Frontiers in Business, Economics and Management
ISSN: 2766-824X | Vol. 23, No. 2, 2026

Rethinking Ethics in Brand Communication: AI for Sustainable Consumption

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Abstract: Artificial Intelligence has brought changes in some new Directions for brand Communication, while also triggering various Ethical Problems linked with Green Consumption. Using the latest precision of behavioural advertising and persuasion optimisation technologies to build asymmetric Power Relationships among Brands and Consumers, which were inadequately covered by previous ethical standards. Examine three main ethical conflicts caused by AI-based brand communication: The algorithm has manipulated consumer autonomy; There is an inadequacy in the data-consent system; Systematically promotes unceasing consumption. Drawing on data from the United Nations Environment Programme, the Global Web Index, etc., as well as Freeman's stakeholder theory, Belk's extended self-theory, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals framework. The three-level ethical governance System is introduced to Brands, Platforms and policy makers who want to align with sustainable consumption's Values Through artificial Intelligence-Powered Communication.

Keywords: Ethics of AI; Brand Communication; Sustainable Consumption; Algorithmic Manipulation; Consumer Autonomy; Data Privacy; Stakeholder Theory.

1. Introduction

There are many changes in brand Communication Strategy today; this is not because of technological progress alone. After introducing artificial intelligence technology, there has been an unprecedented distinction between brands and consumers at this time: in the past, people could only see one kind of information dissemination; Now that it is more casual than then. Currently, AI builds a detailed psychological profile of each consumer, optimises the message in time to maximise emotional connection, and delivers that message when the moment is most vulnerable. The commercial reasonableness is reasonable, and the ethical problems involved are relatively complicated.

The Scale of this Transformation Is Not Marginal. According to global web index data in 2022, about 49 per cent of the population had been exposed to personalised advertisements every day[1]; this proportion rose significantly for young people spending longer periods on algorithmically-driven digital platforms. The United Nations Environment Programme also states that at present, Household consumption contributes to about 60 per cent of Global Greenhouse Gas emissions; Marketing Communication plays an identifiable part in establishing these normative or aspirational Consumption behaviour patterns [2]. With an increase in the persuasive power provided by artificial intelligence for brand dissemination, it will help individuals as well as contribute to global collective-benefit outcomes where everyone benefits.

Among the 17 UN Development Goals towards sustainable development, environmental consumption can only refer to purchases of green products. It includes the problem of whether consumption behaviour across society is in line with sustainable environment and social development [3]. Artificial Intelligence-branded brand communications directly address this problem. The appropriate Design care promotes People's Willingness to participate in a lower carbon Life. As most of them have been optimised to boost interaction rates and purchase conversions but without considering environmental protection, they serve as strong accelerators in promoting such harmful consumer behaviour.

The examination of the three interlinked goals' tension problem. To establish the theory foundation of assessing AI brand communication from an ethical and sustainable consumption viewpoint; Analyse the main ethically tension generated by current AI marketing practice; Propose a governance framework to align AI-driven brand Communication with Sustainable Consumption Principles at brand, Platform, and Policy levels.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

Based on three theoretical bases to investigate, each providing a particular perspective from which this phenomenon manifests in actual circumstances.

According to Freeman, an organisation has a duty toward every group of individuals whose activities it affects [4]. In terms of AI-assisted Brand Communication, there are indeed more substantial implications for ethical considerations beyond just the brand-consumer exchange and extend to all participants' social environments affected by marketing systems that have a broad range of people impacted. An artificial-intelligence-marketing System that impacts more than 10 per cent of the world's consumers in their purchase decision is owed to those affected. The community members exposed to consumption-oriented environmental damage, the individuals whose free will is controlled as a matter of course; The social relationship disrupted by continuous commercial stimulation of want become an object of concern in this kind of research.

