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The Steered Self: Algorithmic Consumer Identity Theory in Platformized Markets

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Abstract

Platformized markets increasingly organize consumer encounters through adaptive ranking and personalization systems that learn from behavioral traces and reorder what consumers see over time. Although consumer identity theory explains how consumers use marketplace resources to express and negotiate the self, it does not fully explain how recursive ranked exposure shapes identity trajectories. This article develops Algorithmic Consumer Identity Theory (ACIT) to address that gap. ACIT proposes that identity formation in platformized markets is conditioned by three interrelated mechanisms: algorithmic mirroring, through which consumers interpret personalized outputs as self-diagnostic signals; algorithmic steering, through which ranking and recommendation systems structure future exposure; and reinforcement-loop strength, which captures the inertia generated by recursive feedback among behavior, inference, and exposure. Together, these mechanisms produce the steered self, an emergent identity configuration shaped through repeated interaction with curated exposure environments. The theory specifies how adaptive personalization can increase identity salience, strengthen or fragment coherence, intensify dissonance under conditions of misrecognition, and reduce perceived data agency when contestability is weak. By distinguishing representational feedback from directional exposure governance, ACIT offers a mechanism-based and empirically falsifiable framework for understanding identity in AI-mediated markets. The article contributes to consumer identity theory, platformization research, and AI-in-marketing scholarship, and identifies implications for platform governance and identity-safe personalization design.

Keywords: algorithmic consumer identity theory (ACIT); steered self; recursive exposure architectures; algorithmic mirroring; algorithmic steering

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1. Introduction

Consumer identity is central to marketing theory because it explains how consumption becomes meaningful. Consumers do not merely purchase, avoid, or display marketplace offerings for functional reasons; they also use them to express, affirm, and negotiate who they are and whom they aspire to become. Consumer identity research, both past and present, shows that identity is symbolic, shaped by society, and expressed through marketplace resources. Consumers use, understand, and enact these resources over time (Belk, 1988, 2013; Reed et al., 2012).

Across these traditions, markets are typically understood as providing symbolic materials and interactional contexts within which identity work unfolds. That assumption now requires reconsideration. In platformized markets, consumer interactions are increasingly managed by adaptive systems. These systems infer preferences from behavioral data

and continuously adjust what consumers see. Ranking, recommendation, filtering, and personalization systems now shape feeds, product selections, search results, and service interactions across digital platforms (Davenport et al., 2020; Grewal et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2021; Ricci et al., 2022; Zhang & Chen, 2020; Wang & Benbasat, 2007). As a result, exposure is no longer a stable background for consumer choice; instead, it is dynamically produced, constantly updated, and controlled by computational systems that learn from past behavior and determine future visibility (Chaney et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016).

This infrastructural shift has direct implications for identity formation. Identity processes depend, in part, on what is repeatedly encountered, cognitively accessible, and socially meaningful. When symbolic resources are surfaced through ranked systems optimized for engagement, conversion, or retention, identity work no longer unfolds only within social or cultural environments; it also unfolds within algorithmically curated exposure environments. Consumers are increasingly using algorithmic systems to search for, evaluate, and discover information. They may interpret personalized results not just as helpful suggestions, but as indicators of their own preferences, tendencies, and self-perceptions (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Logg et al., 2019; Puntoni et al., 2021). Therefore, in these situations, identity is formed not only through how it is understood and expressed, but also through the repeated organization of what is made visible, frequently encountered, and available for consideration.

Existing research has not fully captured this transformation. Consumer identity theory explains how identities guide behavior and how consumers use marketplace meanings to construct the self, but it does not fully explain how adaptive exposure systems shape which identity-relevant cues become repeatedly available in the first place. Platformization scholarship explains how digital infrastructures govern visibility and access, yet rarely specifies the micro-level identity processes through which those infrastructures shape consumer self-concept (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). While studies on personalization and artificial intelligence in marketing have examined trust, relevance, well-being, and decision support, they have not yet fully explored how identity forms through repeated, ranked exposure (Helberger et al., 2022; Henin & Le Métayer, 2022; Puntoni et al., 2021). What remains underdeveloped, therefore, is a mechanism-based consumer theory explaining how algorithmically organized exposure conditions identity trajectories over time.

This article addresses the gap in ACIT development. ACIT proposes that identity formation in platformized markets is increasingly conditioned by recursive exposure architectures in which behavioral traces are converted into inferences that reorganize subsequent encounters. The theory distinguishes between algorithmic mirroring, through which consumers interpret personalized outputs as self-diagnostic signals, and algorithmic steering, through which ranking and recommendation systems shape the distribution of future exposure. These mechanisms interact through reinforcement-loop strength (RLS), which captures the trajectory inertia generated by recursive feedback among behavior, inference, and exposure. Together, they produce what this article calls the steered self: an emergent identity configuration shaped through repeated interaction with curated exposure environments.

ACIT contributes to marketing theory in several ways. First, it reconceptualizes ranked exposure as an identity-conditioning mechanism rather than as a neutral background to consumer choice. Second, it offers a parsimonious, mechanism-based framework that distinguishes representational feedback from directional exposure governance and specifies how their interaction shapes identity salience, coherence, dissonance, and perceived data agency. Third, it connects consumer identity theory with platformization scholarship and

AI-in-marketing research, thereby clarifying how infrastructural design choices become consequential for consumer self-concept in contemporary markets. In doing so, ACIT provides a falsifiable framework for understanding identity formation under adaptive personalization and opens a research agenda on identity-safe platform design and governance.

ACIT offers a distinct theoretical explanation by identifying recursive exposure governance as a mechanism that conditions identity trajectories over time. Existing frameworks explain how identity guides behavior (e.g., identity-based motivation, self-verification) or how algorithmic systems shape choice through relevance, nudging, or curation (Burke & Stets, 2009, 2022). However, they do not account for how adaptive exposure environments systematically determine which identity-relevant cues become repeatedly encountered and cognitively accessible. ACIT addresses this gap by specifying a recursive process in which behavioral traces inform algorithmic inference, which in turn structures ranked exposure and repetition. This process redistributes salience across identity facets, reinforcing some trajectories while attenuating others. As a result, ACIT explains variation in identity salience, coherence, and dissonance that cannot be reduced to preference stability, self-selection, or efficient personalization.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. ACIT's placement within established theoretical frameworks, such as consumer identity theory, platformization studies, and AI-driven personalization, is addressed in the subsequent section, which also elucidates its conceptual significance. Following this, a synthesis of the extant literature is presented, along with an identification of the theoretical lacuna the framework seeks to address. The article then details the fundamental elements of ACIT, including its underlying mechanisms, foundational assumptions, and procedural logic, ultimately formulating a series of propositions and boundary conditions. The ensuing sections then establish the theory's formal characteristics and its capacity for falsification, while also outlining the research design considerations pertinent to empirical validation. Finally, the article concludes by examining the wider theoretical and practical ramifications of ACIT for marketing theory, platform governance, and the development of identity-aware personalization systems.

2. Theoretical Positioning and Contribution

ACIT is proposed as a mid-range, mechanism-based theory of identity formation in platformized markets. Its purpose is not to replace established identity theories or to offer a universal account of how identity develops across all settings. Rather, ACIT addresses a more specific problem: how identity trajectories are conditioned when consumer encounters are increasingly organized through adaptive ranking, recommendation, and personalization systems. In this sense, the theory responds to a structural transformation in market environments, one in which exposure is no longer relatively stable or exogenous to the consumer, but is dynamically generated through recursive feedback between behavioral traces and computational inference (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Davenport et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2021).

The central theoretical move of ACIT is to treat ranked exposure as an identity-conditioning mechanism. Traditional consumer identity perspectives have shown that consumers use marketplace resources to express, negotiate, and stabilize the self through symbolic appropriation, self-categorization, and identity-based motivation (Belk, 1988, 2013; Reed et al., 2012). Although these perspectives remain foundational, they typically assume that identity work unfolds within symbolic environments whose contents may be socially structured but are not continuously reconfigured in real time in response to the consumer's own traces. In platformized markets, by contrast, the encounter environment itself becomes adaptive. What the consumer repeatedly sees, encounters, and rehearses is shaped by systems that learn from prior behavior and adjust subsequent visibility accordingly. ACIT therefore extends existing identity theorizing by explaining not only how consumers enact

identity through markets, but also how markets increasingly reorganize the distribution of identity-relevant cues that consumers encounter over time.

This reframing is significant because related bodies of literature, despite their relevance, do not fully address the specific analytical requirements of the present issue. Research on platformization has illuminated how platforms function as infrastructural organizers, influencing visibility, participation, and access, and thus shaping the parameters of market interactions (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies on AI-driven personalization and recommender systems have revealed how behavioral data is transformed into predictive models that then reorder future exposure, potentially diminishing diversity through optimization strategies (Chaney et al., 2018; Ricci et al., 2022; Zhang & Chen, 2020). In addition, consumer–AI interaction research has shown that consumers frequently perceive algorithmic outputs as meaningful, competent, and, at times, self-relevant (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Logg et al., 2019; Puntoni et al., 2021). However, none of this literature, on its own, provides a consumer identity theory that specifies how recursive exposure architectures shape identity salience, coherence, dissonance, and perceived agency over time. ACIT is designed to fill that conceptual gap. Platform-based personalization can be understood as a form of "hypernudge," in which behavioral environments are continuously shaped through data-driven interventions (Yeung, 2017).

ACIT makes three interrelated contributions. First, it introduces the idea that identity in platformized markets is conditioned not only by symbolic meaning and social interpretation, but also by the repeated sequencing of exposure through adaptive systems. This shifts the analytical focus from identity expression alone to the recursive infrastructures within which identity is rehearsed. Second, the theory distinguishes between two analytically separable mechanisms: algorithmic mirroring, through which personalized outputs are interpreted as representations of the self, and algorithmic steering, through which ranked systems govern the probability of future encounters. This distinction is important because much prior discussion of personalization conflates representational inference with directional influence. ACIT argues that identity outcomes depend on the interaction between the processes rather than on either process in isolation. Third, the theory formalizes reinforcement-loop strength as the mechanism linking behavior, inference, and exposure over time. This provides ACIT with a dynamic core and allows it to generate falsifiable propositions about when identity trajectories are likely to become more salient, coherent, fragmented, dissonant, or constrained.

A further contribution of ACIT lies in its level of theoretical ambition. Following conceptual development work in marketing, the theory is intentionally framed as mid-range rather than totalizing (MacInnis, 2011). It seeks to explain identity formation under identifiable infrastructural conditions: when exposure is ranked, when behavioral traces are used to update predictive models, and when personalization meaningfully affects the consumer's encounter environment. This boundedness is important for two reasons. It prevents the theory from collapsing into vague claims about "algorithmic influence," and it creates clear scope conditions for empirical examination. ACIT does not assume that algorithms determine identity, nor does it treat consumers as passive recipients of infrastructural power. Its claims are probabilistic and conditional. Identity conditioning is expected to vary with factors such as personalization intensity, exploration design, contestability affordances, cross-domain integration, and consumers' prior identity orientations.

