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WHEN SALES AGENTS AREN'T HUMAN: HOW IDENTITY DISCLOSURE, SOCIAL PRESENCE, AND SPECIESISM SHAPE TRUST¹

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The Challenge of AI Transparency

In retail and service landscapes increasingly dominated by AI agents (Noble and Mende, 2023), understanding consumer reactions to non-human entities is a strategic imperative. Furthermore, with growing regulatory pressure for transparency, informing consumers that they are interacting with AI could soon become mandatory. De Cicco, Elmashhara, Silva and Hammerschmidt (2025) examine the impact of various strategies for conveying the non-human identity of a sales agent on consumers' perceptions and purchase-related outcomes, as well as how a social interaction style influences these responses. Moreover, the authors examine the role of consumer speciesism—a critical yet underexplored concept in this context—in triggering negative reactions to the disclosure of the agent's artificial nature. Traditionally discussed in philosophical and ethical domains, speciesism is defined as the bias in favour of humans over non-human entities. The research proves it is a significant driver of consumer trust and attitude, as well as willingness to purchase after interactions with artificial agents.

¹ Based on the paper: De Cicco, R., Elmashhara, M. G., Silva, S. C., & Hammerschmidt, M. (2025). The impact of providing non-human identity cues about sales agents on consumer responses: the role of social presence and speciesism activation. *European Journal of Marketing*, 59(13), 55-84.

This policy brief condenses key findings and strategic implications for managers seeking to deploy or enhance non-human agents in customer-facing roles.

Key Insights from Three Studies

Three experimental studies were conducted using a custom-built chatbot (Chatfuel) for pizza ordering, with live consumer interactions. Participants engaged in real-time interactions with the chatbot, ensuring the ecological validity of the study (Figure 1). Participants were randomly exposed to retail interactions featuring non-human agents (with varying strategies for disclosing their non-human nature and varying degrees of social presence). Speciesism was measured using a 9-item scale modelled on an established scale for speciesism against animals (Caviola et al. 2019) and adapting it to the context of AI-based agents (Figure 2).

Figure 1 – Research model

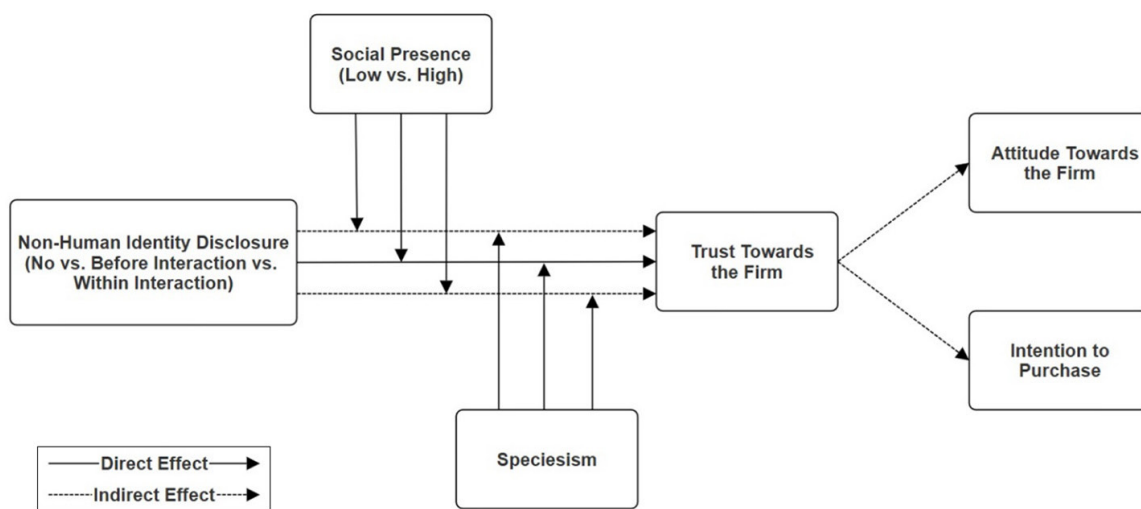


Figure 2 – The 9-item scale of Speciesism

1. I think that non-human agents, such as chatbots, are in all regards inferior to humans
2. I do not mind interacting with a non-human agent when I need to interact with an organisation (r)
3. I do not think non-human agents are clever
4. I do not think non-human agents are intelligent
5. I prefer to communicate to a non-human conversational agent than interacting with a human being (r)
6. I believe that interacting with non-human agents is in all regards worse than interacting with a human
7. I cannot stand when interaction is provided through non-human agents
8. I think that non-human agents are not able to consider my unique human characteristics
9. I prefer interacting with humans rather than non-human agents

Statistical techniques, such as PROCESS macro-based moderation and mediation models, were employed to analyse the model proposed in Figure 1 to ensure the robustness of causal interpretations (Hayes, 2017).

