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Are We Marketing to Consumers or Algorithms? Artificial Intelligence, Consumer Autonomy, and Digital Marketing Management in the Platform Economy: A Narrative Review

Original Article

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become central to digital marketing in the platform economy, where recommendation systems, predictive targeting, chatbots, ranking algorithms, and engagement architectures shape what consumers see, how they decide, and how firms compete for attention. This narrative review synthesizes recent literature from 2020–2025 on the relationship between AI-driven marketing, consumer autonomy, and digital marketing management. The review asks whether contemporary marketing is directed primarily at human consumers, algorithmic systems, or both; how personalization and recommendation systems alter choice architecture; what ethical risks emerge from profiling, opacity, bias, and surveillance; and which responsible AI practices can preserve trust and consumer agency. The literature shows a consistent trade-off: AI improves engagement, conversion, retention, and segmentation precision, yet can also narrow choice environments, intensify behavioral steering, and weaken decisional and attentional autonomy when systems are opaque or intrusive. Transparency, explainability, privacy controls, and user-adjustable settings emerge as the most common mitigators, though they do not fully resolve structural concerns tied to datafication and attention extraction. Taken together, the evidence suggests that platform marketing is increasingly dual-facing: it persuades consumers while simultaneously optimizing for algorithmic visibility and prediction systems. The review concludes that effective digital marketing management should move toward transparent, explainable, and user-contestable AI governance.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Consumer Autonomy, Digital Marketing, Platform Economy, Narrative Review.

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed digital marketing from broad message distribution into continuous, data-driven personalization across search, commerce, social platforms, and mobile ecosystems (Zekos, 2023; Epuran, 2026; Dixit et al., 2025; Karthick et al., 2026). Recommendation systems, predictive targeting, chatbots, algorithmic rankings, and programmatic delivery improve efficiency and relevance, but they also redesign the consumer decision environment (Sowmya et al., 2025; Kumari & Singh, 2025; Sidra & Wagan, 2026; Naz & Kashif, 2025; Peng & Wang, 2025). As a result, the key question is no longer only whether marketing persuades consumers, but whether firms increasingly design marketing to satisfy the algorithmic infrastructures that filter visibility, optimize engagement, and convert behavioral traces into predictive value (Bergua et al., 2023; Rilinger, 2024; Mützel & Unternährer, 2024; Alexander, 2025).

This question matters because consumer autonomy is not only about final choice but also about how options are surfaced, ranked, framed, timed, and reinforced (Galli, 2022;

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Ulker-Demirel, 2025; Yeung, 2017). AI-enabled marketing can support consumers through relevance, convenience, and reduced overload, yet the same tools can operate as subtle control systems when data practices are hidden, recommendations are overly directive, or platform designs are built to maximize time-on-platform rather than informed choice (Kumar et al., 2024; Cyrino & Fabriz, 2024; Wang & Zhang, 2025; Monge Roffarello et al., 2024). In this sense, marketing management in the platform economy sits at the intersection of performance optimization and ethical governance (Grabara, 2025; Qadri & Ahmed Moustafa, 2026; Du & Xie, 2021).

This review has four aims. First, it synthesizes how algorithmic personalization and recommender systems affect consumer autonomy and perceived control (Gao et al., 2025; Chkoniya, 2025). Second, it examines how AI-driven persuasion differs from human or hybrid influence (Van Berlo & Breves, 2025; Li et al., 2025). Third, it situates marketing within broader platform governance logics of datafication and attention capture (Chen et al., 2023). Fourth, it identifies managerial and governance responses associated with responsible AI in digital marketing (Nizette et al., 2025; Lacmanović & Skare, 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Algorithmic Personalization and Consumer Autonomy

The strongest pattern in the literature is that AI personalization improves marketing outcomes while creating autonomy risks (Yildirim & Gunduzeyli, 2026; Bhanja et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2026; Sowmya et al., 2025; Ammupriya et al., 2025). Personalization increases usefulness, trust, satisfaction, purchase intention, and loyalty when consumers perceive value and fairness in the exchange (Chkoniya, 2025; Song et al., 2021; Méndez-Gutiérrez et al., 2025; Kalai Lakshmi et al., 2025). Recommender systems can also reduce information overload and make decisions smoother (Wang et al., 2024; Onile et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024).

