

When Recommendation Becomes Judgment: Identity Threat and Consumer Resistance to Generative AI Recommendations

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Abstract. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) recommendations are increasingly embedded in everyday consumption decisions, yet consumers are far from passive recipients. Drawing on fourteen open-ended questionnaires and a three-level coding procedure, this study explores how consumers perceive identity threat when facing generative AI recommendations and how they protect their sense of self-worth. The findings show that identity plays three roles in decision making: it acts as a pre-screening filter, as a reference point for evaluating consequences, and as a carrier of economic interests. Identity threat arises from three sources: the lack of situational knowledge in AI, the averaging logic of algorithms that erodes individual uniqueness, and a feeling of being watched that triggers anxiety about autonomy. In response, consumers adopt four strategies that form a continuum from passive withdrawal to active control: total avoidance, reverse selection, partial reference, and active steering. Based on these findings, the study proposes four theoretical propositions, namely identity precedence, context dependence, the strategy spectrum, and the resistance paradox, and discusses their implications for the design of recommender systems.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation, identity threat, consumer resistance, qualitative research

1. Introduction

From the "you may also like" section of shopping platforms to conversational AI tools that directly generate plans, outfits, reading lists and investment ideas, recommender systems are taking over more and more stages of the consumer decision process. Such systems are expected to reduce search costs and improve decision efficiency, yet consumer responses to them are considerably more varied than a simple calculus of usefulness would predict. Some accept the recommendations without question, some ignore them entirely, and others deliberately choose the opposite of what the algorithm suggests.

A growing body of research attributes part of this variation to identity. Zhou et al. [1] argue that the high intelligence and human-like abilities of generative AI trigger identity threat through three affordances: creative, analytical and communicative. Gonçalves et al. [2] show that when AI

misclassifies consumers, it undermines their self-expression and provokes defensive reactions. Tong et al. [3] find that identity concerns lead consumers with strong self-identification to reduce variety-seeking behavior when exposed to AI recommendations. From a philosophical perspective, Brown [4] contends that controllability and explainability are preconditions for recommender systems to support rather than damage authenticity. Studies in the Chinese context have likewise examined the tension between AI and consumer self-identity [5], the moderating role of AI identity threat in information avoidance [6], and the algorithmic resistance practices of young social media users [7].

Most of these studies, however, treat identity threat as an outcome that appears after AI use, and they tend to reduce consumer reactions to a binary choice between acceptance and rejection. Comparatively little is known, at the level of lived experience, about how consumers encounter identity threat in everyday settings and how they respond to it. The present study therefore addresses the following question: how do consumers perceive identity threat when facing generative AI recommendations, and what strategies do they use to protect their self-worth?

2. Methodology

This study focuses on subjective experiences such as identity perception, emotional reactions and decision strategies, which are difficult to capture with standardized scales. A qualitative approach was therefore adopted, with open-ended questionnaires as the data collection instrument. Compared with closed-ended scales, open-ended questionnaires keep a consistent question framework while leaving respondents enough space to organize their answers according to their own experiences. In addition, the questionnaires had no time limit and were completed without the researcher present, which helped to reduce social desirability bias.

A total of fourteen valid questionnaires were collected. The respondents included three university and high school students, three retirees and three working professionals, as well as five supplementary respondents drawn from different settings such as parenting and home education, information searching, multi-platform content consumption and knowledge seeking. Three sampling criteria were applied to ensure heterogeneity: respondents had to cover the three occupational states of studying, working and retirement; they had to cover different levels of AI exposure, ranging from frequent active use to almost no use; and they had to come from diverse professional backgrounds, including design, psychology, education, finance and human resources. The profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

ID	Occupation / setting	AI exposure	Key domain of AI use
Student A	Undergraduate, design	Frequent, active	Design ideas, literature search
Student B	Undergraduate, psychology	Frequent, active	Literature recommendation
Student C	High school student	Moderate, active	Video and film recommendation
Retiree A	Retired civil servant	Rare, passive	Clothing, gifts
Retiree B	Retired designer	Rare, passive	Health products, finance
Retiree C	Retired nurse	Occasional, passive	Short videos, shopping links
Professional A	Internet operations	Frequent, active	Content strategy, proposals
Professional B	Human resources	Moderate, active	Résumé screening
Professional C	Financial analyst	Moderate, active	Investment information
Respondent 1	Parent, home education	Moderate	Tutoring children

Table 1. (continued)

Respondent 2	Working professional	Frequent	Work tasks
Respondent 3	Information searcher	Moderate	Information search
Respondent 4	Multi-platform content consumer	Frequent	Shopping, content feeds
Respondent 5	Knowledge seeker	Moderate	Knowledge and health queries

