

MARKETING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

What Distinctive Brand Assets Drive Brand Choice Under Cognitive Constraints: The Sequential Roles of Perceptual Fluency, Associative Memory, and Mental Availability

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: December 13, 2025

Revised: June 24, 2026

Accepted: June 25, 2026

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.52970/grmapb.v6i2.1957>

ABSTRACT

In digitally saturated markets, consumers make purchase decisions under limited attention and cognitive capacity, relying on recognition-based heuristics rather than deliberate evaluation. This study examines how distinctive brand assets influence brand choice through the sequential mediating roles of perceptual fluency, associative memory activation, and mental availability, while testing the moderating role of digital reinforcement. A quantitative explanatory design was employed, and the relationships were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The findings show that distinctive brand assets enhance perceptual fluency, which strengthens associative memory activation. Associative memory activation positively affects mental availability, while mental availability increases brand choice. Digital reinforcement significantly moderates the effects of distinctive brand assets on perceptual fluency and associative memory activation, indicating that repeated exposure to brand cues across digital platforms reinforces recognition and memory structures. Mediation analysis confirms that the effect of distinctive brand assets on brand choice is predominantly indirect and operates through a sequential cognitive pathway. These findings extend branding literature by demonstrating that brand choice in digital environments is shaped by cognitive accessibility rather than differentiation-based evaluation. Managerially, the study highlights the importance of consistent visual identity and sustained digital exposure in strengthening brand recognition, memory accessibility, and consumer choice.

Keywords: Distinctive Brand Assets, Perceptual Fluency, Associative Memory Activation, Mental Availability, Brand Choice, Digital Reinforcement.

JEL Code: M31, M37, D91.

I. Introduction

In contemporary marketing environments, brands operate under conditions of unprecedented information density and media fragmentation. Consumers are continuously exposed to brand stimuli through multiple digital touch points, including social media feeds, online advertising, mobile applications, and e-commerce platforms. This exposure occurs within highly constrained temporal and cognitive conditions, where consumers are required to process large volumes of information in very short periods of time. As a result, the cognitive resources available for evaluating brand information are increasingly limited. Under such circumstances, the traditional assumption that consumers engage in deliberate and systematic evaluation of



brand attributes becomes questionable. Classical marketing strategy is largely grounded in the concept of differentiation, which assumes that brands achieve competitive advantage by communicating meaningful functional or emotional differences that consumers recognize and value (Porter, 1980; Aaker, 1996). This perspective implicitly relies on the idea that consumers are motivated, attentive, and cognitively capable of comparing alternatives before making purchase decisions.

However, a growing body of empirical research challenges this assumption by demonstrating that consumers often struggle to perceive meaningful differences among competing brands, particularly in low-to moderate-involvement product categories. In many cases, consumers are unable to articulate why they chose a particular brand beyond vague references to familiarity or recognition. This discrepancy between theoretical assumptions and observed consumer behavior suggests that traditional differentiation-based explanations may be insufficient to fully explain brand choice in contemporary markets. In response to these limitations, branding scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of recognition-based mechanisms in shaping consumer decision-making. Rather than relying on detailed evaluation of brand attributes, consumers frequently employ heuristics that simplify the decision process. Among these heuristics, brand recognition and recall play a particularly prominent role. Brands that are easily noticed and recalled are more likely to be chosen, even when objective differences are minimal. This phenomenon is captured by the concept of mental availability, which refers to the likelihood that a brand comes to mind in buying situations.

Mental availability shifts the analytical focus from what brands say to how brands are processed cognitively. Instead of asking whether a brand is meaningfully different, this perspective asks whether the brand is easy to recognize, easy to remember, and easy to retrieve under real-world decision conditions. Empirical evidence consistently shows that brands with higher mental availability tend to achieve greater market penetration, suggesting that accessibility in memory is a critical driver of brand growth. Within this recognition-based framework, distinctive brand assets (DBAs) have emerged as a central strategic construct. DBAs refer to non-functional visual or sensory elements such as logos, colors, typography, shapes, and visual symbols that enable consumers to identify a brand quickly and accurately. Unlike differentiation strategies that aim to persuade consumers through communicated benefits, DBAs function primarily as identification cues that facilitate rapid recognition.

