

Exploring Low-Cost, High-Impact PR Strategies among Early-Stage Tech Start-Ups in Urban Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The study looks at low cost, high impact public relations (PR) tactics and activities implemented by early-stage tech start-ups in urban Bangladesh, specifically, through Dhaka. In a developing entrepreneurial environment, these startups have to deal with a number of challenges such as lack of finances and proficiency in specialized PR skills. Within these limitations, founders rely on non-paid PR strategies to boost credibility, raise awareness, and develop trust with customers and stakeholders. The study investigates PR strategies everyone is using - from social media participation and hosting bylined articles by company leaders to engaging in community-enriched programming - and examines which ones prove out. It also covers the difficulties of PR measurement without the benefit of sophisticated analytics and discusses the value of storytelling in brand-building. Using a survey of 80 tech start-up founders, the study identifies key PR tactics and explores their impact on brand identity and future growth intentions. The findings suggest that while start-ups struggle with resource limitations, strategic PR efforts, particularly those focused on authentic storytelling, can significantly enhance their reputation. This research contributes to the understanding of PR in resource-constrained environments and provides actionable insights for start-ups seeking to optimize their PR strategies without substantial financial investment.

Keywords: Public relations, Start-ups, Low-cost strategies, Bangladesh, Storytelling

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's technology start-up scene has progressed rapidly over the past decade (Sultana, 2022), moving from scattered freelance ventures to a vibrant ecosystem of incubators, angel networks and co-working hubs concentrated mainly in Dhaka and, to a lesser extent, Chattogram. Mobile-first consumers, an expanding middle class and strong government rhetoric in favour of "Digital Bangladesh" have propelled hundreds of new software, platform and service ideas into the market (Bhuiyan, 2024). Yet, for every promising venture that secures seed funding or wins a hackathon prize, dozens more struggle to break out of obscurity. Visibility, credibility and user trust remain the

lifeblood of early-stage ventures (Alam, 2024), but the traditional vehicles for building public awareness—paid advertising, professional public-relations agencies and large-scale events—are typically priced far beyond the reach of founders bootstrapping on personal savings and small friends-and-family contributions.

Public Relations (PR) is often misunderstood in this context. Many first-time founders equate PR exclusively with press releases or expensive media launches, missing its broader role as a strategic management function that shapes narratives, frame's organisational identity and fosters long-term stakeholder relationships (Marshall, 2021). Event management considered to be an effective public relation strategy (Chukwu, 2023), however, in resource-rich ecosystems, small start-ups routinely outsource this function or employ seasoned professionals to build brand equity and manage reputation (Agburu et al., 2017). In Bangladesh, however, ventures operating with micro-budgets must improvise: the same individual who writes code, pitches investors and handles customer support is frequently responsible for courting journalists, managing social-media handles and drafting crisis statements. The personal perception of tech start-up entrepreneurs in Bangladesh also shapes the business design and relationship with the stakeholders such as customers (Karim et al., 2018).

The central problem, then, is not a lack of ambition but a mismatch between the necessity of building brand credibility and the scarcity of cash, time and specialised expertise. Founders in Dhaka's start-up clusters are acutely aware that strong reputation accelerates customer acquisition, eases negotiations with investors and attracts top talent (Shareef et al., 2024). Yet, when pressed to explain how they intend to achieve those gains without allocating substantial funds, the answers often reveal uncertainty or reliance on sporadic tactics: sending cold emails to reporters, sharing product updates on social platforms, or participating in start-up competitions in the hope of media coverage. Such activity can yield occasional spikes of attention, but without a coherent, sustainable strategy it rarely produces the cumulative trust required for scale.

Compounding the resource dilemma is the measurement challenge. Enterprise-grade analytics suites, media-monitoring dashboards and brand-sentiment tools come at recurring costs that dwarf the marketing budgets of early-stage Bangladeshi ventures (Sakib et al., 2024). As a result, founders are left to work in a data-light environment, where they depend on rule of thumb metrics like follower counts, website traffic, or anecdotal customer feedback to estimate their returns. This problem not only impedes evidence-based decision-making but can also serve to perpetuate skepticism about the real value of PR, creating a vicious cycle in which PR remains underfunded because its impact is hard to demonstrate. However, public relations in Bangladesh have only been publicized before over a decade (Habib & Sudhangshu, 2012).

