

Building a customer experience strategy in phygital retail: the role of digital platforms¹

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Abstract

Frame of the research: As customer experience becomes increasingly central to brand differentiation and digitalization reshapes retail, brands must engage consumers across both physical and digital channels. This convergence has accelerated the need for 'phygital' strategies-integrated approaches that deliver seamless, contextually relevant experiences across touchpoints.

Purpose of the paper: This paper explores how digital platforms are transforming the nature and delivery of customer experience in retail. By focusing on the fashion industry, it investigates how platforms reshape traditional experiential components and purpose-and enable the integration of these elements into a cohesive phygital customer journey.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews and case analyses based on press and media sources. This methodology highlights the critical elements necessary for effective customer experience in phygital retail.

Results: The research identifies five key elements essential to delivering effective customer experiences in phygital retail: (1) a core digital platform, (2) a shared brand purpose, (3) experience customization, (4) strong brand positioning, and (5) a dynamic partnership ecosystem. The digital platform emerges as the central enabler, integrating these elements and allowing brands to mediate relationships and deliver a cohesive, customer-centric phygital journey.

Research limitations: This study faced limitations due to the inability to conduct in-store visits and the fact that interviews were conducted online, which limited control over contextual factors. However, triangulation of multiple data sources and interview prompts shared in advance helped enhance the reliability of findings.

Practical implications: With expanding digitalization, brands are increasingly omnipresent in customers' lives, requiring coherent phygital strategies. This research offers guidance to managers on developing a consistent customer experience across phygital touchpoints by integrating the five identified elements.

Originality of the paper: Despite increasing academic interest in phygital retail, strategies for structuring the customer experience in this domain remain scarce. This

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Authors contributed equally to the conceptualization and writing of the research. They agreed on the research question, methodology and conclusions. Nevertheless, Mogno was responsible for the planning and implementation of the empirical session, while Bellio was responsible for the selection and organization of the relevant literature.

study contributes both theoretically and managerially by presenting a framework of five interrelated elements -with a pivotal role of digital platforms- that can help brands navigate the complexity of hybrid retail and build enduring customer relationships.

Key words: *fashion industry; phygital; omnichannel strategy; brand experience; retail*

1. Introduction

The emergence of contemporary ‘omni-customers’-individuals who actively participate in brand content creation and demand seamless control over how, when, and where they engage with brands- has positioned customer experience as a critical factor for generating distinctive engagement (Bellio *et al.*, 2021; Pangarkar *et al.* 2022; Timoumi *et al.*, 2022), while also strengthening customer loyalty (Zou *et al.*, 2022; Tuguinay *et al.*, 2022) and retention (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2021). The “experience room”-the space where customers encounter the brand, whether physical or digital-becomes a key managerial tool whose features can be controlled to assemble a specific customer experience (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005). When retail is positioned as a strategic driver of memorable customer experiences (Brakus *et al.*, 2009), then the integration of digital and physical touchpoints into a cohesive and contextually relevant ‘phygital’ journey becomes imperative. Such a phygital approach is essential for fostering social engagement and building customer rapport (Pangarkar *et al.*, 2022), while enabling the delivery of hyper-personalized experiences (Klaus, 2024; Pangarkar *et al.*, 2022) that align with the expectations of “onlife consumers” (Kotler *et al.*, 2021) across both digital and physical channels.

While digital transformation has bridged physical and digital retail environments, existing research has not yet fully clarified how digital technologies reshape key experiential elements such as positioning, purpose-driven engagement, strategic partnerships, and customization. Addressing this gap is crucial, as these elements are foundational to the construction of meaningful and differentiated experiences that drive consumer loyalty and emotional attachment to brands. What strategies do brands pursue to choose and integrate digital technologies with the traditional components of the omnichannel customer experience? This paper seeks to explore the interplay between digital platforms and these core components, offering new insights into how digital platforms reconfigure the experiential value delivered across hybrid retail contexts. The study undertakes an in-depth literature review on customer experience and retail strategies, revealing that, despite the increasing academic interest in both domains, there remains limited clarity regarding which elements of the customer experience are most effectively transferable to phygital retail environments. To gain insights into current managerial practices and derive practical managerial implications, we adopt an exploratory qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews with CEOs and industry experts operating within the fashion sector, alongside a case-based analysis of online press coverage and brand-generated content.

Considering the evolving state of phygital retail, this paper adopts an exploratory approach to build theoretical foundations rather than test hypotheses. Our contribution is twofold. Theoretically, we bridge the literature on customer experience and retail strategy by identifying the most pertinent experiential dimensions to a phygital context. From a managerial standpoint, we offer preliminary hypotheses and practical guidelines on how digital platforms can serve as central enablers in aligning traditional customer experience levels - such as branding, purpose, partnerships, and customization - with the demands of hybrid retail environments.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical foundations of customer experience and examines how digital transformation has reshaped retail dynamics, as discussed in the marketing and distribution literature. The second section details the research methodology adopted for the study. Section three presents the main findings from the semi-structured interviews and the analysis of press and media content related to fashion brands. In section four, we discuss and synthesize the results of both qualitative approaches, offering an original interpretation of how digital platforms influence traditional customer experience elements. Finally, section five concludes the paper by outlining the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings and by proposing directions for future research.

