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Examining the Effect of Autobiographical Memory Recall on Accessible Product Category Knowledge as a Predictor of Brand Retrieval and Purchase Intention: The Moderating Role of Perceived Choice Importance and Brand Familiarity

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A B S T R A C T

Autobiographical memory refers to the mental retrieval of personally experienced past events and plays an enduring role in psychology by guiding individuals' goals and behaviors; however, its cognitive mechanisms have received comparatively limited attention in consumer behavior research. Using a survey-based approach and structural equation modeling, the present study examines the effects of recalling product-category-related autobiographical memories and accessible product category knowledge in memory on brand retrieval and purchase intention, while also testing the moderating roles of perceived choice importance and brand familiarity. Data were collected from a sample of 385 respondents across four service categories. The measurement model demonstrated a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.22$, CFI = 0.992, RMSEA = 0.024). The findings indicated that the direct effects of category-related autobiographical memory recall on brand retrieval and purchase intention were not statistically significant. However, category-related autobiographical memory recall exerted significant negative indirect effects on both outcomes through accessible product category knowledge. Accessible product category knowledge also reduced brand retrieval ($\beta = -0.36$) and purchase intention ($\beta = -0.45$). Perceived choice importance intensified the negative effect of accessible product category knowledge, particularly on purchase intention, and multi-group analysis revealed that this effect was predominantly observed for highly familiar brands. Based on these findings, implications are proposed for brand communications and for the pretesting and post-testing of advertising campaigns.

Keywords: *autobiographical memory, product category knowledge, brand retrieval, purchase intention, perceived choice importance, brand familiarity*

1. Introduction

Consumer decision-making is increasingly understood as a process that depends not only on current market information but also on the accessibility, organization, and retrieval of information stored in memory. In competitive service markets, consumers rarely approach a purchase decision as a cognitively blank slate; rather, they interpret brands, alternatives, and consumption situations through previously accumulated experiences, remembered episodes, category knowledge, and affective associations. Contemporary branding research therefore places increasing emphasis on the mental structures through which brands become available, recognizable, and retrievable at the point of choice (Keller, 2020; Romaniuk, 2023). From this perspective, successful marketing depends not merely on exposure or awareness, but on the extent to which a brand can be brought to mind in relevant buying situations and whether its activation can translate into behavioral intention. This issue has become even more important as digital environments, social media, artificial intelligence, and interactive service platforms continuously expose consumers to large quantities of category and brand information, thereby intensifying competition for cognitive accessibility (Azizi & Khanjanzadeh, 2026; Gad, 2026; Sun et al., 2026). Although recent studies have shown that customer experience, perceived value, digital communication, and AI-supported interaction can influence purchase and repurchase intentions, the cognitive memory mechanisms that determine which brands are actually retrieved when consumers make a choice remain less fully understood (Azizi & Khanjanzadeh, 2026; Putri & Maskur, 2026). One particularly important but still underexamined mechanism is autobiographical memory and its potential influence on the activation of category knowledge, brand retrieval, and purchase intention.

Autobiographical memory refers to memory for personally experienced events and is central to the continuity of identity, future planning, emotional regulation, and behavioral guidance. It enables individuals to mentally reconstruct prior experiences and to use these reconstructed experiences as input for current judgments and future-oriented decisions. In cognitive psychology, autobiographical remembering is often understood as a form of mental time travel through which individuals revisit previous events and simulate possible future actions on the basis of remembered experience (Addis, 2020). Autobiographical memories may emerge deliberately or involuntarily, and they can vary considerably in vividness, emotional intensity, specificity, and accessibility (Berntsen, 2021). Emotional events are particularly likely to be strongly encoded and later retrieved, especially when they contain personally significant contextual details (Kensinger & Ford, 2020). Rubin's distinction between episodic and semantic memory is also useful in this context because autobiographical remembering may involve both the reconstruction of a specific personal event and the activation of broader self-relevant or category-related knowledge (Rubin, 2022). Accordingly, when consumers think about a service category such as fitness clubs, cinemas, fast-food services, or automobile insurance, they may retrieve not only abstract beliefs about the category but also vivid memories of previous consumption episodes. Such memories may contain sensory impressions, emotional reactions, situational cues, prior evaluations, interpersonal interactions, and brand-related associations. These memory traces can therefore serve as a cognitive bridge between past experience and present marketplace behavior.

The relevance of autobiographical memory to consumer behavior becomes particularly clear when consumption is viewed as an experiential phenomenon. Customer experience research emphasizes that consumption experiences are multidimensional and involve cognitive, affective, sensory, behavioral, and social responses occurring across multiple stages of the customer journey (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Such experiences can later become autobiographical memory content, especially when they are personally meaningful or emotionally salient. Once stored and later retrieved, these experiences may influence how consumers interpret brands and categories in subsequent decision contexts. Thus, a consumer entering a new purchase situation may not simply ask which brand has the strongest advertising presence; instead, the consumer may recall a past movie outing, a memorable meal, a positive or disappointing interaction with an insurance provider, or a personally significant experience at a fitness club. The retrieved memory may then activate broader knowledge concerning the category. This process is theoretically important because prior experience does not necessarily make a single brand more dominant. Rather, it may increase the number of activated category associations, competing options, evaluative criteria, and usage situations. In other words, autobiographical recall may expand the cognitive field within which a brand must compete for retrieval.

This possibility is particularly relevant to the distinction between autobiographical memory and accessible product

category knowledge. Semantic memory includes generalized knowledge about concepts, objects, categories, and their relationships, rather than memories tied to one specific event (Kumar, 2021). In consumer settings, category knowledge can include beliefs about alternative brands, attributes, quality cues, prices, usage contexts, previous advertising exposure, and typical purchase criteria. Product-related experience often contributes to this knowledge structure, although greater experience does not always result in more accurate or objectively superior knowledge (Lichtenstern et al., 2024). Consumers who perceive themselves as knowledgeable may possess broader cognitive networks containing numerous brands and decision criteria, but such broader activation can potentially make a focal brand less dominant. Consequently, accessible category knowledge should not automatically be treated as equivalent to stronger brand retrieval. This distinction is central to the present study because a consumer may possess rich knowledge about a service category while simultaneously having difficulty retrieving one specific brand as the preferred or dominant choice. The cognitive accessibility of a category and the accessibility of a specific brand within that category are therefore conceptually related but analytically distinct.

Brand retrieval is a core issue in contemporary branding because the ability of a brand to enter the consideration set depends on its mental accessibility at the moment of need. Brand metrics that focus on mental availability emphasize that brands compete not only for positive evaluations but also for the probability of being noticed, recognized, and retrieved in relevant buying situations (Romaniuk, 2023). Keller similarly highlights the role of memory structures and brand knowledge in shaping consumer responses to marketing activity (Keller, 2020). These perspectives imply that a brand can be widely known yet fail to be retrieved when category-level cognitive activation becomes diffuse or when alternative associations become more salient. Stocchi et al. provided direct evidence that autobiographical memory can affect both brand retrieval and purchase intention, demonstrating that memory-based processes may influence consumer outcomes in ways that are not reducible to general familiarity or attitude (Stocchi et al., 2021). Their work is especially important because it positions autobiographical memory as a potentially consequential mechanism in consumer decision-making rather than as a purely psychological phenomenon. However, the processes connecting autobiographical recall to brand-level outcomes remain insufficiently specified. In particular, it is necessary to determine whether autobiographical memory exerts a direct effect on brand retrieval and purchase intention or whether its influence operates indirectly through the activation of broader category knowledge.