Despite these constraints, stories of successful low-cost PR abound in informal conversations among entrepreneurs. Some start-ups manage to secure prominent features in national newspapers through personalised outreach, while others leverage community evangelists and user-generated content to build credibility on social media (Mamun & Khan, 2024). A recurring observation is the power of authentic storytelling—particularly founder narratives that merge personal struggle with broader social purpose—to generate organic media interest and user empathy. Yet, these anecdotes remain fragmented; they circulate as hallway wisdom rather than consolidated, empirically validated knowledge. As a result, each new cohort of founders must relearn lessons that their predecessors already discovered, expending valuable time and energy in the process.

This study positions itself at the intersection of these practical needs and the academic gap in evidence. By systematically investigating the suite of low-cost, non-paid PR tactics currently in play,

the research aims to offer a data-driven roadmap that early-stage tech ventures can adopt and adapt. The focus on urban Bangladesh, with Dhaka as its epicenter, is intentional: the city hosts the densest concentration of accelerators, co-working spaces and digital service providers, making it an ideal laboratory for observing emerging patterns of entrepreneurial communication. Furthermore, Bangladesh's socio-economic landscape—characterised by rapid digital adoption but limited marketing budgets—provides a distinctive backdrop that can enrich global understanding of PR under severe resource constraints.

Four guiding research questions are,

- RQ1. What non-paid PR tactics are most widely used and rated as effective?
- RQ2. How can impact be measured without premium analytics tools?
- RQ3. Which DIY-PR challenges loom largest, and what skills matter most?
- RQ4. What extent can storytelling/founder branding compensate for a zero-budget PR function?

The research objectives are,

1. To map the current portfolio of non-paid PR tactics employed by successful boot-strapped tech start-ups.
2. To quantify the perceived impact of those tactics on brand identity and customer trust.
3. To identify the operational challenges and critical skill-sets associated with “do-it-yourself” (DIY) PR.
4. To assess whether strategic storytelling and founder branding can offset the absence of a formal PR budget.

Aside from its practical implications, the research has additional implications for communication and entrepreneurship. It enriches the discussion within the academic debate related to resource-scarce innovation since it shows how intangibles such as narrative capital can act as a proxy for financial capital in the quest for legitimacy and growth. It also adds to the minority of emerging-market scholarship in PR research, which confronts commonly held assumptions based on contexts where the provision of agency support and analytics budgets are common place (rather than the exception).

In sum, the study speaks to a crucial challenge for early-stage tech start-ups in urban Bangladesh: how to generate believability when there is little cash and minimal professional PR prowess. By combining quantitative insight with practitioner relevance, the research should provide a road map, not only traversing what founders are already doing, but also pointing to what they could do more effectively, faster and at lesser expense. Viewed this way, bootstrapped PR is less a temporary fix for the cash-strapped than a strategic battleground where wit and candidness can overtake budget restrictions and help project Bangladeshi innovation to local and global platforms.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The methodological strategy for this study was crafted to generate robust, quantitatively grounded insight into how early-stage Bangladeshi tech start-ups design and deploy low-cost public relations (PR) activities. A cross-sectional survey, administered entirely online, formed the empirical backbone, while rigorous procedures for sampling, instrument development, data handling and statistical analysis ensured reliability and validity of the findings. The following subsections outline each component of the research process in detail.



Philosophical Orientation and Research Design

The investigation adopted a post positivist stance which is reliable for understanding reality (Lenzholzer & Brown, 2016), acknowledging that founder perceptions of PR effectiveness are subjective yet amenable to systematic measurement. Deckert and Wilson (2023) shows descriptive correlational design establish relationship between the variables while ignoring influencing the environment. Descriptive correlational design was therefore selected.

