RESEARCH ARTICLE **Open Access**

Algorithmic Touchpoints: Investigating AI's Role in Shaping Customer Experience and Relationship Quality at Zara

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Abstract

This research intends to understand how artificial intelligence (AI) impacts customer experience and their relationship quality with Zara UK in the fashion retail context. The study utilizes Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Theory and the Task-Technology Fit (TTF) Model. It seeks to examine relationships between AI (e.g., chatbots, personalization recommendations, smart fitting rooms) either enhance customer shopping experience and build customers' relationships with Zara. A quantitative survey was conducted with 312 Zara customers from major cities in the UK, and the data was analysed using the SPSS PROCESS macro. The findings show that AI usage resulting in enhanced customer experience has significant impact on relationship quality. Here, customer experience plays a mediating role between AI use and the relationship construct. Therefore, when AI tools are designed geared towards customers' needs, the interaction benefits can improve customer convenience and build on their trust and loyalty with Zara. So, the findings could provide practical implications for fashion retailers looking to implement a digital strategy, whilst keeping in mind digital versus personal interaction experiences

Keywords: Technology Fit Model, Artificial Intelligence in Retail, Customer Experience, Customer Relationship Quality, Fast Fashion, Zara UK, CRM Theory, Task-Technology Fit Model, AI Personalization, Retail Technology Adoption, Consumer Engagement

1. Introduction

In the swiftly progressing landscape of fashion retail, artificial intelligence (AI) has come to the fore as not simply a technological evolution, but as a strategic route for customer-led innovation. Zara, a flagship under the Inditex brand, showcases this by incorporating AI into its operations—ranging from predictive analytics; inventory management; and personalized customer interaction and commitment to the customer. The integration of AI enabled tools such as smart mirrors: real time chatbots; and recommendation engines based on customers behavior show a conscientious effort to enhance the immediacy and intimacy of customer engagement (Gomes, 2024; Abdullah, 2025).

In today's fast fashion world, retailers like Zara are changing the way shoppers relate to their clothing, creating experiences that make it thrilling, responsive, and with an immediate "just-in-time" delivery perspective that makes every day browsing a real adventure! As a leader in fast fashion, Zara has a flair for quick turnarounds, inspired trend spotting, and enjoyable store concepts that make customers feel connected and excited to go back. Zara capitalizes on real-time data feedback from stores and online shopping centers to create collections consistent with what consumers want. This not only allows for quick delivery times but also creates a seamless and enjoyable journey from window shopping to check-out. This ultimately grows trust and a 'wow I'm excited to see what's next' feeling so consumers want to engage with the brand from time to time.

Ultimately, this is how these items contribute to the type of customer relationships that determine the success of a business. Things like online-to-offline seamlessness, personalized styling recommendations based on prior purchases, a no-care return policy, etc. help to create bonds, especially loyalty contribution awards for returning visits or curated in-store experiences that seem designed just for customers.

Study finds show how service elements, in particular, those such as stock availability, attentive staff, etc., all contribute to how valued customers feel, which significantly affects emotional ties and word-of-mouth. After all, change in the retail environment is rapid, and pace aside, customers expect to see inbound, outbound-stock, as a moving target; for example, indicating stock available, then out of stock, then available again, moving faster than the customer can react, to fully unpack what these increasingly subtle patterns mean for building long-term relationships to any given brand, like Zara. As fashion consumers anticipate seamless, responsive, and customized brand experiences, both while shopping and throughout their customer journey, the use of AI and its impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty takes center stage. The way that Zara has been able to use platforms like Jetlore to map consumer preferences into structured attributes (style, fit, color) allows the brand to provide more relevant product recommendations and communication strategies (Gomes, 2024). Additionally, AI-enabled or powered supply chain systems provide Zara with a level of responsiveness to market trends that are truly unparalleled and furthers its reputation for flexibility and relevance (AI Expert Network, 2023).

