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ARTIFICIAL DECEPTION: IDENTIFYING AND TRACING THE PHENOMENON OF "AI WASHING"

Summary

Purpose | In this paper, the phenomenon of AI washing – a deceptive form of market communication – is explored. In particular, the research aims to answer the question: What are the main factors fostering or limiting the development of AI washing? As a theoretical frame, the 6Cs framework, depicting the category (AI washing) against the background of causes, conditions, consequences, context, covariance, and contingencies, is adopted.

Research method | The research is based on secondary sources and on a qualitative approach. The qualitative narrative data were collected, and next, the closed coding technique was used to identify the factors comprised in the 6Cs framework.

Results | AI washing is a complex phenomenon related to a specific context of high technological and market pressures. These pressures connected with the opportunities created by causing and facilitating conditions create the environment driving AI washing.

Originality/value/implications/recommendations | Contemporary fast technological development creates the surroundings enabling AI washing. It is very difficult to be explored due to the limited access to data, however, as it endangers investors and clients worldwide, it is important to explain the phenomenon and search for the solutions.

Keywords: AI washing, deceptive marketing, market pressure, stakeholder, qualitative research

JEL classification: M31, O14

1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a topic that arouses great interest not only among scientists and business practitioners but also among the media and politicians. AI is seen as a highly disruptive technology beginning to revolutionise societies, organisations and individuals' lives with possibilities that were unimaginable a few years ago [Chowdhury et al. 2022]. In general, AI refers to the simulation of human intelligence through machines, particularly computer systems, enabling them to perform tasks that typically require human cognition, such as learning, reasoning, problem-solving, and understanding natural language [Lu, 2019; Mikalef, Gupta, 2021]. AI can be described in terms of its applications – AI refers to systems with the ability to perform any intellectual task a human can do [Russell, Norvig, 2016]. As presented in numerous papers and reports, the investments of companies in AI-driven solutions are increasing dramatically [Dwivedi et al. 2021; www2; www3], and AI is regarded as the primary condition of competitive advantage or even survival of businesses.

The creation of solutions based on AI, however, is not only a technological challenge. The development of AI induces new customer expectations, changes the streams of investments, as well as alters the competitive game in numerous markets. The disclosures related to AI investments or AI-based products are therefore a significant component of companies' communication strategy, and they require careful choice between transparency and secrecy [Bonsón et al., 2021]. The new phenomena related to disclosing new AI-driven solutions that are observable due to the rising expectations as to AI implementation are termed AI washing. AI washing describes the practice of falsely promoting or exaggerating the AI aspects of a product, service, or organsation to make it seem more advanced, innovative, or aligned with digital trends than it is. This phenomenon is similar to such terms as greenwashing or pinkwashing and represents market communication based on manipulation and deceptive marketing tactics [Vangeli et al., 2023].

In this paper, I explore this phenomenon and I am looking for the answer to the research question: Why is the AI washing developing? What are the factors fostering such deceptive market communication? In my research, I am adapting

the 6Cs framework [Hoda et al., 2011] analysing the category (AI washing) but also the causes, conditions, consequences, context, covariance(s), and contingencies of this phenomenon.

This paper is structured as follows: after a brief presentation of AI development, I will discuss the meaning of AI washing comparing it to other deceptive marketing tactics such as greenwashing. Next, I will demonstrate my research approach, research findings and discuss the results, indicating the limitations of my research as well as further research questions.

2. AI development as research context

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is one of the most disruptive technologies in this century, and the development and applications of AI are profoundly important as they are reshaping industries, enhancing human capabilities, and driving innovation across numerous fields [Borges et al., 2021; Chowdhury et al., 2022]. AI technology is becoming the "new normal" in both manufacturing and service industries [Periera et al., 2023]; it is an integral component not only of the technological solutions but also of the business model or a key strategic element of many organisations [Dwivedi et al., 2021; Borges et al., 2021; Krakowski et al., 2023; Mikalef, Gupta, 2021].

AI systems have advanced to the point that autonomous vehicles, chatbots, autonomous planning and scheduling, gaming, translation, medical diagnosis, and even spam combating can be accomplished using machine intelligence [Dwivedi et al., 2021]. Moreover, AI holds the potential to not only increase efficiency and productivity but also to unlock new possibilities in research, creativity, and everyday life. Therefore, it is not surprising that research on AI is developing at a rapid pace. Research on AI has also generated numerous discussions about defining the term. Beyond doubt, AI is defined in various ways, thus reflecting its broad and evolving nature [Dwivedi et al., 2021]. While several scholars maintain that there is no universally accepted definition of AI due to "intelligence" not being formally (and mathematically) defined [Hoffmann, 2022], the literature review may offer various definitions of AI [Mikalef, Gupta, 2021]. For instance, Russell and Norvig [2016] defined the term AI as

systems that mimic cognitive functions generally associated with human attributes such as learning, speech, and problem solving, and Lu [2019] explained AI as a multidisciplinary technology with the capability of integrating cognition, machine learning, emotion recognition, human-computer interaction, data storage, and decision-making. The various definitions [Mikalef, Gupta, 2021] highlight AI's complexities and the diverse angles from which it is understood and deployed.

