2025

NIGERIAN JOURNAL

OF SOCIAL

PSYCHOLOGY

Editor-in-Chief
Prof. S.O. Adebayo
Managing Editor
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Which is more effective? News release through Facebook or Radio?

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Abstract

Despite the revolutionary changes brought about by the digital media in PR communications, how PR communications can be optimized across different platforms has not been completely mapped. In response to this evident research gap, therefore, this study examined the contextual factors that interact to influence the perceived credibility of press releases. We devised a scenario-based experiment involving 461 subjects recruited from Abakaliki to test our research questions. Our findings show the main and interaction effects of PR channel and age of PR audiences on the credibility of press releases. Based on the findings, we recommend that organizations and practitioners targeting different age groups with PR communications especially press releases must put message platform into consideration. Specifically, we admonish PR experts to disseminate press releases targeted at young people through social media platforms such as Facebook and those targeted at older adults through conventional media channels like radio.

Introduction

Public relations (PR thereafter) defined as "the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2024), has long been viewed as a critical activity for organizations whilst its growth has correspondingly been exponential. This is due to the importance of PR. According to Bachmann and Ingenhoff (2016), organizations use PR to strengthen their reputation and gain legitimacy in the face of their respective publics. PR is also said to facilitate exchange of favors and development of social capital (Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2021). The implicit proposal is that PR enables organizations to shape how they are perceived by various publics since it acts to enhance organization-publics understanding such that the image of the organization in question is enhanced. PR also helps to create quality relationships and goodwill (Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017).

Consequently, it has become advisable for organizations to devise PR communication tools such as corporate websites, corporate social responsibility reports, press releases, conventional media advertising (e.g. TV, radio etc) to engage their various audiences in meaningful communications. Although the foregoing points to the multi-faceted nature of PR

communications, our focus in this article is press release because of its utility in disseminating matters of public interest and importance. Lowe (2015) also noted that press releases are helpful in enhancing sales, firms' public exposure and company or brand image. Press releases also enhance credibility, audience engagement, boost connections with various publics and can also act as a tool for managing crisis. Meanwhile, research carried out by Business Wire indicate that 73% of the participants stated that their first point of call when learning about an organization is press release (Montgomery, 2023). In Nigeria too, there has also been a tremendous growth in press releases as a media relation tool. The foregoing underscores the importance of press release as a PR tool and the need to further examine its influence in various media channels with a view to establishing a more nuanced understanding of how to better deploy this tool. This is so because the audiences of press releases access these communications via a variety of platforms including conventional media (e.g. newspaper, radio, TV etc) and new or digital media (social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc) (Montgomery, 2023) while Zaynab (2022) stated that PR professionals are also using digitized media platforms in combination with conventional media channels.

Meanwhile, the public relations field has witnessed growth in scholarly research. The first line of literature that extolled the interactive capabilities of digital technologies in PR communications appeared in the late 1990s and were conducted by Coombs (1998), Johnson (1997), and Kent and Taylor (1998). With the passing of time, research interest in the field shifted from normative stances (Wright, 1998; Kent, Taylor & White, 2003) to a more nuanced understanding of the risks, benefits, and drawbacks of the digital technologies (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). But despite this growing body of evidence, there is still lack of clear body of theory in the PR field and how organizations use social media in the PR context and for managing communication is not completely understood (Navarro, Moreno, & Zerfass, 2018). Additionally, the phenomenon of social media still lacks a coherent body of theory and significant gaps remain in knowledge of how organizations are using social media in concert with conventional media platforms in the context of public relations and communication management.

