
Guest editorial: Navigating design, branding and marketing in the era of technology and sustainability

1. Introduction

The retail landscape has undergone a profound transformation in the past 10 years. The convergence of digital technology and sustainability has become a defining force in the evolution of retail strategy. Indeed, retailers have faced mounting pressure to innovate responsibly, communicate transparently and engage consumers across increasingly complex channels. This special issue in *Management Decision* responds to these challenges by presenting a collection of scholarly contributions that examine the intersection of design, branding and marketing in the context of technological advancement and sustainability imperatives. The accepted papers reflect a broad spectrum of methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives, yet they converge around several key themes that are central to contemporary management decision-making in retail, including sustainability as a strategic imperative, technology as both an enabler and a challenge and design and branding in a globalised, ethical marketplace.

2. Sustainability as strategic imperative

Several contributions position sustainability not as an add-on, but as a core driver of branding and consumer engagement.

“*Communicating Sustainability to Children Through Fashion Retail Third Places*” (Elizaga *et al.*, 2026) highlights the role of retail third spaces in shaping early consumer awareness and values, positioning sustainability as an experiential and educational tool. The authors reveal that children demonstrate a strong awareness of sustainability and express positive attitudes and intentions toward it. However, these intentions rarely translate into sustainable behaviours. While participants showed limited understanding of third places, they responded positively to the concept of educational third places. The paper offers preliminary empirical insights into the ideal forms, functions and features of third places that childrenswear retailers can implement to promote sustainability education within their retail environments.

The theme of consumer trust and transparency is advanced by the article “*Utilizing Blockchain-based Traceability to Mitigate Greenwashing*” (Charfi *et al.*, 2026). Consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious, striving to engage in sustainable behaviours and transactions. As a result, businesses strive to follow this trend by providing sustainable and environmentally friendly products and services. However, this has increased the prevalence of greenwashing practices. Blockchain-based traceability technology, a system that may give transparent, traceable and trustworthy information, has the potential to help address this issue. Indeed, the authors demonstrate how blockchain can reinforce brand legitimacy in the sustainability domain. Importantly, the findings remind managers that sustainability communication must be backed by verifiable practices – designing systems of accountability is just as critical as crafting compelling narratives.

Sustainability also surfaces in moments of reputational vulnerability. The multi-study systematic literature review “*Brand Crisis and Legitimacy*” (Lim *et al.*, 2026) shows that crises are not only threats to reputation but also tests of ethical positioning. By linking brand crisis management with legitimacy theory, the paper provides a roadmap for how organisations

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can safeguard stakeholder trust in an era when sustainability and ethics dominate consumer expectations.

Finally, the paper “*Consumer Responsibility and Local Brand Preferences in an Emerging Market: Evidence from Mexico*” (Agredano *et al.*, 2026) shifts the spotlight to consumers themselves. The study examines consumer responsibility in sustainable consumption, revealing how localised branding can influence global sustainability outcomes. The authors reveal that consumers’ sense of responsibility for sustainable consumption enhances preference for local brands, particularly when mediated through attitudes and social signalling. By reframing sustainability as a co-created responsibility between firms and consumers, this paper extends our understanding of how branding strategies can harness consumer agency in emerging markets.

Together, these papers show that sustainability is not a uniform challenge but one that touches retail design, consumer education, technological accountability, brand legitimacy and consumer responsibility.

3. Technology as an enabler and a challenge

Technology remains a double-edged sword: a driver of efficiency and innovation, but also a source of complexity and strategic risk.

The contribution “*Does Artificial Intelligence Always Contribute to Marketing Performance?*” (Zhang *et al.*, 2026) offers a critical perspective on artificial intelligence (AI) adoption. AI in marketing is widely acknowledged; yet it remains unclear how AI reshapes marketing capabilities to influence performance and particularly whether AI always contributes to marketing performance. By integrating the resource-based view and capability theory and the Data–Information–Knowledge–Wisdom framework, the authors conclude that cognitive analytics capability (CAC) significantly enhances AI-powered two-way (AI-TCC) and one-way communication capabilities (AI-OCC), which boost marketing effectiveness (MEC) and marketing efficiency (MEI), thereby enhancing performance. This study uncovers the mechanisms through which AI affects marketing performance and examines the conditions under which AI may fail to enhance it. By doing so, it directly expands the research on AI and marketing performance, resonating with the special issue theme by urging managers to treat AI as a contingent capability that requires careful alignment with market contexts and consumer expectations.

The role of consumer identity in digital environments is addressed by “*Antecedents of Retention: Digital Subscription Perspectives of Generation Z*” (Škudienė *et al.*, 2026). As an innovative business-driven solution within the contemporary digital industry, successful subscription retention requires a continuous focus on delivering value to subscribers and maintaining a strong relationship with them over time to stay competitive in a fast-growing digital business environment. Thus, this research investigates digital subscription retention antecedents among Generation Z. The authors uncover positive relationships between social media, performance expectancy, brand equity and Generation Z’s subscription retention decisions. However, a close social environment only demonstrates a moderate relationship with Generation Z subscription retention, indicating that social media plays a more significant role for Generation Z subscription. The findings provide valuable insights for digital subscription-based business managers, highlighting the importance of Generation Z customers’ preferences to encourage subscription retention. In doing so, it links technology with branding, showing that digital design and marketing must address not just functionality but also the symbolic and social dimensions of consumption.

