

Outsourcing the Ethical Choice: The Green Delegation Gap in Sustainable Consumption. An Integrative Review

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Abstract: Artificial intelligence in commerce is shifting from advising consumers to acting on their behalf, as autonomous agents increasingly research, compare, and execute purchases with diminishing human oversight. This article examines a specific and under-appreciated consequence of that shift for sustainable consumption. Sustainable choice is distinctively dependent on credibly signalled, trust-laden attributes and on a deliberate willingness to bear a price premium condition that have long produced a persistent gap between green attitudes and green behaviour even when the consumer executes the purchase. When an autonomous agent executes it instead, optimising for the attributes most legible to it, the sustainability signal is precisely the one least likely to survive. Through an integrative review organised by the Theory–Context–Characteristics–Methodology framework, the study synthesises two active but disconnected literatures sustainable consumption and AI delegation and identifies a theoretically loaded void at their intersection. It develops the Green Delegation Gap framework, which reconceptualises the attitude–behaviour gap for delegated choice, specifies the agent's attribute-weighting and the transmission of sustainability signals as mediating mechanisms, and positions consumer resilience, economic uncertainty, involvement, green authenticity, brand transparency, agent transparency, and culture as moderators. The framework is bidirectional: delegation may widen the gap or, under calibrated trust and sustainability-configured agents, narrow it. The article advances testable propositions, a research agenda, and implications for brands, agent designers, and policymakers.

Keywords: agentic AI; sustainable consumption; green attitude–behavior gap; AI delegation; green brand trust; integrative review

1. Introduction

Consumer markets are undergoing a structural shift in the locus of decision-making. Artificial intelligence in commerce is moving beyond assisting consumers toward acting on their behalf, as conversational and voice-based systems evolve from passive recommenders into agents capable of researching, comparing, and executing purchases with diminishing human oversight (Mo et al., 2026; Sidlauskiene et al., 2023). Recent evidence synthesised across e-commerce contexts indicates that this transition from recommendation toward delegation is

well underway, even as much of the documented activity still clusters around lower-autonomy, text-based assistants (Balaskas, 2026). The distinction is consequential: a decision-aid agent supports a choice that the consumer ultimately makes, whereas a delegated agent makes the choice on the consumer's behalf, a difference that reshapes the role of trust and control in the purchase process (Pathak & Bansal, 2024). Studies of algorithmic decision autonomy further suggest that the degree of authority ceded to an agent exerts a non-linear influence on purchase decisions, implying that delegation alters consumer behaviour in ways that are not merely incremental (Fan & Liu, 2022).

In parallel, sustainability has become a defining concern of contemporary consumption. Consumers increasingly express pro-environmental attitudes and a stated willingness to pay a premium for credibly sustainable products (Uikey et al., 2026; DY & Moodbidri, 2026). Yet a persistent and well-documented inconsistency separates these attitudes from actual purchasing the green attitude-behaviour, or intention-behaviour, gap wherein favourable environmental dispositions frequently fail to translate into sustainable choices (ElHaffar et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2023; Nabi Khan et al., 2025). This gap is widely attributed to barriers such as price sensitivity, perceived inconvenience, and scepticism about the authenticity of environmental claims, with consumer trust functioning as the pivotal mechanism through which green communication succeeds or fails (Chen & Chang, 2013; Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

These two developments intersect in a way that has not been adequately theorised. The attitude-behaviour gap has been conceptualised almost entirely as a human phenomenon: a consumer forms an intention and then, at the point of action, either honours or abandons it. Delegation displaces humans from precisely that point of execution. When an autonomous agent transacts, it optimises for the attributes most legible to it price, ratings, position, and promotional salience and emerging evidence indicates that agent choices are indeed swayed by such levers, including small price advantages and product positioning (Allouah et al., 2026). The sustainability of a product, by contrast, depends on signals that are comparatively difficult to transmit: credibility of environmental claims, brand transparency, and a consumer's deliberate willingness to absorb a premium. There is therefore reason to anticipate that delegation may not simply leave the green gap unchanged but may widen it, as pro-environmental intention fails to survive the handoff to an agent optimising for conventional utility. We consider this under-examined phenomenon the *green delegation gap*.

