

# THE GEN Z RETAILTAINMENT EXPERIENCE: TRANSFORMING ENGAGEMENT IN TODAY'S RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*This systematic literature review examines how retailtainment—a strategic fusion of retail and entertainment—reshapes consumer engagement among Generation Z (Gen Z), a cohort characterized by digital fluency and a strong preference for immersive and value-driven experiences. Despite growing interest in retailtainment, the academic literature lacks consensus on its definition, measurement, and long-term impacts. This study aims to synthesize current empirical and conceptual insights, addressing how retailtainment is conceptualized, which strategies most effectively engage Gen Z, and what research gaps remain. A systematic review of 47 peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 was conducted using the Scopus database, guided by PRISMA methodology. Thematic synthesis using NVivo software revealed four dominant experiential strategies: immersive technologies (AR/VR), gamification, emotional engagement, and social media integration. Bibliometric analysis with VOSviewer further identified value creation, innovation, and technological integration as central research themes. Results underscore the importance of aligning retailtainment with Gen Z's values of authenticity, sustainability, and seamless phygital experiences. However, gaps persist regarding cross-cultural insights, SME adoption strategies, and longitudinal impacts on loyalty. The findings offer valuable implications for both academic inquiry and retail practice, positioning retailtainment as a core component of future consumer engagement strategies.*

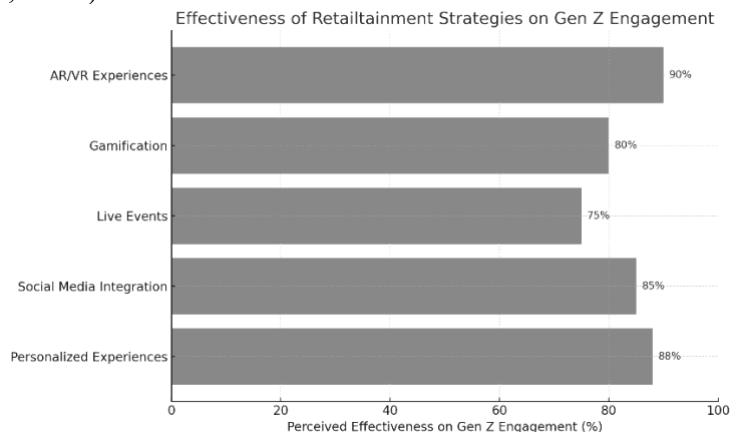
**Keywords:** *authenticity, gamification, Generation Z, immersive technology, retailtainment*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The retail landscape is increasingly shaped by technological advancements and the shifting expectations of consumers, particularly as Generation Z (Gen Z) emerges as a prominent and influential consumer segment. Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012, has been raised in a digital world, making them fundamentally different from previous generations in terms of values, behaviors, and expectations. This generation is characterized by digital nativity, a preference for authentic engagement, and a strong desire for immersive experiences that go beyond mere transactional interactions (Anjum et al., 2020). Consequently, traditional retail strategies are being re-evaluated to accommodate these new consumer priorities. Retailers must respond by reimagining their physical spaces, brand narratives, and customer engagement strategies in ways that align with Gen Z's experiential mindset (Ingriana, 2025; Siregar et al., 2023; Widjaja, 2025).

One response to this shift is the emergence of “retailtainment,” a concept that blends retail and entertainment to create emotionally engaging shopping environments (Abid et al., 2025). Retailtainment is not a superficial embellishment but a strategic evolution in how value is delivered within retail spaces. It emphasizes experience, interactivity, and emotional

resonance as core value propositions. For Gen Z consumers—who frequently assess brand relevance through the lens of social media shareability, emotional connection, and participatory culture—retailtainment offers a meaningful platform to foster engagement and loyalty (Y.-C. Tan et al., 2022). This has led to a proliferation of in-store activities that include immersive technologies like augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), gamified shopping, live events, and curated social interactions (Ranieri et al., 2024; D. M. Tan & Alexia, 2025; Zahran, 2025).



**Figure 1.** Comparative effectiveness of key retailtainment strategies in engaging Generation Z consumers.

**Source:**(Gatter et al., 2022).

Retailtainment strategies cater directly to Gen Z’s desire for personalization, community, and value-driven brand experiences. As digital natives, Gen Z consumers expect retailers to deliver seamless “phygital” experiences that unify physical and digital environments (Liu & Lee, 2024; Wigayha et al., 2025; Winata & Arma, 2025). AR and VR tools allow users to virtually interact with products and spaces, creating dynamic experiences that resonate with their desire for novelty and control (Hilken et al., 2022). Furthermore, gamification techniques can encourage prolonged engagement and cultivate a sense of competition or collaboration that aligns with Gen Z’s sociability and competitive playfulness (Akbari & Wagner, 2021). These elements, when used effectively, are more than technological embellishments—they shape the very essence of Gen Z’s brand experiences and contribute to deeper customer-brand relationships (Rolando et al., 2025).

