



# Exploring phygital omnichannel luxury retailing for immersive customer experience: The role of rapport and social engagement

Aniruddha Pangarkar<sup>a,\*</sup>, Vibha Arora<sup>b</sup>, Yupal Shukla<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Austin E. Cofrin School of Business, University of Wisconsin- Green Bay, WI 54311, USA

<sup>b</sup> ICFAI Business School, Gurugram, 122016, India

<sup>c</sup> Department of Management, University of Bologna, Italy

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## ABSTRACT

Omnichannel retailing has revolutionized the way retailers create strategies for engaging customers in making purchase decisions. Phygital is a new-age transformative form of omnichannel retailing that emphasizes combining the physical and digital elements, with a particular focus on the human touch to satisfy social and symbolic consumer needs. Extant research has not fully addressed the role of phygital in luxury fashion retail. We explore the research question regarding how human interactions with experienced salespeople add value to the phygital experience. In doing so, we contribute to the luxury marketing literature by addressing the research gap by elucidating the role of phygital functionality in enhancing rapport building, social engagement, and developing trust and commitment, which results in a seamless customer experience, along with enhanced loyalty and patronage. Through 18 in-depth qualitative research interviews conducted with luxury retail managers and senior retail leaders, we provide guidelines to managers and practitioners at retail firms, to create actionable growth-oriented strategies focused on leveraging phygital capabilities.

## 1. Introduction

The world of omnichannel retailing has transformed and revolutionized the way luxury retailing has been implemented and perceived (Ameen et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2021a). Changes in customer preference from physical to *phygital* have encouraged retailers to find meaningful ways to merge brick & mortar experiences with online offerings. *Phygital* is a new-age paradigm and evolution of omnichannel luxury retailing that combines and unites the physical and digital elements to provide customers with an unparalleled, distinct, and everlasting experience (Banik, 2021). This view finds favor with other researchers, such as Klaus (2021), who articulate that phygital is a holistic and exhaustive form of omnichannel management in today's world, because in comparison to an omnichannel approach, which focuses on e-commerce and purchase, the phygital realm encompasses these in addition to branding, marketing, promotion, advertising, innovation, and pricing tools, to provide customers with not only monetary benefits, but also symbolic, social, and identity-based advantages. Therefore, this manuscript uses the term phygital to refer to a more transformative form of omnichannel retailing, prevalent with and conforming to the interactive and hybrid experiences it offers. Six out of

ten customers in The United States have been phygital retailing through the use of different channels in making their final purchase decisions (Briedis et al., 2019). Luxury brands such as Burberry have started offering phygital experiences by means of which customers can search for assortments online and then visit stores to complete the purchase (Weiners, 2017). The major issue, luxury brand marketers are currently facing, is how to offer seamless experience phygitally so that customers do not lose out on experience elements from brick & mortar stores (Klaus and Manthiou, 2020; Lawry, 2021). The missing element in digital experience offerings is the human touch (Solnet et al., 2019), which is believed to be a source of seamless customer experience (Wirtz et al., 2018) if implemented well in a phygital setting. This research endeavors to answer broad research questions about how firms can integrate human touch in phygital omnichannel luxury retailing for offering immersive customer experience.

Our study argues that salespeople can facilitate and help the firm in providing human touch in a phygital setting, which can help in rapport building, engaging customers through innovative strategies, building social engagement, and subsequently strengthening commitment and trust, along with enhancing customer experience. Therefore, our research question addresses whether the presence of human touch in the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [pangarka@uwgb.edu](mailto:pangarka@uwgb.edu) (A. Pangarkar), [vibha@ibsindia.org](mailto:vibha@ibsindia.org) (V. Arora), [yupal.shukla3@unibo.it](mailto:yupal.shukla3@unibo.it) (Y. Shukla).

form of rapport building and social engagement in phygital delivery can result in delivering an immersive customer experience. Extant research has looked at customers' psychology aspects (Mele et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2021c) and needs, but has not devoted enough attention to salespeople or the human touch perspective. Our study addresses this research gap and contributes to the luxury marketing and retailing literature by investigating the role of phygital setting in leveraging human touch for rapport building and thereby offering an enhanced customer encounter, through immersive customer experience. An immersive customer experience involves leveraging technology to impact customer experiences positively at each point of their journey with the firm's products and services during the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stage, resulting in greater value in the form of customer experience (Tom Dieck et al., 2021).

This research study follows the approach of conducting 18 in-depth interviews with senior luxury retail managers and senior leadership managing successful luxury brands such as Coach, Burberry, Armani, Ermenegildo Zegna, Diesel, Hugo Boss, and Canali to understand the role played by phygital setting in adding human touch in offering an immersive and seamless experience. The study aims to test existing theory (Deshpande, 1983; Yadav, 2010) by leveraging qualitative interviews. We conducted in-depth qualitative research interviews with retail managers and senior leadership at luxury firms to conduct analyses and test the Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan and Hunt 1994). These interviews resulted in invaluable information about phygital and human touch interaction, which is important for luxury retailers to design long-term strategies for growth. A qualitative research methodology can provide rich and interesting information on the topic being explored (Guest et al., 2017) and therefore we follow this process. The interviews also helped us identify relevant themes that would be helpful in extending this research through future studies.

In the following sections, we provide a literature review of phygital omnichannel retailing, how it assumes great importance for luxury brands, the role of rapport in building long-lasting ties with customers, and how retailers are focused on customer engagement and social engagement.

## 2. Overview of phygital omnichannel luxury retailing

Over the past decade, the importance of luxury fashion brands globally has gained significant importance because of higher living standards, greater international exposure, coupled with changing paradigms and worldviews, and loftier consumer aspirations to communicate an "haute-couture" reputation, through creating an exclusive and vintage image (Goldstein and Carpenter, 2021; Jebarajakirthy and Das, 2021; Park et al., 2021; Shahid and Paul, 2021). Luxury fashion brands appeal to consumers because they are conduits of belongingness and status affiliated with glamour and high-society, which along with their elite reputation, signal class, and sophistication (Ko et al., 2019). Because luxury fashion brands thrive on building relationships with consumers, it is important to provide distinctive and exceptional advisory services to new-age modern patrons through adopting a "digital luxury" experience encompassing various touchpoints that satisfy the needs, desires, and aspirations of such avant-garde consumers (Barann et al., 2020).

