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Retail futures: Customer experience, phygital retailing, and the Experiential Retail Territories perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the existing literature on the evolution of the physical retail space and its effect on customer experience (CX). Reflecting on previous research in the retail CX field, we explore the impact of accelerated change on the role of physical stores and the likely progression of CX management in the context of integrated physical and digital channels in the fashion retail domain. Qualitative exploratory research was conducted with industry experts using semi-structured interviews to reveal insights and projections regarding phygital retail and CX evolution. The Experiential Retail Territories (ERT) framework is introduced as a new perspective on the future of fashion retailing.

1. Introduction

Retailing is dynamic and radically affected by sociotechnological change. Although the COVID-19 pandemic fostered consumer expectation for integrated online and offline retail, contemporary estimates suggest that 70% of sales (globally) still occur in physical space (Euromonitor, 2024). Despite the onslaught of lockdowns, changing work patterns, online retail growth, geopolitical instability, and increasing cost structures associated with traditional formats, many commentators (e.g., BoF, 2022; Gauri et al., 2021) argue that physical stores remain more important in shaping customer experience (CX), while being untethered from their traditionally economic (purchase) and functional (channel) roles: ‘Store environments will be less about selling products and more about providing enriching, emotional, ethereal, and exclusive experiences’ (Martin Raymond, Co-founder, The Future Laboratory; Scott and Harkin, 2023).

Experiential value in physical retail space is different and unique; the ‘ability of the store to morph and evolve is considered a prerequisite in store design with an emphasis on flexibility, integration, and entertainment’ (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020:3). Retail technologies are pervasive enablers of store evolution (Ylilehto et al., 2021) and influence CX delivery in increasingly integrated retail spaces.

Omnichannel operations by retailers and habitual online shopping behaviour are the post-pandemic new normal (Bruce et al., 2023). Physical stores can heighten CX via differentiated retail environments, as demonstrated by the Burberry Open Spaces social store in Shenzhen (Fish, 2020) and Zara’s phygital flagship in Madrid (Elizaga and San-Miguel, 2024). With rapid industry changes, the gap between retail practice and academic research casts doubts on the alignment of traditional academic theory with contemporary development (Hänninen et al., 2021). More nuanced and interdisciplinary conceptions will help advance CX and retail research in relevant directions (Batat, 2022; Chevtchouk et al., 2021).

This paper answers the call for CX exploration in different contexts, including customer interactions with service firms in offline environments (Bruce et al., 2023; Klaus and Kuppelwieser, 2023). It also responds to suggestions for further research that question the extent to which physical retail space remains central to CX value generation (Babin et al., 2021). Thus, establishing novel ways to organise physical retail space is necessary (Gauri et al., 2021; Grewal et al., 2017). Empirical consumer and retailer perspectives on this topic remain deficient (Bäckström and Johansson, 2017; Bruce et al., 2023; Poorrezaei et al., 2023), especially within the physical fashion retail context, with nuances concerning tactile, sensory, and hedonic needs. Alexander and Blazquez Cano’s (2020) reinvention and reimagination of physical store space in an omnichannel fashion context makes a valuable contribution to the field and allows us to reflect on their research considering the global pandemic shock five years on.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on the evolution of physical retail space and its effect on CX management by introducing the territorological perspective, which is broadly discussed across academic disciplines (Brighenti, 2010; Warnaby, 2018), to re-evaluate retail space

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and place while embracing re-envisioned CX within phygital retailing. This novel exploratory empirical study applies the Experiential Retail Territories (ERT) framework (Alexander, 2024), providing academics and practitioners with new perspectives on this constantly evolving topic.

This paper begins with a literature review, providing an overview of retail space and its connection to CX, moving to a conceptual progression from omnichannel to phygital retail, and tracing the ERT concept as a new way of considering retail space. An account of the inductive industry practitioner research methodology is then followed by a discussion of the qualitative findings and their implications for retailers vis-à-vis the physical retail space. Finally, limitations and avenues for future research are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Retail space and customer experience

Historically, the conceptualisation of *'servicescape'* (Bitner, 1992) acknowledges that retail service experiences can add materiality and control to abstract in-store atmospheres, positively influencing consumers' evaluations of products and services. While contributing to the understanding of CX in retail contexts, many early CX discussions focus primarily on the effects of physical retail selling environments on consumer behaviour (Hänninen et al., 2021) and are based on task-related, utilitarian shopping experiences rather than on hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Additionally, earlier studies did not fully consider the social dimensions of servicescape (Verhoef et al., 2009), and lacked holistic approaches to CX management (CXM), including CX design, orchestration, and evaluation (Alexander, 2024), since they were conducted in the era before online retailing disrupted the industry. CX is no longer bounded by store space but is impacted by combinations of experience across evolving channels during the purchase journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Retail scholars deepened the understanding of online and multichannel customer behaviour (Verhoef et al., 2009), while CX and CXM gained increasing interest from both practitioners and scholars, leading to a growing understanding of the significance of channel coalescence across customer journeys (Verhoef et al., 2015); however, the progressive role of physical stores vis-à-vis channel proliferation is often overlooked.

2.2. Spatial retail experiences: from omnichannel to phygital retail

Increasing attention regarding how retailers integrate and harness their offline and online channels (Bustamante and Rubio, 2017; Huré et al., 2017) emphasised the importance of managing total CX across the purchase journey to create value and competitive advantage and improve customer satisfaction and loyalty (Bruce et al., 2023), resulting in the recognition of CX as strategically important. The shift from the retailer-provider perspective to consumer-centric conceptions of CX has resulted in a growing body of research on the contemporary omnichannel context (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Roggeveen et al., 2020) and blended experiences during the purchase journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Alexander and Blazquez Cano (2020) emphasised physical stores as a space for innovation, where channels and customer interactions converge, and suggested that the stores' roles have been redefined. They underscored slow retail (based on immersive experiences) and contrasted it with fast retail (based on efficient experiences), anticipating an increased blending of the features and purposes of retail spaces. As a convergence of multiple channels, physical stores become a pivotal reflection of a brand's visual identity, signalling its CX intentions (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020); however, the changing emphasis of stores' roles from sales generation to a space conferring a more holistic contribution to CX remains under-researched (Bruce et al., 2023; Poorrezaei et al., 2023).

The digitalisation of the retail industry is transforming the role of physical stores from a place to transact to a showroom where social interactions occur, which can be attributed to the development of online retailing that enabled different and more meaningful CXs (Hänninen et al., 2021). Moreover, the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is paving the way for more empathetic and personalised customer journey experiences (Alexander, 2024). Klaus (2021:1) conceptualises 'phygitality' as a new form of 'hybrid consumption experience', integrating customer interactions online and offline and combining elements of both digital and physical experiences (Batat, 2022; Lee et al., 2024). Perceived as a merging, holistic, and integrative multidimensional ecosystem, phygital CX aligns a retailer's resources with those of its customers, resulting in a co-created experience (Jacob et al., 2023). The holistic aspect is deemed important in a contemporary understanding of phygital retail to avoid limiting the construct to channels and seeing phygital as 'a part' of CX. Rather, phygitality is viewed as a customer-centric approach that extends beyond purchase and channel (e.g., Batat, 2022; Bonfanti et al., 2023). How phygitality impacts the evolving nature of stores and holistic omnichannel customer journey in the post-pandemic era warrants further investigation.

Traditionally, in retail business, the terms place and space are interchangeable. Cheetham et al. (2018:4) propose that the 'complex kaleidoscopic nature of a place' should be celebrated, building on Agnew's (1987) three-way definition of place, which joins *location*, a fixed point on the earth's surface; *locale*, the physical social setting; and *sense of place*, subjective and emotional attachments ascribed to places. This proposition differentiates place from space, with place conceived as 'space invested with meaning' (Cresswell, 2015:19). As a more abstract concept than place, space is detached from physical and cultural connections (Gieryn, 2000).