The growing body of literature around experiential and immersive retail has begun to explore these themes, yet significant gaps remain. Much of the existing research tends to generalize across generational cohorts, thereby overlooking the specific behaviors, motivations, and technological expectations that distinguish Gen Z (Artusi et al., 2025). Likewise, while the terminology of “retailtainment” is increasingly adopted in industry discourse, academic consensus on its precise definition, measurement, and implementation remains limited. Few studies have offered a systematic review of how retailtainment is conceptualized and operationalized in the context of Gen Z, making it difficult for researchers and practitioners to assess the effectiveness and limitations of such strategies. Furthermore, while retailtainment is recognized for its potential to drive emotional engagement, its long-term impact on brand loyalty and repeat patronage—particularly among Gen Z—remains under-researched (Grewal et al., 2023).

This systematic literature review is designed to address this gap by critically synthesizing existing empirical and conceptual research that examines the relationship between retailtainment and Gen Z consumer engagement (Ingriana, Gianina Prajitno, et al., 2024; Mulyono, Hartanti, et al., 2024; Putri & Setiawan, 2025). It seeks to identify how retailtainment is defined and implemented across contexts, what experiential strategies are most effective in capturing Gen Z interest, and how these strategies influence behaviors such as store visit frequency, emotional satisfaction, social sharing, and brand loyalty (Barann et al., 2022). Additionally, the review aims to uncover areas in the literature that remain underdeveloped, such as how retailtainment functions across cultures, industries, and economic scales.

The review is guided by several core research questions: (1) How is retailtainment conceptualized and operationalized in current literature? (2) What retailtainment strategies most effectively impact Gen Z experiences? (3) How does Gen Z respond to various forms of in-store entertainment? and (4) What are the existing gaps in research concerning retailtainment and Gen Z engagement? These questions reflect the urgent need to provide clarity and direction to a field marked by rapid innovation and evolving consumer expectations.

The rationale for conducting a systematic literature review in this domain is twofold. First, a systematic review offers a rigorous methodological approach to synthesizing existing research, reducing bias, and producing generalizable insights. Given the interdisciplinary nature of retailtainment—which spans consumer behavior, marketing, digital technology, and design—an integrative review is necessary to connect fragmented findings and establish theoretical coherence (Grøndahl Larsen & Følstad, 2025). Second, as businesses increasingly invest in experiential design and immersive technologies, there is growing demand for evidence-based guidance that can inform both strategy and practice (Wongwas et al., 2024). Retailtainment is no longer a niche approach—it is becoming central to the future of physical retail (Manocha et al., 2024). As such, it is critical to identify best practices and avoid common pitfalls in its application.

This review is bounded by specific inclusion criteria to ensure relevance and focus. Only peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 were included, allowing for an up-to-date examination of Gen Z-related developments and retail innovation. The focus is on physical retail environments and hybrid phygital contexts, excluding studies that deal exclusively with digital or e-commerce platforms. Moreover, only studies that explicitly engage with Gen Z as a target demographic and explore entertainment-based enhancements in the retail experience are considered. This focus allows the review to maintain conceptual precision and relevance to contemporary retail challenges.

The potential contributions of this review are both theoretical and practical. On a theoretical level, it seeks to refine the concept of retailtainment by integrating it with established consumer behavior theories such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which explains how individuals actively seek out experiences to fulfill cognitive, emotional, and social needs (Hilken et al., 2022), and Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy framework, which positions experience as a primary economic offering (Loranger & Greene, 2020)(Loranger & Greene, 2020). Additionally, Postmodern Consumer Behavior Theory provides a useful lens through which to understand Gen Z's preference for symbolic consumption, lifestyle alignment, and brand activism (Ylilehto et al., 2021).

