

DOI: https://doi.org/10.48009/1_iis_2026_101

An historical perspective and conceptualization of AI cyberculture: Ethical foundations, governance, and empirical propositions

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly embedded in organizational decision-making, digital communication, and cultural production. This paper develops a historically grounded conceptualization of AI cyberculture—the shared norms, values, symbolic practices, and power relations that emerge from sustained human–AI interaction in networked environments. Synthesizing scholarship in information systems, cyberculture studies, and AI ethics, we propose a multidimensional framework with four interrelated dimensions: historical continuity, algorithmic mediation, cultural production, and governance. We foreground ethics by linking these dimensions to convergent normative principles (e.g., fairness, transparency/explicability, accountability, privacy, robustness, and human agency) and to governance instruments such as the OECD Recommendation on AI, the U.S. Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights, and the NIST AI Risk Management Framework (Floridi & Cows, 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019; Tabassi, 2023; White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022). The paper offers eighteen empirically testable propositions and associated constructs to support mixed-methods research on trust, legitimacy, identity, and power in AI-mediated settings. Implications are discussed for organizations and policymakers seeking to institutionalize responsible AI practices.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, cyberculture, IT ethics, algorithmic governance, socio technical systems

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become deeply embedded in the infrastructures that support modern organizations, governments, and everyday social life. Recommendation systems curate information consumption, machine learning models automate decision making, and generative AI systems increasingly participate in symbolic production once considered uniquely human (Burrell, 2016; Jin, 2021). These developments have prompted widespread debate regarding automation, employment displacement, surveillance, privacy, creativity, and human agency.

Despite the intensity of contemporary concern, the assumption that AI represents an entirely novel phenomenon obscures important historical continuities. From early mechanical automata to industrial automation and digital computing, societies have repeatedly confronted technologies that challenge established cultural norms and ethical frameworks. The persistence of similar anxieties across time suggests that AI should be understood not solely as a technical breakthrough, but as part of a broader historical pattern of socio technical transformation (Ali et al., 2023).

Within information systems (IS) research, AI is frequently examined through lenses of efficiency, adoption, system performance, and governance. While these perspectives are essential, they are insufficient for explaining how AI reshapes meaning, identity, and social interaction. Traditional cyberculture research emphasized human to human interaction mediated by digital networks. AI introduces a critical shift: non human agents now participate directly in cultural processes, influencing communication, knowledge creation, and social organization.

Early evidence from human–computer interaction shows that even relatively simple conversational systems can elicit anthropomorphic attributions and interpersonal responses, encouraging users to treat the system as a social actor (Weizenbaum, 1966, 1976; Nass et al., 1994; Reeves & Nass, 1996). In contemporary generative AI contexts, this tendency raises ethical concerns about manipulation, over-trust, and inappropriate delegation of moral judgment to automated systems (Floridi, 2023; Tabassi, 2023).

In addition, reliance on AI tools for writing, recall, and problem-solving can be interpreted through the lens of cognitive offloading: the strategic use of external resources to reduce internal cognitive demands (Risko & Gilbert, 2016). From a related perspective, the “extended mind” thesis argues that cognition can be distributed across brains, bodies, and external artifacts (Clark & Chalmers, 1998). Research on the “Google effect” suggests that when individuals expect information to remain externally accessible, they may show reduced memory for the information itself and greater memory for where it can be retrieved (Sparrow et al., 2011). Within AI cyberculture, the ethical question is not simply whether offloading occurs, but whether socio-technical design and educational practices preserve human agency, critical thinking, and accountability for consequential decisions (Tabassi, 2023; White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022).

Popular and managerial narratives often portray AI as a general-purpose solution for productivity, creativity, and even interpersonal understanding. Yet these narratives can obscure well-documented socio-technical risks: algorithmic management that shifts power toward platform owners and employers; expanded surveillance and datafication of work; and contested claims regarding affect recognition and emotion inference from biometric signals (Burrell, 2016; Barocas et al., 2023; Tabassi, 2023). Such dynamics are central to AI cyberculture because they shape what counts as legitimate knowledge, how authority is assigned, and how ethical responsibility is distributed across humans and machines.