In Nigeria particularly, PR communications are sufficiently evident in all media platforms including conventional and digital media. Thus, demand for PR services is on the surge but there is an acute shortage of skilled PR professionals (Otunbanjo, Amujo, & Melewar, 2010). Drawing on key trends in the global PR market, Aleobua (2024) identified three related developments in Nigeria which will rapidly shape and continue to shape PR practices. Firstly, the development of various digital media tools and platforms such as artificial intelligence and social media is causing a massive shift from conventional to digital media such that PR experts that fail to leverage on these platforms and tools to rethink their content formats along these media dynamics risk been left behind. Secondly, consequently, media audiences are becoming selective in the messages they seek; thus, triggering the need for integrated PR communication channels. Finally, global trends in digitalization have meant the need to adopt PR media platforms that enable experts to monitor and manage crisis more adroitly and proactively. While the foregoing has put strong emphasis on digitalization as a PR tool, it does not by any means completely underplay the continued importance of traditional media. It rather calls for media integration to optimize PR campaigns. To realize this, there is need to understand the media channels that various media publics seek out contents on. This is

important because younger people use social media for information retrieval more than older people (Klar, 2021) who are conventionally known to listen to radio more than their younger counterparts (Krause, 2020). Despite this, few young people trust information retrieved from social media. An important managerial question, therefore, is: *which medium evoke greater credibility for PR campaign targeted at young and older audiences of PR communications: radio or Facebook?* The objective of this paper is to offer empirical answer to the above-stated research question.

Review of Related Literature

Public relations (PR) in conventional and digital media

It has been argued that PR is a communication activity tailored toward creation, sustenance, and governance of meanings (Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2015) which are essential for reputation management and legitimacy enactment (Bachmann and Ingenhoff, 2016). Pressures from stakeholders are currently motivating organizations to deploy PR communications strategies such as press releases to engage their audiences. All these are meant to influence the perception of stakeholders. However, attaining the right of level of stakeholder engagement depends much on the organization's understanding of the expectations of their stakeholders (Navarro, Moreno, & Zerfass, 2018). This includes knowing the most suitable platforms where stakeholders want PR communications such as press releases to originate from. In fact, Coombs (2014) argued that failure to identify stakeholders' expectations rightly can lead to negative publicity. The implicit proposal is that good press release messages passed through the wrong channel will mar the attainment of corporate objectives. Therefore, understanding the various media platforms that is mostly desired by various PR publics in an era when message clutter abound due to multiplication of channels is an avenue for further research. This is because strong bonding, relationship enhancement, strong brand reputation and so forth are a function of stakeholders' expectations.

While conventional media channels such as radio reflects securing editorial coverage in radio stations where the transpiring communications follow the one-to-many model (Cox, n.d), social media make organization-stakeholders' interactions easier and dialogical and further empowers stakeholders to lend their voices and demand areas where improvements are required (Tsai and Men, 2017). The expectations offered by social media are integrated communications management, rapid responses, regular updates, open dialogue/debate on issues of public interest (Navarro, Moreno, & Zerfass, 2018). Although social media has become a strong instrument for corporate communication because it allows organizations to pass on information, listen and actively engage in online interactions with their various publics (Capriotti et al., 2021), radio listenership is popular especially among older adults due to its positive impact (Krause, 2020). Moreover, the fact that some social networks not others have become the key corporate communication platforms deployed by organizations means that channel type, nature and features can influence the success or otherwise of PR communications (Capriotti et al., 2021). To better situate the foregoing debate within the stakeholder perspective, it is important at this juncture to discuss the stakeholder theory.

Stakeholder theory

This paper is anchored on the stakeholder's theory (Freeman, 1984). The core premise of the stakeholder theoretical perspective is that organizations that manage their various stakeholders well are most likely to achieve their corporate objectives (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). Thus, organizations that are able to establish strong relationships, mutual trust and cooperation with their stakeholders through their PR programmes are better able to attain competitive advantage (Jones, 1995).

The growing availability of digital platforms especially social media in addition to conventional media platforms (for example, radio) has helped various organizations to facilitate stakeholders' identification, needs analyses, disseminate valuable contents, develop emotional bonds, enhance satisfaction and loyalty while also building a positive brand image. While traditional media channels are effective in PR communications, the addition of social media to the pool of PR media platforms has further enhanced organizations' engagement with stakeholders, bond and relationship building as evidenced in several previous research (Zhang, Dong, & Cheng, 2023; Capriotti, Zeler, & Camilleri, 2021; Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2015). As Heath (2014) notes, engagement is not limited to two-way interaction but includes committed effort toward attaining constant dialogue that fosters shared management and community building. Engagement as used in this article refers to public impression about PR communications disseminated through either social media or radio.