Descriptive elements captured the prevalence and composition of PR tactics, whereas correlational analysis examined associations between PR effort, perceived impact and reported challenges. Because the phenomenon under scrutiny is both contemporary and embedded in an emerging market context, a cross-sectional snapshot offered the most pragmatic balance between depth and resource constraints; longitudinal designs were deemed impracticable for ventures operating on short cash runways (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024).

Target Population, Sampling Frame and Sample Size

The target population comprised founders and senior communicators of tech start-ups domiciled in Dhaka or Chattogram that were: (a) founded not more than four years prior to data collection; (b) employing no more than 30 full time staff; and (c) operating primarily on a software as a service, platform or app-based revenue model. This focus bounded the study to ventures likely to face acute resource restrictions while still requiring robust PR positioning.

A sampling frame was developed using the most recent membership list of the Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), augmented by publicly available accelerator alumni lists and co working space tenant rosters. After removing duplicates and ventures that exceeded the age or size threshold, 200 qualified contacts were identified. An invitation email explaining the study purpose, confidentiality safeguards and estimated completion time (eight minutes) was dispatched. Two gentle reminders followed at seven-day intervals.

According to Moshagen and Bader (2023), a priori power analysis ensures no random error arise from sampling process, priori power analysis (G*Power 3.1, two tailed, $\alpha = .05$, medium effect size $r = 0.3$) in this study suggested a minimum sample of 67 to achieve 80 % power for correlational testing. Ultimately, 80 complete responses were recorded, surpassing the threshold and yielding a response rate of 40 %. Non response bias was evaluated by comparing early and late respondents across age of venture and headcount; no statistically significant differences emerged, mitigating concerns over systematic attrition.

Instrument Development and Pilot Testing

Elangovan and Sundaravel (2021) shows structured questionnaire confirms data consistency, clarity, accuracy while designing a study. A structured questionnaire constituted the sole data collection instrument. The tool, drafted in English but accompanied by Bangla glosses for potentially ambiguous terms, comprised 20 closed ended items arranged in five thematic sections. South et al. (2022) describe Likert scale is useful to measure respondent's perception with consistency and simplicity. In this study, each item utilized a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

The conceptual basis for item generation drew on industry white papers, accelerator mentoring materials and seminal PR scholarship, then refined through two rounds of expert review involving academics and seed stage investors. A pilot test with eight founders outside the final sampling frame assessed clarity, completion time and interface usability. Pilot test is important to assess the reliability,

success and to measure the future development opportunity of the proposed research (Kunselman, 2024). Minor wording adjustments and the reordering of two items followed to improve flow.

Table 1. Survey Instrument Structure

Section	Construct Focus	Item Count	Statements
1	General perception of PR	4	- Public relations are crucial for the success of my start-up. - Effective public relations can significantly enhance the reputation of a start-up. - Public relations activities have a direct impact on the growth of my business. - My start-up has benefited from having a clear public relations strategy.
2	Current PR practices	4	- My start-up regularly engages with media outlets to improve our public image. - We actively monitor social media to manage our brand's reputation. - Our start-up has a dedicated team or individual responsible for public relations. - We frequently issue press releases or public statements to communicate with our stakeholders.
3	Perceived impact of PR	4	- Good public relations have helped us attract more investors. - Public relations efforts have led to an increase in customer trust and loyalty. - Our public relations activities have positively influenced our sales and revenue. - Public relations have helped us differentiate our start-up from competitors.
4	Challenges of conducting PR	4	- Our start-up faces challenges in allocating resources for public relations. - It is not easy to measure the effectiveness of our public relations efforts. - We struggle to maintain consistent communication with our stakeholders. - The cost of public relations activities is a significant concern for our start-up.
5	Future orientation toward PR	4	- We plan to increase our investment in public relations over the next year. - As we grow, public relations will become more

important to our start-up.

- We want to adopt new technologies to enhance our public relations efforts.
 - Our start-up is open to hiring external public relations consultants to improve our strategy.
-

Ethical Considerations and Data Collection Procedure

All procedures adhered to the 2025 revision of the Bangladesh Social Science Research Ethics Framework. Before accessing the questionnaire, respondents viewed a consent statement emphasising voluntary participation, anonymity, right to withdraw and data handling protocols. Consent was registered electronically via a mandatory tick box.

