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The responsibility to inform: How AI companies' transparent communication practice influences public readiness in a cross-national context

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) companies face increasing societal scrutiny as their technologies diffuse rapidly, creating both benefits and risks. A central challenge lies in public readiness – the preparedness of the public to understand, evaluate, and engage with AI products amid profound information asymmetry between companies and users. This study examines how organizations' transparent communication practice, as a form of corporate social responsibility (CSR), can foster public readiness to engage with AI products. It conceptualizes transparent communication practice not simply as disclosure but as an ethical responsibility. Drawing on Rawlins' (2008) three-dimensional framework, the study investigates how perceived substantial information, participation, and accountability mediate the relationship between organizations' transparent communication practice and public readiness to engage with AI products. A between-subjects experiment was conducted with participants in the U.S. ($N = 270$) and China ($N = 275$), testing public responses to high- vs. low-transparency communication from AI companies. Results show that perceived substantial information and accountability significantly mediated the positive effects of transparent communication practice on readiness in both countries, whereas perceived participation did not. In the U.S., the public's ascription of responsibility to businesses moderated these effects: high-transparency communication had stronger initial impacts among those with low responsibility ascription, but perceptions of substantial information translated more strongly into readiness among those with high responsibility ascription. No moderating effects emerged in China, suggesting that distinct socio-political contexts shape public responses to transparent communication. The findings advance research on organizations' transparent communication practice as a form of CSR and highlight the contextual nature of public openness to AI products.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Corporate social responsibility, Transparent communication, Public readiness

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) companies are advancing rapidly, generating meaningful social benefits while introducing important risks that may affect public interest. From algorithmic bias and data privacy concerns, the societal stakes of AI innovation are high. A key issue is that while the general public is rapidly adopting AI tools, this widespread use may be outpacing public readiness regarding these specific products – the preparedness of individuals to understand, critically evaluate, and effectively engage with the AI applications they encounter in daily life. Fostering such readiness is crucial, as it serves as the bridge between technological innovation and safe, effective user adoption (Magliocca et al., 2024). A public that is prepared and informed is better equipped to advance the beneficial use of AI, mitigate its potential harms, and participate in governance. In this sense, public readiness is a key determinant of the sustainable use of emerging AI products. Such considerations point to the urgency of studying the social responsibility of AI companies to adequately inform and prepare their users.

Amid the rapid societal integration of their technologies, AI companies have started responding to this challenge. This is evident in a range of strategic initiatives, from launching public AI literacy programs and publishing ethical principles to engaging in multi-stakeholder dialogues about AI governance (Karimov & Saarela, 2025). For example, OpenAI (2019, 2025) has publicly committed to safety research, created educational materials to explain its models to non-technical audiences, and established frameworks for the responsible deployment of its technology. These actions represent a deliberate effort by AI companies to signal their awareness of their social responsibilities, helping them build legitimacy and a social license to operate in a volatile, high-stakes environment.

From a communication perspective, transparency is a critical core of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the AI sector. In the context of AI, organizations' transparent communication represents a fundamental ethical practice in public relations, given the profound information asymmetry between developers and the public (Reid et al., 2024). This information asymmetry, which could leave users vulnerable to risks like data misuse and biased outcomes, places a clear ethical burden on companies to provide accessible and honest information, empowering users to make informed decisions and protecting them from potential harm. Transparent communication practice in the AI industry is not merely communication *about* corporate responsibility, but communication *as* corporate responsibility.

Despite the growing consensus on the importance of AI ethics, current research has not paid sufficient attention to how companies' transparent communication practice specifically influences public readiness to engage with AI products. While many studies focus on the technical or policy dimensions of AI governance (e.g., Birkstedt et al., 2023; Reuel et al., 2024; Taeihagh, 2021), there is a gap in understanding the communicative mechanisms through which AI companies can build public understanding and acceptance. Furthermore, little is known about how the public in different socio-political contexts perceives various facets of transparency, and how transparent communication practice can effectively foster readiness.

Therefore, this study examines how AI companies' transparent communication practice influences public readiness to engage with AI products. To explore these dynamics

in a global context, the research is conducted in two of the world's leading but socio-politically distinct AI ecosystems: the U.S. and China. A between-subjects experimental design was employed to test the effects of high- vs. low-transparency communication on different dimensions of perceived transparency and public readiness to engage with AI products. Furthermore, it explores a moderator of this relationship: the public's pre-existing ascription of responsibility (Weiner, 1995), that is, the degree to which individuals believe businesses are responsible for ethical AI governance.

This study adopts a layered theoretical framework. At the macro-level, stakeholder theory situates AI companies' responsibility to address the public as a primary stakeholder under conditions of profound information asymmetry and societal risk. At the meso-level, the public relations literature, based on Rawlins' (2008) three-dimensional framework, defines what responsible transparency entails in communication practice, namely the provision of substantial information, the facilitation of participation, and the demonstration of accountability. At the micro-level, uncertainty reduction theory accounts for how the general public processes transparency cues, thereby shaping public readiness in the context of complex and opaque technologies. In addition, attribution theory and expectancy-based message processing explain how pre-existing responsibility beliefs shape the salience and downstream effects of AI companies' transparent communication practice.

By focusing on the AI industry, this study advances understanding of transparent communication practice as a core dimension of CSR in an emerging sector. It positions organizations' transparent communication practice not simply as a compliance requirement but as a communicative ethic central to advancing public interest and technology adoption. By foregrounding public readiness to engage with AI products, the study highlights how public openness and adoption of emerging technologies are facilitated and the importance of transparent communication in this process. Examining these processes in the U.S. and China further allows us to explore how institutional and cultural contexts shape public reactions.

Literature review and hypotheses

AI companies' social responsibility to the public as a primary stakeholder

CSR has evolved from a peripheral philanthropic concept into a core tenet of modern strategic management (Brown & Forster, 2013; Roszkowska-Menkes, 2018), compelling organizations to address their ethical and societal impacts as integral components of their operations (Carroll, 1999). In the technology sector, CSR carries unique weight. In an environment characterized by advanced, complex technologies that directly impact society, fulfilling the social contract – the implicit set of reciprocal expectations between a business and the society in which it operates – requires organizations to actively facilitate public understanding and acceptance (Reid et al., 2024). Moreover, tech companies face intense and sustained scrutiny over issues such as data privacy (Norval et al., 2021), the potential for algorithmic bias to perpetuate social inequities (Bourne & Jackson, 2024), and the disruptive effects of their products on labor markets and social structures (Abrardi et al., 2022). These challenges demand demonstrable corporate citizenship to mitigate.

Communication plays a vital role in CSR because the value, meaning, and impact of CSR depend on effective communication to be properly understood and evaluated by the target stakeholders. There are ongoing debates over whether CSR communication should be treated instrumentally, to achieve desirable corporate goals, or from a constitutive perspective, as a means to negotiate the co-creation of CSR's meaning and value (Golob et al., 2013). More recently, Kim (2022) proposed a hybrid instrumental approach that combines both instrumental and normative aspects of CSR communication. This hybrid view better reflects industry realities and positions meeting societal expectations as a central goal of CSR communication. Guided by this perspective, CSR communication in the AI industry, a fast-moving field that permeates many aspects of social functioning and daily life while raising a host of ethical concerns, holds promise for disciplining corporate behavior and ensuring accountability to the public.