“*Exploring the Link between Offline and Online Retail Sales: Insights from 15 Years of Retail Sales Data in Great Britain*” (Fatema, 2026) provides a longitudinal analysis of retail data in Great Britain, offering empirical evidence on the evolving relationship between physical and digital retail channels through a comprehensive analysis of 15 years of retail sales data. The authors reveal a bidirectional relationship between online and offline sales, though

asymmetrically weighted toward digital. Indeed, the findings show that offline sales tend to increase significantly when online sales increase, and online sales also increase significantly when offline sales increase. However, the extent of influence offline sales have on online sales is lower than the extent of influence online sales have on offline sales. For every one-unit increase in online sales, on average, the offline sales of retail stores increase by 5.82 units, but for every one-unit increase in offline sales, on average, the online sales of retail stores increase only by 0.07 units. This pattern was found true for all categories for retail stores, with predominantly non-food stores. For managers, this evidences the importance of designing retail strategies that integrate channels rather than treating them as competitors – technology reshapes not only consumer journeys but also the economics of retail ecosystems.

The study “*Competitive Advantage in Online Grocery Supply Chains: Leveraging GPT Technology*” (Xin et al., 2026) pushes the technological frontier further. The intense competition in the online grocery market has driven companies to seek technological innovation. The operations of online grocery stores on both the supply and demand sides are not sufficiently meeting the requirements of consumers and managers. The powerful capabilities of the Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (GPT) technology align with the needs of online grocery stores for innovation and upgrading. By applying game theory to the use of generative AI in online grocery operations, the authors highlight how information-sharing and adaptive technologies can transform both supply chain cooperation and market competition. It reminds us that generative technologies are not only marketing tools but also strategic enablers across the entire value chain.

Collectively, these papers show that technology is not a uniform enabler; its impact depends on managerial decisions about how it is deployed, contextualised and integrated with consumer values.

4. Design and branding in a globalised, ethical marketplace

Design and branding remain central levers for navigating cultural complexity and ethical demands.

The article “*Sustainability, Nationality and Engagement: a Study of Designer Fashion Brands*” (Dourado et al., 2026) highlights how cultural identity shapes consumer engagement with sustainability content. By revealing differences between Spanish and Portuguese audiences in their responses to sustainability messaging, the study demonstrates the importance of culturally attuned branding strategies. It reinforces the broader theme that sustainability must be communicated in ways that resonate with local contexts rather than assuming universal consumer responses.

Finally, “*The Omnichannel Symphony: Harmonising Hearts and Carts*” (Sinha et al., 2026) conceptualises omnichannel retail as an emotional and experiential journey. By showing how channel integration, personalisation and warmth foster engagement and willingness to pay a premium, the findings underscore the need to use customised approaches to cultivate lasting relationships with consumers, emphasising the potential of omnichannel retailing in harmonising business success and consumer sentiments. This resonates with the issue’s themes by showing that effective omnichannel strategies require both technological precision and human-centred design.

Together, these contributions reaffirm that design and branding are not merely aesthetic choices but fundamental strategic levers for creating trust, engagement and differentiation in an ethically conscious, globally connected marketplace.

5. Future research agenda

The contributions in this special issue highlight several important avenues for future research at the intersection of sustainability, technology and branding. A persistent challenge lies in understanding how to close the gap between awareness and behaviour, particularly in

sustainability contexts where consumers often express strong values but fail to act consistently. Further research could explore how educational interventions, technological innovations and retail design can be combined to bridge this divide. At the same time, the integration of technologies such as blockchain and AI raises pressing questions around transparency, accountability and consumer trust. Rather than focusing on efficiency gains, future work should examine the governance and ethical implications of deploying these tools in marketing and retail environments. The global and cultural dimensions of sustainability also demand greater attention. As shown in studies of emerging markets and cross-national consumer engagement, sustainability cannot be assumed to operate in the same way across contexts and future investigations should consider how cultural identities, norms and local branding strategies shape consumer responses. Finally, as AI, automation and immersive retail technologies continue to advance, scholars should critically explore the human side of technology adoption – how consumers perceive, interact with and emotionally respond to these innovations, and how these dynamics reshape the future of retail ecosystems.

6. Summary

This Special Issue underscores that design, branding and marketing are being reshaped by two powerful and intertwined forces: technological disruption and sustainability imperatives. The papers collectively demonstrate that sustainability must be treated as a strategic core, shaping consumer education, brand legitimacy and the shared responsibilities of firms and consumers across diverse markets. At the same time, technology emerges as both enabler and challenge, offering opportunities for innovation, transparency and efficiency, while also demanding careful consideration of ethics, trust and human experience. What unites these contributions is their insistence that managers cannot afford to treat sustainability and technology as separate domains; rather, they are converging to redefine how brands are built, how consumers engage and how markets evolve. The key themes for ongoing investigation – bridging the awareness–behaviour gap, embedding accountability into brand communication, attending to cultural contexts and humanising technology adoption – provide a rich agenda for researchers and practitioners alike.

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