However, personalization also restructures what consumers see first, how alternatives are compared, and how much agency remains in the decision process (Galli, 2022; Ulker-Demirel, 2025; Aridor & Goncalves, 2022; Wang et al., 2025). Ranked lists, defaults, and even autonomous shopping systems can shift decision authority toward the system (Wang et al., 2025; de Bellis & Johar, 2020). Opaque data collection further heightens vulnerability and resistance, whereas overt or transparent collection tends to improve response (Gao et al., 2025; Aguirre et al., 2015).

The literature therefore does not portray personalization as inherently harmful. Rather, its consequences depend on interface design, transparency, explanation quality, and user control (Rianchi et al., 2025; Bharti et al., 2026; Chen et al., 2025; Al-Hazwani et al., 2025). This implies that autonomy is not only a matter of whether AI is used, but how it is embedded in the consumer journey (Cyrino & Fabriz, 2024; Hettler et al., 2025).

2.2. AI-Driven Targeting and Persuasion Pathways

AI targeting improves segmentation precision, campaign optimization, and ROI across multiple digital marketing contexts (Yu & Sosu, 2026; Bansal et al., 2026; Kadyan et al., 2024; Sowndharya & Hariharan, 2025). Reported evidence shows higher ROI under AI-based targeting than under non-algorithmic ad delivery in tourism, shopping, and rental campaigns (Shan, 2024). Other studies report improved predictive performance, stronger audience targeting, and better recommendation accuracy in digital commerce (Sowndharya & Hariharan, 2025; Janga et al., 2025).

Yet persuasion effects are source-contingent. AI recommenders tend to work well for objective, analytical, or expertise-based decision support, while human influencers often retain an advantage in affect-rich settings requiring warmth, authenticity, or social connection (Yadav & Kumar, 2026; Lee et al., 2026; Li et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2024). Credibility, professionalism, expertise, and trust mediate these outcomes (Van Berlo & Breves, 2025; Chen et al., 2024; Park et al., 2024).

Consumer interpretation is equally contingent. Chatbots and predictive suggestions are often welcomed when useful, reliable, and empathetic, but resisted when experienced as intrusive, deceptive, or threatening (Wang & Zhang, 2025; Chen et al., 2025; Rana et al., 2024; Dai & Liu, 2024; Fares, 2025). Disclosure also matters: evidence indicates that revealing chatbot identity can sharply reduce purchase rates even when undisclosed chatbot performance matches skilled human workers (Dipoatmodjo et al., 2026; Luo et al., 2019). This contradiction captures a recurring tension in the field: the same technology can function as assistance or manipulation depending on context, task, and presentation (Chen et al., 2025; Tatu et al., 2026; Yuan et al., 2024).

2.3. Platform Economy Governance and Attention Optimization

The platform literature expands the analysis beyond marketing communication into algorithmic governance (Rilinger, 2024; Rabban & Singh, 2025; Geliskhanov, 2024). Platforms use rules, rankings, surveillance, predictive analytics, and interface constraints to coordinate behavior and shape market outcomes (Rilinger, 2024; Maille & Tuffin, 2025; Kadolkar et al., 2025). This means AI marketing not only targets preferences; it operates within a system that structures exposure, relevance, and participation (Lindroos et al., 2025; Riu et al., 2026).

Datafication is central to this model. Behavioral traces are transformed into customer profiles, predictive insights, and advertising value (Mützel & Unternährer, 2024; Yesilbag, 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Wang & Sarkar, 2026). Platforms convert interaction data into managerial intelligence for optimization, segmentation, inventory decisions, and demand forecasting (Teeli, 2026; Mihailova, 2023; McNealy, 2022; Li et al., 2026). Attention becomes a monetizable commodity, and engagement-oriented architectures are designed to keep users active so platforms can extract and monetize more data (Chen et al., 2023; Alexander, 2025; Oliveira et al., 2099).

This logic directly affects autonomy. Infinite scroll, variable rewards, notifications, and recommendation loops can erode digital wellbeing and increase passive use (Monge Roffarello et al., 2024; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2023). At the same time, intervention studies show that attention-preserving design changes-such as highlighting infinite scroll or isolating recommendations can reduce passive scrolling and promote intentional use (Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2023; Deng & Go, 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that platform marketing increasingly includes the management of attention, not merely persuasion at the moment of purchase (de la Torre et al., 2026; Pinheiro & Santos, 2026; Chen et al., 2023).