The latter possibility is theoretically plausible because autobiographical recall can serve as an entry point into larger semantic networks. Recalling one personal event may trigger related experiences, category meanings, evaluative criteria, and competing brand associations. Such spreading activation may increase accessible product category knowledge while reducing the relative dominance of the focal brand. This interpretation is also compatible with findings concerning the mirror effect in survey and marketing data, where response patterns may reflect systematic differences in memory accessibility and familiarity rather than straightforward evaluations of the object itself (Stocchi et al., 2024). If a consumer has a dense network of memories and associations surrounding a category, the retrieval of one brand may face greater competition from other activated information. Thus, stronger autobiographical recall can theoretically have a paradoxical effect: it may increase category-related cognitive accessibility while decreasing the ease with which a particular brand dominates retrieval and subsequent intention.

This paradox may be especially relevant for highly familiar brands. Familiar brands typically possess stronger and more elaborated memory structures, but high familiarity can also create a larger network of associations and competing retrieval cues. A highly familiar brand may therefore be deeply embedded in category knowledge while simultaneously becoming one among many strongly activated elements in a dense associative system. The comparison between highly familiar and less familiar brands is important because the cognitive consequences of accessible category knowledge may not be uniform across familiarity conditions. For less familiar brands, weak existing memory structures may mean that category knowledge has relatively little effect on retrieval because the focal brand was not strongly represented in memory to begin with. For highly familiar brands, however, broader category activation may create greater interference or competition among salient associations. Testing such differences requires explicit multi-group analysis and evidence that the measurement structure functions equivalently across groups. Multiple-group invariance procedures provide a methodologically appropriate basis for evaluating whether structural relationships differ meaningfully across

familiarity conditions rather than reflecting measurement artifacts (Svetina et al., 2020).

Another factor that may alter the relationship between memory accessibility and brand outcomes is perceived choice importance. Not all consumer decisions are equally consequential. Some service choices are routine and low stakes, whereas others involve greater perceived risk, financial consequence, personal relevance, or anticipated regret. When a choice is perceived as important, consumers are likely to allocate more cognitive effort to the decision, consider more information, compare more alternatives, and evaluate potential outcomes more carefully. Under such conditions, broad category knowledge may become especially influential because consumers are motivated to search their memory more extensively before committing to a specific brand. Thus, accessible category knowledge may have a stronger negative effect on focal-brand retrieval and purchase intention when perceived choice importance is high. Conversely, when the choice is regarded as relatively unimportant, consumers may rely more heavily on habitual or immediately accessible options, thereby reducing the consequences of broader category activation.

The moderating role of choice importance is particularly relevant because interaction effects cannot be interpreted adequately by examining only average structural coefficients. Simple-slopes analysis provides a more informative approach by showing how the relationship between a predictor and an outcome changes across theoretically meaningful levels of a moderator (Finsaas & Goldstein, 2021). Applying this logic to the current context allows the effect of accessible product category knowledge to be examined at low, average, and high levels of perceived choice importance. If the negative relationship between category knowledge and purchase intention becomes progressively stronger as choice importance increases, such a pattern would suggest that deeper cognitive engagement amplifies competitive activation rather than reinforcing a single brand. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of why knowledgeable consumers may sometimes display lower purchase intention toward a focal brand despite possessing extensive category experience.

Purchase intention itself remains a key dependent variable because it represents the consumer's motivational readiness to select or use a brand in the future. Contemporary marketing studies consistently show that purchase and repurchase intentions are shaped by multiple experiential, informational, and evaluative factors. Customer experience and perceived value can strengthen repurchase intention when they generate satisfaction and favorable expectations (Putri & Maskur, 2026). Social media marketing can also influence purchase decisions by shaping the customer experience and the information environment through which consumers interpret products and brands (Gad, 2026). Likewise, AI-powered chatbots increasingly affect online decision-making by providing information, reducing search costs, personalizing interactions, and altering consumers' evaluation processes (Azizi & Khanjanzadeh, 2026). The wording and sentiment embedded in product information can also influence purchase intentions, further illustrating the sensitivity of behavioral intentions to cognitively processed cues (Sun et al., 2026). Nevertheless, these streams of research tend to emphasize current external stimuli, while the role of internally retrieved autobiographical and semantic information remains comparatively underdeveloped. Integrating memory processes with purchase-intention research can therefore provide a more complete account of how consumers move from past experience to present cognitive accessibility and future behavioral choice.

From a methodological standpoint, investigating these relationships requires an analytical design capable of distinguishing measurement validity from structural effects and of estimating direct, indirect, and moderated paths simultaneously. Structural equation modeling is particularly appropriate for this purpose because autobiographical memory recall, category knowledge, perceived choice importance, brand retrieval, and purchase intention are latent constructs measured through multiple indicators. Adequate sample size is essential in such analyses to ensure stable parameter estimation, sufficient statistical power, and reliable model evaluation (Memon et al., 2020). In addition, survey-based consumer studies must address the possibility that observed relationships are inflated by common method variance when predictor and outcome variables are measured using the same instrument and respondent source. Common method bias is therefore an important methodological consideration in applied organizational and consumer research and should be evaluated rather than assumed to be absent (Jordan & Troth, 2020). These methodological concerns are especially relevant when interaction effects, mediation, and multi-group comparisons are examined in the same conceptual model.

Despite the theoretical relevance of autobiographical memory, several gaps remain. First, prior consumer research has not sufficiently separated the direct effects of autobiographical recall from its indirect effects through