The questionnaire was organized around eight core questions: the domains in which respondents encountered AI recommendations, their usage scenarios and trust judgments, the importance of self-identity, experiences of discomfort, perceptions of AI replacing their own thinking, the influence of AI on their uniqueness, their strategies for accepting or rejecting recommendations, and their ideal recommendation model. The data were analyzed through three levels of coding. First-level coding identified concrete situations and behavioral descriptions, second-level coding grouped these into thematic categories, and third-level coding abstracted theoretical concepts. Every questionnaire was checked individually before being incorporated into a unified coding system. Table 2 reports the resulting coding structure together with representative excerpts, and Figure 1 maps each second-level code onto the respondents whose answers supported it.

Table 2. Coding structure and representative excerpts

Theoretical concept	Thematic category	Representative excerpt (respondent)
Role of identity	Pre-screening filter	"If my investment advice were based on AI recommendations, my professional identity would be ruined." (Professional C)
	Consequence reference	"My boss will not blame the AI but will question my professional competence." (Professional A)
	Economic interest	"The money I lose is my hard-earned money." (Retiree B)
Source of threat	Lack of situational knowledge	"Can AI understand these old customs? It has never lived through these social relationships." (Retiree A)
	Homogenization	"All the assignments would look the same, and I would feel like a copy." (Student A)
	Surveillance and autonomy	"This is not service; it is locking me in a cage." (Student B)
Coping strategy	Total avoidance	"I never look at the recommendation page." (Retiree A)
	Reverse selection	"I deliberately avoid the videos with the highest recommendation scores." (Student C)
	Partial reference	"I only accept the skeleton. The flesh and blood must be mine." (Professional A)
	Active steering	"I keep adding constraints until the output matches my research needs." (Student B)

As Figure 1 indicates, no single code was confined to one respondent group. Homogenization and surveillance concerns were each raised by six respondents, and partial reference was the most frequently coded strategy, whereas total avoidance was concentrated among the retirees.

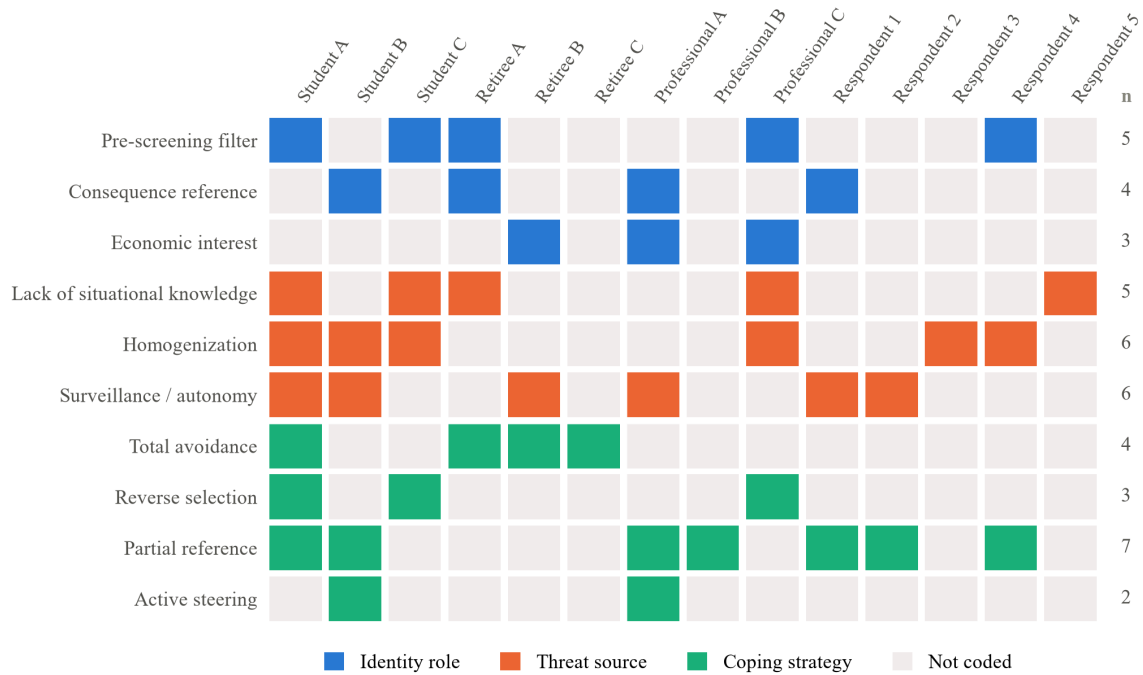


Figure 1. Distribution of second-level codes across respondents

3. Findings

3.1. The three roles of identity in decision making

First, identity serves as a pre-screening filter. Respondents had already screened recommendations according to their identity before they even looked at them. Student A, a design major, worried that "if what I hand in looks exactly like something AI generated, my teacher will notice immediately, and that would be a huge blow to my professional identity." Professional C, a financial analyst, stated that "finance demands independent thinking and judgment; if my investment advice were based on AI recommendations, my professional identity would be ruined." Retiree A rejected recommended products because they "do not fit my age or my status."