From a stakeholder theory perspective (Brown & Forster, 2013), the primary CSR challenge facing AI companies lies in the profound information asymmetry between those who design and deploy AI systems and the publics who are affected by them (Reid et al., 2024). Because users, workers, and communities engage with AI technologies without having the same technical knowledge as developers, they are structurally dependent on companies to understand risks, assess impacts, and make informed decisions. Akerlof's (1978) "market for lemons" analogy is critically relevant: when the public cannot distinguish between high-quality, ethically developed AI and low-quality, potentially harmful AI, trust in the entire "market" of AI products can collapse. From a strategic communication standpoint, this asymmetry constitutes a major challenge in issues management (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). The "black box" nature of many AI models, where even their creators cannot fully explain the reasoning behind specific outputs, exacerbates this challenge (Hassija et al., 2024). As such, the opacity of AI systems itself becomes an issue to be strategically managed through responsible communication practices. This heightens companies' ethical responsibility to communicate transparently, not only to demystify the technology but also to sustain public trust in the broader AI ecosystem.

Public readiness to engage with AI products

As AI rapidly becomes an integral part of everyday life, the information asymmetry undermines public readiness to engage with AI products. Organizational change literature defines readiness as the extent to which individuals and groups are cognitively and emotionally inclined to accept, embrace, and effectively utilize a change (Rafferty et al., 2013; Weiner, 2020) – in this case, a transformative technology. In this study, public readiness captures the extent to which individuals are equipped to engage with AI products that are developed and offered by tech companies and interact directly with everyday users, such as conversational systems, autonomous tools, and other widely deployed general-purpose, consumer-relevant AI technologies. Readiness is a multifaceted concept encompassing both psychological and behavioral aspects. Psychological readiness involves the public's self-efficacy or confidence in using AI products, their perception of its potential benefits, and their apprehension about its risks to privacy, security, and their work and life (Holt et al., 2007; Rafferty et al., 2013). High information asymmetry fuels apprehension and lowers self-efficacy (Joe, 2010; Srivastava & Chakravarti, 2009). Behavioral readiness, in turn, refers to the tangible intention to learn about and adopt AI

tools in one's life and work. Without clear and accessible information, the public is less likely to develop the behavioral intentions necessary for positive adoption (VanDyke & Lee, 2022; Venkatesh et al., 2012). This could lead to public resistance to both specific products and technological advancement as a whole.

Readiness to engage with innovative products is closely tied to how much uncertainty people experience about the innovation and the organizations that provide it (Blut & Wang, 2020). When faced with a novel and complex technology like AI, the public experiences high uncertainty, which can lead to negative affect and avoidance behaviors – corresponding to low psychological and behavioral readiness. A well-informed public, conversely, is better equipped to navigate and utilize AI (de Fine Licht & de Fine Licht, 2020), ensuring their application maximizes its benefits while mitigating potential harms. Therefore, helping the general public become well-informed is essential to enable mutually beneficial engagement.

Given this issue, transparent communication should be seen as a core CSR practice that the AI industry must fulfill, where proactively informing the public becomes a form of responsible corporate behavior. Failure to address this inherent information asymmetry through transparent communication practice represents a major lapse in CSR, as it neglects the organization's duty to provide the very information stakeholders need to reduce uncertainty and make informed judgments (Aquilino et al., 2024).

AI companies' transparent communication practice and public perceptions as mediators

While stakeholder theory explains why AI companies owe transparency to the public, the public relations literature specifies what an organization's transparent communication entails in practice. Following Rawlins (2008), transparent communication is the deliberate effort to communicate all releasable information, whether positive or negative, in a way that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal. It is conceptualized as a communicative behavior comprising three key dimensions: the disclosure of substantial information, the fostering of participation, and the demonstration of accountability (Rawlins, 2008). When applied to the AI industry, each of these dimensions represents a distinct form of responsible conduct.

First, the provision of substantial information is a fundamental act of transparent communication. It goes beyond marketing materials to include meaningful disclosures about how AI systems are designed, trained, and tested, a practice advocated for within the field of explainable AI (XAI) (Arrieta et al., 2020). As a form of responsible conduct, this involves explaining the types and sources of data used for training models, which can help illuminate potential inherent biases (Dwivedi et al., 2023). It also means being candid about the potential limitations and risks of an AI system (IBM, 2023). By providing such substantive information, companies empower the public to form a sufficient understanding of AI.

Second, fostering participation is an act of transparent communication that moves beyond monologic communication toward a more symmetrical approach (Rawlins, 2008). It reflects a shift from viewing the public as entities to be managed to partners in a process of co-creation. For the tech industry, it can take the form of public consultations on ethical guidelines, user forums to report issues or suggest improvements, or partnerships with civil society groups and academic researchers (Bortree &

Seltzer, 2009; Dahl-Jørgensen, 2024). By actively inviting and responding to external input, companies acknowledge that AI development is a shared initiative, and providing a platform for public voice is a key component of a company's CSR commitment.

Finally, demonstrating accountability is another key act of transparent communication (Rawlins, 2008). Accountability can be understood as a relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and justify their conduct to the public (Bovens, 2007; Kaler, 2002). In the context of AI, this means taking ownership of the technology's outcomes, both positive and negative. It involves establishing clear channels for appeal when AI systems cause harm, being forthcoming about errors or security breaches, and establishing structures responsible for ethical oversight (European Parliamentary Research Service [EPRS], 2020). This willingness to be held accountable is a vital element of transparent communication practice for building long-term, trust-based relationships with the public.

Conceptually, it is important to distinguish between transparency as a characteristic of organizational communication and transparency as a perception formed by audiences. The mere act of communicating along these three dimensions does not guarantee a positive outcome. The effectiveness of transparent communication practice is contingent upon how they are perceived by the public (Holland et al., 2018; Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). An organization may release a large volume of technical data, but if it is not seen as substantial or relevant information by its audience, the effort may fail. Similarly, a company can create forums for feedback, but if the public does not perceive these as meaningful opportunities for participation, they will be dismissed. Therefore, it is the public's subjective assessment of the quality of each transparency dimension that serves as the critical mediating mechanism between the organization's communication and its intended effects (Auger, 2014; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). In other words, transparency does not operate directly as a property of communication but as a set of audience-level inferences about information substantiveness, participatory openness, and accountability.

This mediating role is grounded in uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). When individuals encounter complex and opaque technologies such as AI, they experience high levels of epistemic and moral uncertainty, including uncertainty about how the technology works, what risks it poses, and whether the company deploying it can be trusted. Message-level transparency cues only become consequential when the audience interprets them as meaningful, credible, and responsible. Perceived substantial information, participation, and accountability therefore shape whether individuals experience a greater sense of predictability and control over the technology and the company. When people believe that a company is providing substantial information, offering meaningful avenues for participation, and demonstrating robust accountability, their uncertainty is reduced and their psychological and behavioral readiness to engage with the AI product increases. In this way, the perceived transparency dimensions do not merely reflect communication quality; they function as the key psychological mechanism through which the acts of transparent communication influence the public's readiness to engage with the company's AI product.

This proposed mechanism leads to the central hypotheses of this study:

H1: An AI company's communication practice that incorporates higher transparency, compared to one with lower transparency, will enhance public readiness to engage with its AI product, and this effect will be mediated by the public's perceived transparency across three dimensions: substantial information, participation, and accountability.

The public's ascription of responsibility to businesses as a moderator

While the acts of transparent communication are hypothesized to have a positive effect, its impact is unlikely to be uniform across the entire public. Individual differences in pre-existing beliefs about corporate behavior can alter how communication is received and processed. One such critical difference is the ascription of responsibility: the degree to which individuals believe an entity has a moral or social duty to address an issue (Oshana, 1997; Weiner, 1995). According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), responsibility ascription reflects how individuals assign moral and causal responsibility for social and technological outcomes to organizational actors. In CSR, such attributions are central to how people evaluate corporate conduct, including whether organizational actions are seen as necessary, meaningful, or merely symbolic (Oh & Ki, 2023). In the context of AI governance, individuals vary in the extent to which they believe tech companies, as opposed to governments or users, bear the primary responsibility for ensuring AI is developed ethically.