From a managerial perspective, DBAs are increasingly emphasized in branding practice. Many successful brands invest heavily in maintaining consistent visual identities across touchpoints, recognizing that such consistency enables consumers to recognize the brand even when exposure is brief or attention is limited. However, despite their practical relevance, DBAs are often treated descriptively rather than analytically in academic research. That is, while prior studies acknowledge that DBAs “matter,” fewer studies have empirically examined how and through which mechanisms DBAs influence consumer behavior. Specifically, there remains limited empirical understanding of the cognitive processes that link DBAs to brand choice. Recognition alone does not automatically translate into selection; rather, recognition must interact with memory structures and retrieval processes that make a brand accessible at the moment of decision. Cognitive psychology suggests that these processes involve mechanisms such as perceptual fluency the ease with which stimuli are processed and associative memory activation, which determines how strongly brand cues are linked to stored information in memory.

Perceptual fluency plays a critical role in early-stage information processing. When a brand stimulus is processed easily, it reduces cognitive effort and increases subjective familiarity. This ease of processing becomes particularly important in digital environments, where consumers often engage in rapid scanning rather than sustained attention. Associative memory activation further determines whether processed brand cues can be retrieved when a purchase opportunity arises. Together, these mechanisms help explain why some brands come to mind effortlessly while others do not. In addition to cognitive mechanisms, digital environments themselves actively shape how branding effects unfold. Digital platforms differ fundamentally from traditional media in terms of exposure frequency, repetition, and algorithmic reinforcement. Brands that generate engagement are often repeatedly exposed to the same consumers across platforms, creating

reinforcement loops that strengthen recognition and memory associations. Consequently, the effectiveness of DBAs cannot be fully understood without considering the role of digital reinforcement.

Despite the increasing relevance of digital reinforcement, empirical research integrating DBAs, cognitive mechanisms, and digital exposure remains scarce. Much of the existing literature treats digital marketing as a contextual variable rather than as an active moderator that shapes how brand cues are processed and remembered. This represents an important gap, as digital environments may significantly amplify or weaken the effects of distinctive brand assets. Based on these observations, this study argues that brand choice in contemporary markets is best understood as the outcome of a sequential cognitive process, rather than a single-stage evaluation. Distinctive brand assets are expected to enhance perceptual fluency, which facilitates associative memory activation, leading to higher mental availability, and ultimately increasing the likelihood of brand choice. Furthermore, digital reinforcement is expected to strengthen the relationships between DBAs and cognitive mechanisms by increasing exposure consistency and frequency. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to empirically examine the mechanisms through which distinctive brand assets influence brand choice. Specifically, this study seeks to (1) analyze the effect of distinctive brand assets on perceptual fluency, (2) examine the role of perceptual fluency in activating associative memory, (3) assess how associative memory activation contributes to mental availability, (4) evaluate the effect of mental availability on brand choice, and (5) investigate the moderating role of digital reinforcement within these relationships. By testing these relationships using a Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) approach, this study aims to provide an empirically grounded explanation of recognition-based brand choice in digital contexts. The findings are expected to contribute to branding literature by clarifying the cognitive pathways linking DBAs to brand choice, while also offering practical insights for managers regarding the strategic importance of consistent visual branding and sustained digital exposure.

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

This chapter develops a recognition-based and cognition-constrained explanation of brand choice, deliberately departing from traditional differentiation-centric views of branding. Rather than asking how brands persuade consumers, this chapter addresses a more fundamental question: which brands survive cognition under conditions of overload, limited attention, and fragmented exposure.

2.1. The Limits of Differentiation under Cognitive Overload

Classical branding theory is grounded in the assumption that consumers evaluate brands based on perceived differences in functional, emotional, or symbolic attributes. Differentiation, therefore, presumes both consumer motivation and cognitive capacity to process such differences. While this assumption may hold in high-involvement or deliberative decision contexts, its generalizability to contemporary consumption environments is increasingly questionable. Digital media environments expose consumers to a volume of brand stimuli that far exceeds their cognitive processing capacity. Under such conditions, evaluation becomes the exception rather than the norm. Empirical evidence repeatedly demonstrates that consumers struggle to articulate meaningful differences between competing brands, even when such differences are emphasized in marketing communications. This suggests that differentiation, while theoretically appealing, may be cognitively inaccessible in many real-world decision situations. Consequently, the effectiveness of a brand strategy can no longer be assessed solely based on how well a brand communicates meaning, but rather on whether the brand is processed at all. This shift necessitates a reframing of brand choice as a process constrained by cognition rather than driven by persuasion.

