

Strategic Adaptation of Brick-and-Mortar Apparel Retailers in the Digital Era: Practitioner Perspectives from India

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The quick expansion of e-commerce has significantly altered the retail landscape in India, compelling the traditional brick-and-mortar retailers to re-evaluate their competitive strategies. While several studies have examined the phenomenon of online shopping from the consumer's perspective, relatively few have explored how experienced retail practitioners perceive the potential convergence of digital and physical retail formats, particularly in the Indian apparel sector. This study addresses this gap through an exploratory qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with two distinguished retail experts: Dr. Nalli Kuppaswamy Chetti of Nalli Silks and Mr. Vejay Anand, an apparel retail and brand management specialist. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis to complement qualitative interpretation. Four major themes emerged that include a) e-commerce as an inevitable strategic reality, b) the continuing competitive advantage of physical stores, c) strategic adaptation through omnichannel integration and technology adoption and d) customer-centric coexistence as the future of apparel retailing. The findings indicate that e-commerce should not be viewed in isolation from physical stores but as a channel that complements the retailers to develop integrated, technology-enabled, and customer-focused business models. The study contributes to the growing literature on omnichannel retailing by offering practitioner-derived insights from the Indian apparel industry and proposes a conceptual framework explaining how strategic adaptation enhances customer experience and sustainable retail competitiveness. The findings provide useful implications for retailers, policymakers and researchers seeking to comprehend and predict the future of apparel retailing in emerging economies.

Keywords: Apparel retailing, E-commerce, Brick-and-mortar retailing, Omnichannel retailing, Strategic adaptation, Customer experience, India

1. Introduction

The retail industry is undergoing one of the most significant transformations in its history, driven by rapid advances in digital technologies, increasing internet penetration, mobile commerce, and evolving consumer expectations. Among these developments, the growth of e-commerce has fundamentally altered the manner in which consumers search for information, evaluate alternatives, purchase products, and interact with retailers. Digital platforms have expanded consumer choice, increased price transparency, and intensified market competition, compelling traditional retailers to redesign their business models and customer engagement strategies (Verhoef et al., 2015; Grewal et al., 2020).

The apparel retail sector represents one of the most dynamic segments of this transformation. Apparel purchasing, unlike many product categories, is characterised by relatively high consumer involvement since buying decisions often depend on tactile evaluation, garment fit, colour perception, aesthetics and personalised assistance. Consequently, despite the remarkable growth of online shopping, physical stores continue to play an important role in the customer decision-making process by providing experiential value that digital channels alone cannot fully replicate (Lynch & Barnes, 2020; Shaw & Sullivan, 2013). In recent years, scholars have increasingly argued that the future of retailing lies not in competition between online and offline formats but in their strategic integration through omnichannel retailing. Contemporary consumers frequently move across multiple touchpoints during the purchase journey by searching products online, visiting physical stores for product evaluation, comparing prices through mobile applications, and completing purchases through either digital or physical

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channels. Therefore, retailers are increasingly required to deliver seamless, technology-enabled and customer-centric experiences that leverage the strengths of both formats (Verhoef et al., 2015).

The Indian apparel retail sector particularly provides a relevant context for examining this transformation. Rapid urbanisation, increasing disposable incomes, widespread smartphone adoption, digital payment ecosystems and expanding organised retail have accelerated the growth of e-commerce across metropolitan, Tier II, and Tier III markets. Simultaneously, India's strong cultural orientation towards festive, wedding and premium ethnic apparel continues to sustain the relevance of physical retail stores, where customers often seek opportunities to evaluate product quality, check alternatives and receive personalised assistance before making high-value purchases. As a result, traditional family-owned retailers, organised retail chains, and digital commerce platforms increasingly coexist within an evolving omnichannel ecosystem.

Although a substantial body of literature has investigated online shopping behaviour, technology acceptance, and omnichannel retailing, existing research has largely relied on quantitative consumer surveys. Limited attention has been devoted relatively to understand how experienced retail practitioners perceive digital transformation, interpret changing consumer behaviour and formulate strategic responses to sustain competitiveness. Practitioner perspectives are particularly valuable as they offer experiential knowledge that complements consumer-based evidence and provides deeper insights into strategic decision-making.

