BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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Introduction

It is our please to present this book of abstracts. It include one page summaries of the paper to be presented at the RARCS 2026 conference in Berlin. We hope the abstract will help you in preparing your personal conference program.

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Why Consumers Buy Counterfeit Medications Online? An Eight-Country Global Study

The exponential growth in online sales of medications has opened the door for bad actors to infiltrate the supply chain with substandard, falsified, and/or counterfeit medications, with an estimated market value of $200-432 annually (Ofori-Parku *et al.*, 2022). Using counterfeit medications has a direct impact on consumer health and well-being. With roughly 10% of all medications and 50% of medications sold online being counterfeit, the health cost of using such medications is insurmountable, from medication inefficacy, negative health effects, injuries, and death (WHO, 2024). This presentation highlights the prevalence of online medication purchase, including counterfeit medications, and how motivations to buy medication online predict counterfeit medication purchase behaviors. The study leveraged a cross-sectional survey of consumers (N = 3,982) from Australia, Brazil, China, India, Italy, Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the US. Results showed that approximately half of the participants reported using online marketplaces to purchase medicines, including 46% who bought prescription medications, 45% for over-the-counter (OTC) medications, and 55% for vitamins and supplements. When asked about non-deceptive purchase of counterfeit medications, 26% of the sample indicated they knowingly bought counterfeit prescription medications, 23% bought counterfeit OTC medications, and 29% bought counterfeit vitamins and supplements. We identified two online medication purchase motives: (1) convenience and accessibility, and (2) necessity. Necessity motives were significant positive predictors of both non-deceptive and deceptive purchases of counterfeit medications, with the likelihood of buying counterfeit medications increasing by 17% to 67%. Convenience and accessibility motives were not as uniformly predictive. They did not significantly predict non-deceptive purchase of counterfeit prescription and OTC medications, while they were positively predictive of non-deceptive purchase of vitamins and supplements. On the other hand, convenience and accessibility positively predicted the deceptive purchase of prescription and OTC medications, and were a significant predictor of buying vitamins and supplements.

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Service, Reputation, and Sustainability in Hotels

In the hospitality and tourism industry, service quality and corporate reputation are increasingly linked to the principles of sustainable development. This connection reflects the expectation that businesses will operate responsibly, both environmentally and socially, while maintaining effective and profitable operations. Over recent decades, sustainability has become a central theme in public discourse and policy, driven by growing awareness of human impact on the environment. As a result, consumers are paying closer attention to companies' sustainability practices when making purchasing decisions, which in turn influences their perception of corporate reputation. This study explores how sustainability-related factors, particularly those focused on environmental and social responsibility, affect the reputation of hotels. It also aims to identify which performance attributes should be prioritized to enhance guests' evaluations of hotel reputation. A quantitative research approach was employed, involving a survey of 530 guests across nine hotels located in downtown Reykjavík during the summer of 2023. The findings reveal that although guests do not think that sustainability factors as highly important in their pre-booking evaluations, the environmental factor does have a measurable impact on their perceived reputation of the hotel after their stay. In addition, other key factors that significantly influence reputation include perceived value for money, the quality of hotel facilities, and the performance of hotel staff in service delivery. These elements were found to have a positive and statistically significant effect on how guests assess hotel reputation. Based on these results, it is recommended that hotels focus their improvement efforts on the areas that matter most to guests. Enhancing service delivery, maintaining high-quality facilities, and ensuring good value for money should be prioritized. At the same time, continued attention to environmental sustainability can contribute positively to reputation, even if it is not the top concern for all guests. Theoretical implications include understanding of the interplay between service, sustainability factors and reputation of hotels. A limiting factor of this study is that it only includes hotels located downtown Reykjavik, which may result in a relatively homogenous sample.

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Consumer Cognitive Dissonance and Authenticity of AI-Generated Product Detail Pages by Product Types and Consumer AI Self-Efficacy

With the increasing implementation of AI-generated content, retailers' websites have begun utilizing AI-generated product detail information on their product detail pages (PDPs). It has become apparent that the perceptions of AI within retail and consumer-facing contexts are mixed, with varying opinions and expectations. Consumers may perceive a lack of authenticity, leading to cognitive dissonance toward AI-generated information on PDPs. Consumer responses to AI-generated information on PDPs may vary depending on product types and consumers' AI self-efficacy. Through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), this study aimed to examine consumer cognitive dissonance and responses toward AI-generated PDPs by product types and consumers' AI self-efficacy. The following hypotheses were examined. H1 a & b: Awareness of AI-generated content for (a) luxury product PDP and (b) value product PDP has a positive effect on dissonance arousal. H2 a & b: Awareness of AI-generated content for (a) luxury product PDP and (b) value product PDP has a negative effect on perceived content authenticity. H3: Cognitive dissonance has a negative effect on trust in AI-generated PDPs. H4: Perceived authenticity of AI-generated PDPs has a positive effect on trust in AI-generated PDPs. H5: Trust in AI-generated PDPs has a positive effect on intention to shop in the online store. H6: The stronger AI self-efficacy, the weaker relationship between AI generated PDP awareness and cognitive dissonance. This study collected 213 usable responses. Results indicated that participants who evaluated the value-product page reported a higher intention to shop on the fashion brand's website than those who evaluated the luxury-product page. Consumers with high AI self-efficacy reported lower cognitive dissonance, higher perceptions of authenticity on the product detail page, and greater shopping intentions than consumers with low AI self-efficacy.

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Double Tap or Swipe Away: Gen Z, Virtual Influencers, and Para-Social Bonds on TikTok

Situated within influencer marketing, this study examines how parasocial interaction with TikTok virtual influencers shapes Gen Z consumers' brand engagement, with brand evaluation mediating the relationship. It has been noted that the artificial nature of virtual influencers raises questions about their morality, creating a potential for consumer disbelief or disengagement under certain conditions (Cheng, 2025; Alim *et al.*, 2025). Whilst previous studies have established links between human influencer attributes, para-social interaction, and purchase intention, the transferability of these findings within the context of virtual influencers is underexplored (Masuda *et al.*, 2022; Zha *et al.*, 2023). This research makes a novel contribution to the literature by extending the Theory of Persuasion into the distinct context of human-virtual influencers interaction. It addresses a key gap by proposing and testing a new framework where brand evaluation mediates the relationship between para-social interaction and the more comprehensive outcome of consumer brand engagement, moving beyond the traditional focus on purchase intention (Masuda *et al.*, 2022; Hien *et al.*, 2020). Addressing this gap is crucial because it captures the deeper, long-term relational and attitudinal effects of interactions with virtual influencers, providing richer insights into the mechanisms of persuasion and the sources of brand influence. The study employed a mixed methods approach, given the limited research undertaken on the thematic. Drawing from established literature on the Theory of Persuasion and para-social interaction (Nicolas *et al.*, 2023; Rehman & Elahi, 2024; Araújo *et al.*, 2023), hypotheses were developed from the extant literature to examine the transferability of key parasocial constructs impacting brand engagement within a virtual influencer context, with brand evaluation acting as a mediating role. A survey of 408 Generation Z TikTok users was conducted through an online questionnaire distributed via the Qualtrics consumer panel. The collected data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). A subsequent qualitative phase consisting of 25 semi-structured interviews was conducted to contextualize the survey results. These interviews aimed to gain deeper insights into the conditions for consumer engagement versus disengagement by identifying the specific brand and product categories that trigger disengagement with virtual influencers.

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The Future of Bio-Based Materials and Circular Economy in the Sportswear Industry: A Scenario Analysis

The success of sustainable products and processes in the sportswear industry depends on various driving forces. So, e.g., Rese *et al.* (2022) highlight in their success factor analysis the availability of high-performing, cost-effective, and recyclable feedstocks as well as the support by R&D investments, convincing communication, and regulation as key factors. Allwood *et al.* (2008) even go one step further in their scenario analysis on the sustainability of the clothing and textile industry in the United Kingdom: They develop possible projections for various political, economic, sociological, technological, legal, ecological, cultural, and historical factors and calculate their potential environmental, economic, and social impact. However, they are not able to predict the projections' probability of occurrence as well as their pairwise and overall consistency. In this paper, we propose and apply an alternative scenario analysis to predict the future of bio-based materials and circular economy in the sportswear industry. The approach is based on the methodologies applied by Kahn & Wiener (1967), Gausemeier *et al.* (1997) as well as Kaier & Baier (2008): Driving forces and their possible projections into the future are determined. The set of possible combinations of these projections – potential candidates for the future – is reduced to a set of consistent and probable ones. Then, cluster analysis is applied to the reduced set and the derived partitions are discussed. A large team of experts from science and from the sportswear industry – members of the large publicly and privately funded BioTexFuture-project (www.biotexfuture.info) – were involved in scenario development and interpretation of the results.

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Artificial Intelligence in the Cosmetics Market: Promoting or Moderating Consumer Choices?

AI is reshaping the cosmetics market, a fast-growing part of e-commerce where choices are often emotional and symbolic. Brands use AI to recommend products, manage prices, and craft persuasive messages such as urgency, scarcity, and upselling, thus acting as a promoter of consumption. At the same time, AI can also act as a moderator of consumption, introducing features such as spend limits, stock alerts, and suggestions of sustainable or cheaper alternatives. Prior research has largely examined AI as a promoter, focusing on its persuasive capacity to intensify purchasing behavior, but has given far less attention to its potential as a moderator. This study addresses that gap by comparing the effects of AI as a promoter and AI as a moderator in cosmetics e-commerce, focusing on their influence on consumers' perceived autonomy and trust, and the downstream impact on purchase intention and expected satisfaction/regret. This study adopts a between-subjects experimental design with three conditions (promoter, moderator, control), conducted with adults who purchased cosmetics online in the last six months. Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study offers insights for the ethical and responsible design of AI personalization in e-commerce platforms.

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GenAI-Driven Experiential Learning for Human Skills Development in Retail Education

This study examines the impact of using generative artificial intelligence (GenAI)-enabled scenario-based tasks followed by reflective exercises to equip students with human skills which are recognised as essential traits in an increasingly automated digitalised retail sector (Murniarti & Siahaan, 2025; Jones *et al.*, 2021, McKinsey & Company, 2018). Using Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2009), this research explores how GenAI-enabled scenario-based tasks combined with reflective exercises (Shah, 2024) immerse students in realistic, complex situations and foster human skill development through active engagement, reflection, and adaptation – essential skills for retail graduates (Toral & Montano, 2022). GenAI when used in experiential learning settings is found to increase students' motivation, and concurrently, their creativity levels (Murniarti & Siahaan, 2025). Further, such activities have also been shown to improve metacognitive skills such as reflection and critical thinking and lead to increased self-awareness in students (Salinas-Navarro *et al.*, 2024). In this study, we provide students with GenAI enabled scenario-based tasks to create situations that mimic contemporary retail workplace challenges (Chen *et al.*, 2023) and follow them by reflective exercises (Shah, 2024). By doing so, we investigate how GenAI based experiential learning activities boost critical reflection and problem-solving and contribute towards embedding necessary human skills in retail students. This would increase their readiness for digital and human-centred retail roles (Chen *et al.*, 2023), align with broader calls for Industry 4.0-ready human skills (Sonal *et al.*, 2024) and bridge the gap between academic teaching and retail industry expectations (AACSB, 2025). According to recent studies, to develop human skill sets in retail graduates, teaching must shift toward personalisation, integrated GenAI use, continuous feedback, and competency-driven learning (Verhoeven & Hor, 2025; Richter, 2024). Through GenAI enabled experiential learning experience this study shows the transformative impact of using GenAI on retail curriculum design embedding digital, human, and ethical skills as outlined in Montano and Toral Manson's (2024) roadmap for educators to prepare students with essential human skill sets. Thus, we position AI-driven experiential learning at the heart of retail education and offer a theory-informed approach to bridging the automation-skills gap and ensuring graduate resilience in a rapidly evolving digitalised and automated retail industry (McKinsey, 2018; Sonal *et al.*, 2024).

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Motivational Pathways to Local Food Purchase

Becker *et al.* (2013) highlight that unobserved heterogeneity may compromise the validity of structural equation models, and we argue that such heterogeneity is likely to exist in samples regarding motivations to purchase responsible foods. This paper examines the impact of heterogeneity in motivational pathways leading to the purchase of fresh local food products on the validity of models estimated with the overall sample. To address this issue, we apply the prediction-oriented segmentation (PLS-POS) method proposed by Becker *et al.* (2013) to identify segments that exhibit distinct motivational pathways to the purchase of fresh local food products. Data were collected through a self-administered e-mail survey distributed to a Canadian web panel (N = 502). The purchase of local fresh food was measured by asking respondents to what extent they had purchased a list of fresh food products over the previous year, using a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 10 (always). To assess the drivers of responsible food consumption, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements concerning local food products, also on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 10 = totally agree). The drivers of local food consumption were adapted from Bauer *et al.*, with the addition of one construct pertaining to the support of local economy. The final set of constructs thus included perceived healthiness, perceived hedonism, perceived environmental friendliness, perceived food safety, and perceived support for the local economy. Results indicate a substantial improvement in the quality of the estimated model when comparing the overall sample with the four-segment model obtained through the application of the PLS-POS method. Specifically, the explained variance (R^2) increases from 0.297 to 0.831. The motivational pathways to the purchase of fresh local food products differ considerably across segments. At the overall sample level, only perceived hedonism and perceived support for the local economy exert a significant influence. In segment 1 (N = 105), only perceived environmental friendliness and perceived support for the local economy show a significant positive effect. In segment 2 (N = 183), both perceived hedonism and perceived healthiness are significant positive drivers. In segment 3 (N = 127), perceived hedonism, perceived environmental friendliness, perceived food safety, and perceived support for the local economy all emerge as significant positive influences. Finally, in segment 4 (N = 87), perceived healthiness, perceived environmental friendliness, and perceived food safety are significant predictors of purchase. These results underscore the importance of accounting for heterogeneity in consumer motivations, as ignoring it may conceal critical differences between consumer groups and lead to misleading conclusions.

Picking Authentic Creators: Authenticity Factors Within the YouTube Guitar Player Community

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Authenticity is an important construct in relation to building a strong brand. In a bibliometric study of brand and product authenticity (Li *et al.*. 2024), the authors identified 880 articles since 2003 across 256 journals that dealt with the topic. This much-studied idea is seen as important in areas as diverse as athletic sponsors (Hasaan & Fişne, 2021), retail design (Kahn *et al.*, 2024) and TV advertising (Becker *et al.*, 2019), but this very attention has led to competing theoretical models. Work to clarify the most useful theoretical models is required. In 2025, several content creators within the guitar player community on YouTube investigated issues regarding how authenticity might be presented or perceived. In videos reviewing content creation, channel analytics, and platform management, content creators departed from typical content to explore issues they saw as impacting authenticity and issues of trust for their viewers or sponsors. Comparing and contrasting a variety of theoretical models regarding how authenticity has marketing impacts (e.g., Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Becker *et al.*, 2019; Hasaan & Fişne, 2021; Safeer *et al.,* 2023), specific situations will be analyzed where social media influencers in the guitar player YouTube community (those who have received multiple sponsorships to create guitar player-oriented videos) called out issues that they saw as impacting influencer credibility, and by extension, authenticity. Content analysis will be conducted on videos posted by guitar player influencers that address brand authenticity within the guitar player community rather than more typical content. Once the material has been collected and analyzed, content creators will be approached to provide their assessment of the various issues and theoretical dimensions of authenticity within the guitar player community on YouTube via semi-structured interviews. Through content analysis and interviews in a two-phase qualitative design, we will look at how various theoretical models regarding authenticity handle the specific case of YouTube guitar player influencers. As a result, we hope to reconcile existing theories and offer guidance for authenticity as it is performed and evaluated by musician-oriented video content creators.

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The Differential and Complementary Effects of Films and Tourism Information on Destination Image and Tourist Behavior

Film-induced tourism has emerged as a compelling research area in tourism and marketing, driven by the recognition of films as powerful promotional tools. Beyond attracting visitors, films enhance place awareness, shape cognitive and emotional destination images, and encourage engagement in film-related activities that generate significant economic benefits. Despite its importance, little research has systematically compared the effects of films with traditional tourism information on consumer perceptions and behaviors, leaving a gap in understanding their relative and complementary influence. This study addresses that gap by examining the differential and complementary effects of film content and tourism information on consumer responses to a destination. Building on the immersive qualities of films, we hypothesize that cinematic portrayals elicit stronger reactions than conventional promotional materials. To test this proposition, we conducted a large-scale experimental study with 1,010 participants across three countries—the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States—providing robust cross-cultural evidence. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three video scenarios: (1) a tourism trailer promoting Spain, (2) a compilation of scenes from international films shot in Spain, and (3) a hybrid trailer combining both. Consumer responses were measured across six key dimensions: country awareness, country image, intention to visit, intention to recommend, intention to seek additional information, and intention to engage in film-related activities. This multidimensional approach allowed us to capture both attitudinal and behavioral aspects of consumer reactions. Results show that the film-only trailer generated the strongest responses across most indicators, followed by the hybrid, while the tourism-only trailer consistently received the lowest evaluations. These findings underscore the superior effectiveness of films in building awareness, enhancing image, and fostering positive behavioral intentions. The hybrid trailer also demonstrated added value compared to the tourism-only version, though not all effects reached statistical significance, suggesting that integrating cinematic content into promotional materials can reinforce their impact. This research contributes to the literature by empirically validating the distinct and complementary roles of films and tourism information in shaping consumer responses to destinations. The study enriches theoretical discussions on destination marketing and consumer engagement while offering actionable insights for practitioners. From a strategic perspective, our findings emphasize the benefits of attracting international film productions as part of place marketing initiatives. Moreover, the creation and promotion of film tourism experiences—such as guided tours of filming locations and themed events—can act as additional draws for tourists and should be effectively integrated into tourism strategies.

Note: The authors are listed alphabetically, and they all contributed equally.

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Serial Returners in Europe: A Geodemographic and Attitudinal Analysis

Consumers are met with considerable uncertainty when shopping online, both when it comes to quality and fit (Hong & Pavlou, 2014; Sahoo *et al.*, 2018). It is only natural that a part of those purchases return back to the retailer because of this (De *et al.*, 2013). Yet the volumes that retailers are faced with today are anything but. About a quarter to half of online purchases end up as returns (Ader *et al.*, 2021), a result of lenient retailer policies and opportunistic consumer behaviors such as bracketing and wardrobing (Nestler *et al.*, 2021; Pei & Paswan, 2018). As such, returns create a cost that is too high for the sector (i.e., direct cost) or society (i.e., external cost) to bear (Jack & Frei, 2019). In an effort to reduce return rates, some retailers have started to contact or even blacklist so-called 'serial returns' who do not keep enough of their purchases (Frei *et al.*, 2020). Although Harris (2010) suggested to study fraudulent returns in an online shopping context already fifteen years ago, most of what we know about serial returners is covered in non-academic sources (Cullinane *et al.*, 2019). For instance, the Wall Street Journal notes that "a small number of customers tend to account for the majority of returns" (Kapner, 2023). Who the serial returners are and what sets them apart from other online shoppers, is currently unknown. This article aims to address this gap and respond to this question by surveying 10,092 online consumers from ten European countries (i.e., Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, France, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Poland, Greece, and Germany), classifying those who report to have returned at least half of their online purchases as serial returners. Using a logistic regression model that explains about 31% of variance, we find significant differences between nationalities, age, education, and urbanization in the odds of serial returning. Moreover, convenience-centered attitudes appear as the strongest predictor of serial return behavior, more so than attitudes reflecting acceptance and sustainability. Surprisingly, higher purchase frequencies reduce odds once geodemographics and attitudes are controlled for.

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Large Green Industrial Plant Openings and Incumbent Retailer Performance: A Matrix Completion Approach

The EU's Green Deal represents a shift in both the focus and the distribution of investment funds in Europe. To achieve the goal of a climate-neutral Europe by 2050, the EU will be investing at least 100 billion Euro over the years 2021 to 2027 in green industrial technology throughout Europe. Green investments are often seen as a panacea for rural and small-town regions that have historically been characterized by economic decline. Additionally, the green investments that are planned are so significant in size that one can expect effects well outside the industries that are directly related to the investment. Increased demand created by increased population and an increase in commuting into the region, as well as increased wages in the affected region, all suggest that these large-scale green industrial plant openings will also have effects on incumbent retailer performance. The purpose of our research is thus to investigate how the large green battery production plant, Northvolt one, opening in Skellefteå, Sweden in 2017 affected incumbent retailers in the entry region. We will investigate the impact of the large plant opening on sales, employment, productivity, profitability and firm growth. The analysis will focus on the years from 2010, with the plant opening in 2017, and until 2023. As such, the focus on our evaluation does not involve the decline and eventual bankruptcy of Northvolt, although we plan to investigate that as well in future work. All causal analysis is at heart a missing variable problem (Varian, 2016). The fundamental problem is that one cannot observe what retailer performance in Skellefteå would have been had Northvolt One not been established in 2017. To address this problem, a recently developed statistical machine learning method called matrix completion with fixed effects (MCFE, Athey *et al.*, 2021) will be used to create the counterfactual. As shown by Athey *et al.*, MCFE generally outperforms other panel data methods for causal analysis such as differences-in-differences (DiD, Card & Krueger, 1994) or synthetic control methods (Abadie and Gardeazabal, 2003; Abadie *et al.*, 2010; 2015), while also requiring less stringent assumptions. Secondly, the method estimates retailer specific treatment effects. As such, we can easily also investigate different causes of treatment effect heterogeneity on the retailer level. Thirdly, a solid validation procedure makes it possible to empirically test (knowing the ground truth for validation retailers) how well the model predicts the counterfactual for retailers in other, but similar, municipalities to Skellefteå in the 2017 to 2023 period. These tests can be performed even after long periods of time have elapsed after the implementation of the event under study. As such, we believe that matrix completion models are likely more suited for estimations of medium- to long-run effects of an event as in our empirical case (with a 7-year evaluation period) than, for example, DiD.

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Does Algorithmic Pricing Increase Retailer Profits?

Retailer use of algorithmic pricing is increasing rapidly. Chen *et al.* (2016) reports that one third of the 1600 best-selling products on Amazon.com use algorithmic pricing, while the European commission (2017) reports that over 50% of retailers in their survey use automated tracking of competitors' prices, and that two-thirds of the firms that track their competitors' prices also use algorithmic pricing in some form. In a more recent study, Lindgren *et al.* (2025a) investigated the use of algorithmic pricing for 16 product categories in seven countries. They found that there were algorithmic pricers active in all 16 product categories in the United Kingdom, while only seven out of the 16 categories had at least one algorithmic pricer in Denmark. Algorithmic pricers were also found to be more common in consumer electronics categories than in household appliances. For seven out of 16 categories, algorithmic pricers were present in all seven national markets under study. As such, algorithmic pricing is nowadays common in many national and product markets. Despite its popularity among retailers, empirical research into the impact of algorithmic pricing in retail markets is scarce and mainly focuses on questions regarding how increased use of algorithmic pricing will affect competition (Assad *et al.,* 2020; Musloff, 2021; Lindgren *et al.,* 2025b). None of these empirical studies have found any direct evidence that algorithmic pricing has led to price coordination. Instead, higher average prices are observed in markets where retailers use algorithmic pricing, which is interpreted as price coordination. However, as Calvano *et al.* (2020) point out, high prices are not in themselves evidence of price coordination, and the question of how algorithmic pricing affects the likelihood of price coordination thus warrants further research. The common finding in the literature that markets with retailers that use algorithmic pricing have, on average, higher prices, leads to another important research question: Are retailers that use algorithmic pricing more profitable than similar retailers that do not? To investigate this, we have collected annual report data for the algorithmic pricers identified in Lindgren *et al.* (2025a), as well as for a large group of potential control group firms from the seven different countries under study. Data has been collected for the period 2010 to 2023. In a first step, we employ coarsened exact matching (Blackwell *et al.,* 2009; Iacus *et al.,* 2011, 2012) on these data to identify valid control group firms not using algorithmic pricing. Then, in a second step, we estimate a difference-in-differences model (Card & Krueger, 1994) to obtain estimates of how the implementation of algorithmic pricing affected retailer profits. Our results indicate that retailers using algorithmic pricing are not more profitable than similar firms using traditional pricing.

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Small Shoppers, Big Impact – The Effect of Child-Adult Interactions on the In-Store Shopping Journey

Owing to their elevated consumption potential, young families are considered an important target group in grocery retail marketing. Parents with toddlers and preschoolers typically conduct their shopping for daily goods accompanied by their children and report that these young companions influence their purchasing decisions (Chen *et al.*, 2021; Wilson & Wood, 2004; Nguyen, 2023). While research on parent-child interactions in retail from a consumer behavior perspective dates back to the 1970s (Atkin, 1978), studies from the perspective of retail marketing remain scarce (Ebster, 2009). Surprisingly, little research has examined children as integral participants in the social shopping environment and the implications for in-store marketing strategies. The research at hand is exploratory in nature and adopts an ethnographic observational approach. It investigates the influence of child-adult interactions on the in-store shopping journey. It combines an analysis of child-directed in-store marketing activities, collected through store audits using a standardized observation sheet, with qualitative data from shopper shadowing, i.e., the covert observation of children and their accompanying adults throughout the entirety of their shopping trip. Across a total of 25 stores from five retail brands, 155 shopping trips were subjected to observation. Data analysis, which is still ongoing, focuses on categorizing the interactions and strategies used by both children and adults as well as linking them to shopping trip characteristics. It also investigates those interactions for temporal aspects concerning the shopper journey and observations from the store audits. Preliminary results show that the timing of interactions during the purchasing process makes a significant difference to their success rate in terms of impulse purchases, which provides valuable insight for both the FMCG industry as well as grocery retailers regarding product presentation and point of sale marketing stimuli.

