediated environments. The interpretivist paradigm underpins the analysis, recognizing that the evolution of PR theory is socially constructed within the digital communication ecosystem (Creswell, 2014).

Reliability and validity were ensured through multiple measures. Two independent reviewers conducted article selection and coding, resolving discrepancies through discussion. The PRISMA flow diagram documented the screening and selection process, while coding was iteratively refined to enhance consistency and analytical validity. This systematic and transparent process ensures that the review offers robust, replicable insights into the current trajectory of PR scholarship, particularly concerning the intersection of theory, platform-driven visibility, and algorithm-mediated communication.

Findings & Discussion

This section presents a systematic analysis of the theoretical frameworks that have guided public relations (PR) research from 2021 to 2024. The discussion is organised chronologically, highlighting how different theories have emerged, evolved, and been applied in response to shifts in the digital media environment, stakeholder expectations, and societal challenges. By examining each year individually, the analysis identifies dominant frameworks, key applications, methodological approaches, and emerging trends. This chronological approach provides a clear overview of the evolving theoretical landscape in PR, illustrating how scholarship has adapted to address crises, brand management, corporate social

responsibility, and audience engagement in increasingly complex and digitally mediated communication environments.

2021

Research published in 2021 highlighted key topics in public relations (PR), crisis communication, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and the impact of digital media on public engagement. A systematic review identified several dominant theories, including Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Stakeholder Theory, Dialogic Communication Theory, and Narrative Theory. While no single theory dominated, SCCT was frequently cited due to its relevance and applicability.

SCCT provides a framework for guiding organisational communication during crises based on the nature of the crisis and perceived responsibility. Its significance lies in the ongoing importance of effective crisis communication in rapidly changing media environments, particularly for protecting organisational reputations (Smudde, 2021). Given the challenges posed by digital crises, SCCT is widely applied across studies to analyze response strategies and reputation management, especially on social media (Fortunato, 2021). SCCT's frequent application can be attributed to its practical framework, testability, and applicability in the context of crises exacerbated by social media, political polarization, corporate activism, and global events like COVID-19. However, gaps remain, including limited cross-cultural applicability and a lack of longitudinal studies to examine long-term effects of communication strategies.

Stakeholder Theory emphasizes managing relationships with all stakeholders—including employees, customers, and communities—to achieve organisational goals (Zhou, 2021). Zhou's research applied this theory to examine corporate LGBTQ advocacy within CSR efforts, highlighting inclusivity, global trends in representation, and the relationship between CSR discourse and stakeholder engagement. Stakeholder Theory is particularly relevant for studies exploring interactions between organisations and their publics.

Dialogic Communication Theory focuses on two-way communication and mutual understanding. Research by Michael John (2021) applied this theory to analyse how organisations manage relationships with audiences on platforms like Facebook, offering insights into engagement and relationship-building in digital PR.

Narrative Theory examines how storytelling shapes audience perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Studies often investigate the effectiveness of narrative richness in CSR communication and crisis contexts, demonstrating how narrative elements influence public perceptions (Boukes et al., 2021).

2022

In 2022, research highlighted Frame Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, Spiral of Silence Theory, and Gatekeeping Theory as widely applied frameworks. These theories remain relevant for analyzing communication phenomena in the digital age and provide practical tools for empirical research.

Frame Theory was applied across contexts such as public health, cross-cultural communication, and visual media. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, framing strategies emphasizing collective interests (e.g., protecting communities) were more effective than fear-based messaging. Tu and Li (2022) examined the Sun Yang doping incident, showing how collectivist frames influenced public perception in contrast to individualistic Western framing. Devos et al. (2022) highlighted the role of visual framing by digital influencers in shaping idealized public images.