accessible category knowledge. Second, the possibility that category knowledge may negatively predict focal-brand retrieval and purchase intention challenges the intuitive assumption that greater knowledge necessarily benefits brands. Third, the contingent role of perceived choice importance has not been adequately incorporated into models of autobiographical memory and brand accessibility. Fourth, potential differences between highly familiar and less familiar brands require explicit analysis because familiarity may alter the competitive dynamics of memory activation. Finally, the combined assessment of mediation, moderation, moderated mediation, and brand-familiarity differences within a single structural framework remains limited. Addressing these gaps can contribute to both memory-based consumer theory and managerial practice by clarifying when recalling past category experiences strengthens general category cognition but weakens a focal brand's relative accessibility and purchase likelihood.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to examine the effect of category-related autobiographical memory recall on accessible product category knowledge, brand retrieval, and purchase intention, while testing the mediating role of accessible product category knowledge and the moderating roles of perceived choice importance and brand familiarity.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study was applied in terms of purpose, descriptive-correlational in nature, and survey-based with respect to data collection. The proposed conceptual model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM), which enabled the simultaneous examination of direct, indirect, moderating, and conditional relationships among the study constructs. The statistical population consisted of adult consumers of four service categories, namely fitness clubs, cinemas, fast-food services, and automobile insurance, in Urmia, Iran. These four service categories were selected because they differ in the perceived importance of consumer choice and involve varying levels of personal involvement, prior consumption experience, and cognitive and affective contextual cues, making them particularly suitable for investigating autobiographical memory processes in consumer decision-making. The required sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for an unlimited population, assuming a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and maximum population variance, which yielded a minimum sample size of 385 respondents (Memon et al., 2020). This sample size was also considered adequate for SEM. Specifically, with 385 observations and 18 measurement items, the observation-to-item ratio exceeded 21:1, which is above commonly recommended minimum thresholds for confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of the four service categories and, within that category, to either a highly familiar brand or a less familiar brand. Of the total sample, 205 respondents evaluated a highly familiar brand and 180 evaluated a less familiar brand. This grouping structure was incorporated into the study design to allow the examination of brand familiarity as a moderator through multi-group comparisons. Participation was restricted to adult consumers with at least some prior awareness of or experience with the assigned service category so that responses concerning autobiographical recall, category knowledge, and brand retrieval could be meaningfully elicited.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising 18 items distributed across five latent constructs: category-related autobiographical memory recall, accessible product category knowledge, perceived choice importance, brand retrieval, and purchase intention. All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Category-related autobiographical memory recall was measured using four items adapted from the conceptualization of autobiographical remembering proposed in prior research (Conway et al., 2019; Rubin, 2022). The items assessed the extent to which hearing the name of the assigned service category elicited a specific memory of a previous personal experience, the clarity with which scenes from that experience could be recalled, the subjective sense of mentally reliving the experience, and the ability to remember its temporal and spatial context. These indicators were intended to capture the episodic and experiential qualities of autobiographical recall rather than merely general familiarity with the category. Accessible product category knowledge was measured with four items based on previous research on consumer category knowledge and memory accessibility (Lichtenstein et al., 2024; Romaniuk, 2023; Stocchi et al., 2021). The items assessed respondents' perceived familiarity with the service category, accumulated experience in using services within the category, perceived adequacy of their knowledge about the category, and the frequency with which they had previously used or encountered advertising related to that category. Perceived choice importance was assessed with four items adapted

from earlier consumer decision-making research (Konopka et al., 2019; Stocchi et al., 2021). These items measured the perceived importance of making the correct choice in the service category, anticipated dissatisfaction resulting from a poor choice, the amount of time and attention devoted to choosing among alternatives, and the perceived importance of the eventual choice outcome. Brand retrieval was measured using three items derived from previous work on brand memory accessibility and mental availability (Romaniuk, 2023; Stocchi et al., 2021). Respondents indicated the extent to which the focal brand came quickly to mind when considering use of the service category, the number of brand-related associations such as attributes, images, or usage situations that could be generated, and the ease with which the focal brand could be retrieved from memory. Purchase intention was measured using three items adapted from established behavioral intention measures (Morwitz & Munz, 2021; Stocchi et al., 2021), assessing respondents' intention to use the focal brand in the near future, the perceived likelihood of obtaining services from that brand, and the likelihood of selecting the brand for their own future use. The questionnaire therefore captured both memory-based cognitive mechanisms and downstream behavioral intentions within a unified measurement framework.

Data analysis was conducted in two principal stages following established recommendations for SEM-based research (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2023). In the first stage, the measurement model was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis to assess whether the observed indicators adequately represented their respective latent constructs. Overall model fit was assessed using multiple fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio (χ^2/df), with values below 3 considered acceptable; the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), with values above 0.95 indicating excellent fit; the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), with values below 0.06 considered desirable; and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), with values below 0.08 indicating acceptable model fit. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, with values of 0.70 or higher regarded as satisfactory (Tavakol, 2018). Convergent validity was evaluated through average variance extracted (AVE), with a threshold of at least 0.50, and by verifying that AVE exceeded maximum shared variance (MSV). Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022) and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT), for which values below 0.85 were considered indicative of adequate discriminant validity (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019). Potential common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test and by comparing the hypothesized multi-factor measurement model with a single-factor alternative model (Jordan & Troth, 2020). In the second stage, the structural model was estimated using maximum likelihood estimation. Direct structural paths from category-related autobiographical memory recall and accessible product category knowledge to brand retrieval and purchase intention were tested, along with the indirect effects of autobiographical memory recall through accessible product category knowledge. Indirect effects were estimated using percentile bootstrap confidence intervals following Hayes (2022), allowing mediation effects to be evaluated without relying on the normality assumption of the indirect-effect sampling distribution. The moderating role of perceived choice importance was examined through latent interaction modeling using orthogonalized product indicators, as recommended by Kline (2023). Prior to constructing the interaction term, relevant indicators were mean-centered, and the products of corresponding indicators were regressed on their first-order components so that the residualized product terms served as indicators of the latent interaction construct. Conditional moderation effects were further interpreted using simple-slope analysis at one standard deviation below and one standard deviation above the mean of perceived choice importance (Finsaas & Goldstein, 2021; Hayes, 2022). The moderating role of brand familiarity was examined using multi-group structural equation modeling comparing the highly familiar and less familiar brand groups. Before structural coefficients were compared across groups, factorial invariance was evaluated to establish sufficient measurement equivalence, after which differences in constrained and unconstrained structural models were assessed using the chi-square difference test ($\Delta\chi^2$) (Svetina et al., 2020). The magnitude of latent interaction effects was evaluated using f^2 effect sizes in accordance with contemporary recommendations for effect-size interpretation (Funder & Ozer, 2019). Statistical significance was evaluated at $\alpha = 0.05$. In the overall structural model, service category and brand familiarity were entered as control variables predicting both brand retrieval and purchase intention in order to isolate the focal effects of autobiographical memory recall, accessible category knowledge, and perceived choice importance.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 385 respondents, including 178 men (46.2%) and 207 women (53.8%). Regarding age distribution, 16.1% of respondents were younger than 25 years, 30.6% were between 25 and 35 years, 24.9% were between 36 and 45 years, 19.2% were between 46 and 55 years, and 9.1% were older than 55 years. In terms of educational attainment, 14.0% had a high-school diploma or lower qualification, 43.6% held a bachelor's degree, 31.4% held a master's degree, and 10.9% held a doctoral degree. The sample was nearly evenly distributed across the four service categories, comprising 95 respondents assigned to fitness clubs, 96 to cinemas, 98 to fast-food services, and 96 to automobile insurance. With respect to the brand-familiarity condition, 205 respondents (53.2%) evaluated a highly familiar brand, whereas 180 respondents (46.8%) evaluated a less familiar brand.