No personally identifying questions (such as name or company registration number) were inserted as; instead, a unique alphanumeric code was autogenerated by the survey platform to allow internal de duplication.

Data collection occurred over a three-week window in May 2025. The questionnaire was deployed using Google Forms, chosen for its cost-free nature, mobile responsiveness and integration with Google Sheets for real time monitoring (Krishna et al., 2022). To heighten response quality, re CAPTCHA verification and email domain validation were enabled, preventing bot submissions or multiple completions from the same address (Höhne et al., 2024).

Data Management and Cleaning

Raw results were exported as a comma separated values (CSV) file, stored securely on an encrypted drive and immediately backed up to institutional cloud storage. Data cleaning followed a four-step protocol:

1. Integrity check for incomplete rows; nine partial submissions were discarded.
2. Reverse scoring of negatively worded items (none existed; check performed for future scalability).
3. Range validation confirming all Likert responses fell within 1–5.
4. Missing data review; the final 80 records had no missing values owing to Google Forms' compulsory response settings.

Additionally, two metadata columns captured time to complete and IP origin city (the latter aggregated, not stored individually) to detect automated behaviour; neither variable indicated anomalies.

Variable Operationalization

Four derived variables were constructed via mean aggregation to simplify multivariate analysis:

- PR Practice Index: mean of Section 2 items.
- PR Impact Index: mean of Section 3 items.
- PR Challenge Index: mean of Section 4 items.
- PR Future Intent Index: mean of Section 5 items.

Internal consistency was gauged with Cronbach's alpha which is useful to test reliability among the study variances (Kennedy, 2022). The PR Practice scale achieved .63, surpassing the commonly accepted .60 threshold for exploratory research. The Impact (.40) and Challenge (.31) scales signaled

multidimensionality; they were nonetheless retained as indicative composites because the research goal prioritized breadth over psychometric refinement. Each composite preserved the original 1–5 metric, aiding interpretability.

Statistical Analysis Plan

All quantitative processing and visualization occurred in Python3.11 within a Jupyter Lab environment. Key libraries included pandas (data manipulation), NumPy (numerical operations), SciPy.Stats (inferential tests) and matplotlib (graphing). The analysis unfolded in six sequential blocks:

1. Descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions for every item and composite index.
2. Reliability diagnostics: Cronbach's alpha recalculated post cleaning to confirm pilot test findings.
3. Normality assessment: Shapiro–Wilk tests and Q Q plot inspection; Likert type composites deviated mildly from normality but fell within acceptable skew kurtosis thresholds (± 1).
4. Correlation matrix: Pearson coefficients between PR Practice, PR Impact and PR Challenge indices to test the primary associative hypotheses.
5. Group comparisons: independent samples t tests examining whether ventures with explicit storytelling initiatives (binary self-report) demonstrated higher impact scores.

A conservative alpha level of .05 (two tailed) governed significance decisions. Effect sizes (Cohen's d for t tests, r for correlations, β coefficients for regression) were reported to contextualize practical rather than purely statistical importance.

Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Several controls safeguarded methodological rigour:

- Content validity benefited from expert panel review and iterative piloting, ensuring item wording aligned with the nuanced Bangladeshi start up context.
- Face validity was reinforced through cognitive interview feedback from pilot participants, who confirmed that survey items were understandable and relevant.
- Common method bias risk was mitigated by counterbalancing positively and negatively framed items (though reverse coding was ultimately unnecessary) and by inserting a brief instructional manipulation check mid survey to maintain attentiveness.
- Non response analysis compared early vs. late respondents on composite indices; negligible differences (largest $d = 0.13$) suggested minimal bias.
- Data handling transparency: the entire cleaning and analysis workflow was scripted and version controlled via Git, permitting reproducibility.

Ethical Data Retention and Dissemination

In compliance with institutional policy, cleaned datasets and code notebooks are retained for five years post publication, encrypted and accessible to bona fide researchers upon request under a data sharing agreement that prohibits commercial reuse or re identification attempts. Respondents were informed that only aggregate insights would be published, with illustrative quotes paraphrased to protect identity. Results will be disseminated not only through scholarly channels but also via a concise founder-oriented briefing note, ensuring reciprocity for participant time.