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The Irony of Digital Luxury: When AI Chatbots Fail, Prestige Fades

Luxury consumption depends not only on superior products but also on the symbolic value of exclusivity, personalization, and prestige. As luxury brands increasingly adopt AI chatbots in customer interactions, this raises the question of whether automation can truly coexist with luxury expectations. This study investigates whether chatbot service failures shape consumers' psychological responses and perceptions in luxury contexts. The findings suggest that such failures evoke a sense of absurdity, stemming from the mismatch between high financial investment and inadequate service experiences. Beyond immediate dissatisfaction, repeated failures risk diluting symbolic value and prompting concerns that the very aura of luxury may be eroding. This phenomenon—conceptualized here as de-luxurization perception—captures an emerging consumer sentiment about the potential loss of prestige when luxury services fail to deliver exclusivity or recognition. The consequences extend beyond short-term frustration to enduring outcomes such as loyalty erosion, brand switching, and mockery-based word-of-mouth. By tracing consumers' psychological journey—from experiencing absurdity to perceiving broader threats to brand identity—this study contributes to service failure research by identifying a novel pathway linking automation to symbolic brand degradation. Managerial implications highlight the need to balance efficiency with exclusivity in order to safeguard the essence of luxury in the digital era.

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Is Omnichannel a Green Retailer?

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Despite the rapid expansion of omnichannel retailing, integrating environmental sustainability into online–offline coordination remains a major challenge. Buy-Online-Pickup-in-Store (BOPS), also known as Click-and-Collect (C&C), represents a prominent model that can enhance consumer flexibility, reduce over-purchasing, and lower carbon emissions by shifting the responsibility of product collection to consumers (Jara *et al.*, 2018; Gielens *et al.*, 2021; Pernot, 2021; Vyt *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, BOPS/C&C provides retailers with real-time insights into consumer demand, improving inventory management and operational efficiency. However, little is known about how consumers perceive the environmental value of BOPS/C&C and how such perceptions influence sustainable consumer behavior. This study investigates the role of technological integration and logistics service quality in shaping consumers' perceptions of retailers' environmental practices and their subsequent engagement in green word-of-mouth. We further examine the moderating role of green self-identity, which reflects how consumers' environmental values condition their responses to green retailing initiatives. A mixed-method design was employed. In the first phase, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore consumers' views on retailers' environmental efforts. Insights from these interviews informed the development of a survey instrument for the second phase, ensuring the questionnaire captured consumer-centered perspectives. This sequential approach complements prior research, focusing on retailer-centered logistics and cost efficiency. The findings provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the study extends omnichannel retailing and sustainability research by integrating BOPS/C&C operations with consumer-centered outcomes and highlighting the moderating role of green self-identity. Practically, it offers guidance for retailers to design sustainable omnichannel strategies that optimize operations and resonate with consumers' environmental values, thereby strengthening green word-of-mouth in the digital era.

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When Fans Meet Idols in VR

Brands are increasingly leveraging virtual reality (VR) to promote popular culture and enhance marketing effectiveness. By wearing VR headsets, consumers can watch concerts together in virtual cinemas, engage in immersive interactions with idols, and experience a sense of physical presence. For instance, the "BLACKPINK A VR Encore" virtual concert demonstrated how VR enables fans to enjoy proximity and connection in ways that transcend physical boundaries. The effectiveness of virtual reality interactions depends on the unique characteristics of VR technology and the interplay between users' physiological and psychological responses, with the primary goal of guiding users into immersive and absorptive states (Lee *et al.*, 2020). Drawing on self-determination theory, this study investigates how consumers' intrinsic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, shape their social brand engagement and webrooming behavior in the context of VR concerts. Specifically, the study explores whether these psychological needs directly influence social brand engagement and consumers' willingness to attend offline concerts (webrooming), or whether their effects are mediated through social brand engagement. Data were collected through an online survey distributed to consumers who had previously attended VR concerts. Questionnaires were delivered via idol-related Facebook fan pages, LINE groups, and Threads accounts. A total of 223 valid responses were analyzed using SmartPLS 4. The results indicate that autonomy and relatedness significantly enhance consumers' community brand engagement, whereas competence shows no significant effect. Furthermore, autonomy, competence, and relatedness do not influence consumers' willingness to attend physical concerts. However, when mediated by community brand engagement, these psychological needs positively affect offline concert participation. This suggests that identification and belonging derived from community engagement foster subsequent consumption behaviors for younger generations. From a managerial perspective, brands should prioritize fostering autonomy and relatedness needs by providing interactive options, enabling self-directed engagement, and creating opportunities for meaningful idol–fan interactions. In addition, hosting VR-based activities that extend to social media communities can further strengthen brand relationships.

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Is AI a Friend or an Assistant? How Role Perception Shapes Flow, AI Dependency, and Usage Intention

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly become an integral part of consumers' daily lives, supporting tasks such as information search, content creation, organization, recommendation, and decision-making. As consumers increasingly interact with generative AI (Gen AI) systems and conversational agents, they continue to return to these tools with remarkable frequency. This widespread and sustained engagement raises a central question: why do people keep using Gen AI? While prior research has attributed AI continuance to functional factors—such as usefulness, convenience, accuracy, or trust—these explanations are no longer sufficient to account for the increasingly relational, immersive, and socially nuanced ways in which people engage with AI today. While functional benefits such as usefulness or convenience remain important, they do not fully explain the persistent and immersive engagement many users experience. Recent evidence suggests that consumers' flow during AI interactions and their resulting dependency may be critical psychological drivers of continued use. Building on this perspective, the present study proposes that a key antecedent of flow and dependency is how users perceive the role of the AI agent. In other words, we argue that perceiving an AI as friend-like enhances flow, fosters dependency, and ultimately increases usage intention. Moreover, we propose that the effect of AI role perception on flow depends on individuals' self-enhancement motivation. Based on this framework, we propose the following hypotheses: H1: AI role perception (friend-like) has a positive direct effect on continued usage intention. H2: AI role perception increases continued usage intention indirectly through flow and dependency in a serial mediation pathway. H3: H2 is moderated by self-enhancement, such that the mediation is stronger when self-enhancement is low and weaker when self-enhancement is high. We tested our hypotheses through an online survey. Participants were first asked to report the AI program they use most frequently and were then instructed to respond to the study measures (e.g., AI role perception as friend-like, flow, dependency, and usage intention). Data were collected via Embrain and targeted Korean users. A total of 278 valid responses were obtained. We employed PROCESS Macro Model 6 to test the direct effect (H1) and the proposed serial mediation effect (H2). The results revealed that the direct effect of AI role perception on continued usage intention was not significant, failing to support H1 (β = .152, 95% CI = [-.202, .504]). However, the proposed serial mediation effect was significant, supporting H2 (indirect effect = .416, 95% CI = [.246, .592]). Furthermore, we tested the moderated mediation effect (H3) using PROCESS Macro Model 83. The results indicated a significant moderation in the mediation pathway (β = -.205, 95% CI = [-.357, -.067]). Specifically, the serial mediation effect was stronger among individuals with lower levels of self-enhancement, whereas this effect weakened as self-enhancement increased. These findings highlight the role of friend-like AI perceptions in driving flow, dependency, and continued use. To further assess the robustness and generalizability of this process, Study 2 will extend the model to a retail context through an online experiment.

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What Do We Expect From Conversational AI? The Power of Friendliness Through Care and Reliance

As AI-powered chatbots become central interaction tools in online and fashion retail environments, fashion companies increasingly seek to leverage chatbot design to cultivate stronger user stickiness. Recent research highlights that the type of AI chatbots characterized by agency and friendliness elicit distinct consumer responses. However, it remains unclear how these differing chatbot types shape consumers' stickiness behaviors and through which psychological mechanisms these effects occur. Specifically, personalized AI chatbot services often give consumers the impression that the company is caring for them, which may heighten their reliance on the AI chatbot services during the decision-making process. Furthermore, decision difficulty may shape how consumers engage with the serial mediation pathway (AI chatbot type → sense of care → reliance → stickiness intention), thereby strengthening or weakening the extent to which chatbot design influences downstream outcomes. Addressing these gaps, the present research empirically tests following hypotheses: H1 (Study 1&2): The type of AI chatbot (agentic vs. friendly) will significantly affect consumers' stickiness intention, such that consumers will exhibit higher stickiness intention when assisted by a friendly AI chatbot than by an agentic AI chatbot. H2 (Study 1&2): The relationship between AI chatbot type (agentic vs. friendly) and stickiness intention will be serially mediated by consumers' perceived sense of care and their reliance on the AI chatbot. H3 (Study 2): Decision difficulty (low vs. high) will moderate the serial mediation effect of AI chatbot type (agentic vs. friendly) on stickiness intention via perceived sense of care and reliance We tested our hypotheses through two online experiments. Study 1 employed a 2-between-subjects design (AI chatbot type: agentic AI vs. friendly AI). Study 2 will employ a 2 × 2 between-subjects design—AI chatbot type (agentic AI vs. friendly AI) × decision difficulty (low vs. high)—to examine the moderating effect proposed in H3. In Study 1, chatbot type was manipulated by holding all other aspects of the interaction constant while varying only the chat style to reflect either an agentic or friendly communication tone. Data were collected through Invight from U.S. consumers, yielding 200 valid responses (100 per condition). A pretest and the manipulation check in the main study both confirmed that the chatbot type manipulation was successful. To test H1, we conducted a one-way ANOVA on stickiness intention. The results showed a significant main effect of chatbot type (F = 80.19, p < .001), indicating that consumers interacting with the friendly AI chatbot reported higher stickiness intention than those interacting with the agentic AI. To test H2, we employed Hayes' (2015) PROCESS macro (Model 6) to assess the serial mediation effect through perceived sense of care and reliance. The results revealed that the direct effect of chatbot type on stickiness intention was not significant, whereas the serial indirect effect was significant (β = .539, 95% CI = [.285, .835]), supporting H2. These findings indicate that the effect of chatbot type on stickiness intention is fully mediated by consumers' perceived sense of care and subsequent reliance on the chatbot. These findings underscore the importance of AI chatbot type in fostering perceived care, reliance, and ultimately stickiness intention. To further assess the robustness of H1 and H2 and to examine the boundary conditions of this mechanism, Study 2 will be conducted using a 2 × 2 online experiment.

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Mapping Fashion Tourism: A Conceptual Framework for Decoding the Multifaceted Roles of Fashion in Shaping Travel Motivation and Experience

Fashion tourism is gaining prominence within the global tourism market. Although past literatures generally defined the concept as travel for fashion purposes (Liberato *et al.*, 2021), the precise fashion-related activities involved were rarely specified, and there was little consensus on the underlying motivations. To address this conceptual ambiguity, our study aimed to develop a conceptual framework that robustly maps the scope of fashion tourism across the tourist journey. A systematic literature review was conducted following the SPAR-4-SLR protocol (Paul *et al.*, 2021). A comprehensive search of Scopus or Web of Science databases retrieved 1124 English peer-reviewed journals and book chapters published between 2014 and 2025, using a combination of fashion-related ("fashion" OR "clothing" OR "clothes" OR "outfit*" OR "garment*" OR "boutique*") and tourism-related ("tourism" OR "travel*" OR "tourist*" OR "trip*" OR "destination*" OR "sightseeing") keywords. After excluding irrelevant articles that did not cover both the fashion and tourism areas, a final corpus of 77 articles were identified for further content analysis. Five subtypes of fashion tourism were identified: experiential tourism (i.e., participating or immersing in fashion; 33%), shopping tourism (i.e., purchasing fashion; 30%), cultural tourism (i.e., exploring or studying fashion; 23%), beauty tourism (i.e., wearing or styling with fashion; 7%), media tourism (i.e., sharing about fashion; 5%), and others (e.g., trading fashion; 2%). While most experiences occur on-site, media tourism behaviors like posting fashion photography on social media help shape destination image and attract other tourists to visit, connecting the pre- and post-trip phases.

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Retail Value Creation: Co-Creation Opportunities in the Customer Journey

More of the world's inhabitants gain access to products from a variety of retail options every year. These options vary from brick mortar retail stores to online digitized omnichannel giants. More recently, the marketing literature has offered two additional insights that further defined retail management strategies: the Customers Migration Process and Service (Dominant) Logic. Specifically, Yadav & Varadarajan's (2005) depiction of the customer migration process suggests that the customer experience is defined by search, purchase, acquisition, use, and disposal phases. This process is informed by service logic (SL) which suggests interactions between users and providers define value creation. The objective of this research is to extend the value co-creation in-use perspective of SDL to identify value creation opportunities available for retailers in each of the Customer Migration using transaction cost economics (TCE) and behavioral economics. Gronroos (2008) describes SL as a business logic that suggests providers (e.g., retailers) facilitate the interactive processes that support customers' value creation in their everyday practices. Interactions between firms and their customers in the marketplace are identified as enabling engagement that is value-generating and opportunities to co-create value. As such, Gronroos (2008) suggests providers are no longer restricted to making value propositions but can engage itself in customers' value fulfillment. In addition to the value co-created in-use, each stage of the customer migration offers potential value creation opportunities. Thayler (1987) suggests that while all interactions with individuals or objects potentially create a benefit, it also characterize humans as cognitive misers. Given that costs, whether monetary, time, or effort (i.e., sacrifices), are more objective much easier for consumers to evaluate than the subjective appraisal required of the benefits of the service received. TCE theory, and its two Nobel Prize winners (Coase & Williamson), in turn opine that the objective of economic systems is to maximize efficiency while minimizing costs. The inherent implications of SDL that value is "released" in-use" by customers inherently focuses on benefits. Logically, a failed benefit is a cost, and a beneficial "sacrifice" is a benefit. To the extent that customer engagement across the customer migration phases lowers the perceived sacrifice attributed to the search for, purchase of, acquisition of, use of, and disposal of a product solution to a customers need or want, value is potentially created. A grounded research design will be employed to identify the specific attributes associated with each of the five Customer Migration Phases. Specifically, the literature will be searched first to identify studies that evaluate any or all of the five stages of the Customer Migration. The intent of this process is to identify attributed previously used to evaluate the benefits and sacrifices associated with the customer migration process. This set of attributes will be shown (in a fixed response survey format) to a sample of customers and retail employees and managers to ascertain the relative importance of each. Each respondent then will be asked to identify any benefits or costs associated with each stage they perceived to be missing. The expected Outcome reported is the results of the survey and the identification of a conceptual model identifying the relevant value creating attributes for each stage.

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Future-Proofing the Retail Workforce: Using Active Learning to Close the Soft Skills Gap

In an increasingly automated and AI-driven retail landscape, the demand for human-centered soft skills has never been more urgent. In a survey of human resource professionals (SHRM, 2019), communication was identified as the third-most cited soft skills gap; more than half of the HR respondents indicated that education systems have done little or nothing to help address the skills shortage. Communication is critical in how information is disseminated, received, and interpreted between and across platforms and organizations. Moreover, communication sets the groundwork for building trust and fostering collaboration. An explanatory case study will be used to extend our understanding of active learning, student engagement, and soft skill development, specific to business communication. The proposed research builds on the findings presented in the first part of our two-part study. This project aims to: 1) describe innovative pedagogy used in teaching business communication models and best practices in an undergraduate business communications course (i.e., meeting simulations, case studies, fish bowls, presentations, performance review role plays, sales pitches, product demos, active listening sessions); and 2) examine the impact of active learning on soft skill competency development and student engagement. Rooted in constructivist learning theory, active learning embraces the use of learning groups and social interactions to bridge cognitive processes and helps students solve problems (Almulla, 2023). In fact, there is increasing evidence to suggest that students can develop soft skills such as communication and relationship building more effectively in informal and active learning spaces (Mwita *et al*, 2023). Multiple data sources including observation, pre-test and post-test surveys, end-of-semester evaluations, and course materials will be collected and examined. Specifically, we will assess attitudes toward scientific inquiry, attitudes toward active learning and soft skill competency development. An observation protocol will be used to capture levels of student engagement. Coding and thematic analysis will be used to interpret the results. Our study builds on prior findings that active learning significantly enhances leadership competencies. Preliminary observations indicate that students engaged in experiential andragogy and interactive methods demonstrate marked improvement in communication proficiency and engagement. As retail transitions to digital platforms, educating students on these interpersonal skills remains vital for both performance and human connection.

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Leading through Retail Turbulence: Transformational Leadership as a Foundational Catalyst for Service Outcomes

The contemporary retail environment is marked by declining physical retail space (Jackson, 2023; Kupfer *et al.,* 2024), shifting consumer decision-making process, and divergent demands of omnichannel shoppers (McKinsey & Company, 2021; Manhattan Association, 2025). These conditions create unprecedented challenges for organizations seeking to maintain service quality and customer loyalty. Leadership has become a critical factor in guiding employees through uncertainty, balancing efficiency with empathy, and aligning employee behavior with evolving customer expectations. The leadership problem this creates is not simply a matter of the right style. Path-Goal Theory (House, 1971, 1996) emphasizes matching directive, supportive, participative, or achievement-oriented behaviors to situational requirements, but this logic assumes a degree of situational clarity that turbulent retail environments rarely provide. In many retail settings, employees need goal clarity, emotional support, decision-making autonomy, and performance challenges at the same time, not in a neat sequence. Transformational leadership (TFL) theory offers a more suitable conceptual entry point in such conditions because it emphasizes identification, inspiration, and intellectual development rather than contingent exchange (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Yet TFL has been examined primarily as a predictor of single outcomes, limiting its potential to explain leadership effectiveness when multiple outcomes must be achieved concurrently. This study proposes a Transformational Leadership-Activated Outcomes Framework (TLAOF) that reframes the TFL-PGT relationship as hierarchical rather than parallel. In this framework, TFL does not operate alongside Path-Goal Theory as a competing explanatory logic. It is the foundational condition from which Path-Goal behavioral repertoires and customer orientation emerge. Four TFL dimensions were measured: collaboration (team-based individualized consideration), idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. Five outcome variables were assessed: customer orientation and four Path-Goal leadership behaviors such as directive, supportive, participative, and achievement orientation. All scales used 5-point Likert response formats, and internal consistency reliabilities exceeded conventional thresholds (Cronbach's $\alpha > .70$). Drawing on survey data from 274 retail employees, this study found TFL creates the foundational conditions through which PGT behaviors become viable and sustainable. The TFL dimensions differentially activate specific service outcomes and demonstrate that these activation patterns are empirically distinct, theoretically coherent, and practically consequential.

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Enhancing Graduate Students' Employability: An Enacted-Resilience Framework

In an increasingly dynamic and digitally mediated professional landscape, the demands on graduate students extend far beyond technical proficiency. To successfully navigate the ambiguities of the modern job market—including its unpredictable expectations, digital challenges, and frequent rejections—they must possess not just specialized skills but also a profound capacity for resilience. While resilience is widely recognized as a critical life skill, this paper argues that our current understanding of it remains incomplete, particularly at the individual level. We contend that a more robust theoretical framework is needed to capture the active cognitive processes through which resilience is forged in relation to employability – defined as an individual's proactive capacity to adapt to career-related changes (Fugate *et al.*, 2004). The existing literature often treats resilience as a static trait or a simple outcome of adapting to adversity. However, we propose a more dynamic view, one that positions resilience as an ongoing process enabled by sensemaking—the cognitive mechanism through which individuals construct meaning from ambiguous experiences (Weick, 1995). This paper establishes that sensemaking is not merely a component of resilience; it is the fundamental engine that powers it. When confronted with professional setbacks, individuals must make sense of the experience to recover and reorient themselves. A failure to make sense of a crisis, as Weick (1993) demonstrated in his analysis of the Mann Gulch disaster, leads directly to an absence of resilience and a breakdown in effective action. Therefore, we propose that the core of resilience lies in the ability to engage in productive sensemaking. We argue that these are not separate processes but are mutually constituting, with each serving as both an input and an outcome for the other in a continuous, cyclical fashion (Kilskar *et al.*, 2020). While some studies have explored the link between these two concepts (e.g., Kilskar *et al.*, 2020), there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning the micro-level processes by which an individual's sense of self and resilience are intertwined during moments of ambiguity. Existing research has touched on related concepts like Sense of Coherence (Antonovsky, 1987) and identity formation in students (Durso, *et al.*, 2021), but no unified framework has been developed to explain graduate students' employability. This paper not only contributes to a deeper conceptual understanding but also provides a clear and actionable research agenda. The proposed framework offers a new lens for academics to study resilience in the context of student employability and provides a theoretical foundation for developing targeted interventions. Ultimately, this framework can help educators, career counselors, and students themselves better understand and cultivate the cognitive competencies necessary for thriving in today's complex professional world.

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Exploring Customers' Perceptions of Neobanks and the Influence of Corporate Digital Responsibility

Digital banking, referred to as Financial Technology (Fintech) services, is widely acclaimed for delivering financial services entirely online. These services have ushered in a wave of innovative experiences for people globally. Since the emergence of neobank services in the 2000s, significant changes in their structure have led to varying levels of acceptance worldwide. Understanding the factors influencing individuals' adoption of these services has always been crucial for fintech companies to align with client expectations and encourage more users to join. This study delves into customers' perceptions of neobanks, barriers to their adoption, and the potential of Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) to overcome those hurdles. We employed a qualitative approach, analyzing several semi-structured interviews conducted in two formats: individual interviews and focus group discussions. Using structured interview guides, we recruited 40 respondents with diverse demographic profiles who were interested in participating in our sessions. Among them, 21 were non-users and 19 were users of neobank services, all residing in different provinces across Canada during the interviews. The interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12 software. Our investigation revealed several dimensions, including a strong need for transparency, enhanced security, new protection protocols, supervised legislation, and a lack of access to sufficient educational materials and social inclusion. These findings underscore the importance of CDR as a primary concern for Neobanks. Additionally, ease of access, convenience in managing daily financial affairs, and 24/7 customer support emerged as motivating factors for adoption. By highlighting these insightful results, this qualitative study aims to inform the financial sector and policymakers about the current client landscape, attitudes, and mindsets, enabling them to enhance services to meet client expectations. Furthermore, it provides the academic community with the latest analysis of neobanks perceptions for future research.