Review of empirical studies

The PR field has witnessed tremendous scholarly research in the past few decades. Earlier studies focused on establishing the credibility of the PR profession and the right communication strategies that make the most impact. Along this line of inquiry, Moloney (1999) examined the credibility of PR as a profession and its distorted reality aftermath. The author employed a survey-based research strategy involving a self-selected and representative sample to investigate the low reputation suffered by the PR industry and the distorted reality it has created about the PR profession. Their findings informed an argument for location, reform and greater nuanced research. Ranchhod, Gurãu, and Lace (2002) also sought to understand the model of communication deployed by biotechnology firms through a content analytical approach conducted on the websites of 600 firms. They found that data presented highlight the type of on-line messages, their function (marketing or PR oriented), the targeted audiences, and the level of on-line interaction provided by the company's site. Finally, the interpretation of results concludes with an integrated on-line communication model for biotechnology companies.

Overtime, research examining social media as viable communication tool for brand building and reputation management has burgeon due to more Internet penetration and its increasing adoption among organizations (Bondy, Matten, & Moon, 2004; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Even in this new era, strategic PR communications and credibility and the need for regulation remain burning issues. For instance, Vardeman-Winter and Place (2015) investigated PR culture in the present era of social media with a view to uncovering the nexus between PR practice and regulatory forces. They demonstrated that social media is currently acting as an integral part for maintaining culture. Adi and Grigore (2015) examined the relationship between PR and corporate social responsibility all disseminated through social media using a methodology that combines qualitative content analysis with social media

audit. They found PR and CSR communications disseminated through various platforms align with the principle of integrated communication across channels.

Capriotti, Zeler, and Camilleri (2021) adopted a critical literature review to examine how dialogical communications between organizations and stakeholders transpire on social media with the aim of developing a conceptual framework that captures the dimensions of those dialogical interactions. The findings indicate that interactive resources, interactive attitude, responsiveness, and conversation were the dimensions of dialogical social media communications identified by the authors; thus, putting forward vital implications for the practitioners of PR. But, in line with the current quest for strategic PR communications in the digital age, Zhang, Dong and Cheng (2023) examined the communication strategies that nonprofit organizations deploy to foster effective PR communications in social media. More precisely, they investigated how emotional and interactive PR communication strategies influence audience engagement. The authors employed computer-assisted textual and emotional analyses to analyze over 300,000 tweets made by 100 nonprofit organizations in the United States. The results indicate that both functional interactivity and contingency interactivity have negative effect on *likes* and *retweets*. It was found that emotion valence has a positive effect on likes and retweets. Thus, the influence of emotion and interactivity on audience engagement varied, pointing to the existence of contextual peculiarities in social media PR communications.

Valentini and Sriramesh (2024) examined how personal influence could be leveraged for different public relations purposes in varied cultural contexts through the use of a self-administered survey to PR professionals in private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Their findings indicate that four manifestations of personal influence including relational closeness strategy, engagement strategy, expertise strategy and added value strategy as deployed by PR influence interpersonal relationships. Additionally, Lambert, Ewing and Hassan (2024) examined the strategies that PR practitioners use to manage the crisis emanating from fake news and how strategies differ in other corporate crisis using 21 in-depth interviews and a focus group. The findings shed insight on how PR practitioners determine when to respond to fake news crisis the strategies to employ as well as the tactics deployed to control narratives during crisis in corporations.

Gaps in the literature and research questions

A critical look at the foregoing empirical review reveals some evident gaps in the literature which the current tries to address. Firstly, most of the studies focused on a single PR platform especially social media even though integrated PR communications has been declared the supposed norm for organizations that want to achieve their corporate objectives by several scholars and practitioners (see Aleobua, 2024; Navarro et al. 2018; Adi & Grigore, 2015). Secondly, none of the reviewed studies considered the impact of different PR channels and audience categories in PR message credibility. This is so despite the widely acclaimed potency of contextual factors in the influence of PR communications (Navarro et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). Methodologically too, previous studies deployed mainly survey and content analysis. None utilized experiment even though it is the gold standard in empirical research due to its ability to categorically establish causality. Finally, despite the convergence of both conventional and digital media no previous studies conducted a comparative examination of the contextual factors that influence the adoption of conventional and digital

media and their credibility perception among different age groups. The current paper aims to fill these gaps by examining the following research questions:

1. Is different PR channels (conventional and digital media) susceptible to perceptual differences in press release message credibility?
2. Does the perception of press release message credibility vary according to the age bracket of PR audiences?
3. Does PR channels and age or PR audiences interact to influence press release message credibility?