The existing literature, however, has approached the relationship between AI and sustainable consumption from two comparatively narrow vantage points, both of which retain the human as the decision-maker. The first treats AI as a promotional aid or behavioural nudge that steers consumers toward greener options through sustainability-oriented recommender systems, AI-enabled green marketing, and service agents that promote eco-friendly choices (Garg et al., 2025; Satinet et al., 2025; Choi & Yi, 2025). The second positions AI as an instrument of accountability, deploying natural-language and machine-learning tools to detect greenwashing and scrutinise environmental disclosures (Guglyuvatyy, 2026; Sari et al., 2025). Valuable as these streams are, both presuppose that the consumer remains the chooser and that AI operates around the decision rather than in place of it. The delegated, agentic frame in which the system itself selects and transacts has not been integrated with sustainable-consumption theory. At the same time, a substantial body of work on algorithm aversion and algorithm appreciation explains the conditions under which consumers do or do not defer to algorithmic judgment (Dietvorst et al., 2015; Logg et al., 2019; Longoni et al., 2019; Jussupow et al., 2024), yet this literature has rarely been connected to pro-environmental outcomes. The result is a conspicuous void at the convergence of three otherwise active fields.

2. Method

2.1 Research design and rationale

This study adopts an integrative literature review. Unlike a meta-analysis, which aggregates effect sizes within a mature and homogeneous evidence base, or a purely bibliometric review, which maps a field's structure quantitatively, an integrative review is suited to domains that are emerging, fragmented, or drawn from multiple disciplines, and it permits the reviewer to critique, reconceptualise, and synthesise prior work into new theoretical formulations (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). The present enquiry sits precisely at such an intersection, joining a mature sustainable-consumption literature to a rapidly evolving body of work on AI delegation, with only sparse connective tissue between them. Because the principal output is a conceptual framework accompanied by testable propositions rather than a pooled empirical estimate, the design follows the logic of theory-building reviews, in which the contribution lies in identifying gaps, synthesising disparate streams, and articulating a forward agenda (Paul et al., 2021).

2.2 Search strategy

The literature was retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science, the two databases most appropriate for indexing peer-reviewed business, management, and environmental research. Consistent with the integrative design, the search was organised around three thematic strands corresponding to the review's structure: (A) sustainable and green consumption, including the attitude-behaviour gap, green trust, and willingness to pay a premium; (B) AI delegation, encompassing algorithm aversion and appreciation, recommendation and conversational agents, and agentic commerce; and (C) the intersection of AI and sustainable consumption. Boolean strings combined the core constructs within each strand for example, pairing terms such as "green consumption," "sustainable consumption," and "attitude-behaviour gap" for Strand A, and "AI agent," "agentic," "delegation," "algorithm aversion," and "purchase decision" for Strand B while the intersection search deliberately combined agentic terms with sustainability terms to gauge the size of the connective literature. The search window spanned 2015 to 2026 to capture the contemporary trajectory of the field, with foundational theoretical and methodological works admitted irrespective of publication date. Reporting of the identification, screening, and inclusion stages follows the structure of the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021); the corresponding flow-diagram counts are to be populated from the final database export.

2.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Records were eligible for inclusion if they were peer-reviewed journal articles supplemented by seminal books and foundational conceptual works where these establish the theories underpinning the review published in English and situated within the business, management, marketing, consumer-behaviour, or environmental subject areas. Records were excluded if they appeared in predatory or non-indexed outlets, were not peer-reviewed, or constituted bare conference abstracts without an accessible full text. A quality screen was applied to ensure that retained sources met the standards expected of a Scopus-level synthesis; sources of uncertain provenance were excluded in favour of conservative coding. The deliberately small return on the intersection search was retained as a substantive finding in its own right, evidencing the gap that motivates the review rather than a deficiency of search.

2.4 Analysis and organising framework

Retained sources were analysed using the Theory-Context-Characteristics-Methodology (TCCM) framework, which provides a transparent and replicable scheme for organising a framework-based review and for surfacing the theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps from which a future agenda is derived (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019). Synthesis proceeded concept-centrally rather than article-by-article: evidence was first consolidated within each of the two principal streams, then examined at their intersection, and finally integrated into the conceptual model developed in Section 6. This sequence mirrors the structure of the review and ensures that the proposed framework and propositions are traceable to the synthesised evidence.

3. Sustainable Consumption and the Attitude-Behaviour Gap

3.1 The persistence of the gap and its drivers

The point of departure for the sustainable-consumption literature is a robust empirical regularity: consumers routinely express pro-environmental attitudes that do not materialise in corresponding purchases. This discontinuity, variously labelled the green attitude-behaviour gap, the intention-behaviour gap, or the motivation-behaviour gap, has been documented across product categories and national contexts and remains the field's central explanatory problem (ElHaffar et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2023). Much of the explanatory effort has been organised around the Theory of Planned Behaviour, in which attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape intention, which in turn predicts behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Extensions of this model have sought to account for the residual gap by incorporating additional constructs: perceived consumer effectiveness as a mediator, alongside eco-literacy and green-product perceptions as boundary conditions (Nabi Khan et al., 2025), and past behaviour as a predictor that materially improves the explanation of green-purchase intention (Witek & Kuźniar, 2023). Yet even enriched models leave a behavioural shortfall, and complementary frameworks attribute this to barriers of opportunity rather than motivation alone difficulties of product availability, the legibility of sustainability labelling, and the effort required to identify genuinely green alternatives such that raising knowledge and motivation proves insufficient when situational frictions persist (Sundaraja et al., 2024). The recurring drivers of the gap therefore reduce to a familiar triad: price sensitivity, perceived inconvenience, and doubt about the credibility of environmental claims.