To address this gap, the present study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with two highly experienced practitioners representing both heritage and organised apparel retailing in India. Drawing upon Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the study investigates how successful retailers interpret digital transformation, strategically adapt to the growing influence of e-commerce and envision the coexistence of online and brick-and-mortar retailing. By integrating practitioner insights with contemporary retail management literature, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of strategic adaptation, omnichannel capability and sustainable competitiveness in the Indian apparel retail sector.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Evolution of Apparel Retailing in the Digital Era

Retailing has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades as technological innovations, digital connectivity, and changing consumer lifestyles have reshaped the way products are marketed, purchased, and consumed. The emergence of e-commerce has significantly altered traditional retail structures by enabling consumers to access wider product assortments, compare prices instantly, and purchase products irrespective of geographical boundaries (Verhoef et al., 2015). Consequently, retail competition has shifted beyond physical store locations towards creating integrated customer experiences across multiple channels.

The apparel sector represents one of the fastest-evolving segments of retailing because fashion consumption is highly dynamic and strongly influenced by changing lifestyles, social media, digital marketing, and evolving consumer preferences. Unlike standardized consumer goods, apparel purchases involve considerable sensory evaluation, including fabric quality, garment fit, colour, texture, style, and aesthetics. These characteristics make apparel retailing fundamentally different from many other retail categories, thereby preserving the strategic importance of physical stores despite the rapid expansion of online retailing (Lynch & Barnes, 2020).

Increasingly, retailers are recognising that sustainable competitive advantage no longer depends solely on offering superior products or competitive prices. Instead, long-term competitiveness is increasingly driven by the ability to deliver seamless, personalised, and engaging customer experiences that integrate both digital and physical retail environments (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Recent research suggests that successful omnichannel implementation depends not only on technological investments but also on retailers' dynamic capabilities to integrate organisational resources and customer-centric processes (Solem et al., 2022).

2.2 Growth of E-commerce and Digital Transformation

The rapid growth of e-commerce has fundamentally changed the retail landscape by transforming consumer behaviour, business operations, and competitive dynamics. Digital platforms provide consumers with

unprecedented convenience through twenty-four-hour accessibility, extensive product variety, personalised recommendations, customer reviews, and multiple payment options. Simultaneously, retailers have gained access to sophisticated technologies including artificial intelligence, customer analytics, cloud-based inventory systems, mobile commerce, and data-driven marketing that enable more efficient customer engagement and operational decision-making (Grewal et al., 2020).

However, digital transformation extends far beyond establishing an online sales platform. Contemporary research emphasises that digital transformation requires retailers to redesign organisational processes, supply chain integration, customer relationship management, fulfilment systems, and organisational capabilities to meet evolving customer expectations. Consequently, technology is increasingly viewed as a strategic capability that supports innovation, operational agility, and long-term competitiveness rather than merely a communication or sales channel.

2.3 Omnichannel Retailing and Customer Experience

The concept of omnichannel retailing has emerged as one of the most influential developments in contemporary retail management. Unlike multichannel retailing, where different channels operate independently, omnichannel retailing seeks to integrate online, offline, and mobile platforms into a seamless customer journey (Verhoef et al., 2015). Customers increasingly expect retailers to provide flexibility in searching, purchasing, receiving, and returning products across multiple touchpoints without experiencing service discontinuity.

Previous studies suggest that customer experience has become one of the most important determinants of retail success (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Physical stores continue to create value by enabling consumers to interact with products directly, receive personalised assistance, and experience emotional engagement through visual merchandising, ambience, and human interaction. Consequently, leading retailers increasingly reposition physical outlets as experiential destinations rather than simply transactional spaces.

The literature therefore suggests that the future of retailing lies not in replacing brick-and-mortar stores with digital platforms but in integrating both formats to maximise customer value and organisational performance.

2.4 Strategic Adaptation of Brick-and-Mortar Retailers

The expansion of e-commerce has intensified competitive pressures on traditional retailers, compelling them to rethink conventional business models and develop adaptive capabilities. Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2018) provides an appropriate theoretical explanation for this transformation by proposing that firms sustain competitive advantage through their ability to sense environmental changes, seize emerging opportunities, and continuously reconfigure organisational resources.