Lawry (2021) focuses on how phygital shopping experiences should incorporate the distinctive and exclusive needs of luxury consumers and how "self-gifting" plays a unique role in fulfilling hedonic needs and engaging in conspicuous consumption. The author further highlights the role of status-seeking in bolstering the use of mobile devices and apps, including taking selfies and sharing within brand communities, to gain attention from friends and individuals in their network. This behavior also results in patronizing physical stores and sharing pictures through online media and channels. Thus the "phygital" cycle is completed here, through the interface and confluence of technology with the physical shopping experience, which bridges the gap between physical and

digital, thereby providing a unique interactive experience for luxury consumers involving social engagement.

Lynch and Barnes (2020) state that because luxury fashion brands are high-involvement products, the consumer decision-making process leading to purchase is very important and as part of this process, factors such as seamless customer engagement (quicker delivery times, no delivery charges, lack of differences between online and offline purchases, no difficulties in product returns to a different channel), risk (risk of financial loss mitigated through coupon codes, using wish lists, and click and collect), and a consistent brand (uniform brand image and representation across channels, availability of inventory across channels), are part of the omnichannel service encounter that luxury brands need to excel at. Luxury fashion brands, including haute-couture ones such as Burberry, are adept at channelizing the power of omnichannel retailing by allowing for greater and stronger interface and links between online and physical (in-store) shopping experiences, through adding a human touch to its online customer service (customers receive calls from experienced salespeople, availability of chat options online), which ensures a superior and seamless service experience (Weiners, 2017).

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

The phenomena related to rapport and social engagement can be explained well with the help of *The Commitment-Trust Theory* (Morgan and Hunt, 1994a). *The Commitment-Trust Theory* (Morgan and Hunt, 1994a) explicates how relational exchanges between both parties (i.e., store managers and customers in this study) hinge on reliability, assurance, confidence, communication, integrity, positivity, willingness, and shared values. The authors further add that trust is a vital antecedent to determining commitment and that relationship termination costs and relationship benefits accrued from shared synergies between both parties, determine trust and commitment, while opportunistic behavior is a deterrent toward fostering these values. Mukherjee and Nath (2007) articulate how commitment and trust is integral in the omnichannel and retail world because along with all the focal variables that constitute the theory, privacy, and security in the online and electronic word-of-mouth era assume significant importance, with a view to developing long-term relational exchanges. In their paper on omnichannel retailing, Ameen et al. (2021) explain how this environment has paved the way for customers to use myriad channels via the disparate technologies available in shopping malls, therefore in such contexts trust in these technologies and commitment toward using them is an important constituent of the customer omnichannel process. In their research on relational exchanges in online and omnichannel environments, Arli et al. (2018) propose that firms should administer and designate dedicated resources toward relationship-building efforts focused on trust and commitment, particularly in the initial stages of the interaction, with an intention to solidify, strengthen, and augment these exchanges, especially given the rapidly changing and evolving nature of such interactions.

The basic tenets of the Commitment-Trust Theory demonstrate that it is the engagement toward luxury brands that make customers feel committed because rapport and communication with the salespeople invoke these feelings, which leads to an immersive customer experience. In the context of our study, customers experience feelings of reassurance regarding the reliability of salespeople they develop a rapport with, which leads to purchase behaviors. Similarly, our literature review demonstrates that the communication between retail staff/salespeople through technology domains such as the internet, mobile apps, WhatsApp, and video calls (showcasing latest products, designs, and catalogs), that focus on style advising and customization, demonstrates integrity and commitment to customers, thus facilitating sales transactions. This helps us identify our focal constructs such as rapport building, social engagement, and immersive customer experience behaviors in a phygital setting.

## 2.2. Rapport building in phygital setting

In the world of omnichannel retailing, the concept of rapport has received considerable attention over the past few years, because frontline employees and salespeople are the first and last point of contact for customers, therefore an enjoyable and memorable interaction experience exemplified by personal bonding can translate into customer satisfaction, gratification, and delight (Fatima et al., 2020). While marketing has long been characterized by relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994a; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995) and long-last enduring ties that are conducive for and critical to achieving success among partners, rapport building between employees and customers has been vastly neglected, understudied, and insufficiently researched. In their study on the rapport between employees and customers, Fatima et al. (2020) articulate how positive service encounters, personal connection, friendly demeanor, and meaningful interactions all lead to customer happiness because there is a strong underlying element of trust, satisfaction, and fulfillment experienced by the patrons. Although extant research has studied how store employees and frontline personnel can help customers manage and confront stress through emotional encouragement, support, compassion, and advice, a recent study by Eroglu et al. (2022) states that to placate and assuage customers experiencing stress in crowded retail environments, the role of rapport, as an emotion-focused mechanism that can alleviate and curb stressful environments, is very valuable. Delcourt et al. (2013) explain the importance of employee emotional competence and rapport in the retail world, by stating that they are important determinants of relationship quality, and it is critical for employees to emotionally connect with customers and resonate with them in creating a positive culture that leads to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Extant research has viewed rapport as a critical stimulus regarding customer perceptions of a firm and commitment toward customers that evokes loyalty and satisfaction, delineated by strong communication, connection, understanding, and empathy between both parties (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000, 2008).

Gremler and Gwinner (2008) create a typology of rapport behaviors that can help retailers determine which behavior is appropriate and relevant as per the context. These rapport-building behaviors include attentive behavior (personal recognition and interest such as remembering customer names, their unique needs, and aspirations), common grounding behavior (discovering commonalities with the customer, such as hobbies and interests), courteous behavior (demonstrating honesty, civility, and empathy with customers), connecting behavior (diffusion of humor, and exchange of pleasantries/friendly demeanor), and information sharing behavior (providing advice to guide decision-making, sharing knowledge, and soliciting questions to better understand customer needs). Rapport-building behavior involves behavior that is interactive, friendly, emotionally connecting, attentive, encouraging, and supportive (Fatima et al., 2020; Gremler and Gwinner, 2000, 2008). To foster such behaviors effectively and efficiently, it is important for retail firms to cultivate trust and develop long-term relationships that mitigate risks and nurture commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994a; Mukherjee and Nath, 2007).