Methodology

Experimental design and stimulation materials

To examine the three research questions, we employed a scenario-based experiment because it is a popular technique devised by researchers in the field of social media and advertising research (e.g. Izogo et al., 2020). A 2 (PR campaign channel: radio vs. Facebook) × 2 (Age of PR audience: young vs. older) between-subjects factorial design was utilized. The basis for stimuli formulation was a PR campaign countering fake news. This was because PR practitioners confront fake news stories as a main aspect of their crisis management activities (Lambert, Ewing, & Hassan, 2024). We chose Facebook and radio as the channels of experimental manipulation because Facebook is the mostly used social networking site among Nigerians with nearly 41.6 million users (Statista, 2024) while 42% of Nigerians indicated to have listened to radio on weekly basis in a recent survey (Statista, 2023).

We calibrated PR audience's age group to young (18-34 years) and older adults (≥ 35 years) because a recent statistic by Statista (2024) showed that Facebook users are mostly dominated by the 18-34 years age bracket while those who are 35 years of age or older use Facebook less. The use of 2 × 2 experimental design means that we realized four experimental groups for stimuli administration and data collection. The rules of random assignment of subjects into each experimental group was realized by premixing the stimuli beforehand. The subjects were stimulated to imagine that they encountered a PR campaign countering either a Facebook or radio fake news claiming that the organization was shutdown. Those who were assigned to the radio group we told that they received the news from a radio while those who were assigned to the Facebook condition were told that they saw the campaign on Facebook. We neutralized the potential impact of previous experiences, by using a fictitious company name.

Measures

The questionnaire that accompanied the experimental stimulation materials incorporated questions that tested the manipulation effectiveness, realism checks, and measures of the dependent variable. Two questions were included as manipulation checks: i) based on the scenario, indicate the PR channel through which you learnt about the PR campaign (radio/Facebook); and ii) indicate your age bracket (18-34 years/≥35 years). The following question measured realism: how real did the PR campaign look/appear? Message credibility which is the dependent variable was measured with four scale items adapted from Freeman and Spyridakis (2004). The adapted scale items include: i) I perceive the information in the PR campaign as credible/reliable; ii) I perceive the information in the PR campaign as trustworthy; iii) I perceive the information in the PR campaign as accurate; and iv) I perceive

the information in the PR campaign as unbiased. The internal consistency of the foregoing measures is excellent ($\alpha = 0.917$).

Sampling and sample

We collected data in Abakaliki, Ebonyi State through the help of trained research assistants. 461 subjects were included in the sample based on random assignment that was predetermined. A criterion for prequalification to participate in the experiment was that the subject must have adequate experience of the task involved in the experiment. We further ensured data quality through other filter questions that guaranteed that participants could relate themselves to the scenarios.

Data Analysis and Findings

We devised descriptive statistics to analyze the demographic data and questions that required descriptive examination while analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the three research hypotheses.

Demographics

Based on our descriptive analysis, 250 participants paralleling 54.23% were male while the remainder (that is, 45.77%) were female. In addition, the age bracket data turned out an almost equitable distribution because (51.63% were within the 18-34 age bracket (i.e. young) while 48.37% were ≥35 years (i.e. older)).

Manipulation and realism checks

The manipulation of the PR channel was effective because 100% of the participants who received PR campaign that was supposed to have been aired through radio was able to correctly identify the channel. Similarly, the subjects were also able to correctly identify their age bracket (100%). Experimental realism was also established because the mean value (i.e. *M*) of the measured item is 4.318 which is a clear indication that the subjects rated the realism check question very positively.