3.2 Trust, transparency, and authenticity as the bridge

Across this literature, consumer trust emerges as the pivotal construct mediating whether favourable attitudes convert into sustainable choices. Greenwashing misleading or exaggerated environmental claims erodes that trust; in an influential formulation, perceptions of greenwashing diminish green trust through the intervening mechanisms of green consumer confusion and green perceived risk (Chen & Chang, 2013), and the practice has been shown to depress green brand equity by undermining the image, satisfaction, and trust on which it rests (Chen, 2010; Ha et al., 2022). Because the drivers of greenwashing are structural as well as opportunistic, the credibility problem is unlikely to resolve spontaneously (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). The literature consequently identifies transparency and authenticity as the principal antidotes. Consumer perceptions of corporate transparency and social responsibility build the trust on which durable consumer–brand relationships depend (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014), and brand authenticity conceptualised and measured as a multidimensional construct centred on sincerity and genuineness functions as a closely related determinant of favourable consumer response (Morhart et al., 2015). Recent work situates these mechanisms in digital settings, showing that influencer credibility strengthens perceptions of green brand authenticity while perceived greenwashing weakens them, with implications for narrowing the attitude–behaviour gap (Poulis et al., 2026), and that transparent sustainability communication on social media raises trust and, through it, purchase intention (Kothari et al., 2025). Interpreted through signalling theory, these findings describe a market in which environmental quality is an unobservable attribute that must be credibly signalled, and in which greenwashing represents a corrupted signal that raises the consumer's perceived risk (Spence, 1973).

3.3 The green premium, loyalty, and willingness to pay

A distinguishing feature of sustainable consumption is that the favoured choice frequently carries a price premium whose justification is informational rather than experiential. The literature accordingly treats willingness to pay more as a key outcome and trust as its proximate cause. Applying a stimulus–organism–response logic, green transparency and green perceived value (stimuli) shape green brand trust (organism), which in turn drives green brand loyalty and willingness to pay more (responses), with identity-based factors such as self-brand connection amplifying these effects (Uikey et al., 2026; cf. Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Comparable evidence among younger consumers shows that willingness to pay for sustainable options is not driven by attitudes alone but is formed under conditions of credible and transparent communication, with eco-label credibility strengthening the trust–willingness relationship, perceived greenwashing weakening it, and price sensitivity constraining premium acceptance even where evaluations are favourable (DY & Moodbidri, 2026). The implication for the present review is significant: sustainable choice is uniquely dependent on trust-laden signals and on a deliberate readiness to absorb a premium characteristics that make it more, not less, vulnerable to disruption at the point of execution.

3.4 Resilience and economic uncertainty as boundary conditions

Sustainable choices are not made in economic isolation, and the literature increasingly attends to how adversity conditions consumption. Consumer resilience the capacity to cope with and adapt to disruption has been theorised both as a psychological attribute, drawing on foundational accounts of resilience as an ordinary adaptive process and of the role of positive emotion in recovery (Masten, 2001; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), and, more recently, as a relational and communitarian phenomenon shaped by institutional context (Hosany et al., 2025; Gordon et al., 2025). Resilience has been linked to situated learning, active coping, and well-being in stressful consumption encounters, with psychological flexibility moderating these pathways (Bose, 2022). Adjacent work on consumer vulnerability synthesises the antecedents and consequences of compromised consumer capacity, further specifying the conditions under which decision-making is strained (Verma et al., 2026). Economic uncertainty intensifies these dynamics, heightening price sensitivity and reordering priorities in ways that can either crowd out or, conversely, reframe sustainable consumption. For the framework developed later, resilience and economic uncertainty are therefore retained as boundary conditions that govern how readily a consumer's pro-environmental intention withstands competing pressures.

3.5 Implications for the review

Stream A establishes three points that the subsequent analysis carries forward. First, the green attitude–behaviour gap is durable and is governed principally by trust, transparency, and authenticity. Second, sustainable choice depends on credible signalling and a willingness to pay a premium, rendering it distinctively fragile at the moment of execution. Third, this fragility is conditioned by consumer resilience and economic uncertainty. These

properties make the green domain an especially demanding test case for any reconfiguration of who or what executes the purchase, the question to which Stream B now turns.