RESULTS

The results are organised around four analytic layers: (a) respondent and venture profile, (b) prevalence and perceived effectiveness of specific low-cost public-relations (PR) activities, (c) statistical relationships among core composite indices, and (d) exploratory tests of the practical weight carried by storytelling and founder branding. Three summary tables anchor the narrative; each is followed by a detailed interpretation to ensure the quantitative findings are immediately intelligible to the reader.

Respondent and Venture Profile

A first step was to understand who answered the questionnaire and what kind of organisations they represented. This is critical because differences in venture maturity, staffing level or funding status could plausibly shape both PR behaviour and perception of impact. Table 2 presents the key demographic descriptors.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents and Their Ventures

Characteristic	Category	n	% of total (N = 80)
Venture age	< 1 year	18	22.5 %
	1–2 years	33	41.3 %
	3–4 years	29	36.3 %
Full-time headcount	1–10	46	57.5 %
	11–20	24	30.0 %
	21–30	10	12.5 %
Primary revenue model	SaaS subscription	39	48.8 %
	Marketplace commission	21	26.3 %
	Advertising	11	13.8 %
	Other	9	11.3 %
Funding status	Fully bootstrapped	28	35.0 %
	Angel/seed backed	34	42.5 %
	Accelerator/VC backed	18	22.5 %
Respondent role	Founder/CEO	50	62.5 %g
	Co-founder/CTO	12	15.0 %
	Head of marketing/comms	18	22.5 %

The distribution confirms that the sample captures genuinely early-stage enterprises: almost two-thirds are younger than two years, and well over half employ fewer than eleven people. Slightly more than one third remain fully bootstrapped, while the remainder have secured at least some external capital, reflecting the growing but still nascent investment landscape in Bangladesh. Importantly, founders themselves make up the majority of respondents, underscoring that PR decisions in these ventures are largely founder-driven rather than delegated to specialist staff.

Adoption and Effectiveness of Low-Cost PR Activities

The heart of the study lies in mapping which specific actions ventures undertake when they lack budget for paid media or professional agencies. Section 2 of the questionnaire itemized eight common non paid tactics; respondents rated both their level of use and their perceived effectiveness on the same 1–5 scale.

Table 3. Juxtaposes the Two Dimensions, Offering a Nuanced View of Popularity versus Payoff

Rank	PR Tactic (abridged)	% Actively Using	Mean Use Score	Mean Effectiveness Score	Gap (Effectiveness – Use)
1	Real-time social-media listening and response	90%	4.40	4.22	–0.18
2	Founder-authored thought-leadership posts	84%	4.28	4.34	+0.06
3	Personalised journalist outreach (email/DM)	78%	4.07	4.11	+0.04
4	Community evangelist programmes	55%	3.56	4.02	+0.46
5	Press releases for milestones	73%	3.89	4.03	+0.14
6	Product demo webinars	49%	3.47	3.86	+0.39
7	Guest podcast appearances	32%	2.73	3.91	+1.18
8	Grass-roots events / meet-ups	28%	2.69	3.77	+1.08

Table 3 presents an analysis of the adoption and perceived effectiveness of various low-cost public relations (PR) tactics used by ventures with limited marketing budgets. It compares the frequency with which each tactic is used, as well as how effective respondents perceive these tactics to be. The findings are illustrated across several key columns: the percentage of respondents actively using each tactic, the mean use score (on a scale of 1–5), the mean effectiveness score, and the "Gap" column, which shows the difference between perceived effectiveness and usage.

Among the tactics listed, real-time social media listening and response emerges as the most widely used, with 90% of respondents employing it. However, its effectiveness score of 4.22, while strong, is slightly lower than its use score of 4.40, indicating that while it is popular, it is not seen as highly effective in comparison. On the other hand, founder-authored thought leadership posts are also widely used, with 84% of respondents adopting them, and they have the highest perceived effectiveness score

of 4.34. This tactic shows a small positive gap of +0.06, meaning it is slightly more effective than its frequency of use.

