

## **BRAND HEURISTICS AND BRAND CHOICE IN MOBILE FIRST MARKETS IN NAIROBI CITY COUNTY, KENYA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This independent paper develops an integrative conceptual framework explaining heuristic-based brand choice in mobile-first consumer markets. Drawing on bounded rationality and information processing perspectives, the study positions brand heuristics such as price cues, social proof, brand salience, and origin signals, as adaptive cognitive shortcuts that simplify complex brand environments. In digitally dense and innovation-driven markets, consumers encounter information overload and attribute proliferation, conditions that intensify reliance on heuristic processing. The paper advances theory by conceptualizing cognitive processing as a mediating mechanism through which brand heuristics influence brand choice, specifically through cognitive ease, heuristic reliance, and reduced evaluative effort. Further, the framework incorporates consumer characteristics and first-market contextual conditions as moderating forces that shape the strength and direction of heuristic-cognition-choice relationships.

By synthesizing fragmented streams of literature on heuristics, branding, and emerging market consumer behavior, the study addresses conceptual, empirical, contextual, and methodological gaps in existing scholarship. The proposed model enhances theoretical precision by distinguishing mediation from moderation effects and by modeling brand heuristics as a multidimensional construct rather than isolated cues. Overall, the paper contributes to marketing theory by offering a cognitively grounded, context-sensitive explanation of brand choice suitable for mobile-first environments, while providing a structured foundation for future empirical validation.

**Keywords:** Heuristic-Based Decision-Making; Brand Heuristics; Cognitive Processing; Cognitive Shortcuts; Brand Choice; Mobile-First Markets; Consumer Behavior; Digital Consumer Context.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Study**

Contemporary marketing theory has increasingly moved away from the classical rational-choice paradigm, recognizing that consumer decision-making is not always fully rational but is instead shaped by bounded rationality and cognitive limitations. Rather than engaging in extensive information search and systematic evaluation of all available alternatives, consumers often rely on heuristics, that is, mental shortcuts that simplify complex decision-making processes. Behavioral economics and cognitive marketing literature demonstrate that heuristics such as price cues, social proof, and brand familiarity significantly influence consumer evaluation and choice outcomes (Taylor et al., 2024; Jha & Sokhatska, 2025; Özdemir, 2025). Within this evolving perspective, brand heuristics are not viewed as biases or errors but as adaptive mechanisms that reduce cognitive effort while maintaining effective decision-making.

Consequently, understanding the influence of brand heuristics on brand choice is essential, as these heuristics shape how consumers interpret information, manage uncertainty, and ultimately select among competing brands.

Consumer decision-making is further complicated at the industry level, particularly in product categories characterized by rapid technological advancement and a wide array of product attributes. Such environments create information overload, making it difficult for consumers to evaluate all alternatives comprehensively. Frequent product updates, complex specifications, and intense marketing communication increase cognitive demands, thereby reinforcing reliance on heuristic processing (Min, 2023; Proi et al., 2025; van de Sand et al., 2020). In such contexts, brand-related cues act as informational substitutes, enabling consumers to infer product quality, reliability, and value without detailed comparison. Familiar brands may be perceived as more trustworthy, higher prices may signal superior quality, and social endorsements may replace independent evaluation. While existing literature highlights the importance of these heuristic mechanisms, much of the evidence is derived from developed economies, limiting its applicability to other contexts with different socio-economic and market conditions.

Emerging economies present unique structural and cognitive environments that influence how heuristics operate in consumer decision-making. Factors such as market uncertainty, institutional gaps, infrastructural limitations, and information asymmetry increase reliance on heuristic cues as tools for reducing risk and building trust (Guercini & Freeman, 2023; Guercini & Milanesi, 2022; Singh, 2024). In such settings, brand heuristics extend beyond cognitive efficiency to become socially embedded mechanisms that help consumers navigate complex and uncertain markets. The relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice therefore becomes context-dependent, with heuristics potentially exerting stronger or qualitatively different effects compared to developed markets. However, much of the existing literature treats heuristic constructs as universal and stable, failing to adequately account for contextual variations. This creates a significant gap in understanding how brand heuristics function within emerging market environments.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, consumer markets are characterized by both rapid modernization and structural diversity, creating a complex landscape for brand evaluation. Products often carry both functional and symbolic meanings, particularly in categories that support economic participation and social identity. In these contexts, brand cues may signal not only product quality but also trustworthiness, social status, and aspirational value (Chikweche et al., 2024; Akello, 2024). As a result, brand heuristics play a multifaceted role in influencing consumer behavior, extending beyond decision efficiency to include social validation and identity construction. Despite this, empirical research in African markets remains limited and often descriptive, with insufficient integration of cognitive and behavioral theories. This lack of theoretical depth restricts a comprehensive understanding of how heuristic processes shape consumer choices in these settings.

