Like a Bird on a Wire: AI Agents Pull the Strings of Consumer Influence

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AI agents increasingly mediate consumer shopping decisions in agentic commerce, where autonomous systems recommend, filter, or execute product choices on consumers' behalf. Yet, it remains unclear when consumers are willing to rely on AI agents, particularly when their design affects consumer autonomy. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, we examines how the autonomy afforded by AI agents influences consumer reliance and how this effect depends on perceived consumer-AI goal alignment. Across three experiments (N=694), autonomy affordance is manipulated by varying the number of options recommended by an AI agent. Results show that consumers rely more on AI recommendations when agents preserve decision autonomy. This effect is moderated by perceived goal alignment: when alignment is low (e.g., under sponsorship disclosure), autonomy-supportive design increases reliance, whereas the effect attenuates when alignment is high. These findings advance advertising research by identifying autonomy-supportive AI design and goal alignment as key drivers of persuasion in AI-agent recommendation contexts.

Keywords: AI Agents, Artificial Intelligence, Consumer Autonomy.