## 2.3. Social engagement in phygital setting

Current research on luxury fashion brands has highlighted the role of conspicuous consumption, for the purpose of ostentatious demonstration of elite status, and the desire to signal distinctiveness, which is symbolic of affluence, wealth, and sophistication (Jebarajakirthy et al., 2021; Ko et al., 2019; Park et al., 2021; Shahid and Paul, 2021; Shankar and Jain, 2021). Patrons of luxury fashion brands are upmarket, cosmopolitan, and tech-savvy, and looking to satisfy both hedonic and status-seeking goals (Lawry, 2021). As such, these luxury connoisseurs immerse themselves in phygital activities, such as sharing information using mobile apps and technology to seek validation from social networks, fashion opinion leadership to leverage their deep expertise in

influencing opinions, purchase intentions, and dimensions of other users, and self-gifting, where new-age technologies, such as augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality play a key role in relieving daily stress and celebrating special occasions (Lawry, 2021; Quach and Thaichon, 2017).

Shankar and Jain (2021), in their study on Indian luxury consumers, explicate how socialization and community bonding play an important role in webrooming intentions because consumers prefer seeking information online about products, attributes, deals and offers, etc., but ultimately prefer buying it in a physical environment such as in-store. This is because they seek reaffirmation and engagement with other individuals, including friends, family, and others in their social circle, before finalizing the purchase decision. Gen Z and millennials represent important luxury consumer segments and the impact of current technologies and platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Spotify on this generation is very profound (Haenlein et al., 2020). In fact, it is estimated that Gen Z and millennials will likely account for 40% of the luxury market by 2025, resulting in even some of the more haute-couture and traditional luxury companies such as Gucci and Burberry taking steps to understand the social psyche of this new generation of consumers and their propensity to share information about their luxury consumption through Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (Oi, 2021). Therefore, it is paramount that luxury firms keep in mind the social aspirations and goals of luxury consumers in mind while designing appropriate omnichannel strategies to engage customers for enhancement of customer experience.

Overall, we summarize that the Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994a) is a powerful overarching theory that can foster trust and commitment within the phygital space to develop long-lasting enduring ties. Therefore, we leverage the Commitment-Trust Theory to answer our research question about how firms can integrate human touch in phygital omnichannel luxury retailing for offering immersive customer experience. We address the proposed research question through the process of qualitative research interviews. A qualitative research approach and methodology, through its focus on in-depth and deeper understanding of situations, will help us identify and confirm the role of Commitment-Trust Theory in comprehending how an immersive experience can be delivered in the phygital omnichannel luxury retailing context.

## 3. Research methods

As seen in our literature review, very few research studies have focused on leveraging human touch in the omnichannel retailing and phygital space for luxury fashion brands, using rapport as an important mechanism to engage and attract customers using innovative practices to retain consumers, when luxury sales have been somewhat impacted. Therefore, to enlighten and enhance our understanding of this space, we conducted in-depth interviews with 18 senior retail Managers and practitioners (Male 50%, Female 50%), to understand their perceptions, attitudes, and innovative strategies toward targeting new luxury brands consumers and retain existing ones. The Managers were all working as Group Heads, Assistant Vice-Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Group Vice-Presidents, and Retail Store Managers for various famous luxury brands such as Armani, Coach, Burberry, Canali, Diesel, Ermenegildo Zegna, Hugo Boss, etc., as part of an Indian conglomerate which had joint-venture agreements with these brands. Participant ages ranged from 28 years to 46 years, and the average work experience of the participants was 13.3 years (with minimum work experience being 8 years and maximum being 23 years), indicating the rich quality and tenure of experience in the luxury industry. The retail stores for these brands were in an upmarket location in a huge mall in Mumbai, India, where only haute-couture luxury brands are sold. Each Manager interviewed had the experience of working in the luxury retail industry and had deep insights to offer about customer behavior, psyche, purchasing habits, and lifestyle and aspiration needs. Participation in these

interviews was voluntary and each interview lasted anywhere from 60 min to 90 min. Each interview was recorded. The interviews were conducted in the retail conglomerate's corporate office (for the Group Heads and Vice-Presidents), and at the upmarket mall (for the respective Store Managers).

Our extensive literature review on extant omnichannel and phygital literature, including our theoretical framework featuring our overarching theory, which is The Commitment Trust Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994b), helped in creating the interview guide which consisted of three main sections that endeavored to explore, 1) the types of luxury brand consumers and their unique desires and motivations to purchase these brands, 2) the innovative phygital strategies used by retailers to engage new customers and retain existing ones, and 3) current trends in the luxury market, including leveraging digital marketing and technology with the help of human elements, that can fulfill the purchase intentions and status-seeking desires of consumers. A semi-structured in-depth interview process was followed, because the phygital space is still in a very nascent stage, and therefore comprehensive interviews would likely result in rich findings for such exploratory studies (Patten et al., 2020). Moreover, interviews allow greater conceptualization and more attention to detail, along with aiding finer nuances of the topic being investigated, all of which help in identifying and disseminating relevant information to address the research question (Guest et al., 2017). A comprehensive literature review greatly contributed to identifying the relevant constructs in soliciting responses from participants.

In conformance with the guidelines proposed by (Guest et al., 2006) that interviews should be conducted until saturation levels are reached, and clear patterns and themes emerge, the 18 interviews conducted were deemed adequate. We followed the analysis methods using qualitative content analysis, as recommended by (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This qualitative content analysis helped us in arriving at important emergent themes (Bryman, 2016), specific to luxury consumers and their unique needs and desires, which are especially important in the context of our research.

The transcripts for the 18 interviews conducted were evaluated and transcribed using NVivo software and important themes pertinent to our research that emerged were determined, studied, and explored in detail. It is pertinent to mention that one of the researchers conducted all the interviews, while the other two worked on the coding for the transcripts, which greatly reduces the propensity of bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). A thematic analysis method is critical to this process because the themes that developed are manifests of the most recurring and important concepts from the interview and are highly crucial to provide an understanding of the phenomena being investigated (Glavas et al., 2020). The patterns and concepts of the interviews were first coded into sub-themes and then later, these were classified into relevant themes. This approach is in line with extant research that proposes incorporating all important and relevant data obtained (Azemi et al., 2019).

Please refer Table 1 for the details related to gender, age, position, number of years of work experience, and interview length and Table 2 for the interview guide that was developed.