At the local level, Kenya provides a relevant and strategic context for examining the role of brand heuristics in consumer decision-making. The Kenyan market is characterized by increasing competition among brands, diverse consumer segments, and varying levels of product knowledge and access to information (Onganyi, 2022; Chikweche et al., 2024). While prior studies have focused on factors such as price sensitivity, product attributes, and digital influence, they have paid limited attention to the cognitive mechanisms underlying consumer choice. By conceptualizing brand heuristics as key explanatory variables influencing brand choice through cognitive processing pathways, this study seeks to bridge the gap between behavioral theory and market-specific realities. This approach contributes to marketing scholarship by offering a contextually grounded and theoretically integrated understanding of how consumers make brand choices in emerging markets such as Kenya.

### **Brand Heuristics**

The genesis of brand heuristics is rooted in cognitive psychology and behavioral economics, where early scholarship challenged the assumption of fully rational decision-making in traditional economic theory. Foundational studies conceptualized heuristics as mental shortcuts used to simplify complex decisions under uncertainty, limited time, and information constraints (Ilkevich, 2022; Taylor et al., 2024; Jha & Sokhatska, 2025). These ideas reframed decision-making as bounded rather than fully rational, emphasizing adaptive cognitive simplification. In marketing, this perspective positioned brands as heuristic cues that compress information and reduce consumer evaluation effort. Thus, brand heuristics emerged from the integration of cognitive simplification theory into consumer behavior research, where brands function as mental signals guiding choice under complexity.

As the theory evolved, scholars extended brand heuristics to include constructs such as familiarity, salience, trust, and perceived popularity. Brands became symbolic repositories of meaning, accumulating experiences, associations, and reputational signals that reduce cognitive effort in decision-making (Guercini & Freeman, 2023; Min, 2023; van de Sand et al., 2020). This shift moved branding theory from a firm-centered asset view to a consumer-centered cognitive framework. However, early studies largely focused on branding strategies while paying less attention to the internal cognitive processes through which heuristic cues are encoded and retrieved. This created a gap in explaining how brand signals translate into actual consumer judgments.

Behavioral economics further strengthened the theory by showing that heuristic use is systematic rather than random, influenced by risk, cognitive load, and decision complexity (Özdemir, 2025; Shad et al., 2024; Al-Hadrawi & Jawad, 2024). International studies also show that brand heuristics intensify in uncertain markets where product information is unreliable and brand credibility is difficult to verify (Guercini & Milanese, 2022; Singh, 2024; Karakuş, 2023). In digital environments, consumers increasingly rely on brand cues due to information overload and rapid product innovation (Min, 2023; Proi et al., 2025). Overall, brand heuristics explain how consumers use simplified cognitive rules to make brand choices under complexity and uncertainty.

## **Brand Choice**

The conceptual foundations of brand choice are historically anchored in rational choice theory and classical consumer decision-making models, which posit that individuals systematically evaluate alternatives to maximize utility. Early marketing scholarship emphasized attribute-based comparison, preference hierarchies, and compensatory evaluation rules as central mechanisms guiding selection (Sani, 2020; Onganyi, 2022; Taylor et al., 2024). Within this paradigm, brand choice was treated as the logical outcome of deliberate information processing, where consumers weighed product features, prices, and performance indicators before arriving at an optimal decision. Although these models significantly advanced consumer research, they have been critiqued for overstating cognitive capacity and underestimating the constraints imposed by complexity, time pressure, and informational abundance in contemporary marketplaces. In response to these limitations, behavioral and cognitive perspectives reconceptualized brand choice as a boundedly rational process shaped by heuristic cues and affective judgments, where consumers often rely on brand salience, familiarity, and perceived popularity to simplify decision-making (Min, 2023; Proi et al., 2025; Shad et al., 2024). This shift reframed brand choice as an interaction between cognitive efficiency and environmental complexity, positioning heuristics as central explanatory mechanisms rather than peripheral influences, and suggesting that brand choice emerges from the interplay of mental shortcuts and contextual stimuli rather than exhaustive evaluation.