Second, identity functions as a reference point for evaluating consequences. Respondents were keenly aware that following or ignoring AI recommendations would have consequences for how others see them. Professional A, who works in internet operations, observed that "if an AI-recommended content strategy fails, my boss will not blame the AI but will question my professional competence." Retiree A expressed the same logic within the family: if a gift chosen by AI for her grandson turned out to be unsuitable, "my daughter-in-law would not say anything, but she would think I am an unreliable grandmother." In each account, the outcome of adopting a recommendation was read as a statement about the respondent's competence or standing.

Third, identity is tied to economic interests. Retiree B, describing themselves as an ordinary person "living on a small pension," explained that trusting the health supplements and financial products pushed by AI would mean that "the money I lose is my hard-earned money." Professional C put it even more directly: "I have to keep unique views in my industry to make money." Identity maintenance thus appears less as an abstract psychological need than as a practical concern rooted in social relationships and economic calculation.

3.2. Three sources of identity threat

The first source is the lack of situational knowledge. Several respondents noted that AI does not understand the implicit rules of specific situations. When discussing what to wear to a wedding banquet, Retiree A asked, "Red means celebration and black is a serious taboo. Can AI understand these old customs? It has never lived through these social relationships." Professional C pointed out that the dress code in the finance industry "has never been written in any handbook," so a "universal" answer from AI might be exactly what makes someone look foolish within the industry. AI recommendations rely on statistical patterns and tag matching, whereas consumer identity is embedded in concrete social contexts that cannot easily be coded. Even when a recommendation is statistically "correct," ignoring these implicit rules amounts to denying the consumer's own situational judgment.

The second source is the averaging logic of algorithms, which erodes individual uniqueness. Student A worried that if the whole class used AI to generate similar topics and outlines, "all the assignments would look the same, and I would feel like a copy." Student C observed that classmates' content consumption was "gradually converging, and their aesthetic preferences were becoming homogeneous." Respondent 3 simply stated that "the information is overly homogeneous and annoying," while Respondent 4 hoped that an ideal system would "give comprehensive recommendations to avoid information cocoons." These accounts are consistent with the finding of Tong et al. [3] that consumers who value identity consistency tend to make conservative choices within the recommended range, which in turn reinforces the information cocoon.

The third source is a sense of being watched, which creates anxiety about autonomy. Student A described how, after searching for a keyword in an academic database, "the browser, shopping apps and even ads on my social media all started recommending related books and courses; I felt monitored." Retiree B remarked that the phone "seems to know what I am thinking, which is a bit scary, as if someone were listening to me." Student B interpreted the discomfort at a deeper level: "It keeps recommending things it knows I will like and never shows me unknown areas. This is not service; it is locking me in a cage." Surveillance appears to threaten identity because respondents experienced recommendations less as a service than as a form of being read and categorized. When recommendations become too accurate, the unpredictability that marks a person as an autonomous subject disappears. Respondent 2 added that "AI flatters and guides users," suggesting that users feel not only watched but also manipulated.

3.3. Four strategies for protecting self-worth

Faced with identity threat, respondents developed a range of coping strategies. Together, these strategies form a continuum that runs from passive withdrawal to active control, as summarized in Table 3 and illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 3. Consumer strategies for coping with identity threat

Strategy	Core behavior	Psychological logic	Typical respondents
Total avoidance	Not viewing, clicking or using	Protecting boundaries by opting out	Retirees A, B, C
Reverse selection	Deliberately avoiding mainstream options	Confirming the self through deviation	Student C, Professional C
Partial reference	Adopting the form, keeping the substance	Defining where AI may intervene	Students A, B; Professionals A, B

Table 3. (continued)

Active steering	Revising conditions and regenerating	Reasserting agency through control	Student B, Professional A
Total avoidance	Reverse selection	Partial reference	Active steering
<i>Opt out to guard boundaries</i>	<i>Deviate to confirm the self</i>	<i>Keep the substance, adopt the form</i>	<i>Control input to reassert agency</i>
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Passive withdrawal	<i>Degree of user agency over the recommendation</i>		Active control