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Redefining Grocery Shopping: Understanding Predefined Subscriptions for Food and FMCG

Traditional retailers are increasingly challenged by globalization and digital transformation (Paul & Rosenbaum, 2020). In particular, brick-and-mortar grocery stores face mounting competition from the growth of online grocery shopping (Brüggemann *et al.*, 2025). Under these conditions, physical stores must offer compelling reasons for customers to visit (Breugelmans *et al.*, 2023). One business model gaining growing relevance in the online environment is the subscription business (Toteva *et al.*, 2021). Subscription models are widespread across various product categories (Van Droogenbroeck & Willems, 2025) and can take multiple forms, such as rental models (Rese & Baier, 2025). Subscription customers also display distinctive characteristics and behaviors, making them a particularly interesting consumer segment (Sinha, 2021). Furthermore, subscription models further provide predictable demand, enhance customer loyalty, and generate rich data for targeted marketing (McCarthy *et al.*, 2017; Randall *et al.*, 2016). Consumers' motivations for engaging with subscriptions are complex and vary across different product categories (Bray *et al.*, 2021), across past, current and non-users (Van Droogenbroeck & Willems, 2025), as well as across different sociodemographic groups (Woo & Ramkumar, 2018). Although subscriptions are often associated with online channels, they also present opportunities for integration into traditional offline retail formats, enabling hybrid strategies that reconcile online and offline retail (Hänninen *et al.*, 2019). This makes it especially important to consider their application in the grocery sector, where recurring purchases and habitual consumption patterns provide a natural fit (Namin & Dehdashti, 2019; Tan & Chen, 2021). Among subscription types, predefined subscriptions for grocery replenishment are particularly relevant, as they provide consumers with recurring delivery of the same products (Bischof *et al.*, 2020). Despite their growing popularity, little is known about why consumers adopt replenishment subscriptions specifically in the grocery sector. Building on an extensive systematic literature review, this study addresses the gap in understanding why consumers adopt grocery replenishment subscriptions. Two representative surveys of German and English consumers examine perceived benefits of online grocery subscriptions. Based on these findings, a conceptual framework is developed capturing key attributes of subscription models and their potential configurations across online-only and hybrid formats, integrating offline retail. While online-only subscriptions provide convenience and time savings, with home delivery and fully digital management of orders and payments. Hybrid models, in contrast, allow customers to collect their subscription in-store, experience exclusive offers, or adapt their subscription while visiting the physical store, combining utilitarian and experiential benefits. By tailoring subscriptions along these dimensions, retailers can meet diverse consumer needs, drive repeat purchases, and enhance both loyalty and competitive positioning. By connecting insights from consumer motivation research with subscription business models, this study advances theoretical knowledge of hybrid retail strategies and offers practical guidance for grocery retailers to strengthen customer loyalty and maintain competitiveness in an increasingly digitalized market enviro

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The Future of Influence: How Virtual Influencers Shape Brand Attitudes and Purchase Intentions

Despite a substantial body of research examining the impact of real influencers on consumer purchasing behavior, the influence of virtual influencers remains an area of uncertainty. A virtual influencer is a computer-generated character designed to engage with audiences on social media, often resembling real humans in appearance and behavior. Previous studies have concentrated on the impact of human influencers on a range of outcomes, including trust-building, brand loyalty and purchase intention. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research examining the role of virtual influencers in shaping consumer perceptions. As the prevalence of virtual influencers on social media continues to grow, it is imperative to investigate whether they can replicate or even surpass the influence of their human counterparts. This research addresses this gap by examining whether virtual influencers exert the same effect on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions as human influencers. In light of the growing prevalence of virtual influencers on social media, companies are increasingly contemplating the potential benefits they offer, including immunity to scandals and the capacity to be tailored to resonate with specific target audiences. Moreover, it is hypothesized that virtual influencers can enhance consumer engagement through their innovative and distinctive nature, while providing businesses with long-term cost-effectiveness. This study employs a quantitative methodology with a 3x2 design to examine the impact of diverse influencer types (human, virtual, and disclosed virtual) on brand attitude and purchase intention. The research is based on the concepts of source credibility, parasocial interaction theory, and the uncanny valley theory, which will be examined in detail. The parasocial interaction theory posits that consumers form one-sided relationships with influencers that can influence their attitudes and purchasing decisions. The uncanny valley theory, which addresses the discomfort experienced when artificial entities closely resemble humans, is particularly relevant in evaluating the impact of virtual influencers. The study examines six discrete scenarios in which both male and female influencers promote two distinct product categories: headphones and bubble tea. This allows for a comprehensive analysis of the potential interactions between gender, product type and the nature of the influencer, and their influence on consumer responses. The analysis is based on three mediating variables: The variables under consideration are parasocial relationship, source credibility, and attitude towards the influencer. It is hypothesized that these factors act as mediators in the relationship between the type of influencer and the consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions. The study makes a contribution to consumer research by expanding the understanding of how virtual influencers impact consumer behavior, such as brand attitude and purchase intention, through the application of theories such as source credibility and parasocial interaction. The study highlights the pivotal role of the uncanny valley effect in shaping consumer trust and engagement with AI-driven entities. For businesses, the practical insights demonstrate the potential of virtual influencers to enhance consumer engagement, mitigate the risks associated with human influencers, and provide cost-effective, customizable marketing strategies. The findings of this study can assist companies in strategically integrating virtual influencers in order to target specific demographics and enhance brand perception.

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Regulating Gamification: Balancing Customer Satisfaction and Privacy Concerns in Retail

Consumers are increasingly experiencing gamification in their daily lives. Gamification involves using game-like elements in non-game settings, such as online and physical supermarkets. Many retailers adopt gamification to improve the shopping experience. Gamification is often combined with personalization, which depends on collecting consumer data to create tailored offers. To develop these offers, retailers gather and analyse consumer data. However, this data collection can raise privacy concerns among consumers. Therefore, the relationship between gamification and personalization prompts the question of whether gamification can divert consumers' attention from these privacy issues. The aim of this study is to first examine whether gamification distracts from emerging privacy concerns and possibly even makes them disappear altogether. An online experiment tested personalized and non-personalized coupons, with and without gamified elements. While personalization significantly increases satisfaction with coupons, it also raises privacy concerns, which in turn decrease satisfaction. Gamification, on the other hand, proves to be a neutral factor: it influences privacy concerns neither positively nor negatively and does not lessen the negative effects of personalization on privacy perception. The findings show that gamification doesn't override privacy concerns. Consumers interacting with personalized offers still remain aware of data privacy.

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One Customer Journey Doesn't Fit Them All: Navigating the Health System as Parents of Children With Disabilities

In this study, we employ marketing tools to advance understanding of the barriers encountered by parents of children with disabilities when accessing and consuming healthcare services. Parenting a child with a disability involves multiple stressors, including the challenges of supporting the child's development, navigating public health, education, and welfare services, and securing financial resources (Gavidia-Payne, 2020; Heiman, 2002). Parents often encounter numerous barriers in health care, and the literature on their customer experience is limited. Findings consistently highlight obstacles such as insufficient information, delays in service provision, cumbersome administration, and poor coordination among professionals (Afra *et al.*, 2020; Ryan & Quinlan, 2018). The literature on parents of children with disabilities is largely grounded in qualitative studies and rarely applies marketing or service frameworks to understand the customer experience. This study makes a novel contribution by drawing on a large parent sample and employing marketing tools such as segmentation, importance–performance analysis and customer journey maps, thereby offering new insights into parents' customer experience. A survey was distributed to a sample of 537 parents to children with disability, aged 23 to 59, with a mean age of 41.02. Of the participants, 68% were women. Respondents were asked to indicate both the importance they assign to, and their satisfaction with, various service aspects presented in a predefined list. These responses enabled the application of an IPA analysis across the following dimensions of health services: access to information about medical rights, specialist medical services, allied health services, communication among professionals, administrative services, language used by professionals, and medical equipment. In addition, they reported their overall satisfaction with the healthcare system and indicated the extent of effort they invested in exercising their child's medical entitlements. Details about the child's disability and parents' demographics were also collected. In this study, two segmentation approaches were employed (Rinne & Swinyard, 1995): an a priori approach, which examined differences between groups based on parents' demographic characteristics and children's disabilities, and an exploratory approach, which analyzed the data according to parents' satisfaction and the effort they invested. The combination of these two approaches enabled us to identify two groups of parents that differ according to the types of their children's disabilities. The first group, consisting of parents of children with a variety of disabilities, is characterized by a less demanding customer journey that involves interactions with lower number of touchpoints such as the community clinic, specialist care, and a single allied health profession. The second group, consisting of parents of children with autism and ADHD, is characterized by a more complex customer journey with multiple touchpoints, including the community clinic, ongoing diagnostic processes, specialist care, and numerous allied health treatments. This group was also found to invest more effort in exercising medical entitlements for their children. The findings of this study demonstrate that applying marketing tools can provide valuable insights for redesigning and enhancing public sector service systems.

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The Supermarket of the Future from the Consumer's Perspective

The supermarket of the future will not be shaped solely by technological innovations, but by consumers' preferences above all else. A series of studies were conducted to identify what consumers desire in their future brick-and-mortar supermarket (if they could design the store themselves). In an initial pilot study, qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with retail, science, and technology experts to explore developments and challenges facing brick-and-mortar supermarkets. In a subsequent study, consumers were surveyed about various types of smart stores as part of a scenario study to identify potential barriers to fully automated stores. Based on all the results, a mapping was carried out to identify consumers' intuitive preferences. This third (laboratory) study formed the core of the project. The mapping used image scales instead of verbal scales because they are particularly suitable for measuring constructs that are difficult to verbalize. Image scales reduce socially desirable response behavior and elicit more intuitive ("honest") answers. A total of 28 pretested image collages were created to visualize different aspects of a future supermarket, such as variety of products, vertical farming, smartphone-based in-store navigation, Pick & Go, ease of orientation, dynamic pricing, blockchain technology for product traceability, robot assistance, and prices, as well as virtual and augmented reality. Participants were asked to arrange the individual image collages within a circular area on a touchscreen according to how important they perceived each aspect to be (images placed closer to the center were considered more important). Based on these placements, software calculated the Euclidean distances to derive a measure of consumers' preferences. To validate the lab study findings with a representative sample, a quantitative online study was conducted in which participants rated the image collages as more or less relevant and addressed different shopping motives. A final study examined whether instructions based on time distance impact the results. In summary, the results show that technical innovations, such as automated picking machines, virtual and augmented reality, and robotic assistance, are not currently attractive to consumers. In service, ambiance, animal welfare, product quality, and special offers appeal to most consumers (also to the innovative ones). These "classics" remain essential and should not be neglected. They are relevant for both younger and older participants. In terms of the preferences of different age groups, only one significant difference emerged: animal welfare was particularly important to young consumers. The results remained stable when consumers were asked to project themselves into the year 2050. Interestingly, most experts also expected gradual, evolutionary development toward more technology, especially in the background.

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AI Empowered Robust Dynamic Pricing With Endogenous Brand Equity in a Two Period Stackelberg Game

Retailers of premium fashion and flagship products often face two intertwined challenges. First, early pricing shapes brand equity and future willingness to pay. Second, uncertainty regarding rivals and demand shocks creates tail exposure, a downside risk which standard expected value models typically understate. We study the first period price a focal retailer should set, considering that today's price shapes tomorrow's brand, rivals react strategically, market heterogeneity is uncertain, and management is concerned with tail losses as much as average outcomes. The setting is a two-period leader follower interaction, also known as a Stackelberg game, where the retailer leads in period one and a competitor follows. We proceed in three steps that mirror the managerial pathway from price to performance. To begin with, by modelling the customer's purchase decision, (a) we capture the dynamic marketplace where shoppers evaluate the perceived value of the retailer's flagship product against both a key competitor and the option of not purchasing at all. This approach realistically simulates how market share is won and lost based on the perceived appeal of each option. Secondly, by modelling the evolution of brand equity, (b) a core tension in luxury is addressed: price acts as both a quality signal and a volume lever. Our model specifies how a premium price can enhance reputation, while simultaneously penalizing overexposure that dilutes the brand's crucial scarcity appeal. This mechanism links today's price and sales figures directly to tomorrow's brand value, while also allowing for external shocks from social media buzz or press coverage. Thirdly, through integrating abovementioned elements into the retailer's strategic decision framework, (c) the retailer seeks an initial price that balances immediate profitability with the long-term value of the brand. Critically, the objective is not simply to maximize average expected returns. We model a risk averse manager who also cares deeply about mitigating downside "tail-risk". Furthermore, the chosen price must be robust, safeguarding the strategy against plausible uncertainties in the competitor's profile, such as their underlying costs or market appeal. To solve this complex strategic game and find the optimal price, we employ a novel AI assisted methodology, Physics Informed Neural Network (PINN), to learn and predict the rational pricing reactions of the competitor, enabling the retailer to anticipate and strategically preempt these follower moves. This research demonstrates how the optimal price responds to specific strategic priorities. When management is more risk averse, focusing intently on avoiding worst case outcomes, the model correctly shifts the optimal price slightly upward. This confirms the wisdom of a conservatively priced strategy under heightened risk. The model also quantifies the brand's scarcity imperative. A stronger brand penalty for selling beyond a safe threshold naturally encourages quantity restraint by raising the optimal price. Conversely, if a brand's proposition can tolerate higher sales volumes before dilution occurs, modest price reductions become justifiable. Perhaps most critically, our research reveals that the optimal price remains remarkably stable, even when uncertainty about competitors increases significantly. This stability provides strong analytical support for the robust price commitments often seen in the premium fashion and technology sectors. Together, these results provide a policy tool to map risk appetite and brand protection goals directly onto pricing rules.

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The Importance of Factors Influencing Consumers' Choice of Grocery Stores Following the Entry of New Competitors into the Market

Grocery stores are important for families, as each year families spend a significant proportion of their income on buying groceries. Statistics Iceland figures show that food and other groceries account for over 15% of families' total expenditures and that if housing costs are excluded, the figure is around 25%. This resarch evaluates the factors that Icelandic consumers consider when choosing supermarkets and how new stores affect the importance of factors. These included the importance of location (home or workplace), low price, and quality of goods and services. As part of the research, two hypotheses were proposed: (1) location is of greater importance than both price and quality; and (2) consumers who prefere discount stores are more price-conscious than others. The results were based on five surveys conducted in the autumn of 2021 (N = 1,959), 2022 (N = 1,157), 2023 (N = 2,171), 2024 (N = 1,822) and 2025 (N = 1,311). All data was merged into one dataset comprising the 8,420 valid answers. For data analysis, the material was weighted for gender and population age. The findings demonstrate that location is similarly important, and that Hypothesis 1 was therefore not supported. The findings did support Hypothesis 2, since respondents who prefer discount shops agreed more with the statement about the importance of low prices than those who mentioned other stores.

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Building Relationships Through Flirting With Familiar Vs. Occasional Customers

The consequences of flirting in the workplace were recently exposed, specifically in the hospitality sector, where authentic flirting was found to be significantly related to positive service outcomes (e.g., loyalty, tip size; Medler-Liraz & Seger-Guttmann, 2021). However, flirting with customers in the absence of prior acquaintance may be harmful. Prior acquaintance includes duration, frequency of engagement, and self-disclosure (Bäckström *et al.*, 2009). The purpose of the current study is to investigate whether employees' prior acquaintance with customers, established through personal conversations over time, can reveal significant information that positively influences the way servers flirt and their emotional behaviors. This research includes two studies, employing mixed methods. In Study 1, a qualitative field study, 40 hospitality service employees (i.e., bar and restaurant employees) were asked to describe how prior acquaintance with a customer affects their flirting and emotional expression compared with serving occasional customers. Study 2, a quantitative study, sampled 263 customers to examine how prior acquaintance moderates the effects of servers' flirting on customer tip size, trust, and customer sense of entitlement toward service employees. Study 1 showed that familiar customers share personal stories and information, are patient, and engage in pleasant communication. However, these customers developed a sense of place attachment, fostering emotional expectations and service demands seen as disproportionate by service providers. Conversely, interactions with occasional customers were more transactional, with service providers using flirting and appearance-based compliments as tools to build trust and increase tips. Study 2 found that flirting gestures and customer trust as well as tip size were more strongly related for occasional customers than for familiar customers. The link between flirting and customer entitlement is stronger for familiar customers. Overall, the study provides a better understanding of how relationships are built through flirting dynamics with well-acquaintance vs. occasional customers. These dynamics were also found to affect service outcomes.

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Consumer Interests in Alternative Protein Foods in Mediterranean Countries

Traditional protein sources are increasingly associated with environmental degradation, high resource demands, and health risks. To address these challenges, it is essential to shift toward alternative proteins. However, successfully introducing alternative protein products into the market requires evidence-based marketing strategies to enhance consumer acceptance and support sustainable food transitions. This study investigates the consumer information necessary for introducing food products with alternative proteins (e.g., proteins from Tomato pomace or other by-products of food production) in two selected Mediterranean countries: Portugal and Turkey. To achieve this, simulations will be conducted regarding consumer preferences, buying intentions, and willingness to pay (WTP) for specific food products enriched with alternative proteins, compared to existing food products without such enrichment. The study utilizes an online survey that includes a simulation experiment with approximately N = 600 consumers from each country. The collected data will be analyzed using multivariate statistical methods to provide insights into consumer preferences and WTP for selected food products versus those with alternative proteins. It will also identify target groups for these products, the factors influencing preferences and WTP, as well as information and communication needs and sources. The findings will offer practical recommendations for adapting business models and commercialization strategies, aligning product development with consumer preferences, and achieving sustainability goals.

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Tails of Loyalty: Exploring the Role of Pet Amenities in Customer-Store Relationships

Despite the growing role of dogs in consumer lives, marketing research has paid surprisingly little attention to how pet-related infrastructure shapes brand perception in retail settings. Dogs represent a significant part of everyday life for millions of people: they are the second most common pets in Europe, and by far the most common household pets in the United States (FEDIAF, 2023; APPA, 2025). A persistent bias against sentimentality in science has historically blinded researchers to the significant and distinctive role that pets play in human decision-making (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). This oversight has contributed to a narrow focus on pet ownership behaviors (e.g. Jia *et al.*, 2022), underrepresenting the growing phenomenon of co-consumption between dogs and their owners (Kylkilahti *et al.,* 2016) - even in non-pet-related categories. Understanding this influence offers novel and actionable insights for retailers seeking to create more emotionally engaging and loyalty-building environments. This research examines how the presence and type of dog-parking options outside retail stores influence consumers' emotional brand attachment and behavioral loyalty. Specifically, we investigate three common dog-parking formats: a basic hook, a mat with water bowl, and a high-tech Smart Box (e.g., PetParker). We propose that the more sophisticated and dog-friendly the parking solution, the more positively customers evaluate the store - especially when the solution signals care, safety, and inclusion. The study has three main objectives: (1) to test the direct effect of dog-parking type on customer loyalty; (2) to identify mediating psychological mechanisms, such as perceived pet-wellbeing or psychological comfort; and (3) to explore moderating effects of individual and contextual variables, such as human–dog attachment and store type (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian). Building on insights from human-pet-companionship (Dotson & Hyatt, *2008*) and co-consumption (Vänskä, *2014*) the study employs a *2* (store type) x *3* (dog parking type) between-subjects experimental design using visual shopping scenarios. Participants (dog owners in Germany) will be randomly assigned to one of the six conditions and asked to evaluate their indoor and online loyalty intentions and willingness to pay a premium. Planned analyses will include ANOVA and moderated mediation (PROCESS Model 7) to explore underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions. This project is currently in the data collection phase. Preliminary pilot testing suggests that even subtle differences in pet-related amenities significantly shape emotional impressions of the retail environment. By illuminating how dog infrastructure affects shopper behavior, this research contributes to consumer behavior theory and provides actionable guidance for retailers who seek to better serve pet-owning customers in brick-and-mortar spaces. Importantly, our findings aim to demonstrate that dog-friendly retail spaces offer a low-cost, emotionally resonant strategy for strengthening customer relationships in physical stores - outside the dominant focus on digitalization. Especially in the face of increasing online competition, investing in emotional and practical micro-infrastructures such as dog-parking solutions may serve as a differentiating element that fosters in-store engagement, customer retention, and brand loyalty.

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Examining Food Values and Consumer Behavior: Navigating Sustainability Amidst Global Crises

In times of multiple global crises, the food system both impacts and is significantly impacted by environmental and climate changes. Examining the determinants of dietary behavior becomes increasingly crucial. This study focuses on changing dietary behavior as a lever for achieving environmentally sustainable, health-promoting, and economically viable food. Building on the Food Values proposed by Lusk & Briggeman (2009), it has been shown that self-centered motivations (such as price and taste) dominate food choices (Cerroni *et al.*, 2021). Concurrently, literature points to the stability of these values, though Black Swan events can introduce changes (Ellison *et al.*, 2021). Recent studies in Germany emphasize price as the key determinant for food choices (PwC, 2025). A Germany-wide online survey (N = 2,126) captured data on Food Values, sociodemographic and psychological characteristics, as well as attitudes toward nudging and governmental interventions. A mixed logit model was estimated to elicit the relative importance of the Food Values and calculate preference shares, complemented by latent class analyses to segment consumers. Results were compared with data from 2021 and international samples from recent surveys in France, Italy and United Kingdom. Preliminary results reveal that price-sensitive consumers in Germany seem inaccessible regarding sustainability and environmental awareness, and they oppose government interventions. The importance of price has increased compared to taste, contrasting other studies (Mokarram-Dorri & Dewitte, 2025). Society-centered motives remain insignificant. The stability of Food Values over time could not be confirmed without limitation. For long-term changes in dietary behavior, new strategies are required that specifically enhance the balance between individual motivations and societal goals. Price-sensitive consumers require greater security and stability in life before considering sustainable food purchases, whereas undecided consumers may be more easily reached. Country comparisons will help to draw conclusions on policy measures and surrounding conditions, which enhance sustainable food choices.

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From Stories to Actions: How Storytelling Enhances Acceptance of Circular Take-Back Programs

Global challenges such as climate change and resource depletion highlight the urgency of more sustainable practices, with consumer behavior representing a critical lever. However, achieving more sustainable consumption requires transitioning from the linear "produce–use–dispose" model to a circular economy, where resources are kept in use to reduce waste and environmental impact. Circular take-back programs can support this shift by enabling the reuse and recycling of products and materials. However, participation remains low, as motivating consumers to return items is challenging, even though substantial amounts of unused resources often remain in households (McKie *et al.*, 2023). We propose storytelling as an approach to increase consumers' willingness to return items. As a natural and pervasive mode of human communication, narratives are cognitively easier to process and comprehend than non-narrative messages, which contributes to their effectiveness in marketing (Lien & Chen, 2013; Bullock *et al.*, 2021). By embedding complex sustainability actions into the journey of a relatable protagonist, stories convert abstract goals into easy-to-follow actions. In the fashion industry, for example, a story could describe the steps and conditions for returning garments through a retailer's take-back program, thereby making the message easier to process. This ease of processing is central to fluency theory, which posits that messages that are processed more easily are also evaluated more positively (Lee & Labroo, 2004). The overall objective of this study is to examine whether storytelling can foster consumer engagement in circular take-back programs through fluency and to identify potential psychological mechanisms underlying this effect. Building on an extensive literature review on narrative persuasion and fluency theory, this study examines psychological mechanisms through which storytelling enhances fluency and increases engagement, focusing on self-referencing, social distance, and identification. Using an experimental design, participants were exposed to a narrative social media message promoting a fashion brand's take-back program. Results show that storytelling significantly increases engagement intention. This effect unfolds through several mediating processes: storytelling activates self-referencing, reduces perceived social distance, and strengthens identification, which in turn enhance processing and conceptual fluency and ultimately drive engagement. Overall, this work advances research on narrative persuasion and fluency theory in sustainability contexts and provides practical guidance for designing communication strategies that increase participation in circular take-back programs.

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The Wizard of Bots: New Configurations of Service Providers and Environments in Luxury Retail

This study examines how AI-generated empathetic feedback may influence emotional laborers' stress and identity formation. Emotional labor often involves a discrepancy between felt and displayed emotions, which can lead to identity tension. We propose that repeated, non-judgmental empathy from AI could help alleviate such tension and support the reconstruction of role identity. Compared to human coworkers, AI may provide more consistent emotional validation with lower perceived social evaluation, potentially making it a distinct source of identity reinforcement. Furthermore, we explore whether strengthened role identity may be associated with positive behavioral outcomes, such as extra-role behaviors. Preliminary findings offer partial support for these relationships, and ongoing analyses aim to further validate the proposed mechanisms.

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Autoregressive Market Basket Transformer

We introduce the autoregressive transformer for the analysis of retail market baskets. We compare this transformer to benchmark models that also take dynamic effects into account, the multivariate logit model with category loyalties as additional predictors and three main variants of recurrent neural nets. We evaluate models by binary cross-entropies for a holdout sample. Among benchmark models the long-short term neural net attains the best cross-entropy value. However, this recurrent net is outperformed by the transformer with six embedding dimensions, two attention heads and four transformer blocks. Adding own effects of category-specific advertising to the transformer leads to a further improvement. We follow different approaches to interpret this transformer. We determine dynamic dependences between pairs of product categories based on proportional sampling using both original and increased estimated purchase probabilities. For our data the number of complementary dependences is much higher than the number of substitutive dependences. We show that these dependences differ from similarities computed from the static embeddings also estimated by the transformer. We illustrate the dynamics reproduced by the transformer by weekly purchase probabilities for selected product categories and household types. We derive marginal effects of category-specific advertising. These effects are at least moderate in ten of 31 product categories. As a rule, marginal effects in these ten categories differ between selected weeks.

Creating Compelling AI-Enhanced Phygital Encounters

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Against the backdrop of rapid digital transformation and the integration of physical retail, AI-Enhanced Phygital Encounters have become a key strategy for brands seeking to innovate customer experiences. The phygital concept highlights the seamless blending of virtual (digital) and physical experiences, while the use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology further boosts the immediacy, personalization, and immersiveness of customer interactions. This significantly influences customer engagement, brand perception, and actual purchasing behaviors. This study aims to define and develop the core dimensions of AI-Enhanced Phygital Encounters, validating the structure and relationships of observable variables through empirical research. We first define AI-Enhanced Phygital Encounter based on marketing technology and human-computer interaction literature as: An AI-driven customer interaction process that merges physical and digital spaces, emphasizing real-time responsiveness, contextual understanding, sensory immersion, and high interactive engagement. Using quantitative surveys and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), this study identifies seven key dimensions as essential variables for measuring AI-Enhanced Phygital Encounters. 1. Perceived Intelligence: Does the AI show an understanding of customer needs and behaviors? 2. Contextual Responsiveness: Does the AI deliver appropriate interactions and recommendations based on the current situation? 3. Seamlessness: Is there a natural transition and smooth integration between virtual and physical experiences? 4. Digital-Physical Synchronization: Do digital and physical interactions coordinate and link in real-time? 5. Perceived Co-presence: Do customers feel AI or other customers are participating with them in the same context? 6. Perceived Usefulness: Do customers believe AI intervention improves their shopping efficiency and decision-making? 7. Perceived Ease of Use: Is the AI system or interface intuitive and simple to operate? The research findings not only deepen our understanding of AI's role in hybrid environments but also offer a solid measurement framework for designing AI-enhanced consumer journeys in future brand strategies. Businesses should focus on the seven key dimensions outlined above to optimize the integration of AI technology with physical spaces, creating more immersive, interactive, and value-driven customer experiences.