2. Customer experience and brand in retail: a literature review

The importance of customer experience management in retail is largely recognized in previous marketing and business studies (Chi *et al.*, 2024) with retail social capital depending on different consumer-associated factors: acquiescence, recognition, and integration (Mathur, 2020). Consumers traditionally assess their in-store experience based on their motives for visiting, the time available for shopping, their mood at the time of visit, and their familiarity with the store (Backstrom and Johansson, 2006). Adopting an integrated retail brand equity model, Zhang *et al.* (2023) explain how consumer shopping experience and store performance evaluation should be based not only on visible metrics (e.g., sales) but also information about how customers feel. Investigating the hedonic factors shaping customer experience in retail, Banik and Gao (2023) highlight the significant positive effects of mental imagery, entertainment, and aesthetics on customer experiences, which in turn affect customers' satisfaction and decision-making processes, with all three factors having a greater impact on female customers compared to males. Customer experience fosters excitement and loyalty (Ruiz-Molina *et al.*, 2021) through data-driven personalization (Ansari and Mela, 2003) and by offering "*the right content to the right person at the right time*" (Tam and Ho, 2006, p. 867). Thus, it represents one of the most important factors in the maintenance of a company's competitive advantage in addition to influencing customer preferences (Bascur and Rusu, 2020).

As the creation and establishment of a distinctive brand identity in retail become fundamental for building the customer experience, brands allocate

significant resources to various aspects of in-store experiences including product display, knowledge provision, product trials, store layout, and special store-level activities (Kumar and Polonsky, 2019). However, brands are also increasingly expected to champion social, ethical, or political causes resonating with their target audience (De Swaan Arons *et al.*, 2014; Goodyear, 1996; Iannilli and Spagnoli, 2021). Branding strategies must align with broader societal needs, leading organizations to reshape their values to meet customers' expectations for their positive contributions to society (Gad, 2016). Identifying a core motivation for a brand's existence and the impact it aspires to make in the world (Afdhel and Jones, 2016) is decisive nowadays in driving all stakeholders and making them feel part of something "larger" (Annweiler, 2018). Consumers also increasingly expect organizations to act, choosing brands reflecting their values. Sit *et al.* (2021) stress that both honesty and connection through common values directly affect customers' perceived authenticity of online retailers. Modern customer experience is no longer just about transactions; it is about embodying a lifestyle. This approach, known as lifestyle branding, moves the focus from products to intangible values, aligning a brand with a customer's identity. To achieve this, brands must craft narratives around significant moments in a customer's life, ensuring the message resonates with a diverse audience and tailoring content to reflect their interests, affinities, tastes, and lifestyle choices. Importantly, lifestyle branding should emerge organically from existing communities rather than being imposed on them (Pérez del Castillo *et al.*, 2020). Since strong emotional relationships positively affect customer loyalty, sometimes resulting in brand evangelism (Al Nawas *et al.*, 2021), a purpose-driven customer experience allows brands to meet expectations and enhance recall (Anderson *et al.*, 2018).

Multiple studies also establish that retail partnerships and mergers and acquisitions are set to be vital for growing and reinforcing the customer experience they offer (Atmar *et al.*, 2020) and are fundamental for continuous and relevant value co-creation (Rubio *et al.*, 2021). Partnerships can bring convenience for customers, boost sales, allow organizations to gain access to new capabilities and extend their brand reach to new customers in novel places extending a retailer's brand halo to its partners (Briedis *et al.*, 2020). Due to the digital transformation, retailing is increasingly and extensively driven by innovative technologies (Grewal *et al.*, 2021) that are implemented in many retail-related touchpoints, including in-store services, back-end operations (e.g., warehouses, supply chains), communication (e.g., websites, social media platforms), promotion and display of merchandise. Advanced technology enhances the possibility for organizations to influence purchase decisions, creating delightful experiences, gratitude, or customer satisfaction (Bock *et al.*, 2016; Molinillo *et al.*, 2022) by modifying what is displayed and how based on each customer's purchase behavior and history (Zhang *et al.*, 2011). Since integrating retail channels holds enormous potential in delivering superior customer experience (Hanninen *et al.*, 2019; Iannilli and Spagnoli, 2021) by reinforcing customer empowerment (Mishra *et al.*, 2023), this becomes incredibly critical in omnichannel strategies.

The ecosystem of multiple stakeholders co-creating the customer experience across all digital and physical retail touchpoints requires fast information and data sharing across touchpoints, stakeholders, and dimensions. Engaging, interactive, and immersive technology enables this synergy, conferring all stakeholders a major responsibility in the customer experience design by leveraging on network externalities and use of data (Nuccio and Guerzoni, 2019). Due to escalating digitalization, customers expect to take an active role in their interactions with a brand. Therefore, building a competitive advantage through synergies between channels and technologies in customer experience is critical in the actual scenario (Iannilli and Spagnoli, 2021).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has turned omnichannel operations by retailers and habitual online shopping behaviors into “*the new normal*” (Bruce *et al.*, 2023), contemporary estimates indicate that 70% of global retail sales still take place in physical stores (Euromonitor, 2024).