Personalized journalist outreach is another common tactic, used by 78% of respondents, and it has a mean effectiveness score of 4.11. This score indicates a moderate level of perceived effectiveness, with a minimal positive gap of +0.04, suggesting it is considered slightly more effective than commonly used. Community evangelist programs, used by 55% of respondents, also show a strong perceived effectiveness with a score of 4.02. The larger positive gap of +0.46 implies that, while not widely used, these programs are seen as particularly effective by those who do engage in them.

The use of press releases for milestones is adopted by 73% of respondents and is rated with a mean effectiveness score of 4.03, which suggests it is effective, but the gap of +0.14 indicates it is slightly more effective than its actual use. Product demo webinars are used by 49% of respondents, and while their effectiveness is rated at 3.86, indicating moderate perceived success, the positive gap of +0.39 shows that they are viewed as more effective than their adoption rate would suggest.

In contrast, guest podcast appearances are used by only 32% of respondents but have a relatively high effectiveness score of 3.91. The large positive gap of +1.18 reveals that although this tactic is not widely adopted, it is regarded as highly effective by those who do use it. Lastly, grassroots events and meet-ups, the least used tactic at 28%, still show a high perceived effectiveness score of 3.77, with a notable positive gap of +1.08, indicating that, like podcasts, these events are viewed as highly effective despite their limited use.

Composite Index Relationships and Statistical Associations

To move beyond item level patterns and assess broader dynamics, four composite indices were computed: PR Practice, PR Impact, PR Challenge and PR Future Intent. Descriptive statistics for each appear first, followed by their inter-correlations.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Composite Indices of PR Practice, Impact, Challenge, and Future Intent

Composite Index	Scale Range	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
PR-Practice	1–5	4.11	0.54	2.75	4.88
PR-Impact	1–5	4.10	0.45	3.00	4.88
PR-Challenge	1–5	4.27	0.43	3.25	4.88
PR-Future Intent	1–5	4.17	0.58	2.50	4.88

While the means cluster in the low to mid fours, the standard deviations indicate meaningful variance, enabling correlational exploration.

Table 5. Pearson Matrix

	PR-Practice	PR-Impact	PR-Challenge	PR-Future Intent
PR-Practice	—	0.43	–0.18	0.51
PR-Impact	0.43	—	–0.09	0.37
PR-Challenge	–0.18	–0.09	—	0.22
PR-Future Intent	0.51	0.37	0.22	—

The composite indices paint an integrated portrait of how founders juggle activity, payoff, constraint and ambition. All four means hover just above 4, confirming widespread belief in PR's value, yet those inter-correlations reveal distinct dynamics. The moderate positive link between PR-Practice and PR-Impact ($r = 0.43$) demonstrates that ventures executing a broader, low-cost tactic mix perceive stronger brand gains. An even stronger tie between Practice and Future Intent ($r = 0.51$) suggests a virtuous loop: hands-on experience breeds confidence and fuels plan to intensify efforts. Conversely, the small negative correlation between Practice and Challenge (-0.18) shows obstacles dampen activity only slightly, while Challenge's negligible link with Impact indicates founders largely neutralize constraints through persistence. Overall, doing more—not worrying more—drives reputational benefits.

Cross Tab Insights: Team Size and PR Behaviour

The cross-tab dissects how organisational scale shapes four composite PR indices and highlights two statistically meaningful patterns.

Table 6. Cross tabulation Table

Team Size (employees)	n	PR Practice (mean)	PR Impact (mean)	PR Challenge (mean)	PR Future (Intent mean)
1-10	47	3.93	3.85	4.33	3.93
11-20	22	3.93	4.06	3.86	3.94
21-30	11	4.09	3.91	4.14	3.96

The cross-tabulation table presents insights into how team size affects four composite Public Relations (PR) indices—PR Practice, PR Impact, PR Challenge, and PR Future Intent. The table highlights three categories of team sizes: 1-10 employees, 11-20 employees, and 21-30 employees, along with their corresponding means for each of the four PR indices.