Within the retail sector, strategic adaptation involves much more than technology adoption. It includes redesigning customer engagement strategies, integrating digital and physical channels, enhancing supply chain responsiveness, developing personalised marketing programmes, strengthening customer relationship management systems, and creating differentiated in-store experiences. Retailers that successfully integrate these capabilities are more likely to achieve sustainable competitiveness than those relying exclusively on price-based competition (Grewal et al., 2020). Successful omnichannel implementation requires sustained investment in CRM platforms, digital infrastructure, and coordinated customer engagement across channels (Belinskyi, 2025).

This perspective is particularly relevant for apparel retailing because consumers often combine online information search with offline product evaluation before making purchase decisions. Consequently, strategic adaptation increasingly involves creating complementary rather than competing retail channels.

2.5 Indian Apparel Retail Context

India represents one of the world's largest and fastest-growing retail markets, supported by rapid urbanisation, rising disposable incomes, expanding digital infrastructure, widespread smartphone adoption, and increasing internet penetration. The growth of Unified Payments Interface (UPI), digital wallets, and mobile commerce has further accelerated online retail adoption across metropolitan as well as Tier II and Tier III cities.

Despite these developments, physical apparel retailing continues to occupy an important position within the Indian retail ecosystem. Consumer purchases of silk sarees, bridal wear, festive apparel, luxury garments, and premium ethnic clothing frequently involve substantial financial investment and emotional attachment. Consequently, consumers often prefer visiting physical stores to evaluate fabric quality, compare alternatives, and receive personalised assistance before making final purchase decisions. This coexistence of traditional retail formats, organised retail chains, and digital commerce creates a distinctive retail environment that differs from many Western markets.

2.6 Research Gap

Although the existing literature provided a substantial understanding of online shopping behaviour, technology adoption, customer satisfaction, omnichannel retailing and digital transformation, relatively few qualitative studies have explored how experienced retail leaders interpret digital disruption and formulate strategic responses based on practical industry experience. The present study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with two distinguished apparel retail experts. By integrating practitioner insights with Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the study seeks to explain how brick-and-mortar apparel retailers strategically adapt to digital transformation while sustaining customer value and long-term competitiveness.

2.7. Theoretical Underpinning

The present study is theoretically anchored in Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), originally proposed by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997) and subsequently refined by Teece (2018). The theory explains how organisations sustain competitive advantage in rapidly changing business environments by continuously developing capabilities to sense environmental changes, seize emerging opportunities and reconfigure organisational resources. Unlike traditional resource-based perspectives that primarily emphasise the possession of valuable resources, Dynamic Capabilities Theory focuses on an organisation's ability to renew, integrate, and transform its resources in response to environmental uncertainty and technological change.

The contemporary retail environment provides an ideal context for applying Dynamic Capabilities Theory. The rapid expansion of e-commerce, widespread digitalisation, changing consumer expectations, increasing mobile commerce, and intensified market competition have fundamentally altered the way retailers create and deliver customer value. Consequently, brick-and-mortar retailers can no longer rely solely on conventional competitive advantages such as favourable location, product assortment or pricing. Instead, sustainable competitiveness increasingly depends on their ability to adapt strategically by integrating digital technologies, enhancing customer engagement, redesigning operational processes and continuously innovating their business models. Dynamic Capabilities Theory not only provides the theoretical foundation for interpreting the findings but also explains how successful apparel retailers transform digital disruption into strategic opportunity. Rather than viewing e-commerce as a substitute for brick-and-mortar retailing, the theory suggests that sustained competitive advantage arises from an organisation's ability to integrate digital capabilities with experiential retailing, customer-centric innovation and continuous organisational learning. Consequently, the present study extends the application of Dynamic Capabilities Theory to the Indian apparel retail sector by demonstrating how practitioner-driven strategic adaptation supports sustainable retail competitiveness in the digital era.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate how experienced retail practitioners perceive the influence of e-commerce on brick-and-mortar apparel retailing in India. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate when the objective is to understand complex organisational phenomena from the perspectives of individuals possessing rich experiential knowledge rather than to establish statistical relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Research Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the perceived influence of e-commerce on brick-and-mortar apparel retailing in India.
2. To explore the strategic responses adopted by apparel retailers to address digital transformation.
3. To understand practitioner perspectives on the future coexistence of online and offline retailing in the Indian apparel sector.
4. To develop a practitioner-derived conceptual model depicting the strategic adaptation in apparel retailing.