#### 4. Analysis and findings

Our study follows a qualitative content analysis of the data retrieved from in-depth interviews to identify the determinants of phygital customer experience in a luxury retail setting. In accordance with these parameters, the authors reviewed the transcribed data and identified the keywords that were focal to and represented participants' responses. The selected words were carefully screened, and these were found to be the most repeated words that emerged (Kovács and Spens, 2005). As per similarity content, these words were then coded into groups and each group represented a specific important theme (Athwal et al., 2019). Based on this coding, pertinent and germane themes central to addressing the research question were identified. The results from the

**Table 1**  
Interview participants profile.

Respondents	Gender	Age (in years)	Position	Work Experience (in years)	Interview length (in minutes)
1	Male	30	Store Manager	08	70
2	Female	28	Store Manager	10	60
3	Female	36	Business Head	14	60
4	Female	32	Store Manager	10	60
5	Male	29	Store Manager	08	60
6	Male	45	Vice-President	21	90
7	Male	46	Vice-President	23	80
8	Female	35	Store Manager	12	70
9	Female	30	Store Manager	11	70
10	Male	44	Business Head	23	70
11	Female	29	Store Manager	09	60
12	Male	33	Regional Brand Manager	12	60
13	Female	40	Store Manager	23	70
14	Female	37	Assistant Vice-President	13	90
15	Male	39	Vice-President	15	90
16	Female	30	Store Manager	11	70
17	Male	29	Store Manager	08	80
18	Male	33	Store Manager	10	80

**Table 2**  
Interview guide and protocol.

Section 1: Insights on type of luxury consumers that patronize the retailers' brands
Question 1: Who are your typical luxury brand consumers? Please provide a segmentation for these.
Question 2: What are the motivations for consumers to purchase luxury brands?
Section 2: Innovative strategies used by luxury retailers to engage consumers
Question 3: What strategies do you use to get new customers and ensure loyalty from existing consumers?
Question 4: How important is it to develop close bonds with consumers?
Question 5: Is networking and developing bonds with consumers important? Why?
Question 6: What is the role of salespeople in engaging consumers?
Question 7: How do you cater to specific consumer needs and demands? How do you customize services?
Section 3: Current trends and technologies interfaces that help fulfill status needs
Question 8: In your opinion, does technology matter to luxury consumers while shopping? How?
Question 9: Can you share any experiences regarding how your consumers use technology in seeking information about luxury brands? What part do you play in this process?
Question 10: How important is human touch along with technology? Please elaborate.

interviews of luxury retail managers show that three major themes of rapport building, social engagement, and immersive customer experience to enhance customer engagement across phygital channels are of utmost importance in the luxury market. These themes were found to be consistent with our literature review. We developed a qualitative research codebook that helped us identify a list of the codes to be used in our research. Our research questions, literature review, overarching

theory, and emergent themes from our interviews helped in creating this codebook (Table 3). Furthermore, interviewees, consisting of Senior Retail Store Managers, Business Heads, and Vice-Presidents elaborated upon the strategies designed and implemented to create rapport building and social engagement in the phygital environment. Fig. 1 and Tables 4–6 provide a summary of these themes and categories identified. We explain each theme in the next section with relevant findings and details verbatim stated by the luxury retail managers and senior executives.

#### 4.1. Rapport in phygital luxury

The extant literature shows uncommonly attentive, common grounding, courteous, connecting and information sharing behavior results in rapport building (Fatima et al., 2020; Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). Customer rapport becomes important since it has the ability to instill confidence in customers for decision-making during purchases. Our findings reveal that luxury brands consumers are fashion-conscious, status-oriented, and aware of the latest fashions that create an impression in their extended networks. These consumers also solicit information on technology platforms like the internet, WhatsApp, various apps, and social media. Firms are aware of the typical profile of consumers that patronize their brand and regarding how to fulfill their unique needs through providing the phygital elements and human touch, including salespeople acting as style advisors or providing personalized styling tips. The research data from our qualitative study suggests that salespeople at luxury firms help in creating convenience, exclusiveness, personalization, and customization for the customer. These are important rapport-building actions by salespeople across phygital delivery channels. Furthermore, integral communication in rapport-building actions by salespeople results in a feeling of assurance, confidence, and trust. This further positively impacts commitment and willingness to have continuous patronage (Jebarajakirthy et al., 2021).

The importance of rapport building is captured in the following statement from a Group Vice-President for a leading luxury brand:

*“Being luxury retailers, we need to have a rapport with these guys because they have to spend money and make purchases. They will get the correct advice from our salespeople so it’s like a personal stylist helping them by building rapport”*

The analysis from the interviews conducted with senior luxury retail managers reflects that they define and build rapport on the tenets of the feel-good factor by providing exclusivity to the customer, making the purchase process convenient, personalized, customized, and through providing channel choice freedom in a phygital environment. Table 4 represents rapport building theme with its categories and verbatim as shared by senior retail managers and leadership.

Customers use various channels to satisfy their functional and psychological needs. In the content analysis, it has been observed that luxury customers are looking for a phygital experience with the luxury goods retailer. One of the major findings is that luxury firms are innovating by ensuring that physical stores and home shopping channels contribute significantly to the business of various luxury brands. Online platforms like WhatsApp, websites and e-commerce platforms provide support by sharing new collections and photos digitally and making the purchase happen seamlessly at physical stores or the convenience of customer homes, through avenues like home shopping, which is a unique but highly personalized rapport-building initiative, resulting in enhanced customer experience in phygital retailing. This propensity of leveraging technology interfaces that enhance rapport building processes is reflected in the following statement from a Business Head, of a leading luxury brand:

*Company website, WhatsApp technology, online portals like Tata Cliq are also providing the customer with an omnichannel experience. Technology plays a part in sharing brand information with customers. This is very important for our business because luxury is a high-involvement product”*

Phygital retail environment helps in delivering relationship benefits accrued from shared synergies between salespeople and customers. Rapport-building actions by salespeople not only provide convenience, exclusiveness, choice freedom, personalization, and customization but also create value, confidence, trust, and long-term commitment toward the brand. The factors of convenience, integral communication, willingness to help, and other rapport-building actions help in gaining customer trust and long-term commitment toward the brand. Customers having trust in salespeople and technology endeavor to use phygital delivery networks through inviting salespeople to their homes or they use digital platforms to review, evaluate, or purchase the product. This reflects the confidence, assurance, credibility, and enhanced customer experience demonstrated by phygital delivery (Quach et al., 2020). Consider the following quote that resulted during our interview with a Vice-President for a leading luxury brand and which highlights how rapport leads to value in the form of enhanced customer experience:

*“We have clients who do not want to come all the way to the mall, and park during packed weekends. They do not want to go through all that hassle. Besides for some of them, the location might be too far to travel. Then we create value and suggest that they should use alternative channels like home shopping, where we visit them to complete the purchase. It’s a win-win situation for both”*

**Table 3**  
Codebook developed from Thematic Data Analysis.

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants’ key words (concepts)
Rapport Building in Phygital Luxury	Human interaction, Relationship building	<i>Relationships, harmony, connection, networks, affinity, connection, link, ties, understanding, guidance, advice, association, partnership, mutually convenient, helpful, tuning, agreement, resonance, friendship, attachment, linkage, closeness, wavelength, style advisor, confidante</i>
Social Engagement in Phygital Luxury	Community bonding, social association	<i>Celebration, get-together, gathering, function, party, festivity, community, group, society, reunion, congregation, societal, meetings, group, collective, circle, people, status, wealth, affluence, money, power, elite, symbol, identity, distinctiveness, wealth, prestige, show-off, ostentatiousness, signaling</i>
Immersive Customer Experience	Memorable encounter, interactive collaboration	<i>Value-creation, customer gratification, customer journey mapping, experiential satisfaction, information sharing, awareness, customer education, interactive communication, active participation, emotional connection, relational value-building, innovation, social contact, technology interface, continuous improvement, post-purchase follow-up, problem resolution</i>

#### 4.2. Social engagement in phygital luxury

Social engagement satisfies the psychological and social needs of the customer. Both hedonic and status-seeking goals are the driving forces for upmarket and tech-savvy patrons of luxury fashion brands (Lawry, 2021). The extant literature highlights the desire to show affluence, sophistication, elite status, distinctiveness, and wealth with the presence of conspicuous consumption and display of luxury fashion brands (Jebarajakirthy and Das, 2021; Ko et al., 2019; Park et al., 2021; Shahid

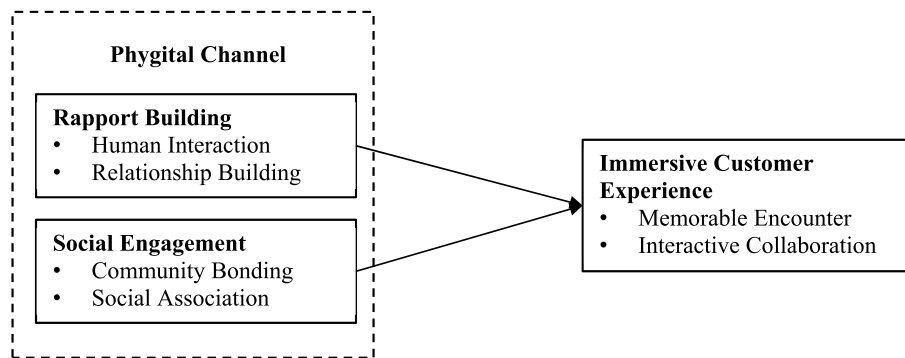


Fig. 1. A Conceptual Framework focusing on how Phygital, Rapport Building, and Social Engagement activities result in Immersive Customer Experience.

and Paul, 2021; Shankar and Jain, 2021). The findings of our qualitative research study reveal that luxury consumers are status-oriented, ostentatious, wishing to signal and demonstrate newly acquired wealth, and concerned about social identity and elite status. Our research analysis shows luxury consumers engage in various phygital activities, such as searching information and offers online, sharing information using mobile apps and technology to seek approval from social media networks, influencing opinion as a fashion opinion leader, and preference toward making a purchase decision in-store, where customers engage with others and seek reaffirmation from family, friends, and others in their social circle. Firms are aware of these changing paradigm shifts and are adapting their phygital strategies to incorporate the human touch element, along with technology interface. Consider the following quote that resulted during our interview with a Retail Store Manager for a leading luxury brand:

*“Old money customers are mature and have elegant taste, whereas new money customers would like to show off their recently acquired wealth and a new segment from smaller cities has been observed, who are having lot of money and would like to flaunt newly acquired wealth to their known ones and networks”*

Our findings show that customers search, examine, explore, and evaluate the product on a digital medium, and then make a purchase offline or vice-versa. This results in a better customer experience and enhanced trust and commitment towards the brand. Table 5 represents the social engagement theme with its categories and ad verbatim as shared by senior retail managers and leadership. The technology awareness and searching for information factor is highlighted through the below quote with a Retail Store Manager for a leading luxury brand:

*“There are luxury brand customers who come and say that price at a particular website or platform is relatively less. As customers also know everything about styling, brand, and price through internet and apps, it becomes important to hold an intelligent conversation with the customer and provide personalized suggestions in making the purchase decision”*

Our findings also reveal the innovative strategies implemented by consumers in catering to the socialization needs and desires of consumers. For example, firms realize that the social aspect is very important for consumers to signal status, share their newly acquired possessions, and seek approval from their social circles. Consumers search for information about the products online and make a visit to an offline store with friends and family. In today’s busy times, with the added pressure of the pandemic, firms are innovating through salespeople visiting consumers’ homes and serving their unique needs through a focus on socialization, community bonding, style advice, and engagement with social networks in a phygital context. It enhances customer experience because they meet various touchpoints and channels to experience convenience, socialization, trained and experienced style advisors who provide reassurance, security, and to satisfy status-oriented needs. Luxury brand marketers need to ensure unparalleled

customer service at each touchpoint to enhance customer experience. Customers feel confident in patronizing the store and using technologies such as WhatsApp, website, applications, along with new-age innovations like home shopping, as per their needs in a seamless fashion. Positive and enhanced customer experience will likely increase commitment toward the brand significantly. The social engagement factor is demonstrated through the below quote with a Retail Store Manager for a leading luxury brand:

*Customers feel socially engaged when they get an opportunity to meet luxury brand managers at their homes in a social group. Luxury brand customers wanted me to go to their home and they already asked their family and friends to join. The social group was expecting me. For them, it was more of a social gathering, and advising them on what to purchase also happens”*