4. AI Delegation and Algorithmic Decision-Making

4.1 From recommendation to delegation: the autonomy continuum

The literature on AI in consumer settings describes a continuum of machine authority. At one pole sits the decision-aid agent, which supplies information or recommendations while the consumer retains the choice; at the other sits the delegated agent, which selects and transacts on the consumer's behalf. This distinction is consequential because the two configurations engage trust differently: a decision aid is evaluated for the quality of its counsel, whereas a delegate is entrusted with the outcome itself (Pathak & Bansal, 2024). An evidence-mapping review of agentic commerce confirms that, although the rhetoric of delegation is pervasive, the documented consumer-facing evidence still clusters around assistive chatbots and recommender-like systems, with execution-level delegation comparatively under-evaluated; the same review observes that constructs central to safe delegation—trust calibration, verification behaviour, and post-delegation regret or blame—are frequently theorised but inconsistently operationalised, and that boundary conditions such as involvement, stakes, and regulatory setting are rarely examined systematically (Balaskas, 2026). Where autonomy has been studied directly, its effect on purchase decisions appears non-linear: an inverted-U relationship in which moderate algorithmic autonomy is tolerated or welcomed but high autonomy provokes resistance, mediated by self-efficacy and moderated by cultural orientation (Fan & Liu, 2022). The emergence of voice assistants positioned as shopping surrogates extends this trajectory, framing the consumer's relationship with the agent through motivations of convenience and connectedness while raising unresolved questions of autonomy, control, and competence (Mo et al., 2026). Critically, agent-centric evaluation indicates that when an autonomous system selects products, its choices are shaped by the attributes most legible to it: price, position, and promotional salience such that delegation reduces search friction but introduces susceptibility to position biases and to the neglect of small but real quality or price advantages (Allouah et al., 2026).

4.2 Algorithm aversion and appreciation

Whether consumers will cede the choice at all is governed by a well-developed literature on responses to algorithmic judgment, which has identified two opposing tendencies. Algorithm aversion describes a reluctance to rely on algorithms pronounced after observing them err, even where they outperform human judgement (Dietvorst et al., 2015) and has been shown in consumer contexts to make favourable outcomes harder to internalise when produced by a machine rather than a person (Yalcin et al., 2022) and to be driven, in sensitive domains, by uniqueness neglect (Longoni et al., 2019). Algorithm appreciation describes the converse tendency to weight algorithmic advice more heavily than human advice under certain conditions (Logg et al., 2019). Reconciling these findings, subsequent work establishes that the response is task-dependent, with aversion concentrated in tasks perceived as subjective and appreciation in those perceived as objective (Castelo et al., 2019), and an integrative account synthesises the conditions under which each pattern prevails (Jussupow et al., 2024). Consumer-focused studies refine this further, demonstrating that aversion and appreciation can co-occur across unstructured tasks, with perceived accuracy mediating trust in algorithmic agents (Jin & Li, 2025), that disclosing an algorithm's accuracy increases reliance and supports trust calibration (de Jong et al., 2025; Daschner & Obermaier, 2022), and that the phenomenon is not culturally universal but varies across national contexts (Liu et al., 2023). The collective lesson is that deference to an agent is conditional, calibrated to perceived competence, and sensitive to error and context.

4.3 Trust, anthropomorphism, and transparency in human-agent interaction

Because delegation is an act of trust, the determinants of trust in AI agents are central. The classical model decomposes trust into perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995), while the Computers Are Social Actors paradigm explains why consumers extend such social judgements to non-human systems in the first place, applying human-like expectations to machines (Nass & Moon, 2000). A substantial body of work shows that anthropomorphic design amplifies these dynamics: a framework-based review documents the rapid growth and effects of anthropomorphism in AI service agents (Li et al., 2025); anthropomorphic and transparent generative-AI communication enhances purchase intention directly and indirectly through social presence and trust (Wang et al., 2025); and brand anthropomorphism in voice assistants raises brand trust and engagement, albeit moderated by perceived privacy risk (Patrizi et al., 2024). The effect is not uniformly positive, however; anthropomorphism can exhibit a non-monotonic relationship with privacy concern, constituting a design dilemma rather than a simple lever (Nikolov et al., 2025). In conversational commerce more broadly, anthropomorphic cues

lead consumers to perceive offers as more personalised (Sidlauskiene et al., 2023), chatbot service quality builds electronic brand loyalty through trust, experience, and word of mouth (Shahzad et al., 2024), and trust in the seller conditions how chatbot interaction translates into brand preference and purchase intention (Illescas-Manzano et al., 2024). Such systems also operate in an environment of acute privacy sensitivity, where the management of personal data is itself a determinant of acceptance (Thomaz et al., 2020).