This coexistence of complementary online and offline brand-related touchpoints requires adopting a customer-centric approach to deliver a holistic experience that is consistent and customized across digital and physical retail touchpoints and moments (Valdani *et al.* 2016; Banik, 2021). Neuburger *et al.* (2018) study the relationship between physical and digital in tourist spaces providing an overview of how they are changing, which technologies are driving novel developments, and which consequences for the user as well as the tourism supply side are expected. In particular, omnichannel strategies combining digital and physical features can be applied to the retail experience, to make customers feel empowered (Mishra *et al.*, 2023) and deliver a holistic customer experience. However, omnichannel management might be just one possible facet of the customer experience construction and might not deliver anything of novel value to advance managerial practice (Klaus, 2024).

Integrated and consistent rapport-building across digital and physical touchpoints is vital in contemporary retail strategies to enhance customer experience by strengthening commitment and trust (Pangarkar *et al.*, 2022). For example, Jones and Runyan (2013) develop a scale to measure brand experience of multichannel retailers, treating online and offline retail channels separately, while Frasquet-Deltoro *et al.* (2021) define a brand experience scale for omnichannel retail focusing on single-brand retailers.

The integration between physical and digital environments in the phygital era has facilitated both the concentration and dispersion of people across space and time. Thus, the concept of “*phygital*” must be understood in a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional way to fully grasp the opportunities and challenges it presents, as well as the broader transformation it brings (Batat, 2024). Mele *et al.* (2021) conduct a systematic literature review to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phygital construction. Their findings show that the integration and use of both physical and digital objects and applications within phygital contexts reshape the customer journey, promoting the development of new forms of phygital experiences. Examining the evolution of physical retail space and its impact on customer experience management from a territorial perspective, Alexander and Varley (2025) re-evaluate the concepts of

retail space and place, reimagining the customer experience within the context of phygital retailing. Employing the Experiential Retail Territories (ERT) framework proposed by Alexander (2024), they emphasize how the phygital transcends traditional channel-based logics, requiring retailers to move beyond channel constraints to fully harness its potential in managing customer experiences (Batat, 2024; Klaus, 2024).

The existing literature on both customer experience and retail management shows that building and delivering a strong meaning through an immersive and engaging customer experience is set to be a key for brands to differentiate themselves (Artusi and Bellini, 2021). Nonetheless, there is no clear view on how digital technologies reshape key experiential elements such as branding, purpose-driven engagement, strategic partnerships, and customization in phygital touchpoints and more generally in retail.

In the following sections we empirically explore how the interplay between digital platforms and the experiential dimensions can deliver an effective phygital strategy. This may also offer innovative insights into how technological integration reconfigures the experiential value delivered across phygital retail contexts.

3. Methods

Although delivering relevant customer experiences through phygital retail is becoming increasingly strategic, our in-depth review of the literature on customer experience and retail strategies reveals a gap: the specific elements of customer experience that should be effectively applied to phygital retail remain largely unexplored. To understand current managerial practices that could help to draw a framework, we combine semi-structured interviews with CEOs and experts working within the fashion industry and a case analysis on online press and content from fashion brands. Given the exploratory nature of our study, qualitative methodologies are the most appropriate for developing new grounded theory (Cornelissen, 2017) by understanding processes and factors beneath a phenomenon through the rich accounts of those experiencing it (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). The combination of these two methodologies strengthens our analysis as both approaches complement each other and align with other research in the phygital retail literature (e.g., Bonfanti *et al.*, 2023; Breugelmans *et al.*, 2023; Pusceddu *et al.*, 2025). While semi-structured interviews enabled us to identify which elements are critical to customer experience in phygital retail through rich insights from field experts, the analysis of online press and media (e.g., Breugelmans *et al.*, 2023) revealed how these key elements are successfully implemented in real-world scenarios. This offers practical evidence supporting the theoretical and managerial implications of phygital retail strategies contributing to build validation and enhancing data triangulation (Yin, 2014). Since this paper aims at developing new theory on phygital retail strategies, the triangulation of multiple methodologies allows us to reliably move from a context-specific reality to a generic deeper understanding of the relationships among variables (Massaro *et al.*, 2020), enabling a more conceptual explanation of a phenomenon into a novel theoretical model

through researchers' interpretation (Cornelissen, 2017). Considering the interpretivist nature of qualitative research, this also reinforces the validity and reliability of our proposed model. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the developing nature of the analyzed phenomenon, semi-structured interviews ensured sufficient coverage of the phenomenon by tailoring questions to the interviewee's specific industry and job position, increasing the robustness and reliability of our results. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Guest *et al.*, 2006) and snowballing technique to ensure that they had sufficient expertise in the topic both in fashion retail and in consultancy companies until theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Guest *et al.*, 2006). We conducted five online interviews between April and May 2021 (Table 1) in Italian or Spanish, with each session lasting approximately one hour. This number aligns with qualitative research guidelines when conducting interviews with experts (Creswell, 2007) and existing phygital retail literature (e.g., Bonfanti *et al.*, 2023; Alexander and Varley, 2025). Participants were initially contacted via email and provided with an abstract and general outline of the research. Video recordings were made and overseen by the same researcher to mitigate potential biases and were transcribed verbatim. The same researcher carried out interview coding in two steps. After an initial open coding, codes were collapsed into higher order categories that could describe a phygital customer experience. Based on the initial literature review on customer experience (Bonfanti *et al.*, 2023), this recursive and iterative process between data and extant theory continued until five conceptual themes emerged (Dacin *et al.*, 2010). These codes were validated by all three researchers to ensure reliability until mutual consensus on the following five key elements: shared purpose, brand positioning, customization, digital platform, and partnership.

