

Digital Marketing Ethics in the Age of AI: A Comparative Analysis of Transparency and Consumer Trust in E-Commerce Platforms

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Abstract

The increasing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in e-commerce has transformed digital marketing strategies, particularly through personalized recommendation systems. However, this advancement has raised ethical concerns regarding data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and consumer autonomy. In Southeast Asia, where digital platforms rapidly expand, these concerns become more complex due to diverse regulatory landscapes and user expectations. This study aims to analyze and compare the transparency of AI-based recommendation systems across three major e-commerce platforms in the region: Shopee, Lazada, and Tokopedia. A qualitative comparative approach was employed using content analysis of official policy documents, including privacy policies and AI guidelines, sourced from each platform between January and March 2024. The analysis utilized LLM-assisted text mining and thematic coding to identify ethical indicators such as algorithmic transparency, user control, and policy readability. The results reveal significant variation in ethical practices: Shopee scored the highest in all dimensions, including algorithmic transparency (score: 9/10), user control (8/10), and policy readability (9/10). Lazada ranked moderately with scores of 6/10, 4/10, and 6/10 respectively, while Tokopedia scored lowest with 3/10 for transparency, 0/10 for user control, and 4/10 for readability. These disparities indicate that ethical communication and user empowerment remain uneven across platforms. This study contributes to the discourse on digital ethics by highlighting the need for regional standards in AI transparency and promoting user-centric ethical design. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, platform designers, and digital consumers navigating trust in algorithm-driven environments.

Keywords: Algorithmic Transparency, Digital Ethics, User Control, AI Recommendation, E-Commerce Platform.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The advancement of AI technology has revolutionized the way e-commerce operates, particularly in terms of content personalization and data-driven marketing strategies. In this digital era, recommendation algorithms play a central role in shaping consumer experiences from product display to search result ordering. The application of AI in this domain enables e-commerce platforms to enhance sales efficiency while simultaneously strengthening customer loyalty. However, alongside these benefits emerge new ethical challenges related to data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and the potential manipulation of consumer decision-making. In this context, the issue of trust becomes increasingly critical; consumers now evaluate not only price and service but also the extent to which they understand and trust the automation processes operating behind digital platforms.

Concerns over data tracking without explicit consent and the use of "dark patterns" to manipulate consumer choices have become central debates in the ethics of digital marketing. Several previous studies have emphasized the importance of transparency in enhancing the perceived legitimacy of technology. For instance, (Adi et al., 2024) highlight that transparent digital marketing strategies, such as A/B testing, significantly contribute to increased consumer trust and loyalty across cultures. Similarly, (Khaq et al., 2024) demonstrate in their study that AI applications accompanied by communicative approaches toward consumers can improve trust and efficiency in digital interactions. (Purnama & Manalu, 2024) explain that in the implementation of digital CRM, the greatest challenge lies in fostering user understanding of how their data are utilized within automated and integrated systems. Other studies, such as those by (Aldboush & Ferdous, 2023) and (Anshari et al., 2022), also highlight the relationship between user control over data and ethical perceptions of digital platforms. Nevertheless, such studies generally remain focused on developed countries and have yet to explore the local dynamics of Southeast Asia, which features a unique user base and digital ecosystem.

Although various studies have explored the relationship between algorithmic transparency and consumer trust in the context of e-commerce, most remain focused on global or developed-country contexts and have not comprehensively compared practices across platforms in Southeast Asia. (Machado et al., 2023) emphasize the importance of AI system openness in shaping ethical perceptions and technological legitimacy, yet do not examine inter-platform differences in detail. (Li et al., 2022) show that explicit algorithmic explanations can increase consumer trust, but their study is limited to a single platform in South Korea. (Yunita et al., 2022) reveal low consumer awareness in Indonesia regarding data tracking, yet do not examine cross-platform privacy policy practices. Meanwhile, (Shiwen & Ahn, 2024) and (Wichmann et al., 2022) discuss how user control over personal data can strengthen consumer-platform relationships, but their studies have not focused on transparency as a primary ethical issue in e-commerce recommendation systems in Southeast Asia. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by analyzing and comparing digital transparency approaches in recommendation algorithms and their influence on consumer trust across three major platforms in the region: Tokopedia, Shopee, and Lazada.

