

DESIGN DYNAMICS

Navigating the new Complex Landscape of Omnichannel Fashion Retail

edited by Valeria M. Iannilli, Alessandra Spagnoli



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D.I. **FRANCOANGELI** OPEN  ACCESS
DESIGN INTERNATIONAL

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7. Piloting a Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design in Multidisciplinary Environments

*by Valeria M. Iannilli, Alessandra Spagnoli, Mariagiovanna Di Iorio, Gabriela Fabro Cardoso
Design Department, Politecnico di Milano*

7.1 Framing the Context: Driving Innovation within the Omnichannel Retail Environment

The complexity of the contemporary distribution and consumption system reflects the complexity of roles, functions, and procedures underlying the architecture of the retail ecosystem. Moreover, the systemic dimension of the technological transformation – which has fostered the diffusion of new business models with impacts on the entire fashion value chain including, indeed, the distribution, representation and selling phases – has made it urgent to reflect on the different competencies and skills needed to cope with the ongoing change (Bertola et al., 2020).

In this context, the need emerged to understand how design can intervene to foster innovation in the retail environment by exploring and studying a design-led operating model capable of addressing the concurrent aspects and dimensions that inform the current consumer experience. As a complex system, the contemporary retail environment requires the convergence and integration of disciplinary knowledge and transversal skills of a social, managerial and problem-solving nature, connecting the latter, in particular, more closely with the design-applicative domain (Iannilli et al., 2019). If on the one hand, design, marketing, management, and IT contribute, each with their own approaches, to handling a specific facet of the retail system (Madsen & Petermans, 2020; Petermans & Kent, 2016). On the other hand, the current multidisciplinary context requires tackling complex

and multidimensional problems (Brown et al., 2011), sharing languages and procedures, and integrating different methods and knowledge in favour of a proper interdisciplinary synthesis (Moran, 2010).

Contemporary retail, taking shape and boundaries of a true ecosystem (Jacobides et al., 2018), consists of a diverse and variable network of companies, technologies, and processes that underpin the constitution and streamlining of the customer experience. This system is by its very nature multidisciplinary: the different disciplinary areas, which contribute to shaping the retail value chain, exchange knowledge, share objectives, and compare results without, however, integrating processes, thus maintaining their own distinctive character. The complexity of the contemporary retail environment, however, demands an endeavour towards an increasingly interdisciplinary approach: a “horizontal” approach that enables an adequate understanding of the complex systems and contexts within which retail is embedded and that promotes the integration of knowledge, methods, and procedures from different disciplines by adopting a proper synthesis of approaches. Design as a discipline that resides “at the intersection of several large fields” (Friedman, 2000) – including the humanities, social sciences, technologies and engineering, and the arts – and simultaneously owns its processes and methods for approaching problems is by nature interdisciplinary. More precisely, design has, in this context, the potential to embrace interdisciplinarity and promote innovation within complex systems (Iannilli et al., 2019).

Within this framework, and with the specific aim of facilitating the incorporation of innovation trajectories within omnichannel retail processes, a Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design is proposed (Fig. 7.1). The Design-led Operational Model is intended to be applied in multidisciplinary environments and at the same time, promote an integrated interdisciplinary and design-led perspective. Within the omnichannel retail environment, design has already embraced multiple disciplines over the past decade going beyond aesthetics and functional space design: interior design, product design, communication and UX design, and service design represent the many faces of retail design practice to which social sciences, branding theory, marketing and technology are also connected (Claes et al., 2016).

Moreover, the recent digital and technological transformation has further emphasised the importance of building relevant, meaningful, and consistent consumer experiences (Hoyer et al., 2020), confirming the centrality of design in guiding and signifying the experience and relating the network of involved channels. In this context, the Design-led Operational Model intends to represent a helpful process to strategically manage the omnichannel retail design phase taking into account both the ongoing transformations – above all, the technological transformation – and the intertwined levels that make up the retail project – from the design of interiors to the design of services, from the implementation of in-store technology to the holistic design of the experience through the multiple digital channels. Due to its inherently interdisciplinary approach, the model is primarily aimed at a new profile of retail designers capable of embracing complexity beyond strictly disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, the model also provides a valuable tool for marketing, management, and technology practitioners to adopt a more holistic and innovation-oriented approach within their own operational processes.

7.2 Framing the process: a Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design

The Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design focuses on the early stages of design, which are considered the most promising for introducing innovative elements into the system, particularly the metadesign and concept generation phases (Fig. 7.1). These early phases, which are traditionally described in product/service development innovation practice and literature as the (Fuzzy) Front End of Innovation stage (Koen et al., 2001), are the starting point where new opportunities mostly emerge, new ideas are generated, and concepts are developed, laying the foundations upon which the development of new projects can be based. At these early stages, design can significantly intervene and bring added value through its practices and tools, its ability to deconstruct given briefs, tackle wicked problems, and become a resource for guiding innovation processes (Calabretta & Gemser, 2015).

Whitin the model, the process's central knot is the customer experience-defining phase in an omnichannel context. This action becomes strategic as the design environment is transformed, and, with it, the design practice and process are also called upon to adapt: from the first experiential theorists in the 1980s (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) to marketing practice that embraces the study of experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999) the concept of customer experience becomes progressively more and more central in retail both in scientific reflection and in praxis and essential at a time of increasing channels multiplication, primarily digital (Gerea et al., 2021). Similarly, this concept increases its importance within the design domain when research on service design recognises the value of the experience in designing a new service (Teixeira et al., 2012; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010) and, later on when the Human Computer Interaction (HCI) domain incorporates it as an extension of User Experience (UX) (Rusu et al., 2020). Considering the customer experience definition phase as central to the design process therefore means focusing strongly, from a design perspective, on the definition and design of the interactions between the consumer and the different elements and touchpoints along the customer journey as a key aspect in driving innovation. Moreover, taking the consumer perspective in designing omnichannel retail solutions allows adopting a human-centred and holistic perspective, capable of considering, as a whole, the connection and complexity of the various designed elements of the retail experience, from the physical space to the system of products-services offered, from the integrated in-store technology to the network of other connected digital channels.

The Design-led Operational Model, therefore, proposes a conceptualisation of the design process in omnichannel retail in a highly multidisciplinary environment, highlighting design macro- and meso-phases, their correlation with each steps' specific objectives, and the related flow of design/process activities. The macro-phases taken into consideration involve the *metadesign phase* (Celaschi & Deserti, 2007), which from research and analysis, leads to concept generation, and the *concept design phase*, which from concept generation, leads to its development and finally to its refinement. As previously stated, the subsequent executive phases, taught towards the development and

implementation of the project – be it in the physical, digital, or integrated sphere – were not the subject of this research, which instead had the main objective of investigating new models and processes to promote retail innovation within the early stages of project idea feeding and generation. Within the metadesign phase, the project is provided with the insight to analyse and interpret the context's signals and generate opportunities: it is a process capable of stimulating creativity within the created scenarios and thus directing potential innovations (Celaschi & Deserti, 2007). Within the subsequent concept design phase, as previously highlighted, the concept of omnichannel customer experience guides the generation and development of the design idea, focusing on the consumer's point of view with respect to the various designed elements that assemble the specific retail ecosystem.

