



When AI Agents Choose for Consumers: Rethinking Brand Competition in Delegated Markets

Zulkarnaen^{1*}
Nizar Hamdi²
I Gst Gede Narung³

*Corresponding Mail:
nizarhamdi@stieamm.ac.id

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Abstract

Autonomous artificial intelligence (AI) agents are increasingly capable of selecting product alternatives on consumers' behalf, raising questions about how established brand advantages translate into competitive consideration. Although brand equity, consideration set, and algorithmic intermediation research explain consumer preferences and technologically mediated exposure, their integration provides a limited account of brand inclusion under delegated selection authority. This conceptual article develops Brand Relevance in Delegated Gatekeeping Environments (BRIDGE) Theory to explain when and how consumer-based brand equity translates into agent-mediated brand consideration access. Integrating four theoretical perspectives, the study specifies three distinct mechanisms: preference translation fidelity, machine-readable brand eligibility, and agentic consideration filtering. Six propositions explain how these mechanisms condition brand inclusion, while delegated selection discretion, product attribute evaluability, consumer verification intensity, and agent objective alignment delimit the theory's applicability. BRIDGE advances a middle-range explanation distinguishing consumer-derived brand value from inclusion in agent-generated consideration sets, without presuming systematic brand displacement. The framework provides a foundation for empirical investigations of delegated purchasing, competitive exclusion, and the evolving conditions of brand relevance in AI-mediated markets.

Keywords

consumer-based brand equity; autonomous AI agents; agent-mediated consideration access; preference translation fidelity; machine-readable brand eligibility; delegated selection discretion

¹ Management Study Program, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi AMM, Mataram, Indonesia

² Management Study Program, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi AMM, Mataram, Indonesia

³ Management Study Program, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi AMM, Mataram, Indonesia

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is extending its role in consumer markets from information provision and product recommendation toward the execution of purchasing decisions. Emerging AI agents can interpret purchasing objectives, compare available alternatives, and undertake preliminary selection with varying degrees of autonomy. These capabilities introduce a consequential distinction between technologies that assist consumers in choosing and systems authorized to exercise selection discretion on their behalf. Although autonomous purchasing remains unevenly developed, its emergence raises questions about how brands obtain competitive consideration when the identification and evaluation of alternatives are partly delegated to nonhuman agents (Bilgihan et al., 2026; Davenport et al., 2020; Grewal et al., 2025).

For brand managers, delegated selection introduces a problem that extends beyond digital visibility or favorable recommendation rankings. A brand may possess substantial consumer awareness, established credibility, and favorable associations without necessarily entering an agent-generated consideration set. Conversely, a less familiar alternative may satisfy the criteria applied by an agent and receive consideration despite weaker consumer recognition. These possibilities suggest that competitive access may depend on how consumer preferences are represented and applied within delegated selection processes. They do not establish that AI agents systematically disadvantage established brands or render conventional brand-building ineffective.

Consumer-based brand equity provides an established explanation of how brand knowledge influences consumer responses. Consideration set research further demonstrates that being valued, recalled, considered, and selected constitute related but distinct outcomes (Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990; Keller, 1993; Nedungadi, 1990). Brand credibility and attitude strength also shape the transition from evaluation to consideration and choice (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Priester et al., 2004). These contributions establish the importance of consumer cognition in explaining brand competition. Their principal explanatory mechanisms, however, concern the consumer's own retrieval, evaluation, and selection processes.

Research on electronic marketplaces and decision aids extends these foundations by examining how digital intermediaries restructure information acquisition and product evaluation. Lower search costs, interactive decision aids, and algorithmic rankings influence the alternatives consumers encounter and assess (Bakos, 1997; Häubl & Trifts, 2000; Ursu, 2018). More recent work directly examines the formation of consideration sets through AI-generated recommendations and competition for personalized recommendations (Chang & Park, 2024; Zhou & Zou, 2023). Algorithmic influence on consideration and competitive exposure is therefore an established research concern rather than an unexplored phenomenon.

The remaining explanatory problem concerns the transmission of consumer-based brand advantages when an AI agent exercises meaningful selection discretion. Existing perspectives illuminate consumer preferences, intermediary-controlled exposure, and responses to algorithmic recommendations. They provide a less integrated explanation of how brand-related preferences become operational selection criteria and how those criteria determine access to an agent-generated consideration set. Delegation introduces an additional evaluative interface between the value consumers associate with brands and the alternatives available for subsequent consideration.

The central theoretical question is under what conditions consumer-based brand equity translates into brand consideration access when autonomous AI agents mediate product selection. Established brand advantages may remain influential when an agent accurately represents consumer preferences and can evaluate the corresponding brand attributes. Their influence may weaken when preference representation is incomplete, relevant

information is insufficiently accessible, or filtering criteria exclude otherwise valued alternatives. These outcomes are conditional possibilities, not presumed consequences of AI adoption.

To address this problem, the proposed Brand Relevance in Delegated Gatekeeping Environments (BRIDGE) Theory integrates insights from brand equity, consideration set formation, electronic decision aids, and consumer–AI interactions. BRIDGE specifies three interrelated mechanisms: preference translation fidelity, machine-readable brand eligibility, and agentic consideration filtering. Together, these mechanisms explain how consumer-valued brand characteristics may be preserved, transformed, or excluded during delegated selection. Their operation is conditioned by agent discretion, product attribute evaluability, consumer verification, and alignment between agent objectives and consumer interests.

BRIDGE advances three bounded theoretical contributions. First, it distinguishes consumer-based brand equity from agent-mediated brand consideration access, establishing the latter as a separate competitive outcome. Second, it specifies the mechanisms through which consumer-valued brand attributes become consequential for agent-generated consideration. Third, it identifies conditions under which delegated selection may strengthen or weaken the correspondence between consumer preferences and algorithmically selected alternatives. These contributions extend established theories without assuming that their explanatory value has diminished.