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AI Meets Luxury: How Virtual Influencer Perceptions Shape Brand Attachment

In the fast-changing world of social media today, virtual influencers (VIs) have become key players in brand marketing. Recent reports show that virtual influencers have generated billions of dollars in exposure and sales benefits for global brands. Their ability to work beyond time and space limits, along with full control over their image and content, makes them especially popular among luxury brands. Many international luxury brands, such as Prada, Gucci, and Balmain, have teamed up with virtual influencers to showcase fashion shows, create co-branded ads, and run social media campaigns, effectively reaching more of the Gen Z and Millennial audiences. This study aims to examine how consumers' perceived features of virtual influencers (attractiveness, perceived human qualities, and perceived artificial intelligence) influence their attachment to luxury brands. Using quantitative surveys and structural equation modeling analysis, the study shows that consumers' increased perception of a virtual influencer's attractiveness, human qualities, and AI intelligence significantly enhances their emotional connection to luxury brands. These findings demonstrate that virtual influencers function not only as brand communication tools but also as psychological catalysts that foster brand affection and emotional attachment. This study addresses an empirical gap in research on virtual influencers and luxury brand marketing, providing meaningful practical insights. For example, brands should utilize the high adaptability and technological appeal of virtual influencers to create engaging marketing campaigns that feature anthropomorphic interaction traits, thereby increasing emotional value and consumer loyalty to the brand. Future research could further examine the alignment between virtual influencer personas and brand strategies across various cultural contexts.

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Suboptimal Food Businesses: How Stakeholder Collaborations Can Close the Loop on Food Waste

A key contributor to food waste at the retail and upstream stages is so-called suboptimal food (SF): products that remain fully edible but fail to meet conventional market standards, making it an important yet underutilized lever for reducing food waste (Kazaz *et al.*, 2023; Tu & Chu, 2024; Yuan *et al.*, 2019). These deviations may relate to cosmetic imperfections (e.g., shape, size, or color), slightly damaged packaging, or proximity to expiration dates (de Hooge *et al.*, 2017; White *et al.*, 2016). In recent years, circular business models dedicated to rescuing and reselling SF have emerged. Examples include Misfits Market in the US, and Wonky Veg Boxes in England. These businesses contribute to closing resource loops within the food system and represent a concrete implementation of circular economy principles. Despite their growing presence, academic research on SF business models remains limited. Existing studies have predominantly focused on consumer perceptions and acceptance of SF (Aschemann-Witzel, 2018; Pandey *et al.*, 2024), while less attention has been paid to how these businesses operate and create impact within the broader food system. In particular, the role of stakeholder relationships in enabling or constraining these models remains underexplored. Yet, the effectiveness of SF businesses in reducing food waste depends strongly on their interactions with a wide range of stakeholders across the supply chain. Previous research in traditional supply chains has already recognized stakeholder collaboration as a key success factor in combating food waste (Bhattacharya & Fayezi, 2021; Surucu-Balci & Tuna, 2022). At the same time, firms depend on external actors for essential resources, creating interdependencies that shape organizational strategies and outcomes (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). However, it remains unclear how these stakeholder dynamics unfold in the specific context of SF business models. Therefore, this study investigates stakeholder dynamics in SF business models by addressing the following research questions: (1) What types of stakeholders are involved in SF businesses' efforts to reduce food waste?, (2) What resources do these stakeholders provide?, (3) How are collaborations between SF businesses and stakeholders organized?, and (4) What barriers emerge in these collaborations?. To answer these questions, this study combines the Theory of Stakeholder Identification and Salience (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997) with Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). By integrating these perspectives, the study moves beyond static stakeholder identification and develops a relational understanding of how stakeholder salience is shaped by resource dependencies in SF business models. This study employs a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to examine stakeholder dynamics in SF businesses. Participants are recruited through purposive and maximum variation sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling, to ensure a diverse sample. Data analysis follows a thematic approach combining inductive and deductive coding. By linking stakeholder prioritization to resource interdependencies, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how SF businesses manage complex stakeholder environments. These insights offer practical guidance for managers and entrepreneurs seeking to structure more effective stakeholder collaborations in support of food waste reduction.

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From Field to Shelf: Insights from Real-World Sales Tests on Marketing of Imperfect Produce in Organic Retail

The EU is striving for a sustainability transformation of agricultural food system. Central goals within its Farm to Fork Strategy are the expansion of organic farming and the reduction of food loss and waste. However, trade-offs hamper the achievement: 1) Organic producers have fewer measures for pest control and improving growing conditions. This increases the share of fruits and vegetables that do not meet the aesthetic requirements of marketing standards. Although perfectly edible, these suboptimal foods remain on the fields and are lost. 2) Organic consumers often have high quality expectations, also due to the higher prices, resulting in a lack of openness towards imperfect produce. While studies have shown that price reductions and communication strategies (e.g., emphasizing sustainability or using emotional messaging) can boost consumer acceptance (e.g., Hartmann *et al.*, 2021), most evidence comes from hypothetical surveys. Real-world validation under actual market conditions is missing. To address this gap, multi-month sales tests were conducted in organic retail stores, assessing consumer acceptance of suboptimal carrots (severely misshaped, under- and oversized) and apples (minor hail damage) when competing with standard-quality produce. Measuring devices, consisting of two electronic balances and a single-board computer, were placed invisibly to customers on store shelves. These devices measured changes in the fill levels of both boxes containing optimal and suboptimal goods, allowing to track purchase decisions. For both products, two communication strategies were tested: informative (highlighting rejection rates) and emotional (humorous, humanized visuals). Binomial logistic regression models analyzed the impact of communication, box fill levels, and store location. For carrots, 3,319 purchase decisions were recorded. In the control phases without communication, suboptimal produce was significantly less preferred (OR: 0.14; $p < 0.001$). The informative strategy had a stronger positive effect (OR: 2.89; $p < 0.001$) than the emotional one (OR: 1.40; $p = 0.030$), especially in one store. A higher box filling level increased purchase likelihood (OR: 1.05; $p = 0.001$). For apples, 1,618 purchase decisions were observed. The acceptance of suboptimal produce varied by store, but both communication strategies significantly increased purchases: emotional (OR: 2.35; $p < 0.001$) and informative (OR: 1.72; $p = 0.001$). Box fill level again had a positive effect on purchase (OR: 1.04; $p = 0.007$). Results show that suboptimal produce can be successfully marketed in organic retail. Acceptance depends on the degree of imperfections: Carrots, with more noticeable flaws, were less accepted than apples. Communication strategies had only modest effects, with no clear superiority of one approach: informative messaging worked better for carrots, emotional messaging for apples. This highlights the need for broader, multi-channel communication. Integrating food waste reduction into CSR strategies can enhance brand image and consumer awareness. This study underscores the importance of testing survey findings in real-world settings to develop effective, scalable solutions for reducing food loss.

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From Urgency to Validation: Mapping the FoMO Networks and Semantic Structures on X

Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) describes the anxiety that others are experiencing rewarding moments without you (Tandon *et al*., 2021). Individuals high in FoMO seek constant connection and real-time updates, a behavior intensified on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (Przybylski *et al*., 2013). Marketing campaigns like Nike's SNKRS App "Limited Drops" and Supreme's weekly releases illustrate how relatedness deficits heighten consumer susceptibility. These strategies integrate psychological triggers (anxiety, exclusivity, reward anticipation) and social influences (influencers, peer comparison, digital status). Drawn from Two-Step Flow of Communication Theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), we investigate how FoMO is strategically activated and diffused on X by opinion leaders and communication clusters, and how semantic structures of discourse reveal the interplay of psychological urgency and social validation. Using Social Network Analysis via NodeXL, we analyzed 6,712 X users and 7,454 interactions (mentions, replies, retweets) containing keywords such as "FoMO," "LimitedEdition," and "ShopTheDrop." Results revealed 10 clusters, each anchored by opinion leaders critical to diffusion and connectivity. Cluster analysis revealed 10 FoMO groups, including G1 featured centralized amplifiers, G2 cross-cluster influencers (e.g., @elonmusk), G4 brand-driven urgency, and G9 meme-based culture. Influencers acted as both emotional drivers and network connectors. Semantic analysis of 1,000-word pairs identified two core FoMO dimensions, psychological urgency and social validation, spanning 12 sub-dimensions such as exclusivity, reward anticipation, and signaling, highlighting how emotional triggers and social dynamics converge to intensify FoMO discourse. Findings demonstrate that FoMO is not only an individual perception of scarcity but a socially constructed experience, strategically shaped by influencers and communities. By mapping opinion leaders, clusters, and semantic structures, this study provides a framework for categorizing FoMO triggers, offering implications for both scholars and marketers. FoMO-driven engagement is sustained through the convergence of emotional urgency and social comparison, suggesting both opportunities and ethical challenges for digital marketing.

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Classifying Older Consumers By Digital Problem-Solving Style: What Drives Their Life Satisfaction?

Grounded in Dewan & Riggins (2005) and Wei *et al.* (2011)'s three-levels of framework of the digital divide (digital access, digital capability, and digital outcome divides), this study systematically examines the multidimensional aspects of the digital divide in the use of self-service technologies (SST) and its impact on individuals' life satisfaction, The specific objectives are: (1) to identify causal relationships among attitudes toward digital devices, SST usage (frequency and proportion), SST self-efficacy, SST outcome expectations (performance-related and personal), and life satisfaction; (2) to compare these relationships by SST type; and (3) to empirically examine the mediating effects of SST self-efficacy and outcome expectations in the link between SST usage and life satisfaction. An online survey was conducted with consumers who had used SSTs within the past six months, yielding 322 valid responses from self-checkout users and 321 from self-ordering kiosk users. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the relationships among all key variables, while a multi-group SEM was conducted to assess measurement and structural invariance across SST type (self-checkout vs. self-ordering kiosk). Mediation analyses using Hayes' PROCESS macro in SPSS were then performed to evaluate the mediating effects of SST self-efficacy and outcome expectations. The findings showed that attitudes toward digital devices predicted SST usage, which then influenced SST self-efficacy. SST usage indirectly affected life satisfaction through SST self-efficacy and outcome expectations. No significant differences were observed across SST types, supporting the model's generalizability. Mediation analyses showed that SST self-efficacy and outcome expectations sequentially mediated the effect of SST usage on life satisfaction. This research extends digital divide theory to SST usage in retail settings, thereby highlighting issues of digital inequality in everyday consumption activities, an area that has been relatively underexplored in prior research. From a practical perspective, the findings offer meaningful implications for retailers and service firms that adopt or manage SST, as well as for governments and public agencies involved in formulating and implementing relevant policies.

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Endorsements in B2B Marketing: A Comparative Framework

Endorsements are widely recognized in consumer markets, yet their role in business-to-business (B2B) marketing remains underexplored. This paper develops a comparative framework to analyze five key strategies: celebrity endorsements, celebrity organization endorsements, entrepreneur endorsements, customer referencing, and co-branding. While often conflated, these mechanisms differ across various dimensions, including endorser identity, motivation, appeal, brand fit, risk, cost, and reach. Building on models such as the source credibility and attractiveness frameworks, the match-up hypothesis, and the meaning transfer model, the paper adapts endorsement theory to B2B contexts where effectiveness relies more on credibility transfer, authenticity, and reputation than cultural symbolism. In B2B markets, which are characterized by high-value transactions, multiple decision-makers, and relational contracting, endorsements operate as signals of reliability and trust, helping firms manage risk and differentiate their brand. The analysis shows that celebrity endorsements generate broad awareness but involve high costs and reputational risks, while celebrity organization endorsements and co-branding provide reputational leverage through alliances. Entrepreneur endorsements embody authenticity and vision, and customer referencing offers powerful, low-cost peer validation. The paper contributes by clarifying distinctions among these strategies and offering managers a structured tool for strategic decision-making. Limitations are acknowledged, with future research encouraged to validate the framework empirically and explore digital-era endorsements.

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The Effects of Brand-Related TikTok Content on Social Commerce – A Cross-Country Perspective

The short-video platform TikTok is one of the fastest-growing social networking sites (SNSs) on a global basis (Barta *et al.*, 2023) 2023), with reportedly more than two billion active users (Oberlo, 2025) and more than 23 million US dollars in revenue in 2024 (Statista, 2025). This research focuses on analyzing the advertising effectiveness of brand-related content on TikTok, a void in existing research (Meng *et al.* 2024) – especially across cultures. This study extends the brand-related content model (Ducoffe, 1996) to analyze advertising attitude and related buying behavior on TikTok across Germany, France, and Italy, in the moment when TikTok introduces its social commerce interface (TikTok Shop) in these three largest EU markets (emarketer 2025). Uses & Gratification theory (Katz & Foulkes, 1962) as well as extant research (Taylor *et al.* 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2012) served as basis for inferring the scales for the brand-related TikTok content model which states positive effects of infotainment (H1) and credibility (H2) on advertising attitude and a negative effect of irritation on TikTok advertising attitude (H3). Advertising attitude is assumed to drive TikTok related buying behavior in a positive way. The survey questionnaire measured the constructs on 5-point Likert-type scales (anchored in 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5= *strongly agree*) and was translated and back-translated (Douglas & Craig, 2006) into French and Italian. Pretesting (N = 69, M_{age} = 23.1 years) led to minor adjustments in the wording. For the main study, data from TikTok users in Germany, France, and Italy were collected via the panel provider Prolific. After data cleansing, a sample of N = 1,284 TikTok users remained (N_{GER} = 474; N_{FR} = 403; N_{IT} = 407) with an average age of 26.4 years that did not differ significantly between countries. Scales were validated across countries using first- and second-generation criteria (multigroup confirmatory factor analysis, AMOS 28.0). After establishing partial scalar invariance, hypotheses were tested with multi-group structural equation modeling (CFI= .921, RMSEA= .036). Results support H1 and H2 (positive effects of infotainment and credibility) on TikTok advertising attitude in all three countries, while the assumed negative effect of irritation is small or non-significant. TikTok advertising attitude exerts a strong effect on related buying behavior (H4). This path will additionally be tested for a mediation effects of TikTok flow (Obadă & Ţugulea, 2024) as well as a moderation effect of the culture dimension uncertainty avoidance. This research provides up-to-date insights on social media advertising effectiveness as TikTok is presumed to be on the verge of boosting social commerce (Statista Research Department, 2024).

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The Effect of Personalized Digital Screens in Storefront Windows on Customer Intentions

Despite the growth of online retailing (Grewal *et al.*, 2023), physical stores remain the dominant retail channel, generating more than 73% of global retail sales (Statista, 2025). To remain competitive, physical stores must deliver experiences that online competitors cannot easily replicate, which requires investment in, among others, technology and personalization (Grewal *et al.*, 2023; Breugelmans *et al.*, 2023). Against this backdrop, smart retailing technologies (SRTs) emerge as a particularly promising resource. An SRT is defined as "an interactive retail system that delivers retail services to customers through a network of smart or intelligent objects or services" (Roy *et al.*, 2018; p. 147). This study focuses specifically on personalized digital screens in shopping windows as a form of SRT within the travel agency context, thereby addressing the scarcity of research on exterior atmospheric variables in brick-and-mortar retail settings (Lecointre-Erickson *et al.*, 2018; Lecointre-Erickson *et al.*, 2024; Sample *et al.*, 2025) and on SRT (Riegger *et al.,* 2021). The overall aim of this research project is to gain deeper insights into the effects of personalized digital storefront displays on customer responses. In particular, our academic contribution is threefold (Whetten, 1989), addressing the following research questions: (1) *'what'*: we investigate the effect of personalized digital storefront displays on customer outcomes, distinguishing between behavioral intentions (e.g. purchase intention, WOM intention) and actual behavior (e.g. attention to the store window, engagement, observed store entry, and sales), (2) *'why'*: we explore underlying mechanisms of effectiveness (e.g., perceived content congruence, message value, and customer experience), and (3) *'when'*: we identify boundary conditions that may moderate these effects (e.g., content type, privacy concerns). To address these research objectives, two experimental studies will be conducted. Study 1 will employ a 2 (no personalization vs. personalization) x 2 (content type: deal-oriented vs. inspirational) x 2 (privacy concerns: low vs. high) between-subjects scenario-based quasi-experimental design, with data collection scheduled the end of March 2026. Study 1 will examine whether content type moderates the effects of personalized digital storefront displays on perceived content congruence, message value, customer experience, and behavioral intentions. We will further test a moderated mediation model in which personalization influences behavioral intentions indirectly through content congruence, message value, and experience, conditional on content type and privacy concerns. Study 2 will employ a 2 (no personalization vs. personalization) x 2 (content type: deal-oriented vs. inspirational) between-subjects field experiment, with data collection scheduled for late April 2026. The study aims to replicate the key findings of Study 1 in a real-world context by examining the effects of personalized digital storefront displays on actual behavioral outcomes. Additionally, we will test whether content type moderates these behavioral effects. The results on how customers interact with personalized storefront window technologies will be discussed during the conference.

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The Circle Strikes Back: Algorithmic Nudges and the Architecture of Circular Consumption

The growing overlap between artificial intelligence (AI) and circular economy (CE) principles calls for rethinking retail strategies and challenges insights into consumer behavior that have for a long time been taken for granted. Circularity emphasizes durability, reuse, and resource efficiency (Bocken *et al.*, 2016; Urbinati *et al.*, 2017; Camacho-Otero *et al.*, 2019), while AI enables personalization, predictive modeling, and data-driven nudges in shopping (Grewal *et al.*, 2017; Ameen *et al.*, 2020; Zhang & Chen, 2020). Together, these forces can reorient preferences toward circular choices, reducing barriers to adoption of second-life products, repair services, and eco-subscription models (Camacho-Otero *et al.*, 2019). Research has begun to examine AI, recommender systems, and circular retailing. For example, Zhang & Chen (2020) survey explainable recommender systems, Ameen *et al.* (2020) review AI's role in shaping consumer experiences, and Verma & Chandra (2022) identify barriers to future-oriented consumption choices. Yet, gaps remain on how AI-enabled personalization can actively foster circular consumption rather than merely optimize convenience or conversion. We employ a randomized field experiment within an omnichannel retail platform (Gerber & Green, 2012). Consumers were assigned to recommendation interfaces: (1) a standard AI baseline, (2) AI highlighting circular attributes (e.g., "renewed," "repairable," "buy-back eligible"), and (3) attributes combined with interpretive explanations. Behavioral outcomes (click-throughs, dwell time, conversions, basket mix) were paired with attitudinal data (trust, perceived risk, willingness to adopt). Analyses applied difference-in-differences estimation (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Athey & Imbens, 2017), structural equation modeling (Hair *et al.*, 2019), and heterogeneity tests (Hayes, 2018). Findings show that AI recommendations foregrounding circular attributes redirected attention and purchasing behavior toward second-life options. Interfaces that combined cues with explanations reinforced adoption, reduced perceived risk, and strengthened trust – a pivotal mediating mechanism. Responsiveness was not uniform: consumers with moderate circularity knowledge were most influenced, while novices and experts shifted less. These results provide clear evidence that AI-enabled personalization can reconfigure consumption patterns toward circularity rather than simply optimize transactional efficiency. The contribution is threefold. Theoretically, this study links AI personalization with CE adoption, extending sustainable consumption theory (White *et al.,* 2019) and circular supply chain literature (Guide & Van Wassenhove, 2009; Atasu *et al.,* 2010). Methodologically, it offers causal evidence at scale in a naturalistic retail setting, addressing calls for robust experimental designs. Managerially, it provides insights for retail interfaces that embed circular nudges without undermining trust or value. Positioned at the intersection of AI, sustainability, and consumer services, this research aligns well with JRCS's mission to advance knowledge on innovation and consumer well-being in retail.

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AI-Powered Conversational Healthcare Agents in Retail and Service Contexts: A Systematic Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant rise in mental health issues, which, in turn, has greatly accelerated the demand for mental healthcare services (WHO, 2022). Traditionally delivered by humans, mental healthcare has increasingly shifted toward contactless solutions, spurring the development and adoption of AI-powered healthcare services. Among these, AI-powered conversational healthcare agents (AI-CHAs) have gained significant traction in recent years. As the importance and adoption of AI-CHAs in mental healthcare continues to grow, there is a pressing need to better understand this emerging technology. While prior research has extensively explored AI-CHAs from technical and clinical perspectives, it is equally critical to examine their usability and impact through the lens of human-computer interaction. This involves delving into the psychological dynamics that drive user adoption and engagement with AI-CHAs as service providers. To assess the current state of knowledge and identify gaps for future research, this study conducted a systematic literature review (SLR), providing a comprehensive analysis of existing work and highlighting areas that remain underexplored in this rapidly evolving field. The search process began with a query in the WoS database for peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025, using the following keywords: ("AI" OR "Artificial Intelligence" OR "Chatbot*" OR "Avatar*" OR "Conversational Agent*" OR "Virtual Agent*") AND ("Psychotherap*" OR "Mental Therap*" OR "Mental Health" OR "Mental Counsel*" OR "Mental Consult*" OR "Online Health Consult*" OR "Healthcare" OR "Health Care"). To ensure the quality of the literature (data), the search was restricted to journals indexed in SSCI and listed in the AJG 2024 (level ≥ 1), resulting in the acquisition of 365 articles. The subsequent 'arranging' step focused on organizing and purifying the acquired articles. A coding framework was developed to systematically organize each study by theoretical framework and key variables (e.g., antecedents, mediators, and consequences). The purification stage excluded articles based on the following criteria: 1) non-empirical research; 2) non-healthcare related focus; 3) absence of psychological dynamics measurement; 4) non-conversational agents; and 5) AI-CHAs used by non-patient groups (e.g., medical professionals). Following this screening, 35 studies were retained for the final step, which involved a critical evaluation of the refined dataset to synthesize key insights and identify gaps within the literature. Our SLR revealed several key insights. First, most studies drew upon social-oriented theories (N = 25, 47.2%)—particularly the CASA theory (N = 9), followed by cognitive-oriented (N = 13, 24.5%) and technology-oriented theories (N = 5, 9.4%). Second, analysis of antecedent factors revealed that the majority of studies focused on AI-CHA–related attributes (N = 35, 58.3%). These primarily examined how visual interface characteristics (N = 12; e.g., anthropomorphism level, gender, and gaze direction) influence user-related outcomes such as satisfaction, intention to use, and trust in AI-CHAs. User-related factors (N = 21, 35.0%) were the next most frequently examined antecedents, including individuals' pre-existing characteristics (N = 8; e.g., loneliness). Third, regarding mediators, the review found that most studies focused on enhancing mediators (N = 26, 81.3%), such as cognitive and emotional trust arising from different AI-CHA interfaces. In contrast, far fewer studies examined mitigating mediators (N = 6, 18.8%), such as whether AI-CHAs can lessen users' concerns about negative social judgments.

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When AI Goes Wrong: Definitions of AI Service Failures and Insights from Academic Research

AI has transformed the service sector, reshaping how firms create value and engage with consumers. Existing research has highlighted several advantages of AI over human labor, including 24/7 availability, multilingual service capabilities, and the ability to handle diverse service queries efficiently, all of which contribute to improved consumer experiences (Xue *et al.*, 2026). However, this predominantly optimistic narrative often neglects the challenges, limitations, and unintended consequences of deploying AI in service contexts. A particularly critical yet underexplored issue is "AI service failures", where AI systems malfunction produce unintended outcomes, which create a gap between consumer expectations and actual service performance (Marques, 2024), resulting in consumer dissatisfaction (Koc *et al.*, 2023). To foster a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of AI's role in service environments, this study undertook a systematic literature review (SLR) on AI service failures. The objectives of the review were threefold: (1) to delineate the concept and scope of AI service failures, (2) to assess the existing body of research on the topic, and (3) to identify key theoretical gaps to guide future research and inform practical implications. To identify the data, peer-reviewed journal articles were searched from WoS and Google Scholar for the past ten years (2015–2025), including in-press articles. To ensure the quality and rigor of the studies included in the review, only journals meeting an AJG 2024 rating of 1 or higher and a SSCI 2024 ranking of Q2 or higher were considered. This search resulted in 76 articles. Next, a coding framework was developed to systematically organize each study by definition, theoretical framework, and key variables. After this process, 63 studies remained. Finally, the organized and purified dataset was assessed. First, we found significant variation in how AI service failure is defined. This inconsistency highlights the need for clearer conceptualization to establish a unified understanding of what constitutes an AI service failure. Second, regarding theoretical frameworks, existing AI service failure research primarily draws on cognitive-oriented theories (N = 39), followed by social-oriented theories (N = 35). This suggests the need for future research to integrate multiple perspectives to capture the full spectrum of consumer responses. Lastly, the focus of key variables in existing studies has evolved over time. Early research (N = 2) explored service failures by comparing different agents (e.g., AI vs. human). More recently, attention has shifted to AI service failure types (e.g., information vs. system failures) and AI service recovery strategies (e.g., apology, compensation, or empathy; N = 15). However, critical discussions on the ethical versus non-ethical nature of AI service failures—an increasingly important issue—remain largely unexplored in the current literature.