Since the Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design is intended to be applied within multidisciplinary environments, consolidated, new or enhanced tools have been mapped and developed to help the different actors face complex design challenges within the different design stages.¹ These tools, selected and entangled to both the project objectives and the actors' different disciplinary backgrounds, aim to integrate, and enhance the players' creative, strategic, and technical expertise. *Creative competence*, intended as the ability to look beyond current boundaries to propose ideas that are both original and innovative as well as effective (Runco & Jaeger, 2012), has emerged as a relevant and cross-curricular competence that has recently been enriched by the possibilities offered by new technologies to discover, communicate, and prototype new innovative solutions (Bertola et al., 2020). *Strategic competence*, intended as the ability to acquire, store, recall, interpret, and act upon information (Sparrow & Hodgkinson, 2006) in order to orient and direct goals and decisions, proactively shapes processes and actions involving a broad set of actors through interrelated processes of sensemaking and sense-giving (Kolko, 2010; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Creative and strategic expertise is crucial for navigating and managing complex contexts, such as the contemporary omnichannel retail environment,

¹ See chapter 6, Retail Design Tools: An Omnichannel Retail Design Process Conceptualisation

and at the same time, must now be complemented by *technical competencies* and hard skills comprising the knowledge and abilities required to apply specific and specialised technical principles.

The model was thus applied to three pilot cases to test its validity within higher different educational contexts and grounded in different disciplinary backgrounds. In all three pilot cases, the experimentation was framed within the retail design in an omnichannel context to nurture and activate the system of competencies and meta-competencies (Siddique et al., 2013; Quartier et al., 2020; Belolipetskaya et al., 2020) needed to cope with the changes taking place. The first experimentation aimed at integrating strategic and technological knowledge and skills within a fashion design background (MSc Design for the Fashion System, POLIMI Design School); the second experimentation integrated creative and strategic knowledge and skills within a management background (Master in Brand and Business Management, MFI); the third experimentation integrated strategic and technological knowledge and skills within an architecture and interior design background (Master in Furniture Design, Retail Experience Module, POLI.Design). These three experimentations allowed the implementation of different variations of the Design-Led Operational Model to make adaptations per the target disciplinary setting and to verify its effectiveness as a model capable of promoting new forms of knowledge, skills, and competencies for retail design.

DESIGN-LED OPERATIONAL MODEL FOR RETAIL DESIGN

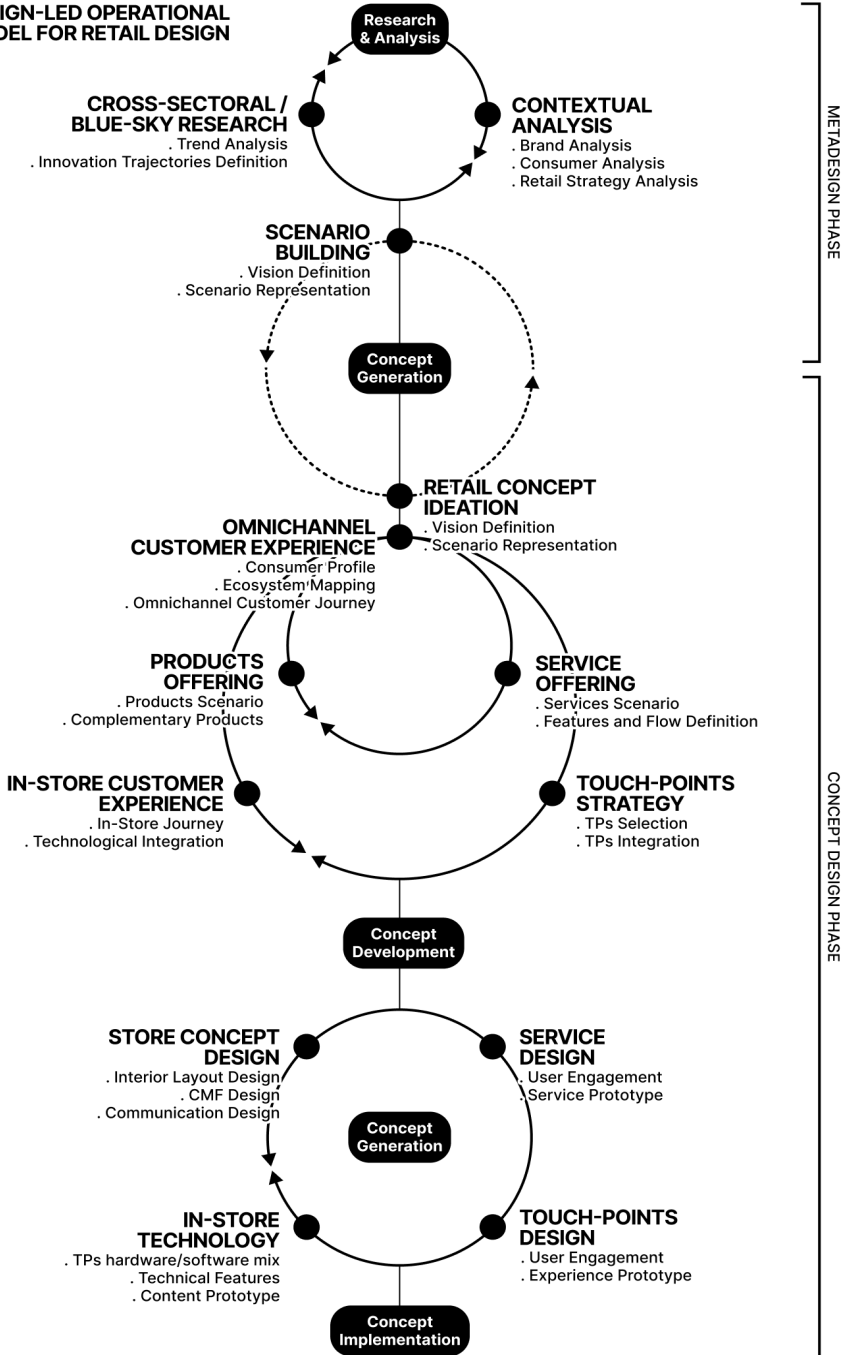


Fig. 7.1 Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design (authors' elaboration).