Based on this background, the study seeks to develop an ethical understanding of algorithmic transparency in digital marketing and to explore how such approaches influence consumer trust in e-commerce platforms. Transparency in this context refers to the extent to which digital platforms explain how personalization algorithms function and the degree to which users are granted control over their data and preferences. In an increasingly complex and automation-driven digital ecosystem, understanding the ethical dimensions of AI-based decision-making is becoming essential for bridging the relationship between technology and consumer values. This

study adopts a literature review and content analysis method, focusing on the privacy policies and recommendation systems of major e-commerce platforms in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the varied approaches employed. The analytical process is supported by AI text mining and LLM-assisted thematic coding, enabling the systematic and data-driven identification of ethical themes. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on digital ethics by offering a new perspective grounded in the local context of Southeast Asia and relevant to the development of responsible digital marketing practices.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Conceptual Framework

1. Recommendation Algorithms and Personalization in AI-Based Digital Marketing

The advancement of AI has become a crucial element in modern digital marketing strategies, particularly through the utilization of recommendation algorithms. These algorithms enable e-commerce platforms to automatically tailor content and product offerings based on user preferences, behavior, and interaction history. According to (Hamada et al., 2022), recommendation systems serve as a bridge between consumers and the vast amount of available information in digital environments by filtering content to make it more relevant and personalized. The algorithmic models employed vary, ranging from collaborative filtering to content-based and hybrid approaches, each with its own advantages depending on the context of use. This dynamic personalization plays a significant role in increasing the likelihood of user engagement with the content presented. The integration of big data in these models also expands the system's capacity to recognize complex and continuously evolving consumer behavior patterns.

Other scholars have also observed that AI-driven personalization not only enhances marketing efficiency but also fosters emotional connections between consumers and digital platforms. (Alimamy & Gnoth, 2022) argue that successful personalization creates more intimate and meaningful experiences for users, as the content displayed appears better aligned with individual needs and desires. When users perceive that the system understands their preferences, the likelihood of interaction and transaction increases. In this context, user experience becomes a critical component in supporting personalization-based digital marketing strategies. The effectiveness of personalization is closely tied to the quality of data collected and the system's accuracy in interpreting various digital behavioral signals from users. Recommendation systems, therefore, serve a dual function: as tools for filtering information and as curators of interaction narratives that align with user expectations.

The predictive approach in recommendation systems reflects a tendency not only to respond to user needs but also to anticipate emerging preferences based on prior interaction patterns. According to (Binlibdah, 2024), AI-based personalization enables the contextual delivery of marketing messages in terms of timing, content, and communication channels. Within this framework, personalization is applied not only to product selection but also to adaptive brand-user communication. These systems simultaneously manage multiple user variables to predict the most relevant content or products for each individual. Such capabilities make recommendation algorithms a central component in fostering deeper consumer engagement. The precision with which algorithms curate relevant content is a key indicator of the overall performance of data-driven digital marketing strategies.

As system capabilities continue to advance, increasing attention is being paid to how users understand and evaluate the recommendation processes operating behind the scenes. Scholars such as (Mauro et al., 2023) emphasize the importance of explainability in recommendation systems, suggesting that users should be able to understand the rationale behind a given recommendation. Such explanations help build the perception that the system operates logically and based on relevant information. Systems that offer this level of transparency are more likely to foster user trust in the digital mechanisms they engage with. User involvement in understanding how the system works also opens the space for perceptions of control and participation in the personalization process. A better understanding of algorithmic foundations can shape more realistic user expectations regarding the content they receive. The interaction between system performance and the perception of information transparency is becoming an increasingly prominent topic in discussions on the sustainability of AI-driven digital marketing.

2. Ethical Principles of Technology: Transparency, Fairness, and Data Ethics

Transparency in the context of digital technology is one of the most widely discussed ethical principles in contemporary literature, particularly in relation to AI-based systems. According to (Wang, 2022), transparency is not solely about the technical disclosure of how systems operate but also about users' ability to comprehend the underlying logic and purpose of algorithmic decisions. Wang explains that overly complex systems often create a gap in understanding between system developers and end-users. Therefore, there is a need for an interpretive rather than merely descriptive approach to transparency. This principle also encompasses the communication between digital platforms and consumers, especially regarding the use of personal data. In the context of e-commerce, the clarity with which platforms explain their personalization algorithms influences how consumers perceive the reliability of the systems they engage with.