Various disciplines are based on broad spatial, temporal, and social perspectives; however, retail scholars have traditionally focused on the materiality of store location as branded and boundaried space (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Through a physical retail lens, consumers have been viewed as passive recipients of goods and services (De-Juan-Vigaray and Seguí, 2019); however, this traditional view of physical retail lacks contemporary relevance where phygital approaches create new virtual and physical territories that blend, collide, morph, merge, and evolve, enhanced and enabled by retail technology (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020; Crewe, 2013). Today, 'the role of physical stores is less purely transactional and more about providing a touchpoint between consumers and products and building the brand narrative through services and experiences' (Euromonitor, 2023: 44).

2.3. The notion of territory in retail customer experience

The notion of territory is introduced into a non-binary sense of place (Crewe, 2013), with a more nuanced understanding of place and space. For example, Brighenti (2010:53) argues that territory is 'not an absolute concept but is better conceived as an act or practice rather than an object or physical space'. It has both expressive and functional components, formed by human and institutional relations, where the boundaries of territory become a series of enactments, reinforcements, interpretations, and negotiations (Brighenti, 2010).

The conventional understanding of place as a consumption site (Kärrholm, 2012) changes with the new perspective; thus, place acquires broader socio-material and relational attributes. The territorial perspective captures the proliferation of borders and mobilities (Brighenti, 2014) and their fluid practices (Lambach, 2020), with retail territories evolving, where social space and action become inextricable, as part of a person's lived experience in embodied spaces (Cohen, 2007).

The evolution from singular, separate retail channels (places) to interwoven sets of digital and real-life spaces (Lambach, 2020) reflects this fluid and adaptable practice. Retail territories emerge at the intersection of digital, physical, and social realms (Alexander, 2024; Bolton et al., 2018), where new possibilities emerge, facilitated by technologies such as augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), AI, and the Internet of

Things (Calvo et al., 2023; Ylilehto et al., 2021). The evolution of retailing beyond omnichannel is conceived by Alexander (2024) as ERT, aligning with recent recognition that phygitality transcends omnichannel management and requires retailers to extend beyond bounded channel logic to fully realise the potential of phygitality for CXM (Batat, 2022; Klaus, 2021). This progression through mono-, multi-, and omnichannel towards 'beyond channel' retail is visualised in Fig. 1.

Batat (2022:10) defines phygital as 'a holistic and integrative ecosystem that adopts a consumer standpoint as a starting point and integrates a combination of physical, human, digital, and media content elements, platforms, technologies and extended realities; the goal of phygital is to offer unique and compelling CX that guarantee a coherent continuum in the delivery process of consumer value provided from digital to physical and vice versa'. Conceptually embracing phygital retailing, the idea of retail territory articulates spaces as places of passage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987)—hybrid, dynamic, and open with interconnecting flows (see Fig. 2)—transcending the idea of channel convergence in the pursuit of an economic transaction. A holistic retail experience in integrated territories that facilitates new customer communities that lack psychic or spatial boundaries (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017; Pusceddu et al., 2023) is imagined for the future of retail, where value is measured in non-financial terms. This aligns with Ibrahim (in Raymond, 2023), who considers omnichannel to be an outdated and technically oriented concept and encourages brands to consider how they are positioned in 'fourth space' that blurs home, work, leisure, entertainment streaming, and retail ecosystems via fluid and integrated technology. It also concurs with Pine's (2023) assertion that while reality will always offer the richest experiences, companies must focus on designing virtual experiences unbounded by physical and temporal realities.

Alexander (2024) characterises ERT using the following terms: multiplicity, complexity, temporality, socio-relationality, intersectionality, non-linearity, liminality, dematerialised, customised, co-created, cognitive, affective, emotional, behavioural, social, personal, and subjective (see Fig. 3), while considering the notion of interior, intermediary, exterior, and annexed milieus (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) to outline the spatial relationships within ERT. This contemporary conceptual development enables reflective applications to gauge the utility of the ERT framework in a current fashion retail context.

Technology continues to shape the context of ERT and related CX (Gauri et al., 2021), with innovation creating novel spatial touchpoints. However, the foundations of value creation in retail space arguably remain constant (Babin et al., 2021), simultaneously satisfying utilitarian and hedonic shopping value while delivering immersive or convenient experiences (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020; Gauri et al., 2021). Therefore, the physical territory becomes an experience-based hub, connecting touchpoints, facilitating seamless integration, CX, and value creation, and challenging the locus of retailers' value proposition, creation, and delivery (Alexander and Kent, 2022; Jocevski, 2020).

Notably, the literature concerning retail space, CX, retail channel development, and the phygital interplay between them is synthesised to form a narrative of retail transformation and evolution accelerated by technological innovation and consumer behaviour changes, leading to two research questions: 1. How are physical stores and their designs evolving within fashion retailing? 2. What is the likely direction of CXM in the interplay between physical and digital fashion retail settings? The subsequent conceptualisation of the ERT framework reflects the development of contemporary thinking about the role of physical retail space in CX creation and delivery and allows us to assess its utility. By applying a more fluid ERT concept to fashion retail places and spaces, the likely evolution of the role of physical space in the context of phygital fashion retail strategies can be considered.

3. Methods

Responding to Bruce et al.'s (2023) call for CX exploration in different contexts, this interpretative study aims to provide a holistic understanding of CX evolution in the physical fashion retail setting. An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, which is recognised as appropriate, important, and beneficial in marketing and retailing research for describing emerging phenomena, assessing meaning, revealing nuanced insights, and developing theory (Alam, 2005; Brown and Dant, 2008; Petrescu and Lauer, 2017). The qualitative approach entailed interviews following a systematic fieldwork process comprising four steps: participant selection and context, interview protocol, data collection, and data analysis (Alam, 2005; Kokho Sit et al., 2018).

3.1. Participant selection and context

The first step involved selecting, identifying, and contacting relevant participants. We recruited 16 'elite' informants for a broad representation (Natow, 2020; Patton, 1990) based on key purposeful criteria, including breadth and depth of retail experience; strategic knowledge

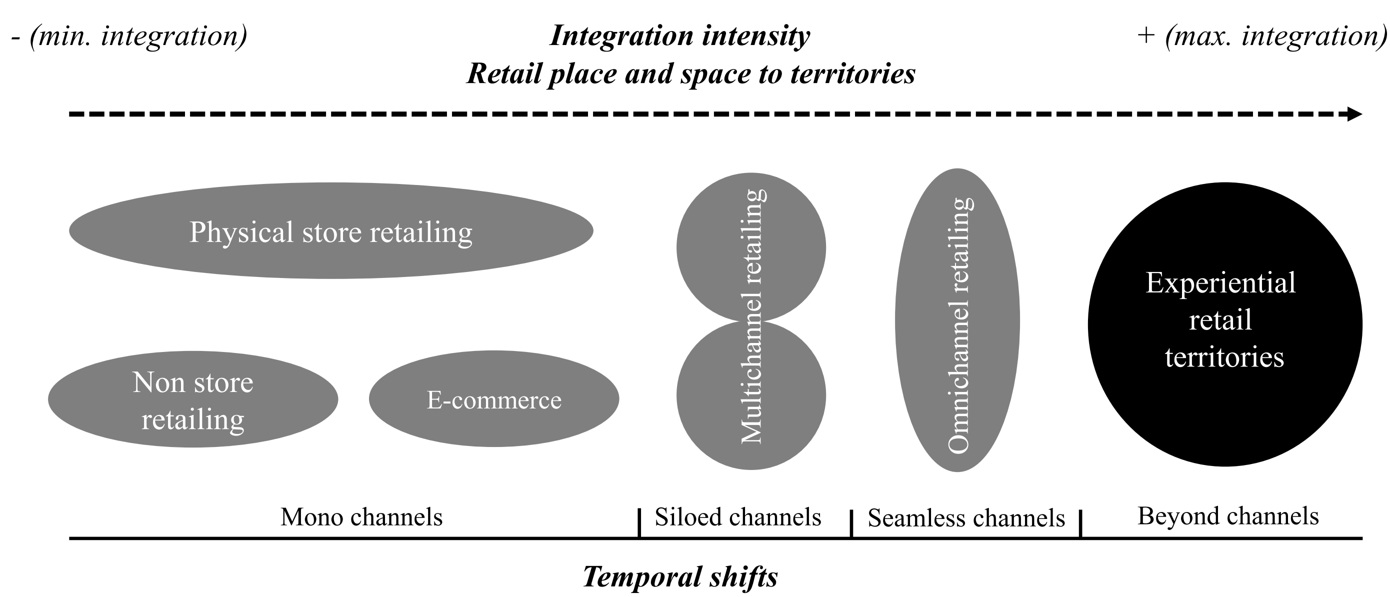

Fig. 1. Retail futures – Experiential Retail Territories Integration (adapted from Alexander, 2024).