Given the rapid transformation of the retail sector and the limited availability of practitioner-oriented qualitative evidence, an exploratory design enables deeper understanding of strategic decision-making that may not be captured through structured quantitative surveys. The study is interpretivist in orientation, recognising that organisational realities are socially constructed through the experiences, observations and interpretations by the practitioners. Accordingly, the research seeks to understand how retail leaders interpret digital transformation and formulate strategic responses within the evolving Indian apparel retail ecosystem.

3.3 Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants possessing substantial professional experience and recognised expertise in apparel retailing. Purposive sampling is widely recommended in qualitative research because it facilitates the selection of information-rich participants capable of providing meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Two distinguished retail experts participated in the study, whose brief profile has been provided below:

Table 1. Profile of Expert Participants

Participant	Current/Previous Position	Area of Expertise	Contribution to Study
Dr. Nalli Kuppuswamy Chetti	Chairman, Nalli Silks	Chairman of Nalli Silks, one of India's oldest and most respected heritage apparel retailers. With several decades of experience in traditional textile retailing, customer relationship management, and brand stewardship, he offers valuable insights into the evolution of Indian apparel retailing and changing consumer expectations. He represents heritage retailing, customer relationships, premium ethnic apparel and rich brand legacy.	Traditional retail perspective and experiential retailing
Mr. Vejay Anand	Retail & Brand Strategy Expert	An experienced apparel retail and brand management professional who has held senior leadership positions in organised retailing. His expertise spans merchandising, retail strategy, branding, customer engagement, omnichannel retailing, and digital transformation.	Strategic adaptation and technology-enabled retailing

3.4 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviewing provides a balance between consistency and flexibility by allowing the researcher to address predetermined research issues while encouraging participants to elaborate on their experiences and viewpoints (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

An interview guide was developed based on the literature relating to e-commerce, omnichannel retailing, customer experience, digital transformation, and strategic adaptation. Broad questions encouraged participants to discuss changing consumer behaviour, the influence of e-commerce on physical retailing, technology adoption, customer relationship management, experiential retailing, and the future of apparel retailing in India.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in a conversational manner, allowing participants to freely share practical experiences, examples, and strategic observations. With participants' informed consent, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate systematic analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, the transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. During the second stage, meaningful statements relevant to the research objectives were assigned initial descriptive codes. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader conceptual categories. These categories were continuously reviewed, refined, and organised into four overarching themes that best represented the collective perspectives of the participants.

The identified themes were interpreted by continuously comparing patterns across both interviews and relating the findings to existing literature and Dynamic Capabilities Theory. Representative quotations were retained to preserve participants' voices and strengthen the authenticity of the interpretations. Unlike quantitative content analysis, thematic analysis enabled the researcher to examine not only recurring concepts but also the meanings, strategic reasoning, and contextual explanations underlying practitioners' responses.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

The trustworthiness of the study was established using the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was enhanced by selecting two highly experienced practitioners possessing extensive knowledge of the Indian apparel retail sector. Transferability was facilitated through detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, interview process, and analytical procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar retail environments. Dependability was ensured by following a transparent and systematic research process involving a common interview protocol, verbatim transcription, iterative coding, and a clearly documented thematic analysis procedure. Confirmability was established by grounding interpretations in participants' own narratives through the use of representative quotations and maintaining an audit trail linking raw interview data, coding, themes, and interpretations. This process minimised researcher bias and enhanced the objectivity of the analytical conclusions.

4. Findings of the study

4.1 Overview of Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts generated four interrelated themes that collectively explain how experienced apparel retail practitioners perceive the growing influence of e-commerce on traditional brick-and-mortar retailing in India. Rather than rendering digital commerce as a threat to physical retailing, both experts consistently emphasised the importance of strategic adaptation, customer-centric innovation, omnichannel integration and technology-enabled retailing. These findings indicate that sustainable competitiveness is determined by retailers' ability to integrate the strengths of digital and physical channels rather than favouring one channel over the other.