Emphasizing transparency highlights the intersection between technological complexity and the growing demand for accessible and comprehensible information.

In addition to transparency, the principle of fairness is a central concern in the ethical discourse surrounding technology, particularly in AI systems deployed in digital marketing. (Kirat et al., 2023) argue that fairness in technological systems should reflect a balanced distribution of benefits and risks while avoiding discriminatory outcomes that may arise from automated processes. The researchers emphasize that systems designed without considering user diversity risk reproducing or even amplifying existing social biases. In the digital marketing context, biased recommendation systems can lead to uneven content distribution or disproportionate targeting of specific demographic groups. The principle of fairness in algorithmic system design is closely linked to how models are developed and how they operate across diverse user data. The presence of bias in these systems underscores the need for ethical reflection from the early stages of technological development.

Data ethics represents another dimension of technological ethics, focusing on how data is collected, used, and stored by digital systems. (Zuboff, 2022) argues that large-scale data collection by technology companies has created a new form of power referred to as “surveillance capitalism,” in which users’ personal data is commodified for economic purposes. Zuboff points out that this practice often occurs without consumers’ full awareness of the extent to which their activities are tracked and analyzed. In the e-commerce setting, practices such as real-time behavioral tracking and third-party cookie usage raise critical issues regarding consent, data ownership, and processing transparency. This ethical dimension reflects the informational asymmetry between technology providers and users, especially concerning the governance of personal data. It highlights the importance of addressing both normative and technical aspects of consumer data collection and processing within digital environments.

Furthermore, ethical principles in technology are increasingly associated with system design that centers human values at the core of digital innovation. According to (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2023), implementing ethical principles such as transparency, fairness, and data ethics requires a comprehensive approach throughout the entire system lifecycle, from design and testing to social deployment. The researchers emphasize that AI systems should not be viewed merely as technical tools but as social actors capable of shaping user behavior and expectations. In digital marketing contexts, these values may be reflected in how platforms communicate with users, establish boundaries around data processing, and adapt algorithmic interactions in alignment with prevailing social norms. Technological ethics, in this sense, concerns the alignment between technical advancement and sensitivity to human values. The relationship between technology and

human values illustrates that systems designed to serve the public must also embody ethical principles that are socially acceptable and justifiable.

B. Previous Research

1. Studies on Algorithmic Transparency and Its Impact on Consumer Trust

Algorithmic transparency has become a major focus in studies examining interactions between users and AI-based systems, particularly in digital environments such as e-commerce. According to Manríquez (Manríquez Roa & Biller-Andorno, 2023), although algorithms are designed to enhance efficiency and personalization, their technical complexity often creates a new form of "black box" that is difficult for ordinary users to comprehend. When users do not understand how a recommendation is generated, skepticism regarding the system's integrity may increase. This lack of clarity can lead to the perception that a platform is manipulative or lacks neutrality in presenting information. In the context of digital marketing, doubts about system transparency have the potential to influence perceptions of the brand and reduce user engagement with the provided content. Studies on algorithmic transparency underscore the importance of understanding the dynamics between automated systems and users' cognitive responses in digital environments.

Other studies indicate that explanations provided by recommendation systems can shape consumer trust in digital platforms. According to (Hoffman et al., 2023), the ability of a system to offer justifications for its recommendations increases user trust, as individuals are able to assess the validity of the logic applied. The researchers developed a framework for explainability encompassing seven functions, including persuasion, transparency, and trust, to evaluate the quality of the explanations provided by systems. Accessible and comprehensible explanations allow users to feel more actively involved in the decision-making process. This mechanism demonstrates that systems that openly explain their processing logic tend to influence users' perceptions of algorithm reliability. This phenomenon reveals a close relationship between algorithmic communication and users' psychological perceptions of control and system clarity.