Positioning ACIT in this way also clarifies its relationship to existing identity traditions. The theory extends identity control and identity verification perspectives by arguing that, in platformized markets, feedback is not only social or interpretive but also infrastructural: ranked exposure systems alter the future availability of cues and enactment opportunities. It also speaks to work on identity complexity by showing that recursive personalization

may strengthen coherence within a focal domain while increasing fragmentation across domains when integration is partial or asymmetrical. Accordingly, ACIT does not reject prior theories of identity; instead, it places them in a changed marketplace ontology, one in which the environment of identity work is itself adaptive, trace-responsive, and recursively consequential.

The theory is therefore positioned at the intersection of consumer identity theory, platformization scholarship, and AI-in-marketing research, but it is reducible to none of them. Unlike traditional identity-based approaches, ACIT focuses on how exposure itself is reorganized. Unlike platformization theory, it offers a micro-level account of how infrastructural governance enters self-concept formation. Unlike most AI and personalization research, it treats identity development rather than transaction-level performance as the principal outcome of interest. This distinctiveness matters because contemporary digital markets increasingly operate through recursive ranking systems, although marketing theory still lacks an account of how such systems condition the formation and stabilization of consumer identity. ACIT provides that account by specifying the mechanisms through which ranked exposure becomes consequential for the self.

The next section develops the broader theoretical foundations for this argument by reviewing scholarship on platformization, personalization, delegated cognition, and classification systems, and by clarifying the specific discontinuity that makes ACIT necessary as a new conceptual framework.

3. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

Understanding how identity forms in contemporary markets requires situating consumer behavior within an evolving digital environment. The rise of platform-based markets, AI-driven personalization, and data-intensive ranking systems has fundamentally altered how consumers encounter, interpret, and engage with market offerings. Exposure is no longer a passive backdrop to decision making; it is dynamically produced through recursive systems that learn from behavioral traces and reorganize visibility over time.

While prior research in marketing, information systems, and platform studies has examined these developments from multiple perspectives, this literature remains only partially integrated with theories of consumer identity. This section synthesizes four relevant streams (platformization, AI personalization, delegated cognition, and algorithmic classification). It demonstrates that, although each provides important insights, none fully explains how recursive exposure processes shape identity trajectories.

3.1. Platformization and Infrastructural Agency

Platformization denotes the restructuring of markets around digital infrastructures that organize transactions, interactions, and visibility through programmable systems (Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Initially framed as a shift in intermediation, platformization is now understood as a broader socio-technical transformation in which platforms actively shape participation, access, and value creation (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Through data extraction, algorithmic ranking, and rule enforcement, platforms determine not only which actors participate in markets but also which offerings and meanings become visible.

This governance structure is often conceptualized as infrastructural power or algorithmic governance, emphasizing that platforms do not merely facilitate exchange but actively structure the conditions of exchange (Gillespie, 2018; Kitchin, 2017; Plantin et al., 2018; Srnicek, 2017). Ranking systems and recommendation algorithms prioritize certain content while suppressing others, shaping familiarity, accessibility, and perceived norms (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Grewal et al., 2020). As a result, exposure is no longer deter-

mined solely by consumer choice or social influence, but is systematically organized by computational systems.

At the same time, platform business models rely on continuous data extraction to support prediction and optimization (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Zuboff & Zanzarella, 2020), raising concerns about bias, inequality, and fairness (Akter et al., 2022; Kellogg et al., 2020; Mehrabi et al., 2021). These dynamics extend beyond market efficiency, reshaping the symbolic and informational environments through which consumers construct meaning.

Despite these insights, platformization research has primarily focused on macro- and meso-level phenomena, such as governance structures and market organization. It has devoted comparatively less attention to micro-level identity processes shaped by the infrastructural control of visibility. Identity theories explain how salient identities guide behavior and how individuals seek coherence and verification, but they typically treat exposure environments as given. ACIT extends this perspective by specifying how exposure itself becomes endogenous to behavioral traces and algorithmic inference, thereby influencing identity formation.

3.2. AI Personalization, Recommender Systems, and Exposure Governance

A second stream of research examines how AI-driven personalization shapes consumer experience. Recommender systems infer user preferences from behavioral data and use these inferences to rank and select future content (Ricci et al., 2022; Zhang & Chen, 2020; Wang & Benbasat, 2007). A defining feature of these systems is their recursive structure: outputs influence user behavior, which in turn generates new data that updates future recommendations (Chaney et al., 2018).

This recursive process affects not only choice but also the structure of exposure. Systems optimized for engagement often favor similarity-based recommendations, producing increasingly concentrated exposure distributions (Cinelli et al., 2021; Dobolyi et al., 2026; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016). Recent developments in AI, including generative systems and real-time adaptive learning, further intensify this dynamic by continuously refining exposure based on behavioral traces (Chacon et al., 2026; Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kshetri et al., 2024).

Research has also examined governance features such as explainability and contestability, highlighting their role in shaping trust, perceived control, and system acceptance (Henin & Le Métayer, 2022; Rai, 2020). At the same time, studies of filter bubbles and algorithmic curation demonstrate how exposure concentration may reinforce homophily and segmentation, although these effects depend on system design and user behavior (Flaxman et al., 2016; Gonçalves et al., 2023; Ontanon & Zhu, 2021).

From a marketing perspective, personalization is typically evaluated using performance metrics such as relevance, engagement, and conversion (Theodorakopoulos et al., 2025). While this literature demonstrates that algorithms shape what consumers see, it largely treats exposure as an input to decision making rather than as a cumulative process with identity implications (Song et al., 2024).

As a result, personalization research explains how systems influence behavior and optimize outcomes, but does not account for how repeated exposure shapes identity-level constructs such as salience, coherence, or dissonance over time. ACIT addresses this limitation by conceptualizing recursive exposure as a mechanism of identity conditioning rather than merely a driver of choice.

3.3. Delegated Cognition, Algorithmic Interpretation, and the Self

A third stream of research examines how consumers rely on algorithmic systems for cognitive tasks such as searching, evaluating, and decision-making. This phenomenon, often described as delegated cognition, reflects a shift in which consumers depend on AI

systems to interpret and assess information (Davenport et al., 2020; Logg et al., 2019). In complex environments, consumers frequently prefer algorithmic recommendations over human judgment.

This reliance has important implications for interpretation. Consumers often attribute competence, autonomy, and agency to algorithmic systems (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Puntoni et al., 2021), and emerging evidence suggests that perceptions of autonomy, fairness, and trust shape how algorithmic outputs are understood (Han & Ko, 2025; Pelau et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2025). Under such conditions, recommendations may be interpreted not only as functional suggestions but also as signals of relevance or preference.

When algorithmic systems repeatedly categorize users into specific profiles, these representations may function as externalized reflections of the self. However, existing research has focused primarily on immediate responses to such outputs rather than on how sustained interpretive engagement, together with recursive exposure, influences identity over time (Masiero, 2023; Won & Lee, 2026).

Within the ACIT framework, delegated cognition serves as an antecedent condition that increases the likelihood that algorithmic outputs will be interpreted as self-diagnostic signals (Longoni & Cian, 2022). As reliance on algorithmic systems increases, consumers are more likely to process exposure in self-referential terms, thereby strengthening algorithmic mirroring. However, delegated cognition alone does not produce identity conditioning; its effects depend on the persistence and structure of exposure, which are governed by algorithmic steering.

3.4. Classification, Inequality, and Identity Consequences

Algorithmic systems rely on classification processes that transform behavioral data into probabilistic categories used for targeting and exposure allocation. These classifications influence not only segmentation but also visibility and the distribution of opportunities (Akter et al., 2022; Mende et al., 2024; O'Neil, 2016). More broadly, algorithmic classification reshapes subjectivity by structuring the ways in which individuals are categorized and governed within digital environments (Sahakyan et al., 2025).

These dynamics are often examined through the lenses of fairness, autonomy, and manipulation, with recent work highlighting ethical tensions in AI-driven personalization (Papageorgiou & Milioris, 2026; Vărzaru, 2023). However, this literature has focused primarily on behavioral and ethical outcomes rather than identity processes.

Identity research, in contrast, has identified key outcomes such as salience, coherence, dissonance, and fragmentation (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). While these constructs are well established, they are typically explained as functions of social interaction or internal processes. ACIT extends this literature by specifying how these outcomes may also be shaped by algorithmically structured exposure.

3.5. Synthesis: The Theoretical Gap

Taken together, existing research reveals four key patterns: platform infrastructures govern visibility, personalization operates through recursive feedback, consumers increasingly rely on algorithmic systems for interpretation, and classification structures access and opportunity.

Despite these advances, a central gap remains. Identity research explains how consumers use symbolic resources to construct identity, but assumes that these resources are exogenously available. Personalization research explains how algorithms shape exposure and behavior, but does not theorize identity formation. Platformization scholarship explains how visibility is governed, but lacks a micro-level account of identity processes.

What is missing is a mechanism-based explanation linking recursive exposure to identity outcomes. Specifically, there is a need to explain how behavioral traces, algorithmic inference, and ranked exposure interact over time to shape identity salience, coherence, dissonance, and perceived agency.

ACIT is developed in response to this gap by conceptualizing exposure as an endogenous and dynamically structured component of identity formation. The next section formalizes this framework and derives empirically testable propositions. To clarify its distinct theoretical contribution, it is useful to position the framework relative to adjacent perspectives in consumer research and digital marketing. Prior approaches have examined how identity guides behavior, how algorithms optimize relevance and performance, and how platforms structure visibility and attention. However, these perspectives differ in their treatment of exposure, temporality, and identity outcomes.

Table 1 summarizes these differences and highlights the unique explanatory scope of ACIT, particularly its focus on recursive exposure governance as a mechanism shaping identity trajectories over time. The next section formalizes this framework and derives empirically testable propositions.

Table 1. Comparative positioning of ACIT and adjacent theories.

Dimension	Identity-Based Motivation (Reed et al., 2012)	AI Personalization Research	Platformization (Poell et al., 2019; Airoldi & Rokka, 2022)	ACIT (This Article)
Core Focus	Identity → Behavior	Algorithm → Performance	Infrastructure → Market organization	Infrastructure → Identity formation
Role of Exposure	Situational/given	Optimized for relevance	Structurally governed	Recursively constructed and adaptive
Mechanism	Identity salience activation	Recommendation optimization	Visibility governance	Reinforcement through ranked exposure
Temporal Orientation	Episodic	Transaction-level	Structural	Longitudinal, recursive
Identity Outcomes	Behavior guided by identity	Not central	Not specified	Salience, coherence, dissonance, data agency
Level of Analysis	Individual	Firm/system	Macro/institutional	Individual identity trajectories
Key Limitation	Static exposure environment	Ignores identity formation	Lacks micro-level identity mechanisms	—

This comparison underscores that ACIT does not extend a single existing framework but integrates and re-specifies them by introducing exposure as a dynamic, endogenous component of identity formation. This comparison clarifies that ACIT does not extend a single existing framework, but introduces a mechanism that links exposure structure, behavioral traces, and identity outcomes in a way that existing theories do not explicitly capture.