Hypotheses Test Outputs

Results from an ANOVA test show that the proposed main effect of PR campaign channel

Figure 1: Interaction of PR campaign channel and age of PR audience on Message credibility
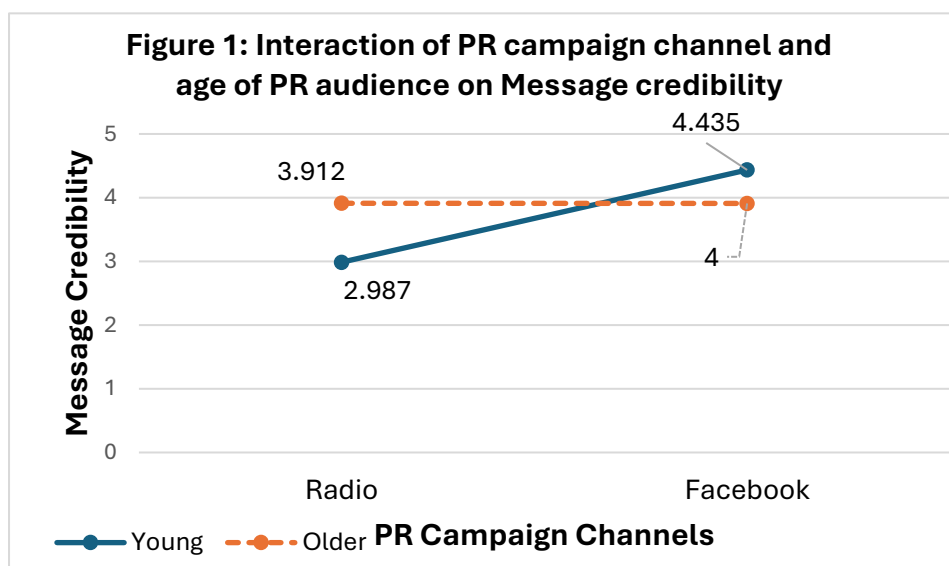
(radio vs. Facebook) on message credibility was significant, $F(2, 458) = 181.231$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.621$. Similarly, findings also indicate that the main effect of the age of PR audience on message credibility is significant, $F(2, 458) = 92.624$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.315$). Furthermore, a significant interaction effect between PR campaign channel and age of PR audience on message credibility was established, $F(2, 458) = 4.476$, $p = 0.010$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.123$. The interaction effect is demonstrated in Figure 1.

Series of contrast analyses were used to simplify the main and interaction effects. With regard to the main effect of PR campaign channel on message credibility, the results indicate that radio was perceived to be a more credible message source compared with Facebook ($M_{\text{Radio}} = 4.517$ vs. $M_{\text{Facebook}} = 3.576$, $p < .001$). Also, the main effect of age of PR audiences on message credibility show that young audiences perceive PR messages to be more credible than their older counterparts ($M_{\text{Young}} = 4.555$ vs. $M_{\text{Older}} = 2.989$, $p < .001$).

Lastly, under the radio PR campaign condition, older PR audiences who are aged ≥ 35 years indicated higher and significant perception of message credibility than their young counterparts who were aged between 18 – 34 years ($M_{\text{Young}} = 2.987$ vs. $M_{\text{Older}} = 3.912$; $t = 10.122$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.201$). Additionally, under the Facebook PR campaign condition, young PR audiences perceived higher message credibility that is significantly different compared with older PR audiences ($M_{\text{Young}} = 4.435$ vs. $M_{\text{Older}} = 3.910$; $t = 5.185$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.103$). These findings answer our research questions aptly.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper initially sets out to examine how PR campaign channel and age of PR audience influence message credibility in both conventional and digital media platforms. We considered both main and interaction effect. This section summarizes the research findings and discusses both the theoretical and managerial contributions of the paper.

Discussion of findings

This paper made three key findings that resonate with our proposed research questions. Firstly, the findings indicate a main effect of PR channel on message credibility. More precisely, we show that press releases disseminated through conventional media platforms such as radio were perceived to be more credible by PR audiences compared with press releases communicated through Facebook. This finding resonates with the literature stream that extol the potency of contextual factors in the influence of PR communications (Valentini and Sriramesh, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023; Navarro et al., 2018). Thus, in contravention to the recent influence of social media in PR communications (Capriotti et al., 2021), PR messages especially press releases disseminated through conventional media is still found to be more credible by PR audiences compared with those originating from social media platforms especially Facebook.