4.2 Theme 1: Acceptance of E-commerce as a Strategic Reality

Both experts unambiguously acknowledged that e-commerce has become an irreversible element of the retail landscape. Instead of resisting digital transformation, they advocated embracing online commerce as an integral part of future retail trajectory.

Dr. Nalli Kuppuswamy observed:

"Generally, we should not oppose e-commerce. I would participate in both channels."

Similarly, Mr. Vejay Anand stated:

"Online shopping is a reality. There is no running away from online shopping. The offline retailer also has to adapt."

These observations demonstrate a clear strategic shift from viewing e-commerce as a competitive threat to recognising it as a complementary channel capable of expanding customer reach and improving service delivery. From the perspective of Dynamic Capabilities Theory, this reflects the sensing capability, whereby retailers recognise significant environmental changes and understand the necessity for strategic adaptation (Teece, 2018).

The findings corroborate previous studies suggesting that successful retailers increasingly compete through integrated customer experiences rather than through isolated online or offline channels (Verhoef et al., 2015; Grewal et al., 2020). The practitioners' perspectives further extend this literature by demonstrating that acceptance of digital transformation is not merely technological but represents a strategic mind-set essential for long-term organisational resilience. Recent research indicates that retailers increasingly recognise digital transformation as a strategic organisational capability rather than merely an online sales channel.

4.3 Theme 2: Experiential Advantages of Physical Retail Stores

Although both experts recognised the remarkable growth of online shopping, they consistently argued that physical stores continue to possess distinctive competitive advantages, particularly in the apparel sector where customers value sensory evaluation and personalised interaction.

Dr. Nalli Kuppuswamy remarked:

"Because silk sarees are expensive, customers want to touch and feel them before buying."

Mr. Vejay Anand similarly explained:

"As the price point increases, people want to touch and feel the product because it reduces their perceived risk."

These narratives illustrate that experiential retailing remains an important source of competitive differentiation. Customers purchasing premium apparel seek reassurance regarding fabric quality, garment fit, colour, craftsmanship, and authenticity, attributes that are difficult to evaluate fully through digital interfaces. Furthermore, personalised consultation, trust and relationship building continue to influence purchase decisions, particularly for ceremonial, festive, and luxury apparel.

These findings support the customer experience literature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), which argues that physical stores increasingly function as experiential environments rather than merely transactional spaces. The findings also suggest that physical retailing is evolving rather than declining, with experiential value becoming its principal competitive advantage.

4.4 Theme 3: Strategic Adaptation through Omnichannel Integration and Technology

A dominant theme emerging from both interviews was the necessity for retailers to integrate digital technologies with conventional retail operations. Rather than advocating complete digitalisation, the experts recommended the strategic adoption of technologies that enhance customer convenience while preserving the strengths of physical retailing.

Mr. Vejay Anand observed:

"Use technology intelligently, manage your supply chain and manage your cataloguing... Offline retailers also have to adapt."

He further highlighted the growing significance of digital communication by noting:

"WhatsApp marketing is becoming very, very important."

Similarly, Dr. Nalli Kuppuswamy emphasised the need for consistency across retail channels by stating:

"If I do something in e-commerce, I would do the same in conventional channels too."

These observations indicate that successful retailers increasingly perceive technology as an enabler of customer engagement rather than a substitute for human interaction. Omnichannel capabilities, including digital catalogues, integrated inventory management, customer relationship management systems, click-and-collect services and personalised digital communication, enhance operational efficiency while simultaneously improving customer experience. Successful retailers create competitive advantage by integrating digital technologies with customer-centric retail experiences and operational agility (Vhatkar et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

Within Dynamic Capabilities Theory, these practices reflect the seizing capability, whereby organisations mobilise technological resources to capitalise on emerging market opportunities. Rather than replacing traditional retailing, technology strengthens organisational flexibility and enables retailers to respond more effectively to changing consumer expectations. Contemporary evidence further demonstrates that customer satisfaction in fashion retail is positively influenced by integrated omnichannel experiences that combine digital convenience with in-store service quality (Khalid, 2024).

4.5 Theme 4: Customer-centric Coexistence as the Future of Apparel Retailing

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the interviews is the rejection of the simplistic "online versus offline" narrative. Both experts envisioned a future characterised by the complementary coexistence of digital and physical retail channels.