After identifying key elements of customer experience in phygital retail through interviews, a case analysis was conducted to delineate how organizations may successfully integrate and manage them into their phygital retail strategies.

Cases were selected based on two phygital-related variables: (a) the usage of multiple digital technologies (e.g., apps, web, social media, mixed reality, virtual reality, and augmented reality); (b) the implementation of interfaces linking physical and virtual dimensions (Bartoli *et al.*, 2023). The methodological approach for case identification followed the framework established for phygital events (Piccioni *et al.*, 2021) and the adoption of technologies blending digital and physical elements, consistent with the criteria outlined by Nofal *et al.* (2017). The selection process was guided by Bata's categorization (2019), which defined phygital experiences as those integrating the real into the digital, a central concept of this study. We conducted a thorough review of articles from authoritative sources within the fashion industry, including Vogue Business, Fashion Network, and the Business of Fashion, alongside scrutiny of LinkedIn content from January to April 2021.

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Tab. 1: Semi-structured interviews. Summary information about the interviewees

Interview	Company Industry	Short Description	Country	Job Position
1	Consulting	Innovation consultancy supporting organizations in the implementation of innovative processes, business models, and products.	Italy	Innovation Consultant
2	Luxury resale e-commerce	E-commerce for reselling second-hand luxury fashion products and accessories.	Mexico	CEO and Co-founder
3	Consulting	Management Consulting Company assisting luxury brands to develop their retail and communication strategy in APAC.	Singapore	Founder and Managing Director
4	Consulting	Retail management consulting helping luxury and beauty brands enter South Korea.	South Korea	Founder and Managing Director
5	Luxury Jewellery	Jewellery luxury part of a larger multi-brand group with more than 2000 retailers and boutiques worldwide.	Italy	Group Head of Controlling

Source: authors' elaboration

A keyword search on these websites and social media was conducted to select an initial sample of articles about phygital retail, which was then refined through deep reading. Eventually, five brands were selected as representative in terms of phygital strategy: Burberry, Gucci, Nike, Gentle Monster, and Portèlo. We collected further information from the brand's official online sources such as the website and all social media platforms (Table 2).

Tab. 2: Selected brands

Company	Industry	Considered Store	Store Location
Burberry	Luxury apparel and accessories	Burberry Shenzhen Social Store	China
Gucci	Luxury apparel, leather goods, and accessories	Gucci Garden Boutique	Italy
Nike	High-end sports apparel, footwear, equipment, and accessories	Nike Rise Store in Guangzhou	China
Gentle Monster	Luxury eyewear and accessories	Gentle Monster Haus Dosan	South Korea
Portèlo	Luxury resale e-commerce	portelo.shop	Mexico

Source: Authors' elaboration

4. Findings

4.1 Semi-structured interviews

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In this section we present the five key elements for delivering a successful customer experience in phygital retail that emerged from the interviews.

Shared Purpose

All interviewees agreed that customer experience is a strategic element in retailing as a purpose shared by both the brand and its customers, becoming a discriminating factor in consumption choices.

“The customer, on buying ... buys ... shared values” (Interviewee 3)

Participants 2, 3, and 5 provided examples of how phygital retail delivers a brand's sustainability purpose through services like in-store perfume refilling stations, AI, machine learning, and algorithms that optimize delivery routes to reduce environmental impact. Hence, technology heightens potential of purpose as a source of competitive advantage in phygital retail through personalized purpose-driven products, services, or experience that better align with customers who are increasingly conscious of the environmental impact of the fashion industry.

Participants 4 and 5 explained that purpose also constitutes an aggregating element since customers acquire an active role in contributing or talking about it throughout their customer experience. Therefore, the customer experience in phygital retail becomes a cooperative process.

“The consumer is no longer captivated by traditional advertising, but much more by the values of a brand, how the brand communicates and resonates with you... how relevant the brand managed to be during the year with respect to its employees, the environment, and other causes” (Interviewee 5)

Participant 3 added that shared values may guide the atmosphere of online and physical retail touchpoints through arts exhibitions or exclusive customers' events in store. If purpose influences the building of the customer experience in phygital retail, the use of digital technology enables this by enhancing retail design, innovative atmosphere, and the proposal of related customer services.

Customization

While most respondents acknowledge that customers are increasingly conscious about their consumption choices (contributors 2, 3, 4, and 5), they also admit that luxury customers, especially among Gen Z, are omnichannel customers merging online and offline dimensions constantly and effortlessly in their daily routine. In addition to sharing values with a brand, they want to freely choose how and what to consume across various touchpoints in terms of contents, channels, and services. Expecting to be empowered with an active role in building their own customer experience,

they value customization through a hyper-customized service and experience at the point of sale (Interviewees 4 and 5).

“The consumer.... does not want to follow what others do, but looks for novelty, trying to personalize, detaching from standardization” (Interviewee 4)

Participant 5 explained that customization in phygital retail should create a ‘wow’ effect by leveraging advanced technology to hyper-customize products and services based on aggregated in-store and online behaviors. For interviewees 2 and 5 this may involve the adoption of AI, 3D printing, scanning, and modeling, or smart mirrors, allowing brands to tailor a product or service to each customer’s needs, enriching customer experience. Giving the example of a customer who, after trying a product sample in-store via 3D scanning, can have a tailored version automatically delivered from the nearest store to their address, interviewee 5 emphasized how customization in phygital retail also requires a more customer-driven value chain through advanced business intelligence. Consequently, a centralized platform becomes essential, as only aggregating data on consumer behavior and experience across digital and physical touchpoints enables this level of personalization.