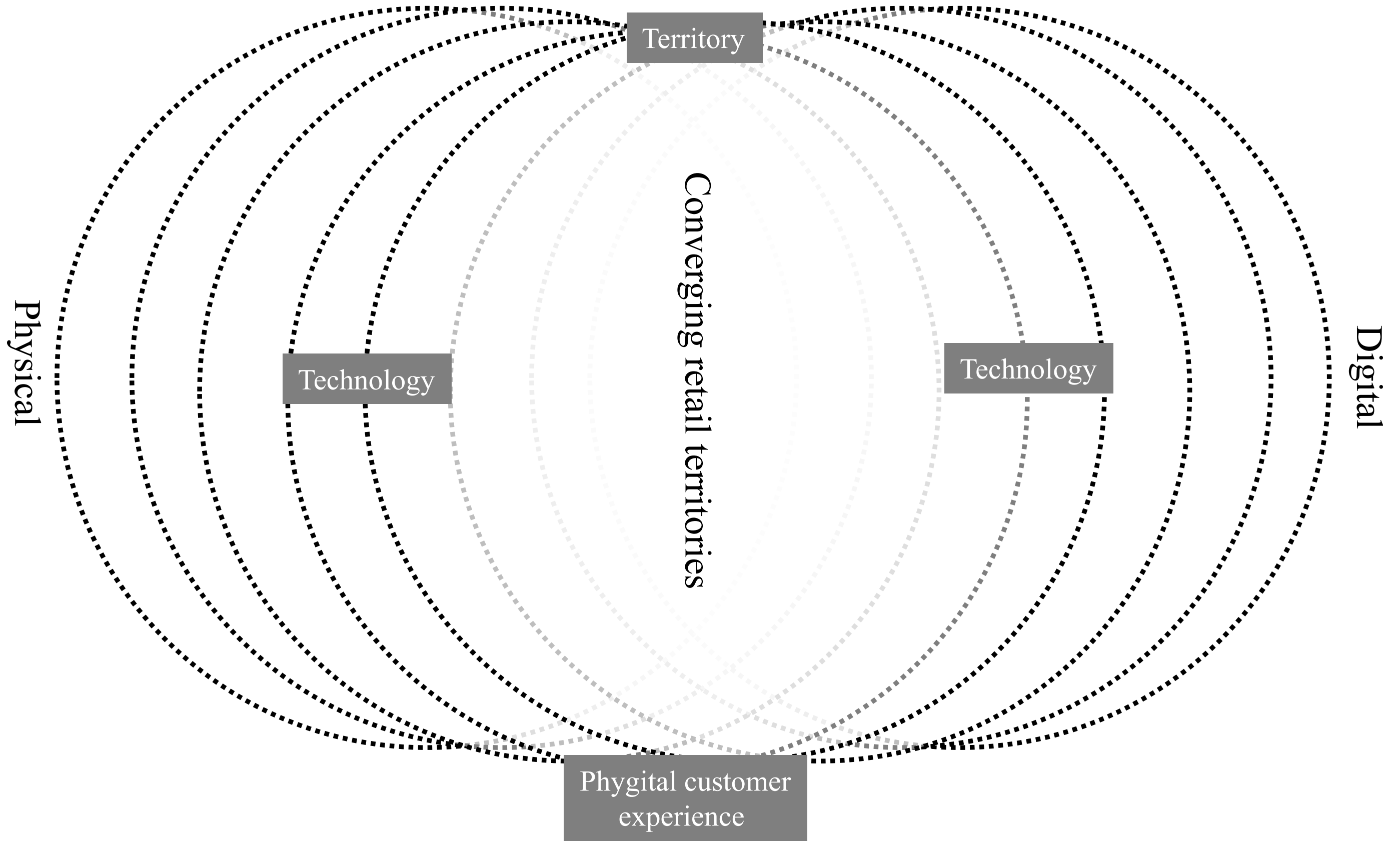

Fig. 2. Retail territories continuum conceptual schema (Alexander, 2024).

and understanding of retail CX creation, management, and/or strategy formation related to the fashion sector; and leadership in designing retail CX (see Table 1). Elite interviews are considered appropriate when specific knowledge and insights based on accumulated lived experience and expertise are required to facilitate engagement between researchers and industry practitioners (Mogali and Nguyen, 2023). Over five decades, many definitions of elite informants have been used by strategic management researchers; for definitional clarification, we adhere to Aguinis and Solarino (2019: 1293), who state that ‘Elite informants are key decision makers who have extensive and exclusive information and the ability to influence important firm outcomes, either alone or jointly with others’. Our informants conformed to this definition; having strategic roles within the retail or fashion retail sector and a vested interest in conceptualising evolutionary themes, they were able to provide in-depth, nuanced perspectives that would have been difficult to achieve using quantitative methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Participants were recruited on LinkedIn through a general call for informants, followed with 30 targeted direct messages, resulting in 16 interview acceptances (53% response rate). All participants were based in the UK for their work but were familiar with and/or worked in retailing or fashion retailing internationally. As effective qualitative sample size focuses more on data adequacy than the quantity (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022), no guidelines exist on the sample size necessary to reach data saturation (Farah et al., 2019). Therefore, we follow Hennink and Kaiser’s (2022) recommendation to conduct between 9 and 17 interviews to demonstrate saturation, particularly for relatively homogenous populations and narrowly defined objectives like ours. Data saturation was reached in our study after the fourteenth interview, when sufficient information was collected and additional interviews shed no further incremental insight (Baker and Edwards, 2012; Guest et al., 2006), which is commensurate with similar exploratory studies (Farah et al., 2019; Kokho Sit et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2022; Stanca et al., 2023). Next, each participant was emailed an information and consent form, including an explanation of the research aims, reason for their selection, and expectations of them. Then, they were asked to provide consent for their responses to be collected, recorded, analysed, and quoted in the reporting of the research. Conforming with ethical practices of confidentiality and anonymity, people and company names were redacted and replaced with pseudonyms (i.e., P1-16).

3.2. Interview protocol

An interview protocol was used to ensure consistency in the succeeding data analysis and improve the reliability of the results (Alam, 2005). Pursuant to existing guidance, the interview protocol was constructed from themes derived from the literature (McCracken, 1988) (see Table 2). It entailed participants’ details and semi-structured open and broad interview questions to encourage discussion and retain focus on the research questions, allowing for in-depth exploration and probing of related topics (Silverman, 2014). Given that the ERT construct succeeds the data collection period, it was not included in the design of the interview questions relating to RQ1 and RQ2 but was used to reflect on its suitability to frame and advance our understanding of future retail CX. The protocol was tested in a pilot study that was not included in the sample, presenting an opportunity for review and revision prior to usage; no modifications were required (Alam, 2005).