4.4 Adoption and the autonomy question

Acceptance of these technologies has conventionally been explained through the Technology Acceptance Model and its successors, which trace adoption to perceived usefulness and ease of use and to broader facilitating conditions (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003), and consumer traits have been shown to shape uptake of chatbot-aided purchasing (Liu & Chen, 2025). Yet delegation poses a distinct challenge that adoption models only partly address, because ceding the choice implicates the consumer's psychological need for autonomy and control; self-determination theory has accordingly been advanced as the appropriate lens for delegated, surrogate consumption (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mo et al., 2026). Reviews of the wider field note a recurring hesitance to use such systems for transactions specifically linked to cognitive biases, inertia, and procrastination, and moderated by brand credibility even as AI continues to reshape consumer–brand relationships in ways that remain underexplored (Nogueira et al., 2025; Ribeiro et al., 2025).

4.5 Implications for the review

Stream B yields three conclusions that the synthesis carries forward. First, delegation is qualitatively distinct from recommendation, and autonomy interacts non-linearly with acceptance. Second, deference to an agent is conditional on calibrated trust and is sensitive to perceived competence, error, anthropomorphic framing, and culture. Third, autonomous agents optimise for legible attributes and are vulnerable to positional and salience biases. Placed beside Stream A, these properties imply a structural risk for sustainable consumption, which depends on precisely the trust-laden, premium-bearing signals least likely to survive an agent's optimisation an intersection examined next.

5. The Intersection of AI and Sustainable Consumption: Two Framings and a Void

Although the two literatures synthesised above have developed largely in parallel, a body of work does sit at their intersection. On inspection, however, this work resolves into two framings that share a common and limiting assumption that the human consumer remains the agent of choice. Neither framing addresses the case in which the choice itself is delegated.

5.1 AI as a sustainability aid and nudge

The dominant framing positions AI as an instrument that steers consumers toward greener options while leaving the decision in human hands. At the level of marketing strategy, AI is presented as a transformative tool for sustainability communication, using personalisation, predictive analytics, and conversational interfaces to engage environmentally conscious consumers, though the same accounts caution that over-customisation and data misuse can provoke fatigue and allegations of greenwashing (Garg et al., 2025). At the level of choice architecture, a more precise mechanism is examined in work on sustainability-oriented recommender systems, which function as behavioural nudges: such systems increase the purchase of sustainable products by heightening interest and desire and by reducing the effort required to locate them, without altering the overall quantity purchased, even as they risk amplifying a sense of being overwhelmed by sustainability messaging (Satinet et al., 2025). A wider technical literature catalogues the design of recommender systems for sustainability and the open research issues they raise (Felfernig et al., 2023), extends eco-nudging to specific domains such as commuting (Bothos et al., 2015), and refines the explanatory content of sustainability-aware recommendations (Halimeh & Müller, 2026). Complementary consumer-behaviour studies model the antecedents of green purchasing in AI-mediated settings through a value–attitude–behaviour pathway (Ma et al., 2025), through the indirect routes of environmental knowledge and green trust, by which AI exerts only a weak direct effect (Zambrano-Vélez et al., 2026), and through comparisons of AI and human service agents that find AI assistance capable of enhancing green-brand perceptions and pro-environmental behaviour (Choi & Yi, 2025). Across all of this work, however, AI advises, personalises, or nudges; the consumer still decides and still executes.

5.2 AI as a greenwashing detector and accountability instrument

The second framing turns AI outward, toward firms rather than consumers, deploying it as an instrument of oversight. Here, natural-language processing, machine learning, and life-cycle assessment are used to scrutinise corporate environmental disclosures and to flag inconsistencies between sustainability claims and underlying practice (Boedijanto & Delina, 2024), an approach that has been linked to corporate performance through ESG-

focused detection systems (Sari et al., 2025). A more critical treatment observes that the same generative capabilities can be turned to the manufacture of deceptive sustainability narratives "AI washing" even as they assist in detecting such deception, with consumer trust positioned as the ultimate casualty when greenwashing is exposed (Guglyuvaty, 2026). Valuable though this stream is for regulation, investment, and governance, it concerns the verification of firm conduct rather than the consumer's act of purchasing. It does not bear on what an autonomous agent shopping for a consumer would do with a sustainability signal.

5.3 The void: delegated choice and sustainable consumption

What neither framing addresses and what no source in the corpus directly examines is the configuration in which the autonomous agent is itself the chooser and the outcome of interest is sustainable consumption. The delegation literature reviewed in Section 4 attends to trust, autonomy, and the biases of agentic choice, but its outcome variables are adoption, satisfaction, and purchase generally, not pro-environmental behaviour (Balaskas, 2026; Allouah et al., 2026; Pathak & Bansal, 2024; Mo et al., 2026). The sustainable-consumption literature reviewed in Section 3 theorises the attitude-behaviour gap, trust, and the green premium, but assumes a human executes the purchase. And the algorithm-aversion literature explains when consumers defer to machines without connecting that deference to environmental outcomes (Dietvorst et al., 2015; Logg et al., 2019; Jussupow et al., 2024). The three fields are individually active and mutually adjacent, yet their point of convergence is unoccupied.