In technology-intensive categories, where product features are complex and rapidly evolving, brand choice is further shaped by heightened perceptions of uncertainty and risk, as consumers often lack the technical expertise required for detailed attribute comparison and instead substitute brand-based inferences for technical assessment (van de Sand et al., 2020; Karakuş, 2023). In this context, brands function as trust anchors that reduce ambiguity during pre-purchase decision-making, although some studies conflate post-purchase evaluations with antecedent decision processes, limiting clarity on the cognitive mechanisms at the point of choice. Emerging market scholarship extends this theory by highlighting contextual factors such as market novelty, institutional variability, and information asymmetry, where brand choice is influenced by observational learning, peer endorsement, and informal communication networks rather than formal marketing signals alone (Guercini & Freeman, 2023; Chikweche et al., 2024; Singh, 2024). However, methodological limitations such as cross-sectional designs restrict generalizability, and overall the evolution of brand choice reflects a shift from rational optimization toward cognitively grounded, context-sensitive explanations that support heuristic-based understanding of consumer selection behavior.

## **Cognitive Processing as a Mediating Mechanism**

Empirical research increasingly identifies cognitive processing as a key mediating mechanism linking heuristic cues to brand choice outcomes. Studies show that information overload in digital environments reduces consumers' capacity for systematic evaluation, leading to reliance on simplified brand signals and cognitive shortcuts (Ali, 2025). Neuromarketing evidence further demonstrates that subconscious cognitive processes mediate the relationship between brand stimuli and decision outcomes, indicating that heuristic reliance is a cognitive adaptation rather than a purely behavioral shortcut (Dragoi, 2024). Additionally, empirical findings

suggest that heuristic reliance increases as cognitive capacity is strained by excessive information and digital complexity (Wang, 2022). Algorithm-driven environments further shape cognition by externalizing decision complexity and reinforcing heuristic judgments (Maheshwari et al., 2025). However, most studies measure cognitive processing indirectly and rarely test it as a formal mediating variable using robust mediation models. This leaves a gap in explaining how cognitive processing translates heuristic cues into brand choice, particularly in mobile-first environments where cognitive overload is intensified.

### **Consumer Characteristics as a Moderating Variable**

Empirical studies show that consumer characteristics significantly moderate the relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice. Traits such as risk aversion, price sensitivity, and prior experience influence the extent to which consumers rely on heuristic cues in decision-making (Yang et al., 2022; Bhutto et al., 2022). Risk-averse and price-sensitive consumers tend to depend more on familiar brands and evaluative shortcuts, while experienced consumers are more likely to engage in analytical evaluation, though this effect may weaken under uncertainty (Kinatta et al., 2022). However, demographic measures of experience often fail to capture deeper cognitive differences (Nassar et al., 2021). Despite this evidence, most studies treat consumer characteristics as control variables rather than formal moderators (Kumar & Mohan, 2021; Karakuş, 2023), creating a gap that supports their inclusion as moderating variables in heuristic-based brand choice models.

### **Mobile-First Markets in Nairobi City County, Kenya**

Mobile-first markets in Nairobi, Kenya, are characterized by the widespread use of smartphones and mobile platforms as the primary channels for accessing digital services, information, and commerce. According to the Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK, 2024), mobile penetration in Kenya exceeds 130%, with internet subscriptions largely driven by mobile broadband, positioning Nairobi as a leading hub for mobile-based digital consumption. This environment has accelerated the growth of mobile-first companies operating in sectors such as fintech, e-commerce, ride-hailing, and digital services, including platforms like M-Pesa, Uber, Jumia, and Bolt, which rely heavily on mobile interfaces for user engagement and transactions (GSMA, 2023).

Reports further indicate that Nairobi's mobile ecosystem is driven by high smartphone adoption, expanding digital payment systems, and supportive innovation hubs such as iHub and Nairobi Garage (World Bank, 2023). However, challenges such as digital inequality, cybersecurity risks, and regulatory constraints continue to shape market dynamics. The dominance of mobile-first platforms makes Nairobi an ideal context for examining how brand heuristics influence brand choice in digitally saturated environments (CAK, 2024; GSMA, 2023).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Consumer decision-making is strongly influenced by heuristics such as price cues, social proof, and brand salience, particularly in complex marketplace environments (Taylor et al., 2024; Shad et al., 2024; Özdemir, 2025). However, most heuristic-based models have been developed

and validated in stable, developed economies characterized by strong institutions and high consumer literacy, limiting their applicability to rapidly evolving and less structured markets. These cognitive shortcuts shape how consumers interpret marketing cues and ultimately influence brand selection outcomes.