7.3 Envisioning Technology-Fuelled Fashion Retail Futures. A Pilot Carried Out at the MSc Design For The Fashion System, POLIMI Design School

The first experimentation aimed at testing the model described in the previous paragraph, took place in spring 2022, in the “Fashion Retail Experience Studio” course of the MSc Design for the Fashion System at Politecnico di Milano. It involved sixty-eight international students attending Fashion System Master’s degree, at their first year of study, a team of four retail experience design professors with strong professional backgrounds and Deutsche Telekom, a leading integrated telecommunications company, which provides information and communication technology (ICT) solutions for business and corporate customers. Deutsche Telekom Customer Experience and Design Area involved in the project has been an important contribution, both for the technical expertise and the strategic one. The professionals involved brought to the class their knowledge of advanced technologies and a strategic long-term vision on the technical evolution and its possible impacts on the retail sector.

The majority of the students had a bachelor’s degree in fashion design, and no previous experience in retail design. The participants were divided into teams of five to six people. The project brief was to design the concept of a phygital retail experience, able to create innovative and valuable relationships among contemporary consumers and fashion products, services, and physical/digital spaces.

Through the whole course, frontal lessons and individual in-class activities guided the students with the support by specific tools, aimed at consolidating key concepts and/or having a first-hand experience in applying them, with a learning-by-doing approach. During the whole design process, for their group work, students were advised to use specific tools aimed at clarifying and supporting the organization, creation, communication and discussion of concepts and ideas (Fig. 7.2).

DESIGN-LED OPERATIONAL MODEL FOR RETAIL DESIGN
 MSc Design for the Fashion System
 POLIMI Design School (2022)

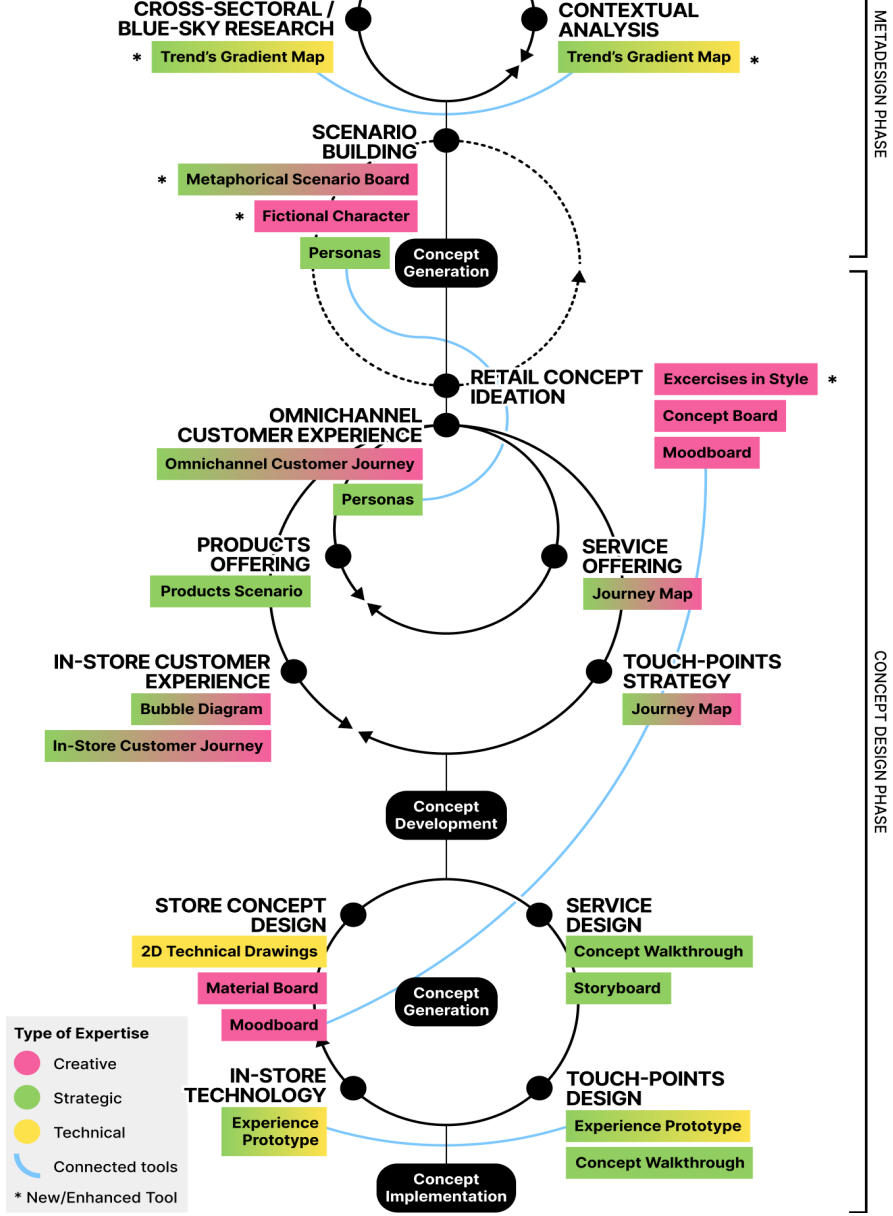


Fig. 7.2 Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design and applied tools within the “Fashion Retail Experience Studio”, MSc Design for the Fashion System, POLIMI Design School (2022); (authors' elaboration).

The course also offered some individual activities aimed at training specific abilities, more precisely two activities have been proposed: the *24h inventory* and the *empathy map*. The *24h inventory* activity aimed at consolidating the ability to analyse consumers' habits and preferences and to describe concepts visually. The request of the exercise was to describe the personality of an ideal customer by illustrating the products he/she used in a typical day. The *empathy map*, a tool originally belonging to the marketing field, helps to schematise knowledge about end-users, in order to create understanding of user needs in decision-making processes and to understand the emotional impact of the design choices in the customer experience.

In the group work, through the design process, the students were supported by the following phases and tools. For the phases of Research & Analyses and Concept Generation: *trends' gradient map*; *metaphorical scenario board*; *fictional characters*; *personas*; *exercises in style*; *moodboard* and *concept board*. For the phase of Concept development: *omnichannel customer journey*; *journey map*; *bubble diagram* and *in-store customer journey*. Finally for the phase of Concept Implementation: *concept walkthrough*; *storyboard*; *2D technical drawings* and *experience prototype*.