Getting into the weeds of this is extremely important because in crowded environments, getting customer experience right is not only nice to have, but it is ripe for being a differentiator for stand out and driving revenue growth. There is growing evidence to suggest that companies prioritizing seamless experiences see increases in loyalty and revenue. The trouble is that too many studies continue to treat customer experience as a one-off initiative and therefore treat tactics like marketing or simply managing inventory separately from the relationship with the customer.

For example, while there is much studies on how fast fashion success stems from speed impacting sales, there is less available research on how it engenders confidence in commitments over the long term, specifically in global contexts

such as Zara. This paper attempts to contribute to that gap by analyzing the contributory factors instilling customer experience and relationship quality at Zara, providing more contemporary views to provide retailers chasing that coveted fanatic consumer similar actionable insights.

This article examines a more complex articulation of how AI affects customer experience and brand relationship quality based within the operational model of Zara. By looking at the effects of AI on personalization, responsiveness, and resonance of emotions which frame customer interactions, this study aims to reveal the ways in which technology can enrich brand-consumer relationships in the fast fashion realm.

2. Literature Review

AI Use in Retail

The integration of artificial intelligence in retail has shifted from back-end optimization to front-line customer engagement. AI tools—such as chatbots, recommendation engines, and smart mirrors—are increasingly used to personalize shopping experiences and streamline service delivery. According to the Task-Technology Fit Model (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995), technology must align with task requirements to be effective. In Zara's case, AI supports tasks like product discovery, inventory navigation, and customer service, enhancing both operational efficiency and user satisfaction. When customers perceive that AI tools help them complete shopping tasks more effectively, their adoption and engagement increase (Vendramin et al., 2021). This fit between task and technology is critical in fast fashion, where speed and relevance are paramount.

Previous studies emphasized generative AI for designing virtual fitting technologies and AI-assisted personalization strategies. For instance, Zhang et al. (2025) outlined a framework for design generative AI in the fashion retail value chain, while Singh (2024) summarized the aspects of AI shaping consumer experience and sustainability in apparel.

CRM Theory also frames AI use as a strategic tool for relationship-building. Rather than viewing AI as a standalone innovation, CRM positions it within a broader system of customer knowledge, interaction, and retention (Nguyen & Mutum, 2012). AI enables Zara to track preferences, predict behavior, and tailor communication functions that support the CRM goal of long-term customer value. As Peppers and Rogers (2011) argue, technology must serve the relationship, not replace it.

H1: AI use in Fashion retail has a significant effect on customer experience

Customer Experience

Customer experience is no longer defined solely by product quality or price, it's shaped by how customers feel during their interactions with a brand. CRM Theory emphasizes the importance of emotional engagement, personalization, and responsiveness in creating memorable experiences (Raab et al., 2008). Zara's use of AI to deliver curated recommendations, real-time support, and seamless checkout processes reflects this shift toward experience-driven retail.

From a TTF perspective, customer experience improves when technology matches the cognitive and emotional demands of the shopping task. If AI tools are intuitive, responsive, and context-aware, they reduce friction and enhance satisfaction (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). Studies in retail environments show that when customers perceive a high task-technology fit, they report greater enjoyment and are more likely to return (McGill & Klobas, 2009).

The utilization of AI within the fashion industry has catalyzed an excellent way of changing the human aspects of a business and how businesses can connect with customers. Zara is one of the fastest fashion brands globally and has put artificial intelligence behind their business to stabilize and grow a relationship with their customers. The fashion industry, like other sectors, has changed dramatically since AI technologies have been inserted into the customer experience. Zara can personalize the recommendations made to customers by

artificial intelligence, while optimizing order fulfilment and beefing up relationships with customers. It is believed that through unique touchpoints facilitated by AI, both customer satisfaction and customer loyalty have improved with forecasted shopping that is best suited with their profiles and behaviors (DigitalDefynd, 2024).

Chatbots and virtual assistants are also helping the customer by giving instant responses to queries and reporting service feedback. It has resulted in an updated customer service interface that rests with customer satisfaction as an output (Rajkhowa & Das, 2020).