These varying ascriptions of responsibility can be shaped by various factors. Media narratives, for instance, can influence the degree of responsibility the public assigns to corporations (Tench et al., 2007), and socio-political values may predispose individuals to see businesses as either primary drivers of progress or as entities requiring strict government oversight (Mudrack, 2007). These deeply held beliefs about the role of business in society form a critical lens through which all corporate communication, including transparency efforts, is interpreted.

Nowadays, the public increasingly expects tech companies to be responsible for the governance of AI. Surveys consistently show that while businesses are viewed as competent and innovative, they are also held to high standards of ethical conduct and social responsibility (Edelman, 2024). In the AI domain in particular, the public expects tech companies to play a leading role in ensuring that these systems are developed and deployed responsibly (Gillespie et al., 2025; McClain et al., 2025). In line with attribution theory, these normative beliefs reflect how individuals ascribe moral responsibility to corporate actors in the tech industry. Variation in individuals' responsibility ascription is likely to shape how transparency levels are perceived.

Building on attribution theory and expectancy-based message processing (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Burgoon, 1993), corporate communication is evaluated relative to people's prior normative beliefs about what companies ought to do. Individuals who weakly ascribe responsibility for AI governance to companies tend to hold lower normative expectations for corporate transparency, whereas those with strong responsibility ascription expect companies to communicate openly and responsibly about their operation (Kim & Ferguson, 2014). As a result, the effects of transparent communication practice can be more salient for individuals with low responsibility ascription, because it stands out relative to their lower baseline normative expectations. For

individuals with high responsibility ascription, transparent communication practice is more likely to be seen as consistent with what companies should do, and therefore produces a less pronounced shift in their transparency perceptions.

At the subsequent judgment stage, responsibility ascription also conditions how perceived transparency influences readiness to engage with AI products. For individuals who strongly attribute responsibility for AI governance to companies, perceptions of substantial information, participation, and accountability are more normatively meaningful and diagnostic (Rim et al., 2019). When these normative expectations are perceived to be fulfilled, such individuals are more likely to translate favorable transparency perceptions into greater readiness to engage with the AI product. By contrast, for those with weaker responsibility ascription, transparent communication practice, although it may be viewed positively, carries less weight in their overall evaluation, resulting in a weaker link between transparency perceptions and readiness.

This expectation-conditioned processing mechanism leads to a two-stage moderated mediation model (see Fig. 1 for illustration):

> *H2:* The public's ascription of responsibility for AI governance to businesses moderates the indirect effect of transparent communication practice on public readiness to engage with the AI product. Specifically: (a) the positive effect of higher- (vs. lower-) transparency communication practice on perceived transparency dimensions will be stronger for individuals with lower ascription of responsibility, and (b) the positive relationship between perceived transparency and readiness will be stronger for individuals with higher ascription of responsibility.

The cross-national context: the U.S. and China

The effects of transparent communication practice can be complicated by national context, as public expectations for corporate behavior are embedded within distinct socio-political and regulatory systems (Dong et al., 2024a, b; Park & Rim, 2025; Rim et al., 2024). This study focuses on the U.S. and China to examine public reactions to AI companies' transparent communication practice. As the world's two largest

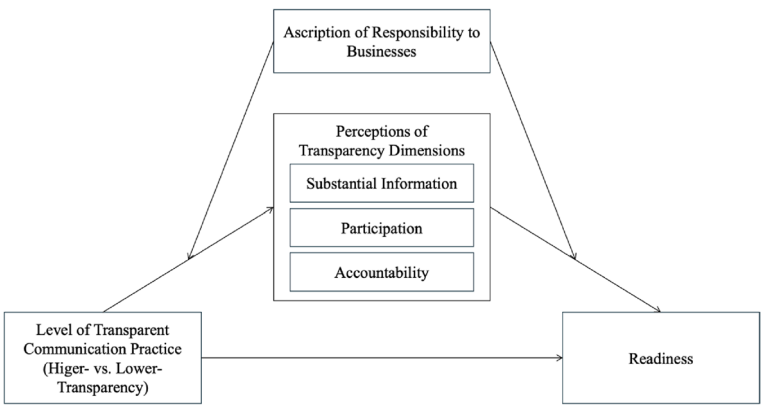

Fig. 1 Hypothesized Moderated Mediation Model (H2)

economies and leaders in AI innovation, with companies such as OpenAI and DeepSeek shaping global markets, public attitudes in these countries carry profound international influence.

The U.S. and China vary in political systems, social values, and business practices, which shape both public expectations and corporate approaches to transparent communication practice. For instance, the Chinese public has been found to value affective expressions of care, reflecting collective traditions, while the U.S. public tends to react more positively to messages of attentiveness to stakeholder needs (Dong et al., 2024a, b). From a corporate perspective, U.S. companies often show a higher level of transparency about stakeholder engagement, while their Chinese counterparts tend to emphasize detailed, quantifiable CSR information (Rim et al., 2024). These variations may stem from their different stages of CSR development, as the U.S. has a longer history of institutionalized practices and China continues to build its norms.

These institutional conditions extend into the realm of AI governance. The U.S. has favored a sector-specific, pro-innovation regulatory approach, relying on existing agencies and "soft law" rather than federal legislation (Pouget & O'Shaughnessy, 2023; White & Case LLP, 2025a). This environment supports a vibrant civil society that foreground debates about rights, fairness, and privacy (McClain et al., 2025; Zuboff, 2019). China, by contrast, has adopted a state-led strategy with comprehensive regulations. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) issued the Interim Measures for the Management of Generative Artificial Intelligence Services, which make companies accountable for model outputs (White & Case LLP, 2025b). Public perceptions are also shaped by media coverage emphasizing technological progress and competition (Cui & Wu, 2021; Wang & Liang, 2024).

These distinct contexts raise questions about which dimensions of transparency may be most salient to the public in each country. The broader socio-political environment can create variation in how transparent communication practice is interpreted (Rim et al., 2024). It remains an open question whether the U.S. public's emphasis on individual rights leads to stronger demands for accountability and participation, or whether the Chinese public prioritizes substantial information as a signal of safety and compliance. At the same time, there may be shared preferences, such as a general desire for clear and trustworthy information. This review highlights organizations' transparent communication practice as a core element of CSR in AI companies, one that can enhance public readiness to engage with AI products. Given the lack of empirical research exploring how the general public in the U.S. and China perceives AI companies' transparent communication practice, this study is exploratory, aiming to provide initial evidence into potential cross-national similarities and differences.

Method

This research was administered in two key global markets, the U.S. and China. A between-subjects experimental design was used to examine how an AI company's high- vs. low-transparency communication influenced public readiness to engage its AI products. This approach was chosen for its strength in establishing potential causal relationships between the communicative act and the public's subsequent perceptions. The study tested a model in which the effects of transparent communication operated

through three parallel mediators reflecting public perceptions of it: perceived substantial information, perceived participation, and perceived accountability. The cross-national design focuses on examining whether the theorized communication mechanisms and boundary conditions operate similarly or differently across two analytically distinct AI governance environments, rather than providing population-level national estimates.

Stimuli development

To enhance the study's internal validity, a fictitious AI company, *BrightPathAI*, was created to isolate communication effects without pre-existing brand influences. In this study, transparent communication is conceptualized as a broader communication practice enacted by the organization. It is operationalized experimentally by presenting participants with messages that vary in the extent to which this practice is reflected. The focal content for the experiment was a corporate blog post, a common and realistic channel through which an AI company communicates to the general public.

The experimental conditions were created by systematically manipulating the content of this corporate blog post. Thus, the blog posts serve as stimuli through which different levels of transparent communication practice are instantiated. The manipulation was guided by the three transparency dimensions conceptualized by Rawlins (2008): providing substantive information, fostering participation, and demonstrating accountability. The higher-transparency condition was designed to exemplify high levels of all three dimensions, while the lower-transparency condition was designed to be deficient in all three.