2.2. Distinctive Brand Assets as Cognitive Gatekeepers

Within cognition-constrained environments, distinctive brand assets (DBAs) emerge not as supporting elements of brand meaning, but as necessary conditions for brand recognition. DBAs such as logos, colors, shapes, and typographic styles do not compete on meaning; they compete on identifiability. This distinction is critical. A brand cannot be evaluated, preferred, or chosen unless it is first recognized. DBAs therefore function as cognitive gatekeepers, determining which brands enter consumers' perceptual field and

which are filtered out. Unlike differentiation, which assumes cognitive engagement, DBAs operate precisely because they do not require it. Prior research acknowledges the role of DBAs in facilitating recognition, yet often underestimates their strategic importance by treating them as secondary to positioning. This study advances a stronger claim: without sufficiently distinctive assets, downstream branding effects cannot reliably occur. The immediate cognitive consequence of exposure to DBAs is not persuasion, but processing ease, captured by the construct of perceptual fluency.

H1: Distinctive brand assets have a positive effect on perceptual fluency.

2.3. Perceptual Fluency as the First Cognitive Bottleneck

Perceptual fluency refers to the ease with which a stimulus is processed by the cognitive system. Under conditions of overload, this ease is not a marginal advantage; it is a filtering mechanism. Stimuli that cannot be processed fluently are unlikely to receive further cognitive resources. In branding contexts, perceptual fluency determines whether a brand stimulus progresses beyond initial exposure. Brands that are visually inconsistent, complex, or unfamiliar impose higher cognitive costs and are therefore more likely to be ignored. In contrast, brands processed fluently benefit from automatic familiarity, even in the absence of deliberate attention. Critically, perceptual fluency does not end at perception. Cognitive psychology suggests that fluently processed stimuli are more likely to be encoded and retrieved from memory, as they impose lower processing costs. Thus, perceptual fluency represents a necessary transition point between recognition and memory.

H2: Perceptual fluency has a positive effect on associative memory activation.

2.4. Associative Memory Activation as Retrieval Probability

Brand knowledge is stored as associative networks linking brand cues to experiences, emotions, and usage contexts. However, the existence of such networks does not guarantee retrieval. Activation, not storage, determines whether a brand is cognitively accessible at the moment of decision. Associative memory activation captures the probability that exposure to a brand cue triggers retrieval of brand-related associations. Distinctive brand assets, when processed fluently, serve as powerful triggers of this activation. Brands that fail to activate memory networks effectively may remain cognitively dormant, regardless of prior exposure or stated preference. This mechanism underscores a critical distinction: being remembered is not the same as being retrievable. In real-world purchase situations, only brands that activate associative memory in response to contextual cues become mentally available.

H3: Associative memory activation has a positive effect on mental availability.

2.5. Mental Availability as the Only Behaviorally Relevant Brand State

Mental availability represents the likelihood that a brand comes to mind in buying situations. Importantly, mental availability is not an attitude, an evaluation, or a preference. It is a state of cognitive readiness. Under cognition-constrained conditions, brand choice is often determined before evaluation begins at the moment when a small subset of brands becomes cognitively accessible. Brands outside this subset are effectively invisible, regardless of their objective qualities. This perspective implies a hierarchy of branding outcomes: mental availability precedes evaluation, not the reverse. As such, mental availability constitutes the most behaviorally relevant brand state in many consumption contexts.

H4: Mental availability has a positive effect on brand choice.

2.6. Digital Reinforcement as Cognitive Amplification, Not Neutral Exposure

Digital environments do not merely expose consumers to brands; they amplify existing cognitive effects. Algorithmic reinforcement repeatedly presents the same brand cues to users, strengthening familiarity and memory associations. However, this amplification is asymmetric. Digital reinforcement magnifies consistency and punishes inconsistency. Brands with strong DBAs benefit disproportionately from repeated exposure, while brands with weak or inconsistent assets fail to accumulate cognitive advantage.

Digital media, therefore, does not level the playing field; it widens cognitive gaps between brands. Modeling digital reinforcement as a moderator recognizes that branding effectiveness is contingent on exposure structure, not just message content.