Practically, this review offers insights into how retailers can better align their experiential strategies with the nuanced expectations of Gen Z. Retailtainment interventions that prioritize authenticity, social media integration, real-time feedback, and ethical branding have been shown to enhance satisfaction and loyalty among this cohort (Alam et al., 2021; Wigayha et al., 2024). For example, pop-up installations, influencer-driven brand activations, and AR-based product trials not only captivate attention but also provide moments worth sharing, which is essential for social media-driven identity expression (Mulyono, Ingriana, et al., 2024; Pantano et al., 2022). Additionally, the review examines how retailers can utilize data analytics and AI to customize experiences at the individual level, offering suggestions for implementing these technologies in cost-effective and scalable ways (Ingriana, et al., 2024; Leite et al., 2024; Rolando & Ingriana, 2024).

Importantly, the review also explores the challenges that may hinder the implementation of retailtainment strategies, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These organizations may lack the capital or technological infrastructure to compete with large retailers in designing immersive spaces (Butt et al., 2023). By analyzing how different business sizes and sectors adapt to the demands of Gen Z, this review highlights opportunities for inclusive innovation and democratized experiential design (Maha et al., 2024; Saarijärvi et al., 2024).

In terms of structure, this paper adheres to the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, And Discussion) format to ensure clarity and academic rigor. The next section details the systematic review methodology, including database selection, keyword search strategies, screening protocols, and quality assessment procedures. This is followed by a comprehensive presentation of results, organized thematically around key experiential and engagement factors. The discussion section interprets these results through theoretical and practical lenses, drawing implications for future research and business strategy. The paper concludes with a synthesis of the main findings, acknowledgment of limitations, and suggestions for further inquiry into retailtainment and Gen Z engagement.

In summary, this systematic literature review responds to a critical gap in retail and consumer behavior research by offering a detailed and theory-informed synthesis of how retailtainment affects Gen Z experiences. By clarifying concepts, identifying effective strategies, and highlighting future research directions, this review aims to advance both academic understanding and industry practice in the evolving domain of experiential retail.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

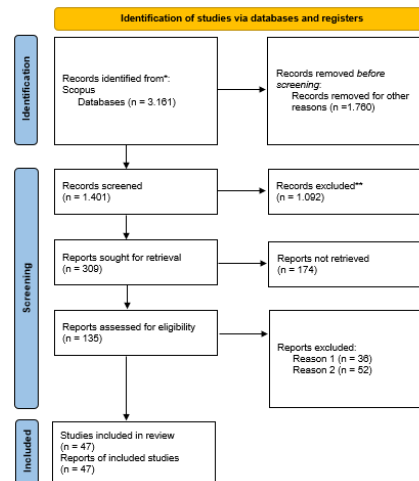
### **2.1 Review Design and Objectives**

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesize conceptual and empirical insights on how retailtainment influences Generation Z (Gen Z) consumer experiences in modern retail spaces. The review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure methodological transparency and rigor. The primary aim was to identify how retailtainment is defined and applied, what strategies are most effective, how Gen Z responds to various retailtainment approaches, and what research gaps remain.

### **2.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy**

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database due to its comprehensive indexing of high-quality, peer-reviewed journals. The search covered publications from January 2020 to March 2025. Boolean operators and targeted keywords

were used to develop the search string: (“retail” OR “customer” OR “experience”) ("retailtainment" OR "experiential retail" OR "entertainment retail") AND ("Generation Z" OR "Gen Z") AND ("consumer engagement" OR "in-store experience" OR "customer loyalty" OR "retail space"). This process yielded 3,161 articles. After removing duplicates and conducting title and abstract screening, 174 articles were reviewed in full, and 47 were deemed eligible for inclusion.



**Figure 2.** PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Source: Authors own work

### 2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2020 and 2025, (2) focused on Gen Z as the primary consumer group, (3) discussed retailtainment or experiential strategies in physical or phygital retail settings, and (4) contained conceptual or empirical findings. Excluded studies either addressed only e-commerce environments, did not isolate Gen Z in their analysis, or lacked sufficient methodological detail.

### 2.4 Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Key attributes from each included study were extracted using a standardized coding template, which captured authorship, year, research objectives, methodology, sample characteristics, type of retailtainment intervention, findings, and theoretical frameworks. Two reviewers conducted independent data extraction and resolved disagreements by consensus. Study quality was appraised using the CASP checklist for qualitative studies, the JBI checklist for quantitative research, and the MMAT tool for mixed-methods designs. Only high- and moderate-quality studies were included in the synthesis.