Agenda-Setting Theory continues to demonstrate the media's influence on public and institutional attention. Witting and Wintterlin (2022) analyzed press release strategies by the German Federal Constitutional Court, while Cheng et al. (2022) showed how media coverage of climate change and economic inequality influenced public discourse. Fecke et al. (2022) highlighted the algorithmic reinforcement of agenda-setting on platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

Spiral of Silence Theory has been adapted to digital platforms. Tu and Li (2022) observed cultural influences on opinion expression, while Fannes and Claeys (2022) documented how activists use Twitter to amplify minority voices.

Gatekeeping Theory remains relevant in both traditional and digital contexts. Fecke et al. (2022) highlighted the multi-layered gatekeeping processes affecting youth information flow, and Witting and Wintterlin (2022) examined ethical concerns with algorithmic bias in automated systems.

Research in 2022 combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative studies explored cultural, visual, and social media phenomena (Tu & Li, Devos et al., Fannes & Claeys), while quantitative studies analyzed algorithms, policy effects, and agenda-setting (Witting & Wintterlin, Cheng et al., Fecke et al.). Limitations included cultural and situational constraints and challenges in applying traditional theories to fast-evolving digital platforms. Future research should integrate interdisciplinary perspectives, incorporate cross-cultural insights, and address technological developments such as AI and algorithms to advance communication theory.

2023
An analysis of 94 articles in 2023 highlighted three core theories: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Excellence Theory, and Dialogic Theory. These frameworks address contemporary PR challenges, dynamic communication practices, and cross-cultural applicability.

Key research areas included internal communication, social impact, social issue management, and organisational PR practices across countries such as the United States, Latin America, and Croatia. SCCT remained central in analyzing crisis communication in the digital age, where social media accelerates crisis escalation (Parmelee & Greer, 2023; Boyle et al., 2023).

Excellence and Dialogic Theories were applied to promote effective interaction between organisations and publics, including controversial corporate-public dialogues (Ju & Dong,

2023) and cross-cultural communication in Ghana (Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023). These theories emphasize two-way communication, relationship-building, and trust cultivation. Methodologies included qualitative approaches (semi-structured interviews, case studies) and cross-sectional quantitative methods. Iterative approaches, such as those used by Yue and Thelen (2023), allowed for refinement in complex communication environments.

While SCCT provides a clear framework for crisis management, it has limitations in addressing complex, multifaceted crises and long-term reputation recovery. Excellence and Dialogic Theories support holistic relationship-building but are less operationalized for measuring dialogue effectiveness or addressing power asymmetries. Combining these theories can provide more comprehensive and nuanced analyses.

2024
In 2024, research emphasized Contingency Theory, Crisis Communication Theory, Relationship Management Theory, and SCCT. These frameworks reflect the increasing complexity of the digital communication environment.

Contingency Theory addresses adaptive organisational strategies during crises (Pang & Jin, 2024). Crisis Communication Theory, especially SCCT, remains highly relevant in social media contexts, helping organisations select appropriate strategies based on crisis type and communication environment (Zhang et al., 2024).

Relationship Management Theory continues to provide insights into trust and emotional engagement, particularly in non-profit and faith-based contexts (Morehouse, 2024; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2024). Cross-cultural applications highlight the importance of adapting communication strategies to local values and norms.

In summary, 2024 research employed diverse methodologies, including qualitative case studies, in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, quantitative surveys, and content analysis. Mixed-methods approaches were less common but offered holistic insights when applied.

Theoretical Focus, Methods, and Trends in PR Research (2021–2024)

Year	Dominant Theories	Key Applications / Focus	Representative Studies	Research Methods	Emerging Trends / Observations
2021	SCCT, Stakeholder Theory, Dialogic Communication, Narrative Theory	Crisis communication strategies; stakeholder engagement; online dialogue; CSR storytelling	Smudde (2021); Fortunato (2021); Zhou (2021); Michael John (2021); Boukes et al. (2021)	Case studies, in-depth interviews, thematic analysis	High relevance of SCCT for crisis response on social media; CSR and inclusivity focus; increasing attention to digital platforms