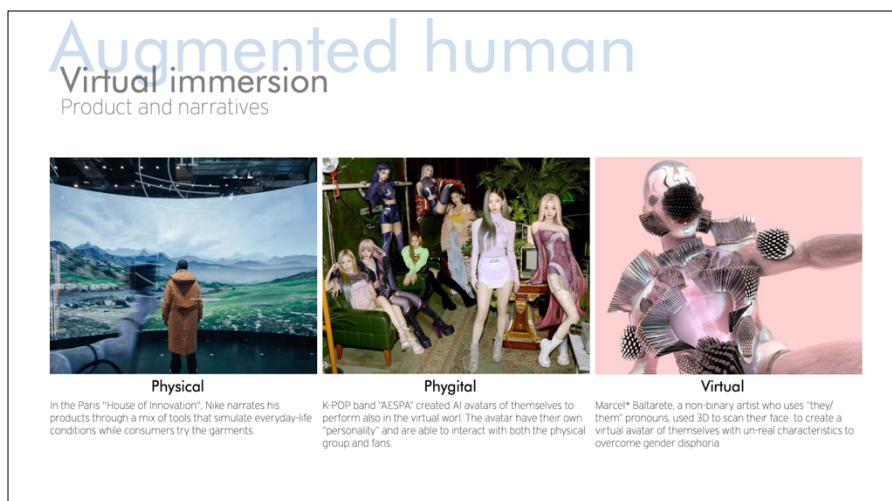


Fig. 7.3 Example of research board elaborated for the Fashion Retail Experience Studio (Diego Dani, Francesca Marzolla, Francesca Rizzo, Irene Sapuppo, Wei Wang).



Fig. 7.4 Example of scenario moodboard created for the Fashion Retail Experience Studio (Bryan Bachmann, Francesca Bergamini, Enola Cappellari, Yuanjing Zhang, Federica Mora).

Some examples of the work from students, participating the Fashion Retail Experience Studio, are presented in Fig. 7.3 (*research board*) and 7.4 (*scenario moodboard*). Through the *research board* the students organized the research inspiring their concept into physical, phygital and virtual case studies, to systematize the research and gain clearer insights about the trends in the retail experience field. While thought the *scenario moodboard*, the students created visualisations to communicate the concept, values and visual mood of their main idea, training creative and communication expertise.

The project presented high complexity and required students to explore not only the creative field, but also the strategic and technical one. In a first step of the Metadesign Phase, students conducted a Cross-Sectoral/Blue-sky Research together with Contextual Analyses. The *trend's gradient map* tool was specifically adapted to the course requirements, with the aim of helping students categorize the results of their research on technological applications by specific focuses. For concept generation, *scenario building* techniques were used to

visually describe the concepts and directions of the first project. The tools for obtaining the result were the *metaphorical scenario board* and *fictional characters* and *personas*, used to understand and describe the ideal client to whom the project is aimed, describing lifestyle, personal interests, and tastes, in a schematic and visual way. Still within the Concept Generation phase, for the Retail Concept Ideation step, the tools used were *exercises in style*, and *moodboard* and *concept board*.

The Concept Development step, part of the Concept Design phase, was divided into five parts. The first concerned the Omnichannel Customer Experience, where the students were asked to describe how the integration between channels could be achieved by constructing *personas* and *omnichannel customer journeys*. The second and third parts refer to Services Offering and Touch-points Strategy, both guided by the creation of a *journey map*. It is important to do journey mapping to get a visual overview of how customers interact with your website, products, or business at various touchpoints. A fourth part refers to Products Offering, developed through *products scenario*, with the aim of illustrating how the consumer will interact with a product. Finally, we have the development of the In-store Customer Experience, done through *bubble diagrams* (schematic drawing for the purpose of planning and organizing space) and *in-store customer journey* (describing the step-by-step experience within the store, detailing all the points of contact and interactions from the consumer's point of view, their feelings, and sensations at each stage).

The transition from the Concept Design Phase to the Concept Implementation includes four parts, which the students were not able to do completely, as they were not asked to build a real-size prototype. However, they developed the Service Design through the *concept walkthrough* and *storyboard* tools, and the Store Concept Design through the tools *moodboard*, *material board* and *2D technical drawings*. The next steps, which were not possible to develop, refer to the prototyping phase of Touch Point Design and In Store Technology. To sum-up, in the Fashion Retail Design Studio experience, the focus on envisioning the evolution possibilities for technological enhancement of retail experience spaces, required integration of some new or enhanced tools in design process, also considering students'

background, mostly centred on fashion design. The integration was specifically regarding the first, meta-design phases. In the Research and Analysis phase the integration of tools aimed at improving technical and strategic skills in the formulation of a neat organization of the research paths, that was central for a better understanding of the themes involved in the general topic and the context related to the project brief. In the concept generation phase, the tools introduced in the process had a focus on enhancing strategic and creative skills, with the aim to encourage the formulation of creative solutions capable of putting together technological evolution and cultural and social meaning.

7.4 Redefining Branding and Retail Strategies in an Omnichannel Context. A Pilot Carried Out at the Master in Brand and Business Management, MFI

The second pilot takes place within the context of the Master in Brand and Business Management, offered by the Milano Fashion Institute in 2022. The project lasted a total of thirty days, between the months of June and July. The class was composed by about 40 students from different nationalities, mostly with an academic background in the business field, except for some with a background in the design area.

Guided by two main teachers and two co-teachers, the pilot is part of a multidisciplinary educational context, which combines the areas of management, design, and social sciences for fashion, while still focusing mainly on the management area. The format of the classes was composed by an initial frontal theoretical class followed by reviews to check the progress of the project; the final result was presented by each group in a final 15-minute presentation.

The project brief is linked to the English brand called Labour and Wait. Established in 2000 in the heart of East London's market district, the store was founded by two former menswear designers who wished to promote well-made and durable home goods. Currently, there are four locations in London and another one in Tokyo. The store offers a range of timeless, functional products for everyday life, defending the

concept of timeless and high-quality products. Within this context, the students, divided into groups, were invited to imagine what it would be like to place Labour and Wait within the Italian environment, in the city of Milan. The difficulty in developing a project of this kind is due to the strong aesthetics transmitted both through the physical and digital stores, where the British essence is present. Furthermore, the curation in choosing the products and the story told through each of them visually is strategically thought out, the decision to take such a concept to another country requires a new strategy to conquer the market. Nevertheless, the main objective of this project was the design of an innovative consumer experience that, starting from the physical space, should be connected to other touchpoints (physical, digital, mixed) through technology.

More specifically, the project aimed to create the Italian physical and virtual store experience, intending to: offer a unique brand experience adapting the customer journey – both physical and online – to the Italian market focusing on curatorial approach; propose collaborations with new brands (fashion, food, beauty sectors) and implement new services and physical/virtual experiences. The development of the work covers creative and strategic techniques. Within this context, creative expertise refers to the ability to see the task from another perspective, using imagination to generate ideas, visualizations, and innovative designs. As for strategic expertise, it refers to the ability to have critical thinking to analyse data, making decisions with a clear vision of the business. Developing both creative and strategic skills and using them together can make a difference, strategic skills help identify market signals, before they become trends, allowing you to detect opportunities and anticipate possible risks for the brand. On the other hand, creative skills allow you to move away from what already exists and propose something new.