**Table 1.** Summary of Included Studies

Author(s)	Year	Methodology	Context	Key Retailtainment Straregy	Key Findings
Hilken et al.	2021	Quantitative (Survey Experiment)	Fashion retail (Europe)	Augmented Reality (AR)	AR enhances the sense of immersion and enjoyment, leading to higher

					brand engagement among Gen Z shoppers.
<b>Akbari &amp; Wagner</b>	2021	Qualitative (In-depth Interviews)	Flagship experiential stores	Gamification, Social Interaction	Gamified elements combined with social spaces foster a sense of community and stimulate repeat store visits.
<b>Leite, Oliveira &amp; Ferreira</b>	2024	Mixed Methods (Survey + Observations)	Technology retail (Portugal)	Personalization through AI and digital displays	Personalized experiences significantly influence emotional connection and loyalty for Gen Z consumers.

## 2.5 Synthesis and Analysis

Thematic synthesis was applied to analyze and integrate findings. Using NVivo software, codes were derived inductively and grouped into descriptive categories, including interactive technologies, gamification, emotional engagement, and social media integration. These were further refined into analytical themes interpreted through theoretical lenses such as Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the Experience Economy framework (Loranger & Greene, 2020), and Postmodern Consumer Behavior Theory. In addition, bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer software was conducted to visualize co-occurring keywords and identify dominant themes within the field.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Conceptualization and Operationalization of Retailtainment

The literature reviewed demonstrates that retailtainment is increasingly viewed as a strategic integration of entertainment, interaction, and experiential elements within physical and phygital retail spaces. Rather than serving as superficial embellishment, retailtainment is designed to foster emotional engagement, social interaction, and brand loyalty, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021).

Although conceptual definitions vary, most scholars agree that retailtainment involves creating immersive and memorable experiences that enhance the traditional shopping journey (Rahardja et al., 2024; Rolando, 2024; Y.-C. Tan et al., 2022). These experiences typically incorporate advanced technologies, interactive store environments, live events, and curated social media engagements (Leite et al., 2024).

Despite this growing interest, the field still lacks standardized frameworks for evaluating retailtainment's impact (Frank et al., 2024). Most studies rely on self-reported consumer metrics (e.g., emotional satisfaction, loyalty intention), underscoring the need for more robust and longitudinal evaluation approaches (Ingale et al., 2024).



### **3.2 Immersive Technologies and Experiential Strategies**

Among the most influential retailtainment strategies for Gen Z are immersive technologies, particularly augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). These tools enable consumers to virtually try on clothing, visualize products in their home environments, and engage with interactive brand experiences (Gardiazabal et al., 2020). For Gen Z, who value novelty, control, and shareable experiences, AR and VR add substantial emotional value to the shopping process (Nöjd et al., 2020).

In parallel, gamification has emerged as an effective method for fostering prolonged engagement and deepening emotional connections (Schultz & Zacheus, 2025). Interactive challenges, reward systems, and collaborative experiences appeal to Gen Z's social and competitive instincts, driving both engagement and loyalty (Artusi & Bellini, 2021). Notably, gamified experiences often synergize with social media platforms, providing content that consumers are motivated to share and discuss with their peers (Saini & Singh, 2020).

The integration of social media also plays a crucial role in amplifying retailtainment initiatives (Caferra et al., 2025). Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram serve as key channels for promoting retailtainment events, showcasing AR-based interactions, and encouraging user-generated content that fosters a sense of community (Sharma et al., 2021). By facilitating peer-to-peer sharing, social media-driven retailtainment enhances both brand visibility and emotional resonance (Jung et al., 2024).

### **3.3 Alignment with Gen Z Values: Sustainability and Authenticity**

A recurring theme across the reviewed literature is Gen Z's emphasis on authenticity, sustainability, and social responsibility in brand experiences (Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021). Retailtainment strategies that reflect these values—such as sustainability-themed installations, transparent sourcing information presented via AR displays, and partnerships with local communities—create deeper and more lasting emotional connections with this cohort (D. Khaled et al., 2021).

Conversely, retailtainment initiatives perceived as inauthentic or purely commercial risk alienating Gen Z consumers, who are highly attuned to performative or superficial branding efforts. Thus, the alignment of entertainment-based experiences with genuine brand purpose is critical for fostering trust and loyalty.