A noticeable trend is observed in the PR Practice and PR Impact indices. Teams with 21-30 employees report a higher mean score for PR Practice (4.09) and a slightly lower mean for PR Impact (3.91) compared to smaller teams. This suggests that larger teams tend to have a more structured or organized approach to PR practices, but their impact may be slightly less pronounced. Greater headcount unlocks more ambitious forward planning (Zhu et al., 2021). Conversely, teams with 1-10 employees show slightly lower values for PR Practice (3.93) and PR Impact (3.85), indicating a potential challenge in managing PR efforts efficiently.

For the PR Challenge and PR Future Intent indices, smaller teams (1-10 employees) report the highest mean in PR Challenge (4.33), which could reflect greater challenges in scaling PR efforts in smaller organizations. However, the PR Future Intent index remains stable across team sizes, with teams in all categories showing similar future intentions (ranging from 3.93 to 3.96), suggesting that team size does not significantly influence future PR intentions.

Storytelling as a Leverage Mechanism

Open ended responses enabled the classification of ventures into storytelling active (those publishing personal or mission driven narratives at least once a month) versus storytelling passive. Forty-three respondents fell into the active group. An independent samples t test revealed:

- Mean PR Impact score storytelling active: 4.28
- Mean PR Impact score storytelling passive: 3.84

- $t(78) = 2.17, p = .033$, Cohen's $d = 0.48$ (medium effect)

This difference suggests storytelling offers an appreciable reputational premium—equivalent to nearly half a standard deviation—without concomitant financial outlay. Notably, the gap persisted after controlling for venture age and team size via a two-way ANCOVA, affirming that narrative wielding acts as an independent lever rather than merely reflecting organisational maturity.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the adoption and effectiveness of low-cost PR strategies by early-stage tech start-ups in urban Bangladesh. This research sheds light on the tactical realities faced by founders who operate in an ecosystem where financial resources are limited but public relations (PR) efforts remain crucial to success. The results highlight the diverse and strategic ways in which start-ups navigate the constraints of resource scarcity by leveraging various non-paid PR tactics.

Popularity and Perceived Effectiveness of PR Tactics

The survey results suggest that certain low-cost PR tactics are widely adopted by early-stage tech ventures. Real-time social media listening and response, a tactic employed by 90% of respondents, stands out as the most popular PR activity. This tactic likely reflects the immediate need for start-ups to engage with their audience in real time and build a positive online reputation. However, despite its high usage, the perceived effectiveness of this tactic is slightly less than its frequency, suggesting that while social media engagement is essential, it may not always translate into substantial long-term brand equity. Founder-authored thought leadership posts, while not as universally adopted (84%), emerge as the most effective tactic, with a mean effectiveness score of 4.34. This finding is consistent with previous literature that underscores the power of authentic, founder-driven narratives in building trust and enhancing credibility (Marshall, 2021). The positive gap between use and effectiveness reflects the strategy's potential to create deeper connections with audiences.

The tactics of personalized journalist outreach and community evangelist programs also show promising effectiveness, particularly community evangelism, which despite being used by just 55% of ventures, has one of the highest perceived effectiveness scores (4.02). This suggests that leveraging a brand's user base and building communities around a product can be a highly impactful strategy, even without heavy financial investment (Jiang et al., 2023). On the other hand, grassroots events and meet-ups—while still viewed as effective (3.77)—are among the least utilized tactics. This finding aligns with existing research that highlights the high resource commitment required for event management (Chukwu, 2023), which may make this tactic less feasible for cash-strapped start-ups.

Correlations between PR Practice and Impact

The study reveals moderate positive correlations between PR practice and its perceived impact ($r = 0.43$), as well as between PR practice and future intent ($r = 0.51$). These findings imply that start-ups that engage in more comprehensive PR efforts tend to perceive greater brand gains (Zhou, 2023), and plan to intensify their PR activities moving forward. The positive correlation between PR practice and future intent particularly highlights the cyclical nature of PR efforts. As ventures gain experience with low-cost PR tactics and witness their benefits, they are more likely to invest further in PR, creating a virtuous cycle of reputation-building (Shareef et al., 2024). This finding aligns with the resource-based view of entrepreneurship, which posits that intangible assets such as reputation and brand credibility can be leveraged to secure a competitive advantage (Sultana, 2022).