Empirical evidence from developed and emerging markets indicates that heuristics are frequently treated as isolated cognitive phenomena rather than being systematically integrated into brand choice models (Karakuş, 2023; Petrescu et al., 2024; Kinatta et al., 2022). Similarly, brand choice studies often focus on outcomes such as purchase intention and loyalty without adequately explaining the cognitive processes that generate these decisions (Sani, 2020; Onganyi, 2022). However, limited research integrates multiple heuristics within a unified framework to explain how marketing cues collectively shape brand selection, particularly in dynamic consumer environments. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing an integrated analysis of cognitive heuristics and their mediating role in the relationship between marketing cues and brand choice, thereby offering context-specific evidence and improving theoretical coherence in consumer behavior research.

## **Objectives of the Study**

### **General Objective**

To investigate the effect of brand heuristics on brand choice of mobile-first markets in Nairobi City County, Kenya.

### **Specific Objectives**

- i. To review and synthesize the conceptual foundations underpinning Price Cues and brand choice.
- ii. To determine the effect of Social proof on brand choice.
- iii. To determine the effect of brand salience on brand choice.
- iv. To determine the effect of country-of-origin-signals on brand choice.
- v. To examine the mediating role of cognitive processing in the relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice.
- vi. To evaluate the moderating role of consumer characteristics on the relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice.

## **Research Hypotheses**

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant conceptual relationship between price cues and brand choice.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** Social proof does not have a significant effect on brand choice.

**H<sub>03</sub>:** Brand salience does not have a significant effect on brand choice.

**H<sub>04</sub>:** Country-of-origin signals do not have a significant effect on brand choice.

**H<sub>05</sub>:** Cognitive processing does not significantly mediate the relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice.

**H<sub>06</sub>:** Consumer characteristics do not significantly moderate the relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study identifies the direct link between heuristic cues and brand choice, it will demonstrate how management of heuristic-based marketing strategies can influence consumer decision-making. This paper will guide marketers and brand managers on how to consistently design branding and communication strategies that align with consumer cognition. This paper will further identify gaps to build on heuristic strategies and other variables that affect brand choice beyond heuristics.

### **Scope of the Study**

The study focuses on mobile-first companies operating in Nairobi City County, Kenya, examining the relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice. Brand heuristics is the independent variable, while brand choice is the dependent variable. The study is anchored on Stimulus–Response Theory, Bounded Rationality Theory, and the Howard–Sheth Model of Consumer Behavior to explain how marketing stimuli and cognitive processes influence consumer decision-making.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the concepts of brand heuristics and brand choice as conceptualized by various studies.

### **Theoretical Review**

The study is anchored on three marketing-related theories: Stimulus–Response Theory, Bounded Rationality Theory, and Howard–Sheth Model of Consumer Behavior.

### **Stimulus–Response Theory**

The Stimulus–Response model, also known as the “Black Box” model, is a foundational framework explaining how external marketing stimuli influence consumer decision-making. It posits that marketing inputs such as pricing, advertising, product features, and promotions enter the consumer’s internal psychological system (“black box”), where they are processed and converted into observable behavioral responses such as brand choice, purchase decisions, and product preferences. These external stimuli are deliberately designed by marketers to shape consumer perceptions and guide buying behavior.

Inside the black box, consumer characteristics such as motivation, perception, learning, attitudes, personality, and social influences determine how individuals interpret and respond to marketing stimuli. Consequently, consumers exposed to the same marketing inputs may exhibit different behavioral responses due to variations in their internal cognitive and psychological processes (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019).

In consumer behavior research, the model provides a structured explanation of how marketing activities translate into purchasing decisions and highlights the role of individual differences

as key moderators. It is particularly useful in understanding how branding, pricing, and promotional strategies influence consumer choices. Thus, the Stimulus–Response model serves as the theoretical anchor for this study, emphasizing that consumer behavior is shaped by the interaction between external marketing cues and internal psychological processing mechanisms (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Solomon, 2019).