4. Algorithmic Consumer Identity Theory (ACIT)

ACIT explains how identity formation unfolds in markets where exposure is increasingly organized through adaptive personalization systems. The theory does not claim that technology determines identity, nor does it assume that consumers are passive recipients of algorithmic influence. Rather, ACIT argues that, in platformized markets, identity development is increasingly conditioned by recursive exposure architectures in which consumer behavior generates traces, traces inform predictive inference, and those inferences reorganize what consumers encounter next. Under such conditions, ranked exposure becomes part of the causal environment that shapes identity salience, coherence, dissonance, and perceived data agency over time.

ACIT is grounded in three observations established in the preceding literature. Platform-based markets first determine what is visible through systems that rank, filter, and order content, products, and interactions (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Poell et al., 2019). Subsequently, personalization systems continuously deduce preferences from behavioral data, utilizing these inferences to influence future exposure (Davenport et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2021; Ricci et al., 2022). Furthermore, consumers are increasingly interpreting and depending on algorithmic outputs when navigating marketplace abundance, rendering such outputs potentially pertinent to self-understanding and decision-making (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Logg et al., 2019; Miller, 2019; Puntoni et al., 2021). ACIT synthesizes these observations into a mechanism-based theory of identity formation under ranked exposure. This theory is structured around three fundamental mechanisms: algorithmic mirroring, algorithmic steering, and reinforcement-loop strength.

To clarify the conceptual structure of ACIT, Table 2 defines the framework's core constructs, specifying their levels of analysis, roles within the model, and potential empirical indicators. This distinction separates interpretive processes, exposure governance mechanisms, and identity-level outcomes, thereby improving conceptual precision and ensuring that constructs are not conflated with their empirical manifestations.

Table 2. Core constructs of ACIT.

Construct	Definition	Level of Analysis	Role in Model	Example Empirical Indicators
Algorithmic Mirroring (ALMI)	The process by which consumers interpret algorithmic outputs as self-diagnostic signals reflecting their preferences, traits, or identity	Individual (interpretive)	Mechanism (interpretive channel)	Perceived relevance, perceived accuracy, self-diagnostic interpretation
Algorithmic Steering (ALSTE)	The directional structuring of exposure through algorithmic ranking and filtering, which shapes what content is repeatedly encountered	System/platform level	Mechanism (exposure governance)	Exposure concentration, ranking bias, and content similarity
Reinforcement-Loop Strength	The degree to which prior behavior informs algorithmic inference and recursively shapes subsequent exposure	System-dynamic	Core mechanism (linking behavior, inference, exposure)	Exposure repetition, low entropy, high predictability of content
Steered Self	An identity configuration that emerges from sustained, patterned exposure to algorithmically curated cues	Individual (identity outcome)	Outcome (identity-level effect)	Identity salience, coherence, dissonance, perceived data agency

Algorithmic mirroring explains how personalized outputs can be interpreted as signals about the self. Algorithmic steering explains how ranking and recommendation systems govern the probability of future encounters. Reinforcement-loop strength explains the degree of inertia generated by recursive feedback among behavior, inference, and exposure. Together, these mechanisms produce what ACIT calls the steered self: an emergent identity configuration shaped through repeated interaction with curated exposure environments. The steered self does not imply technological determinism. It denotes a probabilistic condition in which some identity facets become more cognitively accessible, more internally coherent, more contested, or more difficult to revise because they are repeatedly cued within algorithmically structured encounter environments.

4.1. Scope, Assumptions, and Ontological Position

ACIT is a mid-range theory of identity formation under adaptive personalization. It applies to environments in which exposure is ranked rather than merely chronological or random, in which behavioral traces are used to update predictive models, and in which

personalization meaningfully shapes the symbolic field the consumer encounters. The theory is therefore most relevant to platformized contexts such as feeds, recommender systems, ranked search environments, curated digital marketplaces, and personalized service interactions. It is not intended to explain all forms of identity development, nor does it claim that all personalized environments generate strong identity effects. Its claims are conditional and depend on identifiable infrastructural and interpretive conditions.

Four assumptions define the theory's ontological position. First, identity remains socially constructed, interpretive, and dynamic. ACIT does not replace current identity research; instead, it places identity development within a changed interaction setting. Identity's importance, consistency, and conflicts still arise from interpretation, meaning, and action. However, the availability and frequency of identity-related cues are increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems. Second, algorithmic systems operate through probabilistic reasoning rather than by imposing strict rules. Personalization predicts and reallocates visibility; it does not compel identification. ACIT therefore conceptualizes identity conditioning as a process of probabilistic reinforcement rather than coercion.

Third, exposure variance matters for identity development. Identity trajectories are shaped not only by what consumers choose but also by the diversity and repetition of what they repeatedly encounter. When personalization systems favor exploitation over exploration, they can diminish encounter diversity and amplify the recurrence of inference-consistent cues (Chaney et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016). Repeated exposure to identity-related cues increases the likelihood of their rehearsal, concurrently decreasing exposure to alternative possibilities. Fourth, the impact of algorithmic mediation is constrained by factors such as contestability, transparency, and consumer comprehension. Consumers' responses to personalized content are not uniform; they may accept it, reinterpret its meaning, resist it, or attempt to modify the algorithm's outcomes.

Accordingly, ACIT treats identity consequences as contingent on design features, user interpretations, and prior orientations rather than universal outcomes. ACIT is also explicitly cross-level. Platform-level design features, such as exploration budgets, profile transparency, contestability affordances, and cross-domain integration, shape the conditions under which ranked exposure is generated. Interaction-level processes govern the sequencing and repetition of cues. User-level identity outcomes evolve through repeated encounters within those conditions. This multi-level structure allows ACIT to connect infrastructural design to consumer self-concept without collapsing either level into the other.

4.2. Core Mechanisms

4.2.1. Algorithmic Mirroring

Algorithmic mirroring (ALMI) refers to how consumers interpret personalized outputs as feedback about their identity, preferences, or the system's understanding of them. Mirroring occurs when recommendations, labels, ranked outputs, or inferred interest groups are perceived not just as helpful suggestions but also as signals about the self. Therefore, mirroring is psychological and interpretive, depending on whether consumers see algorithmic outputs as both meaningful and relevant to their identity (Swann, 1983). Algorithmic mirroring refers to an interpretive process, not a system property. It captures how consumers make sense of algorithmic outputs as signals about the self. Measures such as perceived diagnosticity are therefore treated as indicators of this interpretive process, rather than as the construct itself.

A critical distinction in ACIT concerns the difference between identity conditioning and behavioral reinforcement. Repeated exposure to prior-consistent content does not, by itself, imply a change in identity. Such patterns may reflect stable preferences, habit formation, or efficient recommendation processes. Identity conditioning, in contrast, requires evidence

of change in self-concept. This includes shifts in the salience of identity facets, changes in perceived coherence across domains, the emergence of identity-related dissonance, or alterations in perceived agency over personal data. ACIT therefore predicts identity-level outcomes only when recursive exposure affects how individuals interpret, prioritize, and integrate aspects of the self, rather than merely reinforcing observed behavior.

The idea of mirroring is supported by research showing that recommendation systems turn behavioral data into representations of preferences, and then provide outputs that consumers often see as personalized (Ricci et al., 2022; Zhang & Chen, 2020; Wang & Benbasat, 2007). Studies on how consumers interact with artificial intelligence suggest that people often see algorithmic systems as capable and knowledgeable. They sometimes view the results as helpful indicators of their own preferences or traits (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Puntoni et al., 2021). As a result, when these outputs align with how they see themselves, they can serve as a means of confirming their identity. When they misalign, they may be experienced as misrecognition, generating tension, discomfort, or efforts at reinterpretation.

Mirroring is analytically important because it identifies a pathway through which personalization becomes identity-relevant. However, mirroring alone does not determine identity trajectories. A recommendation can reflect an inferred profile without structurally narrowing what the consumer will encounter next. For that reason, ACIT distinguishes mirroring from a second mechanism, algorithmic steering, which governs exposure itself.

4.2.2. Algorithmic Steering

Algorithmic steering (ALSTE) refers to the directional structuring of exposure through ranking, filtering, and recommendation. Steering operates at the level of visibility governance: it changes the probability that consumers will encounter some products, themes, narratives, or communities rather than others. Unlike mirroring, which concerns the interpretation of outputs, steering concerns the organization of future encounters. It is therefore infrastructural rather than purely psychological. Algorithmic steering operates at the level of exposure governance. While related to constructs such as mediation intensity or exposure concentration, it specifically refers to the directional structuring of what is encountered, rather than the volume or frequency of interaction alone.

Steering is significant because repeated visibility influences accessibility, familiarity, and rehearsal. Systems that prioritize exploitative optimization often produce outputs mirroring previous behavior, thereby diminishing encounter diversity over time (Chaney et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016). ACIT considers this contraction identity-relevant because identity formation partly depends on the availability of content for enactment, comparison, and reflection.

Steering does not impose identity directly; rather, it structures the field in which some facets of identity are more likely to be activated and stabilized than others. This mechanism is related to work on digital nudging and hypernudging, but ACIT treats steering as broader than momentary choice architecture (Jesse & Jannach, 2021). Steering is not merely a tactic for influencing individual decisions; it is an ongoing property of ranked environments that can systematically organize repetition, cue availability, and the horizon of encounter. For that reason, its relevance extends from transaction-level outcomes to identity-level consequences.

4.2.3. Reinforcement-Loop Strength

Reinforcement-loop strength (RLS) captures the degree of inertia generated by recursive feedback among behavior, inference, and exposure. It refers to how strongly and how quickly consumer traces update predictive models, and how strongly those updated inferences shape subsequent exposure. RLS is therefore the mechanism that links mirroring

and steering over time. It is the source of trajectory persistence within the theory. RLS is conceptualized as a dynamic system property that links behavior, inference, and exposure. Empirical indicators such as exposure repetition or entropy are treated as observable manifestations of this underlying mechanism, rather than as the mechanism itself.

When RLS is high, behavioral traces rapidly inform algorithmic predictions, which in turn produce increasingly concentrated exposure patterns. The consumer is then more likely to encounter outputs consistent with prior behavior, which, in turn, produce new reinforcing traces. Under such conditions, identity-relevant cues may become increasingly repetitive, and alternative cues may become less available. When RLS is lower, exposure remains more varied, trajectories are easier to redirect, and identity effects are less likely to stabilize.

In empirical terms, RLS can be reflected in observable signatures such as declining exposure entropy, rising state persistence, decreasing transition diversity, and low exploration share. Conceptually, however, its role is straightforward: it captures the strength of user–system coupling. High RLS does not guarantee identity stabilization, but it increases the likelihood that ranked repetition will become consequential for identity development, particularly when consumers also experience algorithmic outputs as meaningful reflections of the self.