Several studies also show that consumers' perceptions of algorithmic transparency are strongly influenced by their digital experience and background. According to (Cabiddu et al., 2022), users who feel that systems withhold information or are not forthcoming about how their algorithms work tend to lose trust in the platform, even when the recommendations are content-relevant. In their study on users of personalized news systems, it was found that reactive transparency, such as providing explanations only when questioned, is insufficient to build long-term, trust-based relationships. In contrast, proactive transparency combined with educational approaches has a stronger effect in enhancing users' positive perceptions of the system. The interaction between

users and algorithms in this context fosters a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between system control and user experience. Perceptions of clarity and control over the system are key indicators in fostering user comfort with automatically generated personalization.

Research in the e-commerce context also shows that variations in the level of information disclosure across digital platforms affect consumer loyalty and trust. According to (Low et al., 2023), users are more likely to trust platforms that clearly communicate how their data is used to generate product recommendations. In a survey involving several online shopping platforms, it was found that transparency in privacy policies and the workings of personalization systems is positively correlated with perceptions of fairness and user control. The researchers emphasized that consumers are increasingly aware of the importance of active involvement in digital interactions and appreciate systems that allow them to understand what happens behind the scenes. This approach illustrates that transparency is multidimensional. It is not only a technical feature but also part of the communication process that shapes consumer expectations and responses. The relationship between the information shared by the system and the user's understanding of that information becomes a mutually reinforcing element in building trust.

2. Analysis of Dark Pattern Practices and Ethical Issues in Digital E-Commerce

Dark patterns in e-commerce refer to interface design strategies intended to manipulate user behavior for the benefit of the platform. According to (Kollmer & Eckhardt, 2023), dark patterns are a form of design manipulation that exploits users' cognitive biases, such as making subscription cancellations difficult, concealing important information, or subtly steering users toward certain choices. The researchers classified various types of dark patterns, including forced continuity, hidden costs, and confirmshaming, which are commonly found on online shopping websites and applications. The existence of these practices shifts the relationship between users and platforms from one of voluntary interaction to one characterized by covert pressure. These strategies are not always explicitly noticeable to users, thereby creating an imbalance in understanding the digital decision-making process. In the context of digital marketing, dark patterns are often associated with overly aggressive and insufficiently transparent personalization designs.

The ethical issues arising from the use of dark patterns are closely related to the principles of transparency and user control over their digital experiences. According to (Kim et al., 2023), the application of dark patterns on e-commerce platforms can influence users' decision-making processes in ways they may not fully recognize, raising concerns about the integrity and intentions behind such systems. Their study found that several popular commercial websites employ manipulative tactics such as fake countdown timers or default options that make it difficult for

users to unsubscribe from paid services. The presence of such techniques illustrates that digital design is not ethically neutral but carries strategic elements that influence consumer choices. Thus, interface design becomes a part of the ecosystem that governs user experience, including in contexts of information consumption, purchasing decisions, and digital interaction more broadly. The relationship between users and technology is not solely determined by technical features but also by how ethical values are embedded within the system.

Other researchers have also highlighted that dark patterns are often integrated into AI-based marketing strategies, particularly within personalization systems and recommendation algorithms. According to (Ahuja & Kumar, 2022), aggressively implemented content personalization can lead to systematic manipulation, as users are not always given the option to manage their preferences or opt out of data tracking. In such cases, recommendation systems not only present relevant choices but also guide users toward behavior that benefits the platform without providing clear information. Algorithms that lack explanation or control features reinforce the platform's dominant position over users. This imbalance creates a dilemma between system efficiency and the user's right to a fair and transparent experience. Automation in AI systems may amplify manipulative strategies if not accompanied by adequate ethical design principles.

Studies conducted across various jurisdictions also show that regulations and norms governing dark patterns vary widely, depending on local social and legal contexts. According to (Pollmann et al., 2023), their field experiments revealed that users exposed to manipulative design were more likely to make decisions that conflicted with their own best interests. The researchers observed that while dark patterns can enhance sales effectiveness, they simultaneously reduce user satisfaction and trust in the platform. Within this framework, digital ethics are shaped not only by individual practices in system design but also by prevailing policy frameworks and technological cultures. Users' perceptions of fairness and transparency are not solely formed by technical features but also by social expectations regarding fair and honest treatment by digital service providers. Understanding these issues becomes especially relevant when discussing AI-based digital marketing practices on both global and regional e-commerce platforms. A mapping of key findings from previous studies is presented in Table 1, which summarizes the main focus, contextual background, and ethical contributions of each study.