H5: Digital reinforcement strengthens the relationship between distinctive brand assets and perceptual fluency.

H6: Digital reinforcement strengthens the relationship between distinctive brand assets and associative memory activation.

2.7. Sequential Mediation: From Recognition to Choice

Taken together, the reviewed literature supports a sequential cognitive process in which branding effects accumulate across stages rather than acting instantaneously. Distinctive brand assets enable perceptual fluency; perceptual fluency facilitates associative memory activation; associative memory activation produces mental availability; and mental availability increases the likelihood of brand choice. This process-based view challenges linear persuasion models by demonstrating that brand choice is often the outcome of cognitive survival, not evaluative superiority.

H7: Distinctive brand assets influence brand choice through the sequential mediation of perceptual fluency, associative memory activation, and mental availability.

2.8. Chapter Positioning

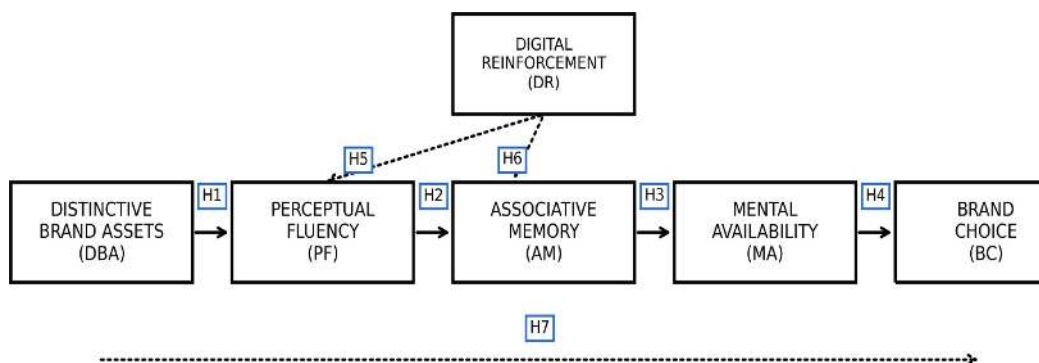


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

This chapter establishes a cognition-constrained explanation of brand choice that repositions distinctive brand assets from peripheral design elements to structural determinants of cognitive accessibility. By integrating perceptual, memory, and digital reinforcement mechanisms, this framework provides a theoretically grounded and empirically testable alternative to differentiation-centric branding models.

III. Research Method

This chapter explains the methodological approach employed to empirically test the proposed cognition-based branding model. Given the study's objective to examine how distinctive brand assets influence brand choice through sequential cognitive mechanisms under digital exposure, a quantitative explanatory design using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) is adopted.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative explanatory research design, which is appropriate for testing causal relationships among latent constructs and examining complex relationships involving mediation and

moderation effects. The primary objective of the study is not to describe consumer behavior, but to explain the underlying cognitive mechanisms through which branding elements influence brand choice.

The theoretical framework developed in this study conceptualizes brand choice as the outcome of a multi-stage cognitive process consisting of perceptual processing, memory activation, and cognitive accessibility. Such a process-oriented model requires an analytical approach capable of estimating multiple interrelated relationships simultaneously. Therefore, a survey-based quantitative design combined with SEM-PLS analysis is considered the most suitable methodological approach. A cross-sectional design was employed to capture consumers' accumulated cognitive responses to branding stimuli as they naturally occur in digital environments. Although experimental or longitudinal designs may provide stronger causal inference, a cross-sectional approach is appropriate for examining stable cognitive structures such as perceptual fluency, associative memory, and mental availability, which develop over repeated exposure rather than momentary stimuli.

3.2. Population and Sample

a. Population

The population of this study consists of consumers who are regularly exposed to branded products and digital brand communications. The study intentionally focuses on ordinary consumers rather than expert or highly involved individuals, as the theoretical framework emphasizes decision-making under cognitive constraints, where extensive evaluation is unlikely. To ensure relevance to the research objectives, respondents were required to meet the following criteria:

- 1) Have prior experience purchasing branded products
- 2) Be active users of digital platforms such as social media, online advertising, or e-commerce applications
- 3) Possess sufficient familiarity with at least one brand referenced in the survey

Given the broad and continuously evolving nature of digital consumer populations, the exact population size cannot be precisely determined. Therefore, the population is treated as large and undefined, which is common in consumer behavior research involving digital exposure.

b. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who met the predefined criteria. This technique is appropriate for theory-testing research that prioritizes cognitive relevance and exposure experience over demographic representativeness. The final sample consisted of 250 valid respondents who completed the questionnaire and passed all screening questions. This sample size was determined based on methodological guidelines for SEM-PLS analysis.