5.4 Why the void matters

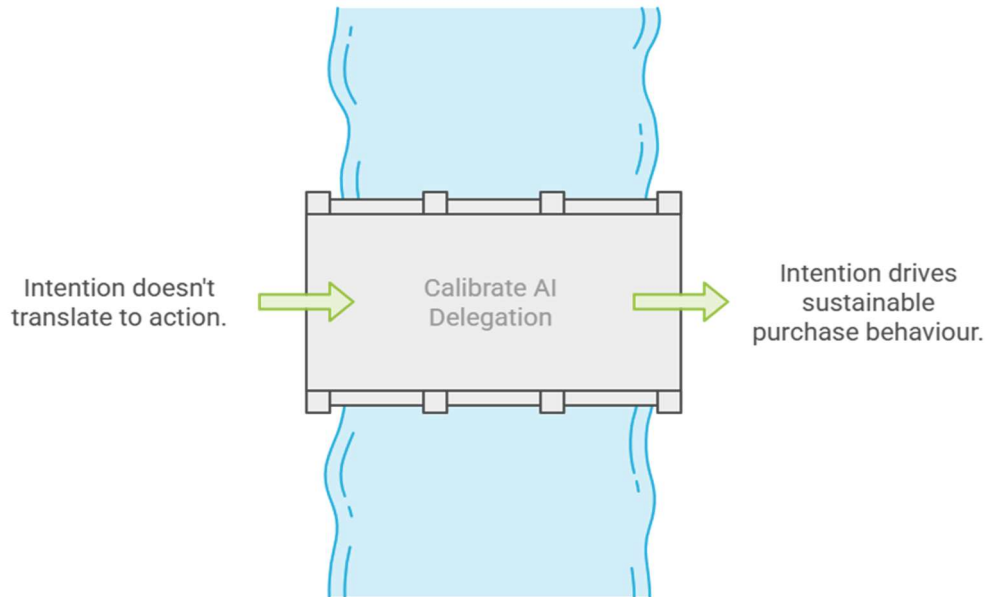
This is not an arbitrary gap but a theoretically loaded one. Section 3 established that sustainable choice is uniquely dependent on trust-laden, credibly signalled attributes and on a deliberate willingness to absorb a price premium. Section 4 established that autonomous agents optimise for the attributes most legible to them price, ratings, and positional salience and are vulnerable to the neglect of small advantages and to position biases. Juxtaposing the two yields a clear and consequential conjecture: the sustainability signal, which depends on transparency, authenticity, and a consumer's conscious premium tolerance, is precisely the signal least likely to be preserved when an agent optimises on the consumer's behalf. The pro-environmental intention that a human might honour at the point of purchase may therefore fail to survive its delegation to an agent. Far from closing the green attitude-behaviour gap, delegation may institutionalise and widen it. It is this conjecture that the framework developed in the following section formalises as the *Green Delegation Gap*.

6. The Green Delegation Gap: An Integrated Framework

6.1 Overview

Synthesising the two streams and their intersection yields a conceptual framework, the *Green Delegation Gap*, which reconceptualises the green attitude-behaviour gap for a context in which the act of purchasing is delegated to an autonomous agent. The framework retains the established core relationship pro-environmental intention predicting sustainable purchase behaviour, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay a premium (Ajzen, 1991; Uikey et al., 2026) but inserts delegation as a transformative condition operating on that relationship. The central proposition is that delegation does not act neutrally. Because sustainable choice depends on trust-laden, credibly signalled attributes and on a conscious tolerance for a price premium (Chen & Chang, 2013; DY & Moodbidri, 2026), and because autonomous agents preferentially weight legible conventional attributes such as price, rating, and positional salience (Allouah et al., 2026), delegation tends to attenuate the translation of green intention into green behaviour. The framework specifies two mediating mechanisms the agent's relative attribute-weighting and the transmission of the sustainability signal and a set of moderators drawn from both streams. Importantly, the framework is bidirectional: under conditions of calibrated algorithm appreciation and explicitly sustainability-configured agents, the same delegation that ordinarily widens the gap may instead narrow it by removing the search and effort frictions that depress human follow-through. Figure 1 depicts pro-environmental intention on the left, the delegation mechanism and its two mediators at the centre, sustainable purchase outcomes on the right, and the moderators arrayed across the central path.

