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Recommended Citation

Smith, Kane and Liang, Xueping, "Examining Ethics Washing & Consumer Trust in the Smart Device Context" (2023). *AMCIS 2023 TREOs*. 76.

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Examining Ethics Washing & Consumer Trust in the Smart Device Context

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Organizations engaging in ethics washing can often be said to be creating ‘window dressing,’ with respect to how they both view and engage in ethical behavior. This is to say, organizations are using the concept of ‘ethics’ to disguise their behavior such that it appears ethical, yet this is only really lip service. Hence, ethics washing is little more than ethical theater, with organizations fabricating or exaggerating their real interest in topics such as consumer privacy/security, equitable AI or diversity and inclusivity. To this end, the goal of ethics washing is to create the illusion amongst observers that ethical issues within an organization are being adequately addressed, rather than engage in actual ethical behavior. Presently, there are a number of examples of organizations (Douek, 2019; Romano, 2019) that have engaged in the practice of ethics washing and have suffered negative public backlash from doing so.

Globally, smart home personal devices have seen an explosion of growth, yet while impressive, serious issues involving problems such as ethics washing have come to light. One prominent relevant example of ethics washing involves that of Amazon’s smart home personal assistant known as ‘Alexa.’ It was reported that Alexa persistently captured children’s voices without user consent or knowledge, which violates laws in 8 different states, solely to improve the outcomes of their devices relative to the competition (Romano, 2019). In light of such ethical blunders (and others like it), we consider the effects of ethics washing on existing consumer’s continued use of smart home personal assistant devices. Our research seeks to better understand the motivating factors for consumer’s continued use behavior of smart home personal devices and the impact of potential constraining factors such as ethics washing.

The goal of this study is to highlight the interplay between consumer’s trust and ethical concerns in shaping their decision to continue using smart devices. This novel perspective explains why individuals continue to use these devices considering the dichotomy between the ethical concerns, driven by the perceived privacy and security risks associated with the organizations who create these devices, and the trust placed within the device itself by users, that overrides these concerns. These insights will help to explain a fundamental tension among smart device users – how to trust in the benefits of data-enabled smart devices, while acknowledging the concerns of sharing personal data associated with ethically disingenuous organizations.

References

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Romano, B. (2019, June 12). Suits allege Amazon’s Alexa violates laws by recording children’s voices without consent. *The Seattle Times*. <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/amazon/suit-alleges-amazons-alexa-violates-laws-by-recording-childrens-voices-without-consent/>