### **Bounded Rationality Theory**

Bounded Rationality Theory was originally developed by Herbert Simon (1955) to explain how individuals make decisions under conditions of limited information, cognitive constraints, and time pressure. Contrary to classical economic assumptions of perfect rationality, Simon argued that individuals rarely possess the capacity to evaluate all available alternatives optimally. Instead, decision-makers rely on simplified strategies that enable them to reach satisfactory rather than optimal outcomes, a process he termed “satisficing.”

Within consumer behavior contexts, bounded rationality suggests that individuals frequently rely on salient cues such as brand familiarity, price signals, or perceived popularity when making purchase decisions. In complex market environments, consumers are exposed to numerous alternatives and extensive information, making it difficult to evaluate every attribute of competing brands. In marketing research, bounded rationality provides the theoretical justification for the existence and influence of brand heuristics. Consumers substitute detailed analysis with heuristic cues that provide rapid indications of quality or trustworthiness. For example, price–quality inferences, brand recognition, and social proof signals function as efficient informational shortcuts guiding brand evaluation without requiring exhaustive cognitive processing (Min, 2023; Petrescu et al., 2024).

The relevance of Bounded Rationality Theory to this study lies in its explanation of why brand heuristics function as a key independent variable influencing brand choice. Consumers rely on simplified cues when confronted with information overload, particularly in digital and mobile-first consumption contexts where cognitive constraints are amplified.

### **Howard–Sheth Model of Consumer Behavior**

The Howard–Sheth Model of Consumer Behavior (Howard & Sheth, 1969) is a comprehensive framework that explains how consumers process information and make brand choice decisions. It proposes that consumer behavior is shaped by three categories of inputs: significant stimuli such as product price, quality, and features; symbolic stimuli such as advertising and branding messages; and social stimuli including family, peers, and reference groups. These inputs collectively influence how consumers evaluate and differentiate competing brands in the marketplace. The model is particularly useful in explaining how marketing and environmental factors interact to shape consumer preferences and decision-making outcomes.

These inputs are processed through perceptual and learning mechanisms, where consumers engage in attention, perception, and interpretation, as well as develop motives, attitudes, brand comprehension, and purchase intentions over time. This learning process gradually shapes brand preferences and loyalty, ultimately resulting in observable outcomes such as brand choice and purchase behavior. The model also recognizes the influence of exogenous variables

such as personality, social class, culture, and financial status, which affect how consumers interpret stimuli and make decisions. These factors explain differences in consumer behavior and justify their role as moderating influences in brand choice studies. Overall, the Howard–Sheth Model provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the interaction between marketing stimuli, cognitive processing, and consumer characteristics in shaping brand selection (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993; Solomon, 2019).

### **Empirical Review**

This section reviews past studies on brand heuristics and brand choice, focusing on how cognitive shortcuts such as familiarity, salience, and social proof influence consumer decision-making. It also examines empirical evidence on the relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice outcomes in complex and information-rich markets. In addition, it explores cognitive processing mechanisms and contextual factors that shape how heuristics translate into final brand selection decisions.

### **Price Cues and Brand Choice**

Empirical research shows that price cues significantly influence brand choice by acting as heuristic signals of quality, value, and performance, especially under conditions of uncertainty or limited information. Consumers often associate higher prices with superior quality, leading them to prefer premium brands even when objective differences are minimal (Min, 2023; Nugraha et al., 2024). This effect is particularly strong in online and emerging market contexts where direct product evaluation is limited, prompting consumers to rely on price as a substitute indicator of reliability and performance (Petrescu et al., 2024).

Studies further show that consumers assess a perceived trade-off between price and quality, with moderate and premium pricing often perceived as offering better value than very low-priced alternatives (Monroe, 2003; Zeithaml, 1988). However, most existing studies examine price cues in isolation, without considering how they interact with other heuristic signals such as brand familiarity and social proof. In addition, many rely on cross-sectional and simplified analytical models, limiting deeper understanding of combined heuristic effects. As a result, there is a need for more integrated frameworks that explain how price cues jointly operate with other heuristics in shaping brand choice decisions.

### **Social Proof and Brand Choice**

Social proof heuristics refer to consumers' tendency to rely on others' opinions, behaviors, and experiences when making brand choice decisions. Empirical studies consistently show that online reviews, ratings, and recommendations significantly influence consumer trust and increase the likelihood of selecting a particular brand, especially in digital marketplaces where direct product evaluation is limited (Petrescu et al., 2024; Onganyi, 2022). These cues often substitute for personal experience and play a key role in shaping purchase intentions and brand preferences.