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Perceived Omnichannel Integration and Consumer Outcomes: The Moderating Role of Omnichannel Journeys

Omnichannel integration is a central promise in the retailing of luxury, and retailers often assume it is a universal pathway to unique experiences and positive business outcomes. However, recent evidence shows that this approach is inaccurate because delivering real uniqueness is challenging (Massi *et al.*, 2023), a full channel integration is still aspirational (Hajdas *et al.*, 2022), and phygital interactions stress the human contact without clear links to consumer related outcomes (Pangarkar *et al.*, 2022). From the customer side, research shows that shoppers follow different journeys as they use multiple channels with different purposes. Also, evidence consistent with the stimulus–organism–response framework indicates that consumers' contact with brand touchpoints trigger internal states that influence how consumers perceive and respond to omnichannel strategies (Pereira *et al.*, 2022; Sengoz *et al.*, 2024). Literature acknowledges these provider and consumer centric tensions. However, to date little is known about how the influence of perceived omnichannel integration on consumer responses varies depending on the journey consumers follow as they perform multiple tasks across channels and make purchase decisions. To narrow this gap, this paper follows the SOR model for exploring how different omnichannel customer journeys shape the effect of perceived omnichannel integration on customers-related outcomes. We collected survey data from 584 luxury consumers in an emerging country, measuring channel usage, perceived integration, customer experience (CX), and advocacy. Clustering the patterns of channels usage we identified three omnichannel journeys: (1) hybrids, alternating between physical and digital touchpoints, with moderate app use and strong response to email; (2) digital explorers, heavily engaged with apps, social media, and e-commerce, with low levels of physical interaction; and (3) traditional physicals, using most of the time mortar-and-brick stores with low digital activity. Partial least squares SEM (PLS-SEM) with multi-group analysis revealed that for digital explorers CX strongly mediates the effect of omnichannel integration on advocacy because high levels of perceived integration across channels enhance CX, which in turn drives advocacy behaviors. For hybrids it partially mediates the relationship because integration contributes to CX but coexists with brick-and-mortar encounters, producing only partial mediation. Finally, for traditional physicals the mediation effect is very low as advocacy is grounded in human touch rather than technology-driven consistency. These findings indicate that the impact of perceived omnichannel integration on consumer-related outcomes is journey-dependent rather than universal. Thus, the study demonstrates that the value of integration varies across journeys, while the SOR framework helps explain the mechanism behind these differences. Our findings inform luxury retailers how to manage the tensions of omnichannel retailing. Also, our findings suggest that coherence across channels should not be pursued universally because seamlessness matters most for digital-heavy consumers, while physical journeys thrive on the excellence on physical channels. Authenticity also varies, arising from consistent cross-channel experiences for digital users and from human contact in physical encounters.

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Clicks for Convenience and Anticipation: Examining Two Alternate Motivations for Online Shopping Behavior

Online shopping continues to grow at staggering rates across the globe, yet consumer motivations for shopping online remain incompletely defined. Extant theory emphasizes product assortment, selection control, value optimization and budgetary control as primary motivations for online shopping behavior (Sethuraman *et al.* 2022; Honka *et al.* 2024), but it is argued here that two alternative motivations, convenience and anticipation, operate alongside these drivers to help explain online shopper behavior. The objective within this study is to qualitatively and quantitatively examine convenience and anticipation as motivators of online shopping behavior by employing a grounded theory mixed method research program. Aims are to: 1) establish convenience and anticipation as motivators of online shopping behavior; 2) identify online shopper segments that differentially prioritize convenience vs. anticipation; 3) test whether these motivations predict online shopping behavioral outcomes (e.g., frequency, expenditure, waiting-time tolerance, willingness to recommend); and 4) examine mediating variables (e.g., satisfaction, relationship quality, brand image), situational moderators (e.g., product-category involvement, delivery lead-time, information cues) and individual moderators (e.g., age, technology orientation, prior online experience). It is posited that for some online shoppers and within some contexts, convenience (e.g., reduced effort, time-savings, multi-channel access, seamless fulfillment) is the dominant motivator (Lin & Pazgal, 2024), while anticipation (e.g., hedonic and experiential value derived from order build-up, waiting and expectation) is the dominant motivator for others (Wang, 2023). Study 1 will consist of qualitative assessments from a Qualtrics-secured panel of sixty regular online shoppers via situational vignettes, visual prompts and open response questions. Thematic coding will be employed to identify key conceptual, experiential and online shopper dimensions. Study 2 will consist of a survey distributed to a Qualtrics-secured panel of approximately 700 online shoppers. The survey will measure the key constructs identified in Study 1, enable online shopper segment classification and hypothesis testing, and capture demographic and behavioral covariates. Studies 3 and 4 will use vignette experiments and ordering/delivery fulfillment manipulations to test causal pathways. Based on extant theory and exploratory work, study hypotheses are: H1) Higher convenience-motivation predicts greater online shopping frequency; H2) Higher convenience-motivation predicts lower tolerance for delivery lead-time; H3) Higher anticipation-motivation predicts greater enjoyment of waiting periods; H4) Higher anticipation-motivation predicts stronger willingness to order online; H5) Higher anticipation-motivation predicts higher satisfaction when waiting is framed as experiential; H6) Product-category involvement and shipping lead-time moderate the online shopper-seller relationship such that convenience dominates for low-involvement, time-sensitive categories, and anticipation emerges for hedonic and experiential categories; H7) Online shopper segment characteristics (e.g., younger age, high social-sharing orientation) strengthen the anticipation → satisfaction path while technology-oriented shoppers strengthen the convenience → frequency path. Planned analyses include thematic coding of qualitative data by multiple coders, cluster analysis to identify different shopper segments, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural-equation modeling to test motivational pathways, mediation effects and moderation effects.

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Examining the Potential of True Costs for Sustainable Consumption

Production frequently generates externalities, i.e. hidden environmental (e.g., pollution) and social costs (e.g., child labor), which consumers neither perceive nor pay for, but which are ultimately borne by society. The true costs (i.e., retail price plus hidden costs) may therefore differ from the retail price. While taxing externalities (e.g., carbon tax) to internalize hidden costs may be a first step to make hidden costs visible, in many sectors, hidden costs persist without regulatory intervention. Beyond mandatory measures, firms and consumers may voluntarily choose sustainable products to reduce hidden costs. Yet, despite consumers' generally positive attitudes toward sustainability, their actual purchase intention for sustainable products often falls short — a phenomenon known as the "green gap" (White *et al.*, 2019). Research provides first ideas for using pricing strategies to mitigate the green gap. Since one of the most central challenges for sellers lies in justifying higher prices from sustainable production, price partitioning has been applied to display sustainability-related costs separately (Bürgin & Wilken, 2022). Another related, but less researched approach, is providing information on hidden and true costs (Wilken *et al.*, 2024). Both approaches are based on the division of the price. The key distinction is that partitioned pricing consists of mandatory price components (Abraham & Hamilton, 2018), whereas hidden costs are not covered by consumers (Wilken *et al.*, 2024). Although price partitioning has been widely examined, the role of hidden and true costs remains underexplored. Existing studies have investigated this approach only in limited contexts (e.g., supermarket/food sectors) and primarily through direct but not realistic product comparisons (e.g., Wilken *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, the logical research question is: How can the transparent communication of hidden and true costs in realistic shopping contexts encourage more positive consumer perceptions and purchase intention for sustainable products? We hypothesize that detailed cost transparency improves consumers' perceptions of price fairness and subsequently promotes purchase intention (Bürgin & Wilken, 2022). To address the research question, a 2 (product sustainability) × 3 (price information depth) between-subjects experiment was conducted. Product sustainability comprised two levels: (1) conventional and (2) sustainable. Price information depth included (1) market price only, (2) market price plus hidden and true costs, and (3) market price plus hidden and true costs with a comparison to a comparable, conventional/sustainable product. First results show that a detailed level of price information can stimulate purchase intention and increase positive perceptions of the product and the seller. Planned subsequent laboratory studies will further examine comparisons with alternative sustainability presentations (e.g., labels) and varying price levels (e.g., brand influence), with the research agenda ultimately culminating in a field experiment. The corresponding studies and results will be processed until April 2026.

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Crafting a Professional Story for Success as a Fashion Retail Professional: A Cross-Functional Capstone Case Study

In an increasingly competitive career landscape, institutions of higher education are striving to enhance both the preparedness and marketability of their graduates. Students seek opportunities to gain "real-world experience" through academic involvement, jobs, and internships. Specifically for future fashion retail professionals, it is crucial that students understand the dynamic, cross-functional nature of roles within a fashion retail business. Research has highlighted the importance of both knowledge (e.g., technical skills, explicit expertise, tacit experience) and the demonstration of soft skills (e.g., communication, passion, and solution-oriented thinking) in a corporate fashion retail environment (McAndrews, 2023). To incorporate this into existing curricula, many college programs have implemented capstone courses. These courses are typically project-based, drawing on the cumulative knowledge and skills acquired throughout the program, and linking the project's outcome to career preparedness. Capstone courses have been shown to foster collaboration, critical thinking, empathy, and problem-solving—key soft skills that contribute to student success in their career pathways (Lapolla & Copeland, 2023). A recently developed capstone course within a fashion merchandising curriculum, presents an opportunity to examine how students apply knowledge to build a skill set as fashion retail professionals. Specifically, the goals of this study are to investigate the impact of the cross-functional capstone project by (1) examining the interplay between the demonstration of knowledge and soft skill proficiency, and (2) evaluating students' ability to craft a professional narrative that articulates their career readiness. Data were collected during the 2025 and 2026 academic years. There have been three iterations of the course, which has been redesigned based on feedback from previous semesters to better facilitate the cross-functional capstone project. Data will include an examination of student work and artifacts, a pre- and post-survey of students' experiences, and reflective instructor journaling to identify emerging trends in students' preparation and application of skills. An important outcome of any culminating project is not only for students to build confidence in their skills and knowledge but also to effectively describe and advocate for their competencies. Connecting an industry-level project with the development of strong communication skills provides significant value to both young professionals and fashion retail businesses. There is an increasing need to align company expectations of college graduates with the preparation offered by higher education, as well as to strengthen students' ability to craft a compelling professional narrative (Succi & Canovi, 2020). The outcomes of this research may offer best practices for fashion retail professional preparation, while also suggesting ways to improve alignment between fashion retail business expectations and the emerging talent pool for future leaders in the retail industry.

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The Wizard of Bots: New Configurations of Service Providers and Environments in Luxury Retail

Luxury retail has long relied on meticulously crafted, comfort-oriented environments, often enriched with natural and organic cues, paired with warm, attentive human service to deliver refined brand experiences. The introduction of AI-powered service robots represents an emerging trend that challenges this established model. While back-end operations can justifiably adopt automation for efficiency gains, luxury retailers face a more complex challenge: determining how to deploy robotic and human service in customer-facing interactions without undermining the experiential coherence that defines luxury brand experiences. This issue is pressing because decades of service quality research have focused on human-delivered interactions, leaving practitioners without frameworks to design coherent service environments in which robots are meaningfully integrated into biophilic luxury settings. Servicescape studies, particularly those examining biophilic design, demonstrate how natural elements enhance aesthetic value and strengthen perceptions of luxury. Research on service robotics, by contrast, has concentrated on consumer technology acceptance, robot characteristics (e.g., anthropomorphism) and their fit with functional service settings. Although these literatures have generated valuable insights, they have largely developed in parallel, offering limited guidance for understanding how environmental attributes and service provider types jointly shape consumer perceptions of service quality and brand experience. This separation overlooks the practical reality that, in high-experience luxury retail domains, the physical environment and service providers function as mutually reinforcing elements of a coherent luxury service system. This study bridges the divide by examining how servicescape design (biophilic vs. non-biophilic) and service provider type (human vs. robot) combine to shape consumer perceptions. Using a scenario-based 2×2 experimental design and structural equation modeling, this study tests how different configurations influence perceived harmony, evaluations of service quality, and consumers' behavioral intentions. Our results reveal when environmental-provider combinations create perceptual congruence or dissonance, leading to differences in harmony, quality assessments, and behavioral outcomes. The findings advance theory by integrating previously parallel literatures and revealing how the relationship between servicescape environments and service providers takes on new dynamics when robots emerge as an alternative to human staff in luxury retail. For managers, this study provides strategic guidance on aligning service environments and delivery modes, offering a roadmap for maintaining coherent consumer experiences as robotics enter the luxury domain.

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Mental Imagery in Online Retail: The Role of Automatic and Deliberate Stimulation Techniques, Consumer Imaginativeness and Consumer Load

In the beauty and personal care sector, e-commerce sales have risen steadily since 2017 and are expected to reach 264.7 billion USD by 2030 (Statista, 2025). However consumers cannot touch or test products before purchase. This lack of physical interaction often creates uncertainty and hesitation (Kim & Krishnan, 2015). This issue is especially pronounced in beauty and personal care, where tactile qualities of products drive satisfaction. To offset this gap, we examine whether and when we can leverage consumers' own resources (i.e. mental imagery) to imagine how a product feels. Two types of mental imagery exist (Krishna *et al.*, 2016): automatic imagery, which occurs spontaneously (e.g., from reading a description), and deliberate imagery, where consumers are instructed to form a mental image. Most studies examine these types separately (Elder & Krishna, 2022). Additionally, consumer's imagery ability affects how they respond to imagery prompts (Bone & Ellen, 1992). Highly imaginative consumers may benefit more from deliberate stimulation, as concrete pictures used to trigger automatic imagery leave little room for personal elaboration (Babin & Burns, 1997). In contrast, for les imaginative consumers, automatic stimulation may be more effective, as deliberate prompts can clash with their dispositional abilities (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). When considering the underlying resources of sensory imagery, previous research (i.e., fMRI results) shows that images are formed by making use of cognitive and perceptual resources (Kosslyn *et al.*, 2001; MacInnis & Price, 1987). Elder & Krishna (2022) distinguish between these processes and suggests that automatic imagery relies predominantly on perceptual resources and deliberate stimulation on cognitive resources. Daily life imposes constraints on consumers, such as holding a phone while browsing, which can serve as both a perceptual and cognitive constraint. This research aims to clarify how automatic and deliberate stimulation techniques perform under such constraints, factoring in consumer imaginativeness. We examine the moderating effect of consumer imaginativeness and compare three conditions: no load, perceptual load and cognitive load. We propose two hypotheses: (1) For low imagers, automatic imagery stimulation will lead to a higher level of mental imagery than deliberate mental imagery stimulation (a). This effect does not hold in the case of a perceptual load (b). (2) For high imagers, deliberate imagery stimulation will lead to a higher level of mental imagery than automatic mental imagery stimulation (a). This effect does not hold in the case of a cognitive load (b). We conducted three scenario-based experiments in a personal care context with a 2 (mental imagery condition: automatic and deliberate) x 2 (imaginativeness: low/high) between-subjects experimental design. The empirical results show that automatic stimulation works best for low imagers, while deliberate stimulation works best for high imagers. However, when constraints are present, the effectiveness of both stimulation techniques wears away regardless of the type of load. This challenges Elder & Krishna's (2022) view, suggesting that automatic and deliberate imagery rely on both perceptual and cognitive resources. Using virtual reality to elicit imagery might be a solution as consumers are isolated from the real world.

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Sparking Creativity: The Juxtaposition of a Digital Detox to Stimulate Graduate Skills

Over recent years graduate employability has become a necessary focus of all academics thanks to multiple internal and external measures (Aljumah, 2023). However, for the retail sector, employability of graduates is critical with many leading employers offering graduate schemes. To be successful in these highly competitive schemes requires students to not only have strong academic attainment but to have an array of employability skills, including digital literacy (Jackson, 2014). As we move to increasing automation in retail, digital skills are essential yet this is not sufficient as they must be partnered by soft skills. WEF (2025) in particular noted that, the skills creative thinking, resilience and are most desired by employers. Furthermore, the BRC (2025b) state that as automation is reshaping the retail workforce the key skills of analytical, digital and analytical skills are in demand (BRC 2025a). In summary, as the lower skilled tasks become delivered by technology, the skills that our graduates will need can be defined as the "so-called human skills" (Montano & Toral Manson 2024). Yet, it is not sufficient to just focus on graduate skill development as there are additional factors that mean, as HEI's, we need to consider how we deliver retail undergraduate and master's education. The first compounding factor is HEI governmental surveys and assessments of teaching quality such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), to the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES). In such surveys students are asked questions not just on the quality of their teaching but also on teaching engagement (NSS 2025). Teaching engagements require academics to move beyond lectures and consider new modes of delivery such as Lego Play (Montano & Toral 2024). The second compounding factor is the impact of AI on higher education not just in assessments but on learning generally. In a widely cited paper (Chow 2025), Kosmyna *et al.* (2025) found that the more students used GAI in education, underperformance increased and students become less original in their writing. Authentic assessments (Villarroel *et al.* 2018) have found to be a keyway forward to resolve some of these issues, particularly around skill development, yet we argue that address the compounding factors as educators we need to use a holistic experiential learning approach (Kolb 1984; Montano & Toral Manson 2024). Using our postgraduate services and retail marketing module where we have tracked skill development for over a decade, we will demonstrate how seminar sessions where students are asked to complete tasks without the use of technology has ironically led to better digital skills and the so-called human skill development. By asking students to engage in Lego Play, draw on a paper and tell stories we found that students were able to become less reliant on technology, boost their confidence and apply critical thinking. We will demonstrate how we the critical conversations around AI, graduate skills and metrics can be opportunities for innovative and our own creative thinking. We will further demonstrate that such a holistic experiential learning approach can be truly engaging.

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What Women Want: Experiential Retail and the High Street

The British high street has undergone significant structural and cultural transformation in recent years, shaped by economic uncertainty, technological disruption, and shifting consumer behaviors (McGregor, 2024; Shahab & Webb, 2024). While experiential retail has gained prominence in academic and industry discourse, much of the focus remains on flagship stores and urban centers. Our research addresses a critical gap by exploring how gender influences consumer engagement with a specific focus on how experiential retail supports the needs of women as the predominant users of retail. The rationale to focus on women is that women are central to retail – they drive most consumer decision-making, shape household spending patterns, and interact with high streets through routines, social life, and care work (Roshitsh, 2019; Pereira & Rebelo, 2024; Graham, 2024). Yet retail research has under-examined female experiences, often assuming a neutral or default male consumer overlooking gendered differences in safety, accessibility, and representation **(**Schauer *et al.*, 2023; Montano & Toral, 2023**).** In summary, women account for approximately 70% of global consumer spending and therefore make most household purchasing decisions (Roshitsh, 2019) thus we should consider fundamentally, does the high street work for women? Focusing on interviews with female consumers the research examines experiential retail across four United Kingdom high street locations: Birmingham city center, Harborne, Lichfield, and Mere Green. By adopting a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, the study conceptualizes retail experiences as socially constructed and emotionally mediated. Drawing on Pine & Gilmore's (1999) Experience Economy and Oldenburg's (1989) Third Place theory the investigates how immersive and socially inclusive retail environments are interpreted by women in their daily routines. Much of the research on experiential retail, using these frameworks and others, remains concentrated in flagship stores and performance-driven settings (Jahn *et al.*, 2018). The greater challenge is how the retail experience can be reimagined on high streets, where women do much of their everyday, community-oriented shopping and overlooking the local contexts where most shopping occurs (Beebeejaun, 2016; Graham, 2024). The findings reveal four key dimensions that shape female engagement with high street retail: emotional and social atmosphere; functional needs and hybrid use; representation and visibility; and identity, locality, and place attachment. These dimensions informed the development of the Experiential Third Place Model, which integrates immersive design with social inclusion and routine-based engagement. The model extends existing experiential retail frameworks by foregrounding gendered, context-specific experiences in everyday retail settings. This study shows that women engage with high streets not only as sites of consumption but as spaces of routine, belonging, and identity. Yet their needs for safety, representation, and inclusivity remain inconsistently met, meaning high streets only partially reflect their position as primary drivers of consumer spending. For councils, stakeholders, and retailers, these insights can foster fairer representation of modern consumers and support the long-term vitality of high streets.

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Brand Opportunism Harms LGBTQ+ Consumer Response Following Pride 2025 Pullbacks

Consumer expectations have evolved significantly due to increased awareness of social justice issues and higher demands for corporate accountability. Consumers now expect brands to publicly take stances on race, gender, and social issues and to genuinely incorporate marginalized identities into their marketing strategies (Chu, 2022). This is particularly evident during cultural heritage and advocacy months, such as Pride Month and Black History Month, when brands engage in brand activism, for example, using marketing strategically to show support for social justice causes (Caruelle, 2025). In contrast to previous years, many brands reduced their Pride-related messaging in 2025, citing concerns about consumer backlash, political pressure, and threats to their DEI initiatives (Meyersohn, 2025; Windels *et al.*, 2025). These pullbacks faced strong criticism not only from LGBTQ+ consumers but also from younger audiences, who tend to hold progressive values and often express their discontent through social media activism, negative reviews, and boycotts (e.g., Target). A 2025 survey by the Human Rights Campaign found that more than 75% of LGBTQ+ adults would view a company less favorably if it scaled back its DEI efforts, and over half said they would take active steps like boycotting or publicly criticizing the brand. LGBTQ+ consumers are increasingly aware of such inconsistencies, especially when corporate actions contradict previously expressed commitments (Lewis, 2025). These perceived gaps between brand messaging and behavior can lead consumers to view brands as opportunistic, meaning they believe a company is exploiting social issues primarily for its own gain rather than out of genuine concern or commitment (Martínez-López *et al.*, 2017; Ryu, 2024). Perceptions of brand opportunism result in heightened skepticism, diminished trust, negative brand attitudes, and lower purchase intent (Mundel & Yang, 2021; Yang & Mundel, 2021). While some research has connected opportunistic brand behavior with negative consumer responses, the concept of brand opportunism remains underexplored in marketing communications literature. More studies are needed to understand how it influences not just consumer attitudes but also behavioral intentions downstream (Ryu, 2024). To address this gap in the literature, this study examines the impact of perceived brand opportunism, particularly in the context of LGBTQ+ advocacy and corporate Pride pullbacks, on consumer outcomes among LGBTQ+ individuals. H1: Greater perceived brand opportunism will be associated with lower perceived brand ethicality. H2: Stronger perceptions of brand opportunism will lead to (a) lower purchase intent and (b) more negative eWOM intentions, mediated sequentially by lower perceived brand ethicality and more negative brand attitudes. Four hundred self-identified LGBTQ+ participants were recruited via Prolific. After completing screening and demographic questions, they read a Google AI-generated summary about brands scaling back their Pride 2025 campaigns. The summary described actions taken by companies such as Mastercard, Target, and Meta to reduce or withdraw their Pride sponsorships (The Drum, 2025). Participants then completed validated survey items on brand opportunism, perceived brand ethicality, brand attitudes, purchase intent, and eWOM.

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Visual Attention to AI-Generated Images vs. Images of Real People

Consumer attention to visual stimuli in advertising and signage plays a critical role in shaping purchase intentions and brand perceptions, particularly in the horticultural sector. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in plants has surged, with nearly 38% of U.S. households engaging in flower gardening and over 35% in indoor plant care (Whitinger & Cohen, 2024). Despite this increased interest, signage in independent garden centers (IGCs) and home improvement centers (HICs) often emphasizes plant imagery over human representation, primarily to showcase a plant's mature appearance. However, visual endorsers can have a significant influence on consumer motivation and decision-making. Endorsers act as persuasive agents that trigger motivational processing (Alhabash *et al.*, 2020. These findings align with cue utilization theory, which holds that consumers rely on intrinsic cues (e.g., product features) and extrinsic cues (e.g., slogans, logos, endorser types) to evaluate products (Huddleston *et al.*, 2023). Visual cues such as endorsers in ads can reduce perceived risk and increase trust by reinforcing brand identity (Wallace, 2001; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). As the horticultural sector explores new advertising formats, understanding how consumers visually attend to different types of endorsers is vital for enhancing persuasion. Concurrently, advances in AI have enabled a new wave of advertising personalization. Generative AI tools can quickly create adaptive, data-informed content, allowing brands to tailor their messaging in real-time (Wiredu, 2023). While this increases the potential for personalization, it may also lead to mixed consumer reactions. Some individuals embrace AI-generated content as innovative, while others express skepticism or disappointment when personalization feels superficial or rigid. This response—termed algorithmic disillusionment—reflects a sense of disenchantment with profiling systems that rely on basic demographic data such as age, gender, or location (De Graaf *et al.*, 2017; Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020). These tensions raise important questions about how consumers cognitively and behaviorally process ads featuring AI-generated versus real human endorsers, especially in sectors such as horticulture, where human models are scarce. The present study explores whether the type of endorser (AI vs. human) influences visual attention and purchase intent. We explore the following research questions:
RQ1: Does attention (measured by total fixation duration) to advertisements vary depending on whether the endorser is AI-generated or a real person? RQ2: How does the type of endorser (AI vs. real person) influence consumers' purchase intent? RQ3: Does TFD mediate the relationship between endorser type and purchase intent?
Data were collected at a large Midwestern university. Participants completed a brief questionnaire assessing their past plant purchase behaviors. They were then randomly assigned to view a series of plant-related social media ads featuring either real endorsers or AI-generated. The randomization was not disclosed to the respondents. Participants' visual attention was tracked using an eye-tracker. Following the eye-tracking task, participants completed a post-exposure survey measuring their attitudes toward the ad and purchase intent.