Starting in the Metadesign phase and then evolving to the Concept Design phase, four main steps are proposed, namely: Research and Analysis, Concept Generation, Concept Development and Concept Implementation (Fig. 7.5). In this context, the phases that most impacted the good development of projects are the initial ones, which involve analysing and understanding the brand's positioning, as well as identifying growth opportunities, in order to generate the concept.

DESIGN-LED OPERATIONAL MODEL FOR RETAIL DESIGN
 Master in Brand and Business Management, MFI (2022)

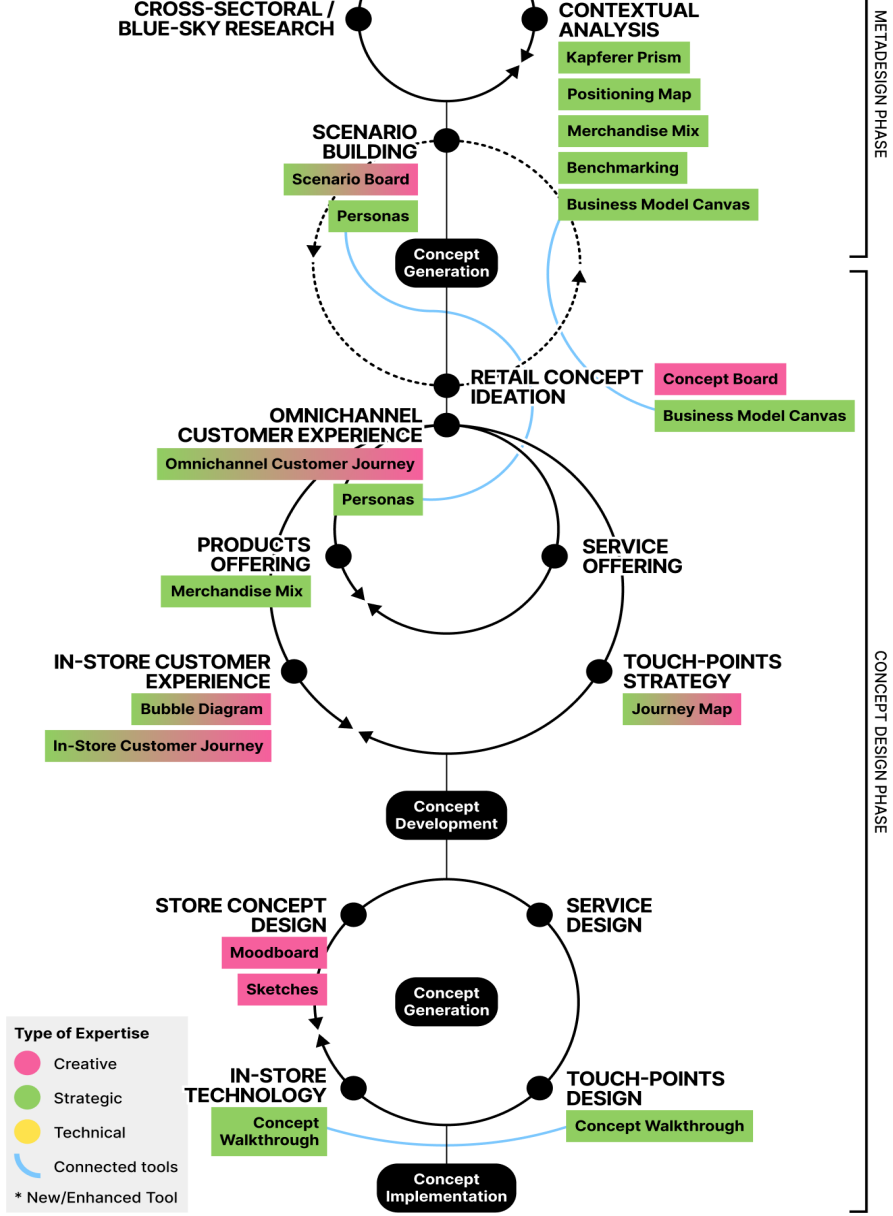


Fig. 7.5 Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design and applied tools within the “Phygital Retail Experience”, Master in Brand and Business Management, MFI (2022); (authors’ elaboration).

Briefly, the focus of the Research and Analysis step was to analyse the target, history and DNA of Labour and Wait, to understand then current business model and the merchandise mix, and to conduct benchmarking and competitive analysis (Fig. 7.6). After the Research and Analysis phase, participants should suggest a 360° integrated retail branding strategy for the new stores in Milan. Imagining the retail store (physical and online) where Labour and Wait collaborates with three new brands from fashion, food, and beauty sectors. To do so, the main actions indicated were: resetting the business model; resetting the category (understanding the market and consumer behaviour, redefines the category, planning changes and improvements to the category); assortment planning (to optimize a store's visual merchandising, layout, and the placement of the products, services); choose the location – strategic suggestions considering the in-store shopping experience, digital and interactive tools to engage customers into sustainability concepts, visual and communication elements.

The Research and Analysis phase is based on cross-sectoral/ blue-sky research and contextual analyses, where group members were invited to gather information not only about the history of the brand but also about the strategies behind the sales channels. The tools used during this phase were: *Kapferer prism*; *positioning map*; *merchandise mix*; *benchmarking*; *business model canvas*. All these tools belong to the marketing/management area, which are familiar to students. At this stage, such tools guided the study of the brand, helping to understand the brand identity, customer profile, brand positioning and conduct benchmarking and storytelling research. Furthermore, in this step the *business model canvas* intends to review the current situation of the brand and discover points for efficiency improvements, opportunities for innovation and even to increase competitiveness.

The Concept Generation phase takes place through Scenario Building (with the application of *scenario boards* and the creation of *personas*) and retail Concept Ideation, where the *business model canvas* tool is also present, in addition to the creation of the concept board. This is the phase where students are challenged to rethink the strategies implemented by Labour and Wait, considering what should be maintained and what should be adapted or added to place the brand

on the Italian market, as well as the choice of the public to be reached. Since every country has its own unique identity and culture is critical to hone your cultural knowledge as well as understanding how business is conducted in your target market. The goal of this step is to investigate the brand; define the claim and purpose; define consumer profile and behaviour and choose a suitable location. As this step unfolds, the group must rethink the entire *business model canvas* created at the beginning identifying the points to be changed, but always taking into account the peculiarities of the new location and its culture, not letting the essence of the brand die.