4.3. The Steered Self

The interaction of algorithmic mirroring, algorithmic steering, and reinforcement-loop strength produces what ACIT calls the steered self. The steered self is an emergent identity configuration shaped through repeated interaction with ranked exposure systems, such that some identity facets become more salient, coherent, reinforced, contested, or difficult to revise over time. It is not a deterministic identity imposed by technology. Rather, it is a probabilistically consolidated form of self-organization that develops within curated exposure environments. The steered self is conceptualized as an outcome rather than a mediating construct. It represents the identity configuration that results from recursive exposure processes, rather than an intermediate variable within the mechanism.

The value of this concept is that it shifts identity theorizing from a focus on symbolic appropriation alone to a focus on the environments within which appropriation occurs. Consumers still interpret, negotiate, and enact meaning, but they do so under conditions in which what is repeatedly visible is increasingly structured by adaptive systems. In such contexts, the self is "steered" not because consumers lose all agency, but because the distribution of identity-relevant cues and enactment opportunities is no longer relatively stable or externally given. Prior traces and predictive inference recursively shape it.

The steered self can take different forms depending on conditions. In some cases, ranked repetition may amplify the salience of a focal identity and increase coherence within a domain. In others, misaligned outputs may produce identity dissonance or make consumers more aware of limited control over their profile and future exposure. In still other cases, repeated reinforcement within a single domain may contribute to fragmentation across domains if data integration is partial or if identity demands differ across settings. ACIT therefore treats the steered self as a dynamic, non-uniform outcome of recursive exposure rather than as a single stable end state.

Figure 1 summarizes the theory's architecture. Consumer behavior generates traces that feed algorithmic mediation. Within this recursive system, mirroring provides representational feedback, steering governs future exposure, and reinforcement-loop strength captures trajectory inertia. These dynamics jointly condition the steered self and, through it, downstream outcomes such as identity salience, coherence or fragmentation, dissonance, and perceived data agency. Platform-level features and user-level conditions moderate these effects by shaping how ranked exposure is generated and interpreted.

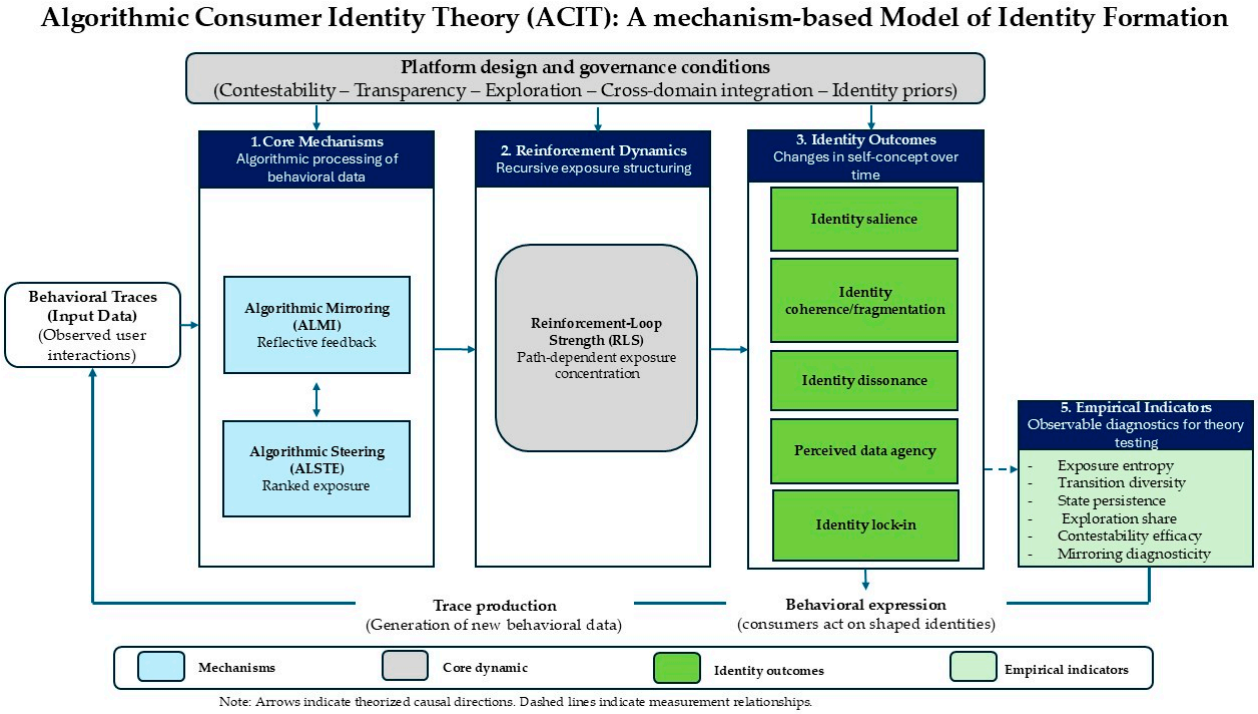


Figure 1. ACIT mechanism-based model. The figure illustrates how behavioral traces are processed through algorithmic mirroring and steering, generating recursive exposure dynamics captured by RLS. These dynamics shape identity outcomes (salience, coherence/fragmentation, dissonance, perceived data agency, and lock-in), which in turn influence behavioral expression and subsequent trace production, forming a feedback loop. Platform design conditions moderate these processes, while empirical indicators provide observable diagnostics for theory testing.

4.4. Conceptual Process Logic

ACIT's process logic can be expressed in five linked stages. First, consumers engage with platformized environments, producing behavioral traces through searching, clicking, purchasing, viewing, following, liking, hiding, or ignoring. Second, these traces are converted into algorithmic inferences that represent the system's evolving estimate of the consumer's preferences, orientations, or likely future responses. Third, these inferences are translated into ranked exposure, altering what the consumer encounters next and the relative probability of different categories of content, products, or cues being presented. Fourth, consumers interpret and respond to those outputs. Some outputs may be experienced as identity-congruent and self-revealing; others may be treated as irrelevant, intrusive, or misrecognizing. Fifth, those responses generate new traces, restarting the cycle.

This recursive structure differentiates ACIT from theories that treat the environment as static or loosely responsive. In platformized markets, the environment of identity work is trace-contingent. Identity-relevant exposure is increasingly endogenous to prior enactment, which means that behavior not only expresses identity but also reorganizes the future conditions under which identity is rehearsed. The central claim of ACIT is that this recursive coupling makes ranked exposure itself an identity-conditioning mechanism.

This logic also clarifies why ACIT is not reducible to a general theory of algorithmic influence. Identity consequences arise not from personalization in the abstract, but from the interaction of three conditions: outputs must be interpretable as self-relevant (mirroring), exposure must become directionally patterned (steering), and recursive updating must be strong enough to generate persistence over time (reinforcement-loop strength). When these conditions do not co-occur, identity effects are likely to be weaker, less stable, or absent.

4.5. Boundary Conditions and Moderating Factors

Although ACIT posits a general mechanism architecture, its outcomes are not universal. Several boundary conditions shape whether and how ranked exposure becomes consequential for identity. The first boundary condition is exploration design. Systems that preserve diversity through exploration budgets, serendipity injections, or exposure balancing are less likely to generate strong trajectory concentration than systems dominated by exploitation. Greater encounter diversity weakens reinforcement and preserves access to alternative cues, thereby reducing the likelihood that a narrow identity repertoire will stabilize.

A second boundary condition is contestability and transparency. When consumers can examine, adjust, change, or significantly influence the conclusions used to personalize their experiences, the potential negative effects of ranked exposure on their identity might be reduced. These affordances can increase interpretive control, reduce misrecognition, and weaken the perception that exposure is inevitable or irreversible. By contrast, low contestability increases the likelihood that misaligned outputs will be experienced as persistent and agency-reducing.

A third boundary condition is cross-domain integration. When data and inferential logic are propagated across adjacent consumption domains, reinforcement effects may extend beyond a single context, increasing the likelihood of coherence across related domains or producing broader forms of identity lock-in. When integration is partial or asymmetrical, however, one identity facet may stabilize while others remain weakly connected or exposed to conflicting cues, increasing fragmentation rather than coherence.

A fourth boundary condition concerns consumer interpretation and prior identity orientations. Consumers vary in the extent to which they perceive algorithmic outputs as diagnostic, rely on ranked systems for discovery, or treat the system as an authority on their preferences. Preexisting orientations can also affect how quickly reinforcement mechanisms operate, providing initial points of reference for understanding. Therefore, identity conditioning depends not only on how things are set up but also on how people interpret things and their existing tendencies.

These boundary conditions underscore a central feature of the theory: ACIT predicts patterned variation, not inevitability. The theory is strongest where ranked exposure is intense, recursive updating is consequential, and algorithmic systems meaningfully reorganize the symbolic encounter environment. It is weaker where exposure remains diverse, interpretable, and contestable.

4.6. Transition to Propositions

The preceding sections establish ACIT as a mechanism-based theory of identity formation under ranked exposure. The theory's central claim is that identity trajectories in platformized markets are conditioned by the interaction of algorithmic mirroring, algorithmic steering, and reinforcement-loop strength, which together shape the steered self. The next section translates this conceptual architecture into a set of propositions concerning identity salience, dissonance, coherence or fragmentation, perceived data agency, and the amplification of preexisting identity orientations. These propositions clarify the conditions under which ranked exposure is expected to stabilize, contest, or narrow consumer identity over time.

5. Propositions and Boundary Conditions

ACIT proposes that identity trajectories in platformized markets are conditioned by the interaction of algorithmic mirroring, algorithmic steering, and reinforcement-loop strength. The purpose of this section is to translate that mechanism architecture into a set of propositions that are conceptually precise, bounded, and empirically testable. The propositions do not assume universal identity transformation. Rather, they specify pat-

terned outcomes that should emerge when ranked exposure becomes sufficiently recursive, concentrated, and identity-relevant. Across the propositions, the central claim remains consistent: identity consequences arise not from personalization in the abstract but from how recursive exposure architectures reorganize the availability, repetition, and interpretive meaning of identity-relevant cues over time.

5.1. Ranked Exposure and Identity Salience

A first implication of ACIT concerns identity salience, defined as the accessibility and centrality of a particular identity facet within the self-concept. Prior identity research has shown that repeated activation increases the likelihood that a given identity becomes cognitively accessible and behaviorally consequential (Reed et al., 2012). ACIT extends this logic by arguing that, in platformized markets, activation frequency is not shaped solely by social or situational cues. It is also shaped by ranked exposure systems that regulate what becomes repeatedly visible and available for rehearsal.

When mediation through ranked systems is frequent, consumers repeatedly encounter cues that are consistent with prior traces and inferred preferences. Algorithmic mirroring increases the likelihood that these cues are interpreted as relevant to the self, while algorithmic steering increases the probability that similar cues will reappear across future encounters. When RLS is high, the interaction between these processes becomes more persistent, increasing the recurrence of some cues and reducing the visibility of alternatives. Under such conditions, the salience of repeatedly cued identity facets should increase because those facets are activated more often and encounter fewer competing cues.