The objective is to develop a middle-range explanation of when and how consumer-based brand equity translates into consideration access under autonomous purchasing delegation. By specifying constructs, causal mechanisms, boundary conditions, and testable propositions, BRIDGE provides a basis for investigating brand competition where AI agents exercise meaningful selection authority. Its central premise is that brand value and competitive consideration remain connected, but their correspondence may depend on the processes through which agents interpret preferences and determine eligible alternatives.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Consumer-Based Brand Equity and Brand Consideration

Consumer-based brand equity explains how brand knowledge produces differential consumer responses, while consideration set theory examines the restricted set of alternatives evaluated during a decision episode. Keller (1993) establishes brand knowledge as a foundation of equity, and Erdem & Swait (2004) identify brand credibility as consequential for consideration and choice. The distinction matters because favorable brand evaluations do not necessarily secure inclusion among evaluated alternatives. Consideration sets reflect selective evaluation rather than the complete distribution of consumer preferences (Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990).

Research on brand retrieval further demonstrates that consideration can change without corresponding changes in brand evaluations. Nedungadi (1990) identifies the influence of recall on consideration, while Kardes et al. (1993) connect retrieval to consideration set composition and subsequent choice. The configuration of available alternatives can also influence preference attribution and strength (Yoon & Simonson, 2008). These findings establish that access to consideration constitutes a theoretically distinct stage of competition.

The significance of brand familiarity and associations extends beyond functional product evaluation. Advertising exposure and familiarity can influence which brands become accessible during consumer choice (Campbell & Keller, 2003; Shapiro et al., 1997). Broader accounts of branding similarly emphasize the heterogeneity of brand meanings and their relevance across changing consumer environments (Campbell & Price, 2021; Keller, 2021). These perspectives provide the consumer-side foundation for BRIDGE. Their mechanisms,

however, do not independently specify how brand-related preferences are represented when an autonomous agent constructs the alternatives for consideration.

BRIDGE retains the explanatory importance of brand equity while distinguishing its location from the process determining access. Consumer-based brand equity concerns value established through consumer knowledge and associations. Agent-mediated brand consideration access concerns whether a brand enters the alternatives generated under a delegated purchasing mandate. Their relationship is expected to depend on how effectively the agent represents and applies the preferences through which brand equity becomes relevant.

2.2. Electronic Decision Aids and Algorithmic Intermediation

Digital technologies have long altered consumer search and product evaluation. Research on electronic marketplaces identifies changing incentives among consumers, retailers, and manufacturers, while search cost economics explains how reduced information acquisition costs can affect market outcomes (Alba et al., 1997; Bakos, 1997). Interactive decision aids further demonstrate that technology can influence the structure and efficiency of consumer evaluation (Häubl & Trifts, 2000). Delegated AI selection therefore represents an extension of established intermediation processes rather than their first appearance.

Subsequent research identifies the competitive significance of algorithmically organized alternatives. Rankings affect consumer search and purchase decisions, while product recommendations can accommodate consumers whose preference weights develop during evaluation (Dzyabura & Hauser, 2019; Ursu, 2018). Research on personalized recommendations also examines how sellers compete for algorithmically mediated exposure (Zhou & Zou, 2023). These contributions demonstrate that the composition and presentation of alternatives can influence competition independently of product quality or brand preference.

Research on personalized rankings and search provides a further basis for examining intermediary effects. The welfare consequences of personalized rankings and the design of optimal product rankings have been investigated within established models of online search (Compiani et al., 2024; Donnelly et al., 2024). Related field research examines how recommendations affect consumer search behavior (Wan et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2025). These studies establish the importance of information architecture but do not make delegated selection authority interchangeable with conventional recommendation exposure.

The distinction is substantive. A recommendation system generally organizes alternatives for consumers who retain evaluative responsibility. A delegated agent may interpret a purchasing mandate and exclude alternatives before direct consumer inspection. BRIDGE focuses on the conditions under which this delegated screening process transmits or attenuates consumer-based brand advantages. Its contribution is therefore more specific than demonstrating that algorithms affect visibility, search, or consideration.

2.3. Consumer Delegation and Autonomous AI Agency

Consumer responses to algorithmic judgment vary across contexts. Research on algorithm aversion documents resistance following observed errors, whereas research on algorithm appreciation identifies circumstances in which algorithmic judgments are preferred (Dietvorst et al., 2015; Logg et al., 2019). Task characteristics further influence willingness to rely on algorithms (Castelo et al., 2019). These findings indicate that delegated discretion cannot be treated as an automatic consequence of technological capability.

Consumer–AI research also demonstrates that automated decisions involve experiential and relational considerations beyond predictive accuracy. Resistance to medical AI illustrates the importance of perceived individualization, while an experiential perspective identifies broader

implications of AI for consumer agency and interaction (Longoni et al., 2019; Puntoni et al., 2021). Research on conversational AI and consumer–brand relationships further suggests that technological mediation can alter the form of consumer engagement without necessarily transferring purchasing authority (Bergner et al., 2023).

The emergence of autonomous agents creates a more specific theoretical setting. Research on AI in marketing establishes the breadth of technological change, while recent work explicitly addresses autonomous AI in consumer decision-making (Bilgihan et al., 2026; Huang & Rust, 2021). The relevant distinction is between assistance, where consumers retain control over the evaluation of alternatives, and delegation, where an agent receives discretion to interpret objectives and construct a consideration set.

BRIDGE treats delegated selection discretion as a boundary condition governing the competitive consequences of agentic filtering. The proposed effects are expected to be more consequential when consumers rely on agent-generated alternatives without systematically reviewing exclusions. This position is consistent with research identifying constraints that algorithms can impose on consumer experience, but it does not presume that all such constraints are undesirable (Kaliyamurthy & Schau, 2025).