Brand Positioning

Positioning is determined by the overall customer experience in and with all online and offline retail touchpoints and the involvement of stakeholders through the implementation of digital platforms. Hence, delivering a consistent and relevant positioning across this multitude of touchpoints and stakeholders is critical to a well-integrated customer experience in phygital retail. Interviewee 3 asserted that positioning of customer experience in phygital retail may involve the development of events and extraordinary customer services, like cafeterias and art exhibitions in stores for customers to get to know the brand while diving into an experience of it. According to participant 5 this also applies to e-commerce through pre-sales and after-sales services and advanced interfaces.

“The store should be a place where you enter not necessarily to buy something, but to spend an hour with friends drinking a glass of wine or a coffee... where you enter into a brand-related context ... and live a brand experience... where the brand presents itself in an indirect way, without imposing itself on the customer, and the customer is free to live the experience without strings attached” (Interviewee 3)

Participant 5 claimed that concept stores are increasingly pivotal for positioning, bringing unique experiences to customers and connecting with them more deeply. As customer experience in phygital retail may start in store and end online or vice versa, a customer may get to know a product in store during an exclusive event and buy it online later (participant 3, 4, and 5). A digital platform allows aggregating a customer’s behaviors in

both online and physical retail touchpoints, therefore, marketing managers can develop a comprehensive assessment of their customers. Participant 3 revealed that positioning becomes a collaborative process, shaped by the interactions among all involved stakeholders across online and offline retail touchpoints. Digital platforms enable brands to do so effectively by allowing customers to actively contribute to the brand's storytelling through content creation and online sharing, as they engage with the brand in both physical and digital environments.

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"A brand should become more digitally consistent from a 360° perspective... propose a phygital experience" (Interviewee 5)

Partnerships

Interviewees stressed that partnerships with local retailers (Interviewees 3, 4, 5) and distributors (Interviewee 5) are more crucial than ever to acquire the necessary knowledge and technology for delivering a relevant and consistent customer experience, through deeper customer knowledge and engagement throughout all phygital retail touchpoints. Respondents argued that building highly integrated ecosystems is strategic in phygital retail, making effective system thinking (respondents 1 and 5) and customer-centric approaches to retail critical.

"[Companies must start] creating networks, ecosystems, reinforcing both financially and economically their value chain to make all operations more fluid, flexible, a continuous improvement cycle ... of hyper-customization, digitalization, and new role of retail" (Interviewee 5)

Interviewee 1 highlighted that partnerships can successfully solve brands' frictions in implementing innovative technology in retail, supporting the idea that building fully integrated ecosystems is pivotal. Respondent 2 explained that partnerships with distributors may help reduce the impact and time of shipping from store to home, strengthening a brand's sustainability purpose. For interviewees 2, 3, 4, and 5 partnerships help improve customer experience in phygital retail by providing innovative technology in store (e.g., refilling stations and 3D scanning), enhancing store events (e.g., art exhibitions and cafeterias), and supporting e-commerce services (e.g., fast shipping). For interviewee 4, partnerships can add experiential features to phygital retail by ensuring the frictionless connection between online and offline retail touchpoints and promoting content co-creation and engagement, for instance through live streaming. Therefore, partnerships strengthen both brand positioning across the customer experience elements of phygital retail and the importance of a platform as essential for providing innovative technology.

Digital Platform

The platform emerged as a critical aggregating and mediating element of multiple customer experience elements in phygital retail. Interviewees 1, 4, 5 stressed that successfully delivering a seamless and relevant customer experience through online and offline retail touchpoints requires exploiting

platforms making shopping frictionless by integrating digital tools (interviewees 1, 4, 5) and additional store services (i.e., cafeterias and art exhibitions; contributor 3) through interactive and immersive technology, turning stores into locations where customers go not necessarily to buy but to live an experience about the brand with other visitors. Since the exploitation of the potential of digital platforms demands more customer-driven strategies in retail (interviewee 5), the platform constitutes a key factor in building holistic customer experiences in phygital retail.

“Companies...should move... under a more customer-centric approach... exploiting the potential of digital platform” (Interviewee 5)

Participant 2 explained that digital platforms may help businesses transition towards more circular and sustainable solutions, reinforcing the commitment of a brand and its customers towards a shared purpose and enhancing customer trust and perceived brand authenticity, boosting customer experience. Interviewee 2 described how platforms in second-hand fashion retail may improve shipping routes and time through collected data, machine learning and algorithms and more deeply engage customers in the commitment towards sustainability by giving them the possibility to actively do something for the shared cause. Enabling brands and customers to easily connect and talk about the sustainability issue, digital platforms further enrich the customer experience through higher transparency and customer engagement. According to participants 2, 4, and 5, interactive technology and platforms make the connection between online and offline retail even more frictionless and enhance the experiential features of retail through virtual reality (VR), virtual fitting, 3D scanning, and live streaming.