### **3.4 Phygital Integration and Seamless Experiences**

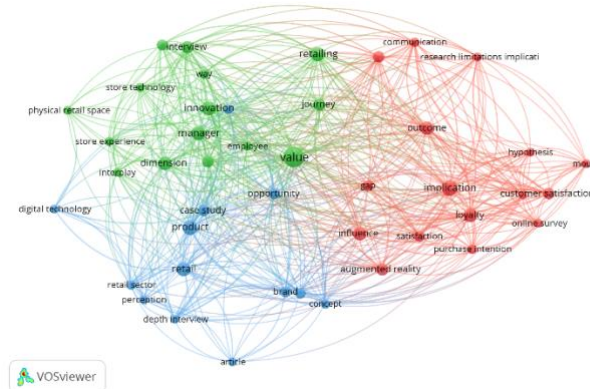
Gen Z consumers expect consistent and fluid engagement across both digital and physical touchpoints. The integration of mobile apps with in-store experiences, personalized recommendations driven by real-time data, and loyalty programs accessible across platforms exemplify the phygital strategies that resonate with this generation (Alexander & Varley, 2025).

Studies indicate that retailers who successfully harmonize online and offline experiences are better positioned to cultivate loyalty and encourage repeat patronage among Gen Z consumers (Leite et al., 2024). Conversely, fragmented or inconsistent experiences can undermine brand credibility and deter engagement.

### **3.5 Bibliometric Analysis**

To further explore the intellectual structure of the literature, a network visualization of co-occurring keywords was generated using VOSviewer. This visualization highlights the relationships between key concepts and reveals clusters of thematically related terms,

offering a comprehensive overview of how the field has evolved and where scholarly attention is concentrated.



**Figure 3. Network Visualization**

**Source: Authors own work**

The network visualization generated using VOSviewer illustrates the co-occurrence relationships among key terms and concepts within the body of literature analyzed in this systematic review. The visualization reveals three prominent clusters, each represented by a distinct color, indicating thematic groupings within the research domain.

The green cluster centers around the concept of value, connecting terms such as innovation, manager, employee, interview, store experience, and physical retail space. This suggests that a substantial portion of the literature explores how managerial practices, technological innovations, and store environments contribute to value creation in retailtainment contexts.

The red cluster focuses on consumer outcomes and engagement, with terms like customer satisfaction, loyalty, purchase intention, augmented reality, and word-of-mouth. This indicates a strong research emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of experiential retail strategies in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors, particularly through the use of immersive technologies and communication dynamics.

The blue cluster is anchored around retail sector and brand, encompassing terms such as digital technology, product, perception, retail, and case study. This reflects the literature's focus on brand management, the role of digital innovation, and methodological approaches employed to study retailtainment phenomena.

Overall, the network reveals a highly interconnected field where value creation, consumer experience, and technological innovation are closely linked. The central positioning of terms such as value, innovation, and implication highlights their pivotal role in shaping the discourse around retailtainment and Generation Z consumer engagement. Additionally, the visualization suggests opportunities for further integrative research, particularly bridging the managerial and consumer outcome perspectives with emerging digital technologies.

An overlay visualization was also produced to examine the temporal dynamics of keyword usage. By applying a color gradient based on the average publication year, this visualization illustrates how research trends have shifted over time and highlights emerging areas of interest within the domain.

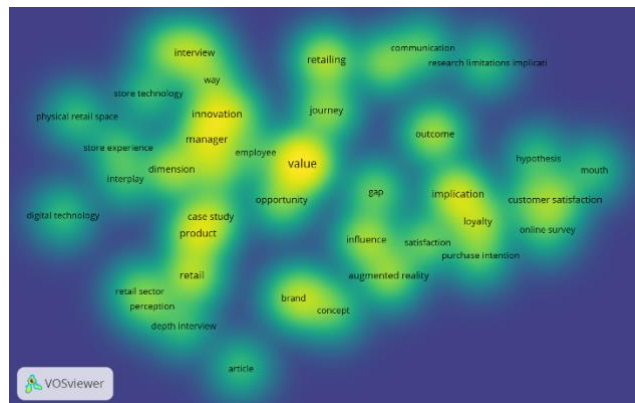




The visualization shows that value, innovation, and implication remain central and highly connected themes across the entire time span, indicating their sustained relevance in discussions of experiential retail strategies. More recent terms—highlighted in yellow—such as augmented reality, brand, opportunity, and digital technology suggest a growing scholarly emphasis on the role of immersive technologies and brand-led experiential innovations in shaping Gen Z consumer experiences.

Overall, the overlay visualization reflects a dynamic research landscape in which the focus is progressively shifting toward emerging technologies, personalized brand interactions, and digitally augmented experiences. This temporal evolution underscores the increasing importance of integrating cutting-edge innovations into retailtainment strategies to meet the evolving expectations of Gen Z consumers.

