When Brands Take a Stance on AI: How Brand AI Positioning Shapes Perceived AI Washing, Brand Dehumanization, and Commercial Outcomes

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly highlighted in brand communication thematically to signal innovation and competence. However, excessive AI emphasis may trigger consumer skepticism, a phenomenon referred to as AI washing, which can lead to consumers' dehumanization of the brand and negatively impact commercial outcomes. This study investigates how brand AI stance messaging strategies (i.e., AI-Centric, Human-Centric, AI–Human Collaboration, Control) affects consumers' perceptions of AI washing, dehumanization of the brand, and commercial outcomes. In an online experiment (N = 402), AI-centric messaging increased perceived AI washing and mechanistic and animalistic brand dehumanization, resulting in lower brand attitude, ad attitude, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth. Human-centric messaging produced the most favorable outcomes across the board, and AI–human collaboration yielded intermediate effects. Serial mediation analyses confirmed that AI washing and brand dehumanization sequentially mediated the effects of AI stance on consumer responses. Findings advance signaling theory, AI-washing research, and dehumanization theory while offering actionable guidance for marketers.

Keywords: Brand AI Stance, AI Washing, Dehumanization, Brand Dehumanization