Preliminary screening indicated that the distributions of the observed variables were compatible with the assumptions underlying maximum likelihood estimation. The absolute skewness values of the measurement items ranged from 0.02 to 0.26, while absolute kurtosis ranged from 0.24 to 0.63, both well within the commonly accepted thresholds of less than 2 for skewness and less than 7 for kurtosis. Mardia's multivariate kurtosis coefficient was 354.77 compared with an expected value of 360, corresponding to $z = -1.91$ (Kline, 2023). Thus, no substantial departure from multivariate normality was detected, supporting the use of maximum likelihood estimation. Sampling adequacy was also satisfactory, with a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value of 0.858, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant, $\chi^2(153) = 3494.70$, $p < .001$, indicating that the correlation matrix was appropriate for factor analysis. Harman's single-factor test showed that the first unrotated factor accounted for only 31.1% of the total variance, which was well below the conventional 50% threshold. In addition, variance inflation factor values for the predictor constructs ranged from 1.12 to 1.48. Collectively, these findings indicated that neither common method bias nor multicollinearity represented a substantial threat to the analyses.

The five-factor measurement model demonstrated excellent fit to the observed data, $\chi^2(125) = 152.44$, $\chi^2/df = 1.22$, CFI = 0.992, TLI = 0.990, RMSEA = 0.024, 90% CI [0.002, 0.036], and SRMR = 0.029. As shown in Table 1, the hypothesized five-factor model clearly outperformed alternative measurement specifications. A four-factor model in which brand retrieval and purchase intention were combined showed substantially poorer fit, and constraining these two constructs to a single factor significantly deteriorated model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 295.14$, $p < .001$. Likewise, the single-factor model exhibited unacceptable fit, with CFI = 0.447 and RMSEA = 0.191. These comparisons provided further support for the empirical distinctiveness of the five study constructs.

Table 1

Fit Indices for the Measurement and Structural Models

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
Five-factor measurement model	152.44	125	1.22	0.992	0.990	0.024 [0.002, 0.036]	0.029
Four-factor model: brand retrieval and purchase intention combined	447.58	129	3.47	0.906	0.889	0.080 [0.072, 0.088]	0.064
Single-factor model	2018.58	135	14.95	0.447	0.373	0.191 [0.183, 0.198]	0.159
Structural model without latent interactions	205.93	181	1.14	0.993	0.991	0.019 [0.000, 0.030]	0.031
Recommended criterion	—	—	< 3.00	> 0.95	> 0.95	< 0.06	< 0.08

All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant and ranged from 0.72 to 0.85. The first indicator of each latent construct was fixed to 1.00 for scale identification. As reported in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.815 to 0.877, while composite reliability values ranged from 0.816 to 0.877; therefore, all constructs exceeded the minimum reliability criterion of 0.70. Average variance extracted values ranged from 0.578 to 0.703 and were above the recommended threshold of 0.50. Moreover, AVE exceeded the corresponding maximum shared variance for every construct. These findings supported adequate internal consistency and convergent validity.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics, Standardized Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Convergent Validity

Construct	M	SD	Standardized Loading Range	α	CR	AVE	MSV
Category-related autobiographical memory recall	4.16	1.23	0.78–0.84	0.875	0.876	0.638	0.284
Accessible product category knowledge	4.66	1.18	0.74–0.85	0.873	0.873	0.633	0.284
Perceived choice importance	4.91	1.06	0.74–0.80	0.845	0.845	0.578	0.100
Brand retrieval	4.47	1.18	0.72–0.80	0.815	0.816	0.598	0.228
Purchase intention	4.12	1.33	0.83–0.84	0.877	0.877	0.703	0.228

Discriminant validity was also supported. The square root of AVE for each construct ranged from 0.76 to 0.84 and exceeded its correlations with the other study constructs. The maximum absolute latent correlation was 0.53, while the maximum HTMT value was also 0.53, substantially below the recommended threshold of 0.85. Table 3 presents the Fornell–Larcker results, observed composite-score correlations, and HTMT ratios. Accessible product category knowledge was moderately and negatively correlated with brand retrieval, $r = -0.31$, $p < .01$, and showed a moderate-to-strong negative association with purchase intention, $r = -0.41$, $p < .01$. Category-related autobiographical memory recall was also negatively related to brand retrieval, $r = -0.18$, $p < .01$, and purchase intention, $r = -0.23$, $p < .01$. This pattern suggested the possibility of a negative interference mechanism whereby activation of autobiographical and category knowledge may reduce the accessibility or behavioral dominance of a particular focal brand, with the association being somewhat stronger for purchase intention.

Table 3

Discriminant Validity, Correlations, and HTMT Ratios

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Category-related autobiographical memory recall	0.80	0.53	0.32	0.21	0.27
2. Accessible product category knowledge	0.46**	0.80	0.22	0.37	0.47
3. Perceived choice importance	0.27**	0.19**	0.76	0.06	0.10
4. Brand retrieval	−0.18**	−0.31**	−0.02	0.77	0.48
5. Purchase intention	−0.23**	−0.41**	−0.09	0.40**	0.84

A one-way analysis of variance further revealed statistically significant differences among the four service categories in both brand retrieval, $F(3, 381) = 10.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$, and purchase intention, $F(3, 381) = 11.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Accordingly, service category was retained as a control variable in the structural model. Descriptively, mean brand retrieval was 4.18 (SD = 1.08) for fitness clubs, 4.54 (SD = 1.18) for cinemas, 4.97 (SD = 1.11) for fast food, and 4.16 (SD = 1.16) for automobile insurance. Mean purchase intention was 3.54 (SD = 1.30), 4.30 (SD = 1.32), 4.56 (SD = 1.24), and 4.05 (SD = 1.25), respectively. Across the full sample, mean brand retrieval was 4.47 (SD = 1.18), and mean purchase intention was 4.12 (SD = 1.33). Respondents evaluating highly familiar brands reported slightly higher brand retrieval than those evaluating less familiar brands, 4.53 versus 4.40, as well as higher purchase intention, 4.30 versus 3.91. Median-split descriptive comparisons showed the same general pattern as the correlations: respondents in the high autobiographical-memory-recall group reported lower brand retrieval, M = 4.31, SD = 1.19, and lower purchase intention, M = 3.90, SD = 1.38, than those in the low autobiographical-memory-recall group, whose corresponding means were 4.63 (SD = 1.15) and 4.34 (SD = 1.24). Similarly, respondents with high accessible product category knowledge reported lower brand retrieval, M = 4.06, SD = 1.17, and purchase intention, M = 3.61, SD = 1.30, than those with lower accessible category knowledge, for whom the respective means were 4.77 (SD = 1.09) and 4.49 (SD = 1.22).

The structural model without interaction terms demonstrated excellent fit, $\chi^2(181) = 205.93$, $\chi^2/df = 1.14$, CFI = 0.993, TLI = 0.991, RMSEA = 0.019, and SRMR = 0.031. After introducing the latent interaction terms between perceived choice importance and autobiographical memory recall and between perceived choice importance and accessible product category knowledge, the final model explained 29% of the variance in accessible product category knowledge, 29% of the variance in brand retrieval, and 46%

of the variance in purchase intention. The standardized and unstandardized structural estimates are presented in Table 4.