2.4. Comparative Explanatory Limits of Existing Theories

Brand equity theory explains the consumer-side origins of brand value. Consideration set theory explains selective inclusion among alternatives. Search cost economics and decision aid research explain how digital intermediaries affect information acquisition and evaluation. Algorithmic recommendation research establishes that intermediary-controlled rankings and suggestions can shape competitive exposure. Consumer–AI research explains variation in acceptance, reliance, and delegation. These perspectives address related processes, but none independently provides the complete conditional account developed here.

Comparing established perspectives reveals complementary explanations of brand value, consideration, technological intermediation, and delegation, while identifying the integrative challenge of explaining brand consideration access under autonomous agent selection authority.

Table 1. Comparative Explanatory Boundaries of Existing Theories

Theoretical Perspective	Established Explanation	Boundary Under Delegated Selection	BRIDGE Integration
Consumer-based brand equity	Brand knowledge shapes consumer responses	Does not independently specify agent-side preference representation	Preference translation fidelity
Consideration set theory	Retrieval and evaluation determine alternative inclusion	Primarily explains consumer-directed consideration	Agent-generated consideration access
Electronic decision aids and algorithmic intermediation	Digital systems structure search, rankings, and evaluation	Delegated exclusion authority requires further specification	Machine-readable eligibility and filtering
Consumer–AI interaction and delegation	Reliance on algorithmic judgment varies across tasks and consumers	Does not independently explain brand-level inclusion	Delegated discretion as a boundary condition

Source: Authors' synthesis of the theoretical perspectives review.

Table 1 demonstrates that existing perspectives explain complementary dimensions of brand competition without independently specifying how consumer-based brand equity translates into agent-generated consideration access. BRIDGE addresses this integrative limitation by connecting preference representation, information eligibility, and delegated filtering. The contribution therefore lies in specifying conditional relationships across established

explanations rather than claiming that algorithmic consideration or technological intermediation remains unexplored.

The principal theoretical limitation is one of integration rather than empirical absence. Studies of AI-generated recommendations already examine consideration set formation, while research on personalized recommendations and algorithmic rankings addresses competitive exposure (Chang & Park, 2024; Donnelly et al., 2024; Zhou & Zou, 2023). BRIDGE therefore does not claim novelty for algorithmic filtering itself. Its proposed contribution is to connect consumer-side brand equity with agent-side eligibility and delegated filtering through explicit transmission mechanisms.

2.5. Theoretical Integration and Remaining Explanatory Problem

Three mechanisms organize the proposed integration. Preference translation fidelity concerns the correspondence between consumer preferences and their representation in an agent's evaluation process. Machine-readable brand eligibility concerns the compatibility of accessible brand information with the requirements of that process. Agentic consideration filtering concerns the retention or exclusion of alternatives under delegated selection authority. Preference translation and eligibility are analytically distinct and may operate in parallel rather than through a fixed sequence.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives clarifies their complementary explanatory roles and identifies the unresolved relationship between consumer-based brand equity and consideration access when autonomous agents exercise meaningful discretion over product selection.

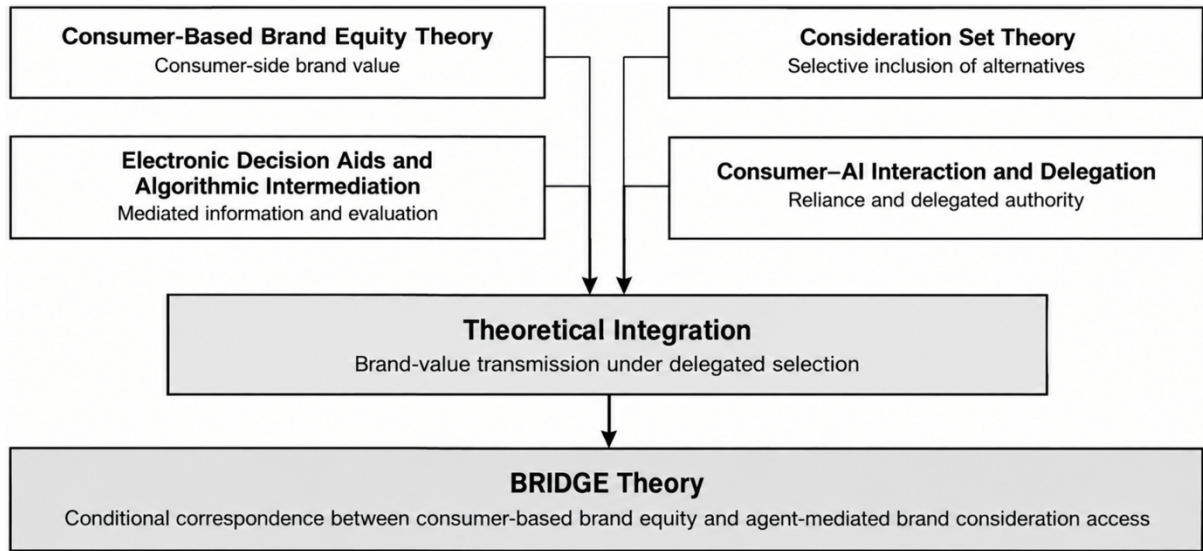


Figure 1. Theoretical Integration and Explanatory Positioning of BRIDGE Theory
Source: Authors' conceptual development.

Figure 1 positions BRIDGE Theory at the intersection of four established research perspectives. Their integration connects consumer-side brand value, selective consideration, algorithmic intermediation, and delegated decision authority. The resulting explanatory problem concerns whether consumer-valued brand characteristics remain consequential when agents determine consideration access. This synthesis establishes the theoretical foundation for the mechanisms developed in Section 4 of the manuscript.