Table 1. Comparison of Previous Studies on Dark Patterns and Ethical Issues in Digital E-Commerce

Researchers	Research Context	Main Focus	Ethical Findings
(Kollmer & Eckhardt, 2023)	Global e-commerce interface design	Classification and identification of dark patterns	Dark patterns exploit users' cognitive biases through manipulative design

(Kim et al., 2023)	Popular commercial websites (U.S.)	Exploration of manipulative techniques in UI	Tactics such as fake countdowns undermine the integrity of digital interactions.
(Ahuja & Kumar, 2022)	Personalization algorithms and AI marketing	Personalization and user control	Information asymmetry reinforces platform dominance
(Pollmann et al., 2023)	Field experiments on U.S. consumers	Effects of dark patterns on consumer decision-making	Manipulative design increases conversion but decreases user trust

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a comparative qualitative approach by combining literature review and document content analysis methods. This approach was selected for its relevance in examining the dynamics of digital communication, which are not only textual but also embedded with values and strategies for representing information. The primary focus of this approach is to explore and compare how e-commerce platforms implement transparency principles in their privacy policies and AI-based recommendation systems. In this research, understanding the social and technical contexts embedded within documents serves as a crucial foundation for interpretation. The analysis is conducted not only to reflect the surface content of the texts but also to trace implicit meanings that reveal the direction of policy and the ethical responsibilities of the platforms. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how ethical policy representations are embedded within the institutional narratives of each digital company.

The objects of analysis in this study consist of privacy policies, recommendation system guidelines, and other documents related to algorithmic system usage from three major e-commerce platforms in Southeast Asia: Tokopedia, Shopee, and Lazada. These documents represent official sources of information published by each platform and substantially reflect the institutional stance on privacy and AI-based personalization. All documents were obtained directly from the official websites of the respective companies between January and March 2024 to ensure the currency of content and consistency between public policies and their technological implementation. The selection of documents focused on the most recent publicly accessible versions, as these represent institutional transparency. The availability of documents in both Indonesian and English was also considered in the selection process to ensure accessibility and ease of interpretation. The detailed characteristics of each analyzed document are presented in Table 2 to support the methodological clarity of this research.

Table 2. Description of Analyzed Documents

Platform	Document Type	Most Recent Version (Year)	Language	Length (words)
Tokopedia	Privacy Policy & AI FAQ	2024	ID	2.300

Shopee	Privacy Policy & Services	2023	ID	1.900
Lazada	Terms & AI Recommendations	2024	EN/ID	2.700

The analysis process involved two complementary techniques. The first technique was AI-assisted content analysis, a form of content analysis supported by advanced Large Language Model (LLM) technologies to automatically extract dominant topics and key terms. This technology enabled researchers to identify semantic structures within the documents with extensive coverage and high precision. The tools used in this process were ChatGPT-4 (OpenAI) and Claude AI (Anthropic), operated in exploratory mode to uncover narrative patterns and thematic repetitions within the policy texts under analysis. The use of this technology served as a support mechanism in understanding how policy language is constructed to communicate—or obscure—information regarding recommendation systems. The results of the initial extraction were then used as a starting point for more focused thematic categorization. This stage played a critical role in constructing an initial framework for understanding ethical communication structures in digital platforms.

The second technique employed is thematic coding, aimed at identifying and categorizing key themes related to digital ethics within the context of e-commerce. The themes examined include algorithmic transparency, user control over personal data, and the clarity of explanations regarding the functioning of recommendation systems implemented by the platforms. This coding process was conducted through repeated readings of the texts, both explicitly through direct statements and implicitly through narratives or policy configurations conveyed in the documents. The units of analysis used were sentences and paragraphs, which served as the smallest meaningful components for uncovering representations of ethical values in corporate policies. This unit was chosen to capture linguistic nuances while also identifying how meaning is constructed and framed by platforms to articulate their digital responsibilities. The coding process was carried out iteratively to ensure that the thematic variations that emerged reflected the distinctiveness of each document and were capable of highlighting the differences in how platforms frame AI-based digital marketing ethics.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the results generated by the LLM were validated through manual reading by two independent researchers, who compared the consistency of emerging themes. Each researcher conducted an independent identification of patterns and meanings within the text to ensure that the outcomes were not merely products of automated interpretation. This manual review was performed in stages, including re-evaluating the main