The direct effect of category-related autobiographical memory recall on brand retrieval was not statistically significant, $\beta = -0.03$, $p = .651$, and its direct effect on purchase intention was likewise nonsignificant, $\beta = -0.03$, $p = .632$. Therefore, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were not supported. In contrast, category-related autobiographical memory recall had a strong positive effect on accessible product category knowledge, $\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$. Accessible product category knowledge, in turn, negatively predicted brand retrieval, $\beta = -0.36$, $p < .001$, and purchase intention, $\beta = -0.45$, $p < .001$. Thus, greater autobiographical recall increased the accessibility of category-level knowledge, whereas greater accessibility of category-level knowledge was associated with lower retrieval of the focal brand and lower purchase intention. The main effects of perceived choice importance on accessible product category knowledge, brand retrieval, and purchase intention were not statistically significant. The effects of service category and brand familiarity were included as controls in the overall model but are not reported individually for parsimony.

Table 4

Structural Path Estimates and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Structural Path	B	SE	z	p	β	Result
—	Autobiographical memory recall → Accessible product category knowledge	0.512	0.061	8.38	< .001	0.51	—
H1	Autobiographical memory recall → Brand retrieval	−0.031	0.067	−0.45	.651	−0.03	Not supported
H2	Autobiographical memory recall → Purchase intention	−0.032	0.066	−0.48	.632	−0.03	Not supported
H3	Accessible product category knowledge → Brand retrieval	−0.345	0.068	−5.10	< .001	−0.36	Supported
H4	Accessible product category knowledge → Purchase intention	−0.487	0.068	−7.18	< .001	−0.45	Supported
H5a	Choice importance × Autobiographical memory recall → Brand retrieval	−0.013	0.093	−0.14	.887	−0.01	Not supported
H5b	Choice importance × Autobiographical memory recall → Purchase intention	0.083	0.094	0.89	.375	0.08	Not supported
H6a	Choice importance × Accessible category knowledge → Brand retrieval	−0.234	0.104	−2.25	.024	−0.24	Supported
H6b	Choice importance × Accessible category knowledge → Purchase intention	−0.462	0.110	−4.22	< .001	−0.42	Supported

The mediation analysis provided further support for the indirect cognitive mechanism. As shown in Table 5, the standardized indirect effect of category-related autobiographical memory recall on brand retrieval through accessible product category knowledge was −0.182, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [−0.265, −0.108]. The corresponding indirect effect on purchase intention was −0.231, with a 95% confidence interval of [−0.307, −0.159]. Because neither confidence interval included zero, both indirect effects were statistically significant. At the same time, the direct effects remained nonsignificant, indicating full mediation in accordance with the bootstrap-based interpretation proposed by Hayes (2022). The total effect of autobiographical memory recall was also negative and significant for both brand retrieval and purchase intention. Thus, autobiographical recall reduced brand retrieval and purchase intention not through a direct suppressive mechanism, but through its tendency to increase accessible product category knowledge, which in turn reduced the relative accessibility and choice likelihood of the focal brand. These results supported Hypotheses 3 and 4.

Table 5

Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects With 95% Bootstrap Confidence Intervals

Outcome	Path a: Memory Recall → Category Knowledge	Path b: Category Knowledge → Outcome	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Brand retrieval	0.512 (0.050), [0.411, 0.603]	−0.355 (0.071), [−0.495, −0.217]	−0.031 (0.074), [−0.173, 0.119]	−0.182 (0.040), [−0.265, −0.108]	−0.213 (0.061), [−0.329, −0.093]
Purchase intention	0.512 (0.050), [0.411, 0.603]	−0.451 (0.060), [−0.563, −0.327]	−0.030 (0.065), [−0.156, 0.097]	−0.231 (0.038), [−0.307, −0.159]	−0.260 (0.059), [−0.377, −0.141]

The interaction between perceived choice importance and category-related autobiographical memory recall was not statistically significant for brand retrieval, $\beta = -0.01$, $p = .887$, or purchase intention, $\beta = 0.08$, $p = .375$. Consequently, Hypotheses 5a and 5b were not supported. However, the interaction between perceived choice importance and accessible product category knowledge was significant and negative for both brand retrieval, $\beta = -0.24$, $p = .024$, and purchase intention, $\beta = -0.42$, $p < .001$. Thus, Hypotheses 6a and 6b were supported. The effect size of this interaction was $f^2 = 0.08$ for brand retrieval and $f^2 = 0.26$ for purchase intention. Using the interpretive benchmarks of 0.02 for a small effect and 0.15 for a moderate effect (Funder & Ozer, 2019), the moderation effect was modest for brand retrieval but clearly more substantial for purchase intention.

Simple-slope analysis further clarified the interaction pattern. As reported in Table 6, when perceived choice importance was low, defined as one standard deviation below the mean, accessible product category knowledge did not significantly predict purchase intention, $B = -0.035$, $SE = 0.125$, $z = -0.28$, $p = .782$. At the mean level of perceived choice importance, the negative effect became statistically significant, $B = -0.487$, $p < .001$, and at one standard deviation above the mean it became substantially stronger, $B = -0.940$, $p < .001$. An analogous pattern was observed for brand retrieval. At low perceived choice importance, the effect of accessible product category knowledge on brand retrieval was nonsignificant, $B = -0.117$, $p = .334$, whereas it was significant at the mean, $B = -0.345$, $p < .001$, and strongest at high perceived choice importance, $B = -0.574$, $p < .001$. In substantive terms, consumers who perceived the service choice as more consequential exhibited a stronger negative relationship between readily accessible category knowledge and focal-brand outcomes.

Table 6

Simple Slopes and Conditional Indirect Effects at Different Levels of Perceived Choice Importance

Outcome	Choice Importance Level	B	SE	z	p	Conditional Indirect Effect, β	95% CI
Brand retrieval	Low (−1 SD)	−0.117	0.121	−0.97	.334	−0.061	[−0.189, 0.062]
Brand retrieval	Mean	−0.345	0.068	−5.10	< .001	−0.182	[−0.267, −0.106]
Brand retrieval	High (+1 SD)	−0.574	0.124	−4.62	< .001	−0.302	[−0.457, −0.166]
Purchase intention	Low (−1 SD)	−0.035	0.125	−0.28	.782	−0.016	[−0.130, 0.099]
Purchase intention	Mean	−0.487	0.068	−7.13	< .001	−0.229	[−0.312, −0.154]
Purchase intention	High (+1 SD)	−0.940	0.129	−7.26	< .001	−0.442	[−0.607, −0.298]

Note. B, SE, z, and p refer to the simple slope of accessible product category knowledge. Conditional indirect effects represent the pathway from autobiographical memory recall through accessible product category knowledge to the respective outcome.