#### 4.3. Immersive customer experience in phygital luxury

Omnichannel retailing endeavors to incorporate each customer point of contact as an amalgamated experience resulting in customer satisfaction and delight (Mishra et al., 2021c; Tueanrat et al., 2021). Luxury fashion brands believe in building relationships with consumers, and it becomes important to provide exceptional service to patrons through “digital luxury” experiences encompassing various touchpoints that satisfy the needs, desires, and aspirations of such avant-garde consumers (Barann et al., 2020). Immersive customer experience is important for retailers because it has the potential to impact customer perceptions significantly and positively about the firm and helps in mapping the customer journey (Tom Dieck et al., 2021). Ratcliff (2015) highlights immersive customer experience and its importance by stressing the fact that this is the sum total of each and every experience that the customer has with the specific firm during the entire span of the relationship and it constitutes factors that facilitate purchase decision-making, such as creating product awareness and educating about the virtues of the product, social interaction and communication that fosters trust, and solicitation of feedback post-purchase, which reassures the customer that the firm is willing to provide stellar service throughout the process and even after the transaction is closed, resulting in customer delight.

Our findings reveal that the communication between retail staff/salespeople through technology domains such as the internet, mobile apps, WhatsApp, and video calls (showcasing latest products, designs, and catalogs), followed by home shopping visits that focus on customization and active participation of consumers in the process. From their end, retailers seek to provide information about the product, educate consumers about the unique product attributes, understand diverse and distinct customer needs with a view to providing superior service and customization, interactive collaborative touchpoints through leveraging technology that enhances customer experience, and long-term value creation that focuses on relational aspects. All these initiatives, involving the active involvement of various stakeholders, shape current

**Table 4**  
Rapport building in Phygital Luxury.

Theme	Stated by	Categories	Quotes
Rapport	Business Head	Human interaction	<i>“In today’s times customers have busy schedules and might not be able to visit our retail stores. At the same time, they want to also experience human interaction. How do we solve this problem? It’s simple- if they cannot come to us, then we can go to them!”.</i>
Rapport	Vice-President	Human interaction	<i>“When customers have seen our catalog through apps or video calls and want to purchase but can’t visit the store due to the fact that it’s far away from their home or because of heavy crowds in the mall, it is an issue for sure. We have clients who do not want to come all the way to the mall, and park during packed weekends. They do not want to go through all that hassle. Besides for some of them, the location might be too far to travel. Then we suggest that they should use alternative channels like home shopping, where we visit them to complete the purchase. It’s a win-win situation for both”</i>
Rapport	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Relationship building	<i>“We often see some customers who have shifted to online shopping because it’s more convenient for them. They have shopped at our stores and brands, and they know their sizes for a particular brand. They see the styles and products offline, but want to shop online using technology interfaces”</i>
Rapport	Group Vice-President	Relationship building	<i>“We need to have relationships with the customers because these guys are fashion-conscious people. The customer thinks- I want to look good and I want to look unique. Being luxury retailers, we need to have rapport with these guys because they have to spend money and make purchases. They will get the correct advice from our salespeople so it’s like a personal stylist helping them”</i>
Rapport	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Relationship building	<i>“When customers tell their friends that the Diesel brand is coming today to my home (home shopping), it’s a big hype and they will invite their other friends and share their sizes, to get something for them as well. They will have drinks and dinner together with us. It gives a nice feeling of bonding together. They trust us and seek advice from us regarding style, designs etc.</i>
Rapport	Vice-President	Relationship building	<i>“Many times, the customers directly contact us saying they need particular brands and products. First, they ask for pictures so that we can share these with them, and if they really like something then they call us home for those items”.</i>
Rapport	Business Head	Relationship building	<i>“Platforms like WhatsApp support home shopping services by sharing new collection and photos with customers. Company website, online portals like Tata Cliq are also providing the customer with omnichannel experience. Technology plays a part in sharing of brand information with the customers. This is very important for our business,</i>

**Table 4 (continued)**

Theme	Stated by	Categories	Quotes
Rapport	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Relationship building	<i>because luxury is a high-involvement product”</i>
Rapport	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Relationship building	<i>“Interaction with customers- It’s a very personal, customized experience. Wherever they see us, they always remember my name. We also feel good that the customer knows us well and they feel very proud to tell people that Emporio Armani has come all the way from Mumbai specially to visit me”.</i>
Rapport	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Relationship building	<i>“Sometimes, we tell the customers, we’ve got this particular style, which is going to get sold out and we can see that they are very busy. We offer to deliver it to them at their homes. This is the relationship we build. They’re very appreciative of this”.</i>
Rapport	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Relationship building	<i>“When we receive new stock of products for the customer’s preferred brands, we just send pictures through WhatsApp/phones, thus people staying in other cities can then choose these products, make the purchase decisions, and then actually close the sale by transferring money to our bank account, and we can then ship it to them”.</i>

customer perspectives and create expectations for further positive innovative encounters that provide gratification and contentment. For example, home shopping is an important innovation as customers are busy with professional and personal commitments, home shopping serves as an interactive mechanism to communicate, customize, and enhance the experience with experienced salespeople, who communicate, educate, enlighten, and collaborate with customers to provide an unparalleled and integrative encounter at all times.

The importance of immersive customer experience is captured in the following statement from a Group Vice-President for a leading luxury brand:

*“Even after so many other factors conducive to our customer buying elsewhere, they still come to us to buy that’s what we take pride in because it is the customized services that we give that the clients truly come for. They tell us if they’re buying a new house, they call us on their personal functions. We go all the way if the groom is buying his whole attire from us, we go all the way to dress him up for his reception. So, you know these are gestures which I’m sure clients truly appreciate, and it shows when they come back next to when they start giving us references”*

Another major finding reveals that technology and human touch together enhance customer experience and modern luxury patrons prefer phygital experience while buying goods. WhatsApp application, technology platforms like apps, websites, and human interaction at the store and home collectively help in fulfilling customers’ psychological and functional needs. The use of interactive interaction with help of technology and salespeople results in an everlasting experience for the customers and customers demonstrate loyalty and repeat patronage. The following quote shared by a luxury brand store manager reflects the customers’ preference for customized promotional messages and services from salespeople personally and digitally.