As literature review demonstrates, the major themes of prior research [Borges et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al. 2021; Zhang, Lu, 2021], are focused on AI in decision making, application domains, data and information, as well as the main social, economic, technological, political, and ethical challenges related to the fast development of AI. Moreover, the researchers present numerous figures and numbers illustrating the increasing significance of AI. For instance, the research from the World Economic Forum [www 1] forecasts that by 2025, machines will perform more current work tasks than humans, compared to 71% being performed by humans today. McKinsey Global Institute [www 2] estimated that by 2030, in a midpoint adoption scenario, up to 30 percent of current hours worked could be automated, accelerated by generative AI. According to BCGX/BCG AI Radar 2024 [www 3] 89% executives surveyed rank AI and GenAI as a top-three tech priority for 2024, and 51% put it at the top of their list.

Undoubtedly, the advancement of AI encourages investments, technological progress, and provides hope for positive societal and fiscal changes linked with the improved decision-making systems. On the other hand, it raises concerns about the future, such as job displacement or hazards to privacy, AI biases, and fairness [www 2].

One important issue related to AI solutions and AI-based business transformation is the transparency of its usage vis-à-vis the protection of trade secrets [Mylly, 2023]. For instance, the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act [AIA] seeks to ensure that AI systems are human-centric, trustworthy, and safe, especially for high-risk applications. On one hand, as Bonsón et al. [2021] revealed in their research on company disclosures (annual and sustainability reports), 41.5% of companies did not report any AI activities, and less than 5% addressed ethical issues related to AI. However, on the other hand, the reports and media new

publicise the manifestations of the phenomenon termed AI washing related to the overestimation of the advancements based on AI in new products or services of numerous start-ups [www 12] as well as large, well-known companies [www 7].

3. AI washing

One important phenomenon related to the current development of AI is the new aspect of organisational external communication called AI washing. AI washing is a term used to describe the practice of falsely promoting or exaggerating the AI aspects of a product, service, or organisation to make it seem more advanced, innovative, or aligned with digital trends than it actually is. A good way to clarify and comprehend AI washing is to draw a parallel with another similar phenomenon, greenwashing, in which firms misrepresent their environmental efforts [Vangeli et al., 2023].

AI washing and greenwashing are similar in that they both involve deceptive marketing practices in which companies exaggerate or misrepresent their efforts in a specific area – technological innovation for AI washing and environmental responsibility for greenwashing. Greenwashing, as extensively discussed in literature [Blazkova et al., 2023; Vangeli et al., 2023], fundamentally revolves around the dissemination of misleading information, wherein a company portrays its products or activities as environmentally beneficial when they may not be. Lyon and Maxwell [2011] characterise greenwashing as the selective disclosure of positive environmental or social performance information without revealing negative aspects, aiming to foster an overly positive corporate image, while Walker and Wan [2012] depict greenwashing as the disparity between "symbolic" and "substantive" corporate social actions. There are also terms that are similar to greenwashing but differ in their scope and claims. For instance, "bluewashing" refers to the colour of the United Nations flag and is discussed in relation to humanitarian issues such as human rights or poverty reduction [Seele, Gatti, 2015], "brownwashing" is when a company attempts to look supportive of ethnic diversity [Huang et al., 2022] and "pinkwashing" is when businesses present their public commitment to LGBTQ+ causes or symbolic raising breast cancer awareness [Schoier, de Luca, 2017].

Recently, when in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, some companies announced that they would withdraw from Russia, but many of them failed to do so, and the term "moralwashing" also emerged [www 4].

Using the comparison, we can understand AI washing as a deceptive marketing tactic that involves the use of buzzwords like "AI-powered" in marketing or promotional materials without substantial or meaningful implementation of AI technologies. In other terms, it's about creating a perception of being digitally savvy without actually delivering the promised technological benefits. AI washing is a misleading manoeuvre orientated towards not only the customers but the broad audience, including shareholders and investors, business partners, or other stakeholders (employees, suppliers) who value digital innovation. An illustration of AI washing is a company advertising its product as "AI-driven" to attract tech-savvy customers, but in reality, the product only uses simple automation techniques that have been around for years and has no true artificial intelligence capabilities. AI washing constitutes deception and ethical misconduct as it misleads investors and technology-conscious consumers. Such deception often leads to the overpricing of products, to exploiting consumers' willingness to pay a premium for AI-driven options.