The conditional indirect effects likewise showed evidence of moderated mediation. At low perceived choice importance, the indirect effect of autobiographical memory recall through accessible product category knowledge was not significant for either brand retrieval, $\beta = -0.061$, 95% CI [−0.189, 0.062], or purchase intention, $\beta = -0.016$, 95% CI [−0.130, 0.099]. At the mean level of perceived choice importance, however, both conditional indirect effects were significant, and they became substantially stronger at high perceived choice importance. For brand retrieval, the conditional indirect effect increased in magnitude from $\beta = -0.182$ at the mean to $\beta = -0.302$ at +1 SD. For purchase intention, it increased from $\beta = -0.229$ at the mean to $\beta = -0.442$ at +1 SD. These findings indicate that the indirect negative effect of autobiographical memory recall through accessible product category knowledge becomes increasingly pronounced as consumers attach greater

importance to the service choice, thereby extending the moderation results within a moderated-mediation framework (Hayes, 2022).

To examine whether the effect of accessible product category knowledge differed between highly familiar brands and less familiar brands, multi-group SEM was conducted for the highly familiar brand group (n = 205) and the less familiar brand group (n = 180). Measurement invariance was first assessed. The configural invariance model demonstrated excellent fit, $\chi^2(334) = 358.59$, CFI = 0.993, RMSEA = 0.020. The metric invariance model also showed excellent fit, $\chi^2(347) = 368.03$, CFI = 0.994, RMSEA = 0.018. The difference between the configural and metric models was nonsignificant, $\Delta\chi^2(13) = 9.44$, $p = .739$, and ΔCFI = 0.001, which was below the conventional 0.01 threshold. Metric invariance was therefore supported (Svetina et al., 2020), permitting meaningful comparison of structural path coefficients across the two brand-familiarity groups.

As presented in Table 7, accessible product category knowledge had a strong negative effect on brand retrieval among highly familiar brands, $\beta = -0.53$, $p < .001$, but its effect was nonsignificant among less familiar brands, $\beta = -0.07$, $p = .478$. Constraining this path to equality across groups significantly worsened model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 13.72$, $p < .001$. Similarly, accessible product category knowledge strongly reduced purchase intention for highly familiar brands, $\beta = -0.67$, $p < .001$, whereas the corresponding effect for less familiar brands was nonsignificant, $\beta = -0.15$, $p = .136$. Equality constraints again produced a significant deterioration in fit, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 23.83$, $p < .001$. Hypotheses 7a and 7b were therefore supported. By contrast, the direct effects of autobiographical memory recall on brand retrieval and purchase intention remained nonsignificant in both familiarity groups, while its positive effect on accessible product category knowledge was virtually identical in the two groups, $\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$. The overall pattern therefore indicates that the negative consequences of accessible product category knowledge are concentrated primarily among highly familiar brands, consistent with the possibility that activation of broad category knowledge creates greater activation confusion when a focal brand already possesses a dense network of existing associations (Stocchi et al., 2024).

Table 7

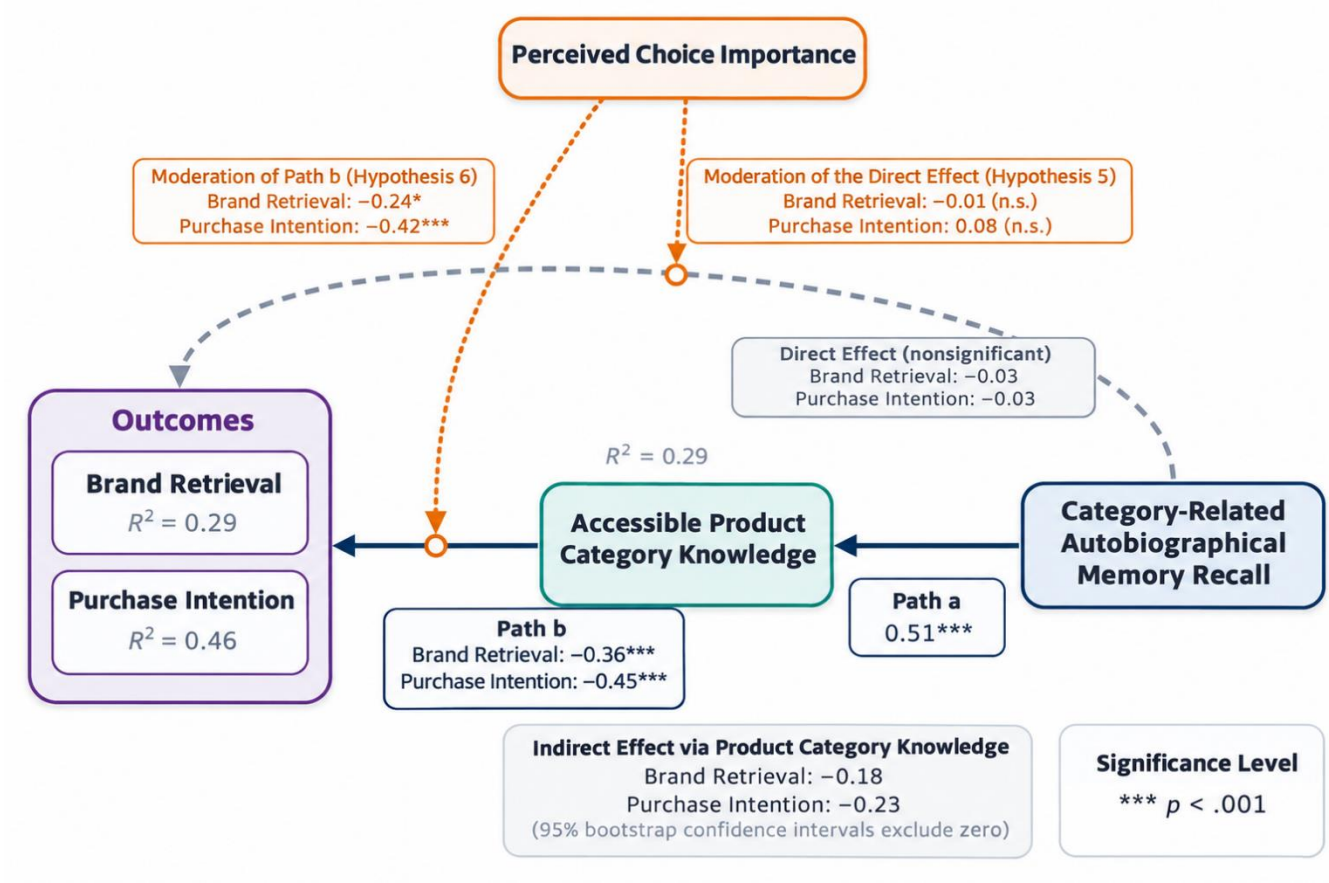
Multi-Group Comparison of Standardized Structural Paths by Brand Familiarity

Structural Path	Highly Familiar Brand, β (p)	Less Familiar Brand, β (p)	$\Delta\chi^2(1)$	Hypothesis Result
Accessible product category knowledge → Brand retrieval	−0.53 (< .001)	−0.07 (.478)	13.72	H7a supported
Accessible product category knowledge → Purchase intention	−0.67 (< .001)	−0.15 (.136)	23.83	H7b supported
Autobiographical memory recall → Brand retrieval	−0.04 (.676)	−0.03 (.772)	—	—
Autobiographical memory recall → Purchase intention	−0.04 (.610)	0.00 (.995)	—	—
Autobiographical memory recall → Accessible product category knowledge	0.51 (< .001)	0.51 (< .001)	—	—

Taken together, the results showed that Hypotheses 1, 2, 5a, and 5b were not supported, whereas Hypotheses 3, 4, 6a, 6b, 7a, and 7b were supported. The central pattern of findings indicates that category-related autobiographical memory recall does not directly suppress brand retrieval or purchase intention. Rather, autobiographical recall increases the accessibility of product category knowledge, and this broader category-level cognitive activation subsequently reduces both focal-brand retrieval and purchase intention. This indirect negative effect is contingent on perceived choice importance, becoming evident primarily when the choice is regarded as moderately or highly important, and it is substantially stronger for highly familiar brands than for less familiar brands.