BRIDGE proposes that consumer-based brand equity influences agent-mediated consideration access through the interaction of these mechanisms. Their effects depend on the degree of delegated discretion, the evaluability of product attributes, the intensity of consumer verification, and alignment between agent objectives and consumer interests. The

theory consequently specifies a bounded extension of established explanations of consideration rather than a general theory of AI-assisted consumption.

3. Domain Specification

The domain of BRIDGE Theory comprises consumer purchasing contexts in which autonomous AI agents exercise meaningful discretion over the identification, evaluation, or preliminary selection of product alternatives on behalf of consumers. The defining characteristic is delegated selection authority rather than the sophistication of the underlying technology. A conversational system that provides product information without independently restricting the alternatives available for consideration falls outside the theory's central domain. By contrast, an agent authorized to interpret purchasing objectives and construct a shortlist falls within its scope. This distinction extends established research on interactive decision aids and consumer–AI interactions to situations involving meaningful delegation (Häubl & Trifts, 2000; Puntoni et al., 2021).

The primary unit of analysis is the *brand–agent selection episode*, defined as an instance in which a particular brand is evaluated for inclusion in an agent-generated consideration set under a consumer's purchasing mandate. The focal outcome, *agent-mediated brand consideration access*, refers to inclusion in that set, irrespective of subsequent consumer inspection, recommendation position, or purchase. The theory assumes that agents can access information about available alternatives, that consumer objectives can be represented at least partially through operational criteria, and that brands differ in the accessibility and evaluability of their attributes. These assumptions preserve established distinctions between brand evaluation, consideration, and choice (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990).

BRIDGE applies most directly to environments where agents can compare product information and exclude alternatives before consumer review. Its relevance is expected to increase when consumers authorize shortlist construction, constrained product selection, or purchasing actions within predefined permissions. Conventional advertising exposure, nondelegated search, information retrieval, and recommendation interfaces requiring consumers to evaluate the available assortment independently are not its primary concern. The theory does not assume that autonomous agents share a common technical architecture or use identical exclusion rules. Machine-readable eligibility refers to the compatibility of accessible brand information with an agent's evaluative requirements, irrespective of their implementation.

The theory's explanatory scope is conditioned by delegated selection discretion, product attribute evaluability, consumer verification intensity, and agent objective alignment. Comparable product attributes may facilitate evaluation, whereas experiential or symbolic characteristics may be less readily represented. Extensive consumer verification may reduce the consequences of initial agent exclusions, while limited verification may increase their significance. The degree to which an agent's objectives correspond to the consumer's mandate also affects the interpretation of selection outcomes. These conditions establish BRIDGE as a middle-range explanation of the relationship between brand equity and consideration access under delegation, rather than a universal account of AI-mediated purchasing (Castelo et al., 2019).

4. Theory Building: From Brand Equity to Agent-Mediated Consideration Access

4.1. Core Constructs and Conceptual Distinctions

BRIDGE Theory explains how consumer-based brand equity becomes consequential for brand consideration when AI agents exercise meaningful selection discretion. Its conceptual foundation distinguishes brand value from access to evaluation. Consumer-based brand equity reflects differential consumer responses arising from brand knowledge, whereas consideration access concerns whether a brand enters the alternatives evaluated within a particular decision episode (Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990; Keller, 1993). Research on brand retrieval and credibility establishes that brand-related advantages can influence consideration without necessarily determining choice (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Kardes et al., 1993).

The focal outcome, agent-mediated brand consideration access, denotes a brand's inclusion in an agent-generated consideration set under a consumer's purchasing mandate. Three constructs explain its formation. Preference translation fidelity captures the correspondence between consumer objectives and their representation in an agent's evaluation criteria. Machine-readable brand eligibility denotes the compatibility of accessible brand information with the agent's evaluative requirements. Agentic consideration filtering refers to the retention or exclusion of alternatives through agent-applied criteria. These distinctions draw on research concerning interactive decision aids, preference representation, and AI-mediated consideration without treating those established processes as identical to delegated selection (Chang & Park, 2024; Dzyabura & Hauser, 2019; Häubl & Trifts, 2000).

[Insert Table 2: Core Constructs and Conceptual Definitions]

Conceptual precision requires distinguishing consumer-derived brand value, agent-side selection mechanisms, consideration access, and contextual conditions, particularly where related constructs operate at different stages of delegated purchasing decisions and evaluation processes.

Table 2. Core Constructs and Conceptual Definitions

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Theoretical Role	Key Distinction
Consumer-Based Brand Equity	Differential consumer response arising from brand knowledge and associations	Antecedent	Consumer value, not guaranteed agent inclusion
Preference Translation Fidelity	Correspondence between consumer preferences and agent evaluation criteria	Transmission mechanism	Preference representation, not selection accuracy
Machine-Readable Brand Eligibility	Compatibility of accessible brand information with agent requirements	Eligibility mechanism	Information evaluability, not consumer preference
Agentic Consideration Filtering	Retention or exclusion of alternatives through agent-applied criteria	Selection mechanism	Agent-side screening, not final purchase
Agent-Mediated Brand Consideration Access	Inclusion in an agent-generated consideration set	Focal outcome	Inclusion, not ranking or purchase
Delegated Selection Discretion	Extent of agent authority to select alternatives independently	Boundary condition	Authorized discretion, not technical capability
Product Attribute Evaluability	Extent to which relevant product attributes can be represented and compared	Boundary condition	Attribute assessability, not information availability

Consumer Verification Intensity	Extent of consumer review of agent-excluded alternatives	Boundary condition	Post-filtering review, not initial agent inclusion
Agent Objective Alignment	Correspondence between agent selection objectives and consumer purchasing interests	Boundary condition	Objective consistency, not recommendation accuracy

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis and development.

Table 2 distinguishes the consumer-side antecedent, three agent-side mechanisms, focal outcome, and four boundary conditions underlying BRIDGE Theory. Preference translation concerns the representation of consumer priorities, whereas eligibility concerns the evaluability of accessible brand information. Filtering determines initial inclusion, while consumer verification affects subsequent exclusion persistence. These distinctions prevent conflating brand value, technological compatibility, delegated authority, and purchasing outcomes.