Although there is complex and extended research on greenwashing [Vangeli et al., 2023] and there are similarities between concepts, there are also differences, making AI washing a particular phenomenon. Moreover, the fast development of AI and AI applications in business and everyday life makes AI washing more important as a concept to be described and properly understood.

4. Research approach

When performing research on such phenomena as greenwashing or AI washing, undoubtedly, the primary challenge is to gain access to reliable information. As the literature review [Vangeli et al., 2023] indicates, the exploration of deceptive marketing practices can be based on NGO reports, publicised activists' information, or news published in various traditional and social media. In this paper, similar sources created the foundations for the investigations – news, articles, or blog posts related to AI washing. Research material

contained both the examples of AI washing as well as the analyses of experts or journalists related to the development of this phenomenon. The research material included 15 grey sources, as presented in Appendix 1.

In the qualitative research process, MAXQDA software was used to systematically code, organise, and analyse data, enabling the identification of patterns and themes across research material. MAXQDA was chosen as it is a widely recognised and robust software for qualitative data analysis, offering advanced tools for systematic coding and theme development, which were essential for ensuring the transparency and reliability of the analysis. According to adopted research framework, the research material was coded to indicated the factors related to: context, condition, causes, consequences, contingencies, and covariance.

5. Research findings and discussion

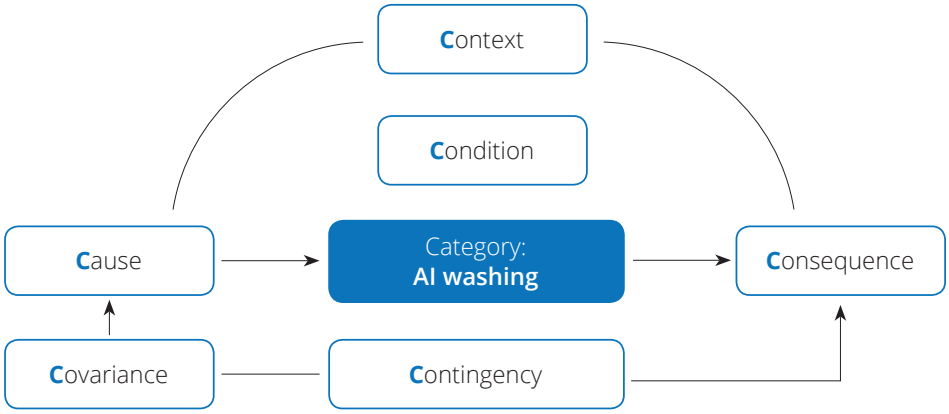
The main aim of the research was to indicate and describe the model of AI washing, i.e., to clarify the sources and factors fostering the development of AI washing. To answer the research question and explore the background and circumstances of AI washing, the 6Cs framework was used. The 6Cs framework (Context, Condition, Causes, Consequences, Contingencies, and Covariance) supporting the understanding of a specific Category – was developed by Hoda et al. [2011] as the result of the application of grounded theory approach for exploring the self-organising teams. However, it is a more universal approach that can be adapted to study other complex phenomena, such as AI washing.

The adapted framework was extended by the additional "C" letter that stands for the term category. On the basis of the collected research material, the definitions or understanding of the term AI washing were analysed and compared, as well as the examples from the practice illustrating this phenomenon were indicated. The analysis of research material demonstrates that the analysed category "AI washing" is understood by many sources in a very similar way: *AI washing (similar in principle to "greenwashing") is a tactic organisations use to exaggerate the amount of AI technology is actually in their products* [www 5] or:

Some companies claim to use AI when they're actually using less-sophisticated computing, while others overstate the efficacy of their AI over existing techniques, or suggest that their AI solutions are fully operational when they are not [www 7]. Similar text describes AI washing: *This term has been coined to describe the misleading practice of overemphasising AI capabilities in products or services, often resulting in consumers believing that the product being paid for uses AI-powered technology* [www 11].

CHART 1

6Cs framework for AI washing analysis



Source: the author's own elaboration on the basis: [Hoda et al., 2011]

Among the examples used when publicise AI washing such cases as Global Predictions, a San Francisco-based firm that claimed offering AI driven investment advisory services [www 5; www11], Delphia [www 5], Amazon Fresh and Amazon Go [www 7], Coca-Cola [www 9], or Engineer.ai [www 13] were presented. According to PWC, a study of 2.830 European start-ups by London-based MMC Ventures, 40 percent of those that claimed to be "AI start-ups" had barely any AI at all [www 12].

To summarise the results of the qualitative analyses, the specific elements of the 6Cs framework that were identified in the research process are presented in Table 1. Only the selective, illustrative quotations are provided to exemplify the threads in the ongoing discussions.