Belk's Theory of the Extended Self provides an additional and psychological basis for reference [5]. The Belk company believes that consumers regard their possessions as extensions of their identities, and hence purchase items to achieve a sense of self-identification or expression through their belongings. AI systems have built rich models of people's identity investment and expectations about their own

future lives; therefore, they fall within the scope of Emile's theory more closely. Using such close connections to fabricate desirous Attachments that exceed ordinary ad practice, respect questions as well as the appropriateness of commercial impact in establishing self-recognition are being brought up recently.

The United Nations' goal of sustainable development, namely SDG 12 about responsible consumption and production that sets out international regulatory norms to measure the conformity or non-conformity of marketing practices. As mentioned in SDG 12, the target of consumption-oriented Patterns need to be based on accurate information sources and true consumer awareness; AI-aided brand communication is expected to either achieve this or impair it if misused. Set up AI marketing ethical positioning based on this system can connect with policies that promise to be committed norms and operational governance strength, turn it into a real-world policy basis for developing the governance recommendation section at the end of the paper.

2.2. Existing Research

Sciences' attentions of ethical issues with AI have been increasingly growing; however, they still lag behind in comparison with the detailed study about technical capabilities for AI and related applications in marketing. Calo's analysis of digital market manipulation found that the particular risk brought about by a system consisting of detailed behavioural data and real-time persuasion optimisation was asymmetric power in markets between brands and consumers as these frameworks did not exist during development [6]. Asymmetrical Calo is more pronounced in terms of AI; that is, how sophisticated the persuasion systems are compared to most consumers' ability to detect and reject them.

The connection of Algorithmic recommendation Systems and unsustainable Consumption is receiving increasing attention[7]. Her research documented how these systems systematically focus consumers' attention on novelties and purchases, thereby constructing an identification with consumption at the cost of the sufficient value orientation for sustainable consumption[8]. This is no accident; it has been built into the system during optimisation for purposes of maximising engagement and sales conversion, which have become reasonable goals in business terms but detrimental to ecology without regulatory restraint.

Privacy Dimensions in AI Marketing Have Been Studied Thoroughly. Acquisti et al. (2017) laid the foundation for research that demonstrates that consumers systematically underestimate the degree and significance of information acquisition in digital environments; therefore, genuine consent to AI-driven personalisation is practically unobtainable within the present framework of disclosures[9]. In this sense, it can be considered a problem of ecological consumption: If consumers cannot perceive how the behavior-data-driven strategy shapes their buying decisions and thus lose an information basis that supports ethical autonomous choice, it undermines the fundamental condition for people's actions based on values. Floridi et al. have established a more detailed ethical standard for artificial intelligence (AI) systems through their work on "ethical" artificial intelligence; It is required to meet three essential conditions: Transparency, Justice, and Preserver of Autonomy. Peattie's study of green consumption has added another layer to it; besides individuals' motives for pursuing environmental benefits in their choices, there are also necessary environments supporting these actions - which is why optimised artificial intelligence for promoting traditional consumption habit still works counter-productively with this need [10].

3. Methodology

The synthesis of theory, combined with publicly-available data and peer-reviewed empirical studies. Environmental impacts and consumption statistics are derived from the official documents of the United Nations Environment Programme; Data showing consumers' exposure to AI-advertised content is obtained directly from the Global Web Index's consumer-research reports. Both of these sources have methodologically validated and periodically updated data; therefore, they can be independently checked to form a basis for the empirical arguments presented below.

Empirical studies were chosen based on their peer-reviewed status, direct relevance to AI marketing ethics, consumer behaviour or sustainable consumption issues, and the time span was in the late 1980s to early 2020s. A range that is close but not far from current research conditions can be adopted for reference in this part. Analytical Frameworks integrate Freeman's Stakeholder Theory [4]; Belk's Expanded Self-Theory [5] and UN SDGs [3] across; neither serve merely as a decorative apparatus of theory nor an active analytical tool to interpret evidence or generate governance recommendations.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. The Expanding Role of AI in Brand Communication

The present scene of AI-based brand Communication has become more widespread, but the public perception remains relatively superficial in recognising its breadth. According to Global Web Index data, in 2022, about 50 per cent of the online population received personalised advertisements every day; this shows some manifestations under the system operation. [1] Each personalised ad trail through an algorithm-driven network: behaviour data collection, psychological characteristics analysis, real-time bidding, message adjustment - all these form the strongest persuader Infrastructure in history. From the general broadcast of advertisements to personalised Communication, no technology innovation has taken place yet; instead, this is a change in how brands have influence over people.