2.4. Ethical Risks in AI-Driven Marketing

Across the literature, four ethical risks recur most consistently: manipulation, opacity, privacy loss, and bias (Jadallah & Awwad, 2025; Benjelloun & Kabak, 2024; Kumar et al., 2024; Al Haj Eid et al., 2024). These risks are especially concentrated in profiling, targeting, and recommendation infrastructures that rely on large-scale behavioral data (Saura et al., 2024; Nijru et al., 2025; Knight, 2025; Rivas & Zhao, 2024).

Targeted advertising and profiling can intensify surveillance and exploit consent gaps, especially where age verification is weak, disclosures are superficial, or data practices remain

hidden (Vargas-Salas et al., 2026; Fernández-Barrero & Aramburú Moncada, 2026; Li et al., 2026). Personalized ads may also undermine trust when consumers feel used for the platform's interests rather than served by the system (Tatu et al., 2026; Nusir et al., 2026). Bias risks are recognized, but comparative evidence on harms across age, income, and culture remains limited (Rianchi et al., 2025; Bacalhau et al., 2025; Alowayfi et al., 2024).

A key nuance is that transparency does not always solve the problem. Disclosure can increase trust and legitimacy, but it can also intensify awareness of surveillance and trigger resistance (Arif & Windarsari, 2026; Li et al., 2026; Liu et al., 2027). This makes ethical design a question of calibration rather than simple disclosure.

2.5. Responsible AI Practices in Digital Marketing Management

Recent work shows a shift from broad ethical principles toward implementation-oriented governance (Ananny & Crawford, 2018; Raji et al., 2020; Grabara, 2025; Lacmanović & Skare, 2025). At the consumer interface level, recommended practices include explanation interfaces, transparent data policies, privacy dashboards, opt-in/opt-out controls, deletion rights, and simplified disclosures (Nizette et al., 2025; Mo et al., 2026; Alsaffarini & Awwad, 2026; Kumari, 2026; Rendon, 2022). These measures tend to improve trust, willingness to share data, and perceptions of fairness and collaboration (Erdavit & Salim, 2025; Mao et al., 2026; Shuqair et al., 2024; Rendon, 2022; Windarsari & Arif, 2026).

At the organizational level, responsible AI includes audit trails, human oversight, bias testing, vendor controls, conformity checks, and ESG-style reporting (Grabara, 2025; Qadri & Ahmed Moustafa, 2026; Aguilar et al., 2026; Lacmanović & Skare, 2025). However, implementation remains uneven due to fragmented regulation, weak standards, poor data quality, infrastructure costs, and uncertain ROI (Aarthi & Ravikumar, 2026; Das et al., 2026; Shabbir, 2026; Tibebu & Kakadiaris, 2026).

3. Methods

This study uses a narrative review design. That approach is appropriate because the topic spans conceptual debates, interface studies, experiments, surveys, governance analyses, and ethical frameworks rather than a single uniform empirical tradition (Yildirim & Gunduzeyli, 2026; Rabban & Singh, 2025; Barredo-Arrieta et al., 2020; Floridi et al., 2018). A narrative review also suits fast-moving fields in which technologies and governance concerns evolve faster than stable meta-analytic categories (Aarthi & Ravikumar, 2026; Huang & Rust, 2021).

3.1. Search Strategy and Scope

The review scope covers literature from approximately 2020–2025 concerning AI in digital marketing, platform economies, consumer autonomy, recommender systems, algorithmic targeting, digital nudging, platform governance, attention optimization, and responsible AI (Ammupriya et al., 2025; Shan, 2024; Rianchi et al., 2025; Aarthi & Ravikumar, 2026; Kalai Lakshmi et al., 2025). The synthesis prioritizes English-language recent studies and integrates conceptual, qualitative, mixed-method, survey, and experimental evidence (Bacalhau et al., 2025; Zejjari & Benhayoun, 2024; Hettler et al., 2025; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2023).

3.2. Data Extraction and Thematic Coding

Data extraction followed thematic coding around five analytic categories: (1) personalization and autonomy, (2) persuasion and targeting, (3) platform governance and attention capture, (4) ethical risks, and (5) responsible AI responses (Zheng et al., 2024; Cyrino & Fabriz, 2024; Kumari, 2026; Castaldo et al., 2023; Aoki & Matsui, 2025). Findings were then compared to identify recurring tensions, moderators, and contradictions. The central synthesis logic focused on whether AI acts primarily as a consumer aid, a persuasion tool, or a governance mechanism (Wang & Zhang, 2025; Du & Xie, 2021).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Narrative Synthesis of Major Themes

Table 1 presents the narrative synthesis of the five major themes identified across the reviewed literature.