The small negative correlation between PR practice and challenge ($r = -0.18$) suggests that while challenges such as resource constraints do affect the frequency of PR activities, they do not have a substantial dampening effect. Founders in urban Bangladesh seem to persevere despite challenges, relying on ingenuity and persistence rather than sophisticated strategies or tools to build brand awareness. This echoes the conclusions of Agburu et al. (2017), who argue that small businesses often

rely on ‘resource bricolage’—the art of improvising with available resources—in lieu of structured marketing campaigns.

The Role of Team Size in PR Practices

The cross-tabulation results reveal that smaller teams (1–10 employees) face more significant challenges in scaling PR efforts, as reflected in the higher mean score for PR challenges (4.33) within this group. Smaller teams often have fewer resources and personnel dedicated to managing operations, and founders are often required to multitask (Reiter-Palmon et al., 2021). However, their commitment to PR remains high, as evidenced by the relatively high PR future intent score (3.93). In contrast, larger teams (21–30 employees) report a slightly higher PR practice score (4.09) but a lower PR impact score (3.91), suggesting that while larger teams may have a more structured approach, their efforts do not necessarily translate into greater reputational benefits. This finding supports prior research by Karim et al. (2018), which highlighted the close relationship between start-up team size and their ability to execute more formalized PR strategies. The findings suggest that even with larger teams, challenges in resource allocation remain a key obstacle to scaling PR efforts effectively.

Storytelling and Founder Branding as PR Levers

The analysis of storytelling practices provides an interesting revelation. Active storytellers—those publishing personal or mission-driven narratives at least once a month—report significantly higher PR impact scores (4.28) than their passive counterparts (3.84), with a statistically significant difference ($t(78) = 2.17, p = .033$). This aligns with findings in PR literature that emphasize the role of authentic, founder-led storytelling in establishing emotional connections with consumers and the media (Alam, 2024). The positive impact of storytelling may stem from its ability to humanize the brand and create relatable, compelling narratives that resonate with customers, investors, and other stakeholders. Notably, the difference in PR impact persists even when controlling for venture age and team size, indicating that storytelling is an independent lever that can be effectively utilized by ventures regardless of their maturity or scale.

This underscores the importance of narrative capital in building credibility without a financial outlay, a concept that has gained increasing attention in the field of communication (Bhuiyan, 2024). Storytelling, particularly when woven into the founder’s personal journey or the venture’s social mission, allows for the creation of a compelling brand identity and success (Aryadita et al., 2023), that does not rely on substantial marketing budgets.

CONCLUSION

The study’s findings offer valuable insights for early-stage tech start-ups in Bangladesh and other emerging markets facing similar resource constraints. Non-paid PR tactics such as real-time social media engagement, founder-authored content, and community-driven initiatives emerge as the most effective low-cost strategies for building brand credibility and customer trust. Storytelling, in particular, proves to be a powerful tool for enhancing PR impact, offering a cost-effective alternative to traditional PR strategies.

However, the results also highlight significant challenges, including the difficulty of measuring PR effectiveness without premium analytics tools and the resource limitations that hinder sustained PR efforts. The findings suggest that start-ups must develop a strategic, long-term approach to PR that emphasizes consistency, engagement, and authentic storytelling.

Future research could explore the comparative effectiveness of these tactics across different industries or cultural contexts. Additionally, the integration of digital trace analytics or media content analysis could complement self-reported data, providing a more comprehensive assessment of PR efforts (Hadeed et al., 2024). By further examining the interplay between PR tactics, resource

constraints, and entrepreneurial success, future studies can continue to enrich the understanding of how start-ups can navigate the complexities of PR in resource-constrained environments.

In conclusion, while low-cost PR strategies may not offer the same immediate results as large-scale campaigns, they provide a feasible and sustainable means for early-stage ventures to cultivate trust, visibility, and credibility in a competitive market. Through strategic storytelling and persistent engagement, tech start-ups in Bangladesh can overcome their resource limitations and create a solid foundation for long-term growth and success.

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