Figure 1

Estimated Structural Equation Model With Standardized Path Coefficients



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated how category-related autobiographical memory recall influences brand retrieval and purchase intention, with particular attention to the mediating role of accessible product category knowledge and the moderating roles of perceived choice importance and brand familiarity. The findings revealed a more complex pattern than a straightforward positive effect of remembering prior consumption experiences. Category-related autobiographical memory recall did not exert a statistically significant direct effect on either brand retrieval or purchase intention. However, autobiographical memory recall significantly increased accessible product category knowledge, and this increased category knowledge, in turn, significantly reduced both brand retrieval and purchase intention. The indirect effects were negative and statistically significant, while the direct effects were nonsignificant, indicating full mediation. In addition, perceived choice importance did not moderate the direct relationship between autobiographical memory recall and the two outcomes, but it significantly strengthened the negative effect of accessible product category knowledge on both brand retrieval and purchase intention. This moderating effect was especially pronounced for purchase intention. Finally, multi-group analysis demonstrated that the negative effects of accessible product category knowledge were concentrated primarily among highly familiar brands, whereas the corresponding relationships were nonsignificant for less familiar brands. Collectively, these results suggest that autobiographical memory affects consumer outcomes chiefly by activating broader category-level knowledge structures rather than by directly determining whether a focal brand is retrieved or chosen.

The nonsignificant direct effect of category-related autobiographical memory recall on brand retrieval and purchase intention is theoretically important because it indicates that recalling a personal consumption episode does not automatically strengthen the accessibility or attractiveness of a specific brand. This finding is consistent with the view that autobiographical memory represents a complex reconstruction of personally experienced events rather than a simple repository of brand-specific associations

(Berntsen, 2021; Rubin, 2022). Autobiographical memories may contain contextual details, emotions, people, locations, usage situations, and multiple competing objects, any of which can become activated during recall. Addis similarly argues that episodic remembering involves reconstructive mental simulation, in which elements of past experiences are recombined and used to guide present and future cognition (Addis, 2020). Accordingly, the retrieval of a category-related personal event may activate a broad experiential episode without necessarily privileging one particular brand. This provides a plausible explanation for why the direct coefficients from autobiographical memory recall to brand retrieval and purchase intention were negligible in the present model.

This result also refines the findings of prior consumer research showing that autobiographical memory can influence brand retrieval and purchase intention (Stocchi et al., 2021). Rather than contradicting that earlier work, the present results suggest that the effect may be more indirect and cognitively mediated than previously assumed. Stocchi et al. demonstrated that autobiographical memory is relevant to brand-related outcomes, but the current study extends this logic by identifying accessible product category knowledge as a mechanism through which the effect may operate. In other words, recalling personal experiences appears to activate knowledge about the category as a whole, and it is this category-level activation that subsequently affects the focal brand. This distinction is important because it separates episodic retrieval from downstream semantic accessibility. Such a separation is consistent with Rubin's conceptual distinction between episodic and semantic memory, whereby specific autobiographical events and generalized knowledge structures are related but functionally distinct (Rubin, 2022). It is also compatible with Kumar's account of semantic memory as a broad network of conceptual knowledge and category relationships that can be activated independently of a specific episodic trace (Kumar, 2021).

The strong positive relationship between autobiographical memory recall and accessible product category knowledge supports the idea that personal experience provides an important pathway to category-level cognitive accessibility. When consumers recall a prior service experience, associated information about category features, alternative brands, usage situations, and evaluative criteria is likely to become available in memory. This interpretation is consistent with customer experience research emphasizing that consumption experiences involve multiple cognitive, emotional, sensory, social, and behavioral elements that can later shape subsequent judgments and decisions (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). It is also consistent with evidence showing that product-related experience influences perceived product knowledge, although experience and knowledge are not always equivalent in accuracy or structure (Lichtenstern et al., 2024). Thus, the current findings suggest that autobiographical recall serves as a cognitive gateway into a richer network of category knowledge.

More unexpectedly, accessible product category knowledge negatively predicted both brand retrieval and purchase intention. This result challenges the intuitive assumption that greater knowledge is always advantageous to a brand. The finding can be interpreted through the logic of competitive memory activation. When consumers possess readily accessible knowledge about a category, a larger set of alternatives, attributes, usage situations, and evaluative standards may become simultaneously activated. Under such circumstances, the focal brand may lose relative salience because it must compete with a broader associative network. Romaniuk emphasizes that brand performance depends heavily on mental availability and the probability that a brand comes to mind in relevant buying situations (Romaniuk, 2023). From this perspective, category knowledge may enhance the accessibility of the market as a whole without necessarily enhancing the accessibility of one brand within it. The more alternatives and category cues that become activated, the greater the potential for retrieval competition.

This interpretation also aligns with broader branding theory, which distinguishes between the existence of brand knowledge and the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations (Keller, 2020). A consumer can possess substantial knowledge about a category and still fail to retrieve one specific brand quickly if the memory network contains many competing associations. The negative coefficient observed in the present study may therefore reflect a dilution effect: as category-level cognition becomes richer and more accessible, the relative dominance of the focal brand weakens. The same mechanism may explain the negative association with purchase intention. A knowledgeable consumer is likely to recognize more alternatives and apply more evaluative criteria before reaching a decision, thereby reducing the likelihood that a focal brand is selected automatically. In this sense, increased knowledge may foster more extensive comparison rather than stronger commitment.

The mediation findings provide particularly strong support for this interpretation. The indirect effects of autobiographical memory recall on both brand retrieval and purchase intention through accessible product category knowledge were negative and statistically significant, whereas the direct effects remained nonsignificant. This pattern indicates that autobiographical recall is not inherently detrimental to brand outcomes; rather, it becomes negatively associated with them because it activates broader category knowledge. The result helps reconcile the psychological literature on autobiographical memory with consumer research. Emotional and personally meaningful events are often more memorable and retrievable (Kensinger & Ford, 2020), but greater memorability of an experience does not necessarily imply that the associated brand will dominate subsequent choice. Instead, a vivid personal memory may cue an entire category representation, including competing brands and alternative consumption possibilities. The current results therefore shift attention from whether autobiographical memories are activated to what those memories subsequently activate.