Table 1. Narrative synthesis of major themes in AI-driven marketing and consumer autonomy

Theme	Representative Evidence	Main Finding	Managerial Implication
AI improves performance but changes choice architecture	Yildirim & Gunduzeyli (2026); Bhanja et al. (2025); Galli (2022); Shan (2024); Sowndharya & Hariharan (2025)	Personalization improves trust, conversion, ROI, and retention, but ranking and recommendation systems steer attention and decisions.	Optimize for relevance without hiding alternatives or over-concentrating exposure.
Autonomy depends on transparency and control.	Gao et al. (2025); Chkoniya (2025); Li et al. (2026); Nizette et al. (2025); Shuqair et al. (2024)	Trust and perceived fairness rise when users can understand and govern data use and AI outputs	Use disclosures, explanations, dashboards, and reversible settings.
AI persuasion is context-dependent	Van Berlo & Breves (2025); Li et al. (2025); Huang & Wang (2023); Zheng et al. (2024)	AI is often stronger for objective guidance; humans remain stronger in emotional or relational persuasion.	Combine AI with human or human-like relational cues when emotional trust matters.
Platform governance intensifies behavioral steering.	Rilinger (2024); Maille & Tuffin (2025); Chen et al. (2023); Yeung (2017); Monge Roffarello et al. (2024)	Ranking rules, infinite scroll, notifications, and predictive loops shape time use and market outcomes	Treat UX design as a governance issue, not only a growth lever.
Ethical risk and responsible AI responses	Benjelloun & Kabak (2024); Raji et al. (2020); Qadri & Ahmed Moustafa (2026); Lacmanović & Skare (2025); Yuan et al. (2024)	Risks cluster in profiling, opacity, privacy, and bias; audits and oversight are emerging mitigations.	Build operational governance, not only ethical principles.

Theme 1: AI Improves Performance but Changes Choice Architecture

The reviewed literature consistently reports that AI improves marketing performance. Personalization strengthens engagement, trust, retention, conversion, and loyalty, while targeting improves segmentation precision and ROI (Yildirim & Gunduzeyli, 2026; Bhanja et al., 2025; Shan, 2024; Sowndharya & Hariharan, 2025; Alzoubi et al., 2025). However, these

gains are achieved partly by reorganizing consumer exposure through ranking, recommendation order, and interface cues (Galli, 2022; Aridor & Goncalves, 2022; Wang et al., 2025). Thus, AI does not merely match products to preferences; it actively structures the set of options most likely to be considered (Ulker-Demirel, 2025; Maille & Tuffin, 2025).

Theme 2: Autonomy Depends on Design, Transparency, and Control

Autonomy outcomes are not fixed. Transparent data practices, recommendation explanations, privacy controls, and user-adjustable settings increase trust and privacy-disclosure intentions while lowering resistance (Gao et al., 2025; Chkoniya, 2025; Nizette et al., 2025; Mao et al., 2026; Chen & Cheng, 2026). Conversely, opaque or invasive personalization increases surveillance perceptions and weakens willingness to disclose data (Liu et al., 2027; Haque et al., 2024; Du & Xie, 2021). The strongest practical pattern is that consumers accept personalization when they perceive value and retain meaningful control (Shuqair et al., 2024; Song et al., 2021).

Theme 3: AI Persuasion Is Context-Dependent

AI persuasion works best where consumers seek objective information, consistency, or efficiency (Li et al., 2025; Park et al., 2024). Human and human-like influences remain stronger where emotional resonance, social identification, and authenticity matter (Van Berlo & Breves, 2025; Zheng et al., 2024). This suggests that full automation may underperform hybrid designs in many platform settings (Lee et al., 2026; Chen et al., 2024).

Theme 4: Platform Governance and Attention Capture Intensify Behavioral Steering

Platform marketing is embedded in infrastructures designed to maximize engagement and data extraction (Chen et al., 2023; Yesilbag, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2099). Attention-capture devices such as infinite scroll and recommendation loops can reduce intentionality and autonomy (Monge Roffarello et al., 2024; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2023). Yet studies also show that redesign interventions can support more intentional use, which means platform architecture is a modifiable governance variable rather than a neutral backdrop (Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2023; Deng & Go, 2024).