Specifically, the higher-transparency condition featured a blog post providing specific, verifiable details about *BrightPathAI's* operational practices. It included information on data types and sources used to train models and a frank discussion of known limitations (substantive information), offered concrete engagement opportunities through active links to user forums and public consultation schedules (participation), and outlined clear oversight structures such as an independent ethics board and well-defined appeal channels (accountability). In contrast, the lower-transparency condition relied on vague, promotional language and corporate platitudes. It praised the AI product's transformative benefits without providing details (low substantive information), expressed general commitment to users without concrete engagement channels (no participation), and made broad, unactionable claims about responsible innovation without specific oversight mechanisms (weak accountability).

Pretest

The stimuli were initially developed in English. A pretest was conducted in the U.S. with 115 participants recruited through CloudResearch. After exposure to the stimulus, participants responded to a manipulation check item: "Overall, how transparent did you find the company's communication?" on a seven-point scale. An independent samples t-test was conducted to test the effect of the experimental condition (high- vs. low-transparency) on the perceived transparency score. The pretest results revealed a significant difference in perceived transparency between conditions, $t(113) = 5.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$. This confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulation before its deployment in the main study.

Stimuli and questionnaire translation

The finalized stimuli and the full questionnaire were translated from English into Simplified Chinese by the authors. To ensure cross-language equivalence, professionals and peer researchers with relevant language expertise and topic knowledge reviewed the translated materials. This review process focused on resolving any terminology uncertainties and verifying that the questions were comprehensible and conceptually equivalent in both languages. Prior to full deployment, both the stimuli and questionnaire were tested with small sample groups in the U.S. and China to confirm clarity and comprehension.

Main study procedure

After providing informed consent, participants were given a brief definition of AI to establish a common point of reference. Specifically, AI was described as technologies that enable applications such as self-driving cars, voice assistants, and conversational systems such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek, which use data and algorithms to learn and make decisions. This description was intended to ensure that participants evaluated the company's communication in relation to widely used, consumer-relevant AI products rather than to purely technical applications. Participants then answered a set of true-or-false questions designed to assess their factual knowledge of contemporary AI technologies. After that, they read a brief two-sentence explanation of "AI Responsibility" and indicated the extent to which they attributed AI governance responsibility to businesses.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (high- vs. low-transparency) and presented with the corresponding corporate blog post from *BrightPathAI*. They were given sufficient time to read the material carefully. Following exposure to the stimulus, participants responded to a series of questions measuring their readiness to engage with the company's AI product, which served as the key dependent variable, and their perceived transparency across the three dimensions (i.e., substantive information, participation, and accountability).

The study concluded with questions for demographic information, including age, gender, education, income, and ethnicity (for the U.S. sample only). All participants received fair compensation for their time and effort.

Measures

Perceived transparency dimensions

This measure captures participants' evaluative inferences regarding the quality of three distinct transparency dimensions: substantial information, participation, and accountability. These audience-level perceptions are theorized as the psychological mechanisms through which practice-level transparent communication influences readiness. The three dimensions of perceived transparency were measured using scales from Rawlins (2008) and Auger (2014). Participants were asked, "How well do you think the company is doing in…" (1 = not well at all; 7 = extremely well) followed by items representing the three dimensions. Perceived *substantive information* was measured with nine items, with a sample item being including "providing accurate information to people like me" (U.S. α = .98; China α = .97). Perceived *participation* level was assessed with six items,

including "asking for feedback from people like me about the quality of its information" (U.S. $\alpha = .98$; China $\alpha = .96$). Perceived *accountability* was measured with five items, such as "being forthcoming with information that might be damaging to the organization" (U.S. $\alpha = .95$; China $\alpha = .94$).

Public readiness to engage with AI products

The construct was operationalized as individuals' self-reported psychological and behavioral preparedness to interact with and adopt AI products. Based on a synthesis of studies on organizational and technological readiness (e.g., Holt et al., 2007; Parasuraman, 2000; Shea et al., 2014; Weiner, 2020), a 12-item scale captured individuals' psychological and behavioral tendencies of accepting, understanding, feeling capable of using, and being willing to engage with the company's AI products. Sample items were "I understand what the company's AI product is intended to do;" "I believe I have the necessary skills or resources to benefit from the company's AI tool;" and "I am open to learning more about the company's AI product and how it might help me" (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) (U.S. $\alpha = .96$; China $\alpha = .98$).

Ascription of responsibility

Ascription of responsibility to business was measured on a six-item scale adapted from Oh and Ki's (2023) study, with the items modified to fit the context of AI. Sample items included "Businesses rather than the citizens are responsible for AI governance" (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) (U.S. $\alpha = .81$; China $\alpha = .69$).

Control variable

Factual knowledge of AI was included as a control variable, as it has been shown to influence people's interpretation of AI-related communication (Bao et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024). It was measured using ten true-or-false items developed around five key capabilities of contemporary AI: reasoning, knowledge, planning, communication, and perception (Corea, 2019), based on the state of AI as of August 2025 when data were collected. For each capability, one true statement and one false statement were constructed. Participants selected from three response options: "true," "false," or "I don't know." A correct response was scored as one point, whereas an incorrect response or "I don't know" received a score of zero. Scores on the AI knowledge measure ranged from 0 to 10. The means in China ($M = 7.26$, $SD = 2.10$) and the U.S. ($M = 7.73$, $SD = 1.73$) were close.

Samples

Data collection was conducted using two established online panel services: Prolific for the U.S. sample and Credamo for the Chinese sample. For the U.S. sample, representative quotas for age, gender, and ethnicity were established to ensure the sample was comparable to the general population. For the Chinese sample, no demographic quotas were set, resulting in a non-representative convenience sample. Accordingly, the Chinese sample is used to represent an analytically meaningful socio-political context rather than a statistically representative national population. A total of 283 participants were recruited in the U.S. and 277 in China. After removing participants who failed embedded attention checks or exhibited straight-lining response patterns (13 from the U.S.

sample and 2 from the Chinese sample), the final sample consisted of 270 participants in the U.S. and 275 in China.

The U.S. sample ($N = 270$) included 131 males (48.5%), 134 females (49.6%), and 5 participants who identified as non-binary (1.9%). The average age was 46.0 years ($SD = 15.7$). The ethnic composition was 73.7% White, 15.2% Black, 9.3% Asian, 5.2% American Indian/Alaska Native, 1.1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 5.6% identifying as another ethnicity. In terms of education, 53.6% of participants held a bachelor's degree or higher. The median annual income bracket was $50,000-$74,999.

The Chinese sample ($N = 275$) included 103 males (37.5%) and 172 females (62.5%). The average age was 32.4 years ($SD = 8.5$). For education, 92.7% of participants held a bachelor's degree or higher. The median annual income bracket was ¥96,000-¥143,999.

An a priori power analysis indicated that, assuming $f^2 = .08$ (small-to-moderate), $\alpha = .05$, and $1 - \beta = .80$, a minimum sample size of $N = 205$ was required for detecting effects in regression-based analyses. Both final samples therefore exceed this threshold.

Results

Manipulation check results

To verify that participants differentiated between communication practice that incorporates higher (vs. lower) levels of transparency, we included a single general item asking how transparent they found the company's communication. This item served as a treatment differentiation check. ANOVA tests were conducted on the global perceived transparency item. In the U.S., individuals in the high-transparency condition rated the AI company's communication as significantly more transparent ($M = 5.86$, $SD = .98$) than those in the low-transparency condition ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.64$), $F(1, 268) = 64.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .195$. Similarly, in the Chinese sample, participants in the high-transparency condition perceived the communication as significantly more transparent ($M = 5.87$, $SD = .63$) compared to those in the low-transparency condition ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.67$), $F(1, 273) = 156.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .365$. The results confirmed that the intended differences in practice-level transparent communication were successfully perceived by participants in both countries, indicating a successful manipulation.