This paper argues that a historically informed conceptualization of AI cyberculture is necessary to understand these transformations. The study addresses three guiding research questions:

- 1. How has AI evolved historically as a socio technical system?**
- 2. How does AI cyberculture differ from earlier forms of digital cyberculture?**
- 3. What ethical and governance challenges arise from AI cyberculture?**

By integrating historical analysis with cybercultural theory and IT ethics, this paper advances a conceptual framework and empirical propositions to guide future research.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

AI has long been a subject of interest within IS scholarship, particularly in decision support systems, expert systems, and automation. Early IS research emphasized AI’s potential to improve organizational efficiency and decision quality. However, as AI systems became more complex and data driven, scholars began to highlight issues of opacity, bias, and accountability (Burrell, 2016; Barocas et al., 2023).

Machine learning systems operate through probabilistic inference rather than explicit rules, making their internal logic difficult to interpret even for designers. This “black box” characteristic raises ethical concerns regarding explainability, trust, and responsibility (Burrell, 2016; Tabassi, 2023). As AI systems increasingly influence hiring, credit allocation, healthcare, and policing, these concerns extend beyond technical performance into the realm of social justice and ethics (Barocas et al., 2023; White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022).

Cyberculture and Digital Mediation

Cyberculture research emerged alongside the expansion of the internet and emphasized online identity, virtual communities, and digitally mediated social interaction. Foundational work examined how networked environments reshape community formation, identity play, and the social organization of communication (Bell, 2001; Castells, 2001; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995). Early cyberculture scholars conceptualized digital environments as spaces where humans experimented with identity, community, and meaning, with humans assumed to remain the primary agents of cultural production.

AI disrupts this assumption. Algorithms now curate information flows, prioritize visibility, and generate cultural artifacts. This shift transforms cyberculture from a human centered phenomenon into a hybrid human-machine cultural system (Burrell, 2016). Larson (2021) argues that Michael Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowledge challenges strong claims that AI can fully replicate human understanding, because much human skill and judgment remains context-dependent, embodied, and not readily formalized.

Philosophical Foundations and Ethical Debate

Philosophical debates surrounding AI intelligence and consciousness provide critical context for understanding AI cyberculture. Turing’s functionalist perspective framed intelligence as observable behavior (Turing, 1950), while critics such as Searle argued that syntactic manipulation cannot produce semantic understanding (Searle, 1980). These debates re emerge in contemporary discussions of generative AI, which convincingly simulates understanding without possessing consciousness or intentionality.

AI ethics scholarship emphasizes that ethical issues are not reducible to metaphysical claims about whether machines “really” understand, but instead concern the governance of socio-technical systems deployed in contexts of power, risk, and unequal impact. Comparative reviews of AI ethics guidelines show strong convergence on principles such as transparency, accountability, privacy, fairness, and human agency, alongside persistent gaps in enforcement and operationalization (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Hagendorff, 2020; Jobin et al., 2019).

Historical Evolution of Artificial Intelligence

Human fascination with artificial intelligence predates modern computing. Myths of artificial beings, mechanical automata, and enchanted objects reflect enduring cultural desires to replicate intelligence. These narratives establish a cultural foundation that later technological developments would activate (Ali et al., 2023). The formalization of computation in the twentieth century transformed these aspirations into scientific inquiry. Alan Turing’s work on computability and machine intelligence provided a theoretical framework that treated intelligence as an operational property rather than a metaphysical essence (Turing, 1950).

The Dartmouth Paradigm and Symbolic AI

The 1956 Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence is widely treated as a foundational institutional moment for the field. Early researchers believed that human level intelligence could be achieved through symbolic reasoning and formal logic, reflecting broader cultural confidence in rationalism and scientific progress (McCarthy et al., 2006).

However, symbolic AI systems struggled with ambiguity, context, and learning. These limitations led to growing skepticism and eventual funding withdrawals.

AI Winters and Cultural Disillusionment

The so called AI winters of the 1970s and 1980s illustrate how technological development is shaped by cultural expectations and institutional support. Unrealistic promises generated disillusionment when progress failed to match predictions. Influential evaluations—such as the Lighthill report in the United Kingdom—contributed to funding contractions and shifts in research agendas (Lighthill, 1973). Importantly, AI winters were not periods of stagnation but of recalibration.

Data Driven AI and the Rise of Machine Learning

The resurgence of AI in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries was driven by advances in machine learning, computational power, and data availability. High profile successes such as Deep Blue's 1997 match victory against Garry Kasparov and AlphaGo's later achievements symbolized a shift from rule based intelligence to statistical learning and search at scale (Campbell et al., 2002; Silver et al., 2016).

Generative AI as a Cultural Inflection Point

Generative AI represents a qualitative shift in AI history. Unlike earlier systems, generative models directly participate in cultural production by creating text, images, music, and code. This capacity accelerates the emergence of AI cyberculture by embedding AI systems in meaning making processes and creative labor (Jin, 2021; Floridi, 2023).