Certainly, one of the most complex phases of the project is Concept Development and Concept Implementation. Initially, for the development part, students had to present the Services Offered, the Touch-points Strategy (through the *journey map*), the Product Offer (through the *merchandising mix*, as shown in Fig. 7.7) and the In-Store Customer Experience (through the *bubble diagram* and *in-store customer journey*). Regarding the Product and Services Offering, the goal was to do a category reset, redefining it, planning changes and improvements. As for the Customer Experience, a touch-points selection and integration were requested, along with the build of a customer journey, storyboard and content definition. The implementation phase is where the design activity presents itself, since at this final moment of the project the group must present the service design, the touch-point design (through the *concept walkthrough*), the Store concept design (through *moodboards* and *sketches*) and In-store Technologies (through *concept walkthrough*).

Considering the students' background, one of the difficulties in implementing this project was the integration of the strategic analysis phase with the more creative phase of concept proposition. The tools used between concept generation and development were important, as they provided students with the acquisition of new knowledge.



Fig. 7.6 Example of Benchmarking and competitive analysis elaborated for the Master in Brand and Business Management (Dumandzic Milagros, Julin Victoria, Kim Taein, Kocjan Monika, Pasqualini Capone Giulio, Viganò Francesca).

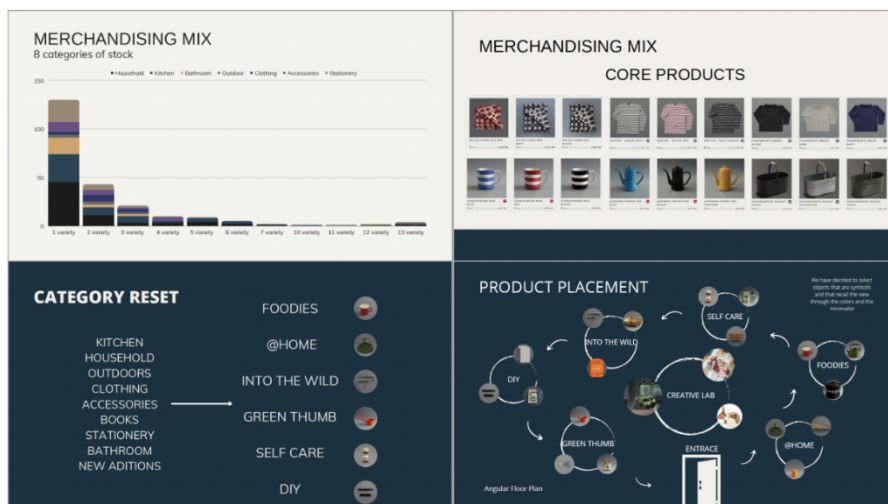


Fig. 7.7 Example of Merchandising Mix, elaborated for the Master in Brand and Business Management (Francesca Guidi, Aramis Agrapart, Patricia Sandoval, Eva Castillo Cruz, Francesca Bianchini, Juliana Varuseckina, Leonardo Manganeli).

7.5 Designing a Technologically Enhanced Retail Experience. A Pilot Carried Out at the Master in Furniture Design, POLI.Design

The third pilot experience has been conducted during the Master in Furniture Design, Retail Experience Module at the POLI.Design school in the academic year 2023.

The program is a post-graduate master and addresses a systemic vision of the role of design in the furniture industry – aiming to develop new knowledge in innovation that responds to the challenges posed by technological, social and market changes – teaming new fields of interest to the traditional focus on product development, along with the growing importance of brands and its tangible and intangible elements of expression; in this context the Retail Experience Module has been aiming at the design of a concept for a smart retail experience for new furniture scenarios for a company in a omnichannel & narrative context. The class consisted of thirty students, most of whom with a background in interior design or architecture, and some work experience in the design field. The students worked divided into five groups of six students.

The design brief for this course has been to design a technologically enhanced retail experience addressing the next design furniture scenarios. A fixed plan of the space in which to set the experience was given to the students, together with a list of Italian design furniture firms from which the students could choose the company to work.

In the design process, as group work, students were guided to the use of specific tools aimed at clarifying and supporting the analysis and concept generation in the form of specific activities aiming at enhancing the analysis and interpretation of the context's signals and the detection of opportunities for potential innovation. Specifically, following the design process, as clearly illustrated in Fig. 7.8, for each design phase some omnichannel design tools were involved in the activities in order to foster specific expertise.

First, in the analysis phase students have been asked to create: *company analysis moodboards*, relating different aspects of the chosen company identity (such as merchandise mix, colours, materials board; brand identity); and *touchpoints boards*, in which the goal was

to analyse which touchpoints the company is using, the tone of voice used in it and to map the possible customer journeys enabled by the touch points. After the brief was launched to the students, a *Mystery Shopping* activity was proposed to fuel the first step of analysis and strategic expertise, in order to foster understanding of the system in which to operate, to analyse the existing interrelations between digital and physical environment and develop a critical vision on the new connection possibilities that could be enhanced in the project proposal. The activity consisted in the observation and analysis of in-store customer experience. The activity required to visit a store of the brand chosen for the project and produce a sketch of the store plan locating: the technology in use in the store with its function; the services offered in the store; brand communication elements placed in the store. The students were also asked to highlight the connections between the physical elements in the plan and digital environments, to let them focus on the omnichannel experience and on spotting where and if a digital enhancement of the physical space has been taking place. The students have been provided with specific templates guiding the different steps of the activity.

In the concept generation phase the request was: firstly, to define the narrative of the experience through occasion choice, product and services selection, location and narrative scenario, through the use of different tools aimed at the development of creative skills, such as moodboards and concept boards; secondly the definition of a customer journey with the description of touch-points selection and integration, storyboard, and content of the experience; thirdly, a focus on the concept of the space as a phygital retail concept in which the experience (or a part of it) has been thought to take place, to be described with retail layout boards, technological integration boards and specific contents of the experience.

The tools used in these phases were meant to support mostly strategic and creative skills (as in fig 7.8 *dynamic personas, omnichannel customer journey, journey map for services and touch points and phygital experience blueprint*).