Figure 2. The strategy spectrum and the respondents coded to each strategy

Total avoidance was mainly adopted by retirees. Retiree A said, "I just do not use it. In the apps my children installed for me, I never look at the recommendation page; I only check what the people I follow have posted." Retiree B likewise dismissed push notifications "as soon as they appear," unless the information had been searched for deliberately, such as the weather forecast. The core of this strategy is to protect one's boundaries by opting out. Notably, the retirees did not attribute their refusal to difficulty with technology; their accounts suggest instead a deliberate defence of self-definition, in which they position themselves as the authors of their own choices rather than as users of a system.

Reverse selection was most common among respondents who valued uniqueness. Student C explained, "I deliberately avoid the videos with the highest recommendation scores and the most views, and instead choose the least popular ones from the end of the list. I believe the things truly worth watching are rarely on the list the algorithm thinks I will definitely like." Professional C applied the same logic to investment: "I look at which popular stocks AI recommends and deliberately avoid them, then research overlooked sectors with solid fundamentals." Although such choices may appear suboptimal in behavioral terms, they allow individuals to reaffirm their capacity for independent judgment.

Partial reference was the most widespread strategy. Respondents separated recommendations into an acceptable form and a non-negotiable substance. Professional A explained, "AI provides the framework and the first draft, but I only accept the skeleton. The flesh and blood must be mine; anything involving company data or brand tone never goes to AI." Professional B, a human resources specialist, used AI's screening logic but paid extra attention to résumés that the system scored low yet showed special experiences such as entrepreneurship or volunteering. Respondents 1, 2 and 4 all chose "selective reference," and Respondent 2 added that "verification is necessary."

Through this strategy, consumers mark out the territory that AI is allowed to enter while retaining the judgments they are unwilling to give up.

Active steering was adopted by respondents who refused to accept AI output passively. Student B described the process as follows: "If the initial recommendation does not meet my expectations, I neither accept it nor abandon it. I keep adding constraints, changing the time range and adjusting the sample features until the output matches my research needs. It is like systematically manipulating independent variables in an experiment." Professional A likewise "keeps revising the prompt to guide it in the direction I want." By controlling the input, individuals reassert their position as the subject in human–AI interaction.

4. Discussion

The findings support several arguments in the existing literature. First, they are consistent with Zhou et al. [1], who argue that the affordances of generative AI trigger identity threat. Even retirees who hardly use AI reported defensive reactions simply because they sensed that "an intelligence beyond themselves" was at work, which suggests that perceiving a threat does not require a deep understanding of the technology. Second, respondents' efforts to control the recommendation process support Brown's [4] claim that controllability is a precondition for authenticity. By revising their prompts, users ensure that recommendations remain aligned with what they truly want rather than being driven by the system's first output.

At the same time, the study refines existing views in three ways. First, consumer reactions are not a binary of resistance versus avoidance but a continuous spectrum full of strategic negotiation. Respondent 1, for example, reported basic trust in AI but added that anything requiring precision had to be "double-checked," while also feeling that AI can be "too subjective." This combination of trusting and verifying is typical of the middle of the spectrum. Second, identity threat is not only a consequence of use but also a filter that operates before use. Retiree A said that "AI recommendations completely conflict with who I am, so I do not use them at all." Here, identity threat is the reason for non-use rather than its result. Respondent 5 trusted AI when filling knowledge gaps but only "selectively" trusted it when feeling unwell, which shows that identity screening happens before adoption. Third, the core target of the threat is not ability itself but the social position anchored by that ability. What AI replaces is not the ability to draw but the position of a designer who conceives ideas; what it challenges is not knowledge of clothing but the position of an elder who judges what is appropriate. This form of "position anxiety" may help to explain why consumers insist on retaining part of their decision-making power even in scenarios where AI clearly improves efficiency.

Based on this analysis, the study proposes four theoretical propositions. Proposition 1 (identity precedence): consumers make an identity-based judgment before deciding whether to consult AI recommendations, and the more closely a recommendation domain relates to their core identity, the higher the threshold for adoption. Proposition 2 (context dependence): the intensity of identity threat depends not on the absolute capability of AI but on the relative gap between AI and the individual in a specific context. Proposition 3 (strategy spectrum): consumers' resistance strategies lie on a spectrum from passive withdrawal to active control, and the choice among them depends on the strength of self-identity and technological self-efficacy. Proposition 4 (resistance paradox): choices that deliberately deviate from AI recommendations, although seemingly irrational, can be understood as a reasoned means by which consumers preserve their autonomy. Table 4 lists the propositions with their supporting evidence, and Figure 3 integrates them into a single framework.