Additionally, a density visualization was created to identify areas of high research intensity. In this map, terms that appear more frequently and are more central to the literature are represented with higher density (brighter) colors, providing a visual representation of core research themes and focal points in the field.

**Figure 5. Density Visualization****Source: Authors own work**

The density visualization produced using VOSviewer illustrates the concentration and prominence of key terms within the literature on retailtainment and Generation Z consumer engagement. In this visualization, terms that appear more frequently and are more central in the network are represented with warmer colors (yellow), while less frequent or peripheral terms are shown in cooler colors (blue to green).

The visualization reveals that value is the most prominent and densely connected term, highlighting its central role in discussions surrounding experiential retail and consumer engagement strategies. Other highly dense terms include innovation, manager, product, retailing, implication, loyalty, and customer satisfaction, indicating that these concepts are frequently explored and are foundational to the field. This suggests that much of the current research emphasizes creating value-driven and innovative retail experiences that foster loyalty and customer satisfaction among Gen Z consumers.

Additionally, terms such as augmented reality, digital technology, and brand appear with moderate density, reflecting an emerging but growing interest in leveraging technology and brand experience within retailtainment strategies. Meanwhile, less dense terms like depth interview, hypothesis, and article likely reflect methodological aspects of the literature rather than core thematic content.

Overall, the density visualization complements the network and overlay analyses by clearly identifying the most intensively studied concepts in this domain, offering a useful overview of current research priorities and potential areas for further exploration.

### 3.5 Research Gaps and Challenges

While the current literature provides valuable insights, several gaps remain evident. Longitudinal studies examining the sustained impact of retailtainment on loyalty and brand equity are scarce (Callegaro et al., 2020). Additionally, cross-cultural research is limited, despite the increasingly global nature of both Gen Z culture and retailtainment innovations. Understanding how cultural contexts shape retailtainment preferences is an important area for future inquiry.

Moreover, there is insufficient attention to how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can implement effective retailtainment strategies despite resource constraints (Saarijärvi et al., 2024). Scalable, cost-effective models that democratize experiential retail could help SMEs compete more effectively with larger firms. Finally, the lack of

standardized definitions and metrics for retailtainment effectiveness continues to pose challenges for both academic and managerial evaluation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As Generation Z (Gen Z) continues to reshape consumer expectations, the retail landscape is undergoing a profound transformation toward more immersive, authentic, and value-driven experiences (Happ et al., 2021). This systematic literature review highlights that retailtainment—the integration of entertainment elements within retail environments—has become a strategic imperative for retailers seeking to engage this digitally fluent and socially conscious cohort (Roggeveen et al., 2020).

The effective deployment of immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and gamification enables brands to create emotionally resonant and memorable experiences that extend beyond transactional interactions (Tupikovskaja-Omovie & Tyler, 2020). These experiences foster brand loyalty while encouraging social sharing, thereby amplifying brand presence across digital platforms where Gen Z is most active (Alves et al., 2025).

Moreover, this review underscores that Gen Z consumers are motivated by purpose and authenticity. Retailtainment strategies that genuinely reflect sustainability, inclusivity, and social responsibility are more likely to build trust and foster long-term loyalty (Gahlot et al., 2024). In parallel, the seamless integration of digital and physical touchpoints—phygital experiences—is no longer optional but essential for delivering the frictionless engagement Gen Z expects (Jocevski, 2020). Retailers capable of aligning experiential innovation with coherent brand narratives and ethical values are better positioned to navigate the complexities of this evolving retail landscape (Lu & Sinha, 2023).

Despite the rich insights emerging from current research, several gaps remain. There is a clear need for longitudinal studies to evaluate the enduring impact of retailtainment on consumer loyalty and brand equity. Additionally, cross-cultural investigations are warranted to understand how retailtainment strategies resonate in different geographic and cultural contexts (Taufique et al., 2024). Another critical area is the development of scalable retailtainment models that can be adopted by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), many of which face resource limitations yet seek to compete through experiential differentiation (Nair & Manohar, 2024).

In conclusion, retailtainment is no longer a niche innovation but a core strategy for engaging Gen Z consumers. By harmonizing technological innovation with emotional engagement and purpose-driven branding, retailers can create experiences that resonate deeply with this influential generation (Guzzetti et al., 2024). The findings of this review provide valuable insights for both academic inquiry and managerial practice, offering a foundation upon which future research and strategy can further evolve to meet the expectations of tomorrow's consumers.

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