At the same time, this effect is bounded because exposure diversity, exploration budgets, and the availability of alternative non-ranked encounter pathways may preserve countervailing cues and reduce concentration effects. Salience amplification should therefore be strongest when steering is relatively concentrated and when consumers experience surfaced cues as diagnostically meaningful rather than incidental.

The following propositions specify core identity-level effects, while moderating conditions are discussed in the accompanying text to preserve conceptual clarity and empirical testability.

Proposition 1. *Greater exposure to recursively ranked and personalized environments increases the salience of identity facets that are repeatedly cued, when such exposure is interpreted in self-referential terms and influences self-concept rather than merely reinforcing prior preferences or habitual behavior.*

This effect is amplified when algorithmic outputs are perceived as self-diagnostic, when algorithmic steering concentrates future exposure around prior-consistent cues, and when reinforcement-loop strength is high. Conversely, the effect weakens when exploration mechanisms preserve exposure diversity or when consumers do not interpret personalized outputs as identity-relevant.

5.2. The Agency–Dissonance Paradox

A second consideration concerns the circumstances under which personalization generates both relevance and unease. When algorithmic outputs are perceived as significant representations of the self, mirroring can facilitate identity affirmation, provided that recommendations align with consumers' self-perceptions. Conversely, when these outputs are seen as inaccurate, overly simplified, or inappropriate, the same interpretive process can lead to identity dissonance. ACIT suggests that the problem becomes particularly significant when algorithmic steering consistently reproduces or worsens these undesirable outcomes in later interactions. This dynamic gives rise to what ACIT terms the agency–dissonance paradox. Under conditions of high mirroring diagnosticity, stronger

personalization may increase perceived relevance because consumers encounter more tailored outputs. However, the same system may also increase dissonance and reduce perceived data agency when consumers cannot effectively inspect, correct, or redirect their representation. In other words, the system may feel highly attuned and insufficiently contestable at the same time. The paradox is strongest when contestability is weak, steering is persistent, and consumers attribute significant self-relevance to the inferred profile.

The paradox is moderated by identity centrality and interpretive investment. If the focal consumption domain is peripheral to the consumer's self-concept, misaligned outputs are more likely to be dismissed as trivial system errors. By contrast, when the domain is identity-central, or when consumers actively engage in efforts to shape what the system learns about them, misrecognition may be experienced more acutely.

Proposition 2. *When personalized outputs are perceived as self-diagnostic, stronger algorithmic steering increases the likelihood that consumers will interpret them as relevant to the self.*

These effects are amplified when transparency and contestability are low, limiting consumers' ability to question or correct algorithmic representations. The strength of the effect is also greater when the focal identity domain is central to the self and when consumers are more interpretively invested in the system's representation of them.

Under these conditions, increased identity-level consequences may accompany perceived relevance. Specifically, when algorithmic inferences are misaligned with self-perception, stronger steering can increase identity dissonance and reduce perceived data agency, creating an agency–dissonance tension in how consumers interpret system outputs.

5.3. Conditional Coherence and Fragmentation

A third implication of ACIT concerns identity coherence. Traditional accounts explain coherence primarily through narrative integration, social verification, and consistency in self-meaning across contexts. ACIT adds a further mechanism: repeated exposure to a relatively concentrated set of identity-consistent cues can stabilize a focal identity orientation by making some themes, categories, and enactment opportunities more recurrent than others. When steering repeatedly surfaces similar cues, the encounter environment becomes more homogeneous, and some identity facets may feel more internally consistent simply because they are rehearsed more often.

However, ACIT does not unconditionally predict coherence. The same recursive processes that strengthen coherence within a focal domain may weaken coherence across domains. If reinforcement is strong in one area but data integration is incomplete, uneven, or inconsistent, one part of a person's identity might become stable. In contrast, other parts could remain disconnected or be influenced by conflicting information.

Similarly, when platform-shaped signals conflict with salient offline roles or other strongly anchored self-definitions, recursive exposure may produce compartmentalization or fragmentation rather than integration. Thus, ACIT predicts conditional coherence: coherence within a domain may increase even as broader identity organization becomes more complex or fragmented.

Proposition 3. *Algorithmic steering that concentrates exposure around identity-consistent cues increases perceived coherence within a focal domain when repeated exposure is interpreted in self-referential terms, thereby influencing self-concept rather than merely reinforcing stable preferences or behavioral consistency.*

This effect is stronger when reinforcement-loop strength is high, as recursive feedback increases the consistency and persistence of exposure.

Proposition 4. *When cross-domain integration is partial or asymmetrical, or when platform-steered identity cues conflict with salient offline roles or competing identity commitments, recursive personalization is more likely to produce identity fragmentation or compartmentalization than generalized coherence. These outcomes reflect distinct identity-level effects and should not be inferred from behavioral consistency alone.*

5.4. Identity Lock-In and Perceived Data Agency

A fourth implication concerns the possibility that recursive exposure can narrow not only information environments but also perceived identity flexibility. When reinforcement-loop strength is high, behavioral traces rapidly update inferential profiles, and those profiles increasingly govern future visibility. Over time, this produces informational lock-in, a path-dependent concentration of exposure in which some categories and cues become highly recurrent while alternatives become less visible. ACIT argues that under certain conditions, this process extends beyond exposure narrowing to identity lock-in.

Identity lock-in occurs when consumers come to rely on algorithmic outputs as privileged self-diagnostic inputs while simultaneously encountering a reduced repertoire of alternative cues and enactment possibilities. In this condition, the issue is not merely that the system keeps showing similar things; it is that repeated mirroring and steering stabilize a narrow identity narrative and reduce the perceived ease of revising, contesting, or moving beyond it. This effect is especially likely when contestability is weak and when cross-domain integration propagates inferred identity logic across adjacent areas of consumption. Under such conditions, switching platforms may not immediately restore identity flexibility, because the consumer's practices, expectations, and self-understandings may already have adapted to the narrowed repertoire.

Proposition 5. *Higher reinforcement-loop strength produces informational lock-in through path-dependent narrowing of exposure.*

Proposition 6. *Identity lock-in occurs when repeated exposure is interpreted as self-diagnostic and influences self-concept, rather than merely reinforcing stable preferences or habitual behavior.*

These effects are amplified when contestability is weak, limiting consumers' ability to question or correct algorithmic representations. They are further strengthened when cross-domain integration extends inferred identity patterns across adjacent domains, reducing perceived data agency and the perceived reversibility of identity trajectories.

5.5. Orientation Priors and Amplification Dynamics

ACIT also allows for heterogeneity in the speed at which reinforcement dynamics emerge. Consumers do not enter ranked environments as blank slates; they bring preexisting orientations, values, and identity priors that shape early traces and provide inferential anchors for the system. Prior orientations, such as cosmopolitanism, xenocentrism, ethnocentrism, environmentalism, or other domain-relevant self-definitions, may therefore serve as initial conditions in recursive exposure architectures. When early traces are consistent with such priors, algorithmic systems may generate earlier, more confident inferences, thereby accelerating concentration on prior-consistent cues.

This reasoning is particularly pertinent given prior identity-based research that has established how orientations shape marketplace preferences. For instance, studies on consumer centrism have revealed that xenocentrism, an identity-linked orientation, is linked to a preference for foreign products, a perception of domestic alternatives as inferior, and the symbolic significance of consuming foreign goods (Camacho et al., 2020, 2022). Within the framework of ACIT, these orientations might not only directly influence behavior

but also intensify algorithmic reinforcement by providing initial signals that the system interprets as robust and enduring. In that sense, ranked systems may amplify culturally or psychologically salient priors rather than simply detecting them.

This proposition is best understood as an extension of the core model that specifies how reinforcement dynamics vary across consumers. It does not alter ACIT's core architecture; rather, it clarifies why some consumers may move more quickly toward concentrated exposure trajectories than others under similar infrastructural conditions.

Proposition 7. *Stronger preexisting identity orientations accelerate the rate at which reinforcement dynamics concentrate exposure on identity-consistent cues.*

This effect occurs because stronger identity priors increase early inferential confidence, making algorithmic systems more likely to reinforce and stabilize prior-consistent exposure patterns.

The effect is amplified when ranked mediation is intense, and exploration is limited, as these conditions accelerate the concentration of exposure. It is further strengthened when cross-domain integration propagates inferred identity orientations into adjacent consumption contexts.

5.6. Boundary Conditions Across Propositions

Taken together, these propositions specify a bounded theory rather than a universal one. ACIT predicts stronger identity-conditioning effects when ranked mediation is frequent, outputs are interpreted as self-relevant, steering is concentrated, and reinforcement-loop strength is high. The predicted effects weaken when exploration mechanisms preserve diversity, when algorithmic representations are easily contestable, when consumers rely less on algorithmic outputs for self-relevant interpretation, or when alternative identity anchors remain more salient than ranked cues. In this respect, the propositions should be read as conditional claims about recurrent patterns under identifiable infrastructural and interpretive circumstances.

The propositions also clarify the theory's distinctiveness. Mirroring alone should not produce strong longitudinal identity stabilization if future exposure remains diverse and unconcentrated. Steering alone should not reliably generate dissonance or agency effects unless consumers treat the outputs as self-representational. Reinforcement-loop strength is important because it determines whether these processes remain episodic or become persistent. ACIT therefore predicts identity conditioning most strongly where mirroring, steering, and recursive inertia co-occur over time.

ACIT is developed as a mid-range theory and therefore applies under specific conditions rather than universally across all consumption contexts. Clarifying these boundaries is important for both theoretical precision and empirical testing.

First, the domain of consumption: The framework is most applicable to identity-relevant, symbolic, or socially meaningful consumption domains, where exposure to products, content, or categories is likely to be interpreted in self-referential terms. In contrast, in routine, utilitarian, or low-involvement consumption contexts, repeated exposure may primarily reflect efficiency or habit formation, with limited implications for identity.

Second, temporal horizon: ACIT primarily concerns identity trajectories that unfold over time through repeated exposure and recursive feedback. The theory does not predict strong identity effects at the level of single interactions or isolated sessions. Instead, identity conditioning is expected to emerge through sustained patterns of exposure over longer time horizons, such as weeks or months.

Third, platform context: The strength of identity-conditioning effects is likely to vary across platforms. Public or socially visible contexts, such as social media platforms

where content is shared, displayed, and evaluated by others, may amplify identity-relevant interpretation and reinforcement. In contrast, private or purely functional recommendation environments (e.g., utility-based search or transactional systems) may attenuate such effects, as exposure is less likely to be interpreted in identity-relevant terms.

Together, these scope conditions clarify that ACIT does not assume uniform effects across contexts but instead predicts systematic variation depending on the domain's identity relevance, the temporal structure of exposure, and the visibility and social embeddedness of the platform environment. These boundary conditions also provide a basis for empirical testing by specifying where identity conditioning effects should be strongest, weakest, or absent.

5.7. Transition to Formal Properties and Falsifiability

The propositions above convert ACIT from a conceptual architecture into a set of empirically adjudicable claims. The next section, therefore, turns to the theory's formal properties, scope conditions, and falsifiability criteria. In particular, it clarifies what kinds of empirical signatures would support or weaken ACIT, how its mechanisms can be distinguished from those of adjacent frameworks, and what forms of evidence are needed to establish that ranked exposure functions as an identity-conditioning mechanism rather than merely a decision aid or a background feature of digital markets.