themes extracted by the system and matching them against relevant excerpts from the documents. Subsequently, a peer debriefing session was held between the researchers to reach an agreement on the thematic categories and interpretations of the results, as well as to mitigate interpretative bias. These discussions also included clarifying terminology, testing the consistency of themes across documents, and reinforcing the interpretive framework used throughout the analysis. Through this procedure, the coding process not only reflects the outputs of AI technology but also demonstrates the depth of human critical reflection on the dynamics of ethical representation in the digital policies under examination.

IV. RESULT

A. Results

This study aims to analyze and compare the level of transparency in digital policies across three major e-commerce platforms in Southeast Asia: Shopee, Tokopedia, and Lazada. The central focus of the analysis is how each platform implements digital ethics principles, particularly in terms of algorithmic transparency, user control, and policy readability. These three aspects were selected because they represent key elements in constructing ethical communication that can influence consumer perceptions and trust in AI-based recommendation systems. In this context, transparency refers to the extent to which users understand how algorithms operate, the degree of control they have over their preferences, and how easily the policies can be read and understood. The selection of these platforms was based on their market dominance in Southeast Asia and the availability of policy documentation that allows for comparative analysis. The analysis employed a qualitative approach using content analysis methods, focusing on policy narratives and features related to digital ethics in the use of AI technology.

A thematic analysis of privacy policy documents and platform features revealed significant variation in how each company addresses transparency issues. Shopee demonstrated the highest level of transparency among the three platforms, offering relatively comprehensive explanations of how its recommendation algorithms work, providing user preference settings, and using accessible language in its privacy policy. Lazada occupied a middle position, with a limited explanation of its algorithmic systems and less comprehensive control options, although the overall structure of its policies remained relatively accessible. In contrast, Tokopedia showed the lowest level of transparency, characterized by minimal technical detail regarding its recommendation systems, the absence of user preference controls, and the use of legalistic language that is difficult for general users to comprehend. These findings are summarized in Table 3, which presents a thematic comparison of the transparency levels across the three platforms based on the three analyzed ethical dimensions.

Table 3. Thematic Comparison of Platform Transparency Levels

Ethical Theme	Shopee	Lazada	Tokopedia
Algorithmic Transparency	High	Medium	Low
User Control	High	Low	None
Policy Readability	High	Medium	Low

These findings are further visualized in Figure 1, presented as a bar chart to illustrate the distribution of transparency scores for each platform across the predefined categories. The chart provides a visual comparison of the platforms in the three key dimensions: algorithmic transparency, user control, and policy readability. This graphic representation is intended to facilitate readers’ understanding of the differing approaches adopted by each platform in relation to digital ethics. The values used in the chart are derived from thematic coding based on the content analysis of publicly available policy documents and platform features. Each bar reflects the general tendencies of each platform in addressing ethical concerns surrounding the use of AI technologies. The visualization also assists in identifying patterns and trends that may not be immediately apparent through narrative description alone.