*“As soon as we launch a new collection. We send images through WhatsApp to all these clients who are probably in these remote areas that they can’t come, and we send to our normal clients also. Salespeople have the databases on their phones, and they will send a message first to generate clients’ interest for the new collection and then clients send inquiries about pictures. If they like something, then they would do an online transfer and we get it home delivered”*

**Table 5**  
Social engagement in phygital luxury.

Theme	Stated by	Categories	Quotes
Social Engagement in Phygital Luxury	Vice-President	Social association and bonding	<i>“It’s a big hype for customers, when they say to friends that, you know what- The Diesel brand is coming today to my home. For me I have that kind of relationship with Diesel brand. It’s a big thing in a smaller city. It’s a big hype- they will say to our salespeople that I’m inviting my friends and then they will say- you know I will provide you with their apparel sizes so it will be good to invite them and for them to purchase some products from you as well. And these things you know- it’s all about good relationships, the customers and their friends will have drinks together with us and they will have dinner together with us too. This kind of a relationship between salespeople and customers is fantastic”</i>
Social Engagement in Phygital Luxury	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Social association	<i>“Customers feel socially engaged when they get an opportunity to meet luxury brand managers at their home in a social group. Luxury brand customers wanted me to go to their home and they already asked their family and friends to join. The social group was expecting me. For them, it was more of a social gathering, and advising them on what to purchase also happens”</i>
Social Engagement in Phygital Luxury	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Bonding	<i>“There are luxury brand customers who come and say that price at a particular website or platform is relatively less. So, now our relationship with the customers is extremely important- the way they style, the way they groom, the way they talk is very, very important. As customers also know everything about styling, brand, and price through the internet and apps. As customers are more exposed to information, it becomes important to hold an intelligent conversation with the customer in phygital environment to provide a great customer experience and help in making the purchase decision”</i>
Social Engagement in Phygital Luxury	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Social association	<i>“It is not always that we are being invited to the home of customers. Many times, luxury brand customers themselves would like to come to our store. Luxury brand customers like to visit our store with their family or friends as they take it as a reason for a social outing, for</i>

**Table 5 (continued)**

Theme	Stated by	Categories	Quotes
Social Engagement in Phygital Luxury	Vice-President	Social association	<i>the experience, ambiance, and to seek our opinions about their style and looks.”</i> <i>“Customers feel very proud that a famous luxury brand is walking into their home. They are seeking something unique about which they can talk to their friends. The brand has come to their home, and they would like to flaunt it to their family and friends. It becomes a symbol of status in the community they belong to.”</i>
Social Engagement in Phygital Luxury	Luxury Brand Store Manager	Social association	<i>“Old money people are mature and have elegant taste, whereas new money people would like to show off their recently acquired wealth and a new segment from smaller cities has been observed, who are having lot of money and would like to flaunt newly acquired wealth to their known ones and networks. New money customers or the customers who have just got money- they have graduated from leading universities of the country, and it was because of their job, or maybe they inherited some wealth, or maybe sold some land/ property, and have overnight become rich. It’s these customers that want to basically show- off their brands/demonstrate newly-acquired wealth. They basically want to tell in their social circles that look at me, the way I studied and did well, the way I look, see the brands I wear, and look at my car, look at my home, I have now arrived in life”</i>

**5. Discussion**

Based on our literature review, we can infer that while omnichannel retailing has attracted the attention of researchers, there has been a paucity of studies on rapport building in the omnichannel environment, particularly for luxury retailers, and focusing on how trust and commitment can play a role in building long-term enduring relationships. Moreover, the relatively few studies that do exist are more from the customer perspective, and not from the retailers’ point of view, which is what makes our study unique and distinctive. Retailers need to pay more attention and focus on leveraging the vast potential and capabilities of phygital retailing in the luxury space to deliver an exceptional experience. Retailers can endeavor to address this through facilitating and channelizing innovative practices, creating, and nurturing rapport, providing rich and everlasting customer experiences, customer retention and management, customer delight and satisfaction, development of e-commerce capabilities, and meaningful relational exchanges that contribute to long-term success (Mishra et al., 2021). Therefore, our study extends extant literature, contributes, strengthens it, and provides future directions to researchers, managers, and practitioners on actionable long-term growth-oriented strategies.

The phenomena related to rapport and social engagement explicates



**Table 6**  
Immersive customer experience.

Theme	Stated by	Categories	Quotes
Immersive Customer Experience	Vice-President	Interactive collaboration	<i>“When customers have some important occasions coming up at their place, they call us at their place with specific merchandise. We already know their sizes, it’s in the system. And then we ask that anyone else also will be there with your shopping. So, if it’s a new customer, then we definitely ask for the sizes and the preferred fit, we take those merchandise to their places and make the required changes as desired.”</i>
Immersive Customer Experience	Assistant Vice-President	Memorable encounter	<i>If we sell a hundred items, we customize 90 of them. It’s amazing. It’s one of the best ways to close a sale because it takes only 10 min of time and you can get like your initials name or some graphics like a heart, badges or something on the garment without any cost”.</i>
Immersive Customer Experience	Group Head	Interactive collaboration	<i>“Customization phenomenon is supported with home shopping. Like it is something it is changing the luxury experience in a unique way. It helps in building personalized relationships with them and going beyond creating stories in those interactions. The bonding between customers and sales staff is fabulous and goes into customization of services and a lot of different things, such as regular follow-up with the client. Of course, this communication has to be genuine, it can’t be scripted, and it can’t be fake”.</i>

how relational exchanges between both parties (i.e., store managers and customers in this study) hinge on reliability, assurance, confidence, communication, integrity, positivity, willingness, and shared values. The authors further add that trust is a vital antecedent to determining commitment and that relationship termination costs and relationship benefits accrued from shared synergies between both parties, determine trust and commitment, while opportunistic behavior is a deterrent toward fostering these values. Mukherjee and Nath (2007) articulate how the commitment-trust theory is integral in the omnichannel and retail world because along with all the focal variables that constitute the theory, privacy, and security in the online and electronic word-of-mouth era assume significant importance, with a view to developing long-term relational exchanges. In their paper on omnichannel retailing, Ameen et al. (2021) explain how this environment has paved the way for customers to use myriad channels via the disparate technologies available in shopping malls, therefore in such contexts trust in these technologies and commitment toward using them is an important constituent of the customer omnichannel process. In their research on relational exchanges in online and omnichannel environments, Arli et al. (2018) propose that firms should administer and designate dedicated resources toward relationship-building efforts focused on trust and commitment, particularly in the initial stages of the interaction, with an intention to solidify, strengthen, and augment these exchanges, especially given the rapidly changing and evolving nature of such interactions.