Hypothesis testing results

All analyses were conducted separately for the U.S. and Chinese samples. Since the Chinese data were obtained from a non-representative convenience sample, the results should be interpreted in terms of similarities and differences in relational patterns rather than as population-level comparisons of means or effect sizes across countries.

H1: the mediating role of perceived transparency dimensions

H1 predicted that an AI company's communication practice with higher transparency, compared to that with lower transparency, would enhance public readiness to engage with its AI product through the parallel mediation of perceived substantial information, participation, and accountability. To test this, parallel mediation analyses were

Table 1 Mediation of Perceived Transparency Dimensions in the Relationships Between Transparent Communication Practice (Higer- vs. Lower-Transparency) and Outcomes (U.S.)

	Mediators			**Dependent variable**
	Substantial information	**Participation**	**Accountability**	**Readiness**
	b (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)
Level of transparent communication practice	1.61 (.19)***	1.57 (.20)***	1.52 (.19)***	-.31 (.11)**
Substantial information	-	-	-	.34 (.08)***
Participation	-	-	-	.10 (.07)
Accountability	-	-	-	.17 (.07)*
	R^2 =.27 $F(6, 263) = 16.11$	R^2 =.24 $F(6, 263) = 13.71$	R^2 =.24 $F(6, 263) = 13.99$	R^2 =.64 $F(9, 260) = 50.40$

Level of transparent communication practice: higher-transparency = 1, lower-transparency = 0

Demographics (age, gender, education, and income) and factual AI knowledge are controlled

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

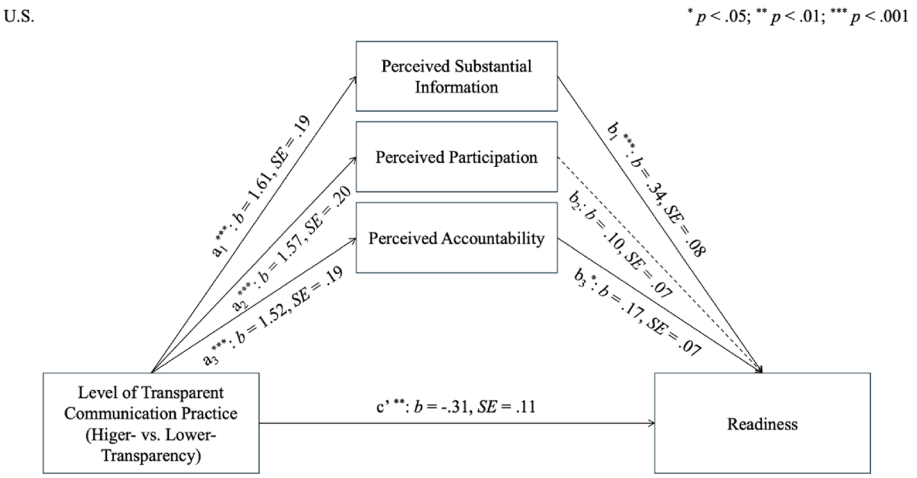

Fig. 2 Mediation of Perceived Transparency Dimensions in the Relationships Between Transparent Communication Practice (Higer- vs. Lower-Transparency) and Readiness (U.S.)

conducted for each country using PROCESS macro Model 4 (bootstrap = 5,000). Demographics and factual AI knowledge were included as covariates in the models.[1]

In the U.S., the results partially supported H1. The analysis revealed a significant total indirect effect of transparent communication practice on readiness (*Effect* =.97, *SE* =.13, 95% *CI*: [.71, 1.24]). However, when examining the specific indirect pathways, the effect was significantly mediated only by perceived substantial information (*Effect* =.55, *SE* =.14, 95% *CI*: [.31,.84]) and perceived accountability (*Effect* =.26, *SE* =.11, 95% *CI*: [.04,.48]). The indirect effect through perceived participation was not significant (*Effect* =.16, *SE* =.12, 95% *CI* [−.08,.41]). The path coefficients are reported in Table 1 and Fig. 2.

[1] As a robustness check, the models were re-estimated including the general perceived transparency item as an additional covariate. The pattern of indirect effects and substantive conclusions remained unchanged.

Table 2 Mediation of Perceived Transparency Dimensions in the Relationships Between Transparent Communication Practice (Higer- vs. Lower-Transparency) and Outcomes (China)

	Mediators			**Dependent variable**
	Substantial information	**Participation**	**Accountability**	**Readiness**
	b (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)
Level of transparent communication practice	1.63 (.14)***	1.81 (.15)***	1.81 (.14)***	-.14 (.09)
Substantial information	-	-	-	.56 (.11)***
Participation	-	-	-	.14 (.09)
Accountability	-	-	-	.22 (.07)**
	R^2 =.34 $F(6, 268) = 22.84$	R^2 =.38 $F(6, 268) = 27.15$	R^2 =.39 $F(6, 268) = 28.69$	R^2 =.83 $F(9, 265) = 144.96$

Level of transparent communication practice: higher-transparency = 1, lower-transparency = 0

Demographics (age, gender, education, and income) and factual AI knowledge are controlled

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

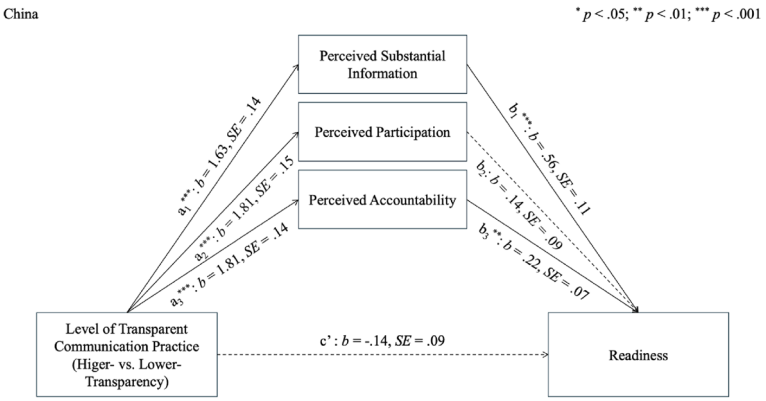

Fig. 3 Mediation of Perceived Transparency Dimensions in the Relationships Between Transparent Communication Practice (Higer- vs. Lower-Transparency) and Readiness (China)

Similarly, for the Chinese sample, the analysis also partially supported H1. There was a significant total indirect effect of transparent communication practice on public readiness to engage with AI products (*Effect* = 1.56, *SE* =.16, 95% *CI*: [1.24, 1.88]). The specific indirect effects through perceived substantial information (*Effect* =.91, *SE* =.18, 95% *CI*: [.56, 1.26]) and perceived accountability (*Effect* =.39, *SE* =.16, 95% *CI*: [.07,.68]) were significant. Again, the indirect pathway through perceived participation was not significant (*Effect* =.26, *SE* =.18, 95% *CI*: [−.04,.67]). Table 2 and Fig. 3 report the path coefficients.

H2: the moderating role of responsibility ascription

H2 proposed a two-stage moderated mediation relationship where the ascription of responsibility for AI governance to businesses would moderate the indirect effect of transparent communication practice on public readiness to engage with AI products.