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Perceived Data Ownership and Consumers' Use of Personalized Services

The rapid growth of personalized digital services has raised new questions about how consumers perceive the trade-off between service utility and privacy risk. While personalized recommendations in search, news, and entertainment platforms enhance convenience and relevance, they also raise concerns about privacy intrusion and data misuse. Because personalized services rely on individuals' data, data ownership has become an increasingly salient topic (Hummel *et al.*, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2023; Wang & Dai, 2025). Despite its importance in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward platforms, the role of perceived data ownership is not yet fully understood. Theoretically, this study builds on psychological ownership theory (Pierce *et al.*, 2001; 2003), which suggests that individuals' sense of control and ownership over personal data may influence their evaluations of digital services. When consumers perceive that they hold ownership rights over their activity data, their responses to the benefits and risks of personalization may differ significantly compared to those who regard data as belonging to firms or as ownerless. These perspectives provide a foundation to examine the role of perceived data ownership in shaping consumers' cost–benefit evaluations of personalized services. To address this issue, the study investigates how perceived service utility and perceived privacy risk affect consumer satisfaction and intention to reuse personalized services, and whether these relationships are moderated by consumers' perceptions of data ownership. We conduct regression analyses to test whether ownership beliefs interact with perceived benefits and risks in predicting satisfaction and reuse intention. The data used for the analysis are drawn from the 2023 User Panel Survey on the Intelligent Information Society conducted by the Korea Communications Commission, with a sample of 4,581 respondents. The dataset includes indicators of satisfaction and reuse intention, perceived benefits of personalization (e.g., relevance to preferences, usefulness), perceived risks (e.g., data leakage, exposure to harmful information), and data ownership beliefs, along with socio-demographic controls such as gender, age, education, household income, and digital capability. The expected contribution is twofold. Theoretically, the study integrates the construct of perceived data ownership into personalization research, advancing understanding of how psychological ownership shapes consumer evaluations of digital services. Practically, the findings will provide guidance to firms and policymakers on how to design data governance strategies that respect consumer ownership perceptions and build trust, thereby enhancing sustainable adoption of personalized services in an era where personalization is both valued and contested.

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Exploring Pathways to Smart Service Acceptance Across Customers' Technology Readiness Levels

Smart services are increasingly shaping customer's experiences in physical retail (Lin, 2022). In fully unstaffed environments, such as smart stores, smart services replace human labor, ensuring local provision where staffing stores is economically unfeasible (Benoit *et al.,* 2024). As part of such complex service systems, smart services aim to improve convenience and efficiency (Roy *et al.,* 2024). However, they can also cause ambivalence emotions, such as uncertainties, perceived loss of control or concerns about data protection (Chouk & Mani, 2019). Consequently, customers' propensity to embrace and use such services differ significantly, a disposition referred to as 'technology readiness' (Parasuraman, 2000). Existing literature on the acceptance of smart services predominantly relies on linear explanatory models, which assume additive effects on usage intention (e.g., Lin, 2022) and recognize technology readiness as a crucial customer trait for acceptance (e.g., Park & Zhang, 2022). However, these research approaches remain limited when smart services are embedded within complex service systems (Ordanini *et al.,* 2014). Following configurational theory, acceptance arises from the perceived coherence and complementarity of the overall system (Di Paola *et al.,* 2025; Ragin, 2008). Acceptance thus results from the interplay of multiple smart service attributes, such as efficiency or personalization, which reinforce, substitute, or only become effective in combination. Furthermore, the customers' technology readiness shapes these perceptions, as individual predispositions influence the overall evaluation of services (Xu *et al.,* 2021). Although scholars have emphasized the importance of technological readiness in acceptance research (Park & Zhang, 2022; Roy *et al.,* 2018), little is known about how configurations of smart service attributes lead to acceptance, or how these effects vary across different levels of customer' technology readiness. This understanding is essential for explaining how and why smart services in unstaffed stores are accepted by some customers and not by others. The research questions are: How do configurations of smart service attributes lead to customer acceptance? How do these configuration effects on customer acceptance differ depending on customers' technology readiness? Moreover, we formulate the following propositions: (1) Depending on how it is configured with other attributes, the same attribute can either promote or inhibit acceptance. (2) Different configurations of attributes can generate similar levels of customer acceptance. (3) Depending on customers' technology readiness, the same configurations can have different effects on acceptance. Following smart service attributes, we incorporate customers' degree of technology readiness to capture customer traits (Ordanini *et al.,* 2014; Parasuraman, 2000). Our empirical analysis draws on quantitative survey data, which we evaluate using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Our study contributes to acceptance research in two ways. First, we show that smart service acceptance emerges from multiple configurations that remain invisible to linear models. Second, we position technology readiness as a segmentation lens, demonstrating which services align with different readiness levels, thereby outlining avenues for future research and enabling more targeted service provision in unmanned environments.

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Can the Power of Personal be too Personal? Human-Robot Interaction in Retail Services

Van Osselaer *et al.* (2020) describe a negative effect of retail technologization in the form of the objectification of the human being and, as a result, the alienation of customers. In reference to Marx (1844/1933) and Nussbaum (1995), something similar is happening to customers in technologized retail environments as happened to workers in the days of the Industrial Revolution. Employees are being replaced by technology, and therefore, customers no longer experience contact with human staff and must take over service processes themselves. This may lead to alienation between retailers and customers and thus to the objectification of the customer. Van Osselaer *et al.* (2020) argue that although technology causes this phenomenon, it can also be the solution. For that, technology must have the ability to personalize the service offered. One technology that particularly aims at this personalization effect is humanoid service robots. The imitation of human sensory features is especially vital for this effect. Previous studies found positive effects of visual factors (e.g., van Pinxteren *et al.*, 2019) and auditory factors (e.g., Fan *et al.*, 2016) on human-robot interaction. However, haptic factors like touch have mostly been overlooked (Hayashi *et al.*, 2022; Law *et al.*, 2021; Willemse *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, we investigate the effect of different types of touch in human-human and human-robot interaction in retail service settings. Based on uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1974), we argue that social cues in the form of different touch types signal different levels of intimacy and normativity in frontline service encounters and influence well-established psychological constructs of service relationship quality. We propose that situations of touch (vs. no touch) in service interactions lead to a decrease in perceived interaction comfort and thus to a reduction in perceived trust in the service agent. Furthermore, we propose that touch (vs. no touch) negatively influences the warmth and competence of a service relationship and thus negatively impacts perceived comfort and subsequently perceived trust. We investigated the proposed relationships in two experimental studies. In Study 1, 245 participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of an online experiment with a 3 (touch type: hug, handshake, no touch/waving) × 2 (assistance or no assistance from the robot) between-subjects design. In Study 2, 210 female participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a lab experiment with a 2 (touch type: hug, no touch/waving) × 2 (human vs. robot frontline service employee) between-subjects design. In both studies, we measured trust in the service agent, interaction comfort, as well as associated covariates. Additionally, we integrated perceived warmth and competence as mediators of the effect of touch type on interaction comfort in the second study. All manipulation and realism checks confirmed that participants perceived the conditions in the studies as intended. Analysis using ANCOVA and PROCESS model 4 and 80 reveal an interesting pattern of the power of personal, both in line with and against Van Osselaer *et al.* (2020). Our results indicate that humans generate better interaction comfort and trust than robots in service interactions. The introduction of personal cues in the form of touch to make interactions more personal currently backfires, as touch violates social norms of intimacy and normality for humans and robots. However, results also indicate that this negative effect is less pronounced for robots, indicating that a machine in theory is allowed to actually be more human than a human, thus creating a power of personal on its own.

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Measuring Up: Comparing Photo- and Data-Based Size Recommendation Tools in Online Fashion Retail

Current statistics show that the return rate in online fashion retail is at an historical high, which leads to substantial profit losses for retailers and serious negative environmental consequences (e.g., Bozzi *et al.*, 2022; Nasibov *et al.*, 2019; Prakash *et al.*, 2024). According to current research, the main reasons for this situation are size and fit-related issues due to the inability to physically examine and try on the apparel when shopping online and non-standardized size information that varies between different countries, apparel categories, retailers, and brands (Bozzi *et al.*, 2022). To address this problem, retailers increasingly offer individual size advisors whose prediction accuracy of the correct size is supposed to exceed that of the standardized size charts that have been predominantly offered up to now (Ornati *et al.*, 2022). To date, there are different approaches to this. The most common types of personalized size advisors determine the recommended size either based on several body measurements and data entered by the customers themselves or based on photos that the customer must upload for size determination (e.g., Idrees *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2023). Most research focuses on analyzing the underlying methodology and procedures for determining the optimal size. Hence, previous studies have largely addressed the back-end processes rather than the front-end of a size advisor that is visible to the customer. As a result, the focus is almost exclusively on the retailer's operational perspective. However, customers need to accept and use such size advisors, which depends largely on the perceived usefulness of these technologies. Accordingly, this study aims to find out how useful customers find alternative size recommendation tools in online fashion retail and which factors can contribute to this usefulness. Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), the theory of perceived risk (Bauer, 1960), and on the factors influencing high service quality (e.g., Dabholkar, 1996), the study develops hypotheses on the influence of different size recommendation tools on consumers' perceptions of four mediators, namely data protection risk, ease of use, control, and reliability. In addition, the study assumes that these factors have a mediating influence on the perceived usefulness of size recommendation tools. A commercial online panel in Germany resulted in 446 valid questionnaires. After employing mediation analysis with PROCESS, the results reveal that the data-based size advisor has a greater perceived usefulness than the photo-based size advisor and the size chart, which we included as a control group. The latter two do not differ significantly from each other in terms of their perceived usefulness. The analysis also shows that these findings are explained by all four mediators, as they significantly mediate the effect of the size recommendation tools on the perceived usefulness. For online apparel retailers, this means that offering a personalized size advisor may promise success if it is easy to use, perceived as controllable and reliable, and involves little privacy risk. Since this mainly applies to the data-based size advisor, customers perceive it as more useful than a traditional size chart, so it can be worthwhile for retailers to implement it. However, we advise against offering a photo-based size guide, as this involves high costs but does not lead to a higher perceived usefulness than a standardized size chart. However, this may change if retailers improve the perception of the mediators considered.

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Debate-Based Learning for Ethical Retail Decision-Making: Integrating Human Skills with AI-Aware Practice

As automation reshapes retailing environment, graduate value is shifting toward human capabilities such as critical thinking, ethical evaluation, communication, collaboration, and adaptability, applied alongside AI best-use practices (data literacy, bias awareness) (WEF, 2022; PwC, 2023; QS, 2019; HM Government, 2021; UNEP, 2023). In this submission, we present an inclusive, low-cost activity for diverse, international cohorts: structured debates on ethically sensitive retail scenarios (e.g., labor practices, sustainable sourcing, overconsumption, cultural representation). The method responds to the need for rigorous yet psychologically safe discussion when cases risk implicating specific regions or identities. Pedagogically, the design is anchored in macro-marketing scholarship that centers sustainability and societal impact in marketing education (Shapiro *et al.*, 2021), extends course-level integration of micro–macro sustainability aims (Watson, 2022), and operationalizes the scaffolded controversies sequence in the form of debates and moving from controversy statements to structured debate and collaborative dialogue for deeper reasoning with clear facilitation norms (Watson *et al.*, 2024; Shapiro, 2008). It leverages experiential learning cycles (Kolb, 1984) and authentic assessment principles (Ashford-Rowe *et al.*, 2014), aligns with retail-specific experiential frameworks (Toral & Montano, 2022), and targets soft employability skills central to Fourth-Industrial-Revolution readiness (Teng *et al.*, 2019). Evidence from debate-based and PBL-adjacent approaches indicates gains in critical thinking, communication, tolerance for diverse viewpoints, and evidence use (Mumtaz & Latif, 2017; Yu & Mohamed Zin, 2023). The activity also advances responsible management education consistent with PRME (Haertle *et al.*, 2017). In the designed activity, small groups draw an anonymized scenario and a random stance (Defend/Counter), research with explicit bias checks and data-literacy practices (including appropriate, critical use of AI tools), present in a moderated whole-class debate, then complete a reflective debrief to translate insights into responsible retail actions. The expected learning outcomes of the activity are to identify ethically laden issues in retail contexts; construct and defend evidence-based arguments; rebut respectfully and professionally; apply bias checks and human-in-the-loop judgement; reflect and propose responsible actions. Directly advances From Automation to Adaptability by integrating human-skills formation with AI-aware, responsibility-focused pedagogy for retail education.

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The Rational Black Market: Lessons from France's Wartime Food Supply Chains

During the harsh winter of 1941, Parisian families queuing for hours at ration distribution centers often returned home to empty cupboards, highlighting the severe limitations of formal supply channels. A few streets away, clandestine trade flourished: farmers concealed butter beneath sacks of potatoes, middlemen transported eggs in secret compartments of bicycles and carts, and networks of local traders adapted constantly to shifting demand. Far from random acts of survival, these operations followed rational distribution patterns, with careful planning of routes, schedules, and stock management. Analysis of the French black food market during WWII illustrates how severely constrained environments stimulate organizational ingenuity, requiring rapid problem-solving, territorial knowledge, and coordination across multiple actors. Contrary to conventional portrayals of illegal markets as chaotic or morally deviant, supply chains operating under Nazi Occupation reveal principles of optimization, flexibility, and demand-side adaptation analogous to strategies observed in contemporary economic systems. Studying these networks encourages scholars to broaden theoretical frameworks, incorporating lessons from informal economies regarding resilience, responsiveness, and human creativity. Historical evidence demonstrates that when formal channels fail, actors reorganize flows with remarkable efficiency, often outperforming state-controlled distribution in both speed and adaptability. Beyond mere survival, wartime black markets exemplify sophisticated decision-making under extreme uncertainty. Participants navigated constant risks of control, sanctions, and detection, while simultaneously addressing resource scarcity, fluctuating demand, and logistical bottlenecks. Multi-level distribution systems, including local hubs, regional intermediaries, and mobile couriers, enabled continuous flows of goods across the city and surrounding countryside. Detailed territorial knowledge allowed actors to anticipate potential interruptions, reroute deliveries, and maintain decentralized storage, creating a highly adaptive network. Conceptually, supply chains supporting black markets demonstrate principles that parallel modern retail logistics under crisis conditions, including flexibility, rapid response, and demand-driven allocation. Situating the French WWII black market within a framework of economic rationality and logistical sophistication highlights its analytical relevance, showing that responsiveness and knowledge-based resource allocation extend beyond formal channels. Examining these clandestine networks invites critical reflection: lessons derived from the efficiency of informal operations can inform the design of resilient, agile, and adaptive distribution systems in contemporary contexts. Historical insights thus provide valuable guidance for managing supply chains under severe constraints or uncertainty.

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The Smooth Check-0ut: Customer Preferences for Cashierless Systems

In 2024, more than 45% of the German customers did at least a fraction of their grocery shopping online; trend rising. This increase in online grocery shopping exerts a certain amount of pressure on stationary retailing, prompting retailers to come up with new concepts to attract consumers to their stores. One of those concepts is the introduction of cashierless systems that facilitate the check-out in a time efficient manner, e.g., by avoiding or reducing waiting queues (e.g., Pantano *et al.*, 2023; Schultz/Paetz, 2025). German customers seem to be somewhat reluctant to cashierless systems. Recent literature showed that security concerns, social concerns, and technical concerns hamper the use of those systems. In comparison, convenience is an important driver for their use (e.g., Schultz/Paetz, 2025). So far, the literature has examined several drivers and barriers for the use of cashierless systems as a whole but is limited regarding different types of cashierless systems, i.e., self-checkout, just-walk-out, smile-to-pay, and smart trolleys. These types of cashierless systems, however, differ substantially in their technical implication and are, thus, expected to evoke varying concerns or emotions when engaging with these systems. We tackle this issue by studying the preferences for varying types of cashierless systems and their moderators. In summer 2025, we conducted an empirical study with more than 200 German respondents. The study analyzes customer preferences examining the moderating effect of convenience, data privacy concerns, experience, empowerment, and effort. Additionally, the study collected data on a Discrete-Choice-Experiment in order to extract individual preferences through estimating a Hierarchical Bayesian-Multinomial Logit model (Train, 2009). The individual part-worth utilities enter cashierless-type-dependent structural equation models. The results show differences between the moderating effect of certain constructs between the models. For example, while convenience positively influences the use of self-checkouts, it has a negative impact for just-walk-out concepts. The latter seems counter-intuitive at first, but the negative perception may lend support to concerns of perceived high barriers before entering just-walk-out concepts. These findings provide important insights for retailers, especially, when it comes to a decision for one or another type of cashierless systems for their brick-and-mortal store.

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Between Obligation and Affection: Rethinking Gift-Giving in the Mobile Era

The rise of mobile platforms has reshaped the practice of gift-giving, extending it beyond tangible objects to digital tokens exchanged in daily interactions. This transformation is especially evident in relationships that are not deeply personal but still bound by social expectations. In such cases, digital gifts offer a convenient way to acknowledge obligations while reducing the risks of overinvestment, awkwardness, or misinterpretation. Yet their symbolic meaning and cultural appropriateness remain uncertain. Do recipients perceive them as genuine expressions of care, or merely as ritualistic gestures? This study addresses this question by examining the psychological and relational dynamics of digital gifting, showing how convenience-driven practices intersect with enduring traditions of reciprocity and recognition. In doing so, it enriches research on gift exchange and consumer–brand interactions in digital contexts, while also offering practical insights for retailers and platform providers. The findings underscore the need to design digital gifting solutions that balance efficiency with symbolic value, enabling consumers to navigate shifting social norms and helping businesses embed themselves within emerging rituals of everyday life.

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Live Video Shopping in Retailing

Live video shopping (LVS) has become an increasingly established communications and sales channel in retailing, and numerous retail chains now embrace this practice. While originally introduced as a real-time selling format similar to old-fashioned television shopping, LVS is now widely adopted by major retailers in the United States and Europe as embedded website content to bolster their omnichannel presence and drive long-term consumer engagement. Despite its growing managerial relevance, little is known about how LVS contributes to consumer decision-making in online retail environments beyond live selling contexts. Drawing on theories of consumer decision-making, digital retail atmospherics, and earlier studies on live streaming shopping, our study examines whether LVS content enhances consumers' evaluations of retailers and products when integrated into online stores. We test the effects of LVS on various retail performance outcomes using a scenario-based online experiment with UK consumers (n=98). The stimuli consisted of a realistic product page for a desk lamp offered by a well-known Swedish home electronics retailer, presented either with or without embedded LVS content. The results show that the inclusion of LVS content significantly improves retailer brand attitudes, increases perceived product quality, strengthens purchase intentions, and leads to a substantial increase in willingness to pay, from GBP 21.74 to GBP 34.98. These findings suggest that LVS functions as an effective shopping cue that supports consumer decision-making and enriches the digital retail atmosphere, even when consumers do not actively engage with the live format. This study suggests that LVS creates value as persistent digital retail content rather than as a novelty-driven sales tool. The findings offer actionable implications for retailers' content strategies and contribute to a deeper understanding of how emerging video formats shape consumer behavior in online retailing.

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Age Stereotypes in Advertising: Examining Advertising Portrayals of Older People

Older people are still underrepresented in most forms of advertising, and when older people are included, the portrayals of them tend to be stereotyped. Traditionally, both marketing researchers and practitioners have tended to focus their efforts on younger consumer groups. Lately, however. there have been several calls for research on how consumers respond to the representation of older consumers in advertising. Marketers have always been drawn to young consumers, seeking to build brand loyalty while they are impressionable so that they can hold on to them for life (Schewe et al, 2013). Accordingly, there has been a deficit of research on older consumers. Age stereotypes and generational cohorts are critical concepts in understanding social dynamics that shape preconceived notions and generalized beliefs about individuals based on their age. Generational cohorts include individuals who are born within the same time period and experience similar historical and social events, which shape their values, attitudes, and collective identity. Hence, generational cohorts could have an impact on age-related stereotypes. In this paper, we thus examine how older consumers respond to stereotyped portrayals of older people in advertising, focusing on one of the common aspects of age stereotyping prevalent in advertising. More specifically, we examine age stereotypes in advertising relating to the portrayal of older people in advertisements as passive and physically weak, as opposed to active and physically strong. In two empirical studies designed as experiments, this paper compares the responses of older consumers (aged 60 years or older) to advertising featuring stereotyped (passive) and non-stereotyped (active) portrayals of older people. Our results indicate positive responses to portraying older people as active and physically strong, as opposed to passive and physically weak. The advertisements featuring active portrayals of older people were perceived as less stereotyped than the advertisements featuring passive portrayals. Additionally, attitudes were more positive for the advertisements that featured non-stereotyped, active portrayals of older people. The positive effects of challenging the "older people are more passive" age stereotype in advertising on advertisement attitudes are mediated by a social effect of advertising, namely social connectedness with the models featured in the ads. These empirical findings are discussed in relation to previous research, as well as in terms of their implications for advertising research and practice.

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When Radical Futures Become Current Realities. Consumer Responses to Urban Air Mobility Services.

Flying cars and taxis have long been a staple of sci-fi movies, but urban air mobility (UAM) services are rapidly becoming a reality in numerous locations globally and for a range of tasks from airport shuttles, to air ambulances, to 'flying taxi' services (Wild, 2024). Most early research into UAMs has been focused on the technologies involved (including their engineering feasibility and cost efficiency), regulatory challenges and the infrastructure and logistics involved (Garrow, *et al*., 2021). Research into how consumers will respond to such novel services in practice is relatively embryonic and has been dominated by consumer concerns about safety (e.g. Long *et al*., 2023) and comparative advantages and disadvantages related to cost, speed and complexity of journeys (e.g. Zhao *et al*., 2025). This conceptual paper develops an integrated perspective on how consumers are responding to the introduction of UAM services, and how the opportunity to market them as comparatively safe and sustainable transport services must overcome challenges related to the counterintuitivity of emerging services' selling propositions in consumers' eyes.

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The Role of Customer Engagement in Securing Loyalty in the South African Banking Sector

The South African retail banking industry is sophisticated and highly competitive. It presents a unique blend of emergent fintech players and well-established banks (South African Reserve Bank, 2019). This study seeks to explore the importance of the customer engagement construct in the South African retail banking industry as a link between relationship marketing constructs such as service quality, trust, satisfaction and customer loyalty. The question of customer loyalty has long been the fascination of service quality and relationship marketing scholars (Petzer & Van Tonder, 2024). The study further considers service quality as an antecedent of trust and satisfaction while it also reflects on the mediating role of trust and satisfaction in the relationship between service quality and customer engagement, a well-recognized concept in marketing (Hollebeek, 2016). Finally, it ponders on the disputed structure of the customer engagement construct (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; So *et al.*, 2014) and introduces moderators in the customer engagement loyalty-link. Using non-probability purposive and quota sampling, a total of 352 South African retail banking customers took part in the study by completing a self-administered survey fielded by a field services company in the Gauteng Province of the country. MPlus (Version 7.4) was used to test the study's conceptual model and Hayes Process Macro for SPSS was used for moderation and mediation. The study found that service quality positively and significantly influences trust and satisfaction, which in turn both positively and significantly influence customer engagement, whilst customer engagement positively and significantly influences loyalty. Customer engagement proved to be a second order construct reflective of three first-order dimensions, namely emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement. Satisfaction and trust mediate the relationship between service quality and customer engagement whilst monthly spending on a banking account and duration of support moderate the relationship between customer engagement and loyalty. This study illuminates the strategic importance of customer engagement in South African retail banking, demonstrating how emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement link key relationship marketing constructs to foster loyalty. By explicating these interrelationships, it offers both theoretical insights and practical guidance for banks in an emerging market context seeking to enhance customer retention, strengthen relational outcomes, and optimize engagement-driven performance.