DESIGN-LED OPERATIONAL MODEL FOR RETAIL DESIGN
 Master in Furniture Design
 Retail Experience Module
 POLI.Design (2023)

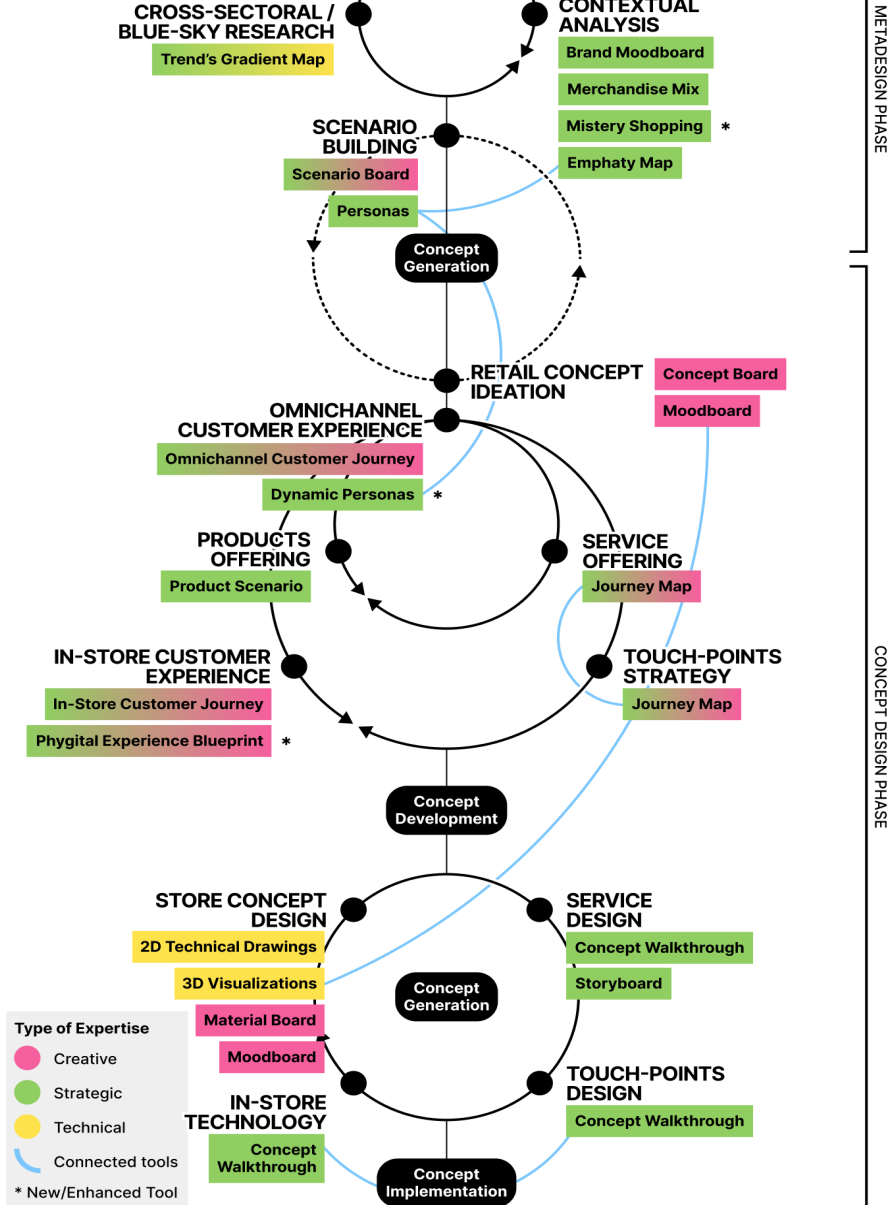


Fig. 7.8 Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design and applied tools within the “Retail Experience and Exhibit Design” module, Master in Furniture Design, POLI.Design (2023); (authors' elaboration).

For the concept generation phase, the activity proposed aimed at focusing on technological integration into the in-store experience, and more specifically to find innovation opportunities for the retail space to be augmented digitally, and therefore to produce a *phygital experience blueprint*.

To foster awareness and promote a meaningful introduction of technology in the in-store experience project, the activity proposed to reflect on how and which technologies could relate to and perform business functions in their smart retail concept. As a tool to facilitate the understanding, to clarify the possibilities, and to suggest possible directions of intervention for in-store experience innovation, a *matrix interrelating technologies and business functions* has been proposed to the students. Technologies and business functions constituting the matrix have been drawn from previous research on retail design and refer to literature in the fields of retail marketing, business management and human computer interaction (Grewal et al., 2017; Kotler, 2021; Pantano & Vannucci, 2019; Soloviov & Danilov, 2020). In particular, the business functions included in the matrix (namely: entertainment/engagement, servitisation, storytelling / brand identity / values, visual display / merchandise offer / decision making, fulfilment, data collection, analytics and profitability) have been synthesized from Grewal et al. (2020) and Alexander et al. (2020).

Thanks to the matrix the master students could reflect on how the combination of different technologies could bring to an innovative way to perform the business functions and services they could include in their concept, fostering the discussion on alternatives and possible variants.

In order to assess the introduction of the two activities and tools proposed in the analysis and concept phases, a questionnaire has been proposed to the students involved, asking to describe, if any, the advantages brought into the design process by the tools proposed. The majority of the respondents positively assessed the tools, and in particular, some of the comments underlined that the tools were helpful for the design choices and acted as a trigger for deepening knowledge of cutting-edge technologies and gaining a wider view on the possibilities of innovation to be included in their projects.

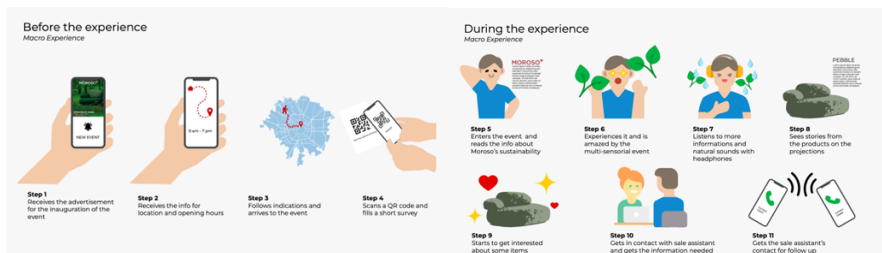


Fig. 7.9 Omnichannel Customer Experience. Moroso Immersion in Nature, Smart Retail Experience – Master in Furniture Design – Poli.Design (Fernando Cebeira, Maria M Del Campo, Javier Fernandez, Michele Fazio, Silvana Archila, Maria Fernanda Rosario).

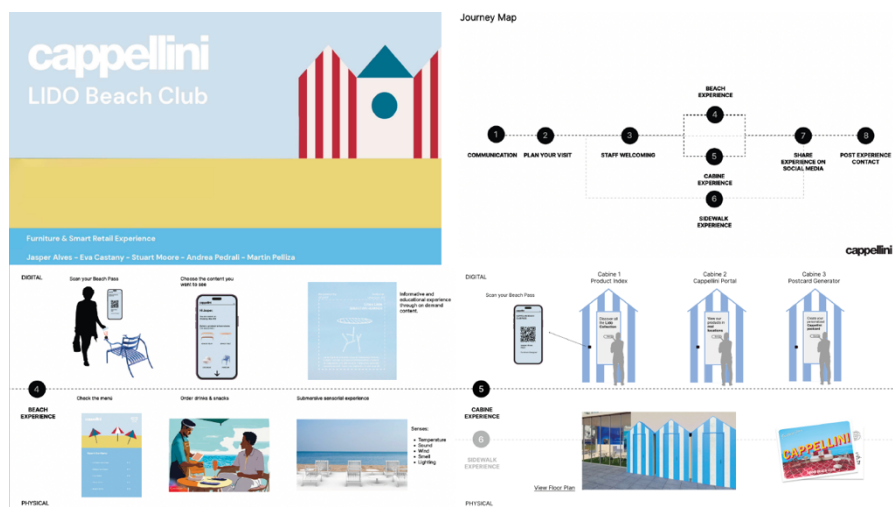


Fig. 7.10 Phygital Experience Journey Map and Blueprint. Cappellini Lido Beach Club, Smart Retail Experience – Master in Furniture Design – Poli.Design (Jasper Alves, Eva Castany, Stuart Moore, Andrea Pedrali, Martin Pellizza).