3.3. Data collection

Following the accepted practice of elite interviewing, the interview format was kept semi-structured to enable flexibility and give informants the opportunity to share their views freely (Alam, 2005). Informant responses determined the sequence of questions and level of probing, enabling some deviation from the interview framework. The interviews were conducted in English, lasted approximately 1 h, were either screen-facilitated or face-to-face, and were audio-recorded,

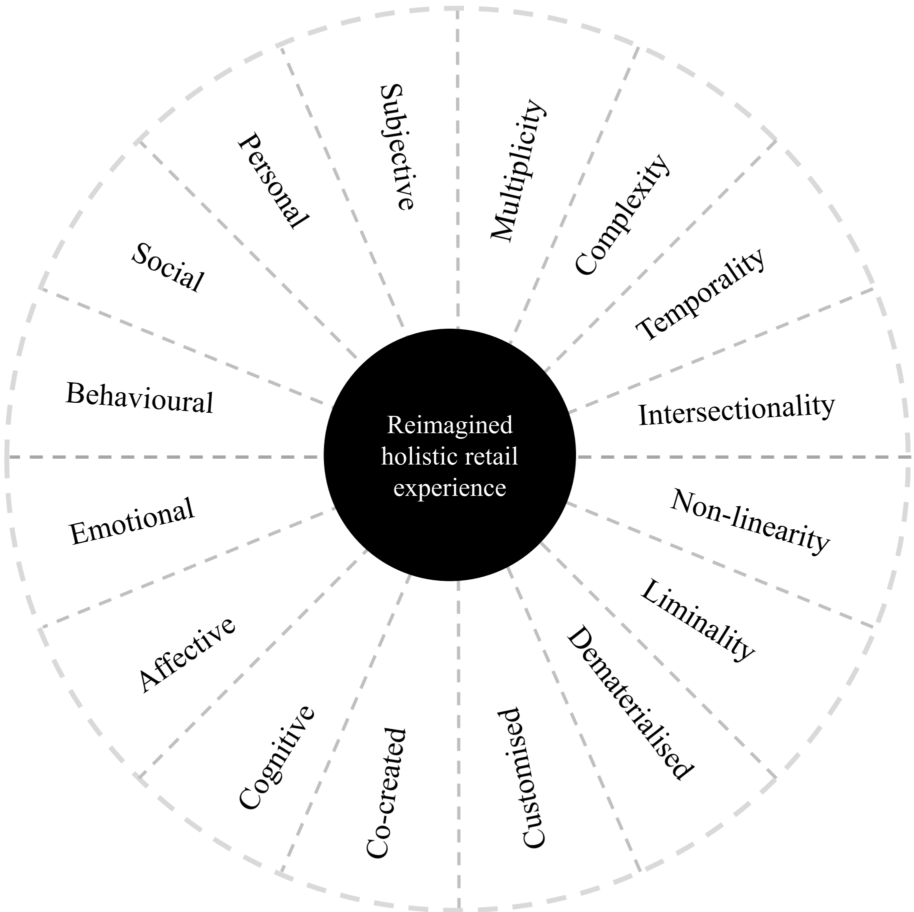

Fig. 3. Reimagined holistic retail experience characterisation (Alexander, 2024).

Table 1
Elite interviewees.

Informant code	Informant role	Company type
P1	Strategy Director	Retail brand strategy consultancy
P2	Executive Strategy Director and Co-founder	Retail and brand creative consultancy
P3	Trends Director	Retail Innovation agency
P4	Head of Innovation	Innovation agency
P5	Senior Strategist	Retail and brand creative studio
P6	Changemaker and Strategist	Fashion consultancy
P7	Head of Customer Experience and Brand Partnerships	Retail development company
P8	Global Retail Advisor	Consultancy
P9	Partner and Strategist	Management consultancy
P10	Retail Consultant	Consultancy
P11	Chief Retail Thinker	Consultancy
P12	Brand and Commercial Director	Luxury accessories company
P13	Managing Director	Premium department store
P14	Global Head of Campaigns	Luxury online retailer
P15	Global Brand Manager	Premium skincare brand
P16	Chief Creative Officer	Retail and brand creative consultancy

wherefrom full transcripts were produced, comparable with similar studies (Farah et al., 2019; Kokho Sit et al., 2018; Tyrväinen et al., 2020). Most interviews occurred between 2020 and 2021, when speculation about the future of retail stores was pronounced in both mainstream and industry-specific media. Transcripts were returned to participants for data verification and enhancement of the construct validity of the research (Alam, 2005).

3.4. Data analysis

Following an accepted process of reflective thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017), an emergent analytical procedure was employed, allowing oscillation between the literature, data collection, and iterative processes of interpretation. To ensure validity, transcripts were systematically read and analysed by both authors, who coded the data independently (Richards, 2005). A three-phase coding process was employed. The first round used eight deductive codes generated from the initial reading of the transcripts and research questions. The second round involved a combination of descriptive, conceptual, and in vivo coding to retain informant voice (Saldana, 2021). The resultant codes with $\leq$15% support (2 occurrences) were discounted or amalgamated with other similar codes. Notably, 125 codes were identified and grouped into 22 categories cross-checked and agreed upon by both authors (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019); no relevant new codes nor categories were found in the data, and no further contribution to the study phenomenon was established (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). The thematic analysis process (codes-categories-themes) is presented in Appendix A. Theme names were derived from the agreed 22 categories. The detection of similar words and expressions that formed the identified categories was counted to add a frequency dimension to the thematic analysis to support the strength of opinion about themes. This systematic process ensured data adequacy for theoretical development and demonstrated content validity (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). Accordingly, findings related to the progressive role of physical stores and channel interplay and ERT-related aspects (Alexander, 2024) were identified, presented,

Table 2
Interview protocol.

Theme	Literature antecedents	Example interview questions
Theme 1: Progressive evolution of the physical store	Call for new conceptions of role of store (Bruce et al., 2023). Role of store in phygital retailing (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020; Babin et al., 2021; Bruce et al., 2023; Gauri et al., 2021; Hänninen et al., 2021) Slow/enhanced and fast/convenient physical retail experience (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020; Gauri et al., 2021). Bounded and controlled space (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).	What is the role of the physical store now and in the future? How does phygital retail impact the role, form, characteristics of the physical store now and in the future? How does technology impact the role of the physical store now and in the future? What does retail CX mean to you and how might CX evolve as the role of the physical store evolves? Which retailers do you consider innovative in terms of retail evolution? What have they (retailers) done differently and why is this important? How have consumer attitudes and behaviours changed and how is this influencing physical retail now and in the future? How has the channel dynamic changed, online and offline, and how do you think it will evolve in the future?
Theme 2: Interplay of physical with digital channels in CXM creation	Channel integration facilitated by technology (Bruce et al., 2023; Bustamante and Rubio, 2017; Gauri et al., 2021; Huré et al., 2017; Lambach, 2020; Ylilehto et al., 2021). Omnichannel progression to phygital (Batat, 2022; Belghiti et al., 2018; Bolton et al., 2018; Bonfanti et al., 2023; Gauri et al., 2021; Klaus, 2021; Lee et al., 2024). Consumer-centric CXM (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020; Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Klaus and Kuppelwieser, 2023; Roggeveen et al., 2020).	How do you see the store evolving with the integration of online and offline? How is omnichannel retailing and CX evolving now and in the future? What role do different stakeholders play in retail CX creation and how might this evolve in the future? Which fashion retailers come to mind as best practice for phygital retailing and CXM optimisation? Why? Which in-store (customer-facing) technologies are likely to accelerate to facilitate CX? Why? How do you think the in-store CX will change in the future? How are front line service interactions and services offered evolving? What are your predictions for physical retail within the evolving retail ecosystem and CXM?

and discussed according to the research questions outlined in the next section. Excerpts from verbatim texts were used to illustrate the themes, gain interpretive understanding, and contribute to the soundness of the research (Miles and Huberman, 2013; Patton, 1990).