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True Prices: A Cross-Cultural Study of Consumers' Perceptions and Behavioral Responses

In recent years, companies have started to take up such environmental and social issues to justify increased prices for their products, in particular for groceries. This phenomenon has become known as "true prices" or "true costing" (e.g., Goldman & Weltevreden, 2024; Wilken *et al.*, 2024) or "true value" (Unnikrishnan, 2021). The true price approach increases sales prices by up to 100 percent for some products. These are immense price increases which were also observed in times of high inflation for products that are sometimes necessary on a daily basis. In 2023, the pioneer was the German discount retailer Penny. Penny's True Price campaign was notable in that the company added a price premium to nine selected products of its private label. This price markup is in stark contrast to the consumer expectations regarding a good price-performance ratio for private labels. Thus, negative effects might be given. Both practical and scientific studies showed that customers react differently to price mark-ups of true price campaigns (e.g., Pick, 2025; Wilken *et al.*, 2024). Sales data from the Penny campaign for example showed that consumers have been sceptic and even purchased less of these food items (Gaugler & Michalke, 2024). Scientific studies instead found a greater willingness-to-pay. With our study, we aim to close several research gaps as insights into the "consumers' acceptance of true-price (TP) food products is still scarcely" (Marangon *et al.*, 2023, p. 61). In previous studies, various groceries were experimentally presented with price mark-ups and then specific customer intentions such as willingness to pay were collected. The research aim of our study is to collect overall customer assessments of such a campaign for a food retailer's own brands and to identify possible differences in perceptions and intentions, such as purchase intention and recommendation intention, between European markets. To answer these research questions, we surveyed more than 200 customers in Germany and Poland. Germany and Poland are therefore suitable as a context for comparison because numerous retailers such as Aldi and Lidl are active in both countries and they differ significantly in cultural dimensions such as individualism and power distance. Therefore, different effects are to be expected in the two EU countries. To ensure high external validity of the study, a fictitious private label "Dobrano" and a corresponding brand logo were created using AI. The aim of this experimental treatment was to ensure that the private label was considered attractive in Germany and Poland and was therefore as close as possible to real brands. Established 7-point Likert scales were used to measure the constructs. The first results of the study show that customers in the two countries differ in their assessment of price fairness and have different willingness to pay for the "Dobrano" brand. The acceptance of true prices is higher in Poland (more collectivist) than in Germany. Our empirical study makes an important contribution to pricing research by examining various customer intentions in relation to true prices and showing what potential there is for environmentally-related price mark-ups for private labels in general. Our study expands knowledge in international marketing because it shows similarities and differences in the perceptions and behavioral intentions of customers in two European countries and thus provides recommendations for market means for internationally operating food retailers.

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Retail Futures: Balancing Human-Centered Skills with Tech-Driven Transformation

Retailers are using AI in merchandising, store operations, customer service, and the supply chain, creating an estimated 240 to 390 billion dollars in sector value and a potential 1.2 to 1.9 percentage point margin lift, which is reshaping job content and the skills required of frontline and early career talent (Sukharevsky *et al.*, 2024). Executives also report broad use across marketing, commerce, supply chain, HR, and IT, with plans to augment rather than automate most activities in the next year, making baseline AI literacy, data awareness, and human in the loop practices part of everyday work (Waddell *et al.*, 2025). This study aims to (1) identify role-specific AI skills in common retail jobs, (2) define early-career proficiency expectations for the first three years after graduation, (3) specify human-in-the-loop checkpoints that keep AI-supported decisions reliable and safe, and (4) translate these into actionable targets for hiring, onboarding, and training. The study proposes the Retail AI Skills Alignment (RASA) framework as the organizing lens for semi-structured interviews with industry executives. RASA links AI use to an employee's role and enablement (e.g., onboarding, guided practice, coaching). This framework, along with human-in-the-loop oversight to early career competencies and job outcomes. The framework is grounded in established theory: Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology, explains variation in use (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003), human–AI interaction guides oversight (Amershi *et al.*, 2019), transfer of training clarifies learning to performance (Baldwin & Ford, 1988), and Holton's Human Resource Development transfer perspective, including the Learning Transfer System Inventory, supports evaluation of on the job transfer (Holton *et al.*, 2000). A bespoke model is used because these theories are typically applied in isolation and are rarely operationalized for frontline, early career retail roles. RASA integrates them into role-level measures that employers and educators can apply and refine. Interview data will be examined using constructivist grounded theory, employing open and focused coding, constant comparison, and memoing to inductively derive categories from practitioner accounts (Charmaz, 2017). The resulting categories will be mapped to the RASA variables (AI use in the role, enablement, human in the loop oversight, early career competencies, job outcomes) to guide instrument design and reporting.

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Truth Marks: How AI-Use Labels Shape Trust and Purchase in Online Retail

Retailers are rapidly adopting generative AI for content and operations (64% behind-the-scenes pilots; 82% customer-facing pilots; 68% plan marketing use), and shoppers are using it in their journeys (38%), while regulators tighten transparency rules (Sukharevsky *et al.*, 2024; State of AI, 2024; Pandya, 2025; FTC, 2024). Although most AI-familiar consumers favor disclosure (84%), "AI-generated" labels can lower perceived credibility, with mixed evidence on persuasiveness (Deloitte, 2024; Li & Yang, 2024; Altay & Gilardi, 2024). This study will test how AI-use labels on product pages influence trust and purchase intent by experimentally varying label wording and placement across high- vs. low-risk products. The results will offer actionable guidance on when and how retailers should disclose AI involvement. The model combines the Persuasion Knowledge Model—where disclosure cues activate persuasion knowledge and heighten scrutiny—with Source Credibility Theory, in which label wording shifts perceived expertise and trustworthiness that drive authenticity, trust, and purchase intent. The study will use a 2 (Product Risk: high vs. low) × 4 (Label Type: none, AI-generated, AI-assisted, human-verified) × 2 (Placement: near-claim vs. footer) between-subjects design on mock product pages. Product risk will be manipulated via a high-risk item (e.g., apparel) versus a low-risk item (e.g., phone case), with label type and placement varied to assess effects on perceptions and behavioral intentions. A potential outcome of this study could be evidence that AI disclosure wording and placement systematically shift consumer trust and decision-making, advancing source credibility and persuasion-knowledge theories in AI-driven marketing. It may also extend authenticity research by showing how "human-verified" cues mitigate skepticism toward AI. For practice, the findings could guide marketers and platforms in crafting transparent AI disclosures that preserve credibility while meeting ethical and regulatory standards. Ultimately, this would help brands balance innovation with consumer trust in an increasingly automated marketplace.

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A Strategic Framework for Enhancing Retail Performance Through Customer Experience Management

Traditionally, retailers have sought differentiation by offering customer value through either low prices or premium benefits. However, in today's retail environment, price and quality products alone are no longer enough to remain competitive. The value more often lies in the customer experiences (CX) that retailers provide (Kahn, 2021). Managing omnichannel experiences effectively results in positive WOM, higher share of wallet, customer loyalty, and overall profitability (Rahman *et al*., 2025; Gahler *et al*., 2023; Puccinelli *et al*., 2009). Building on existing literature, practical observations and a qualitative study using semi-structured in-depth interviews with senior retail executives, we develop a conceptual framework to categorize the ways CX strategies generate value for both the customer and the company. We position "customer time" as an explicit lever for retail differentiation and growth. The columns in our 2x2 conceptual matrix capture how retailers can manage this variable to deliver a differentiated CX: either by spending more valuable time with the customer or by saving them time through faster, more efficient service. The rows reflect how retailers extract value through customer experience: either through premium pricing or through low pricing that also builds loyalty. Each of the resulting quadrants represents a distinct CX strategy: "Frictionless Automatic Retention"; "Experiential Retail Theatre"; "Do-it-Yourself and Treasure Hunt" and "Fast Quality Excellence". This research makes the following key contributions. First, we develop a new framework that can serve as a strategic tool for generating differentiation and growth patterns based on leveraging customer experience. Second, drawing on structured interviews with retail practitioners from Europe and the U.S.A., we provide a deeper understanding of how retailers employ the CX strategies we have defined. Finally, we propose testable research propositions that the framework and expert interviews suggest.

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What drives Sustainability Commitment in Firms?

Although firms across industries are increasingly demonstrating greater commitment to social sustainability, the drivers of firm-level commitment to social sustainability remain largely unknown. It is, however, essential to understand the drivers of social sustainability commitment, as such commitment necessitates significant investment of resources and requires a reconstitution of structural and strategic orientation. Adopting a product-market perspective and integrating rational choice theory with organizational legitimacy theory, we propose that the parity of a firm's product offerings compared to competitors' offerings (i.e., product offerings' parity) either promotes or deters engagement in social sustainability initiatives. Specifically, we posit that a firm's product offerings' parity has a U-shaped relationship with social sustainability. Furthermore, a firm's remit of market operations (viz., market scope) and the product-related innovation agility of competing firms (viz., product-market fluidity) moderate the U-shaped relationship between product offerings' parity and social sustainability, such that the curvature flattens. This comprehensive yet parsimonious conceptual model is rigorously tested using a multi-year (2004–2023), multi-industry sample and employing multi-level mixed-effects modeling. Several sensitivity analyses were also conducted, including various panel regressions and endogeneity-robust instrumental variable regression to reaffirm the robustness of the findings. Additionally, we examined the relationship between product offerings' parity and the four underlying subcategories of social sustainability.

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Empowering Consumers Along the R-Ladder with Strategies to Reduce Textile Waste

Several recent EU legislative initiatives give consumers a decisive role in reducing textile waste. The goal is to move the textile industry toward greater sustainability through pull effects by consumers, who are given the right to return or repair products, and provided with information about the sustainability of their origin, production, and materials. However, consumer requirements and preferences in this regard have only recently begun to be researched (see Mrad *et al.*, 2025; Sharkasi *et al.*, 2025). We present four studies relying on a mixed-method approach and German consumers to address this research gap: Study 1 investigates the interest in measures along the R-ladder (N = 177). Study 2 presents details on interest in repair N = 16), while Study 3 focuses on interest in reuse (N = 364). Study 4 dives into the interest in Rethink/Made-to-be-remade (N = 179). The results show that consumers are mostly indifferent regarding R-ladder measures to reduce waste and do not take an active role in their adoption. However, measures to refuse fast fashion (fees, bans) are accepted, and return/repair/reuse measures are evaluated as attractive by many consumers. If the surcharge for made-to-be-remade is not too high, the concept is appealing to them (if understandable). The results allow us to draw several implications for research, practice, and policy, for example, to use cost-conscious activities, to support legal initiatives to reduce fast fashion, as long as economically feasible, or to provide detailed explanations of surcharges for made-to-be-remade at the point of purchase.

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Haptic Tells - Does Need for Smell and Touch Impact Customers' Willingness to Pay for Roses?

Shopping for plants can be a sensory experience for consumers. While buying flowers and plants online provides convenience to the consumer, is the sensory deprivation of touch and scent a barrier to purchase? Research shows that the presence (vs. absence) of an olfactory cue positively impacts approach behavior (Anggie & Haryanto, 2011) and purchase intention (Anggie & Haryanto, 2011; Cowan *et al.*, 2023). Being deprived of haptic (touch) information decreases confidence in product evaluation, leading to poorer decision-making (Peck & Childers, 2003). Touch positively impacts impulse purchases (Peck & Childers, 2006). These findings underscore the need to understand how to compensate for the absence of these sensory cues, particularly in e-commerce environments. This leads to the research question: Do the need to smell (NTS) and the need for touch (NFT) influence consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for perishable goods (plants, flowers)? Our study analyzed the influence of NFT and NFS on customers' WTP when purchasing plants and flowers online. H1a: Consumers with high (low) need to touch (NFT) and b) high (low) need to smell (NTS) will exhibit different levels of WTP for online (in-store) and plant or flower purchase. Survey data ($N = 678$) were collected using Qualtrics. NFT and NTS were measured using Peck & Childers' (2003) and Dörtyol's (2021) scales. Participants were divided into groups based on high (≥4) and low (<4) ratings from the NFT and NTS scales. WTP was measured using a discrete choice experiment with five choice scenarios. Fragrance (none, slight, highly) and price ($3.99, $5.99, $7.99 per stem) were varied for red roses. Data were analyzed using mixed logit models in Stata 19.0, and WTP was estimated using the Krinsky and Robb (1986) method. Results indicate that 41% of the sample had low NFT and NTS ratings ("Low Sensory"), 32% had high NFT and NTS ratings ("Smell & Touch"), 17% had high NFS ratings ("Smell Only"), and 10% had high NFT ratings ("Touch Only"). Pooled estimates reveal greater WTP for the presence of fragrance (high or slight) vs. no fragrance. Across groups, the Smell & Touch group exhibited the highest WTP estimates for the high ($12.26) and slight fragrance ($8.60) flowers vs. no fragrance. Interestingly, while the Low Sensory group had the lowest WTP values, fragrance still resulted in higher WTP, indicating customers gain value from fragrant flowers even if they do not have a high need for touch or smell. Implications suggest using fragrance descriptions across retail channels to heighten customers' value of flowers and plants.

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Sparking Creative Thinking and Collaborative Problem Solving in Undergraduate Business Education using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®

The modern workplace demands a workforce proficient in core competencies such as creative thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving to accomplish their innovation and performance goals. While these skills are widely recognized as critical for organizational success, their development within undergraduate business education lacks empirical assessment. Therefore, this study addresses the following questions: 1) What factors do upper year undergraduate business students consider important in their development of creative thinking and collaborative problem-solving skills? 2) How do their perceptions of their skill development compare from the beginning of the course and at the ending of the course? This work-in-progress study will have students participate in several pedagogical techniques, including LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®, Foursight® Thinking Profiles, and team problem solving challenges, throughout the 12-week course. This study draws on Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, defined as a person's belief in their own skills or competencies. This concept helps to explain why some students feel confident in their skills and take on challenges, while others with the same skills may hesitate or give up when faced with difficulty. Drawing on established frameworks from creative thinking (PISA Creative Thinking Assessment, OECD, 2022), collaborative problem-solving (PISA Collaborative Problem-Solving Assessment, OECD, 2015) and Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), a mixed-methods approach was adopted and applied in a higher education context. A pre- and post-course survey, using established scales, was deployed to a sample of undergraduate business students. The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data will be analyzed using PLS-SEM to identify the factors influencing students' perceived skill development. The qualitative data, from the open-ended questions, will be analyzed thematically to provide a richer understanding of students' experiences and perceptions. The results of this study will reveal what learning techniques had the highest impact on their perceptions of skill development and allow us to understand if, how and why their perceptions may have changed over time. This research provides valuable insights for business educators and curriculum developers seeking to design effective programs that cultivate essential workplace skills. The findings can inform pedagogical choices and highlight the efficacy of experiential learning techniques in fostering creativity and collaborative problem-solving. This study contributes directly to the ongoing conversation about how business schools can better prepare students for the demands of the professional world. This study contributes to the literature on business education by providing empirical evidence of the relationship between experiential learning and the development of creativity and collaborative problem-solving skills. It extends and integrates existing theoretical models and applies it to undergraduate business students. By using PLS-SEM and thematic analysis, the research will offer a robust model that identifies the specific drivers of perceived skill development, providing a more nuanced understanding than a simple pre-post comparison. This study aims to demonstrate that a thoughtfully designed, experiential curriculum can significantly enhance students' perceptions of their own creative thinking skills and collaborative problem-solving skills. The mixed-methods approach, combining PLS-SEM and thematic analysis, will provide a comprehensive and robust assessment of the course's impact, offering both a predictive model of skill development and a deeper understanding of the student experience.

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Website Cookie Consent? The Importance of Trust in Customers' Intention to Withhold Information

The online world presents us with multiple forms of website cookie notification i.e. "fair" cookie, "unfair" cookie where companies trick consumers to give consent, and "just inform" cookie where consumers do not have the choice whether to give actively cookie consent. This paper aims to study the role of inherent trust and perceived transparency on the consumers' intention to withhold information in the cookie notification context towards an international retailer. We hypothesize that trust increases perceived transparency; and transparency decreases the withholding intention of customers. Data was collected among German and Thai samples, thus investigating potential difference across two cultures. Results reveal interesting findings particular for each of the three cookie scenarios.

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How Shopping Clubs Work: Differential Effects of Nudges Across the Customer Decision Journey

Online shopping clubs, such as BestSecret or limango, have gained popularity, currently representing about 11% of the European fashion market and projected to surpass traditional off-pricing retail by 2025 (Balchandani *et al.*, 2022). These clubs utilize a unique e-commerce model, offering exclusive memberships for access to time-limited sales events, fostering a competitive shopping experience. A key feature is the use of digital nudges throughout the customer journey, which are mechanisms designed to influence behavior (Thaler, 2018; Ghose *et al.*, 2023). Nudges range from pre-purchase alerts (e.g., newsletters about limited-time offers) to purchase reminders (e.g., expiring shopping baskets), including scarcity nudges (e.g., "last sizes") and social proof indicators (e.g., "very popular choice"). This strategy not only drives purchases but also cultivates a dynamic shopping atmosphere. Prior studies on shopping club nudges have largely examined them in isolation, focusing on short-term impacts on purchase intentions (e.g., Eisenbeiss *et al.*, 2015). Research indicates that scarcity enhances perceived value by making products seem more desirable and exclusive, while social proof nudges leverage the tendency to imitate others, particularly in uncertain situations (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Both nudges create urgency, pressuring consumers to act quickly (Etkin *et al.*, 2015). However, the differential effects of nudges across the purchase funnel and their long-term effectiveness remain unexplored. Our study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how nudges impact various stages of the customer journey, from pre-purchase interactions to post-purchase behaviors, including returns. We utilize a unique dataset comprising campaign information and transaction data from a major online shopping club, covering thousands of customers from 2020 to 2023. The retailer varied the types and combinations of nudges in their communications, allowing us to classify campaigns via a dictionary procedure. Our analysis employs fixed effects models to assess the impact of nudges on different stages of the customer journey, accounting for seasonal effects and customer tenure. Preliminary findings indicate that nudges significantly influence purchase behavior at various stages, with implications for both immediate purchases and post-purchase outcomes. Even within a certain stage, nudges have differential effects. While nudges for some types of assortments can increase sales other assortments benefit less. What is more, customer tenure also interacts with the effectiveness of nudges. These findings highlight the need for a nuanced approach in managing nudges.

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The Impact of In-store Shelf Digital Advertising on Behavioral Intentions

This study explores how interactive digital advertising (IDA) of product display shelves (PDS) affects consumer behavioral intention. Based on the S-O-R theory, we constructed a model in which IDA triggers behavioral intention via curiosity and attention, while this causal relationship is moderated by product familiarity and advertising appeal. Two experimental studies were conducted to test the research model using data collected from convenience stores in Taiwan (Study 1: N = 234; Study 2: N = 255). Study 1 employed a 2 (IDA: passive vs. active information acquisition) × 2 (product familiarity: low vs. high) mixed experimental design. The experiment featured a digital advertisement, developed using Microsoft Power Apps, displayed on the pastry shelf of a convenience store. In the active information acquisition via DA scenario, consumers could interact with the product's advertisement interface by clicking to watch a video, view the latest promotions, and access product information. They could also navigate for more content. In the passive information acquisition via DA scenario, the product advertisement was displayed automatically, with no option for interaction. Results indicated that active information acquisition via IDA significantly enhanced curiosity, attention, and behavioral intention compared to passive acquisition, supporting H1a–H1c. Additionally, the serial mediation of curiosity and attention in the relationship between IDA and behavioral intention was confirmed (H2). Notably, the effect of active information acquisition on curiosity was significantly stronger among consumers with low product familiarity, providing support for H3. Study 2 employed a 2 (IDA: passive vs. active information acquisition) × 2 (advertising appeal: rational vs. emotional) between-subjects experimental design. The experiment took place at the refrigerated food display shelf of a convenience store. Results revealed that active information acquisition via IDA significantly increased curiosity compared to passive acquisition under both rational and emotional appeal conditions. While both appeal types positively influenced curiosity, the effect of IDA on curiosity was significantly stronger under the rational appeal condition, supporting H4. This study advances theory by showing how IDA, through active information acquisition, enhances consumer curiosity, attention, and behavioral intentions. This research is among the few empirical studies exploring how IDA design concepts within PDS influence marketing effectiveness, thus further deepening our understanding of consumer psychological and behavioral responses in an IDA context. It identifies curiosity as a key mediator and reveals how product familiarity and ad appeal moderate IDA effectiveness in retail settings. This study advises managers to tailor IDA designs by leveraging interactivity, product familiarity, and ad appeal preferences to enhance consumer engagement and purchase intentions.

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Staged Customer Education - The Implementation of a Three-Act Structure in a Service Theater Framework

The idea that is discussed is that the design of customer education, according to a three-act structure anchored in a Service Theater Framework, leads to an increase in customer satisfaction. To demonstrate this, a model for such a structure is developed and empirically tested, with the additional aim of gaining a more comprehensive view by also considering the categories of flow and enhanced learning effects in the area of customer education. It is expected that these will also benefit from an implemented service dramaturgy, which should have additional indirect positive effects on customer satisfaction. The theoretical foundation of the study is the Service Theater Framework developed by Grove & Fisk (1983), which describes the service experience as a theater. While it might seem unusual at first glance, this approach doesn't seem particularly far-fetched, considering that it is argued by dramaturges that all human interactions can be assessed within a dramaturgical framework (Grove & Fisk, 1992). Applying the theater metaphor to services can be seen as a holistic framework, providing a vocabulary for understanding and managing service experiences (Grove *et al.*, 1992; Grove *et al.*, 2000; Grove & Fisk, 2001). The broad applicability of the Service Theater Framework can be evidenced by examples from the literature, where it has been applied to sectors as diverse as airlines (Grove & Fisk, 2001; Daley *et al.*, 2009), universities (Williams & Anderson, 2005), food retail (Moisio & Arnould, 2005), medical service providers (John, 1996; Berthon *et al.*, 2007), or IT services (Chen & Wang, 2018). Although significant research has already been done on the Service Theater Framework, there are still limits to the model, justifying the attempt to further develop it. One way to do this, which has been suggested in the literature (Grove & Fisk, 2001) but not pursued in significant depth, is integrating the dramaturgical tool of the three-act-structure. This seems promising because it would lead to an approach with refined methodology, building on an established structure of dramaturgy that, due to its widespread use in entertainment media such as film (Krützen, 2004; Field, 2006), can be assumed to be understood by customers, possibly even subconsciously or intuitively. This assumption is further supported by the fact that the three-act structure is based on the concept of the "Hero's Journey," which can be traced in a variety of ancient myths and narratives (Campbell, 1999), making the concept historically established. The project is structured in six steps: First, (1) a brief overview of the Service Theater Framework and its concepts is provided. Then, (2) consideration is given to how a three-act structure can be integrated into the Service Theater Framework and how this affects arousal and activation, which will be used to measure the dramaturgical tension arc. In the next step, (3) additional target categories such as flow and learning effects, and especially customer satisfaction, are addressed to provide a more comprehensive picture of the impact of a Service Theater Framework expanded by a three-act structure. The theoretical background provided in the previous two steps, leads to the formulation of hypotheses (4). In step (5) an empirical study planned and conducted to test them, with an initial pre-test serving as the first step, consisting of five-minute animated staged customer education videos. Finally, (6) the results of the study and their implications for the proposed model are discussed, as well as its limitations and ideas for further research. Contributions of this project: expanding the service theater framework with the three-act-structure.

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Improving Product Labelling to Support Sustainable Consumer Choices

Dietary choices account for one third of global greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to nutrient pollution in oceans and freshwater systems (Crippa *et al.*, 2021; Poore & Nemecek, 2018). Yet consumers often struggle to assess the sustainability of food products due to the complexity of sustainability information and the wide variety of used labels (Camilleri *et al.*, 2019). Labels can reduce cognitive effort and guide purchase decisions, but excessive or unstructured information also cause confusion, stress, and biased evaluations (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999; Thøgersen *et al.*, 2012). This study was performed to investigate whether visually structuring multiple sustainability labels can improve consumers' ability to assess the sustainability of products across the domains of environment, fairness, ethics, and health. We conducted a between-subjects online experiment with $N = 995$ British and $N = 499$ German participants, representative of the general population in terms of age and gender. Participants were randomly assigned to one of five conditions: random placement (control), centralization of all labels in one location, removal of redundant labels, categorization of labels by sustainability area, and color-coding by certification standard. The stimuli consisted of country-specific labels on twelve different foods across five product categories. Primary outcomes included perceived sustainability, accuracy of assessments compared to expert ratings, and self-reported measures such as confusion, sustainability knowledge, and food values. Categorizing labels by area significantly improved assessment accuracy across all dimensions, whereas centralization, color-coding, and the removal of redundant labels showed little or no effect. Removing redundant labels even reduced perceived sustainability overall. Product type also influenced ratings: Vegan products were often underrated in ethical terms, while fairness ratings were generally overrated. Confusion, knowledge, and food values did not differ significantly between groups, suggesting that structured presentation rather than individual differences drove improvements in accuracy. These findings highlight both the potential and the limits of sustainability labels in supporting informed food choices. A systematic, domain-based organization improves consumer evaluations and reduces misinterpretations, while strategies such as color-coding or reducing redundancy appear ineffective or counterproductive. The study provides actionable guidance for policymakers, retailers, and label designers to enhance the clarity and effectiveness of sustainability communication.