“Physical store... turned into a tool to attract everything that happens on social media... live commerce and TV and shopping...which have boosted physical retailing” (Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 5 underlined how platforms make the customer experience frictionless by advancing demand-led production according to store orders and customer behavior in store, making supply chain more efficient as well.

The semi-structured interviews confirm that delivering a successful and relevant customer experience strategy in phygital retail requires brands to move towards a more customer-centric approach, building with each customer an engaging experience through a shared purpose, relevant partnerships, hyper-customization of products, services and experiential features, and a consistent brand positioning across offline and online touchpoints thanks to a centralized platform.

4.2 Press and media case analysis

The analysis of online press and media information about phygital retail strategies was structured around the five identified elements, elucidating

their respective contribution and application to customer experience in the selected brands' phygital retail strategies.

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Customization ascribes the customer an active role in designing their customized experience, products or services. Nike Rise's store customers can personalize their shoes through Nike Fit customization services, but also their whole customer experience through the Nike Member App by choosing whether to extend it beyond the store through an augmented reality (AR) game, gym sessions or sports events in the city. Customers can personalize their customer experience in the Gucci Garden Virtual Store by freely moving in the virtual space as they would do in a brick-and-mortar store thanks to virtual reality (VR) technology. Portèlo's customers personalize their experience by choosing their degree of commitment to the sustainability cause, as they can opt for donating part of revenues to local charities in addition to selling their second-hand clothes through their personal account. Gentle Monster Haus Dosan exists as a physical store and a virtual replica, so customers can decide whether to go to the store or stay at home to "visit" it. Since they can also choose whether to go to the store for either shopping or drinking a coffee with friends in the indoor cafeteria, the store turns into a social place. Burberry's Social Store revolves around a currency-collecting game powered by WeChat allowing customers to design their own customer experience by unlocking additional services and products in store and at home (e.g., items in the cafeteria's menu) according to the amount of social currency collected by scanning QR codes around the shop through their mobile devices. Hence, in phygital retail, customization implies the active involvement of customers and other stakeholders, through digital platforms allowing the former to choose which features to include in their experience and the latter to easily communicate across touchpoints.

The brand's *purpose* also emerged as a vital customer experience element in phygital retail, driving retail design, logistics and storytelling. Nike implements special lighting to reduce energy and water consumption in store and reinforces the commitment to its purpose of wellness and an active lifestyle by providing Nike Members access to local gym sessions and sport games through collaborations with local gyms and events, adapting its purpose to local habits. Portèlo provides customers with a convenient platform to contribute to a more sustainable fashion industry by selling second-hand clothes, whereas Burberry uses local social media WeChat fostering superior customer engagement offline and online. Committed to nurturing local talent, Gucci holds in-store exhibitions of local artists, while Gentle Monster collaborates with local brands like Nudake and Tamburins, and artists to enrich its in-store offerings and develop distinctive concepts and architectural design.

Consequently, maintaining consistent *brand positioning* becomes essential through relevant storytelling based on customization and a shared purpose, collectively defined by the brand, its customers, and its partners. While our analysis shows how customers actively contribute to positioning by designing their customer experience in phygital retail, it also indicates how *partners* enable brands to enrich the customer experience

through additional services and experiences inside or outside the store. Tencent provided the WeChat mini-program working as a foundation for Burberry's Social Store, whereas ObsessVR supplied the technology to build the virtual replica of Gucci Garden brick-and-mortar store. Gentle Monster partnered with Nudake to offer fantasy-inspired desserts to store visitors and Tamburins to sell other products (i.e., artisanal cosmetics) in store. Nike collaborated with local gyms and sport events to extend its commitment to wellness outside the store by granting Nike Members convenient access to gym sessions and games, while Portèlo collaborated with no-profit organizations to let customers further commit to their social sustainability purpose.

Digital platforms enable a brand to become omnipresent in a customer's daily routine, extending the customer experience beyond shopping moments and into everyday life - even outside the physical store. They also highlight how stakeholders involved in specific retail touchpoints can influence the brand's positioning in the customer's mind. As such, partnerships are confirmed to be essential for luxury companies - not only to access necessary technologies or offer localized products and services, but also to reinforce the brand's purpose, thereby strengthening its positioning.

As a core contribution of digital transformation, *digital platforms* play a key role in aggregating, managing, and sharing data across all touchpoints. This continuous flow of information among stakeholders enables greater customization of the individual customer experience across both physical and digital retail environments. Portèlo uses the e-commerce platform as a sort of circularity hub to connect people and local charities promoting a more socially and environmentally friendly fashion industry. Nike's Member app and Burberry Shenzhen Social Store's WeChat platform work as a core element aggregating numerous services both in and outside the store. Hosting three distinct brands jointly building the customer experience through additional services across the physical store and its online VR replica, Gentle Monster's store itself works as a platform. Gucci's virtual store offers complementary services with respect to its physical counterpart.

5. Discussion

Findings highlight the pivotal role of digital platforms in phygital retail as both aggregators and mediators of diverse customer experience elements. Figure 1 visualizes the different elements and stresses relevant connections.