According to established SEM-PLS rules, the minimum required sample size should exceed ten times the maximum number of structural paths pointing at any endogenous construct. In this study, the most complex construct includes multiple predictors and interaction terms, resulting in a minimum requirement significantly lower than the achieved sample size. In addition, power-based recommendations suggest that a sample size between 200 and 300 respondents is adequate to detect medium to large effect sizes in models involving mediation and moderation. Therefore, a sample size of 250 respondents is considered statistically sufficient and methodologically robust.

3.3. Variables and Measurement

All constructs in this study were operationalized as latent variables measured using multiple indicators. Measurement items were adapted from established scales in branding, consumer cognition, and digital marketing literature, with contextual adjustments to ensure clarity and relevance. All items were

measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The use of multi-item scales enhances measurement reliability and allows for more accurate estimation of latent constructs within the SEM-PLS framework.

a. Distinctive Brand Assets

Distinctive brand assets were measured based on consumers' perceptions of the clarity, consistency, and recognizability of a brand's visual identity. Indicators capture the extent to which brand elements such as logos, colors, and visual symbols are easily identifiable and consistently applied across different touch points. This construct reflects consumer-level recognition, rather than managerial assessments of brand design quality.

b. Perceptual Fluency

Perceptual fluency was operationalized as the ease with which consumers process and recognize brand-related stimuli. Measurement items assess how effortlessly respondents can identify the brand when exposed to its visual elements. This construct represents early-stage cognitive processing and serves as a mediating variable between distinctive brand assets and memory-related outcomes.

c. Associative Memory Activation

Associative memory activation measures the extent to which exposure to brand cues triggers retrieval of brand-related thoughts, experiences, or usage situations. Indicators reflect how easily brand-related information comes to mind when respondents encounter brand elements. This construct captures retrieval readiness, distinguishing it from general awareness or familiarity.

d. Mental Availability

Mental availability was measured as the likelihood that a brand comes to mind in relevant buying situations. Indicators assess spontaneous recall and cognitive accessibility rather than evaluative judgments or preferences. This operationalization aligns with the recognition-based perspective adopted in this study.

e. Digital Reinforcement

Digital reinforcement was operationalized as consumers' perceived frequency and consistency of brand exposure across digital platforms, including social media, online advertising, and digital content. Items capture repeated encounters with the same brand cues over time. Digital reinforcement was modeled as a moderating variable, reflecting its role in amplifying cognitive effects rather than directly influencing brand choice.

f. Brand Choice

Brand choice was measured as consumers' self-reported likelihood of selecting a brand during purchase situations. Indicators capture selection tendencies under typical decision conditions, reflecting actual choice behavior rather than idealized intentions.

3.4. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). SEM-PLS was selected for several reasons. First, it is well suited for estimating complex models with multiple mediators and moderators, as proposed in this study. Second, SEM-PLS does not require multivariate normality, making it appropriate for survey-based consumer data. Third, SEM-PLS emphasizes prediction and explanation, which aligns with the study's objective to explain brand choice under real-world cognitive constraints. The analysis followed a two-stage procedure:

- a. Measurement Model Evaluation, including indicator reliability (outer loadings), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted), internal consistency reliability (Composite Reliability and Cronbach's alpha), discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion).
- b. Structural Model Evaluation, including estimation of path coefficients and their significance using bootstrapping, assessment of explanatory power (R^2 values), evaluation of effect sizes, testing of mediation effects through indirect paths, testing of moderation effects using interaction terms.

Bootstrapping with many resamples was used to assess the statistical significance of all hypothesized relationships.