Conceptualizing AI Cyberculture

AI cyberculture is defined as the socio technical ecosystem in which artificial intelligence systems actively shape cultural norms, symbolic practices, organizational behavior, and power relations within networked digital environments.

Core Dimensions of AI Cyberculture

1. **Algorithmic Mediation** – AI systems filter, rank, and generate information, shaping perception and attention (Burrell, 2016).
2. **Datafication** – Human behavior is translated into data for predictive modeling (Barocas et al., 2023).
3. **Non Human Agency** – AI systems act as quasi participants in social and cultural processes.
4. **Power Asymmetry** – Control over data and algorithms is concentrated among powerful institutions (Barocas et al., 2023; Zuboff, 2019).

AI Cyberculture and Cultural Production

AI cyberculture reshapes creativity by introducing machine generated artifacts into cultural ecosystems. This challenges traditional notions of authorship, originality, and labor value. Human interaction with AI systems increasingly resembles social interaction. Users attribute agency, authority, and trust to algorithmic outputs, even when understanding of system limitations is limited—a dynamic consistent with findings that people apply social heuristics to computers and media when given minimal social cues (Nass et al., 1994; Reeves & Nass, 1996; Weizenbaum, 1976).

Ethics and Governance in AI Cyberculture

Normative foundations: from principles to socio-technical practice

Ethical analysis of AI cyberculture requires moving beyond compliance checklists toward a socio-technical understanding of how values are embedded in design choices, data practices, institutional incentives, and everyday use. A convergent set of ethical principles appears across major frameworks, including beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability (i.e., intelligibility and accountability) (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). In AI cyberculture, these principles become culturally operative norms: what users perceive as fair treatment, what organizations treat as “acceptable” opacity, and how responsibility is attributed when AI-generated outputs influence decisions.

Governance instruments: accountability mechanisms

AI governance frameworks increasingly emphasize risk-based oversight across the AI lifecycle. The OECD Recommendation on Artificial Intelligence promotes inclusive growth, human rights, transparency/explainability, robustness, and accountability (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). The U.S. Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights highlights protections against unsafe systems, algorithmic discrimination, abusive data practices, and inadequate notice/explanation (White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022). The NIST AI Risk Management Framework operationalizes governance through functions such as govern, map, measure, and manage, encouraging organizations to document intended use, assess impacts, and implement monitoring and incident response (Tabassi, 2023). Within AI cyberculture, these instruments matter not only as external constraints but as signals that shape organizational legitimacy, user expectations, and public trust (Burrell, 2016).

Ethical risks in generative AI: authorship, epistemic quality, and manipulation

Generative AI intensifies ethical questions about authorship and epistemic quality because it can produce plausible text at scale while lacking intent or truth-commitment. This can amplify risks of misinformation, fabricated citations, and over-reliance on outputs perceived as authoritative (Burrell, 2016; Tabassi, 2023). From an ethics perspective, the core challenge is maintaining human accountability for downstream use while also providing users with transparency regarding provenance, limitations, and uncertainty. These issues are directly linked to the paper’s constructs of cultural production ambiguity and anthropomorphic attribution, and to propositions concerning trust calibration and perceived authority (P6–P8, P14).

Datafication: privacy and power asymmetry

Datafication—the translation of human behavior into data for prediction and control—creates ethical tensions around privacy, consent, and distributive justice. Because data and model development are typically centralized, AI cyberculture often reproduces power asymmetries between those who are measured and those who measure, between model users and model subjects, and between dominant institutions and marginalized groups (Barocas et al., 2023). Governance approaches therefore require not only technical safeguards (e.g., security, monitoring, audit trails) but also procedural safeguards, such as impact assessments, stakeholder participation, and contestability mechanisms aligned with anti-discrimination and human-rights commitments (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019; Tabassi, 2023; White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022).

Empirical Propositions

To guide future research, the following propositions are advanced.

- **Historical continuity (P1–P2):** Historical awareness and institutional memory shape perceived AI risk and reduce adoption anxiety.
- **Algorithmic mediation (P3–P4):** Greater AI mediation can reduce perceived human agency, while transparency strengthens appropriately calibrated trust.