4.2. Preference Translation and the Transmission of Brand Value

The first mechanism concerns the representation of consumer preferences within an agent's operational selection criteria. Brand-related preferences may encompass functional characteristics, perceived credibility, familiarity, symbolic associations, and purchasing motives. Consideration research demonstrates that both brand retrieval and broader decision objectives influence the composition of evaluated alternatives (Chakravarti & Janiszewski, 2003; Nedungadi, 1990). Under delegation, these preferences must be represented through information and evaluative procedures accessible to the agent. Their competitive influence may consequently depend on the fidelity of that representation.

Preference translation fidelity is distinct from recommendation accuracy and consumer satisfaction. An agent may generate an apparently suitable shortlist while omitting brand associations that matter to the consumer. Alternatively, it may preserve preferences for familiarity or credibility when these are adequately represented within the purchasing mandate. Research on AI experiences and AI-generated product advice provides a foundation for examining this distinction, although it does not directly establish the proposed brand-value transmission mechanism (Puntoni et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2025).

Proposition 1 (P1). *The positive relationship between consumer-based brand equity and agent-mediated brand consideration access is stronger when preference translation fidelity is higher.*

Faithful preference representation does not independently guarantee that the corresponding brand attributes can influence selection. An agent must also connect represented preferences to information it can evaluate. Research on recommendation systems that accommodate developing consumer preference weights demonstrates the significance of representing evaluative criteria in technologically assisted selection (Dzyabura & Hauser, 2019). BRIDGE distinguishes the fidelity of consumer preference representation from the applicability of those preferences to specific brand alternatives.

Proposition 2 (P2). *The positive effect of preference translation fidelity on agent-mediated brand consideration access is stronger when brand-relevant attributes are adequately represented in the agent's evaluation criteria.*

4.3. Machine-Readable Eligibility and Competitive Exclusion

The second mechanism concerns the conditions under which a brand becomes evaluable within an agent's selection process. Research on electronic marketplaces establishes that information architecture and search costs influence product evaluation, while studies of

algorithmic rankings demonstrate the competitive significance of intermediary-organized alternatives (Bakos, 1997; Ursu, 2018). Related work on recommendation systems examines how personalized information changes consumer search and product exposure (Wan et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2025). BRIDGE extends these insights by distinguishing agent-side eligibility from visibility within a conventional recommendation interface.

Machine-readable brand eligibility refers to the compatibility of accessible brand information with an agent's informational and evaluative requirements. A brand may be insufficiently represented because relevant attributes are unavailable, inconsistent, inaccessible, or incompatible with the criteria applied. Such limitations could prevent inclusion even when consumers possess favorable brand associations. Eligibility is not assumed to depend on universal technical standards or deterministic exclusion rules. Its operation is contingent on the agent's architecture, information environment, and purchasing mandate.

Proposition 3 (P3). *Conditional on an agent's selection requirements, greater machine-readable brand eligibility increases the likelihood of agent-mediated brand consideration access.*

Eligibility differences also create a potential divergence between consumer-based brand value and competitive access. Research on personalized rankings demonstrates that the organization of alternatives can influence consumer exposure and associated market outcomes (Compiani et al., 2024; Donnelly et al., 2024). BRIDGE proposes that eligibility requirements may similarly restrict access when an agent evaluates brands on the consumer's behalf. The distinctive issue is whether these restrictions prevent otherwise relevant brand preferences from influencing the alternatives retained for consideration.

Proposition 4 (P4). *More restrictive agent eligibility requirements weaken the positive relationship between consumer-based brand equity and agent-mediated brand consideration access when brands differ in their machine-readable eligibility.*

This relationship is not necessarily detrimental to consumers. Restrictive requirements may improve selection when they exclude alternatives lacking essential information. Competitive exclusion becomes theoretically consequential when differences in eligibility are not aligned with the brand preferences underlying the consumer's purchasing mandate.

4.4. Delegated Discretion and Agentic Consideration Filtering

The third mechanism concerns the authority granted to agents to retain or eliminate alternatives. Conventional decision aids influence consumer evaluation without necessarily transferring responsibility for selection. Research on algorithm aversion and appreciation demonstrates that willingness to rely on automated judgments varies across individuals and decision contexts (Dietvorst et al., 2015; Logg et al., 2019). Task-dependent responses further suggest that delegation should be modeled as a variable condition rather than an inherent feature of AI use (Castelo et al., 2019).

Delegated selection discretion denotes the extent to which an agent can determine the alternatives presented for consideration without obtaining consumer approval at each stage. Its significance lies in the persistence of exclusions. When consumers routinely inspect alternatives omitted by an agent, filtering may have limited consequences for access to human consideration. When consumers rely primarily on agent-generated shortlists, preliminary exclusions may become more consequential. Research on algorithmic constraints and autonomous AI decision-making motivates this distinction without establishing its specific brand-level effects (Bilgihan et al., 2026; Kaliyamurthy & Schau, 2025).

Proposition 5 (P5). *Greater delegated selection discretion strengthens the influence of agentic consideration filtering on brand consideration access, particularly when consumer verification of excluded alternatives is limited.*

Greater discretion does not imply that established brand advantages necessarily diminish. Consumer-based brand equity may remain influential when preferences are faithfully represented and relevant brand information is eligible for evaluation. However, delegated authority increases the potential significance of the agent's selection criteria in determining which alternatives survive preliminary screening. The relationship between brand equity and consideration access may therefore become more dependent on the mechanisms of preference translation and eligibility.