Bridging the Green Delegation Gap: From Intention to Sustainable Action



Made with Napkin

6.2 The delegation mechanism and degree of autonomy

The first set of relationships concerns delegation itself. Relative to a human-executed purchase, delegating the decision to an autonomous agent is proposed to weaken the intention–behaviour link in the green domain, since the agent rather than the value-driven consumer becomes the proximate decision-maker (Balaskas, 2026; Pathak & Bansal, 2024). This effect is expected to be non-linear in the degree of autonomy ceded, consistent with evidence that algorithmic decision autonomy exerts an inverted-U influence on purchase decisions: a decision-aid that informs a human choice should preserve green intention, whereas a full delegate that selects and transacts should attenuate it most strongly (Fan & Liu, 2022).

6.3 Mediating mechanisms: attribute-weighting and signal transmission

The framework locates the gap in two mediators. The first is the agent's relative weighting of conventional utility attributes over sustainability attributes; to the extent that an agent optimises on price, rating, and position, the sustainability of an option is discounted at the point of selection (Allouah et al., 2026; Satinet et al., 2025). The second is signal transmission. Read through signalling theory, environmental quality is an unobservable attribute conveyed by credibility signals eco-labels, transparent disclosures, authentic communication whose value depends on human interpretation and trust (Spence, 1973; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Morhart et al., 2015). Where these signals are not encoded in a form the agent can parse and prioritise, they fail to transmit, and the consumer's intended preference is not enacted. The gap, in this account, is the joint product of an agent that under-weights sustainability and a signal that does not survive the handoff.

6.4 Trust calibration and the countervailing pathway

Whether delegation widens or narrows the gap is conditioned by the consumer's calibrated trust in the agent. The aversion–appreciation literature indicates that deference is contingent on perceived competence and is supported by accuracy disclosure (Logg et al., 2019; Jin & Li, 2025; de Jong et al., 2025). When a consumer appreciates an agent's competence and the agent is explicitly configured and disclosed as sustainability-oriented, delegation can reduce the effort and opportunity barriers that drive the human gap the very frictions that sustainability-oriented recommender systems have been shown to lower (Satinet et al., 2025; Bothos et al., 2015). This is the framework's positive pathway, and its existence implies that the green delegation gap is a design-contingent outcome rather than an inevitability.

6.5 Moderators

Five moderators govern the magnitude and direction of the effect. Product involvement and stakes are expected to strengthen the widening effect for high-involvement sustainable purchases relative to routine replenishment (Uikey et al., 2026; Balaskas, 2026). Economic uncertainty is expected to strengthen it by elevating price sensitivity and thereby the agent's effective weighting of price over sustainability (DY & Moodbidri, 2026). Consumer resilience is expected to attenuate it, as resilient consumers more actively set, monitor, and enforce sustainability constraints on their agents an instance of the verification behaviour flagged as under-studied in the delegation literature (Hosany et al., 2025; Balaskas, 2026). Perceived green authenticity and brand transparency are expected to attenuate it by raising the credibility and machine-legibility of sustainability signals through verifiable labels and structured disclosure (Poulis et al., 2026; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Finally, agent transparency and anthropomorphic trust cues, together with cultural orientation, condition the willingness to cede autonomy and the trust extended to the agent (Li et al., 2025; Mayer et al., 1995; Liu et al., 2023; Fan & Liu, 2022).

7. Research Agenda and Implications

7.1 A research agenda

Organised through the TCCM lens that structured the review, the framework generates a programme of future enquiry. In terms of *theory*, the priority is to formalise delegated consumption as a distinct theoretical object that integrates agency and autonomy with the attitude-behaviour gap and signalling logic, and to test the bidirectional model in which delegation can either widen or narrow the gap depending on agent design and consumer trust (Ajzen, 1991; Spence, 1973; Logg et al., 2019). In terms of *context*, the literature is concentrated in low-autonomy, text-based assistants and in Western or culturally narrow samples, leaving substantial scope for studies in emerging markets, in high- versus low-involvement categories, and across cultural orientations that condition the willingness to cede autonomy (Balaskas, 2026; Liu et al., 2023; Fan & Liu, 2022). In terms of *characteristics*, several constructs in the framework require careful operationalisation, since the delegation literature itself notes that trust calibration, verification behaviour, and post-delegation regret or blame are frequently theorised but inconsistently measured (Balaskas, 2026); priority targets include the degree of delegated autonomy, the agent's relative attribute-weighting, the machine-legibility of sustainability signals, and calibrated appreciation of an agent's competence in the green domain. In terms of *methodology*, the agenda calls for a deliberate move beyond self-reported intention toward observed delegated behaviour. Agent-centric experimental sandboxes that manipulate product attributes and platform levers offer one avenue for isolating how agents treat sustainability cues (Allouah et al., 2026); scenario-based experiments contrasting agent configurations extend an approach already used to compare AI and human green service agents (Choi & Yi, 2025); and structural and configurational techniques such as PLS-SEM and fsQCA, already applied to the decision-aid-versus-delegate distinction, can model the proposed mediations and moderations (Pathak & Bansal, 2024). The recurrent caution that intention is a weak proxy for behaviour, voiced in conversational-commerce research, reinforces the case for behavioural and field designs (Sidlauskienė et al., 2023).