6. Formal Properties and Falsifiability

ACIT is developed as a mechanism-based, mid-range theory with explicit scope conditions, observable implications, and empirically distinguishable predictions. Its purpose is not simply to redescribe personalization or platformization in conceptual terms, but to explain how recursive exposure architectures condition identity trajectories under identifiable infrastructural and interpretive circumstances. For that reason, the theory must be evaluated not only by its conceptual coherence but also by the degree to which its claims can be supported, challenged, or falsified through empirical observation. This section clarifies ACIT's formal properties, its theoretical boundaries, the empirical signatures implied by its mechanism architecture, and its distinction from adjacent frameworks.

This distinction is central to the empirical evaluation of the theory. Observed consistency in behavior or preference is insufficient to establish identity conditioning. If repeated exposure leads to stable consumption patterns without corresponding changes in identity salience, coherence, dissonance, or perceived data agency, the effects are more appropriately attributed to preference reinforcement or habit formation. ACIT is therefore supported only when recursive exposure produces measurable changes in self-concept that go beyond what can be explained by self-selection or efficient personalization.

6.1. Ontological Commitments and Theoretical Boundaries

ACIT is grounded in a probabilistic and non-deterministic ontology. The theory does not assume that algorithmic systems dictate identity, nor does it portray consumers as passive recipients of infrastructural influence. Instead, it posits that identity trajectories emerge through repeated interaction among behavioral traces, predictive inference, and ranked exposure. Identity conditioning is therefore conditional rather than automatic. It becomes more likely when recursive exposure is strong, when algorithmic outputs are interpreted as self-relevant, and when alternative cues are less available or less salient.

This ontological stance establishes several theoretical boundaries. ACIT is specifically relevant to adaptive personalization environments. These environments are characterized by ranked exposure, dynamic updates, and meaningful responses to behavioral data (Davenport et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2021; Ricci et al., 2022). The theory is not intended to explain identity formation in environments where exposure is mostly random, unchanging,

or only weakly influenced. Second, ACIT does not claim that all personalization produces identity effects. Where exploration remains high, where personalization is weak, or where consumers do not treat algorithmic outputs as identity-relevant, the predicted effects should be attenuated or absent.

Third, ACIT differs from accounts that locate identity salience exclusively in internal motivation or social appraisal. The theory does not reject those explanations, but argues that in platformized markets, they are increasingly shaped by an adaptive encounter environment that reorders what consumers repeatedly see. In that sense, ACIT adds an infrastructural layer to existing identity traditions. Fourth, the theory does not collapse into a generalized account of persuasion, nudging, or digital influence. Its central concern is not simply whether algorithms affect consumer choice, but whether recursive ranked exposure changes the distribution, repetition, and interpretive weight of identity-relevant cues over time.

Taken together, these boundaries clarify the theory's level of ambition. ACIT is strongest when applied to settings in which ranked exposure is sustained, recursive, and consequential for self-relevant marketplace experience. It is weaker where exposure is diverse, contestable, or only marginally structured by predictive systems. These limits are not weaknesses; they are part of what makes the theory empirically meaningful.

6.2. Falsifiability and Empirical Signatures

For ACIT to function as a theory rather than a descriptive framework, its claims must be empirically adjudicable. The theory's core proposition is that identity outcomes in platformized markets are conditioned by the interaction of algorithmic mirroring, algorithmic steering, and reinforcement-loop strength. That claim implies a set of observable patterns at both the exposure and identity levels. If those patterns fail to appear under the conditions specified by the theory, ACIT is weakened. If they do appear as predicted, the theory gains support.

A central challenge in testing ACIT is algorithmic confounding. In personalized environments, observed exposure is not independent of prior consumer behavior, and observed behavior is not independent of prior exposure (Chaney et al., 2018). This means that researchers cannot infer identity-conditioning effects simply by observing consumers repeatedly choosing similar items. Such choices may reflect prior preferences, platform design, or both. ACIT, therefore, requires designs capable of tracing the interaction between exposure dynamics and identity outcomes over time, rather than attributing causal force to observed choice alone.

To make empirical adjudication feasible, ACIT relies on a minimal set of observable diagnostics that capture the recursive structure of ranked environments and can be linked to repeated measures of identity-related outcomes. The diagnostic metrics encompass several key elements: exposure entropy, which gauges the variety and unpredictability of categories, products, or themes encountered over time; transition diversity, which assesses the frequency of exposure shifts across different categories or states in successive encounters; exploration share, which measures the proportion of encounters that lie outside the dominant inferred cluster; contestability efficacy, which evaluates whether user interventions significantly modify subsequent exposure composition; and mirroring diagnosticity, which indicates the degree to which consumers perceive algorithmic outputs as reflecting something significant about themselves. While these indicators do not, in isolation, establish identity conditioning, they do furnish the essential empirical signatures necessary to assess the presence of recursive ranked exposure as ACIT posits (Carrière et al., 2025; Chaney et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021; Henin & Le Métayer, 2022; Ohme & Araujo, 2022; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016).

The theory's propositions generate corresponding falsifiable implications. If ranked exposure increases identity salience, then repeated concentration around a focal cue cluster should be associated with subsequent increases in the accessibility or centrality of the corresponding identity facet. If the agency–dissonance paradox holds, then consumers who perceive outputs as highly diagnostic but encounter low contestability should report both greater relevance and lower perceived data agency when outputs are misaligned. If conditional coherence is part of the theory's mechanism structure, then increasing concentration in one domain should correspond to greater within-domain coherence, but not necessarily to generalized cross-domain integration. If identity lock-in is real, stronger loop signatures should predict lower perceived reversibility and reduced perceived control over one's represented self. If orientation priors accelerate reinforcement, stronger prior orientations should be associated with faster concentration around prior-consistent exposure patterns under comparable mediation conditions.

What would weaken the theory? ACIT would be undermined if high recursive-exposure concentration consistently failed to correspond to changes in identity salience, coherence, dissonance, or perceived agency when outputs are interpreted as self-relevant. It would also be weakened if mirroring and steering failed to interact as specified, for example, if representational feedback alone generated strong longitudinal stabilization in the absence of concentrated exposure, or if concentrated exposure reliably produced identity dissonance even when consumers did not interpret outputs as self-representational. In short, ACIT stands or falls on the interactional logic of its mechanisms, not on the general claim that algorithms matter.

6.3. Minimum Viable Empirical Tests

Although ACIT is a conceptual theory, it is intended to be empirically testable without requiring privileged access to proprietary platform logs. A range of feasible research strategies can be used to examine its predictions, provided they combine measures of exposure dynamics with repeated indicators of identity states.

The first viable approach is the diary-plus-trace design. In this design, participants repeatedly report on identity salience, coherence, dissonance, or perceived data agency over several weeks. At the same time, exposure data are collected through browser tracking, screen recordings, app logs, or structured data donation methods (Ohme et al., 2024; Ohme & Araujo, 2022). This design is especially useful for testing whether shifts in exposure concentration precede or accompany shifts in identity-related outcomes.

A second approach is the sandbox recommender experiment, in which researchers manipulate exploration–exploitation balances, explanation features, or contestability affordances within a controlled recommendation environment. This design is particularly valuable for identifying whether concentrated exposure and self-diagnostic interpretation jointly produce the effects predicted by ACIT. Because the researcher controls system parameters, the mechanism logic can be isolated more directly than in observational settings. A third approach is the synthetic-account or audit design, in which standardized behavioral profiles are used to estimate directional exposure effects across different platforms or interface conditions. Although such designs do not directly measure identity states, they are useful for establishing whether steering and reinforcement signatures vary across systems in ways consistent with ACIT's assumptions. These designs can also reveal whether contestability actions meaningfully alter exposure or whether cross-domain inferences propagate into adjacent environments.

A fourth approach is the longitudinal panel design, in which identity outcomes and exposure diagnostics are tracked across a longer period and modeled using cross-lagged, multilevel, or state-transition methods. Such designs are especially useful for examining

persistence, acceleration, or fragmentation effects predicted by the theory. Because ACIT predicts recursive and potentially nonlinear effects, repeated observation over time is particularly important. Immediate post-exposure measures alone are unlikely to capture the stabilizing dynamics central to the theory. The theory is therefore not method-bound. What matters is that empirical designs can capture both the structure of ranked exposure and the evolution of identity-related outcomes, while adequately addressing the recursive relationship between them.

6.4. Distinction from Adjacent Frameworks

A major strength of ACIT lies in its ability to generate predictions that are distinguishable from those of adjacent literatures. The theory is related to existing work on consumer–AI interaction, personalization and welfare, and platformization, but it is not reducible to any of them. On the one hand, ACIT differs from consumer–AI interaction frameworks that focus on trust, anthropomorphism, competence attribution, or experiential responses to AI agents (Davidson & Weeks, 2025; Puntoni et al., 2021). Those frameworks help explain how consumers react to intelligent systems, but they do not specify how recursive exposure over time conditions the salience, coherence, or contestation of identity. ACIT uses consumer interpretation as one mechanism component, mirroring, but places it within a broader exposure dynamic. On the other hand, ACIT differs from personalization-as-welfare and choice-architecture frameworks that focus on manipulation, autonomy, or digital vulnerability (Helberger et al., 2022). Those frameworks are centrally concerned with behavioral influence, fairness, and consumer protection. ACIT shares some of those concerns, especially regarding agency, but shifts the analytical focus from discrete choices to the cumulative shaping of identity trajectories. Its key question is not only whether consumers are nudged, but whether recursive ranked exposure reorganizes the self-relevant environment through which identity develops.

Moreover, ACIT differs from platformization theory, which explains how infrastructures govern visibility, access, and value flows at macro and meso levels (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Poell et al., 2019). ACIT draws on that literature's insights about visibility governance, but contributes a micro-level account of how such governance becomes consequential for consumer self-concept. In that sense, the theory acts as a bridge between platform-level infrastructural power and user-level identity outcomes.

These distinctions matter because they clarify what would count as support for ACIT specifically. Evidence that consumers trust algorithms, that personalization changes click behavior, or that platforms shape market visibility is not by itself evidence for ACIT. Support for ACIT requires evidence that recursive ranked exposure, interpreted as self-relevant and reinforced over time, conditions identity outcomes in the patterned ways the theory predicts.

6.5. Research Design Implications

Because ACIT treats identity conditioning as a dynamic outcome of recursive exposure, it encourages research designs that move beyond single-shot measures of attitude or choice. Several methodological implications follow.

First, researchers should measure exposure and identity jointly, rather than inferring one from the other. Behavioral data alone cannot establish identity conditioning, and self-reports alone cannot reveal whether recursive exposure occurred. Second, researchers should prioritize repeated measurement because the theory predicts accumulation, persistence, and feedback rather than isolated immediate effects. Third, designs should attempt to capture or manipulate the balance between exploration and exploitation, since this balance is central to the concentration dynamics assumed by the theory. Fourth, whenever possible,

studies should incorporate indicators of contestability and interpretive meaning, because ACIT predicts that identity consequences depend not just on exposure concentration but also on whether outputs are experienced as meaningful reflections of the self and whether consumers can redirect them.