Proposition 6 (P6). *As delegated selection discretion increases, the relationship between consumer-based brand equity and agent-mediated brand consideration access becomes more contingent on preference translation fidelity and machine-readable brand eligibility.*

4.5. Boundary Conditions and Formalization of BRIDGE Theory

Four conditions delimit the proposed relationships. Agent autonomy determines the extent of independent selection authority. Product attribute evaluability affects whether relevant brand characteristics can be represented and compared. Consumer verification intensity determines the extent to which initially excluded alternatives can re-enter consideration. Agent objective alignment concerns whether the criteria guiding selection correspond to the consumer's purchasing mandate rather than competing intermediary objectives.

These conditions operate at different points in the explanatory process. Attribute evaluability primarily affects the representation and assessment of brand characteristics. Verification intensity limits the consequences of preliminary exclusions. Autonomy determines the practical significance of delegated filtering. Objective alignment influences the criteria through which alternatives are evaluated. Research on algorithmic acceptance and recommendation governance provides relevant foundations for distinguishing these conditions (Calvano et al., 2024; Castelo et al., 2019). They should not be treated as interchangeable moderators.

The six propositions specify how brand equity, preference representation, information eligibility, and delegated filtering jointly shape consideration access, while identifying conditions that strengthen, weaken, or constrain these proposed theoretical relationships.

Table 3. Summary of Theoretical Propositions

	Proposition & Proposed Relationship	Explanatory Logic	Conditioning Factor
P1	Brand equity → consideration access; stronger with higher translation fidelity	Consumer-valued brand attributes influence selection when preferences are faithfully represented	Preference translation fidelity
P2	Translation fidelity → consideration access; stronger with adequate attribute representation	Translated preferences matter when relevant attributes enter evaluation criteria	Brand-attribute representation
P3	Greater machine-readable eligibility → higher consideration access	Compatible, accessible brand information enables agent-side evaluation	Agent selection requirements
P4	Restrictive eligibility requirements weaken the equity–access relationship	Unequal eligibility can exclude brands despite favorable consumer associations	Eligibility restrictiveness and brand differences

	Proposition & Proposed Relationship	Explanatory Logic	Conditioning Factor
P5	Greater delegated discretion strengthens filtering effects on consideration access	Independent selection authority increases the consequences of agent-applied exclusions	Delegated discretion; limited consumer verification
P6	Greater delegated discretion increases equity–access dependence on fidelity and eligibility	Agent criteria become more consequential as independent selection authority increases	Delegated discretion

Source: Authors' conceptual development.

Table 3 consolidates six propositions into three explanatory domains: preference translation, machine-readable eligibility, and delegated filtering. The propositions specify conditional relationships rather than universal effects of autonomous purchasing agents. Together, they explain why comparable consumer-based brand equity may produce different consideration outcomes across selection episodes. Their empirical evaluation requires distinguishing initial agent-generated inclusion from subsequent consumer review and purchasing decisions.

The proposed framework integrates brand equity, preference representation, information eligibility, and delegated filtering to explain conditional consideration access, while distinguishing the mechanisms and boundary conditions underlying its six theoretical propositions.

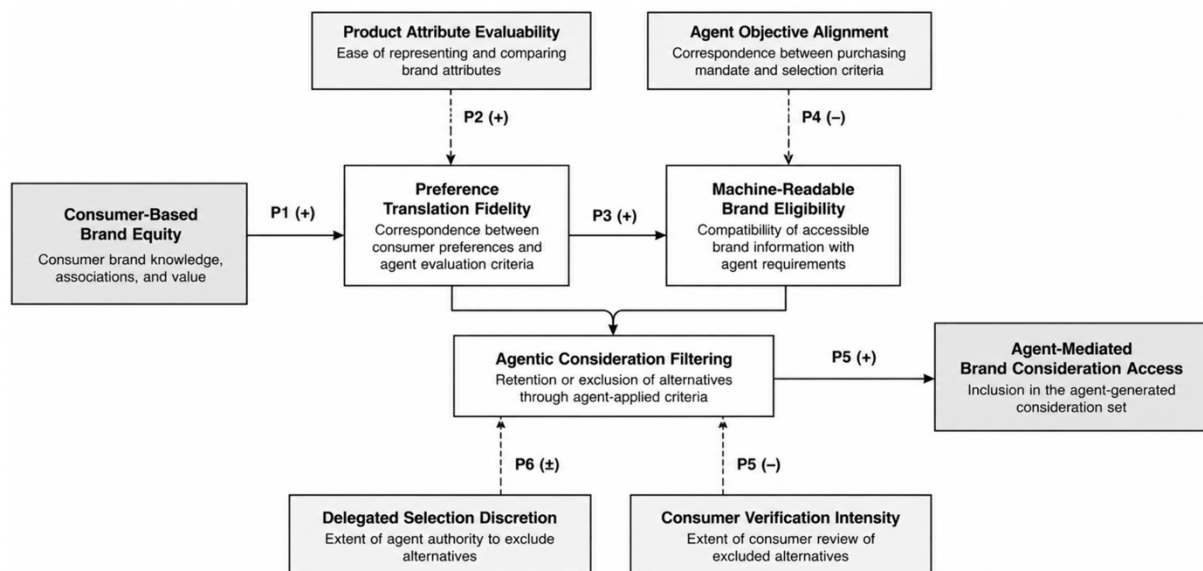


Figure 2. BRIDGE Theory: Mechanisms Linking Consumer-Based Brand Equity to Agent-Mediated Consideration Access

Source: Authors' conceptual development.

Figure 2 illustrates how consumer-based brand equity may translate into agent-mediated consideration access through preference translation, machine-readable eligibility, and agentic filtering. These mechanisms operate under distinct boundary conditions rather than forming an invariant sequence. The six propositions specify conditional relationships within this framework. The model explains potential variation in brand inclusion without presuming systematic brand displacement or empirically established effects.