3.5. Quality criteria

We adhered to the criteria suggested by Fischer and Guzel (2023) in evaluating research quality. *Conversational clarity* is enhanced by situating our study in the extant literature and forming relevant RQs. *Procedural transparency* is evidenced by the consistent application of the interview protocol, accurate interview transcriptions, which were member-checked, and objective coding of transcript contents, thereby improving its trustworthiness, rigor, and potential replicability (Pratt et al., 2020). *Contextual grounding* is ensured through descriptions and quotes from interviews, emphasising informants' viewpoints while minimising researcher interpretation bias. *Conceptual caliber* is established by reconceptualising existing constructs, such as advancement beyond omnichannel retailing logic towards ERT. Finally, while qualitative research is not intended to be generalised, as its value is in generating in-depth, subjective insights that build theory (Crick, 2021), we propose that *conceptual transferability* to a delimited set of contexts is demonstrated, thereby strengthening the credibility of our study.

4. Results and discussion

The findings are grouped into three sections. First, findings relating to the progressive role of physical stores (RQ1) are presented, with 4 key themes derived from 13 categories developed in the thematic analysis (see Table 3). Next, the results for channel integration, phygital retailing, and CXM creation (RQ2) are expounded and captured under four key themes derived from nine categories (see Table 4). Finally, applying the ERT theoretical framework, we use all 22 categories to advance our understanding of future retail places and spaces.

4.1. The evolution of physical stores within fashion retailing

Our findings indicate that the role of retail stores in the fashion sector is advancing in four main directions: accelerated evolution, importance of frontline staff, exceptional experience provider, and value creation and measurement (see Table 3).

The strongly supported expression *brand world* suggests a holistic consideration of store space within an evolving ecosystem that connects consumers and brands, as opposed to static space that can only deliver specific characteristics. The related categories of localisation and fluidity emphasise these findings from a consumer-centric perspective. The store is embraced as a curated point of presence of the brand-consumer relationship, irrespective of size, location, format, or mono- or multi-brand: '*It is the ability to connect with the consumer at a deeper level, where you express your values to them as a brand and as a company .....the store of the future for me, it is got to be less, but physically less with the store itself, and more about "come in and discover my brand'"* (P8). Therefore, stores play a central role in a customer's journey (Jacob et al., 2023), resulting in the enhancement of the brand-consumer relationship rather than the necessity of purchase (Pine, 2023). The example of the retailer Next retaining loss-making stores (measured traditionally on profit/square foot) highlights a broader nuance regarding the experiential value of stores to customers and retailers. Alexander and Blazquez Cano (2020) find retail format proliferation and innovation to be an important trajectory for stores, whereas our findings emphasise space optimisation based on store operation challenges, such as increasing running costs, applying relevant metrics, and the need for store space to be fluid: '*Maybe smaller spaces, but with digital technologies that actually have much wider reach in the local community*' (P5). Our results align closely with Alexander and Blazquez Cano's (2020:5) theme of 'shifting from scalability to appropriateness' and Cheetham et al.'s (2018) vision of kaleidoscope place with a detachment from physicality (Gieryn, 2000). Fluidity emerged strongly in our findings, *with the iterative themes of agility, adaptability, flexibility, and mobility* in space, location, and time: '*so modular fit out is definitely something we are seeing … it gives brands flexibility to pop-up in locations in the short term*' (P7). Our findings add a temporal dimension to fluidity and a sense of adaptability and experimentation, where locale (Agnew, 1987) becomes the driver of nuanced brand presentation. Examples of successful localisation include the

Table 3
Progressive role of the physical store.

Themes (4)	Categories (13)	Indicative quotations
Evolution of the store	Brand world	'Smart [fashion] brands are going to think about the brand world and what that means for their sensory landscape' (P1)
	Localisation	'With physical spaces we're going to see much more awareness of locality' (P16)
	Fluidity	'We talk about it [retail] being borderless, but just more fluid' (P5)
	Store as service delivery hub	'Talking about the store as becoming more of these delivery hubs' (P2)
	Store design	'Particularly in fashion, there will be a more minimalistic approach to how we display things enabling people to find the thing they are looking for … probably digitally enabled as well' (P1)
Importance of frontline staff	Changing role of frontline staff	'I would like fashion assistants to have encyclopaedic knowledge of what's happened in the shows, what the trends are, what the investment buys are' (P16)
	Understanding the customer mindset	'So, your in-store experience is not just going to be a sales staff offering you great advice and great training, great information. It is going to be how the visual merchandising looks; how easy it is to spot and read what it is you are coming to the store for' (P8).
Provider of exceptional experiences	Exceptional experiences over and above online	'And I like to think about the difference between services being time well saved and experiences being time well spent. Some stores that I think have really amped experience' (P9).
	Social and community experiences	'So, the role of the store is to kind of curate spaces for their community and locality, and then there'll be this kind of overarching temporary space, which is where the pop-up comes in' (P11)
	Specific store-based features	'This thing about becoming a home and becoming the space that just was changing and growing and linked to culture and to art' (P2).
Creating and measuring value of stores	Value creation in physical space	'That [sports fashion retailer] is somebody that understands that their store is adding value' (P10)
	Optimisation of store space	'A lot of retailers could just benefit from the mantra of fewer, better, more agile, more experiential' (P9).
	Measuring the value of stores	'The big challenge for brands is being able to prove the value of their space' (P7).

Table 4
Channel interplay and CX.

Themes (4)	Categories (9)	Indicative quotations
Phygital retail	Placing the store as central in phygital delivery	'Experience of the store with all the advances in technology that are going to allow for me to interact with the digital space' (P4).
	Synergies between channels within omnichannel	'That combined with a really compelling digital offer means that you have got synergy between the two which really is working for us' (P13).
	Channel integration	'We are talking about true experiential and obviously all that kind of tech and digital integration' (P6).
	Accelerating acceptance of online shopping	'There has not been a massive shift in how people are shopping with us. Obviously, different people do it in different ways. Some people come in store and buy online, and they might have researched online and come in store; some of that you can track, some of it you can't' (P12).
Digitally enhanced experiences	Technology-enabled experiences	'However, technology is indeed important where it is offering a solution to a problem, where it serves a purpose to make it more fluid then yes' (P8).
Consumer-centricity	Understanding the customer within their purchase journey	'What kind of experiences do people want now and how does that differ from a Monday to a Saturday, from July to December, when they are with their kids, when they are with their partners, when they are alone?' (P9).
	Consumer expectation of omnichannel	'Omnichannel is not a consumer facing term. They do not see, or the way that they experience a brand at retail, they do not make that distinction between social media, online and this physical store. They want to pick it up and carry on that journey across all those things. They see it as one single journey' (P5).
	Convenience	'That sense of convenience especially if you can try it on, that ability to go in because you want something specific, you're trying to get hold of it and just get it done' (P6).
Personalisation	Personalisation and deepening customer-brand relationships	'So, you can really nurture and develop that relationship and feed them other things that are relevant as well' (P12).

department store Nordstrom, fashion multi-brand Flannels, and shoe brand Melissa.

Half of the informants mentioned stores' roles as integrated *service delivery hubs*, as expressed by P13: '*The store as a service hub, the store as immersive entertainment, the store as a brand billboard, all of these elements that are part of the magic of stores in this era where everyone can shop online*'. Regarding store design, it was suggested that operational delivery options should be integrated into store layouts (e.g., *delivery hatches* or lockers), indicating their more significant utilitarian roles for fashion stores than previously found (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020). Zara and H&M were mentioned as spearheads, embracing utilitarian aspects of service delivery within an overall hedonistic retail design. The sensory nature of stores emerged in various ways, including the need for less sensory overload, clearer navigation, and a reflection of post-pandemic feelings about physical retail space. Stores' roles as *educators* and *facilitators of customer creativity* were also mentioned, for example (P14): '*Retail and fashion specifically, is that it [the store] is not just a commercial enterprise, it is also a creative enterprise*'. The ability of stores to become places of *cultural meaning* expands the literature (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020; Cresswell, 2015) on stores as providers of sociocultural experiences within a brand world unbounded by physical and temporal reality (Pine, 2023).