TABLE 1

Components of 6Cs framework depicting the phenomenon of AI washing

6Cs term	Identified factors	Quotes from research material (selected examples)
Context – settings or general circumstances	AI technological development; Start-ups development	• *"The AI gold rush" – Every organisation in the world is exploring ways of how to incorporate Artificial Intelligence (AI) into their business workflows.* [www 5] • *Core technology providers attract a disproportionate share of funding. While comprising a tenth of AI start-ups, they attract a fifth of venture capital.* [www 6]
Condition – a requirement or a criterion that must be met; rule or statement that set boundaries or criteria	Misleading claims; Omission of material facts; Likelihood of consumer harm	• *Some companies have been criticised for labeling products as "AI-powered" with minimal or superficial AI integration, essentially using AI as a marketing buzzword rather than a factual product feature.* [www 11]
Contingency – dependent on uncertain condition; a potential situation or event that could occur	Consumer behaviour; Competitors' actions; Market demand; Replication of the competitors' aggressive or exaggerated claims	• *The competing claims reflect a growing challenge in the tech world of assessing a company's proficiency in artificial intelligence.* [www 13] • *With hype comes the huckster.* [www 14]
Cause – a motivating factor or an underlying reason	Incentives; Anticipating success of AI projects; Lack of clear AI definition	• *Some vendors might advertise AI in their products before it is incorporated. They intend to include AI in the product at some point but advertise as if the product already contains it.* [www 14] • *The term is used very broadly and loosely, without any clear point of reference. It is this ambiguity that is allowing AI washing to emerge.* [www 7]
Covariance – the relationship between two factors, it indicates how they change together	Failing with prior AI projects; Replication of own successful exaggerated claims	• *Companies "digital washing" as most fail in their digital and AI transformation objectives.* [www 16]
Consequence – a result or outcome	Consumer harms; Misleading customers; Deception of investor; Unfair competition; Reputation damage	• *Firstly, it can mislead consumers and investors. Both parties can fall victim to AI washing and find themselves paying or investing in services that are highly overvalued due to buzzwords and misleading statements. Another issue is that AI washing can harm public trust, resulting in the overshadowing of genuine AI advancements. Finally, it can create a cluttered marketplace where true innovation struggles to stand out against the tide of false claims.* [www 11]

Source: the author's own elaboration

The representation of AI washing, as demonstrated in Chart 1 and Table 1, can be seen as the answer to high pressures and expectations related to fast technological development. When such pressures are connected with the opportunities created by causing and facilitating conditions, they create the environment driving AI washing. When summarising the consequences of AI washing, it can be underlined that this phenomenon impacts numerous groups of stakeholders, primarily customers and investors induced to make wrong decisions based on deceptive information, but also the market understood generally as competitors or business partners, as well as potential customers who would be reluctant with their next purchasing decisions.

When discussing AI washing, we should pay attention to the fact that AI washing is based on accusations. Using a nuanced approach created by Seele and Gatti [2015], AI washing can be framed as the co-creation of external accusations against an organisation for disseminating misleading AI messages. It is possible to differentiate between false AI washing, in which an organisation is accused of AI washing without intent, deliberate AI washing, in which an organisation intentionally communicates false or misleading claims and receives an accusation, and potential AI washing, in which misleading information is communicated but no accusation is made. Thus, it should be underlined here that a comprehensive analysis of AI washing necessitates consideration of both the accused organisation and the accuser.

6. Conclusions

AI and its development induce very intense and multidimensional research. The particular interests of researchers are focused on AI disclosures, and as the review of literature and media reports demonstrate, there is a broad variety of approaches: from hiding the information and keeping secrets [Bonsón et al., 2021; Mylly 2023], through boasting about the novelty of the product or other solutions [www 3], till AI washing [www 5] and pretending to be more innovative than in reality.

In this paper, the phenomenon of AI washing was explored, and the factors fostering such deceptive market communication were indicated. On the basis

of qualitative research and close coding analyses related to the 6Cs framework, the main causes, conditions, consequences, context, covariance(s), and contingencies of this phenomenon were demonstrated, presenting AI washing as a complex phenomenon influencing numerous groups of stakeholders, originating from technological and market pressures, and supported by opportunities related, e.g., to the lack of clear definition of AI and the incentives from alluring customers and investors due to buzz words included in market communication of new and advanced products. Undoubtedly, addressing AI washing requires coordinated efforts from regulators, standard-setting bodies, watchdog NGOs, media, and researchers to promote transparency, prevent deceptive practices, and hold organisations accountable for misleading AI claims.

This study has its limitations related mostly to the phenomenon under study that is presented primarily by activists or media. It is very difficult to explore AI washing that inside of companies is rather a taboo than a subject of discussions. However, as it is an important part of innovation management at the intersection of technological development and market communication, further studies related, for instance, to the potential solutions would create avenues for further important and interesting research.

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