7.2 Managerial implications

For brands, the framework reframes a strategic problem. As discovery and selection migrate to autonomous agents, a sustainability advantage that is credible to human consumers may simply fail to register with the agent that now chooses on their behalf. The managerial imperative is therefore to render sustainability signals machine-legible: to encode environmental claims in structured, verifiable form third-party certifications, standardised eco-labels, and transparent disclosures so that an optimising agent can parse and prioritise them rather than default to price and position (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; DY & Moodbidri, 2026; Allouah et al., 2026). Because perceived greenwashing erodes the trust on which green loyalty and premium tolerance depend, and because that erosion may be amplified rather than absorbed in agent-mediated channels, authenticity and transparency become not merely reputational assets but functional requirements for visibility (Chen & Chang, 2013; Poulis et al., 2026). Building durable green brand trust remains the most robust hedge, since it underwrites loyalty and willingness to pay through the very signals most at risk in delegation (Uikey et al., 2026). For the designers of agents and platforms, the framework identifies clear levers: configurable and disclosed sustainability preferences, explainability regarding why a given product was selected, choice-architecture defaults that foreground green options, and accuracy disclosure to support calibrated trust each capable of activating the framework's positive pathway, in which a well-designed agent narrows rather than widens the gap by removing the search and effort costs that depress human follow-through (Satinet et al., 2025; de Jong et al., 2025; Bothos et al., 2015).

7.3 Policy and regulatory implications

The framework also carries implications for policy. If sustainability signals must be machine-legible to survive delegation, then the standardisation of environmental disclosures and eco-labels into structured, verifiable formats becomes a matter of consumer protection as much as of market efficiency, ensuring that an agent acting for a consumer can access and act upon credible green information. The same generative capabilities that can detect deceptive claims can also fabricate them, and the prospect of "AI washing" warrants regulatory attention to the integrity of AI-mediated sustainability communication (Guglyuvatyy, 2026; Boedijanto & Delina, 2024). More broadly, as agents assume the role of chooser, transparency requirements regarding the criteria on which they select and safeguards against architectures that systematically strip sustainability from consideration emerge as legitimate objects of consumer and competition policy. In each case, the policy goal is to preserve the consumer's expressed environmental preference through the delegation that would otherwise silently override it.

8. Conclusion

Consumer markets are crossing a threshold at which the act of choosing is increasingly delegated from the consumer to the autonomous agent. This article has argued that the transition carries a specific and under-appreciated consequence for sustainable consumption. Sustainable choice is distinctive in its dependence on credibly signalled, trust-laden attributes and on a deliberate willingness to bear a price premium qualities that have long produced a stubborn gap between green attitudes and green behaviour even when the consumer executes the purchase. When an autonomous agent executes it instead, optimising for the attributes most legible to it, the sustainability signal is precisely the one least likely to survive the handoff. Delegation therefore threatens not merely to leave the green attitude-behaviour gap intact but to institutionalise it.

By integrating two active but disconnected literatures sustainable consumption and AI delegation and by examining the void at their intersection, the review has developed the *Green Delegation Gap* framework. The framework reconceptualises the attitude-behaviour gap for delegated choice, specifies the agent's attribute-weighting and the transmission of sustainability signals as its mediating mechanisms, and identifies consumer resilience, economic uncertainty, product involvement, green authenticity, brand transparency, agent transparency, and cultural orientation as its moderators. Its central contribution is to show that the gap is design-contingent rather than inevitable: under calibrated trust and an explicitly sustainability-configured agent, the same delegation that ordinarily widens the gap can narrow it by dissolving the frictions that depress human follow-through. The accompanying propositions and TCCM-structured agenda translate this synthesis into a programme for empirical work.

As a conceptual integrative review, the study is bounded by the scope of its corpus and by the fact that its propositions are theoretically derived rather than empirically tested; these are invitations to subsequent research rather than limitations of the argument. What the review establishes is that the question of who or what now executes the sustainable purchase belongs at the centre of green-marketing scholarship. As agents move from advising to acting, the durability of consumers' environmental preferences will depend on whether those preferences can be made legible to, and honoured by, the systems that increasingly choose on their behalf. Ensuring that they are is among the more consequential and least examined challenges facing sustainable consumption in the agentic era.

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