Addressing the needs of omnichannel customers immersed in a hyperconnected "onlife" reality (Kotler *et al.*, 2021), these platforms serve as core hubs that seamlessly integrate information and orchestrate interactions across physical and digital touchpoints. First, by connecting all stakeholders around the individual customer, the platform facilitates personalized experiences through ongoing negotiation and co-creation between the brand, the customer, and other actors. This central coordinating

role enhances synergies and reinforces critical complementarities (Gawer and Cusumano, 2014) among the various dimensions of the phygital customer experience, delivering a common purpose-driven narrative jointly developed by both the brand and its customers. Second, by continuously collecting data on customers' behaviors, platforms enable superior and timely *customization* when and where needed. The platform allows customers to choose which retail touchpoints to include in their customer experience, granting them an active role in customizing not only products or services but also their overall experience with a brand. Hence, platform-enabled retail through interactive stores with temporary concepts and formats might keep customers constantly engaged with a brand by leveraging experience novelty and relevance. This is the case of store experiences based on interactive technology revolving around point-collecting video games or interactive avatars in stores. Future phygital retail strategies should envision brick-and-mortar stores as technology-driven platforms delivering elevated and personalized customer experience through game-based retail, city-led retailing, concept, and social store solutions.

As customers are increasingly looking for building a rapport with brands (Pangarkar *et al.*, 2022) based on shared values (*purpose*), the timely and continuous stream of data provided by the digital platform strengthens an organization's ability to convey its purpose in a way that is more tailored and relevant to individual customers in terms of language, time, and retail touchpoint. This reinforces a brand's capacity to offer a coherent and consistent narrative of its identity across phygital retail to each customer, strengthening customers' sense of belonging (Bartoli *et al.*, 2023; Breugelmans *et al.*, 2023) and loyalty (Bonfanti *et al.*, 2023; Alexander and Varley, 2025) through enhanced brand recall, increased exposure, and customers' active engagement (Zou *et al.*, 2022; Tuguinay *et al.*, 2022).

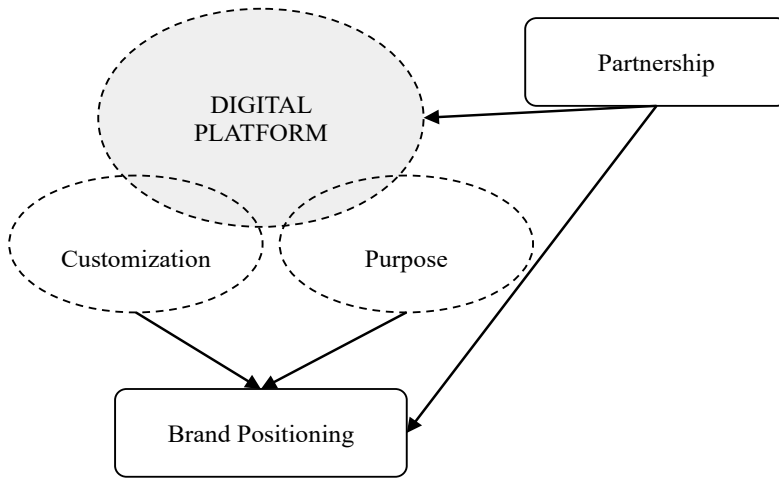
Storytelling and personalized experiences also strengthen *brand positioning* by ensuring consistency across digital and physical touchpoints, connecting stakeholders and channels into a cohesive platform. Moreover, by mediating the negotiation of shared purpose and personalized experiences between brands and consumers across online and offline touchpoints, digital platforms empower phygital retail to better meet evolving customer needs. They facilitate timely and continuous interactions among brands, customers, and other stakeholders, fostering greater engagement and active participation in co-creating personalized brand experiences. Digital platforms overcome traditional storytelling limitations by enabling co-creation through interactive technology, where customers actively shape their brand experience. For instance, social media platform might engage various store and online users in a shared virtual gaming experience, an AR interface could allow individual customers to design his or her own personalized experience outside the store, while an app proposing a point-collecting game inside the store or a two-way live-streaming customized interaction between the brand and the client might strengthen the emotional attachment to a brand (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). Supporting the transition of retail towards new and more engaging formats (i.e., game-based retailing, AR, VR, social and live commerce), digital

platforms reinforce brand positioning by mediating the negotiation and relationship between each customer and the brand.

Partnerships become a vital experience-enhancing element in designing successful customer experiences in phygital retail. They elevate the in-store experience by introducing innovative technologies (e.g., from the entertainment and media industries) and enriching physical spaces through additional offerings (e.g., food and beverage) or localized collaborations (e.g., with social media, local businesses, or artists). Stores transform from mere shopping venues into experiential, community-centered destinations. Integrating all data and partners in a single place, platforms favour self-reinforcing mechanisms that enhance experience customization in phygital retail through more personalized products or services, higher accountability, faster information sharing and communication both internally, across functions, and externally, among all stakeholders. The effect of partnership is twofold: on the one hand, it further reinforces brand positioning, while on the other it provides innovative technologies to create a platform environment.

A technology-powered digital *platform*, such as a social media account, an app, a video game, or a digitally powered store, works as a mediator and aggregator of core customer experience elements in phygital retail strategies, integrating them across physical and digital elements into a coherent phygital experience. Serving as a central hub, it aggregates all online and offline experiential retail touchpoints around individual customers, enabling the customization of brand offerings and purpose by easing interaction between the brand and the customer, reinforcing brand positioning. Moreover, it mediates negotiation and relationships between all stakeholders (e.g., retailers, suppliers, other brands, distributors, logistics operators, etc.) who are actively engaged in building the customer experience of individual customers throughout and across all its touchpoints. Thus, adopting digital platforms providing interactive and engaging technology in phygital retail not only enables the delivery of a cohesive multisensory customer experience about the brand but also empowers customers (Mishra *et al.*, 2023) so that they can customize their journey and easily hop between physical and digital retail touchpoints, strengthening brand positioning. This further underlines the central role of the platform, which allows for more relevant personalization and deeper customer engagement by integrating valuable customer data across multiple touchpoints. Thus, the phygital customer experience achieves higher integration and customization compared to traditional retail.