Mr. Vejay Anand remarked:

"There will be a sense of equilibrium between offline and online."

He further observed:

"Experience can be defined in different ways. Improve service levels, use technology and understand what customers actually expect."

Similarly, Dr. Nalli Kuppuswamy succinctly emphasised:

"Customer's time is important."

These statements collectively indicate that future retail competitiveness will depend less on channel choice and more on customer-centric value creation. Retailers that successfully integrate operational efficiency, digital convenience, personalised services, and experiential shopping are more likely to sustain customer loyalty and competitive advantage.

This finding extends existing omnichannel literature by demonstrating that digital transformation should not be interpreted as channel substitution but rather as strategic integration. Within Dynamic Capabilities Theory, this reflects the reconfiguring capability, whereby retailers continuously redesign organisational processes, customer engagement practices, and service delivery systems to respond to changing market conditions. Recent evidence indicates that mobile applications and integrated digital touch-points increasingly shape fashion consumers' omnichannel experiences, reinforcing the need for seamless interactions across retail channels (Li & Zhao, 2024).

Table 2. Summary of Themes, Representative Quotations and Interpretation

Theme	Representative Quotations	Interpretation
Acceptance of E-commerce as a Strategic Reality	<i>"We should not oppose e-commerce."</i> (Dr. Nalli); <i>"There is no running away from online shopping."</i> (Mr. Vejay Anand)	Digital commerce is viewed as an inevitable component of future retailing, requiring proactive strategic adaptation.
Experiential Advantages of Physical Retail Stores	<i>"Customers want to touch and feel."</i> (Dr. Nalli); <i>"Touch and feel reduces perceived risk."</i> (Mr. Vejay Anand)	Physical stores retain competitive advantage through sensory evaluation, trust, and personalised service.

Strategic Adaptation through Omnichannel Integration	"Use technology intelligently." (Mr. Vejay Anand); "Use technology in both channels." (Dr. Nalli)	Omnichannel integration and technology adoption enhance operational efficiency and customer convenience.
Customer-centric Coexistence	"There will be equilibrium." (Mr. Vejay Anand); "Customer's time is important." (Dr. Nalli)	Future competitiveness depends on integrating digital convenience with experiential retailing and customer-centric innovation.

5. Discussion

The findings collectively demonstrate that the future of apparel retailing should not be understood as a competition between online and offline channels. Instead, the interviews reveal that strategic adaptation represents the central mechanism through which brick-and-mortar retailers sustain competitiveness in the digital era. The four themes together illustrate a progression consistent with Dynamic Capabilities Theory- retailers first sense digital transformation, subsequently seize emerging opportunities through technology and omnichannel integration, and finally reconfigure their business models around customer-centric innovation and experiential retailing.

Unlike many previous studies that predominantly examine consumer adoption of online shopping, the present study contributes a practitioner-oriented perspective on digital transformation. The interviews indicate that technology alone does not generate competitive advantage. Instead, sustainable success depends on integrating technological capabilities with organisational agility, relationship marketing, experiential retailing and superior customer service. Thus, the findings reinforce the growing consensus within contemporary retail literature that the future belongs not to online or offline retailing individually but to intelligently integrated omnichannel ecosystems capable of delivering superior customer value.

6. Practitioner-derived Conceptual Framework

Based on the findings and Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the study proposes a conceptual framework, shown in Fig 1, explaining the process through which brick-and-mortar apparel retailers achieve sustainable competitiveness in the digital era.