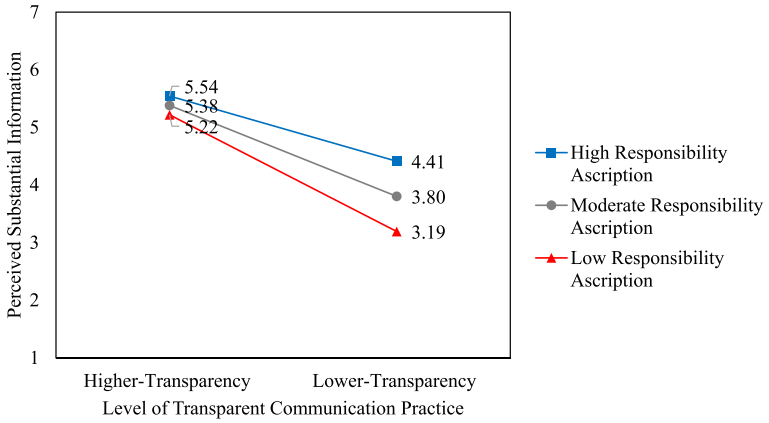

Fig. 4 Interaction Effect of Transparent Communication Practice (Higer- vs. Lower-Transparency) and Responsibility Ascription on Perceived Substantial Information (U.S.)

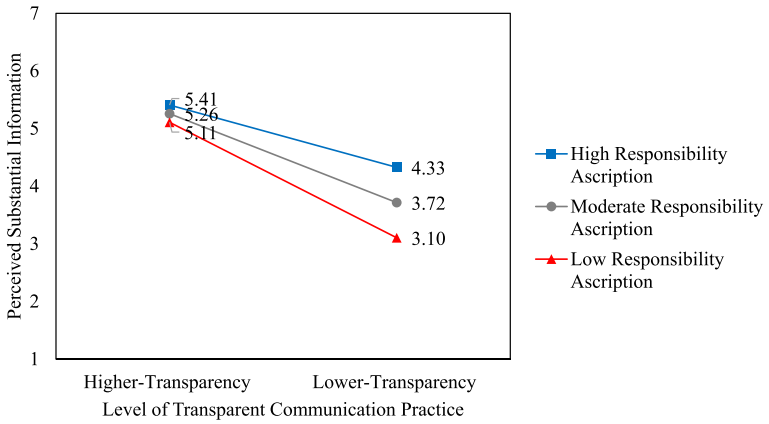

Fig. 5 Interaction Effect of Transparent Communication Practice (Higer- vs. Lower-Transparency) and Responsibility Ascription on Perceived Participation (U.S.)

This was tested using PROCESS macro Model 58 (bootstrap = 5,000), controlling for demographics and factual AI knowledge.[2]

For the U.S. sample, the analysis provided partial support for the hypothesized moderating effect on the initial mediation path (H2a). Transparent communication practice exerted a stronger positive effect on perceptions of substantial information ($b = -.47$, $SE = .19$, $p = .017$) and participation ($b = -.48$, $SE = .20$, $p = .018$) among individuals with lower levels of responsibility ascription (see Fig. 4 for the interaction effects), but this pattern did not extend to the perception of accountability ($b = -.39$, $SE = .20$, $p = .056$). That is, the perceptions of substantial information and participation matter more for those who do not hold companies to high standards of responsibility. As also hypothesized (H2b), a competing effect emerged: the positive influence of perceived substantial information on readiness to engage with AI

[2] As a robustness check, the models were also re-estimated including the general perceived transparency item as an additional covariate. The pattern of indirect effects and substantive conclusions also remained unchanged.

Table 3 Moderation of Responsibility Ascription on the Mediation of Perceived Transparency Dimensions in the Relationships Between Transparent Communication Practice (Higer- vs. Lower-Transparency) and Outcomes (U.S.)

	Mediators			**Dependent variable**
	Substantial information	**Participation**	**Accountability**	**Readiness**
	b (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)
Level of transparent communication practice	4.12 (1.07)***	4.17 (1.12) ***	3.60 (1.09)**	-.31 (.11)**
Responsibility ascription	.64 (.14) ***	.64 (.14)***	.50 (.14)***	.23 (.12)
Level of transparent communication practice x responsibility ascription	-.47 (.19) *	-.48 (.20)*	-.39 (.20)	-
Substantial information	-	-	-	-.71 (.51)
Participation	-	-	-	.54 (.49)
Accountability	-	-	-	1.01 (.45)*
Substantial information x responsibility ascription	-	-	-	.19 (.09)*
Participation x responsibility ascription	-	-	-	-.08 (.09)
Accountability x responsibility ascription	-	-	-	-.15 (.08)
	R^2 =.33 $F(8, 261) = 16.00$	R^2 =.30 $F(8, 261) = 13.73$	R^2 =.28 $F(8, 261) = 12.66$	R^2 =.65 $F(13, 256) = 36.58$

Level of transparent communication practice: higher-transparency = 1, lower-transparency = 0

Demographics (age, gender, education, and income) and factual AI knowledge are controlled

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

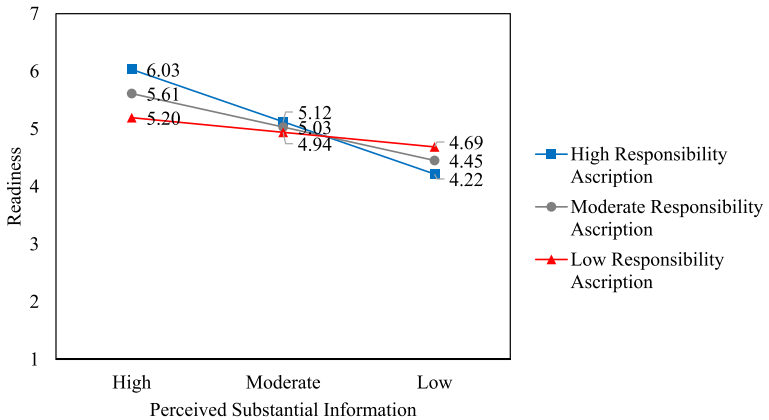

Fig. 6 Interaction Effect of Perceived Substantial Information and Responsibility Ascription on Readiness (U.S.)

products was simultaneously strengthened at higher levels of responsibility ascription (b =.19, SE =.09, p =.040). This means that for those with high responsibility ascription to businesses, perceptions of substantial information become more influential in shaping their readiness (see Fig. 5). To understand the net result of these competing effects, the conditional indirect effects were examined. This showed that the strengthening effect on the path from perceived substantial information to readiness was

Table 4 Moderation of Responsibility Ascription on the Mediation of Perceived Transparency Dimensions in the Relationships Between Transparent Communication Practice (Higer- vs. Lower-Transparency) and Outcomes (China)

	Mediators			**Dependent variable**
	Substantial information	**Participation**	**Accountability**	**Readiness**
	b (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)
Level of transparent communication practice	−1.95 (1.94)	−2.01 (1.98)	−1.33 (1.92)	-.15 (.09)
Responsibility ascription	-.09 (.24)	-.13 (.25)	-.06 (.24)	.16 (.38)
Level of transparent communication practice x responsibility ascription	.61 (.33)	.65 (.34)	.54 (.33)	-
Substantial information	-	-	-	2.08 (1.23)
Participation	-	-	-	-.32 (1.05)
Accountability	-	-	-	-.59 (.98)
Substantial information x responsibility ascription	-	-	-	-.26 (.21)
Participation x responsibility ascription	-	-	-	.08 (.18)
Accountability x responsibility ascription	-	-	-	.14 (.17)
	R^2 =.35 $F(8, 261) = 18.08$	R^2 =.39 $F(8, 261) = 21.33$	R^2 =.40 $F(8, 261) = 22.35$	R^2 =.83 $F(13, 261) = 99.95$

Level of transparent communication practice: higher-transparency = 1, lower-transparency = 0

Demographics (age, gender, education, and income) and factual AI knowledge are controlled

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

dominant, resulting in a significantly stronger overall indirect effect at higher levels of responsibility ascription (+1 *SD*: *Effect* =.57, *SE* =.19, 95% *CI*: [.26,.98]) compared to lower levels (−1 *SD*: *Effect* =.28, *SE* =.23, 95% *CI*: [−.13,.79]) (see Fig. 6). Table 3 reports the model summary.