Table 4. Theoretical propositions and supporting evidence

Proposition	Statement	Key evidence
P1 Identity precedence	Identity-based screening occurs before exposure; the closer a domain is to core identity, the higher the adoption threshold.	Retiree A refuses use outright; Student B pre-sets search strategies.
P2 Context dependence	Threat intensity depends on the relative AI–self capability gap in a given context, not on the absolute capability of AI.	Respondent 5 trusts AI for knowledge gaps but only selectively for health.
P3 Strategy spectrum	Strategies range from passive withdrawal to active control, shaped by identity strength and technological self-efficacy.	Retirees avoid; students and professionals refer or steer.
P4 Resistance paradox	Deliberate deviation from recommendations is behaviorally suboptimal but psychologically self-affirming.	Student C and Professional C choose the least popular options.

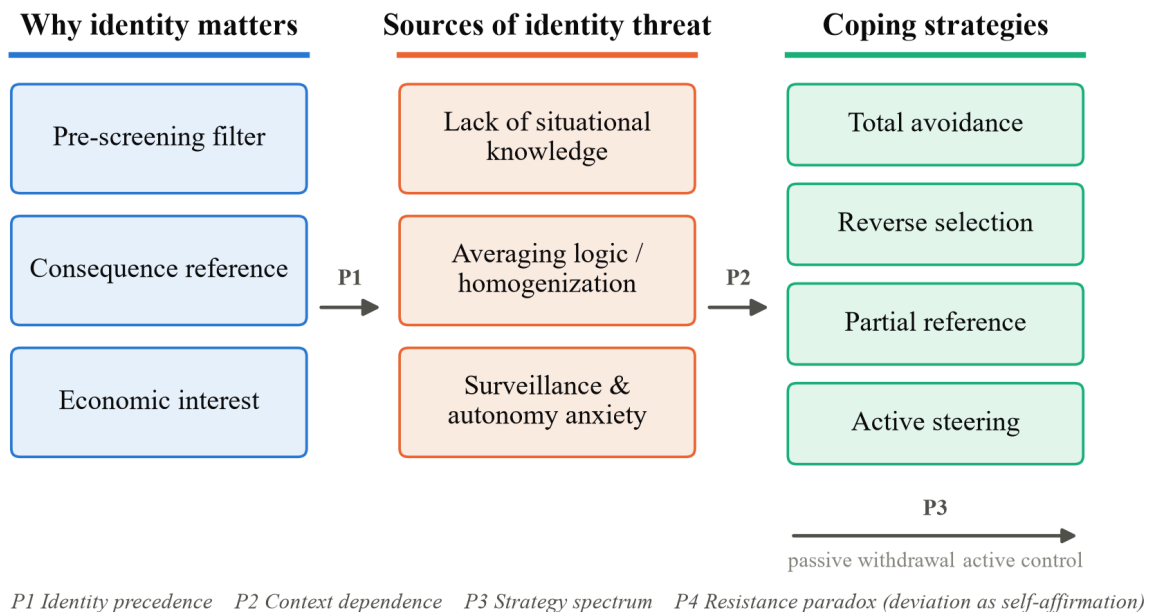


Figure 3. Integrative framework of identity threat and consumer resistance

5. Conclusion

This study shows that, when facing generative AI recommendations, identity is both the starting point of consumer decisions and the yardstick for evaluating their consequences. Identity threat stems from missing situational knowledge, homogenization and a sense of surveillance, and consumers respond with strategies that range from withdrawal to control. Theoretically, the study shifts the understanding of consumer responses to AI recommendations from a technology acceptance paradigm to an identity maintenance paradigm, reveals the pre-emptive position of identity threat in the decision process, and systematically identifies four resistance strategies. Practically, firms should not pursue recommendation accuracy and conversion rates alone. They should offer controllable options in the interface, state the limitations of AI honestly, keep a manual correction entry in scenarios closely related to identity, and avoid the feeling of surveillance created by overly precise recommendations. Respondents' own wish for recommendations that are "similar but not the same" suggests that long-term trust is more likely to rest on perceived objectivity than on accommodation of user preferences.

This study has several limitations. The sample is small, the design is cross-sectional, and the data come only from the Chinese context, so the external validity of the conclusions needs further testing. Future research could use large-scale surveys or experiments to verify the four strategy types quantitatively and adopt longitudinal designs to examine how identity threat and coping strategies evolve through long-term interaction with AI recommender systems.

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