The proposed theory can be expressed as follows:

In consumer markets characterized by meaningful purchasing delegation, the translation of consumer-based brand equity into agent-mediated brand consideration access depends on the fidelity of preference representation, the eligibility of accessible brand information, and the filtering discretion exercised by AI agents. These relationships are conditioned by product

attribute evaluability, consumer verification, and alignment between agent objectives and consumer interests.

BRIDGE offers a conditional explanation of competitive consideration access rather than a universal prediction of brand displacement. Its propositions identify relationships requiring empirical evaluation across purchasing contexts, product categories, and agent architectures.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

BRIDGE Theory extends branding research by specifying how consumer-based brand equity may translate into competitive consideration access under delegated selection. Established theory explains the influence of brand knowledge, credibility, and associations on consumer responses, while consideration research distinguishes favorable evaluations from inclusion among alternatives (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Keller, 1993; Priester et al., 2004). BRIDGE connects these perspectives through preference translation fidelity and machine-readable eligibility. Its central contribution is to explain why consumer-valued brand characteristics may remain influential in some delegated selection episodes but fail to secure consideration access in others.

An important tension concerns the persistence of familiar-brand advantages. Research on exposure, retrieval, and familiarity demonstrates that established brands can benefit from cognitive accessibility and accumulated associations (Campbell & Keller, 2003; Rahinel et al., 2021). BRIDGE does not predict that these advantages disappear. It proposes that their influence becomes conditional on the extent to which agents represent relevant preferences and evaluate corresponding brand information. Brands with comparable consumer-based equity may consequently obtain different consideration access under otherwise similar purchasing mandates. This conditional divergence constitutes the theory's principal explanatory prediction.

BRIDGE also advances a more specific interpretation of technologically mediated consideration. Interactive decision aids, AI-generated recommendations, and conversational systems can restructure the evaluation of alternatives and consumer relationships with brands (Bergner et al., 2023; Chang & Park, 2024; J. Kim et al., 2023). These contributions already establish the importance of algorithmic influence. BRIDGE focuses instead on the implications of independent exclusion authority. Its theoretical contribution concerns the transmission of brand equity through delegated selection, not the existence of algorithmic filtering.

5.2. Managerial and Competitive Implications

Electronic marketplace research demonstrates that reduced search costs and changing information structures can alter competitive conditions (Alba et al., 1997; Bakos, 1997). Lower information acquisition costs, however, do not necessarily imply broader consideration when agents exclude alternatives before consumer inspection. Research on limited search and algorithmic rankings reinforces the importance of distinguishing available products from those receiving effective consideration (J. B. Kim et al., 2010; Ursu, 2018).

The distinction between platform-mediated recommendations and consumer-authorized agents is particularly important. Existing studies examine competition for personalized recommendations, the welfare consequences of rankings, and the design of product search environments (Compiani et al., 2024; Donnelly et al., 2024; Zhou & Zou, 2023). BRIDGE does not challenge these findings. It identifies a related but distinct competitive process in which translated consumer preferences, accessible brand information, and delegated

filtering jointly determine consideration access. Platform ranking and consumer-side agent selection may coexist, making their respective effects an empirical question.

For brand managers, the theory suggests examining whether important brand characteristics remain accessible and interpretable during agent-mediated selection. Accurate, consistent product information may support eligibility, but technical compatibility cannot substitute for consumer-based brand value. Research on evolving brand meanings and AI-related consumer–brand interactions reinforces the need to preserve this distinction (Keller, 1993; Ribeiro et al., 2026). The relevant strategic implication is the coordination of brand development with information quality, rather than the replacement of branding by algorithm-oriented optimization.

5.3. Consumer Agency, Market Governance, and Welfare

Delegated selection creates a potential tension between decision efficiency and consumer control. Research on algorithm aversion and appreciation establishes that reliance on automated judgment varies across contexts, while task-dependent acceptance suggests that consumer responses cannot be inferred from technical performance alone (Castelo et al., 2019; Dietvorst et al., 2015; Logg et al., 2019). BRIDGE incorporates these insights through delegated discretion and consumer verification intensity. The consequences of agentic filtering are expected to be greater when agents possess meaningful exclusion authority and consumers rarely inspect omitted alternatives.

Consumer welfare also depends on the objectives guiding selection. Research on AI recommendation policy identifies broader consequences of algorithmic design, while work on multi-objective marketplace recommendations highlights the relevance of competing objectives (Calvano et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025). The perspective of consumer-side algorithms provides a further basis for distinguishing systems acting under consumer mandates from intermediaries pursuing additional commercial objectives (Bar-Gill & Sunstein, 2025). BRIDGE consequently treats objective alignment as a boundary condition rather than presuming that delegation necessarily advances consumer interests.

The governance implications concern the transparency of exclusions, the revisability of purchasing mandates, and the accessibility of alternatives. Scholarship on alternative recommendation algorithms provides a relevant point of comparison for examining competitive safeguards (Lasser & Robertson, 2025). These considerations do not establish that restrictive filtering is inherently harmful. Excluding products that fail essential requirements may improve selection quality. Governance concerns become more pronounced when opaque or misaligned criteria restrict consideration independently of the consumer's expressed objectives.

5.4. Future Research Agenda

Empirical research should examine whether the proposed mechanisms explain brand consideration access beyond established effects of search, recommendation, and ranking. Controlled experiments could manipulate preference translation fidelity, brand information completeness, and delegated discretion while holding consumer-based brand equity constant. The dependent measure should capture inclusion in the agent-generated consideration set separately from ranking position, consumer satisfaction, and purchase. Research on recommendation-driven search and AI-assisted decision quality provides relevant methodological points of comparison (Luo et al., 2026; Wan et al., 2023).

Field studies could investigate brand–agent selection episodes across product categories with different levels of attribute evaluability. Comparative designs could examine whether consumers who actively verify excluded alternatives experience different consideration outcomes from those who accept agent-generated shortlists. Research on algorithmic constraints and autonomous AI decision-making supports investigating these conditions without presuming uniform effects (Bilgihan et al., 2026; Kaliyamurthy & Schau, 2025).