For the Chinese sample, H2a was not supported. The interaction between transparent communication practice and participants' responsibility ascription did not significantly predict their perceptions of substantial information, participation, or accountability ($p>.05$ for all). Furthermore, H2b was also not supported, as the interactions between each of the three perceived transparency dimensions and responsibility ascription did not significantly predict readiness ($p>.05$ for all) (see Table 4 for the model summary).

Discussion

This study examines how AI companies' communication shapes public readiness, positioning organizations' transparent communication practice as a core CSR practice in the AI industry. The cross-national surveys from the U.S. and China illustrate how the public interprets AI-related transparent communication. The empirical investigation is guided by a macro-meso-micro theoretical architecture. At the macro-level, as AI generates growing uncertainty and intensifies corporate information asymmetry, the general public emerges as a salient stakeholder, demanding greater corporate

responsibility in AI disclosure. At the meso-level, transparency represents how companies enact their social responsibility through communication. At the micro-level, public perceptions of information and accountability explain how these communication acts influence readiness to engage with AI products.

Within this framework, public readiness is not simply an individual-level outcome but a theoretically meaningful indicator of stakeholder relationship quality (Park & Yoon, 2024), reflecting care for the general public's needs, vulnerability, and distrust under conditions of AI-related information asymmetry. Readiness reflects whether the company has succeeded in meeting the informational and moral needs of the public as a primary stakeholder. A ready public is one that feels sufficiently informed and empowered to engage with the company's technology, whereas low readiness is a breakdown in the company's CSR communication and stakeholder management. In this sense, readiness captures the downstream consequence of whether transparent communication practice has effectively reduced information asymmetry and established the conditions for a sustainable company-public relationship.

The primacy of perceived substantial information and accountability

Findings of H1 confirmed that in both the U.S. and China samples, substantial information and accountability significantly mediate the relationship between transparent communication practice and public readiness. The outcome reflects readiness to engage with specific AI products at the individual level. This result strongly supports the idea that in the face of novel, complex, and potentially opaque technologies, the public's primary psychological need is uncertainty reduction. As uncertainty reduction theory posits, individuals are fundamentally motivated to seek information to make their environment more predictable and navigable (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

The findings show that in the public's view, managing uncertainty about AI appears to hinge on two sets of questions: "What is this technology; what are its capabilities; and what are its limits?" (substantial information) and "Who is responsible when things go wrong?" (accountability). When the public perceives that a company is providing clear, verifiable details about its data sources, model limitations, and intended uses, they see this as a direct attempt to address the inherent information asymmetry that characterizes the AI industry (Reid et al., 2024). Similarly, when individuals see that a company has established and communicated clear mechanisms for oversight, appeal, and redress, they interpret this as a signal of integrity and a commitment to ethical conduct. This perception of accountability is essential to building their readiness. In stakeholder terms, this uncertainty reduction mechanism is what allows AI companies' transparent communication practice to fulfill its CSR function: by making risks and responsibilities clear, it enables the public to engage with AI products from a more informed and empowered position.

Notably, perceived participation did not emerge as a significant mediator in either country. While Rawlins' (2008) framework identifies participation as a key theoretical dimension of transparency, its lack of impact in this specific context suggests a potential hierarchy of public needs when dealing with highly specialized technologies. The public may view invitations for feedback as secondary, or even premature, if they are new to the technology and their primary need for foundational knowledge and assurance has

not been met. In the high-stakes context of AI, where concerns about algorithmic bias, data privacy, and societal disruption are paramount, the public may feel ill-equipped to participate meaningfully and instead prioritize a company's demonstration of its core competence (providing substantial information) and ethical integrity (demonstrating accountability). This suggests that for AI companies, communication should be anchored in empowering the public with knowledge and securing their confidence through demonstrable responsibility.

The complex moderating role of responsibility ascription

From an attribution theory perspective, responsibility ascription reflects how the public assigns moral and causal responsibility for AI-related outcomes to corporate actors. When individuals believe that AI companies are responsible for governing risks, errors, and social consequences, transparency is interpreted as morally diagnostic signals rather than as optional corporate communication. In contrast, when responsibility is ascribed elsewhere, such as to governments or users, transparency is treated as less central to how the company is evaluated. Responsibility ascription therefore structures how the public interprets corporate transparency about AI.

The findings revealed a two-stage moderating role for the public's ascription of responsibility in the U.S. sample. This moderation is consistent with expectancy-based processing (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Burgoon, 1993), which holds that individuals evaluate organizational communication in light of their prior expectations about what companies ought to do, making transparency more consequential when it aligns with or challenges those normative beliefs about corporate responsibility.

First, at the initial processing stage, transparent communication practice had a stronger positive effect on perceptions of its substantial information and participation among individuals with low ascription of responsibility. For individuals who do not expect businesses to take a major role in AI governance, a highly transparent message stands out relative to their prior expectations. This unexpected positivity makes those with low responsibility ascription more receptive to such communication. Conversely, for individuals with high responsibility ascription, transparent communication practice merely meets their pre-existing expectations.

However, a competing effect emerges at the subsequent judgment stage. When those with high ascription perceive a message as informationally substantial, that perception translates more strongly into their readiness for AI. For this group, the perception of substantial information is highly diagnostic, serving as critical evidence that a core expectation has been met (Rim et al., 2019). Although prior studies suggest substantial information is a basic act of transparent communication that often yields low engagement (Ju et al., 2021), our results indicate that for high-ascription individuals, it functions as a critical facilitator. Ultimately, individuals who hold businesses to a high standard are especially sensitive to the richness of corporate communication when shaping their readiness for AI. The net result is that the overall indirect effect of transparent communication practice on readiness is strongest among individuals with a high ascription of responsibility. This highlights a crucial challenge for AI companies: while transparent communication practice can make an impression on those with low expectations for business responsibility, its ultimate effectiveness in driving readiness lies in satisfying

the high expectations of a more engaged and demanding public, who are more challenging to impress. In attributional terms, these findings show that transparent communication practice influences readiness most strongly when it aligns with how the public ascribe responsibility for AI governance to companies.

From a CSR perspective, these patterns reflect differences in the public's normative expectations about corporate obligations, such that transparent communication practice takes on different levels of significance depending on how it is interpreted against these beliefs. In this sense, micro-level expectancy-based processing explains why transparent communication practice is associated with different levels of readiness across stakeholder groups.

Notably, these moderating effects were not observed for the accountability dimension, perhaps because the perception of accountability itself is rooted in a more fundamental and universal expectation of corporate duty (Carroll et al., 2012; Valor, 2005), making it less susceptible to moderation by individual differences in responsibility ascription.

Societal context and variations in public responses

The observed patterns suggest that while the psychological mechanism of uncertainty reduction (H1) appears relatively consistent across samples, expectancy-based processing (H2) may be culturally and institutionally contingent. The absence of responsibility-based moderation in the Chinese sample is consistent with the possibility that institutional context plays a role in conditioning how corporate communication is interpreted. In state-led governance systems such as China's, AI companies operate under relatively dense regulatory oversight that explicitly assigns legal and ethical responsibility for AI outcomes to companies (Zou & Zhang, 2025). Under these conditions, expectations about corporate responsibility may be less individualized and less contingent on corporate communication, and instead anchored in government regulation and state authority (Dong et al., 2024a).