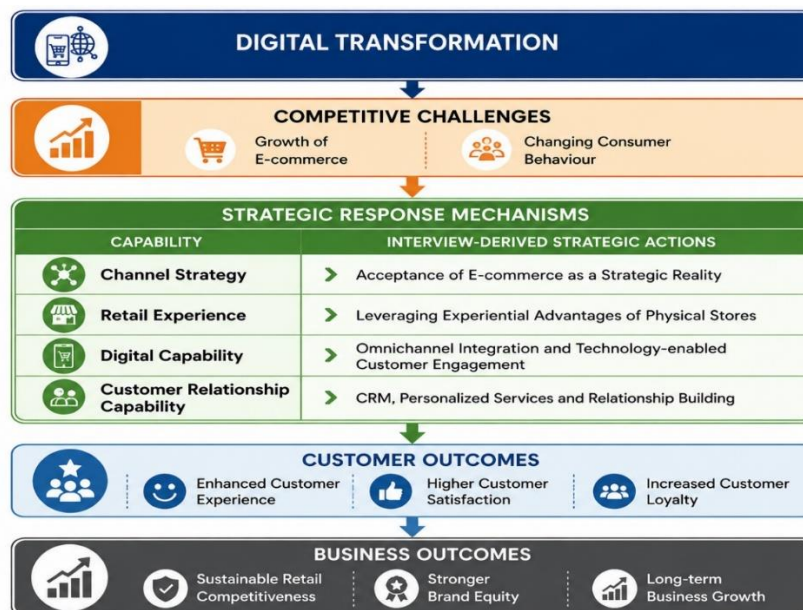


Figure 1. Practitioner-derived conceptual framework.

Source: Conceptualised by the authors and developed using Generative AI tool (chatGPT)

The framework identifies digital transformation as the primary external driver influencing retail strategy. Rapid technological developments, changing consumer behaviour, mobile commerce, and e-commerce expansion generate significant competitive pressures for traditional retailers. In response, retailers develop strategic adaptation capabilities centred on four interconnected dimensions: acceptance of e-commerce as a strategic reality, experiential retailing, omnichannel integration with technology adoption and customer-centric innovation. These adaptive capabilities collectively improve customer experience, customer satisfaction, and operational responsiveness. Consequently, retailers are able to strengthen customer loyalty, improve competitive positioning and sustain long-term organisational performance despite increasing digital competition. Thus, strategic adaptation functions as the central mechanism linking digital transformation with sustainable retail competitiveness.

7. Research and practical contributions

The study extends the growing body of omnichannel retailing literature by shifting the analytical focus from consumer behaviour to practitioner perspectives. The study contributes to the application of Dynamic Capabilities Theory in retail management and the findings therefore provide empirical support for theory within the context of apparel retailing in an emerging economy. Further, the study proposes a practitioner-derived strategic adaptation framework that explains how brick-and-mortar apparel retailers respond to digital transformation. These capabilities collectively enhance customer experience and contribute to long-term retail competitiveness. The study adds up to the limited qualitative literature on Indian apparel retailing. The clear insights for retail organisations emanating from the study include recognising the digital transformation imperative, strengthening physical stores to function as experience centres, strengthen omnichannel capabilities and CRM systems to deliver personalised recommendations, targeted promotional campaigns, festive greetings, loyalty programmes, and post-purchase engagement. The study further underpins the need for equipping frontline employees with digital retail competencies.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like all qualitative investigations, the present study has certain limitations that provide opportunities for future research. Since the study is based on in-depth interviews with two highly experienced apparel retail practitioners, the findings are interpretive in nature and are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Future studies may incorporate a larger number of experts representing organised retail chains, luxury apparel brands, fashion start-ups, and digital-first retailers to capture a broader range of strategic perspectives. Further, consumer behaviour, retail formats and digital adoption vary considerably across industries and geographical contexts. Comparative studies involving other retail sectors, such as electronics, grocery, jewellery, furniture, or lifestyle products, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of strategic adaptation across different retail environments. Cross-country studies may also reveal how institutional, cultural, and technological differences influence retailers' responses to digital transformation.

9. Conclusion

The rapid expansion of e-commerce has fundamentally transformed the retail landscape, compelling brick-and-mortar apparel retailers to reconsider traditional business models and develop new sources of competitive advantage. While digital technologies have significantly altered consumer shopping behaviour, the findings of the present study demonstrate that physical retailing continues to remain highly relevant, particularly in product categories where sensory evaluation, trust, personalised assistance and experiential shopping play an important role in purchase decision-making. Guided by Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the findings illustrate how successful retailers recognise environmental changes, capitalise on emerging digital opportunities, and continuously reconfigure organisational resources to deliver superior customer value. To conclude, the future of apparel retailing lies not in the replacement of brick-and-mortar stores but in their strategic evolution into technology-enabled, experience-oriented, and customer-focused retail ecosystems.

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