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K11 Art Mall, Art Meets Retail: Experiential Design and Consumer Behavior in Hybrid Cultural Space

The rapid rise of e-commerce has transformed consumption habits, forcing brick-and-mortar retail to confront declining footfall and intensified competition (McKinsey & Company and CCFA, 2022). Yet, despite digital growth, around 70% of global sales still occur offline, affirming the continued relevance of physical stores when strategically redesigned (Euromonitor, 2024, cited in Alexander & Varley, 2025). To remain competitive, retail environments are evolving from transactional spaces into experiential settings that prioritise immersion, social interaction, and meaning making (Alexander & Varley, 2025). This evolution reflects Pine & Gilmore's (1999) "experience economy," where value creation increasingly stems from orchestrated experiences. This study investigates how experiential design in art-integrated retail re-shapes consumer behavior in China. It focuses particularly on emotional and cultural engagement as key drivers of differentiation and engagement. Drawing on Pine & Gilmore's (1999) 4Es framework including education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism, the study examines their effects on revisit intention and word-of-mouth. While the 4Es have been widely applied in tourism and temporary formats (Oh *et al.*, 2007; Hosany & Witham, 2010), their use in fixed art-integrated retail remains underexplored, particularly in China where it is developing rapidly. Using K11 Art Mall as a case study, this research applies the 4Es framework to examine critical issues in art-integrated retail. Based on 177 survey responses, the regression analyses show that aesthetics, escapism, and entertainment significantly drive revisit intention and word-of-mouth, whereas education does not exert anymore an important influence. The findings underscore the challenges of reconciling commercial objectives with curatorial practices, while highlighting that consumer loyalty is primarily fostered through immersive and hedonic experiences, with cognitive enrichment playing a comparatively minor role.

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Detoxing Technology: Fostering Creativity and Innovation in Retail Education through the Transformative Skills Development Framework

As digital technologies increasingly shape the retail sector, educators face the challenge of preparing graduates for a future where human-centered skills are as critical as technical proficiency (Kaur *et al.*, 2020; Zhu, 2019). This paper presents the Transformative Skills Development Framework (TSDF), a pedagogical model designed to foster creativity, innovation, and employability through authentic assessment in Retail and Services Marketing education. The objective is to demonstrate how TSDF, grounded in the Experiential Learning Authentic Assessment Diamond (ELAAD) model (Montano & Toral, 2024) and sensemaking theory (Gattringer *et al.*, 2021), supports the development of future-facing skills. TSDF operates across three levels: individual reflection, meso-level articulation between students and instructors, and group-level collaborative metacognition. Central to this framework is the SCAMPER technique, which scaffolds creative thinking by encouraging students to Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to another use, Eliminate, and Rearrange retail concepts. The methodology involves implementing TSDF across two university contexts, collecting longitudinal qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate student performance and course outcomes. Over a decade of evidence shows that students engaging with this framework are more likely to secure competitive graduate roles, particularly in dynamic, tech-driven sectors that value empathy and creativity (Karunarathne & Calma, 2023). Results indicate that authentic assessments designed through TSDF not only enhance creativity and innovation but also help detoxify the over-reliance on technology in retail education. By re-centering human values and fostering structured sensemaking, TSDF offers a replicable model for embedding transformative human skills into business curricula. This work contributes to global conversations on employability, curriculum design, and the future of retail education, offering practical strategies for educators seeking to bridge theory and practice in a rapidly evolving landscape.

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From Clutter to Culture: Understanding Crowding as a Visual Atmospheric Cue in United Kingdom Thrifting Pop-Up Markets

This study explores the impact of crowding, as a visual atmospheric cue, on consumer behavior and shopping experiences within United Kingdom thrifting pop-up markets. Pop-up thrift shops are temporary retail environments that specialize in second-hand and vintage fashion, typically hosted in creative urban settings and characterized by curated, time-limited offerings (Henkel *et al.*, 2021). Although crowding has traditionally been understood as a social or physical phenomenon, its function as a comprehensive visual atmospheric cue—especially in transient retail contexts—remains under explored (Bitner, 1992; Evans & Wener, 2021). This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the following research question: How does perceived crowding, as a visual atmospheric cue, affect consumers' shopping behavior and experience in United Kingdom thrifting pop-up markets? Using a qualitative mixed-methods approach, the study employed in-method triangulation through ten semi-structured interviews supported by participant-generated photographs and AI-generated visual vignettes. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify patterns in how consumers perceive and respond to crowding cues. Participants were recruited via purposive sampling and represented a range of thrifting experiences and cultural backgrounds. The findings indicate that familiarity and expectations play a significant role in shaping responses to spatial organization. Newcomers frequently experience cognitive overload due to conflicting expectations with conventional retail norms, whereas experienced thrifters reinterpret spatial disorder as an integral aspect of the authentic thrifting experience. Aesthetic crowding is identified as a distinct form of crowding, possessing both functional and affective value. Notably, olfactory cues unexpectedly surpass visual stimuli in influencing entry and engagement, underscoring the multisensory nature of retail atmospherics (Sandell, 2019). Human crowding stimulates both avoidance and adaptive behaviors, with some participants engaging in anticipatory planning to mitigate discomfort, while others perceive crowd density as an indicator of popularity and value (Huang *et al.*, 2017). The study extends the S–O–R framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Saricam, 2022) by explaining the role of cognitive appraisal in facilitating affective responses to crowding. It further challenges the assumption that crowding uniformly lowers retail experiences, demonstrating instead that experiential rewards—such as gamified exploration and social interaction—can mitigate negative perceptions. From a practical perspective, the research advocates for the incorporation of designated rest areas and phygital interventions (e.g., QR codes) to enhance engagement and manage sensory overload. This research advances the scholarly discourse on experiential retail, atmospherics, and second-hand fashion by conceptualizing crowding as a context-dependent cue influenced by familiarity, novelty, and sensory interplay. It highlights the significance of curating inclusive, multisensory environments to maintain the appeal of thrifting pop-up markets within an increasingly digital retail landscape.

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Believe It or Not? Effects of Untrue Online Comments on the AI Era

Online comments from previous customers play a crucial role in influencing potential customers' decisions in retail, food, and beverage markets. Nonetheless, some comments are not reliable as they are not the true experience of customers, but rather are paid for by sellers. The fake comment experiment performed by Oobah Butler on the TripAdvisor platform in 2017 drew attention from sellers and customers. Nonetheless, the situation may become even worse when AI technology can automatically perform such services, making it difficult to uncover the truth with merely human resources. Customers may overlook valuable comments or even leave the market if they are misled. In some online retailing platforms in China, it is not uncommon to find service providers offering "likes," false comments, and even responding to services against negative comments from genuine customers. A mixed-methods approach to investigate untrue online comments and their associated reactions, blending digital analysis with qualitative insights. The first method involves the use of automated web scraping tools to collect a large dataset of product reviews, reviewer histories, and the full threads of responses from major Chinese e-commerce platforms. This data will be analyzed computationally using machine learning models designed to detect anomalies indicative of inauthenticity, such as repetitive linguistic patterns, suspicious reviewer behaviors, and coordinated posting timelines. The second method grounds these computational findings in human experience through in-depth interviews with four key groups: consumers, sellers, paid service providers, and platform moderators. These interviews will explore how these individuals identify, react to, and strategize in response to fake comments. The qualitative insights from the interviews will be used to validate and interpret the patterns identified by the algorithms. This article consists of three parts. First, it examines the impacts of misinformation on online retailing and the food and beverage industries, from user dissatisfaction to potential market losses. Second, it estimates the cost and difficulty of removing misinformation. Finally, the authors provide an analysis of whether the government and regulatory bodies should legislate against this behavior, and suggest how legislators and platforms can enhance the reliability of online comments.

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Harnessing Gen AI for Marketing Efficiency: Two SME Use Cases with Editorial Control

In the last three years, marketing professionals have rapidly adopted generative AI (GenAI), mainly for content creation, but the technology also offers potential to streamline marketing operations (Kshetri *et al.*, 2023; Kumar *et al.*, 2025; Prasanna & Kushwaha, 2025). In this paper, two use cases are presented in which a configurable GenAI assistant was deployed to produce marketing content, ranging from segment-specific topic suggestions to blogpost ready drafts, while maintaining human approval and brand control. Use case 1 is a sole proprietorship specializing in tailoring shirts, suits and trousers for three primary segments (B2B, wedding attire, bespoke). The owner emphasizes personal relationships and attentive service, and prioritizes high-quality content across the website (blog posts, testimonials, lookbooks) and social channels. A customized ChatGPT was implemented and configured with precise prompt instructions (tone of voice, do/don't rules, segment personas, brand vocabulary) and curated samples to suggest segment-specific topics and produce search-friendly drafts. When photos are provided, the assistant generates captions and concise blog paragraphs informed by features visible in the images (e.g., cues about the intended customer segment, garment color, suit type) to keep each post relevant and engaging. Within the custom GPT, API connectors to two social platforms prepare channel-specific drafts (formatting and tags/hashtags) and, after the user's explicit approval, publish the posts to the business pages. Use case 2 is a firm providing scaffolding solutions. A customized ChatGPT is implemented to support employees in drafting longer, knowledge-dense articles using internal documentation. The setup uses retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) via the assistant's built-in knowledge feature: approved documents (e.g., product datasheets, assembly/safety procedures, installation manuals, FAQs) were aggregated, uploaded to the assistant, and organized with simple metadata (document type, product line, date). Prompt guidelines instruct the assistant to prefer recent materials and to provide clear source pointers (document title and page/section) so writers can verify facts and reference accurately during drafting articles. A Perplexity Space was piloted in parallel to compare retrieval behavior, drafting flow and perceived output quality. Across both use cases, guardrails are straightforward: fixed prompts and style constraints, optional RAG on approved documents only, no default auto-posting, and human review before any outbound action. We examine how a configurable GenAI assistant supports SME content creation while preserving editorial control, and whether it contributes to efficiency and quality. We will collect end-user feedback via brief questionnaires that include self-reported time to first draft, ease of editing, perceived tone consistency, and fact-checking effort when RAG is used.

Residents' Preferences Regarding Apartments In Inner City Shopping Areas: A Stated Choice Experiment

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This paper provides some insights into residents' preferences regarding apartments in inner city shopping areas. The preferences are collected using a stated choice experiment and analyzed using a standard multinomial logit model. In total, 113 respondents evaluated 1,665 choice tasks each consisting of two apartments. The apartments were described by various location and building related attributes. The model estimation shows that residents valuated the available floorspace of the apartment and corresponding rent price as most important decision attributes. To illustrate the working of the model an application in the city of Heerlen is presented.

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Understanding Consumer Acceptance of Smart Shopping Carts: Integrating Technology Readiness, Status Quo Bias, and Payment Preferences

The retail industry is undergoing a profound technological transformation, with innovations increasingly reshaping not only online environments but also physical stores (Schultz, 2025). Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of online grocery retailing, retailers are actively integrating in-store technologies to enhance operational efficiency and improve customer experiences. One prominent example is the introduction of smart shopping carts in supermarkets. These carts are equipped with digital displays, barcode scanners, and integrated weighing systems, enabling consumers to track purchases in real time, receive personalized recommendations, and navigate stores more efficiently (Schultz & Zacheus, 2025). Retailers such as Amazon Fresh, Whole Foods, and EDEKA have already piloted or implemented these systems, while adoption is currently being tested in several European markets. Importantly, smart carts also integrate payment functionalities, allowing customers to complete transactions directly at the cart, thereby reducing checkout waiting times and potentially altering payment behavior (Venkata Sai Prasad et al., 2023). Despite their potential, the success of smart shopping carts critically depends on consumer acceptance. While these technologies offer benefits such as increased convenience, enhanced shopping transparency, and operational cost reductions, they also introduce challenges related to privacy concerns, perceived complexity, and disruption of established shopping routines (Sohn et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in grocery retailing, where consumer behavior is often habitual and characterized by strong inertia. Consequently, understanding the psychological drivers of adoption is essential. Existing technology adoption models, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), have primarily emphasized functional benefits and ease of use. However, recent research highlights the importance of incorporating psychological and contextual factors, including intrinsic motivation, technology-related anxiety, and situational influences such as employee presence (Chang et al., 2026; Jeon et al., 2020; Schultz & Gorlas, 2024). While building on core constructs from these models, this study extends them by integrating perspectives from Technology Readiness and Status Quo Bias Theory, thereby capturing both consumers' willingness (e.g., innovativeness, optimism) and resistance (e.g., inertia, insecurity). In addition, it incorporates consumers' payment preferences as an additional behavioral factor shaping technology acceptance. Given that smart shopping carts are closely intertwined with (often cashless) payment systems, consumers' habitual payment methods may play a crucial role in shaping their adoption intentions. Empirically, the study is based on survey data collected among supermarket shoppers in Flanders (Belgium). The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on smart retail technologies by providing a more comprehensive understanding of consumer acceptance that integrates psychological readiness, habitual behavior, and payment practices. From a managerial perspective, the results will offer insights into how retailers can design and implement smart cart systems in ways that align with consumer preferences and reduce adoption barriers.

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Feel the Heat: The Effect of Pseudo-Haptic Color-Temperature Congruence in Virtual Reality

Product evaluation is invariably multisensory. However, without physical touch, it becomes difficult for consumers to accurately judge a product's sensory properties in online retail. Especially when those properties have consequences for the consumer's sensory state. For example, for products whose primary function is maintaining body heat (e.g., blankets, scarves, sweaters, ...), trial would be needed to accurately judge if a product can fulfill this function. Hence, this work-in-progress examines the use of visual pseudo-haptics (i.e., visual cues that respond when a product is touched) to more effectively convey these sensory properties. Such pseudo-haptics are particularly promising in virtual reality (VR) apps, where embodied virtual hands can illustrate the natural cause-and-effect structure of touch: the product acts as the cause that initiates an outcome, while the visual pseudo-haptic represents the consequence of that outcome (Huang, 2025). Specifically, this research focuses on the visualization of thermal properties through color changes of a virtual hand in VR. This pseudo-haptic relies on universal color-temperature associations between red and warmth and between blue and coldness (Labrecque *et al.*, 2013). Previous research has shown that changing a product's color to red or blue can influence its perceived warmth (Ketron & Spears, 2020; Fenko *et al.*, 2010). However, this does not visualize the consequences of product use, unlike a pseudo-haptic. Both the product's color and the virtual hand's color (i.e., the pseudo-haptic) can be congruent or incongruent with the product. One can speak of sensory congruence when all sensory attributes related to an experience match each other and align with the product's primary function. However, there is no linear relationship between sensory congruence (from no congruence to full congruence) and effectiveness (Fürst *et al.*, 2021). In some cases, partial congruence (i.e., the alignment of some sensory attributes, but not all, to the products' primary function) is enough to reach the same effectiveness as full congruence. Extending these findings, we argue that the (in)congruence of a pseudo-haptic color cue will dominate over the (in)congruence of the products' color. So far, we have conducted two studies to confirm this. A first study with a 4 (red pseudo-haptic, blue pseudo-haptic, red product, blue product) x 1 between-subjects experimental design examines these visual cues in isolation ($N = 237$; $M_{age} = 46.20$; $SD_{age} = 12.27$; 54.4% women). The participants watched a video of a product visualization in VR, in which a blanket was touched by a virtual hand. They were asked to rate the perceived temperature of the blanket (as a manipulation check), the perceived ability of the blanket to maintain their body heat (as a measure of the consequence of product use), and their overall product evaluation. The results show support for the superiority of pseudo-haptics: the blanket's ability to maintain consumers' body temperature was rated higher in the red pseudo-haptic condition than in the red product condition. Conversely, it was rated lower in the blue pseudo-haptic condition than in the blue product condition. The product's thermal ability, in turn, influences product evaluations. These results were supported in a second experimental study with a 2 (pseudo-haptic: red vs. blue) x 2 (product color: red vs. blue) between-subjects design ($N = 213$; $M_{age} = 45.53$; $SD_{age} = 13.28$; 59.2% women) that mimicked the first study's design. When both cues were present, the pseudo-haptic color once more dominated over the product color.

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Planet First, Unless It's on Sale: A Cross-Cultural and Intergenerational Study to Examine Moral Decoupling and Disengagement in Green Purchasing Behavior

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Positioned within the behavioral literature on moral decoupling and disengagement, this study provides theoretical insights into the psychological and contextual factors that shape green purchase decision-making in the luxury fashion sector. Three interrelated constructs are examined: (1) moral decoupling – separating ethical concerns from product evaluation; (2) moral disengagement – deactivating moral self-regulation through justification mechanisms i.e. blaming others; denial of harm; and (3) norm activation – internalizing personal and social norms driving pro-environmental behavior. Consumers are increasingly guided by moral considerations in their purchasing decisions, with situational concerns shaping their behavior (Sharma & Lal, 2020). Norm activation theory explains how awareness of consequences and ascription of responsibility drive pro-environmental and altruistic actions (Schwartz, 1977; Surira *et al.*, 2025). However, consumers often face dilemmas between self-serving and society-serving choices, leading to behaviors such as moral decoupling, where moral concerns are separated from consumption decisions to prioritize personal or economic benefits (Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2019; Bhattacharjee *et al.*, 2012). Within the field of organizational behavior and psychology, it has been highlighted that these inner conflicts are often resolved through moral disengagement; cognitive mechanisms individuals use to rationalize behavior that serves their own interests at the expense of the greater good—for example, by displacing responsibility, attributing blame to others, or dehumanizing those affected. Given the limited research on moral decoupling and disengagement in sustainable luxury retailing, a two-phase mixed-method design is adopted. Phase one uses semi-structured interviews with Gen Z and Gen Y consumers to build a conceptual model, proposing anticipated emotions as a mediator between personal norms and pro-environmental behavior, while pre-testing and refining hypotheses. Phase two surveys 1,000 consumers across two countries to test these hypotheses and assess cultural influences. PLS-SEM is used to provide cross-cultural and cross-generational insights into sustainable purchase behaviors. The findings aim to provide insights into the drivers, challenges, and consequences faced by luxury fashion retailers, with a view to addressing the persistent attitude–behavior gap in luxury fashion retailing.

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A Greater Need for Inclusive Servicescapes: Companions to Shoppers with Disabilities as a Vulnerable Population

For many shoppers with disabilities, a visit to the mall is not a solo journey - companions act as mediators of inclusion, shaping every aspect of the servicescape experience. Yet, their own perspectives on servicescapes (Bitner, 1992) and retail atmospherics (Kotler, 1973) remain largely overlooked. Previous studies on retail atmospherics (Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020; Vilnai-Yavetz *et al.*, 2021) and services and sales for people with disabilities (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017) rarely intersect (Edwards *et al.*, 2018; Kuppelwieser, 2025), despite 1.3 billion people globally (16%) living with significant disabilities (WHO, 2025). Prior research notes the supportive role of other customers (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020) and examines shopping companions in general (Borges *et al.*, 2010; Chebat *et al.*, 2014) but overlooks the specific experiences of companions to shoppers with disabilities, even when examining such shoppers (e.g., Vilnai-Yavetz *et al.*, 2024). Although Edwards *et al.* (2018) acknowledge their role in retailing, the focus is on reducing dependence on companions through inclusive design, instead of understanding the challenges they face (in contrast to healthcare research that examined companions' (e.g., parents of children with disabilities; O'Loughlin *et al.*, 2024) experiences). Yet to our knowledge, no servicescape or atmospherics studies have directly examined the perspective of companions to individuals with disabilities. Using a mixed-methods design, 143 British mall visitors who had accompanied a shopper with a disability completed an online survey via Prolific. The questionnaire measured perceived quality of traditional mall atmospherics (design, social, and ambient) which have been shown to influence consumer behavior (e.g., Baker *et al.*, 2002) and new mall atmospherics: accessibility, sustainability and hygiene (49 in total), as well as perceived person–environment fit (Caplan, 1987), and mall visit preferences. 80 respondents also answered open-ended questions on shopper–environment fit. Building on a recent comparison showing that accessibility has an impact on shoppers with, but not on shoppers without, disability (Vilnai-Yavetz *et al.*, 2024), the findings show that the type of atmospherics which have the strongest influence on shoppers who accompany shoppers with disabilities are those with relevance for people with disabilities: accessibility and hygiene. Specifically, for companions, perceived fit with the mall mediates the impact of the perceived quality of accessibility, hygiene, and ambient conditions on preferences to visit the mall. The qualitative data further support the vulnerability of the companions, as reflected in the following quote: "…Some of the shops are not very spacious and can make it difficult to push around the wheelchair comfortably. It also means sometimes you feel like you're blocking the aisles for other people so you're constantly apologizing and trying to stay out of the way which ruins the browsing experience!...". The findings suggest that the need for inclusive servicescapes extends well beyond individuals with disabilities. Companions, too, face challenges and experience frustration in non-inclusive servicescapes. We conclude with design recommendations and practical implications for supporting shoppers with disabilities and their companions.

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Negative Online Consumer Reviews and Purchase Avoidance in E-Commerce: A Narrative Transportation Perspective

Online consumer reviews (OCRs), defined as peer-generated evaluations on e-commerce platforms or third-party websites (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010), play a pivotal role in shaping consumer trust and perceptions of brand and product quality, directly influencing purchase decisions in e-commerce (Bai *et al.*, 2022). Previous studies have predominantly adopted an information-processing approach, emphasizing measurable factors such as review length (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010) and readability (Liu & Park, 2015). However, this perspective overlooks the deeper, subjective nature of OCRs. Beyond serving as informational cues, OCRs often convey personal stories, emotions, and experiences, such as satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a brand or product (Pandey & Singh, 2025). These emotional narratives resonate with readers on a personal level, shaping their perceptions and purchase decisions in ways that transcend rational analysis. Despite their considerable impact, the emotional and experiential dimensions of OCRs remain underexplored in marketing literature, necessitating an interpretive approach to fully understand their influence. This study applies narrative transportation theory to explore how negative features in OCRs influence purchase avoidance among consumers who read them. Negative OCRs are the focus of this research because they tend to have a stronger impact on consumer decisions. Consumers often give greater attention to negative comments and perceive them as more credible, as they are seen to signal potential product risks (Lee *et al.*, 2008). Negative OCRs often include narrative elements such as heightened emotional expression, conflict, and storytelling techniques, which enhance their persuasive power (Van Laer *et al.*, 2014). According to narrative transportation theory, readers of negative OCRs with narrative features may enter a state of cognitive, emotional, and imaginative immersion, where they feel "carried away" into the narrative world and connect deeply with the commenter's purchase experience (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000). This immersive response can lead to stronger resonance with the negative review and ultimately result in avoidance of purchasing the associated products or brands (Escalas, 2004; Green *et al.*, 2004). As part of a larger collaboration with a major fashion e-tailer in China, this study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine how negative OCRs with narrative features influence consumers' perceived product risks and purchase intentions. In Phase 1, we analyzed a dataset of reviews provided by the research partner using content analysis powered by large language models (LLMs). Preliminary findings identified six key narrative features: *conflicts*, *emotional expression*, *sequence of events*, *sense of detail*, *sensory vividness*, and *story arc*. This phase highlights how negative OCRs engage readers through vivid narratives that go beyond informational content. In Phase 2, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 20 Chinese online shoppers, exploring how these narrative features heightened emotional engagement, amplified perceived product risks, and reduced purchase intentions. This study contributes to the literature by extending narrative transportation theory to the context of negative OCRs and showcasing the role of storytelling in shaping consumer behavior.

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Ecological Guilt Tripping: How the Availability and Evaluability of Individual Carbon Footprints Shapes Emotion, Cognition and Behavior

Political regulation of business activities is often presented as the primary instrument to avert the climate crisis. Ultimately however, all economic activity is guided by consumer decisions because any business that loses its customers' support will cease its activities rather sooner than later. Providing consumers with information about their individual carbon footprints (ICFs) currently is a hotly debated approach to nudge consumers towards assuming responsibility for their decisions' ecological consequences. While successfully shifting demand towards less carbon-intensive alternatives is the crucial test, undesired side effects on the emotional and cognitive level must be tested as well. In six experiments (total *N* = 3,040), we show that the mere availability of the individual carbon footprint does not sufficiently target high-footprint consumers but elicits negative emotions in low-footprint consumers as well. Only social comparisons make carbon footprints evaluable enough to create a targeted intervention. Moreover, while ICF feedback neither changes consumers' beliefs about climate change nor their perceived responsibility for its mitigation, it aligns emotional and cognitive responses such that those experiencing negative emotions vis-à-vis their ecological impact are also less skeptical about climate change and feel more responsible for climate action. Finally, ICF feedback generally prompts intentions to change consumption patterns leading to a reduction of carbon footprints by about 10%. Additionally, the availability of reference points (either social or technical) shifts contingencies from the past impact (in terms of ICFs) towards the emotional reaction to the feedback. That is, increasing the evaluability of the feedback seems to get consumers on the emotional route to behavior change while less evaluable feedback puts them on a more fact-based route to the same destination. In sum, providing consumers with information about their ICF appears to be a viable approach to reduce consumers' impact on the environment. Furthermore, allowing consumers to compare their ICF with others best calibrates emotional responses on the actual impact. Such a calibration is not only desirable to avoid haphazard scaremongering but also because consumers' reasoning about climate change is strongly related to their emotional reactions.