Further evidence shows that high ratings and positive feedback enhance perceived credibility and popularity, thereby increasing consumer engagement and purchase likelihood (Lim et al.,

2025). Similarly, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) demonstrate that online reviews have a measurable impact on sales performance, highlighting the strong effect of peer influence on consumer decision-making. However, most studies examine social proof in isolation and rely heavily on cross-sectional survey designs, limiting causal inference and broader theoretical integration. Consequently, there is a need for more comprehensive models that integrate social proof with other heuristic cues in explaining brand choice behavior.

### **Brand Salience and Brand Choice**

Brand salience refers to the extent to which a brand is easily recognized and recalled by consumers during decision making. Empirical research suggests that brands with high cognitive accessibility are more likely to be selected because they are readily retrieved from memory when consumers evaluate alternatives. Keller (2003) emphasizes that brand salience forms the foundation of brand equity by ensuring that a brand is considered during purchase decisions. When consumers face time constraints or limited cognitive resources, they tend to select brands that come to mind quickly.

Several empirical studies confirm that brand salience significantly influences brand choice behavior. Lim et al. (2025) found that consumers are more likely to select brands that are familiar and frequently encountered in advertising or digital platforms. Similarly, research by Romaniuk and Sharp (2004) indicates that strong brand recall increases the probability that a brand will be included in the consumer's consideration set. In competitive markets, brand salience therefore becomes an important heuristic cue guiding consumer decisions.

However, the empirical literature often treats brand salience as an outcome of marketing communication rather than as a heuristic mechanism influencing brand choice directly. Many studies measure brand awareness or recall without linking these constructs to heuristic decision frameworks that explain how cognitive accessibility influences final brand selection (Guercini & Milanesi, 2022). Consequently, further research is required to integrate brand salience within broader heuristic-based models explaining brand choice.

### **Country-of-Origin Signals and Brand Choice**

Country-of-origin signals represent another important heuristic cue influencing brand choice decisions. Consumers often associate products with the country in which they are produced, and these associations can significantly affect perceptions of quality, reliability, and prestige. Empirical studies show that consumers frequently rely on country-of-origin information as a shortcut for evaluating product attributes, particularly when they lack detailed knowledge about the product itself (Nugraha et al., 2024; Guercini & Milanesi, 2022).

Research has demonstrated that products originating from countries with strong reputations for technological advancement or manufacturing excellence are more likely to be perceived as high quality. For example, products associated with countries known for engineering or craftsmanship tend to enjoy higher levels of consumer trust and brand preference (Petrescu et al., 2024). These perceptions often influence consumer attitudes toward brands and subsequently affect purchase decisions.

Despite the established importance of country-of-origin cues in consumer research, many empirical studies focus primarily on developed markets and neglect emerging market contexts where consumers may rely more heavily on heuristic signals due to limited product information. Furthermore, existing research often examines country-of-origin effects independently rather than in conjunction with other heuristic cues that influence brand choice. This gap highlights the need for more integrative empirical studies examining the combined influence of multiple heuristic signals on brand selection behavior.

### **Mediating effect of Cognitive Processing on Brand Heuristics and Brand Choice**

Empirical research increasingly positions cognitive processing as a central explanatory mechanism linking heuristic cues to consumer outcomes. Ali (2025) empirically demonstrates that information overload in digital environments induces cognitive ease preferences, prompting consumers to rely on simplified brand signals rather than systematic evaluation. Similarly, Dragoi (2024), using neuromarketing evidence, shows that subconscious cognitive processing mediates the relationship between brand stimuli and choice, reinforcing the argument that heuristic reliance is not merely a behavioral shortcut but a cognitive adaptation to complexity.

Further empirical support emerges from studies examining bounded attention and heuristic reliance under digital saturation. Wang (2022) synthesizes empirical findings indicating that heuristic reliance intensifies as cognitive capacity is strained by excessive information. Maheshwari et al. (2025) extend this argument by showing that algorithmic decision environments reshape cognitive processing by externalizing complexity, thereby reinforcing heuristic-based judgments. However, most empirical studies operationalize cognitive processing indirectly, often inferring mediation without explicitly modeling cognitive ease, overload, and heuristic reliance as distinct constructs.

