

It's just a tiny label... or not? How AI labels can backfire in communication

Marie Berner

Kiel University

Petra Dickel

Kiel University of Applied Sciences

Cite as:

Berner Marie, Dickel Petra (2026), It's just a tiny label... or not? How AI labels can backfire in communication. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (132980)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



It's just a tiny label... or not? How AI labels can backfire in communication

Abstract

Despite global regulations that enforce labeling of artificial intelligence (AI) in advertising and communication, the impact of AI labels on individual perception and behavior remains unclear. Building on signaling theory, two experimental studies examine how the labeling of generative AI in social media affects reactions. Although an eye-tracking experiment (Study 1) found no effect on visual attention, the study shows that AI labels lead to higher psychological reactance and lower source credibility which in turn shape social media engagement. An online experiment (Study 2) replicated these findings and additionally revealed emotions' role: AI labels increased negative and reduced positive emotions, affecting engagement. Across both studies, we show that even a small AI disclosure — legally required to increase transparency — can backfire. These results imply that mandatory AI labeling remains a critical tension that needs to be addressed in advertising research and practice.

Track: Advertising & Marketing Communications