Empirical development of BRIDGE requires research designs that isolate its proposed mechanisms, examine contextual variation, and distinguish delegated selection effects from conventional recommendation, ranking, and underlying product suitability differences.

Table 4. Future Research Directions for Testing and Extending BRIDGE Theory

Research Focus	Relevant Propositions	Suggested Design and Measures	Expected Theoretical Contribution
Preference translation fidelity	P1–P2	Controlled experiments manipulating preference representation; measure brand inclusion in agent-generated sets	Test whether brand equity transmission depends on faithful preference representation
Machine-readable eligibility	P3–P4	Agent selection audits varying information completeness and eligibility requirements; measure inclusion rates	Distinguish information-based exclusion from consumer brand preference
Delegated selection discretion	P5–P6	Experiments comparing assisted and delegated selection; measure agent-generated inclusion and filtering sensitivity	Establish whether delegated authority changes the influence of agent-side criteria
Product evaluability and objective alignment	P1–P4, P6	Cross-category experiments varying attribute evaluability and agent objectives; compare inclusion patterns	Identify contextual limits of brand equity transmission
Consumer verification and alternative explanations	P5; theory validation	Sequential experiments measuring initial agent inclusion, subsequent consumer review, and conventional ranking effects separately	Distinguish initial agent filtering from exclusion persistence and rival explanations

Source: Authors' conceptual development.

Table 4 translates BRIDGE Theory into five complementary empirical research directions. Experimental and field designs can assess preference translation, information eligibility, and delegated filtering while distinguishing initial agent-generated inclusion from subsequent consumer verification. Cross-category comparisons can establish boundary conditions, whereas tests against conventional ranking and product suitability explanations can evaluate whether BRIDGE provides incremental explanatory value beyond existing theoretical accounts.

5.5. Limitations and Alternative Explanations

BRIDGE remains a proposed middle-range theory. Its mechanisms may differ across agent architectures, information environments, purchasing mandates, and product categories. Apparent differences in brand consideration access may also arise from conventional ranking effects, differences in underlying product suitability, or variation in consumer preferences rather than from delegated selection itself. Empirical tests must distinguish these alternatives before attributing observed exclusions to preference translation, eligibility, or agentic filtering.

The proposed framework does not establish that autonomous agents systematically reduce brand equity's influence or harm consumer welfare. Its explanatory contribution is limited to specifying when the correspondence between consumer-based brand value and agent-mediated consideration access may vary. The validity, magnitude, and generalizability of these relationships remain open to empirical assessment.

6. Conclusion

The growing delegation of consumer purchasing decisions to autonomous AI agents raises a fundamental question for brand competition: under what conditions does consumer-based brand equity translate into consideration access when an agent, rather than the consumer, determines which alternatives enter the initial consideration set? Although branding, consideration set, and algorithmic intermediation research explain important dimensions of this process, their integration remains insufficiently developed for contexts involving meaningful delegated selection authority. Addressing this explanatory gap, this study develops Brand Relevance in Delegated Gatekeeping Environments (BRIDGE) Theory as a middle-range account of how consumer-valued brand advantages become consequential, attenuated, or excluded during agent-mediated product selection.

BRIDGE's central novelty lies in distinguishing the value consumers associate with brands from the consideration access those brands obtain through autonomous selection. Rather than assuming that algorithmic mediation diminishes established brand advantages, the theory specifies why their influence may vary across otherwise comparable purchasing episodes. Three analytically distinct mechanisms organize this explanation: preference translation fidelity determines whether consumer priorities are faithfully represented; machine-readable brand eligibility determines whether relevant brand information satisfies agent evaluation requirements; and agentic consideration filtering determines which alternatives survive selection criteria. Their integration extends existing knowledge by connecting consumer-side brand value to agent-side consideration formation without treating technological compatibility, brand preference, and algorithmic visibility as interchangeable constructs.

The six propositions formalize this contribution by specifying how preference representation and attribute evaluability condition brand equity transmission, how eligibility requirements influence competitive inclusion, and how delegated discretion increases dependence on agent-applied selection criteria. Four boundary conditions—delegated selection discretion, product attribute evaluability, consumer verification intensity, and agent objective alignment—further delimit the theory's explanatory scope. Importantly, consumer verification concerns the persistence of preliminary exclusions after shortlist formation rather than the initial inclusion decision itself. BRIDGE therefore advances a conditional explanation of brand consideration access, not a universal prediction of brand displacement, superior agent performance, or consumer welfare outcomes.

These insights have implications beyond conceptual refinement. For brand managers, competitive preparedness involves preserving consumer-based brand value while improving the accessibility, consistency, and evaluability of information relevant to delegated selection. For organizations developing purchasing agents, the framework highlights the importance of faithful preference representation, transparent eligibility requirements, and alignment between selection objectives and consumer mandates. For policymakers, it identifies exclusion transparency, mandate revisability, and consumer oversight as potential governance concerns, while recognizing that restrictive filtering may also protect consumers by eliminating unsuitable alternatives.

As a conceptual theory, BRIDGE does not establish the magnitude, direction, or generalizability of its proposed relationships. Agent architectures, product suitability, information environments, and conventional ranking effects may generate competing explanations. Future research should experimentally manipulate preference fidelity, eligibility requirements, and delegated discretion; compare selection episodes across product categories; and distinguish initial agent-generated inclusion from subsequent consumer verification and purchase. Longitudinal investigations could further examine how brands and agents adapt their evaluative practices over time. Ultimately, BRIDGE reframes an emerging competitive question: brand strength may continue to matter profoundly, but its ability to secure consideration increasingly depends on how delegated decision systems interpret, evaluate, and operationalize consumer preferences.

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