Some examples of the results of the work from students participating the Master in Furniture Design, Retail Experience Module are presented here in Figs. 7.9 and 7.10. In Fig. 7.9, the group of students successfully designed an omnichannel experience customer journey, also considering pre- and post- experience possibilities, the narrative setting, and the digital activation and triggers for their experience context. Relating to the phygital experience blueprint, in Fig. 7.10, the group of students has been illustrating an example of concept

proposal, successfully describing the whole experience journey both from the physical and the digital side.

Overall, the project work proposed has been undertaken by most of the students with great effort and enthusiasm, also the results were fully positive and showed improvements in the students' understanding of the retail omnichannel experience. Considered students' background, mostly linked to interior design and architecture, the main challenges of the course were represented by the understanding and application of the omnichannel customer journey and the ability to design a system encompassing different channels and touchpoints. Even if this was not an easy challenge, the groups were successfully delivering well-thought-out and consequent solutions. In particular, the projects presented proposed innovative solutions consequently integrated into the brand view and took into consideration both physical and digital environments for the development of the experience, integrating at their best technology, functions, and services in the concept, resulting into adequate solutions responding to the brief in a satisfactory way.

7.6 Conclusions

The Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design was systematically tested and refined through three separate pilot experiences conducted in different educational contexts characterised by diverse disciplinary backgrounds. These pilots demonstrated the model's adaptability and effectiveness in fostering innovation in the early stages of retail design projects while emphasising the crucial role of interdisciplinary collaboration and the integration of creative, strategic, and technical competencies.

The first pilot project, conducted as part of the MSc Design for the Fashion System programme, was aimed at students with a background mainly in fashion design and included players in the role of experts with significant experience in promoting innovation in new technologies. The challenge was introducing these students, relatively new to retail design, to the intricate world of phygital (physical and digital) fashion retail experiences. Through a combination of creative

and strategic tools, they embarked on a journey to design innovative retail concepts that bridged the gap between fashion's physical and digital realms. Some of the tools – in particular, *trend's gradient map* and *fictional characters* – were adopted to repurpose the students' trend and consumer research consolidated skills within the strategic context of retail design. Likewise, the entire concept development and implementation phase was facilitated by applying tools to nurture the omnichannel project's processual nature by “unpacking” the different “designable elements” into minimal and manageable units. The pilot highlighted the model's adaptability to students from creative backgrounds, emphasising its ability to ignite their imagination and encourage the generation of innovative ideas.

The second pilot, located within the Master programme in Brand and Business Management, brought together a cohort of students with predominantly business-oriented backgrounds. In this case, the challenge was to reimagine the positioning of a specific brand – the British brand Labour and Wait – in a different market, requiring both strategic acumen and creative vision. The students were tasked with translating the brand's essence and designing an innovative consumer experience, emphasising the importance of preserving brand identity while adapting it to a new cultural context. In this specific case, the entire research and analysis phase was conducted by adopting tools belonging to the marketing and management domains the students belong to. New tools balancing the strategic and creative dimensions were adopted in the concept generation and development phases. The focus on the building of omnichannel customer journeys – by their very nature aimed at restoring the complex dimension of the consumer experience in the interweaving of the various channels and touchpoints identified – promoted a more holistic and interdisciplinary vision, forcing the students to follow new paths and project the concept in the medium term. The pilot project demonstrated how the model can effectively guide students in the fusion of strategic thinking and creative ideation.

The third pilot project, part of the Retail Experience module of the Master degree in Furniture Design, was aimed at students experienced in interior design and architecture. Their mission was to design technologically advanced retail experiences for Italian furniture

companies. The pilot project integrated tools that encouraged in-depth analysis, interpretation of contextual signals and identification of innovation opportunities. By fostering awareness and promoting a meaningful introduction of technology in their projects, the students endeavoured to design phygital retail experiences. In this specific case, given the students' design background, different tools were adapted to the phygital context and applied – such as *mystery shopping*, *dynamic personas* and *phygital experiences blueprints* – to frame the complex dynamics of interaction between the various levels that make up the retail experience within a technology-enhanced physical space. This pilot project highlighted how the model can empower students to imagine and realise smart retail experiences in an omnichannel context.

Overall, these three pilots emphasised the adaptability and effectiveness of the Design-led Operational Model for Retail Design. Applied to fashion, branding or design scenarios, students learned how to harness multidisciplinary, embracing new technologies and combining creative and strategic skills to drive innovation in retail. The model proved to be a valuable guide for the next generation of retail designers, equipping them with the tools and methodologies to tackle the ever-changing challenges and opportunities of the dynamic retail landscape.

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The fashion industry is entering the dynamic global competitive market, promoting various actions prioritising design, creativity, sustainability, and technological advancement as pivotal factors. At the same time, it is re-imagining its business models to adapt to the changing landscape. The rise of pervasive connectivity, intuitive interfaces and innovative interaction channels has triggered a revolution in fashion retail, reshaping customer behaviour and expectations. The traditional retail framework has evolved into a fully interconnected omnichannel system. This transformation is characterised by the proliferation of physical and virtual channels and touch points and by the adoption of a more flexible and integrated approach.

In this dynamic context, design plays a central role, possessing the ability to impart meaning to the production and distribution system. Design-led innovation represents an incremental form of innovation that injects a nuanced range of meaning into the marketplace, extending beyond tangible objects, including discourses, expressions, narratives, visual images, symbols, metaphors, and spaces.

The book analyses the multifaceted nature of the fashion retail experience through the lens of the design discipline, aiming to contextualise the evolution of retail within increasingly complex processes, networks and interconnections, both theoretically and practically. The focus is on retail design, delving into the new skills required and the valuable tools needed to apply them in inherently multidisciplinary contexts. Ultimately, the aim is to navigate the intricate terrain of retail evolution and shed light on the evolving role of design in this multifaceted sector.

FrancoAngeli

La passione per le conoscenze