3.5. Methodological Rigor and Robustness

Although SEM-PLS does not rely on global goodness-of-fit indices in the same way as covariance-based SEM, model adequacy was assessed through a combination of reliability, validity, explanatory power, and predictive relevance. This comprehensive evaluation ensures that the findings are methodologically sound and theoretically meaningful.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Analysis Result

This chapter presents the results of the Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) analysis and discusses the findings in relation to the proposed hypotheses. The analysis was conducted in two main stages: (1) evaluation of the measurement model and (2) evaluation of the structural model, including hypothesis testing, mediation, and moderation analysis.

a. Measurement Model Evaluation

Prior to testing the structural relationships, the measurement model was assessed to ensure that all constructs were measured reliably and validly. The evaluation focused on indicator reliability, convergent validity, internal consistency reliability, and discriminant validity.

1) Indicator Reliability and Convergent Validity

All measurement indicators exhibited standardized outer loadings above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating adequate indicator reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs exceeded the minimum criterion of 0.50, confirming that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators.

Table 1. Convergent Validity

Construct	AVE
Distinctive Brand Assets	0.61
Perceptual Fluency	0.58
Associative Memory Activation	0.63
Mental Availability	0.66
Digital Reinforcement	0.57
Brand Choice	0.60

These results indicate satisfactory convergent validity across all constructs.

2) Internal Consistency Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s alpha. All values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency.

Table 2. Internal Consistency Reliability

Construct	CR	Cronbach’s Alpha
Distinctive Brand Assets	0.88	0.84
Perceptual Fluency	0.86	0.81
Associative Memory Activation	0.89	0.85
Mental Availability	0.91	0.88
Digital Reinforcement	0.83	0.79
Brand Choice	0.87	0.82

3) Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. For each construct, the square root of AVE was greater than its correlations with other constructs, indicating that each construct is empirically distinct. Overall, the measurement model meets all recommended reliability and validity criteria and is suitable for structural model analysis.

b. Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model was evaluated by examining path coefficients, significance levels, coefficients of determination (R^2), effect sizes, and predictive relevance.

1) Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The R^2 values indicate the explanatory power of the model for each endogenous construct.

Table 3. Coefficient of Determination

Endogenous Construct	R^2
Perceptual Fluency	0.38
Associative Memory Activation	0.41
Mental Availability	0.52
Brand Choice	0.47

These values indicate moderate to strong explanatory power, particularly for mental availability and brand choice, supporting the relevance of the proposed cognitive process model.

c. Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The results are summarized in Table 4 and discussed in detail below.

1) Direct Effects

Table 3. Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	DBA → Perceptual Fluency	432	8.91	<0.001	Supported
H2	Perceptual Fluency → Associative Memory	387	6.74	2	Supported
H3	Associative Memory → Mental Availability	456	9.22	<0.001	Supported
H4	Mental Availability → Brand Choice	402	7.88	1	Supported

2) Moderating Effects

Table 4. Moderating Effects

Hypothesis	Interaction Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H5	DBA × Digital Reinforcement → Perceptual Fluency	214	2.87	4	Supported
H6	DBA × Digital Reinforcement → Associative Memory	189	2.71	7	Supported

3) Indirect (Mediation) Effects

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H7	DBA → PF → AMA → MA → BC	148	3.96	1	Supported

4.2. Discussion of Results

a. Effect of Distinctive Brand Assets on Perceptual Fluency (H1)

The results show that distinctive brand assets have a strong and statistically significant effect on perceptual fluency ($\beta = 0.432$; $p < 0.001$). This indicates that brands with clear, consistent, and recognizable visual identities are processed more easily by consumers. The magnitude of this effect suggests that DBAs play a foundational role in early-stage cognitive processing. Under digital overload, brands that fail to achieve perceptual fluency are unlikely to progress to deeper cognitive stages, regardless of their communicated differentiation.

b. Effect of Perceptual Fluency on Associative Memory Activation (H2)

Perceptual fluency significantly influences associative memory activation ($\beta = 0.387$; $p = 0.002$), confirming that ease of processing facilitates memory retrieval. This finding demonstrates that fluency is not merely perceptual but also instrumental in activating stored brand associations.