- **Cultural production (P5–P6):** AI-generated content blurs human–machine creativity boundaries, but authorship ambiguity can erode trust in AI-produced knowledge.
- **Identity and interaction (P7–P8, P18):** Conversational AI increases anthropomorphism, which elevates perceived authority; sustained generative-AI exposure also reshapes professional identity.
- **Power and governance (P9–P10, P17):** Concentrated AI control undermines trust and increases calls for regulation; governance awareness can improve acceptance.
- **Organizational ethics (P11–P16):** Ethics frameworks, training, and institutionalized governance increase trust, legitimacy, and acceptance; culture and experience shape trust calibration over time.

Historical Continuity

- **P1:** Perceived societal risk associated with AI is positively related to historical awareness of prior technological disruptions (Ali et al., 2023).
- **P2:** Organizations with greater institutional memory of past automation initiatives exhibit lower levels of AI adoption anxiety (Ali et al., 2023).

Algorithmic Mediation

- **P3:** Greater reliance on AI-mediated information systems is associated with reduced perceived human agency in decision-making (Tabassi, 2023; White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022).
- **P4:** Transparency of AI systems moderates the relationship between algorithmic mediation and user trust (Burrell, 2016; Lee & See, 2004).

Cultural Production

- **P5:** Exposure to AI-generated content reduces perceived boundaries between human and machine creativity (Floridi, 2023; Jin, 2021).
- **P6:** Perceived authorship ambiguity negatively affects trust in AI-generated knowledge artifacts (Burrell, 2016; Tabassi, 2023).

Identity and Interaction

- **P7:** Increased interaction with conversational AI systems is positively related to anthropomorphic attribution (Nass et al., 1994; Reeves & Nass, 1996; Weizenbaum, 1976).
- **P8:** Anthropomorphic attribution mediates the relationship between AI use and perceived system authority (Nass et al., 1994; Reeves & Nass, 1996).

Power and Governance

- **P9:** Perceived concentration of AI control is negatively related to public trust in AI governance (Barocas et al., 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019).
- **P10:** Regulatory awareness positively moderates acceptance of AI systems (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019; White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022).

Organizational Ethics

- **P11:** Organizations with formal AI ethics frameworks demonstrate higher employee trust in AI systems (Floridi & Cows, 2019; Jobin et al., 2019).
- **P12:** Ethical training moderates the relationship between AI system opacity and perceived organizational legitimacy (Burrell, 2016; Suchman, 1995; Victor & Cullen, 1988).
- **P13:** Cross-Cultural AI Cyberculture—Cultural context moderates the relationship between algorithmic mediation and trust in AI systems, such that collectivist cultures exhibit higher trust in centralized AI decision-making than individualist cultures (Chien et al., 2018; Hofstede, 2001).

Rationale: Cultural norms shape attitudes toward authority, automation, and risk, influencing AI acceptance (Hofstede, 2001; Lee & See, 2004).

- **P14:** Longitudinal Trust Calibration—Over time, repeated interaction with AI systems leads to trust recalibration, reducing both over-reliance and under-utilization (Hoff & Bashir, 2015; Jian et al., 2000; Lee & See, 2004; Parasuraman & Riley, 1997). *Rationale:* Trust evolves through experience, feedback, and outcome evaluation (Hoff & Bashir, 2015; Lee & See, 2004).
- **P15:** Ethical Institutionalization—Organizations that institutionalize AI ethics through formal policies exhibit lower employee resistance to AI adoption (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Jobin et al., 2019; Tabassi, 2023). *Rationale:* Ethical clarity reduces uncertainty and moral ambiguity, strengthening conditions for appropriate reliance and accountability (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Tabassi, 2023).
- **P16:** Transparency and Legitimacy—Algorithmic transparency positively influences perceived organizational legitimacy through increased trust in AI systems (Burrell, 2016; Lee & See, 2004; Suchman, 1995). *Rationale:* Explainability supports accountability and fairness perceptions (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Tabassi, 2023).
- **P17:** Power Awareness and Resistance—Perceived concentration of AI power is positively associated with public demand for regulatory intervention (Barocas et al., 2023; Zuboff, 2019). *Rationale:* Awareness of asymmetrical power structures increases calls for governance and contestability (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).
- **P18:** Generative AI and Identity—Increased exposure to generative AI content weakens perceived boundaries between human and machine creativity, influencing professional identity in knowledge work (Floridi, 2023; Jin, 2021). *Rationale:* AI participation in creative tasks reshapes identity norms and expectations about authorship and expertise (Floridi, 2023; Jin, 2021).