More generally, ACIT invites methods that can model temporal stabilization, fragmentation, and path dependence. Depending on the design, such methods could include cross-lagged models, hidden Markov approaches, multilevel structural equation modeling, transition analyses, or hybrid qualitative–quantitative designs that combine repeated narratives with trace data. The theory does not prescribe one method. It requires only that the recursive interplay between exposure and identity be observable enough to distinguish persistent conditioning from mere momentary influence.

6.6. Normative and Design Implications as Theoretical Extensions

Although ACIT is primarily explanatory, its formal properties imply a set of broader design-relevant considerations. If identity trajectories are shaped not only by symbolic meaning but also by the structure of recursive exposure, then platform design choices such as exploration budgets, profile transparency, contestability mechanisms, and cross-domain integration become identity-relevant variables rather than merely technical parameters. Exposure diversity can thus be theorized not only as a welfare or fairness issue but also as a condition that supports identity flexibility. Contestability becomes relevant not only for accountability, but for preserving the consumer's capacity to revise or resist algorithmically stabilized self-representations.

These implications should not be mistaken for the theory's primary contribution. ACIT is not a normative framework disguised as a conceptual one. Its explanatory value lies in specifying when ranked exposure becomes consequential for the self. But precisely because the theory identifies mechanism-based pathways, it also clarifies which infrastructural arrangements are most likely to preserve or constrain identity flexibility in platformized markets. In this respect, the formal properties of the theory naturally extend into questions of governance and identity-safe personalization design.

6.7. Empirical Operationalization and Testability

This subsection specifies how the core constructs of ACIT can be operationalized for empirical testing. While the preceding sections outline the theoretical logic and empirical signatures of the framework, the present section focuses on translating these mechanisms into measurable variables observable across different research designs.

The framework distinguishes identity conditioning from behavioral repetition. While repeated exposure may reflect stable preferences or efficient recommendations, identity-level effects require evidence of change in self-concept. Such changes may be captured through measures of identity salience, perceived coherence across identity facets, experienced dissonance, or perceived data agency. Behavioral consistency alone is therefore insufficient to establish identity conditioning.

The theory is subject to disconfirmation. For example, if high reinforcement-loop strength does not correspond with measurable changes in identity salience or coherence over time, the proposed mechanism would be weakened. Similarly, if exposure concentration fails to produce identity-level effects after accounting for alternative explanations, such as self-selection, habit formation, or peer influence, the explanatory scope of ACIT would be limited. These conditions define clear empirical boundaries for evaluating the theory.

These specifications establish ACIT as a mechanism-based framework that generates empirically observable patterns and is open to systematic validation through longitudinal, experimental, and audit-based research designs.

6.8. Disconfirming Evidence and Empirical Distinction

A critical requirement for the empirical evaluation of ACIT is the specification of disconfirming evidence. The theory would not be supported if key predicted relationships fail to emerge under conditions where they should be most pronounced. For example, high reinforcement-loop strength should not be interpreted as evidence for ACIT if it produces stable behavioral patterns without corresponding changes in identity salience, coherence, dissonance, or perceived data agency. In such cases, observed outcomes would be more consistent with preference stability, habit formation, or efficient recommendation systems rather than identity conditioning.

Similarly, concentration in exposure is insufficient to infer identity conditioning unless it is accompanied by measurable changes in self-concept. If consumers continue to exhibit stable preferences without reporting changes in identity salience or self-perception, the effects are more appropriately attributed to self-selection or preference reinforcement. ACIT therefore requires evidence that exposure patterns influence how individuals interpret, prioritize, and integrate aspects of the self, rather than merely shaping observable behavior.

More directly, ACIT would be challenged if identity-level outcomes fail to vary with the exposure structure. For instance, if individuals exposed to highly concentrated and recursively reinforced environments do not differ in identity salience, coherence, or perceived data agency from those exposed to more diverse environments, the theory's central mechanism would not be supported. Likewise, if similar identity outcomes emerge in the absence of algorithmic mediation, such as through purely social or peer-driven processes, the explanatory distinctiveness of ACIT would be weakened.

Empirically, distinguishing ACIT from alternative explanations requires designs that isolate recursive exposure effects. Longitudinal studies can assess whether identity trajectories shift as exposure patterns evolve. Experimental designs can manipulate reinforcement-loop strength or exposure concentration to test causal effects. Audit-based approaches can compare algorithmically curated environments with non-algorithmic baselines. Together, these approaches enable researchers to determine whether observed identity outcomes are uniquely attributable to recursive exposure governance rather than to preexisting preferences or social influence.

7. Theoretical Implications

Algorithmic Consumer Identity Theory advances marketing theory by reframing identity formation as a process that unfolds within adaptive exposure infrastructures. Rather than treating personalization as a peripheral aid to decision making, ACIT positions recursive ranking systems as part of the causal architecture through which identity becomes salient, coherent, contested, or constrained over time. This shift has implications for consumer identity theory, platformization scholarship, AI-in-marketing research, and contemporary debates on autonomy and governance. More broadly, it suggests that any adequate account of consumer identity in contemporary markets must take seriously the fact that exposure is no longer merely contextual; it is increasingly endogenous to behavioral traces and predictive inference.

7.1. Reframing Consumer Identity Theory Under Ranked Exposure

The first and most direct contribution of ACIT is to consumer identity theory. Traditional identity perspectives understand that consumers use marketplace resources to construct, express, verify, and negotiate the self through symbolic appropriation, self-categorization, and identity-based motivation (Belk, 1988, 2013; Reed et al., 2012). These accounts remain indispensable, but they have generally treated the environment of identity work as relatively stable, even though it is socially structured. ACIT develops this tradi-

tion by arguing that, in platformized markets, the environment of identity work is itself increasingly adaptive. Identity-relevant cues are not purely present in the marketplace; they are surfaced, sequenced, and repeated through ranked systems that gain knowledge from consumer traces and reorganize future visibility.

This shift is important because it transforms how identity salience should be theorized. Within extant frameworks, salience is often linked to internal motivation, social context, or cue accessibility. ACIT preserves those insights but adds that cue accessibility is increasingly shaped by algorithmic exposure governance. What becomes repeatedly visible is no longer just a matter of social structure, situational activation, or consumer search; it is also the outcome of recursive personalization. This means that some identity facets may become more salient not only because consumers find them meaningful, but also because ranked systems repeatedly surface aligned cues and reduce encounter with alternatives. In this respect, ACIT introduces infrastructural repetition as a mechanism for amplifying identity salience.

ACIT also extends theories of identity coherence. Conventional accounts explain coherence through narrative integration, social verification, or internal consistency across roles and meanings. ACIT adds that coherence may also be partially stabilized through concentrated exposure. When some themes, categories, and enactment opportunities are repeatedly foregrounded, the consumer may experience greater within-domain coherence because certain identity-relevant cues are persistently rehearsed. At the same time, ACIT avoids treating this outcome as uniform or inherently positive. Because ranked exposure may be unevenly distributed across domains, the same systems that stabilize one identity facet may also contribute to fragmentation or compartmentalization in others. The theory, therefore, reframes coherence as not only a narrative or social achievement, but also a possible consequence of the patterned distribution of identity-relevant exposure.

Most importantly, ACIT does not replace expressive accounts of identity; it recontextualizes them. Consumers still interpret, negotiate, and enact meaning. The distinctive claim is that they now do so in markets where exposure itself has become dynamic, trace-responsive, and recursively consequential. Identity is still socially mediated, but it is increasingly mediated through infrastructures that shape what becomes visible, available, and repeatedly rehearsed. In this way, ACIT expands the analytical vocabulary of consumer identity research by showing that contemporary identity work is conditioned not only by symbolic resources but by the ranked architectures through which those resources are encountered.

7.2. Extending Platformization Scholarship Through Identity Mechanisms

ACIT's second contribution to platformization research is to broaden the scope of existing academic inquiry. Previous studies have shown how digital platforms influence visibility, participation, and value generation through programmable infrastructures (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Nevertheless, this research has primarily focused on macro- and meso-level dynamics, especially concerning market organization, governance frameworks, and cultural production.

The theory shows that visibility governance affects more than what is seen in a narrow informational sense; it also shapes the symbolic repertoire available for identity work. By distinguishing between algorithmic mirroring and algorithmic steering, ACIT clarifies that platform power does not operate only through classification or ranking as abstract governance functions. It also operates through recursive processes that make some cues more recurrent, more self-relevant, and more difficult to escape than others. This distinction helps translate infrastructural governance into identity-level consequences without reducing consumer identity to mere platform effects.

ACIT also contributes by formalizing reinforcement-loop strength as the source of trajectory inertia. This is theoretically valuable because it connects the structural insights of

platformization research with the temporal dynamics of consumer experience. Platform infrastructures do not simply allocate visibility once; they continually update and recirculate it in response to user behavior. By specifying how such recursive updating can narrow or stabilize identity-relevant exposure over time, ACIT provides platformization scholarship with a more precise account of how infrastructural arrangements enter the domain of self-concept formation. The result is a bridge between macro-level governance of visibility and micro-level identity outcomes.

7.3. Advancing AI-in-Marketing Research Beyond Performance Outcomes

The third contribution concerns AI-in-marketing research. Existing research on artificial intelligence in marketing has primarily examined automation, service improvement, efficiency, trust, the effectiveness of personalization, and the strategic value of AI (Davenport et al., 2020; Grewal et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2021). While these are important areas of study, they are usually evaluated based on results from individual transactions or the overall system, such as relevance, breadth of use, user satisfaction, or conversion rates. ACIT broadens this agenda by arguing that algorithmic systems should also be evaluated for how they shape identity trajectories.

This reorientation is significant because it introduces identity formation as a legitimate dependent variable in AI-in-marketing research. Within the ACIT framework, the extent of personalization affects not only immediate results but also the conditions that mold how consumers repeatedly encounter, interpret, and assimilate cues relevant to their self-concepts. This means that the consequences of AI systems cannot be assessed solely through behavioral efficiency or perceived convenience. A system that boosts engagement by limiting exposure could potentially diminish identity flexibility or foster reliance on inferred profiles. On the contrary, systems that prioritize exploration or contestability might facilitate both relevance and the evolution of adaptive identities.

Therefore, ACIT advocates for a more comprehensive evaluation of AI in marketing. Instead of solely assessing whether personalization improves performance, the theory encourages researchers to investigate the specific types of identities that different personalization methods are likely to strengthen, weaken, or limit. In doing so, it expands the conversation beyond the economics of efficiency and the psychology of trust toward the longer-term consequences of ranked systems for consumer self-organization.