The next two themes often intertwine; however, many informants spoke specifically of the changing role of frontline staff in relation to both status and expectation of expertise, as expounded by P3: '*More* *hybrid roles for people, I think if you are working in a high fashion store it is probably very likely that you will be in the store sometimes, maybe you will be doing personal styling, at another point maybe you will be the person that actually will be commentating on the shows for the brand, giving a rundown and being in the store broadcasting, kind of doing a SHOWstudio experience … I think that kind of expertise will be so necessary. Particularly in fashion, because very few people shop monogamously*'. Store staff are expected to be *brand ambassadors, empowered,* and able to deliver the highest level of service (including *clienteling*), making greater contributions to stores than the literature suggests. Although our findings reflect those of Alexander and Blazquez Cano (2020) regarding the importance of social and human interaction within CX, increased emphasis was placed on the opportunity for stores to create exceptional experiences beyond those possible online, for example P4: '*I can go there and do something that I cannot do at home … an exploration of how to create more meaningful immersive experiences for consumers that go beyond that simple transaction because none of us need to go [to a store] to transact*'. *Tactile, sensory, and emotional* experiences were considered important for fashion retailing, where the shopping process tends to be hedonistic, as expressed by P10: '*The two unique things about a store are face-to-face interaction with another human and touching the product, and if you try and devalue those too much, there is a danger you throw the baby out with the bath water*'. Chanel and Nike were cited as brand exemplars with empowered retail personnel who used their own knowledge and expertise to underpin excellent CX.

Informant concerns also include the necessity for stores to create value and the challenges associated with measuring their contribution to retail brand value in an omnichannel context. Examples of collaborative initiatives, including the Selfridges x Loanhood clothes swap, or educational workshops (Alexander McQueen) were considered value-adding store-based activities; however, the challenge of measuring the value of stores when online and offline operations are fully integrated and experiences are *emotional* and *subjective* was mentioned but not solved: '*clients will often say, what is the ROI, return on the square footage of the space … they cannot think like that anymore*' (P1). Stores are expected to prove their worth with *embedded technology and data capture* to help them work harder. This builds on Alexander and Blazquez Cano's (2020: 8) theme, 'measuring retail performance within an omnichannel environment', allowing for further conceptualisation in a less operationally defined (as omnichannel) era (Raymond, 2023). Overall, our results support the notion that the progressive role and value of fashion stores are evolving from an economic and transactional perspective to a multifaceted experiential one (Hänninen et al., 2021; Pine, 2023).

4.2. The interplay between the physical store and other channels (retail spaces and places): phygitality and CXM

In response to RQ2, our study uncovered inter-related four key themes: phygital retail, digitally enhanced experiences, consumer centricity, and personalisation (see Table 4).

Our findings concur with Batat's (2022) definition of phygital as a holistic, integrated ecosystem. Placing the store as central in phygital delivery became the strongest category relating to RQ2 mentioned by most informants: an *integration of physical and online*, being *combined, seamless, omnichannel, blended, hybrid and symbiotic*. The *synergy* between physical and online channels was emphasised, for example, P5 stated: '*You need to think about the whole ecosystem and the whole journey and customer experience, and then the ways that it can manifest itself across different channels and different touchpoints, there has to be a singular idea*'. American Eagle was cited as an example of a retailer with a deep understanding of its customers and a high level of channel integration. It was evident that the participants *expected* integrated omnichannel operations, indicating that some considered omnichannel shopping as the *newly adopted consumer behaviour* during the pandemic, as it was used by many. This concurs with Alexander and Blazquez Cano's (2020) channel integration theme but goes further as it is now an *expectation*, with phygitality as the conceptual progression from omnichannel (Batat, 2022; Bonfanti et al., 2023; Klaus, 2021).

Technology, linked to CX, generates another key theme: *digitally enhanced services,* which generally impact CX and facilitate *personalised* digitally enhanced experiences. We additionally found emphasis on specific technologies; for example, *Click and Collect* (buy online, pick up in store) and virtual try-on were seen as relevant bridges between channels for fashion retail: '*More Click-and-Collect and more digital as part of the experience*' (P7). In making the distinction between slow and fast retail, Alexander and Blazquez Cano (2020) find that retail technology provides a convenient or elevated experience; however, our research suggests that technological embeddedness facilitates convenience-related and immersive experiences in the same space, simultaneously: '*There is this thing around convenience but also, it is about joining up*' (P11). In line with Jacob et al.'s (2023) customer-retailer resource alignment notion, informants emphasised the need to be *relevant and reliable*, with Browns Fashion cited as a retailer trying to evaluate which in-store technologies truly add value. An aspect of channel interplay that builds on Alexander and Blazquez Cano (2020) is the *expectation of customers to be understood*. This connects to the role of the store (manifested by frontline staff) and CX itself. Through *accumulated knowledge*, customers expect to be *recognised and respected* as informed shoppers with their *mindset* acknowledged, according to shopping occasion and motivation, including instances requiring *less interaction:* '*And so, sometimes it is also understanding, you know, the mindset … the behaviour … that the people are in*' (P9). Customers' *expectation to have their needs individually met* was mentioned by almost all informants, acknowledging that personalisation requires behind-the-scenes data analysis combined with interpreting needs within physical stores. Personalisation and consumer-centricity are predicted to grow in importance (Roggeveen and Rosengren, 2022), supporting our findings: 'There *is only one channel. It is online and it is offline, my connection and [my] experience with the retailer*' (P8). In line with Ylilehto et al.'s (2021) notion of pervasive retail technologies and emerging innovations in *consumer behaviour tracking* and *learning how to 'read'*, customers are likely to create hyper-personalised, intelligent, and empathetic CX. Although some participants acknowledged that AI will increasingly inform CXM, valued human social interactions transpire in the physical context. Incorporating AI with nuanced human emotional intelligence creates something unique, which is released from the end result of a financial transaction.

4.3. The utility of the ERT framework in advancing the understanding of future retail places and spaces

This study provides an opportunity to gain a holistic understanding of CX evolution in the physical fashion retail setting by applying the ERT construct (Alexander, 2024) to reflect CX progression and anticipate its future development. In the evolution depicted in Fig. 1, ERT transcends multi- and omnichannel to embrace phygital retail. We find that the definition of phygitality (Batat, 2022) closely matches the expressions used by experts to describe the interplay between physical and digital retail channels (Table 4). According to Alexander's (2024) theory, the fluidity, openness, mobility, and porosity of boundaries are at the heart of ERT. In Table 5, we explain ERT characteristics using quotations from our experts to legitimise these dimensions within the fashion context. While broadly corroborating Alexander and Blazquez Cano's (2020) experiential store futures model, our findings suggest that their 'digital zone space' is superseded by phygitality and embraced as a continuous experience through online and offline, with the store reconfigured to a 'multifunctional hybrid place to satisfy shopper plurality' (Alexander, 2024:51). Our findings also suggest that the *distinction* between their slow and fast retail dyads is less pertinent, as retail has morphed towards phygital (Batat, 2022). Meanwhile, ERT more closely conceptualises the non-static and fluid nature of retail space across physical and digital realms, with retail pace being dictated by the customer.

The concept of milieus within territories (Alexander, 2024), which

Table 5
Reimagined holistic retail experience characterisation (Alexander, 2024).