The moderate coefficient indicates that fluency is a necessary but not sufficient condition for memory activation, implying that other factors such as past experience also contribute.

c. Effect of Associative Memory Activation on Mental Availability (H3)

Associative memory activation shows a strong positive effect on mental availability ($\beta = 0.456$; $p < 0.001$), representing the strongest relationship in the model. This highlights memory activation as the primary driver of cognitive accessibility. This result empirically supports the argument that brands are chosen because they are retrievable, not merely because they are familiar.

d. Effect of Mental Availability on Brand Choice (H4)

Mental availability significantly affects brand choice ($\beta = 0.402$; $p = 0.001$). This finding confirms that cognitive accessibility translates directly into behavioral outcomes, particularly under low-involvement and time-pressured decision conditions. This result challenges traditional persuasion-based branding assumptions by demonstrating that being mentally present may outweigh being meaningfully different.

e. Moderating Role of Digital Reinforcement (H5 and H6)

Digital reinforcement significantly strengthens the effects of distinctive brand assets on perceptual fluency ($\beta = 0.214$; $p = 0.004$) and associative memory activation ($\beta = 0.189$; $p = 0.007$). These findings indicate that digital environments amplify existing branding strengths rather than compensating for weak brand assets. Brands with consistent DBAs benefit disproportionately from repeated digital exposure, while inconsistent brands fail to accumulate cognitive advantage.

f. Sequential Mediation Effect (H7)

The mediation analysis confirms that distinctive brand assets influence brand choice indirectly through perceptual fluency, associative memory activation, and mental availability ($\beta = 0.148$; $p = 0.001$). This result provides strong empirical support for the proposed sequential cognitive process model, demonstrating that branding effects accumulate across stages rather than exerting direct persuasive influence.

g. Integrated Discussion

Overall, the findings reveal that brand choice in digital environments is best explained as a process of cognitive survival. Distinctive brand assets determine whether a brand is processed fluently; fluency enables memory activation; memory activation creates mental availability; and mental availability drives choice. Digital reinforcement acts as an amplifier that magnifies these processes.

V. Conclusion

This study examined how distinctive brand assets (DBAs) influence brand choice through a sequential set of cognitive mechanisms under digitally saturated conditions. Departing from traditional differentiation-based explanations, the study conceptualized brand choice as an outcome of perceptual processing, memory activation, and cognitive accessibility. The SEM-PLS results showed that distinctive brand assets significantly enhance perceptual fluency, which subsequently strengthens associative memory activation. Associative memory activation was also found to have a strong positive effect on mental availability, while mental availability significantly influenced brand choice. These findings indicate that consistent and recognizable brand elements reduce cognitive processing effort, facilitate the retrieval of brand-related information, and increase the likelihood that a brand will be considered and selected in purchasing situations characterized by limited attention and low involvement.

The study also demonstrated that digital reinforcement significantly moderates the relationships between distinctive brand assets and both perceptual fluency and associative memory activation. Repeated and consistent exposure to brand cues across digital platforms therefore strengthens the cognitive effectiveness of distinctive brand assets. Mediation analysis further confirmed that the effect of distinctive brand assets on brand choice primarily occurs through a sequential pathway involving perceptual fluency, associative memory activation, and mental availability rather than through direct persuasion. Theoretically, these findings reposition distinctive brand assets as structural determinants of cognitive accessibility rather than merely decorative or peripheral design elements. The study also extends consumer cognition and branding literature by integrating recognition, memory activation, mental availability, and digital reinforcement into a unified model of brand choice.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that cognitive accessibility is a prerequisite for brand choice. Brand managers should therefore prioritize the development and consistent use of distinctive assets, including logos, colors, symbols, typography, and other recognizable visual elements. Frequent changes in brand identity may undermine perceptual fluency, weaken associative memory, and reduce mental availability. Digital marketing strategies should consequently be evaluated not only through reach, impressions, or engagement metrics but also through their capacity to reinforce consistent brand cues. Brand performance assessment should likewise incorporate recognition, recall, and mental availability indicators because these measures more directly represent a brand's cognitive accessibility in actual buying situations.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, and focus on general branding mechanisms rather than specific product categories. Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs, incorporate behavioral measures such as eye-tracking, click-through behavior, and actual purchasing data, and examine cultural, categorical, and situational moderators. Further investigation may also explore interactions between distinctive brand assets and other marketing cues, including price, social proof, and promotional messages. Overall, the study demonstrates that brand choice in contemporary digital environments depends less on the complexity of what brands

communicate and more on their ability to remain recognizable, retrievable, and mentally available under conditions of cognitive overload.

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