2022	Frame Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, Spiral of Silence, Gatekeeping Theory	Media framing; agenda-setting in digital media; online opinion expression; gatekeeping and algorithmic influence	Tu & Li (2022); Devos et al. (2022); Witting & Wintterlin (2022); Fecke et al. (2022); Fannes & Claeys (2022); Cheng et al. (2022)	Qualitative: interviews, thematic analysis; Quantitative: surveys, content analysis	Cultural context influences theory applicability; focus on algorithms and AI; visual and influencer framing; online minority voices and polarization
2023	SCCT, Excellence Theory, Dialogic Theory	Crisis communication; organisational-public relationship management; internal communication	Parmelee & Greer (2023); Boyle et al. (2023); Ju & Dong (2023); Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman (2023); Yue & Thelen (2023); Capizzo (2023); Tkalac Verčić & Men (2023)	Semi-structured interviews, cross-sectional surveys, iterative studies, case studies	Continued relevance of SCCT; holistic relationship-building via Excellence and Dialogic Theory; cross-cultural and global PR challenges; complex social issues management
2024	Contingency Theory, Crisis Communication Theory, Relationship Management Theory, SCCT	Adaptive crisis communication; reputation management; cross-cultural relationship building; digital platforms	Pang & Jin (2024); Zhang et al. (2024); Morehouse (2024); Tkalac Verčič et al. (2024)	Qualitative: case studies, thematic analysis, in-depth interviews; Quantitative: surveys, content analysis	Digital media and social platforms dominate crisis management; cross-cultural applications; emerging tech (AI, AR, blockchain); integration of relational, emotional, and ethical dimensions

In summary, the analysis of public relations research from 2021 to 2024 highlights a dynamic and evolving theoretical landscape. Across these four years, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) consistently emerges as a central framework for understanding crisis response in both traditional and digital contexts, while Relationship Management, Dialogic, and Excellence Theories underscore the growing importance of trust, ethical engagement, and long-term stakeholder relationships. Media-focused theories such as Agenda-Setting,

Framing, Spiral of Silence, and Gatekeeping have adapted to account for the algorithmic, participatory, and cross-cultural dimensions of digital platforms.

Methodologically, the field demonstrates a balance of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches, reflecting the complexity of contemporary PR phenomena and the need to capture both audience behavior and organizational strategies. Emerging trends highlight the prominence of social media, digital transformation, algorithmic influence, audience agency, corporate activism, and political communication in shaping PR practice and theory. These findings reveal that PR scholarship is both responsive and adaptive, integrating traditional theories with new frameworks to address digital, societal, and cultural shifts. This overview provides a comprehensive foundation for the concluding discussion, which synthesizes these insights and outlines directions for future research and practice.

Conclusion

This systematic review demonstrates that public relations is experiencing a profound transformation, driven by digital media, algorithmically-mediated platforms, and shifting societal expectations. Classical theories such as Gatekeeper Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Media Effects Theory continue to provide essential foundations, yet emerging frameworks including Public Sphere Theory and Framing Theory are increasingly applied to address the participatory, networked, and real-time dynamics of contemporary communication. Methodologically, there is a clear shift toward mixed-methods approaches, enabling richer analyses that combine qualitative insights with quantitative metrics to capture the complexity of PR practice.

Despite these advances, critical gaps persist. Cross-cultural adaptation of established theories remains underexplored, particularly in collectivist versus individualist contexts, while the rapid integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and augmented reality introduces ethical and operational challenges for crisis communication. Moreover, the field requires longitudinal research to assess the long-term impact of communication strategies on organizational reputation, trust, and stakeholder relationships. Understudied sectors, including non-profits, startups, and organizations in non-Western contexts, offer further opportunities to broaden theoretical perspectives and inform practice. Taken together, these findings highlight the urgent need for research that is culturally informed, technologically responsive, and methodologically rigorous. By addressing these gaps, future studies can advance public relations scholarship, guiding organizations toward ethical, effective, and adaptive communication strategies that strengthen trust, legitimacy, and stakeholder engagement in an increasingly digital and complex environment.

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