The basic tenets of the Commitment-Trust Theory and our findings demonstrate that it is the social engagement toward luxury brands that

make customers feel committed because rapport and communication with the salespeople invoke these feelings. In the context of our study, customers experience feelings of reassurance regarding the reliability of salespeople they develop a rapport with, which leads to purchase behaviors. Similarly, the communication between retail staff/salespeople through technology domains such as the internet, mobile apps, WhatsApp, and video calls (showcasing latest products, designs, and catalogs), followed by home shopping visits that focus on style advising and customization, demonstrate integrity and commitment to customers, which facilitate sales transactions.

Home shopping is an important and interesting new area of innovation because, in today’s world, where consumers are perpetually busy with work and personal commitments, home shopping serves as an interactive mechanism to communicate with experienced salespeople and not compromise on the “human touch” aspect. We feel there is immense scope for retail firms to hire versatile, highly interactive, and skilled salespeople that can develop a strong rapport with customers, through fostering trust and commitment, thereby serving as style guides and confidantes in the purchasing and decision-making process. Additionally, the positivity and willingness to create a long-term relationship through maintaining contact with regular and infrequent customers (with a view to converting them into regular patrons) exemplifies an amalgamation and matching of shared values from both parties—the retail salespeople, who want to communicate value through product offerings, and the customer, who develops and experiences feelings of trust toward the retailer that is fostered by rapport and relational exchanges.

## 6. Managerial implications

This study provides several practical and actionable implications to managers at luxury retail firms on how to seamlessly manage the omnichannel experience for their customers. Omnichannel retailing has grown in popularity at global levels because it aims to unify, integrate, and merge each customer touchpoint as a consolidated experience, that is immaculate in nature, where customer satisfaction and delight reign supreme (Mishra et al., 2021). With the advent of technology, including mobile apps and QR codes, customers are in a better position to undertake purchase decisions through soliciting and comparing information across channels and selecting the ones that are most appropriate in fulfilling their needs (Lee et al., 2019). Luxury fashion brands are high-involvement products (Corzine, 2018), and brands such as Burberry, Cartier, and Gucci are already taking steps to facilitate and propagate omnichannel retailing among its customers (Weiners, 2017). However, because luxury customers are not homogeneous (similar), but rather heterogeneous (dissimilar) in their needs and want, it is important for retailers in this space to also consider the social engagement and rapport-building factors in the phygital space mind.

In particular, the role of rapport and a “phygital” experience assumes significant importance, particularly because luxury customers are looking to purchase high-end products in meeting their social needs, with a particular focus on distinctiveness, differentiation, and need for uniqueness (Jebarajakirthy and Das, 2021; Ko et al., 2019; Park et al., 2021; Shahid and Paul, 2021; Shankar and Jain, 2021). In this situation, relational exchanges characterized by strong rapport led to positive service encounters, personalized connections, and purposeful interactions, all of which result in customer satisfaction and delight, because they are backed by the notion of trust and commitment, which provides reassurance and is a strong catalyst. Our results reveal that luxury retailers need to be innovative and create value for customers through strategies such as home delivery of products by experienced salespeople. Through maintaining regular contact and connections with customers, retailers can share information about regular styles, designs, and products with customers through digital apps, websites, video calls, and WhatsApp platforms. Keeping in mind the long-term, experienced salespeople who can act as personal stylists and are able to develop

rapport with the customer over a protracted period can visit them and make sales through “home shopping”. In fact, retailers can send such salespeople to many customers covering a particular geographical location or area, which is especially important if customers are unable to travel to a retail store due to hectic lifestyles, or because their city/area does not have a store. These relationships can thrive and sustain through the notions of trust and commitment. Additionally, such personalized strategies focus on rapport building which may subsequently help in e-word of mouth publicity and promotion, which can help garner additional customers.

The role of rapport is further exemplified in the case of reduced consumption consumers, which is a type of minimalistic consumption (Pangarkar et al., 2021). In the case of reduced consumption consumers, financial constraints preclude them from engaging in regular purchases. Such financial constraints are temporal, because of loss of job, personal life situations such as divorce/separation, or changes in the family lifecycle, such as marriage, education, etc. Our results demonstrate that it is important for luxury retailers to stay in touch with such reduced consumption consumers, because when they revert to regular consumption patterns, it is the rapport and human element, combined with the sharing of digital offers through technology, which would enable the relationship to thrive and sustain, enabling top of mind recall. Likewise, rapport and social engagement can result in long-term benefits that can add great value to the firm, such as innovation through customer insights, creating new technology interfaces, and executing new processes to enable customer satisfaction, delight, and loyalty. Therefore, our study provides actionable phygital growth strategies to luxury retailers that can be part of their blueprint for success.

## 7. Limitations and future research directions

Our study contributes to the omnichannel literature and introduces the concepts of rapport building and social engagement in the phygital realm, for luxury retailers, which can help them in successfully navigating and strengthening their operations, in order to bolster market share, retain old customers and attract newer ones. While our research is unique because it offers insights from the retailers’ point of view and is a good starting point to explore phygital capabilities, there are certain limitations, that future researchers can resolve. Our qualitative interviews were conducted with retailers and senior executives of luxury brands, such as Burberry, Armani, Coach, Hugo Boss, Ermenegildo Zegna, Diesel, and Canali. Future research can look at interviewing consumers along with retailers to frame a more holistic picture. Although qualitative research can yield rich insights, particularly for topics like these which are insufficiently researched and understudied, we feel a mixed-method research approach, which includes both qualitative and quantitative research, could generate important findings that can add great value to luxury retail managers and practitioners. In addition, our qualitative research study was conducted in India and although extant research demonstrates that India is one of the fastest-growing emerging markets and represents most emerging/Asian markets very well (Banerjee et al., 2015), it would be interesting to evaluate the generalizability of this research in developed markets such as The United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and parts of Europe, including Italy and France, which are big markets for luxury brands. Finally, future research can also explore the moderating effects of minimalistic consumption, including different minimalism typologies, as identified by (Pangarkar et al., 2021), and how those contribute to the phygital and rapport building approaches, particularly for voluntary simplicity, reduced consumption, and inconspicuous minimalism consumers.

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