Within the environment of this transformation, there exists a kind of significance for an ethical analysis solely focused on consumers may overlook. According to UN Environment's data, among various factors driving the environment in recent years has been increasing consumption; Marketing communication was found by researchers to be a medium for cultural reproduction of such consumption norms and concepts. Therefore, AI systems enhancing persuasive effects of brand communication typically operate under an environment where a higher degree of consumption promotion brings actual sustainability loss to local Communities and ecosystems, which is borne by them privately. The externalisation process in this paper refers to the phenomenon that stakeholders identify as unethically responsible according to stakeholder theory.

4.2. Primary Ethical Tensions

Ethical problems at the interface of artificial intelligence-branded information transmission and environmental-friendly consumption have also appeared threefold in recent years.

With respect to algorithmic manipulation of consumption rights. To the maximum of persuasiveness, AI marketing Systems aim to determine which psychological pathway has been most effective in inducing purchase Behaviour for individual Users. As these systems have a detailed grasp of users' identities investment emotions vulnerability in the social comparison phenomenon based on data analysis techniques to generate needs; When such influence exceeds the legitimate persuasive appeal and turns into a manipulation by reducing rational participation requirements, it also falls under Calo's category. There is no contradiction between AI and behaviour; Advertising also works this way; The difference lies in whether it precisely bypasses the reflective decision-making needed for Autonomous, values-aligned Consumption. Floridi et al. clarify that autonomy preservation must be an unchangeable condition for ethically acceptable artificial intelligence systems; at present, there are deficiencies in the way it fails this standard beyond individuals' consumer interests into a collective undertaking of changing consumption behavior towards environmental friendliness [9].

The second confrontation is privacy protection vs Legitimate Interest. Personalisation in commercial applications of artificial intelligence for brand communication relies on large volumes of behavioural data collected without full understanding by consumers or their genuine agreement after the fact. Acquisti et al. is quite clear in their studies: current consent frameworks cannot meet the actual circumstances of AI-based data collection; Therefore, the information basis for personalised marketing is morally damaged at the very beginning [8]. This cannot be solved by increasing the length of the privacy notice further. The structure of the sophistication in AI data system and its actual ability are different from that of the existing disclosure mechanism; therefore, it cannot fully meet consumers' requirement for informed choices as prescribed by legitimate corporate behaviour theory.

The third contradiction, which is most unique in a perspective of sustained consumption, is that systemically promoting unsustainable consumption Patterns through AI optimised persuasion. Based on Sheehan's study, algorithmic recommendation Systems may help cultivate a more acquisition-driven form of consumer identity while suppressing value orientations related to sustainable Consumption. Peattie's study supports the view that sustainable consumers need to be provided with enabling conditions rather than motivated individually; therefore, AI marketing Systems optimised for conversion increase users' tendency towards unsustainable behaviours by making them appear more tempting, emotional and cultural normal compared to genuine sustainability. At the aggregate level of an artificial intelligence persuasion system operating on a large-scale population over an extended period, its overall culture may become much more ethical than that of any particular example; however, this generalised aspect is largely overlooked in existing discussions on AI marketing ethics.

4.3. Current Governance Gaps

At present, the governance structures for resolving these conflicts do not meet our expectations in terms of details. Currently, the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union is often regarded as a highly stringent regulatory tool regulating the protection of consumer's right to privacy in digital marketing under conditions; However, due to its reliance entirely on an informed-consent mechanism without fully capturing the diversity of current AI-generated personalisation. Cookie banners and privacy notices lack actual consent because, given that these systems are often too complicated for many people to understand fully from a good faith perspective.