Constructs and Measures

Table 1. Core Constructs, Definitions, and Sample Measures

Construct	Definition	Sample Measurement Items (Likert-type)
Historical Consciousness	Awareness of AI as part of historical technological continuity	“AI represents a continuation of past technological change.”
Algorithmic Mediation	Degree to which AI filters information and decisions	“Algorithms strongly shape what information I see.”
Perceived Human Agency	Sense of retained control when using AI	“I remain in control when using AI systems.”
Cultural Production Ambiguity	Uncertainty about authorship and originality	“It is unclear who is responsible for AI-generated content.”
Anthropomorphic Attribution	Attribution of human-like qualities to AI	“AI systems seem to understand users.”
Trust in AI Systems	Willingness to rely on AI outputs	“I trust AI recommendations even without knowing how they work.”
Perceived Power Concentration	Belief that AI control is centralized	“A few organizations control most AI technologies.”
Ethical Governance Awareness	Awareness of AI laws and ethical guidelines	“I am familiar with AI governance regulations.”
Organizational Ethical Climate	Perceived ethical orientation of AI use	“My organization prioritizes ethical AI use.”

Discussion

Overview of Contributions

This study advances Information Systems scholarship by conceptualizing **AI cyberculture** as a historically grounded socio-technical phenomenon rather than a purely technical innovation. While much contemporary research treats AI as a discrete artifact, this paper demonstrates that AI is embedded within long-standing cultural narratives, institutional power structures, and ethical frameworks. By synthesizing historical analysis, cyberculture theory, and IT ethics, the study extends existing IS literature in three important ways. First, the paper introduces **AI cyberculture** as a distinct analytical construct that captures how AI systems participate directly in cultural production, identity formation, and organizational decision-making. Second, it provides a **multi-level conceptual framework** that integrates individual, organizational, and societal dimensions of AI use. Third, the paper advances **eighteen empirically testable propositions** that transform abstract ethical concerns into researchable constructs, addressing a frequent critique of conceptual IS research.

Theoretical Implications for Information Systems Research

Reframing AI as a Cultural System

A central theoretical contribution of this study lies in reframing AI from a tool-centric perspective to a **cultural system perspective**. Traditional IS research often evaluates AI in terms of efficiency, accuracy, or adoption. While valuable, such approaches obscure how AI reshapes meaning, authority, and trust. The concept of AI cyberculture highlights that AI systems do not merely support human activity; they actively mediate it. This reframing responds to growing calls within IS scholarship to move beyond functionalist analyses and engage more deeply with socio-technical complexity. By positioning AI as a cultural actor, this paper bridges gaps between IS, digital sociology, and technology ethics.

Historical Continuity and Theoretical Maturity

Another contribution is the explicit incorporation of **historical continuity** into AI theory. Rather than treating current AI developments as unprecedented, the framework situates them within recurring patterns of technological disruption, moral panic, and institutional adaptation. This historical grounding strengthens theoretical maturity by preventing presentist bias and enabling longitudinal analysis.

The propositions related to historical consciousness (P1–P2) invite empirical examination of how awareness of past technologies influences contemporary AI attitudes, a dimension largely absent from existing IS models.

Ethics as a Structural, Not Peripheral, Concern

This study treats ethics not as an afterthought but as a **structural dimension** of AI cyberculture. Ethical concerns—such as transparency, accountability, and power concentration—are embedded directly into the conceptual framework and operationalized through measurable constructs. The expanded propositions (P13–P18) extend ethical analysis beyond individual moral judgment to institutional legitimacy, regulatory demand, and identity transformation. This approach aligns with ethics scholarship emphasizing that harms and responsibilities are produced systemically through design choices, data practices, and organizational governance—not solely through individual intentions (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Hagendorff, 2020; Jobin et al., 2019).

Power, Trust, and Legitimacy

Findings implied by the framework suggest that **trust in AI systems is inseparable from perceptions of power and governance**. Concentration of AI control among a small number of organizations risks eroding

legitimacy and increasing public demand for regulation (Suchman, 1995; Zuboff, 2019). Conversely, transparency and ethical institutionalization can enhance trust and reduce resistance, particularly when organizations provide meaningful information about system limits and implement governance practices for ongoing monitoring and accountability (Burrell, 2016; Lee & See, 2004; Tabassi, 2023).

Implications for Practice

This framework enables mixed-methods research designs, including surveys, experiments, ethnographies, and longitudinal studies. For practitioners, this research underscores the importance of **ethical infrastructure** in AI deployment. Organizations that proactively establish AI ethics frameworks, transparency mechanisms, and employee education programs are more likely to foster trust and acceptance.