Theme 5: Ethical Risk and Responsible AI Responses

Ethical risks are concentrated where profiling and prediction are most intensive (Saura et al., 2024; Nijru et al., 2025; Benjelloun & Kabak, 2024). The dominant safeguards proposed are transparency, privacy-by-design, fairness checks, audits, impact assessments, human oversight, and minimum-data practices (Raji et al., 2020; Qadri & Ahmed Moustafa, 2026; Lacmanović & Skare, 2025; Yuan et al., 2024; Ansari et al., 2026). Still, implementation barriers remain substantial (Aarthi & Ravikumar, 2026; Das et al., 2026).

4.2. Discussion

The central contribution of this review is to reframe AI marketing in the platform economy as a dual optimization problem. Firms are not only trying to persuade consumers; they are also trying to align with algorithmic systems that determine discovery, visibility, and engagement (Rilinger, 2024; Maille & Tuffin, 2025; Alexander, 2025). In that sense, contemporary digital marketing is increasingly "algorithm-facing" as well as consumer-facing (Mützel & Unternährer, 2024).

This helps explain the recurring trade-off between marketing efficiency and autonomy. Personalization and targeting deliver relevance and commercial value, but they also centralize

informational power in opaque systems that can guide, constrain, or accelerate consumer decisions (Yildirim & Gunduzeyli, 2026; Galli, 2022; Kumar et al., 2024; Shan, 2024). The issue is therefore not simply persuasion versus manipulation; it is whether consumers retain enough visibility, contestability, and control within AI-mediated choice environments (Shuqair et al., 2024; Cyrino & Fabriz, 2024; Yuan et al., 2024).

Trust appears to be the key mediator. Across studies, transparency and explainability often improve trust, willingness to disclose data, and acceptance of AI recommendations (Gao et al., 2025; Nizette et al., 2025; Erdavit & Salim, 2025). But disclosure can also backfire by activating surveillance concerns or algorithm aversion (Li et al., 2026; Luo et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2027). This means managers should not assume that "more transparency" is always sufficient. Transparency must be actionable, proportionate, and paired with user control (Mo et al., 2026; Kumari, 2026).

For managers, the strongest implication is that responsible AI should be built into digital marketing management rather than treated as an external compliance layer (Qadri & Ahmed Moustafa, 2026; Davenport et al., 2020). Practical priorities include: using recommendation designs that preserve option diversity; disclosing when and why personalization occurs; offering opt-in, opt-out, and deletion controls; auditing bias and profiling practices; documenting model and vendor accountability; and redesigning attention-maximizing interfaces when they predictably erode user agency (Raji et al., 2020; Lacmanović & Skare, 2025; Monge Roffarello et al., 2024; Mo et al., 2026). A concise managerial principle emerging from the evidence is that AI should be effective, explainable, and elective—it should improve outcomes, be understandable enough to build trust, and remain meaningfully adjustable or contestable by users (Shuqair et al., 2024; Rahwan, 2018; Rendon, 2022).

Research gaps remain clear. The field is rich in conceptual and experimental work but still thinner in longitudinal qualitative evidence, cross-cultural comparison, and subgroup fairness analysis (Rianchi et al., 2025; Aarthi & Ravikumar, 2026; Bacalhau et al., 2025). More evidence is needed on cumulative autonomy loss, vulnerable populations, and sectoral differences outside retail and social commerce (Shan, 2024; Rianchi et al., 2025; Gubela & Lessmann, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The literature supports a clear conclusion: in the platform economy, marketing is increasingly directed at both consumers and algorithms. AI enables more precise, predictive, and efficient marketing, but it also transforms the conditions under which consumers attend, compare, trust, and choose. Consumer autonomy is most at risk when personalization is opaque, profiling is invasive, and platform design prioritizes engagement extraction over informed choice. It is better preserved when AI systems are transparent, explainable, privacy-protective, and meaningfully controllable by users.

The practical implication is not to reject AI in marketing, but to govern it more carefully. Digital marketing management should move beyond pure optimization toward responsible architectures that protect data autonomy, decisional autonomy, and attentional autonomy while preserving legitimate personalization benefits. The most sustainable future for platform marketing is therefore not fully automated persuasion, but accountable and autonomy-preserving AI use.

5.1. Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly Application and QuillBot to improve the clarity, readability, and language accuracy of the text. Output

generated by the tools was carefully reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this article. All substantive intellectual contributions, including conceptualization, analysis, interpretation of data, and final decisions regarding content, arguments, and conclusions, were carried out solely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, originality, and academic quality of this article.

5.2. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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