Characteristic	Description	Evidence in findings/ themes	Indicative quotes
Multiplicity	Of interacting channels	Strong	'It is that re-balancing from digital to traditional and finding what is that exact right mix for our brand' (P15)
Complexity	Of management processes/ structures	Some	'[retail] is so complicated and so nuanced' (P6)
Temporality	Continually evolving online and offline presences	Strong	'Just iterating and adaptive to change … experimenting with a lot of change and trying different things' (P9)
Socio-relationality	Connectedness	Some	'I think the role of the store could be the real centre of this experience, culture and community' (P2)
Intersectionality	Interconnected, interdependent	Strong	'Linking up to the digital channel but augmenting it in a way that can't be delivered in the digital space' (P1)
Non-linearity	In the customer journey	Some	'The consumer has normally done their research before they come into the store … or been on social media, Instagram' (P8)
Liminality	Of 'new' in-between spaces, such as pop-ups	Some	'So, the role of the store is to kind of curate spaces for their community and locality, and then there will be this kind of overarching temporary space, which is where the pop-up comes in' (P11)
Dematerialised	Beyond the physical	Strong	'Borderless, but I think things like fluidity and the malleability of the space' (P5)
Customised	Specially tailored or changed to users' needs	Strong	'Bookable brand time about being able to have a more personalised experience in conjunction with using technologies that allow us to set out own tempo' (P3)
Co-created	Between consumer, retailer, others	Strong, especially retailer	'The brand's experience and how we make people feel, how we engage with our customers, how we connect with them through our personal shoppers, our events, our editorial, through our storytelling' (P14)
Cognitive	Responses to the retailer	Some	'Their senses are being delighted, but also that we're feeding their intellect and sense of humour' (P15)
Affective	Responses to the retailer	Strong	'It has to be about an emotional reaction to a brand, about brand building or for people to find some kind of excitement' (P4)
Emotional	Responses to the retailer	Strong	'Humans are the ones that can add value, memories, emotional engagement and a positive feeling' (P10)
Behavioural	Responses to the retailer	Some	'You start to get this mix of the physical, the programmable, we will definitely see store spaces where actually, you will have to go to the store space to access a particular virtual experience' (P16)
Social	Responses to the retailer	Some	'The idea of a store not just being an omnichannel store or a phygital store; a physical and a digital, but also a physio-social store' (P16)
Personal	Person, time and context specific	Strong	'Every time that you visit it might have a different guise, it might have a different muse, it might have a different purpose, a different role' (P5)
Subjective	Person, time and context specific	Strong	'Different types of things that are tailored to suit different customers at different points as well' (P10)

suggests the blending and blurring of boundaries, reflects the thinking of our informants. Their responses, as listed in Table 6, support these interconnected environments. The *interior milieu* constitutes the materialised and inclusive brand world concept. It has spatial and relationship implications where ongoing enactments, interpretations, and negotiations are undertaken (Alexander, 2024), involving front-line staff and interactions with the store itself, and where territorial delineation is viewed as fluid, adaptable practices (Belghiti et al., 2018). The *intermediary milieu* can be connected to social and community relationships, becoming a new reimagining of retail and embracing the process of permeating space with meaning and experience to extend beyond physical confines and to other areas of connectivity (Alexander, 2024; Cresswell, 2015). The *exterior milieu* represents localised space with service delivery connections to the stores' locale, while the *annexed milieu* represents a retail brand's phygitality, combining the materiality of the store with a wider, virtual operation in online retail space(s) (Alexander, 2024). The evolution of physical space and curated experiences (Cresswell, 2015) reflects the interplay between online and offline channels, the complementary role played by stores in the phygital context, and the opportunities for synergies across milieus with ERTs.

5. Conclusion, implications, and future directions for research

This study makes valuable contributions to the under-researched field of physical retail space evolution (Bruce et al., 2023) and future retail CX (Klaus and Kuppelwieser, 2023) by reflecting on current studies on CX and retail space in times of accelerated change. Practitioner-oriented approaches and qualitative research designs provide rare and nuanced insights into the rich complexity of CX in fashion retail (Bruce et al., 2023; Petrescu and Lauer, 2017).

While our research aligns with the extant literature in many aspects

Table 6
Applying the concept of milieus.

Milieus	Description	Indicative categories	Indicative quotes
Interior	The instore environment, evident in the materiality of store design elements and the visual identity symbols	Brand world, the changing role of front-line staff, fluidity	'They [stores] are a brand's showcase and not necessarily about the transaction' (P7). 'How you empower your staff to deliver your brand experience, your brand world' (P1) 'A lot of retail is about recreation and excitement, the thrill of it, but there is also a huge part the fashion player can play in terms of the need that people have' (P16)
Intermediary	The interface of the store with its immediate surroundings manifest in both material and performative ways, acting as a membrane that limits and marks the extent of the physical territory	Optimisation of store space, social, and community experiences	'The role of the store has to be much more malleable … it can't be just functioning as a place that does one thing, it needs to facilitate different things, and be able to be agile' (P5)
Exterior	The wider locale within which a store is located	Localisation, store as delivery hub	'Feeding into the social data, personal data, events-based data, to kind of feed a space that is really relevant to your local area' (P3) 'With physical spaces we are going to see much more awareness of locality' (P16)
Annexed	Combines materiality of the store with a broader, virtual operation, recognising the increasingly phygital nature of retail	Placing the store as central in phygital delivery, technology enabled experiences, exceptional experiences not experienced online, synergies between channels	'It is the fusion of physical, experiential, digital, curated and service together which is where the magic comes alive' (P13) 'I did a post last week about what I call symbiotic retail … we have all these different channels which we call omnichannel, symbiotic is how they work together' (P10)

of retail store development (e.g., formats, technologies, channel integration, and CXM), emerging industry practices offer several implications and recommendations for retailers. Stores should create customer-centric value beyond economic transactions. Their place within individual and personalised customer journeys should be entirely evaluated from a consumer perspective, informed and refined by digital enhancements and phygital infrastructure, data capture, and nuanced customer interactions. Retailers are encouraged to think beyond the economic and functional boundaries of omnichannel retailing to generate holistic integrated CX and value creation. Exceptional experiences in stores provide memory-creating value, which may lead to brand preference and loyalty within an integrated channel ecosystem, rather than delimited to the physical store itself; it is imperative that retailers take an integrated ERT approach to CX and CXM. Frontline retail staff should be empowered via training and development to 'read and guide' customers through brand worlds without the pressure of sales conversion as the immediate outcome. Fashion customers increasingly expect phygitality in retail operations, and retailers are advised to manage CX within a fully blended operational infrastructure linking all channels, product information systems, and customer data. Finally, the findings reinforce the strategically important role of physical stores in generating CX value within retail futures; therefore, retailers should prioritise physical CX design within augmentative phygital retail CX.

Theoretically, this study makes the following contributions: it responds to scholarly calls for further research on CX within different contexts, especially offline settings, to assess the importance of physical space within evolving retail for CX value creation (Babin et al., 2021; Bruce et al., 2023; Klaus and Kuppelwieser, 2023). This study extends the existing literature on the progressive role of physical stores within phygitality by introducing a territorological perspective as a novel lens to reassess future retailing. The ERT construct advances our understanding of the evolutionary nature of retail place and space and CX from a new perspective that aligns with the fashion retail industry direction. We find that in ERT, although physical space provides significant customer experiential value through emotional engagement, value cannot be created nor measured using the prevailing 'floor space equals sales' mentality. Thus, a fresh approach to retail is essential, where phygital space is implemented with a different mindset. Technology applications help physical space to be productive, space portfolios to be optimised, and experiences to be personalised or augmented via immersion. Concurring with Pine (2023), who states that productivity is not assessed by immediate sales generation, new (qualitative) methods to evaluate the role of space within experiential territories (brand world) are necessary.