The significant moderating role of perceived choice importance further clarifies when category knowledge becomes especially consequential. The interaction between perceived choice importance and accessible product category knowledge was negative for both brand retrieval and purchase intention, with a substantially stronger effect for purchase intention. Simple-slope analysis showed that when perceived choice importance was low, accessible product category knowledge did not significantly affect either outcome. At average and high levels of perceived choice importance, however, the negative effects became increasingly strong. This pattern suggests that category knowledge matters most when consumers perceive the decision as consequential and therefore devote greater cognitive effort to evaluation. When choice importance is low, consumers may rely on habit, convenience, or immediately accessible cues. Under high choice importance, however, consumers may search memory more extensively, compare more alternatives, and scrutinize potential outcomes, thereby magnifying the competitive effect of category-level knowledge.

The stronger moderation effect observed for purchase intention than for brand retrieval is also theoretically meaningful. Brand retrieval is primarily a cognitive accessibility outcome, whereas purchase intention reflects a more downstream motivational judgment. A consumer may retrieve a brand from memory but still decide not to choose it after considering alternatives. Thus, when perceived choice importance is high, extensive category knowledge may have only a moderate effect on whether the brand comes to mind, but a much stronger effect on whether the consumer intends to select it. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary research showing that purchase intentions are sensitive to the broader informational and experiential context in which decisions are made. For example, perceived value and customer experience influence repurchase intention (Putri & Maskur, 2026), social media marketing affects purchase decisions through customer experience (Gad, 2026), AI-enabled interactions influence online decision-making (Azizi & Khanjanzadeh, 2026), and the framing and sentiment of product information can alter purchase intentions (Sun et al., 2026). The present findings extend this literature by showing that internally accessible memory structures may become especially influential when consumers consider the decision important.

The nonsignificant moderation of the direct autobiographical-memory paths is equally informative. Perceived choice importance did not change the relationship between autobiographical recall itself and either brand retrieval or purchase intention. This suggests that the decisive mechanism lies not in the mere vividness or presence of recalled experiences but in the knowledge activated by those experiences. In other words, consumers may recall personal consumption episodes regardless of whether a decision is important, but the consequences of the resulting category knowledge depend on the amount of cognitive processing devoted to the choice. This distinction supports the moderated-mediation pattern observed in the study. The conditional indirect effects were nonsignificant at low levels of perceived choice importance but significant and increasingly negative at average and high levels. Such a pattern is consistent with the logic of interaction analysis, in which the meaning of a predictor–outcome relationship depends on the moderator level and should be interpreted through simple slopes rather than through a single average coefficient (Finsaas & Goldstein, 2021).

The multi-group findings regarding brand familiarity further strengthen the competitive-activation explanation. Accessible product category knowledge significantly reduced both brand retrieval and purchase intention among highly familiar brands, whereas the corresponding effects were nonsignificant among less familiar brands. This indicates that the negative consequences of category knowledge do not occur uniformly across brands. Highly familiar brands are likely to possess richer and more

established memory representations, but they may also be embedded in denser associative networks. When category-level knowledge becomes highly accessible, the consumer may activate many alternatives and associations around a familiar brand, thereby increasing cognitive competition. This pattern is consistent with the broader logic of the mirror effect discussed by Stocchi et al., whereby observed marketing responses may vary systematically as a function of familiarity and memory accessibility (Stocchi et al., 2024). The present results suggest that high familiarity does not necessarily protect a brand from competitive memory activation; under some conditions, it may make such competition more consequential.

The fact that measurement invariance was established before comparing familiarity groups adds confidence to this interpretation. Because the constructs operated equivalently across highly familiar and less familiar brand groups, the observed differences in structural paths are more likely to represent substantive differences rather than measurement artifacts. This is consistent with recommended approaches to multi-group structural equation modeling, in which invariance testing is necessary before comparing latent relationships across groups (Svetina et al., 2020). The finding therefore provides relatively strong evidence that brand familiarity conditions the effect of category knowledge on downstream brand outcomes.

Taken together, the results contribute to consumer memory and branding research in three main ways. First, they demonstrate that autobiographical memory should not be treated as a direct predictor of brand outcomes without considering intervening cognitive mechanisms. Second, they identify accessible product category knowledge as a key mediator that can transform autobiographical recall into negative effects on focal-brand retrieval and purchase intention. Third, they show that these negative effects are contingent on perceived choice importance and brand familiarity. This integrated pattern advances the understanding of mental availability by showing that stronger memory activation at the category level can paradoxically weaken the relative accessibility and behavioral attractiveness of a specific brand. It therefore complements established branding perspectives emphasizing the importance of memory structures, mental availability, and brand associations (Keller, 2020; Romaniuk, 2023) while highlighting the possibility that richer consumer knowledge can create not only advantages but also cognitive competition.

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional survey design limits causal inference, even though the structural model was theoretically specified and the indirect effects were statistically supported. Second, the study focused on four service categories in one urban context, which may limit generalizability to other product categories, cultural environments, or market structures. Third, all focal constructs were measured using self-report scales, and although diagnostic tests suggested that common method bias was not a major concern, self-reported memory accessibility and purchase intention remain subject to response biases. Fourth, brand familiarity was operationalized through group assignment into highly familiar and less familiar brands, which may not capture the full continuum of familiarity. Finally, purchase intention was used rather than observed purchasing behavior, and actual choice may differ from stated intention when consumers face real financial, temporal, or situational constraints.

Future research should extend the present model through experimental and longitudinal designs that manipulate autobiographical recall, category knowledge activation, and perceived choice importance in order to establish stronger causal evidence. Researchers could also compare utilitarian and hedonic categories, durable and nondurable products, or online and offline service environments to determine whether the observed negative mediation pattern generalizes across contexts. It would also be useful to examine additional moderators such as involvement, perceived risk, brand loyalty, need for cognition, emotional intensity of recalled experiences, and the number of alternatives in the consideration set. Future studies could distinguish between positive, negative, and neutral autobiographical memories and investigate whether memory valence changes the effect of category knowledge on brand outcomes. Behavioral measures such as actual brand choice, click-through behavior, search sequences, or purchase records could further strengthen the ecological validity of the results.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that brand communication should not merely stimulate broad category memories without ensuring that the focal brand remains central within those memories. Advertising and customer-experience strategies should connect personal consumption episodes to distinctive brand cues, usage situations, visual identities, and memorable brand assets so that autobiographical recall strengthens brand-specific rather than only category-level accessibility. Marketers should pay

particular attention to high-importance decisions, because knowledgeable consumers appear more likely to compare alternatives and reduce their intention toward a focal brand when extensive category knowledge is activated. Pretesting and post-testing of advertising should therefore assess not only liking, recognition, or recall of the campaign but also whether the communication increases retrieval of competing category associations. For highly familiar brands, managers may need to reinforce distinctive memory structures continuously, because strong familiarity alone does not guarantee protection from category-level cognitive competition.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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