Secondly, the findings also show that age is a critical factor that determine how audiences of PR communications especially press releases perceive its credibility. Specifically, young people perceive press releases to be more credible compared with older adults. This might be because the young are more likely to jump into hasty conclusion compared with their older adult counterparts who are more thorough in their examination of information. This finding

aligns with previous research that indicate that although older adults process information at a slower pace, they are more objective than their young counterparts (Torrens-Burton, Hanley, Wood, Basoudan, Norris, Richards, and Tales, 2020).

Finally, the above two prevailing findings were qualified by the interaction effect of PR campaign channel and age of PR audiences on message credibility. The findings reveal that the credibility perception of press releases depends on the interaction forces of both the platform through which the press release is disseminated and the age of the audiences receiving the press release. Specifically, we demonstrated that while young PR audiences perceive press releases disseminated through Facebook to be more credible than radio press releases, older adults view radio press releases to be more credible than press releases communicated through Facebook. Therefore, the potency of both platform and age as contextual factors has been established in PR communications.

Theoretical implications

Despite the growing body of knowledge in the PR field, there is limited studies addressing the influence of contextual factors on PR communications. To address this gap, the current study tested the main and interaction effects of PR campaign channel and age of PR audiences on perception of press release message credibility. Our findings contribute to the extant literature in at least three significant ways. Firstly, while most previous PR research focused on a single PR platform even though integrated PR communications has been declared the supposed norm for organizations that want to achieve their corporate objectives by several scholars and practitioners (see Aleobua, 2024; Navarro et al. 2018; Adi & Grigore, 2015), our study respond to the need to shed more light on integrated PR communications by examining how conventional and social media platforms affect press release message credibility. By showing the main effect of PR channel in the context of press release, we demonstrate the often-neglected impact of press release vehicles on message credibility.

Secondly, due to the absence of studies that examined the impact of age on message influence in the PR literature, our study extended the contextual research stream within the PR research domain by not only considering how age could possibly influence the credibility perception of press releases but also demonstrated how age interact with PR channel to influence message credibility. In so doing, we offered a more nuanced understanding of platformization and age in PR communication. Our study is valuable because previous studies are limited to the investigation of a single platform for PR communications especially social media (Navarro, Moreno, & Zerfass, 2018).

Finally, we make a methodological contribution. While most previous studies on PR employed either a survey or content analysis, our study devised an experimental research design to investigate the proposed research questions. Surveys and content analytical approaches have no capacity to establish definite causality. By following the experimental research design, we offer cause-effect evidence that was not found in previous PR research.

Managerial implications

Our findings have three important implications for practice. Overall, it is implicated in our findings that organizations must understand that age of press release audiences and the platforms through which it is communicated are factors that influence message credibility.

Organizations and PR experts must understand that when a press release is targeted at young people, it pays to communicate it through social media platforms such as Facebook, but similar PR targeted at older adults will be more effective in influencing its audience what disseminated through conventional media platform such as radio. This implies that while it is important to pursue an integrated PR communications strategy, practitioners must understand that some PR communications are more effective when disseminated through certain platforms. As we have clearly shown through our empirical analysis, even though conventional and digital platforms are still effective for PR communications, practitioners must bear in mind that the platform to deploy depends on the age of the audience of the PR communication.

Avenues for future research

This study is limited to the investigation of the main and interactions effects of PR campaign channel and age of PR audiences on the perceived credibility of press releases. Future researchers can examine our research questions by integrating other contextual factors such as gender, usage experience, stakeholder type and so on. Conducting a comparative study of other conventional and digital media such as Newspaper or TV and Twitter or Instagram will help to lend credence to our established empirical findings. Additionally, testing our research model in the context of other PR formats such as corporate websites, corporate social responsibility reports and so on is an avenue for further research. Finally, PR practice in Nigeria is yet to be fully developed. Continuous examination of our research model to ascertain its relevance is necessary especially in this era of artificial intelligence.

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