If this interpretation holds, it is possible that AI companies' transparent communication practice in China would function primarily as a signal of regulatory compliance rather than as a cue for evaluating corporate moral responsibility. This aligns with the perspective that public expectations are shaped by the broader governance structures within which businesses operate (Brammer et al., 2012; Young & Thyil, 2014). This institutional anchoring may reduce the scope for expectancy-based processing to operate at the individual level, because the public may not rely as heavily on companies' messages to determine whether companies are acting responsibly; that judgment is potentially delegated to government institutions. Consequently, individual variations in responsibility ascription may become less relevant if the locus of responsibility is institutionally fixed by the state.

In contrast, in the U.S.'s market-oriented and pluralistic governance environment, corporate responsibility for AI remains more ambiguous and contested. In this context, the public likely relies more heavily on corporate communication to infer whether companies are meeting their ethical obligations. This could create the conditions under which responsibility-based expectations shape how transparency is interpreted, allowing expectancy-based effects to emerge.

It is important to note, however, that while these observed differences between the two samples are suggestive, this study was not designed to empirically test geographic or societal context as a formal boundary condition. These interpretations remain exploratory. Future research is needed to directly test these institutional factors as moderators to confirm whether the differences observed here are indeed a product of broader societal structures rather than other sample-specific characteristics.

Theoretical implications

This study advances a comprehensive, hierarchical theoretical framework for understanding CSR communication in the AI sector. By integrating normative perspectives with individual-level psychological processes, it offers a multi-layered explanation of how corporate communication facilitates readiness for adopting emerging technologies.

First, at the macro-level, the study extends stakeholder theory by explicitly positioning the general public as a critical stakeholder within the AI ecosystem – a group defined by its structural dependence and profound information asymmetry relative to tech companies (Matthews et al., 2025). In this context, public readiness represents a core relational outcome of CSR communication and effective stakeholder management, and transparent communication practice functions as more than a tactical reputation management tool. Our focus on public readiness moves a step away from traditionally corporate-focused outcomes as the sole measure of the quality and success of AI-related communication. By conceptualizing AI companies' transparent communication practice as a responsibility to the general public, the study establishes that fulfilling the "responsibility to inform" is a prerequisite for securing social license to operate.

Second, at the meso-level, the research situates transparent communication practice within high-stakes technological domains. By applying Rawlins' (2008) multidimensional transparency framework to AI, the study shows that perceived transparency should not be treated as a single, uniform construct, but as a set of distinct dimensions that are interpreted through public evaluation. This perspective highlights that different aspects of transparent communication practice may matter in different ways depending on how people perceive and make sense of a company's communication efforts as they become ready to engage with complex technologies.

Third, at the micro-level, the study sheds light on the specific psychological mechanisms driving these outcomes by linking uncertainty reduction theory and expectancy-based message processing to the broader stakeholder framework. According to uncertainty reduction theory, transparent communication practice functions by reducing the cognitive burden and ambiguity associated with opaque technologies. Meanwhile, expectancy-based processing and attribution theory explain when and for whom these transparency efforts are most effective. Responsibility ascription is more than an individual difference; it influences how organizations' transparent communication practice is perceived, depending on whether they confirm or diverge from pre-existing normative expectations.

Taken together, these findings offer a multi-level theoretical framework of CSR communication in AI: stakeholder structures determine who companies owe responsibility to; transparency dimensions determine how that responsibility is communicated; and

public cognition determines whether and when those communication efforts influence readiness for technological engagement.

Practical implications

The findings offer useful guidance for communication professionals in the AI industry. The primary takeaway is that substantial information and accountability must be the cornerstones of corporate communication aimed at fostering public readiness to engage with AI products. Companies should prioritize tangible disclosures and verifiable commitments, such as disclosing the data used to train models, being candid about known limitations, and specifying use cases. This level of detail demystifies the technology and empowers users. Simultaneously, companies must demonstrate accountability by establishing clear channels for redress, publicizing oversight bodies, and articulating policies for when AI systems cause harm. These efforts signal that a company stands behind its products.

The moderating role of responsibility ascription in the U.S. highlights that companies must be aware of public expectations. As the AI industry matures and its societal impact becomes more pronounced, public expectations for corporate responsibility are likely to grow, suggesting that the segment of the public with high ascription of responsibility will expand over time. Therefore, communication efforts must not only be tailored to current expectations but also anticipate and adapt to this rising tide of public demand for corporate responsibility. AI companies should not view substantial information as simply a minimum requirement. Instead, they must ensure that high-quality information is consistently delivered, recognizing that high-ascription individuals depend on such communication to feel prepared for AI and are disproportionately vulnerable when it is lacking. Moreover, the cross-national differences underscore that global companies must be attuned to the local socio-political and regulatory context, as it profoundly shapes public expectations and how the public interprets transparent communication efforts.

These exploratory findings tentatively suggest regulatory implications. Governments seeking to foster responsible AI innovation may find it useful to consider that public readiness to engage with AI products appears to be a key component of a healthy AI ecosystem. Insofar as transparent communication practice impacts public perceptions, future regulation could look toward extending beyond technical standards to encourage greater transparency. Future policies could look beyond technical standards to encourage transparency, such as plain-language documentation or clear avenues for appeal. For industry bodies, these initial insights offer a tentative starting point for developing best-practice guidelines. However, as the institutional contexts were not directly tested, these implications remain speculative and require further validation across different governance environments.

Limitations and future directions

The study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The use of a fictitious company, while enhancing internal validity by isolating the message's effect, limits the generalizability of the findings. In reality, public perceptions are heavily influenced by pre-existing brand reputations and attitudes, which are not accounted for in this design. Also, although participants were given a user-facing definition of AI, the scope of AI in

this study remains relatively broad, which may have introduced heterogeneity in how respondents interpreted AI products. Future research could examine whether the same communication mechanisms apply to more narrowly defined AI domains. Additionally, the Chinese sample was not representative of the national population. This limits how generalizable the results are to the broader Chinese public and warrants caution when interpreting cross-national differences. Although the data allow for examination of whether the proposed relationships emerge in a distinct governance context, they do not support population-level inferences in China. Furthermore, this study's cross-sectional experimental design captures immediate reactions but not the long-term effects of sustained communication. Public readiness to engage with AI products is dynamic and can be swayed by high-profile technological breakthroughs or controversies, making longitudinal research essential for a more complete picture.

For future research, it would also be valuable to explore the concept of "participation" more deeply, investigating what specific forms of public engagement (e.g., user feedback panels, co-design workshops) are perceived as meaningful. Additionally, future studies could examine how the perceived source of the transparent communication practice, whether it comes from a CEO, an engineering team, or a neutral third-party auditor, impacts its credibility and effectiveness. Finally, further cross-national research should continue to explore these relationships in other social and regulatory environments, such as the European Union, to build a more comprehensive global understanding.

Conclusion

Based on experiment findings, the study supports a comprehensive macro-meso-micro framework illustrating how AI companies' transparent communication practice shapes public readiness. At the macro- and meso-levels, we explain why transparent communication practice functions as the core means by which ethical responsibility is enacted for the general public. These imperatives are realized through specific psychological processes at the micro-level, where uncertainty reduction and expectancy-based processing drive individual perceptions. Furthermore, attributional judgments regarding corporate responsibility determine when such perceived transparency carries greater normative and evaluative weight. Crucially, this layered framework is bounded by institutional context, as state-market structures define the resonance of corporate responsibility. Ultimately, we highlight that public readiness to engage with AI products is not simply an adoption metric, but the outcome of an integrated system linking corporate ethics, communication, and stakeholder relationship building.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s44382-026-00024-5.

Supplementary Material 1.

Authors' contributions

H.X. and C.D. jointly conceptualized the study and contributed to its overall design. H.X. was responsible for data collection, data analysis, and manuscript drafting. C.D. contributed to the editing and critical refinement of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version for submission.

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Data availability
The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
The study was approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee and Michigan State University Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines and regulations.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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