Professional Identity and Workforce Development

The study also highlights identity implications for knowledge workers. As generative AI blurs boundaries between human and machine creativity, organizations must address evolving professional identities through training, role redefinition, and ethical dialogue.

Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual paper, this study does not report empirical findings. Instead, it provides a structured agenda for future research. Empirical validation of the proposed constructs and propositions is necessary across cultural, organizational, and temporal contexts.

Future research should:

- Conduct longitudinal studies of trust calibration (Hoff & Bashir, 2015; Lee & See, 2004)
- Examine cross-cultural variation in AI cyberculture (Chien et al., 2018; Hofstede, 2001)
- Explore sector-specific ethical dynamics using risk management and impact assessment approaches (Tabassi, 2023; White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022)

Conclusion

This paper argues that AI cyberculture represents not a rupture from history, but an acceleration of long-standing socio-technical dynamics. By grounding AI within historical continuity, cultural mediation, and ethical governance, the study provides a theoretical foundation for future IS research and practice. AI's societal impact will ultimately be shaped not by algorithms alone, but by the cultural and ethical choices surrounding their design and use, including transparency, accountability, and safeguards against discrimination and abuse (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019; Tabassi, 2023; White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022). By situating AI within its historical and cultural context, this paper provides a foundation for ethical, empirical, and organizational inquiry. A conceptual model of AI cyberculture is, in summary, proposed in Figure 1.

					SOCIETAL				
					ORGANIZATIONAL				
					INDIVIDUAL				

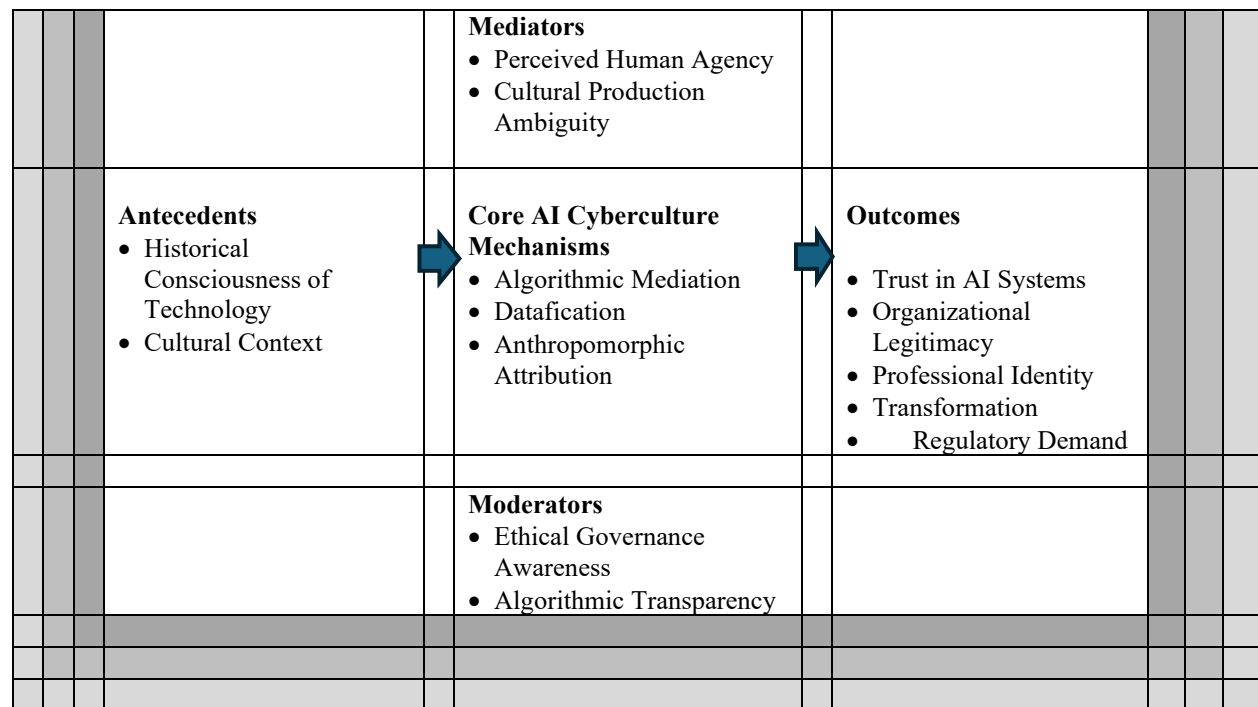


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of AI CyberCulture

This figure visually integrates **Propositions P1–P18** and serves as the organizing framework for empirical testing.

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