Industry self-discipline also failed to succeed. Advertising standards organizations are beginning to formulate rules for artificial intelligence; However, they still remain voluntary without any punishment system that can ensure compliance across different markets has the same ethical boundary in place. Perhaps most importantly, the sustainable consumption dimension of AI marketing ethics is given little consideration among existing governance frameworks that concentrate solely on protecting individual consumers and overlooking potential group-level sustainability repercussions from large-scale operation of AI persuasive systems. The floridi-et-al.-based ethics of Artificial intelligence governance proposed a set of specific goals, such as fair and Sustainable development - these are not addressed by the existing Marketing Governance Framework in practice. There is a lack of such new institutional mechanism and concept framework at present; therefore, bridging the gap needs to be carried out in another way.

5. Ethical Governance Framework

As shown in Figure 2-1 below: The proposed framework runs at three levels and addresses individual deficiencies among other systems cannot.

At the brand level, start from a sincere recognition that at present's configuration of AI Marketing Systems there exists no ethical neutrality. Those brands that apply AI personalisation are responsible for the behaviour of these systems, which may impact consumer autonomy; also, they have used the user's data without genuine informed consent and contributed to non-sustainable Consumption habits. In practice, it means implementing concrete transparency promises that exceed mere legal requirements by making the process of artificial intelligence-based personalised products understandable to ordinary consumers. Meaning to audit the AI communication system for systematic bias towards over-consumption, develop applications to help consumers make a more rational choice under sustainability. Based on Freeman's stakeholder theory provided below, these communities that have been damaged by consumer-driven environmental pollution should be considered as legitimate groups of interest-bearing entities within a brand rather than external non-parties.

Digital Advertising Platforms have duties to manage the total effect of persuasion infrastructures that they maintain at this level. There are differences in responsibility areas between them, and for institutions involved with systemic effects to be established accordingly. The platforms need to carry out algorithmic auditing, examining the potential consequences of its targeting and recommending mechanisms on sustainable consumption, and publish these findings independently. Develop true opt-in sustainable consumption models for users that grant them real autonomy in advertising experiences; there must be no cosmetic choices among

categories as currently practised by these systems. Based on Belk's framework, it can be concluded that: When artificial intelligence systems utilise consumers' extended selves' investment to create desires, they also bear responsibility for such manipulations;

At the policy level, there needs to be an acceleration in catching up with the ethical reality situations of artificial intelligence-assisted brand communication regulation. Establish clear and reasonable consent thresholds that exceed those implied by privacy notices' checkboxes in practice; How to collect AI data lawfully should be addressed separately. Secondly, to combine the goal of sustainable consumption with that of protecting consumers independently. SDG 12 sets out the normative basis for expanding consumption to create a recognised public interest and legitimate regulation over private marketing activities based on responsible consumption. Cross-sectoral coordination among the Consumer Protection Bureau, Environmental Inspection Bureau, Digital Development Bureau, etc., to address the ethical issues that have both individuals' interests involved and characteristics of both culture and environment.

6. Conclusion

Ethical problems in the application of AI-based Brand Communication to achieve Sustainable Consumption Are Not Far Away From Us. Embedded in the daily lives of billions of people's exploration through a digital environment systemised with persuasion mechanisms, which is very sophisticated and powerful business strength. Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that there is a degree of tension among these issues – manipulation of consumer autonomy, insufficiently mature consent mechanisms; Systematic promotion of unsustainable consumption through AI marketing systems violates human values such as social responsibility and ecological awareness.

This requires governance to operate simultaneously at three levels: brand, platform, and policy, because the system of this issue cannot be resolved by any one party alone. Establishing a basic frame of reference for formulating the multi-level approach to the proposed system as an introduction is intended in order to achieve theoretical clarification of the characteristics and standards of ethical AI brand communication, as well as institutional guarantees needed to actualise them. AI marketing ethical standards currently have an obvious gap from meeting the expected goals under the context of developing sustainable-consumption principles; but as long as there are no deficiencies in institutions constructing this field, it should be within reach.

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