Critically, existing empirical work rarely tests cognitive processing as a formal mediating variable using robust mediation techniques. Studies such as El Shamy (2025) and Rodriguez-Fernandez (2025) acknowledge cognitive style differences but focus on individual traits rather than processual mechanisms. This creates an empirical gap in understanding how heuristics translate into brand choice through cognitive processing pathways, particularly in mobile-first markets where digital interfaces amplify both cognitive load and reliance on shortcuts.

### **Moderating effect of Consumer Characteristics on Brand Heuristics and Brand Choice**

Empirical studies consistently identify consumer characteristics as key moderating variables in the relationship between brand heuristics and brand choice. Traits such as risk aversion, prior experience, and price sensitivity shape how strongly consumers rely on heuristic cues when making decisions. Yang et al. (2022) show that risk-averse consumers are more likely to reduce information search and rely on familiar brands, while Bhutto et al. (2022) demonstrate that price-sensitive consumers respond differently to evaluative cues, altering their purchase intentions. These findings suggest that heuristic effects are not uniform but vary depending on individual consumer predispositions.

Further evidence shows that prior experience reduces reliance on heuristics by increasing cognitive confidence in decision-making processes. Kinatta et al. (2022) find that experienced consumers are more likely to engage in analytical evaluation, although this tendency weakens under conditions of high uncertainty. However, Nassar et al. (2021) argue that demographic indicators of experience often fail to capture deeper cognitive differences, revealing measurement limitations in existing studies. Despite strong empirical links between consumer traits and brand choice, most research treats these characteristics as control variables rather than formal moderators (Kumar & Mohan, 2021; Karakuş, 2023). This creates a gap that justifies examining consumer characteristics as a moderating variable within a heuristic-driven brand choice framework.

### Conceptual Framework

Smyth (2004) posits that a clearly structured conceptual framework aids in illustrating the potential relationships among the study variables. The conceptual framework for this research is presented graphically in Figure 1.

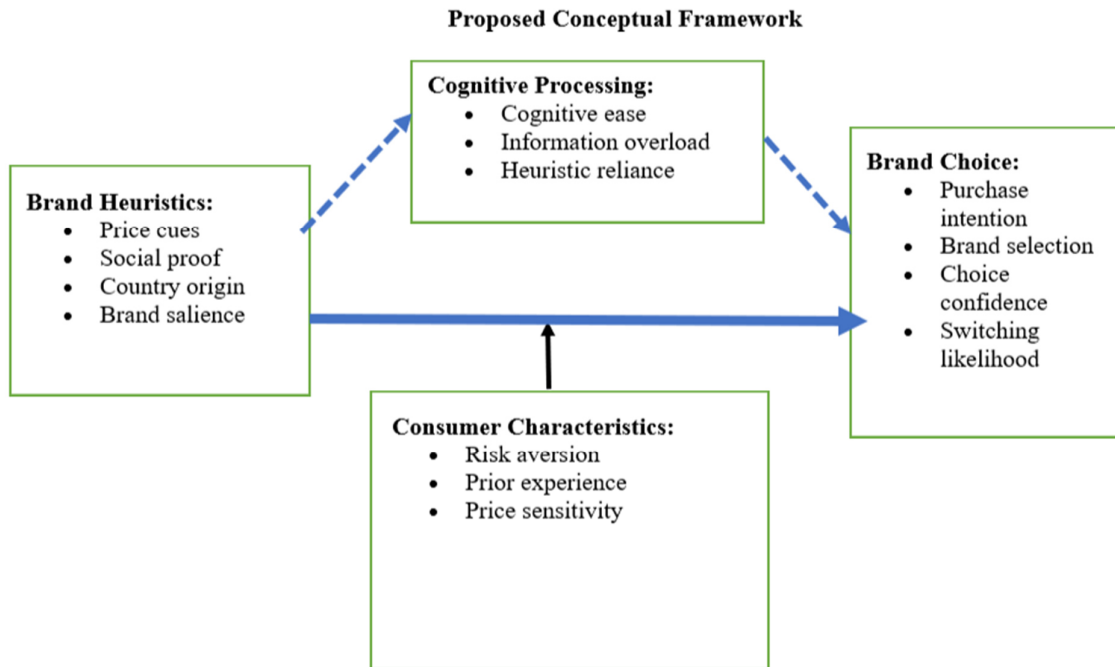


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework  
Sources: Researcher (2026)

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