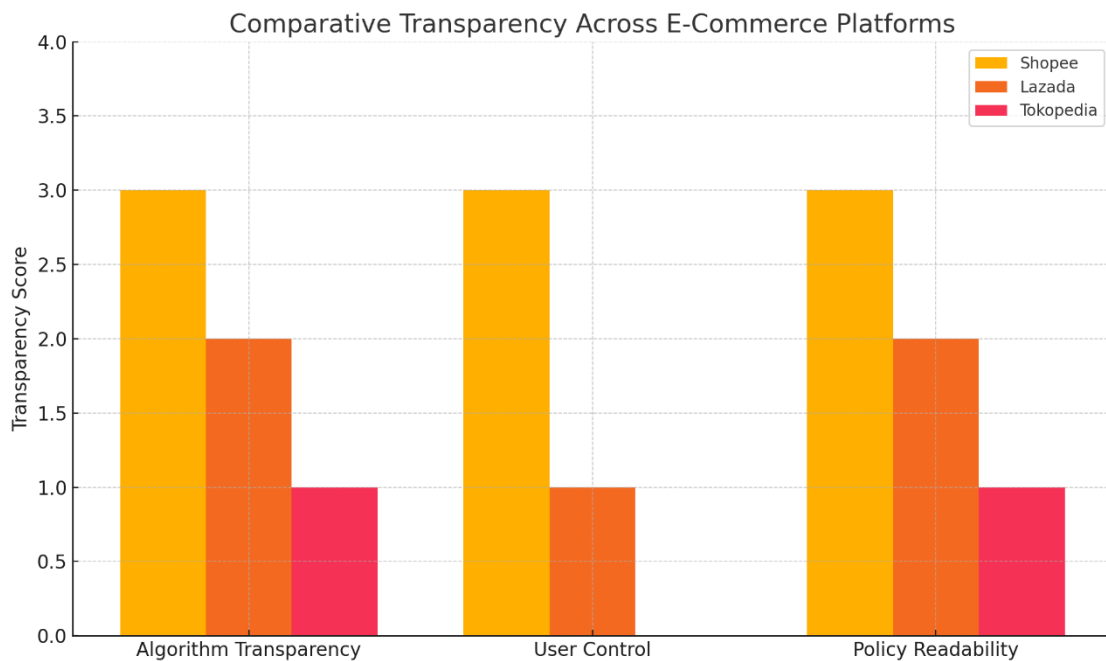


Figure 1. Visualization of Comparative Transparency Levels Across Platforms

Figure 1 presents a comparative overview of the transparency levels of digital policies across three leading e-commerce platforms in Southeast Asia—Shopee, Lazada, and Tokopedia—based on three key indicators: algorithmic transparency, user control, and policy readability. The data illustrated in the chart shows that Shopee consistently scores the highest across all three

categories, indicating a more open and communicative approach in conveying information related to AI-based recommendation systems. Lazada occupies a moderate position with average scores, while Tokopedia demonstrates the lowest scores, particularly in terms of algorithmic transparency and policy readability. This pattern reflects the variation in each platform's commitment to digital ethics, especially in providing clear information and adequate user control. The chart reinforces the study's findings, highlighting the importance of clarity and information accessibility as critical factors in shaping users' perceptions of transparency. As such, this visualization functions as a quantitative representation of the qualitative evaluation conducted on the public policies displayed by each platform.

As part of the analytical findings, this study also maps the thematic relationships between ethical elements, perceived transparency, consumer trust, and user loyalty. This mapping aims to illustrate how ethical digital policy components can influence users' psychological responses and behavioral outcomes toward the systems employed by the platforms. Ethical elements such as clarity in algorithmic explanations, the availability of preference controls, and the use of inclusive, non-technical language contribute to enhancing users' perceptions of transparency. When users perceive openness in the provision of information, they tend to develop a higher level of trust in the platform. This trust encompasses the belief that the system operates fairly, is non-exploitative, and is accountable for user data. This understanding is structurally visualized in Figure 2, which outlines the thematic flow of relationships from ethical principles to user loyalty.

AI Marketing Ethics

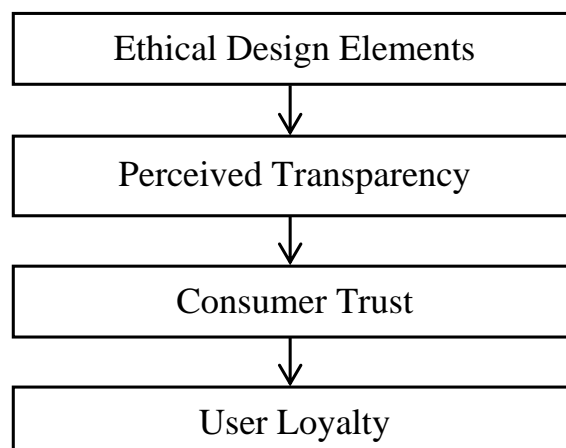


Figure 2. Thematic Map of AI Marketing Ethics

Figure 2 illustrates that strengthening ethical aspects within digital systems—particularly those related to transparency and user control—has strategic implications for shaping positive consumer