7.4. Reframing Autonomy and Agency in Datafied Markets

A fourth implication of ACIT is its potential to reshape discussions concerning autonomy, agency, and governance within data-driven markets. Previous analyses of algorithmic impact have frequently centered on concepts such as nudging, persuasion, manipulation, and consumer susceptibility (Helberger et al., 2022). While ACIT does not dismiss these concerns, it posits that they are insufficient when limited to isolated decisions.

In platformized markets, autonomy concerns also unfold at the level of identity trajectory. When recursive exposure becomes concentrated, self-relevant, and weakly contestable, consumers may experience not only constrained choice environments but also diminished control over how they are represented, interpreted, and repeatedly cued (Sahakyan et al., 2025).

This is where the concept of perceived data agency becomes especially important. ACIT suggests that agency in digital markets encompasses not only the capacity to choose among presented options but also the perceived ability to understand, contest, redirect, or revise the inferential profiles that organize one's future exposure. Under strong reinforcement loops, weak contestability, and broad cross-domain integration, consumers may experience their algorithmically mediated identity trajectory as increasingly difficult to

alter. This does not mean that autonomy disappears. It means that autonomy must be reconsidered as partly dependent on infrastructural conditions that shape the reversibility and flexibility of exposure-based identity development.

By making this move, ACIT contributes to governance debates in a distinctive way. It suggests that design variables such as exploration budgets, profile transparency, contestability mechanisms, and portability are not only fairness or accountability features but also identity-relevant safeguards. Exposure diversity can be understood as a condition that preserves access to alternative identity cues, while contestability can be understood as a condition that protects the capacity to challenge or redirect self-relevant algorithmic representations. In this way, ACIT offers a mechanism-based foundation for thinking about identity-safe personalization without reducing the theory to a normative framework.

7.5. Integrative Contribution

These implications position ACIT as a unifying theoretical contribution that bridges previously separate areas of study. The theory integrates consumer identity research, platformization studies, and the literature on AI in marketing, creating a cohesive understanding of how ranked exposure affects the formation and development of the self. Its distinctiveness lies in reframing ranked exposure as an identity-conditioning mechanism rather than a neutral backdrop to choice, distinguishing algorithmic mirroring from algorithmic steering to separate representational feedback from directional exposure governance, and conceptualizing reinforcement-loop strength as the generative mechanism through which recursive interactions among behavior, inference, and exposure produce trajectory inertia.

These moves matter because they clarify how identity in contemporary markets is shaped by more than meaning, motivation, or symbolic possession alone. Identity is increasingly enacted within environments that dynamically reorder what is available for interpretation and rehearsal. Recognizing this fact allows marketing theory to move beyond asking only what consumers choose, prefer, or express, and toward asking how adaptive exposure systems condition the ongoing formation and stabilization of consumer self-concept. ACIT therefore expands not only the content of identity theory, but also the ontological assumptions underlying how marketing scholars think about markets, mediation, and the self.

7.6. Theoretical Distinctiveness and Anticipated Objections

The final implication of ACIT is methodological and conceptual: it clarifies why a new theory is needed rather than a mere extension of existing ones. One possible objection is that ACIT merely transfers identity-based motivation to digital settings. However, identity-based motivation explains how salient identities guide behavior; it does not explain how adaptive systems reshape which identity facets become repeatedly salient in the first place. ACIT complements motivational accounts by identifying ranked exposure as a mechanism that redistributes salience across identity facets over time.

Another possible objection is that ACIT is reducible to existing work on personalization, trust, or AI performance. However, that literature has primarily examined relevance, adoption, and efficiency rather than the recursive conditioning of identity trajectories. ACIT shifts the level of analysis from immediate performance outcomes to longitudinal identity consequences, thereby identifying a different explanatory target. A third possible objection is that platformization theory already explains the relevant dynamics. However, while platformization research explains infrastructural governance, it does not specify the micro-level mechanism through which visibility governance enters self-concept formation or derive falsifiable propositions about identity salience, coherence, dissonance, and perceived agency.

By anticipating these objections, ACIT sharpens its own theoretical necessity. The theory is not needed because algorithms are new, nor because identity is suddenly important. It is needed because contemporary markets now organize exposure in ways that existing identity frameworks do not fully capture. Ranked environments are not simply new sites of expression; they are adaptive environments that participate in the ongoing structuring of self-relevant cues. ACIT provides a conceptual language and a mechanism architecture for the systematic analysis of development.

7.7. Managerial and Design Implications

The mechanisms specified by ACIT have direct implications for the design and governance of personalization systems. If recursive exposure conditions identity trajectories, personalization cannot be treated solely as a tool for improving relevance or engagement. It must also be understood as a process that shapes how consumers interpret and stabilize aspects of the self over time.

The first implication concerns algorithmic misrecognition. In managerial contexts, misrecognition arises when system outputs consistently reflect inferred profiles that do not align with users' self-perceptions. For example, a user may be repeatedly exposed to content associated with a narrow or outdated behavioral trace, such as being classified into a specific lifestyle, political orientation, or consumption segment, based on limited or historical data. When such misalignment is reinforced through ranked exposure, it may generate dissonance, reduce engagement, or undermine trust. Identifying and correcting such patterns requires monitoring discrepancies between inferred profiles and user feedback, and implementing mechanisms that allow users to signal misclassification or adjust their profiles.

A second implication concerns contestability and user control. ACIT suggests that identity-related risks are amplified when consumers cannot inspect or modify their representation by the system. Platforms can mitigate these effects by implementing features such as "Why am I seeing this?" explanations, editable preference dashboards, and mechanisms to reset, suppress, or recalibrate inferred categories. More advanced implementations may include identity dashboards that display inferred interests or segments and allow users to confirm or reject them. These interventions increase perceived data agency and help interrupt reinforcement loops that would otherwise persist unchecked.

A third implication concerns the balance between exploitation and exploration. Systems optimized for short-term engagement often favor highly concentrated exposure patterns. While this improves immediate relevance, it may reduce exposure diversity and limit identity flexibility over time. Platforms can address this by incorporating exploration budgets into recommendation systems, allocating a defined proportion of exposure to novel, adjacent, or low-probability content. For example, hybrid recommendation models can combine high-confidence recommendations with controlled diversity injections, ensuring that consumers are not confined to narrow, identity-consistent pathways while maintaining engagement.

More broadly, ACIT points to the need for identity-aware personalization design. This involves evaluating systems not only by performance metrics such as click-through rates and conversion rates, but also by their effects on identity salience, coherence, and perceived agency. In practice, this may include tracking indicators such as exposure diversity, persistence of inferred categories, and user-initiated corrections. From this perspective, transparency, contestability, and exposure diversity become core design parameters rather than secondary interface features.

At the governance level, these considerations suggest that personalization systems should be assessed not only for efficiency and fairness, but also for their implications for identity sustainability. Regulatory and organizational frameworks can support this by

requiring auditability of recommendation systems, transparency in profiling practices, and user control over data representations. For example, periodic algorithmic audits, user-facing transparency reports, and internal monitoring of reinforcement dynamics can help ensure that adaptive exposure systems support, rather than constrain, the development of consumer identity in platformized markets.

8. Conclusions

This article has advanced Algorithmic Consumer Identity Theory (ACIT) as a mechanism-based account of identity formation in platformized markets. Its central claim is that contemporary consumer identity is shaped not only by symbolic appropriation, social interpretation, and marketplace enactment, but also by recursive, ranked exposure. In digital environments governed by personalization systems, what consumers encounter is no longer a relatively stable backdrop to choice. It is continuously reorganized through behavioral traces, predictive inference, and algorithmic sequencing. Under these conditions, exposure becomes part of the causal architecture of identity formation rather than a mere context in which identity is expressed.

ACIT addresses this transformation by specifying three interrelated mechanisms: algorithmic mirroring, through which consumers interpret personalized outputs as self-relevant or self-diagnostic signals; algorithmic steering, through which ranking and recommendation systems shape the distribution of future encounters; and reinforcement-loop strength, which captures the degree of inertia generated by recursive feedback among behavior, inference, and exposure. Together, these mechanisms produce what this article terms the steered self: an emergent identity configuration shaped through repeated interaction with curated exposure environments. This formulation does not imply technological determinism. Rather, it proposes that identity trajectories become increasingly conditioned by infrastructures that govern repetition, cue accessibility, and interpretive relevance over time.

The theoretical contribution of ACIT lies in reconceptualizing ranked exposure as an identity-conditioning mechanism. Consumer identity theory has long explained how consumers use market resources to construct and negotiate the self, but it has not fully accounted for the fact that those resources are now increasingly surfaced through adaptive systems that learn from prior behavior. Platformization research has explained how infrastructures govern visibility and participation, but has offered less clarity about how such governance enters the micro-level formation of self-concept. AI-in-marketing research has examined trust, relevance, and efficiency, but has rarely treated identity development as a core outcome of algorithmic systems. ACIT brings these conversations together by providing a bounded, falsifiable framework for understanding how recursive exposure architectures shape identity salience, coherence, dissonance, and perceived data agency in contemporary markets.

A further contribution of the theory is that it clarifies the conditions under which identity consequences should be expected. ACIT predicts stronger effects when ranked mediation is frequent, when consumers interpret personalized outputs as meaningful reflections of the self, when steering concentrates exposure around prior-consistent cues, and when recursive feedback generates persistent trajectories. It also specifies why those effects are not universal. Exploration mechanisms, transparency features, contestability affordances, cross-domain variation, and prior identity orientations all shape whether recursive exposure stabilizes, narrows, fragments, or contests the self. In this way, the theory explains patterned variation rather than inevitability.

The broader implication is that marketing theory can no longer treat infrastructural mediation as peripheral to identity formation. In platformized markets, systems of ranking and personalization do more than optimize attention or support choice. They organize

what becomes repeatedly visible, cognitively available, and behaviorally reinforced. They therefore shape the conditions under which consumers rehearse identities, verify self-meanings, encounter alternatives, and experience the limits of agency. Recognizing this shift requires moving beyond analyses of isolated transactions or immediate persuasion and toward a more dynamic account of how marketplace infrastructures condition who consumers can become over time.

ACIT also opens a research agenda. It invites longitudinal and experimental work on how reinforcement dynamics evolve, comparative work across platforms with different exploration and contestability designs, and empirical investigation into whether exposure diversity functions as a safeguard for identity flexibility. More broadly, it suggests that questions of governance, transparency, and personalization design must be understood not only in terms of fairness or efficiency, but also in terms of their implications for the sustainability and revisability of consumer identity under datafied market conditions.

In sum, the rise of recursive personalization architectures marks a structural change in how markets participate in identity formation. The question is no longer only how consumers use markets to express who they are, but also how markets, through adaptive systems of ranking, inference, and exposure, enter into the process through which identities become salient, stabilized, contested, or constrained. ACIT offers a conceptual vocabulary and a mechanism-based framework for analyzing that transformation. If marketing theory is to explain consumer life in platformized markets, it must account for how adaptive exposure infrastructures shape the ongoing formation of the self.

These developments align with recent research highlighting the expanding role of AI systems in shaping perception, behavior, and identity-related processes in digital environments (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kshetri et al., 2024).

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