Study 1 established a core challenge: simply disclosing an agent’s non-human identity can reduce trust in the firm and lower purchase intention, even when the agent’s performance is flawless. This reveals that consumers can penalise firms for transparency. Study 2 identified a powerful solution: incorporating a high degree of social presence – through the use of emojis, humour, and personalised language- was found to neutralise the adverse effects of disclosure. This approach restored trust to levels matching those of undisclosed agents.

Study 3 pinpointed the critical role of timing and consumer mindset: disclosing the agent’s nature during the interaction (e.g., the agent stating “I’m a chatbot”) triggered speciesism bias, reducing trust among consumers with higher levels of this trait. Consumers with low speciesism remained unaffected, while pre-interaction disclosure produced no negative effects. Table 1 – Summary of the different studies

Study	Focus	Key Finding
1	Effects of disclosure despite flawless performance	Disclosure reduces trust and purchase intention Transparency penalises firms even when agents perform perfectly
2	Mitigating disclosure backlash via social presence	High social presence (emojis, humour, personalisation) neutralises adverse trust effects Anthropomorphic cues restore trust to undisclosed-agent levels
3	Timing of disclosure × Speciesism interaction	Pre-interaction disclosure (e.g., banner): No trust loss Mid-interaction disclosure (e.g., “I’m a chatbot”): Trust loss among high-speciesism consumers Low-speciesism consumers remain unaffected regardless of timing

Discussion

These investigations reveal that how and when companies disclose an agent’s artificial identity profoundly impacts trust, attitudes, and purchase behaviour. One of the centre insights is that speciesism — the psychological bias favouring humans over non-human entities — acts as a hidden barrier to consumer acceptance of non-human agents, when non-human identity cues are made salient. Speciesism operates as a latent mechanism that undermines consumer acceptance when artificial identity cues activate deeply ingrained prejudices. Explicit or implicit reminders of an agent’s non-human nature (e.g., robotic names or mid-interaction messages like “I’m a chatbot”) diminish trust, particularly in high-stakes or emotionally nuanced interactions. Crucially, this effect intensifies among individuals with pronounced speciesist tendencies, who exhibit lower trust when exposed to mid-interaction disclosures. However, these adverse outcomes are not inevitable. Anthropomorphic design choices—such as human names (e.g., “Alex”), emojis, or personalised language—effectively offset speciesism by fostering psychological proximity and mitigating identity-based distrust. This demonstrates that strategic identity cues and psychological framing are pivotal in reshaping customer-agent dynamics.

We also identify the optimal timing for disclosing the agent’s non-human nature. The best outcomes occur when the agent’s artificial identity is disclosed before the interaction begins, allowing consumers to form expectations and preventing speciesism activation during the exchange. Furthermore, consumers can be segmented by their level of speciesism, enabling more tailored and effective communication strategies.

Managerial Implications

Openly communicating the non-human identity reduces trust, especially when social presence is low. Thus, focusing on non-human identity cues (e.g., robot names) is not well regarded: transparency backfires, as consumers penalise firms for honesty. Therefore, when informing consumers about the nature of their interaction counterpart, this information must be disclosed before the interaction. Speciesism and social presence work as

moderators, with anthropomorphic cues (e.g., humour, warmth) being critical in the design of interactions with a chatbot, as this helps reduce distrust. Therefore, as for managerial recommendations, we advise managers to:

1. Design their chatbots with identity in mind: choosing a human name or voice for the bot is not just a branding choice—it can reduce psychological distance.
2. Measure speciesism: As counterintuitive as it may sound, adding items that assess the speciesism of consumers can uncover biases that would otherwise go undetected.
3. Segment by speciesism: as with any segmentation strategy, understanding which customers are more likely to exhibit speciesist attitudes can help tailor communication strategies, with more anthropomorphic cues addressing those with higher levels of this trait.
4. Build social presence through subtle cues: A bot that smiles, blinks, or nods can increase social presence, even if the customer knows it is not human.
5. Train teams to manage hybrid experiences: blending human and non-human agents requires coordinated customer journey mapping and escalation protocols.

References

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