experiences. Transparency serves as a foundational element that enables users to comprehend how AI-based systems within e-commerce platforms make automated decisions. When users feel they have control over their data and preferences, the experience becomes more personalized and secure. The relationship between transparency and loyalty does not occur directly; rather, it is mediated by the degree of trust that is cultivated through honest and open communication. This trust reflects users' evaluations of system integrity and the extent to which they believe the platform acts in the consumers' best interest. The presence of ethical elements at the initial stage of interaction plays a critical role in forming more positive perceptions of the platform and encourages the continuation of the user-platform relationship within the digital environment.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal significant differences in the approaches to algorithmic transparency adopted by the three major e-commerce platforms in Southeast Asia. Shopee emerges as the platform with the highest level of transparency, both in terms of explaining its recommendation system and in providing user preference settings. This is consistent with the findings of (Hoffman et al., 2023), who argue that openness of information influences perceptions of fairness and user control. The findings also reinforce the argument of (Hoffman et al., 2023), who state that systems capable of offering justifications or explanations that are understandable to users are more likely to be trusted, as they facilitate the assessment of the reasoning behind algorithmic recommendations. In contrast, Tokopedia demonstrates the lowest level of transparency, characterized by limited technical information and overly legalistic policy language, which has the potential to create comprehension gaps, as highlighted by (Manríguez Roa & Biller-Andorno, 2023) regarding the “black box” phenomenon in algorithmic systems. This disparity indicates that variations in policy communication approaches contribute to how users perceive digital ethics, particularly in relation to trust and a sense of security in the use of personal data. This study also affirms that the readability of policy documents plays a crucial role in bridging the complexity of systems with public understanding, as emphasized by (Mauro et al., 2023) within the framework of explainability in recommendation systems.

The content analysis also shows that user control over recommendation preferences is a critical factor in trust formation, which aligns with the findings of (Shiwen & Ahn, 2024) concerning the importance of user involvement in enhancing the quality of engagement with digital platforms. Shopee is the only platform that explicitly provides a preference-setting feature, whereas Lazada offers a limited version, and Tokopedia provides none at all. This situation illustrates that the design of ethical policies is not solely related to the content of the policy narrative but is also closely linked to the translation of ethical values into accessible user features. This supports the

argument of (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2023), who emphasize the necessity of integrating ethical principles throughout the entire system lifecycle, from design to implementation. Moreover, this finding intersects with (Zuboff, 2022) critique of surveillance capitalism, in which the lack of user control heightens the risk of data exploitation by platforms. The variation in transparency approaches indicates that ethical principles such as openness, fairness, and user control have not been equally internalized by each platform within the context of Southeast Asia's digital marketplace.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study reveals that ethical practices in digital marketing are closely linked to the extent to which e-commerce platforms provide transparency regarding the algorithms they employ and offer users control over their data and preferences. The level of information openness, clarity of technical explanations, and ease of access to preference settings are key factors in shaping consumer trust toward AI-based recommendation systems. An analysis of three major platforms in Southeast Asia indicates significant differences in the application of these principles, with Shopee demonstrating the most transparent approach, followed by Lazada, while Tokopedia ranks the lowest. These differences not only reflect variations in technical policy but also highlight disparities in the commitment to digital ethical principles among the platforms. The lack of algorithmic explanation and the absence of preference control features in some platforms have the potential to undermine consumer trust, especially when the systems in use tend to be opaque and uncommunicative. Therefore, it is essential for all digital service providers to reassess how the policies and features they design can reflect ethical responsibility in user interaction.

Based on these findings, it is necessary to consider the development of regional digital ethics standards that specifically govern the transparency of algorithmic systems on digital platforms. Such standards could serve as a reference for technology companies in formulating policies that not only comply with regulations but are also responsive to users' needs and expectations in the context of transparency and fairness. Furthermore, a user-centered ethical design approach should be integrated into every stage of technology development, from system design to implementation. Features such as easily understandable recommendation explanations, preference-setting options, and communicative privacy policies will enhance users' sense of security when engaging with digital services. To enrich the understanding of consumer experiences and perceptions, future research is recommended to incorporate qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or user observations, which can offer deeper contextual insights. This approach will help broaden the scope of analysis while supporting the development of digital

policies that are more adaptive, inclusive, and ethically grounded amid the rapid transformation driven by AI technologies.

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