Furthermore, our study supports the view that phygitality transcends omnichannel management in the blurring of territorial boundaries, providing co-created CX synergy for both consumers and retail brands in territories as places of passage. Adopting the retail territory concept as a CXM framework leads to untethered thinking regarding points of brand presence within the milieus (see Table 6). Expectations of integrated CX and omnichannel operations must be met through human-centred and emotionally rich experiences co-created in meaningful interactive spaces by empowered frontline staff. Physical spaces in various shapes and sizes are combined to form experience-based territory that 'connects the various touchpoints and facilitates seamless integration, CX, and value creation' (Alexander, 2024:48). Moving between milieus transcends the notion of a customer journey. Omnichannel becomes the operational base in a multiplicity of interconnecting channels whereupon ERT characteristics (Table 5) are layered to create localised and fluid brand worlds, where brand ambassadors help to create exceptional experiences, individualised or through sociality, using empathy and/or digital enhancement. Although retail technology generates experiences within the customer journey, an ERT mentality allows retailers to resist the pull of transactions being the goal of CX. The future of retail must include brands and consumer communities co-creating exceptional experiences within ERT milieus, including physical (interior) space where value is understood rather than measured.

Finally, this research contributes to territorology and place scholarship more broadly (Brighenti, 2010, 2014; Kärrholm, 2012) as one of the few studies applying the territory concept to retailing (Warnaby, 2018) and the only known study to do so within a fashion context.

5.1. *Limitations and research directions*

The qualitative nature of research presents a trade-off between small sample size and the generalisability of results, yet the range of expertise within the informant sample, the quality of the literature, the richness of the data acquired, and the procedures undertaken ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings and conclusions. Further systematic deductive research is required to analyse the conceptual framework more precisely, for example, using a case study approach. Moreover, some findings warrant further investigation; for example, how do exceptional in-store experiences impact fashion brand preference and loyalty? What are the specific social, community, and store-based features that enhance the role of fashion stores? How does poor channel integration affect CX within fashion retail territories? To what extent does this erode fashion brand value? The limitations imposed by the specific fashion sector perspective (which can also be viewed as a strength) can be overcome through a cross-sector study. Additionally, wider applications of ERT theory, defined by market level, more specific product categories, or geographic location, would help assess the value of ERT in building a more nuanced understanding of CX across fashion retail. The empirical application of the ERT framework to other retail sectors allows us to determine the characteristics of a holistic reimagination of future retail for further research in the retailing and consumer services fields. Evaluating the contribution of physical space within an experiential territory is an urgent research challenge, given the burden of a large physical footprint legacy shouldered by well-known fashion retailers and the rising costs associated with desirable physical retail space. Future consumer and case study research can also focus on more holistic, fluid, and consumer-centred evaluation techniques. Finally, further exploration of the nascent use of AI for localisation and CXM within ERTs is another area of rich potential for further research from both practitioner and consumer perspectives.

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The work has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, the publication has been approved by all authors.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Bethan Alexander: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rosemary Varley:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Appendix A. Thematic analysis process

Research question	Key themes (8)	Categories (22)	Codes (125) with frequency of occurrence
1. Progressive role of the physical store	Evolution of the store	Brand world	Brand world engagement 15 Brand showcase 3 Brand discovery 5 Brand value delivery 5 Inspiration 5
		Localisation	Location based retail 13 Flexing to locality 4 Localised inventory 6 Local relevance 5 Curated space for local community 5 Machine learning for understanding locality 4
		Fluidity	Fluid 8 Agile 7 Flexible 7 Temporary retail 4 Mobile spaces 3 Opportunistic 4
		Store as service delivery hub	Increasing use of BOPIS (Buy online pick up in store) 10 Other service offerings (e.g., renting) 3 Out of hours delivery (e.g., hatch) 3 Product servicing offers (e.g., repair) 3
		Store design concerns	Service area neglect 3 Easy to navigate 5 Inclusive 4
	Importance of frontline staff	Changing role of frontline retail staff	Empowered staff 8 High service levels 8 Knowledgeable staff 4 Augmented role (e.g., styling) 4 Authoritative staff 7 Tech to improve staff productivity 3 Brand ambassadors/broadcasters 3

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(*continued*)

Research question	Key themes (8)	Categories (22)	Codes (125) with frequency of occurrence
			Service/experience connection in fashion 3
		Understanding the customer mindset	Reading the customer 3
			Understanding customer journey 5
			Adapting to customer pace 3
	Provider of exceptional experiences	Exceptional experiences over and above online	Experience different from digital 15
			Experiences out of home 3
			Augmented experiences (e.g., activations) 5
			Expectation of experiences in store 3
			Immersive 10
			Experiential 9
			Memorable 3
			Humanised 14
			Individualised 12
			Emotional 8
			Entertaining 6
			Sensory 7
			Tactile (for fashion) 3
			Exceptional 3
			Combined with leisure/hospitability 7
			Avoiding negative emotions 3
			Brand/product demonstration 3
			Time specific experiences 3
		Social and community experiences	Social/shared experiences 15
			Societal role of store 3
			Community connection with store 5
			Cultural context of store 8
			Staff connection to customer community 3
		Specific store-based features	Cultural events 3
			Art and music connections 3
			Neglect of service areas 3
	Creating and measuring the value of stores	Value creation in physical space	Collaboration opportunities 7
			Communicator of purpose 3
			Point of presence 3
			Sales generator 3
			Experimental 4
			Facilitator of customer creativity 3
			Encouraging social media activity 3
			Educator 4
		Optimisation of store space	Portfolio rationalisation 7
			Reducing store numbers 3
			Store space optimisation 8
			Re-evaluation of space 3
			Smaller spaces 6
			AI to improve physical space productivity 4
		Measuring the value of stores	Measuring contribution of space 9
			Measuring experiences difficult 7
			Performance metrics for omnichannel 5
			Irrelevance of sales/floor space metric3
			Non-transactional value of space 3
2. Interplay between the physical store and other channels (retail spaces and places): phygitality and CX creation	Phygital retail	Placing the store as central in phygital delivery	Store omnichannel evolution 10
			Adapting role of store 5
			Integration of physical and online 7
		Synergies between channels within omnichannel	Omnichannel expectation 5
			Borderless 7
			Stores complementary to online 3
			Physical and digital channel synergy 4
			DTC moving towards physical space 3
			Physical space driving online sales 3
			Hybrid 4
			Ecosystem 3
		Channel integration	Physical and virtual blending 4
			Lack of boundaries 3
			Physical and digital integration 8
		Accelerating acceptance of online shopping	Acceptance of online in customer journey 14
			Online as new behaviour 6

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

Research question	Key themes (8)	Categories (22)	Codes (125) with frequency of occurrence
			Accelerating adoption of online shopping 5
	Digitally enhanced experiences	Technology enabled experiences	Digitally enabled and personalised 13 Mobile facilitated 8 Digitally interactive store features 3 Digitally enhanced customer journeys 4 Irrelevant instore technology 6 Unreliable instore technology 6 Virtual try-on 7 Store as technology showcase 5 Tech to help understand customer 3 Tech to reduce pain points 3 Tech to reduce contact/self-service 4 Use of QR codes 5
	Consumer centricity	Understanding the fashion customer within their purchase journey	Meeting customers where they are 5 Expectation of customer for brands to meet them 3 Understanding and respecting customer mindset 3 Well-researched customer 6 Nuanced customer 2
		Consumer expectation of omnichannel	Expectation of omnichannel operations 5 Smooth 4 Seamless/joined up 5 Consistent 2
		Convenience	Expectation of convenience 4 Convenience motivation in channel choice 11
	Personalisation	Personalisation and deepening customer-brand relationships	Personalisation across channels 12 Relational relevance 4 Brand-consumer connections 3 Customer control (e.g., pace) 6 Bookable 1-1 experiences 5 Tech to improve personalisation 7

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