Fig. 1: Adding platforms into customer experience elements in phygital retail



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Source: authors' elaboration

6. Conclusions

As digital platforms become pervasive, their superior levels of connectivity radically changed the way in which customers experience brands, adding new touchpoints where customers and brands could meet and altering traditional interaction patterns between them. Since existing managerial literature on how non-human elements such as digital platforms affect phygital customer experience is still limited (Mele *et al.*, 2021), this paper makes a theoretical and empirical contribution on customer experience elements and the role of platforms in phygital retail, proposing a framework that could guide managers in devising successful customer experiences through effective phygital retail strategies.

Drawing from qualitative insights and multiple data sources, we propose a framework that reframes traditional customer experience elements—customization, shared purpose, partnerships, and brand positioning—within a phygital logic. Our analysis demonstrates that these elements, while still relevant, must be reconceptualized and cohesively embedded into both online and offline contexts through centralized, data-driven platforms. This study offers a theoretical bridge between the literature on customer experience in retail (e.g., Armstrong and Rutter, 2017; Banik, 2021; Mele *et al.*, 2021) and platform-mediated value creation (e.g., Gawer, 2021), expanding the conceptual boundaries of both fields.

Working as a medium between heterogeneous stakeholders and between digital and physical dimensions, the *digital platform* enables the smooth and timely negotiation of customized products, services, or experiences (*customization*), and shared values (*purpose*) between a brand and its customers across digital and physical retail touchpoints, leading to a superior tailoring of the customer experience to the level of

the single customer. If this reinforces the *brand positioning* through a seamless phygital retail experience that is personalized for each customer (Pangarkar *et al.*, 2022), *partnerships* strengthen brand positioning by providing continuously updated data and innovative technologies that could further enhance the customer experience across digital and physical touchpoints in novel ways, thus further reinforcing the role of the platform in delivering a holistic and relevant customer experience in phygital retail.

Functioning both as an aggregator and mediator of key elements and stakeholders of a brand's customer experience, the platform makes it possible for brands to deliver a coherent, relevant, and personalized customer experience across online and offline touchpoints to each single customer (Banik, 2021) through an engaging relationship and experience (Pangarkar *et al.* 2022).

From a managerial perspective, this study offers actionable insights. As brands must build an ecosystem of synergies among these touchpoints and stakeholders to deliver a consistent phygital experience, managers must carefully consider the most suitable platform for their brand and devise retail strategies accordingly. This paper proposes a theoretical framework that might guide them in designing phygital retail strategies through key customer experience elements. Balancing each element of the proposed framework, managers can gain a better understanding of how to interact with customers in a more relevant and consistent way across phygital retail touchpoints, framing them as a part of a holistic customer experience. The proposed visualization of relationships among customer experience elements in phygital retail may also help them choose which type of technological solution better aligns with customers' needs and behaviors by assessing potential cascade effects in terms of benefits and risks. For instance, using Nike Members app as a central platform aggregating all online and offline retail touchpoints, Nike manages to deliver a personalized experience to each customer, who can choose which services to include in theirs (e.g., shoe personalization in store, participation in a sport-based AR game outside the store or sport events, workshops, and sessions). This also enables Nike to share with customers a joint commitment to sports and wellness both online and offline, enhancing Nike's brand positioning. Nike's partnerships with local gyms and sport events are crucial to strengthening brand positioning and experience even more. Effective partnerships with app developers and technology providers allow Nike to fully exploit the potential of its digital platform (i.e., the app) to enrich and integrate the customer experience across diverse retail touchpoints. As the digital platform collects and aggregates the data of each customer's preferences, choices, and behaviors in every interaction, brands can enhance customer retention and loyalty through feedback loops in experience personalization as well.

This study has limitations, beginning with the methodology. Due to contextual constraints, in-store observations could not be conducted, and interviews were carried out online. This limited direct control over environmental variables. However, the triangulation of multiple data sources and the pre-sharing of an interview guide to participants ensured consistency and reduced variability, preserving methodological rigor.

Given the study's exploratory nature, findings are mainly relevant to the fashion industry and may not generalize to other sectors. Future research could strengthen our findings by expanding the sample, adding case studies, and exploring phygital strategies in other industries. Quantitative approaches - such as large-scale surveys - could also further support and broaden the qualitative insights.

This study focuses solely on the firm's perspective. Future research may also investigate the customer side for additional behavioral insights on how to build a more comprehensive view of phygital customer experiences. Methods like customer interviews, focus groups, ethnography, or neuromarketing could deepen understanding of how consumers navigate technology across touchpoints.

Studies might also unveil how attitudes toward data privacy and platform trust might shape engagement and satisfaction. Examining how platform architecture or governance models influence customer experiences might offer valuable insights, whereas understanding differences in consumer perceptions could enrich the study's framework and help refine phygital platform strategies.

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