H2: Customer Experience due to AI in Fashion retail has a significant effect on customer relationship quality

H2 (a) Customer experience mediates the relationship between AI usage and customer relationship quality in fashion retail

Customer Relationship Quality

CRM Theory defines relationship quality through dimensions such as trust, commitment, and perceived value (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001). In fashion retail, these qualities are built over time through consistent, personalized, and emotionally resonant interactions. AI contributes to relationship quality by enabling Zara to anticipate needs, respond quickly, and maintain relevance across touchpoints. However, CRM scholars caution that technology must be used judiciously—over-automation can erode trust if it feels impersonal or intrusive (Brink & Berndt, 2009).

TTF reinforces this view by suggesting that relationship outcomes depend on how well technology supports relational tasks. For example, if a chatbot can resolve a query efficiently and empathetically, it strengthens the customer's perception of the brand. But if the tool fails to understand context or lacks human nuance, it may damage the relationship. Thus, the quality of customer relationships hinges not just on the presence of technology, but on its alignment

with relational expectations. Using AI in its CRM, Zara has been able to continue fostering good and personal relationships with its clients. The automatic requirements of the CRM tools categorize the customers by frequency of purchase, as well as age and choice. This allows Zara to deliver the best targeted marketing messages and communications to its subscribers, ultimately increasing customer loyalty and engagement (Akuhuo, 2024).

Through AI, Zara has been able to forecast its customers' behavior and expectations, in a way giving the company a lead on providing the solutions for customers' needs. This predictive capacity also has the added advantage of increasing the overall value of customer experience in that customers feel valued and that their feelings are understood (AIX, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical lenses: Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Theory and the Task-Technology Fit (TTF) Model. Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding how AI influences customer experience and relationship quality in the context of Zara's fashion retail operations. This study aligns itself with two complementary theoretical lenses: Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Theory and Task-Technology Fit (TTF) Model. These frameworks combined provide a strong backdrop for understanding how the use of AI affects customer experience and relationship quality in Zara's fashion retail context. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Theory CRM Theory highlights the strategic importance of developing long-term relationships with customers based on engagement, trust, and value creation (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001).

In retail, CRM involves much more than transactional efficiency. There is an emotional connection to the brand, loyalty to the brand, and advocacy for the brand on the part of the consumer. AI tools such as personalized recommendations, chatbots, and predictive analytics are enablers of CRM

directly linked to Zara's ability to personalize engagement, anticipate needs, and adjust to the customers preferences during each one of these interactions (Nguyen & Mutum, 2012). Customers' experience acts as a relational bridge in this framework as it shows that when AI enhances the shopping journey, it supports the customer's emotional bond with the brand, thus improving relationship quality. Modern CRM systems are becoming more dependent on AI-based personalization, real-time data integration, and continuity of customer journeys across multiple channels.

Using omnichannel CRM, companies such as Zara can unify the interaction between the customer and transmit a consistent experience across mobile apps, social media, in-store touchpoints, and email, which improves customer experience and reinforces relationship quality (Dermott, 2025). New digital CRM systems now feature predictive analytics for insight development, sentiment tracking that recognizes customers as channels of data, and AI-driven customer-facing, conversational tools that allow retailers to quickly assess anticipated customer needs and adjust customized engagement strategies (Asar Digital, 2024).

Task-Technology Fit (TTF) Model

The TTF Model, developed by Goodhue and Thompson (1995), posits that technology is most effective when it aligns with the tasks users are trying to accomplish. In the context of fashion retail, tasks include browsing, selecting, purchasing, and seeking support. AI tools must match these tasks in terms of functionality, usability, and responsiveness. When customers perceive that Zara's AI features help them complete shopping tasks more efficiently and enjoyably, they are more likely to engage with the technology and report positive experiences (Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2023). This perceived fit not only enhances satisfaction but also contributes to deeper relational outcomes, such as trust and commitment.

By combining CRM Theory and the TTF Model, this study captures both the relational and functional dimensions of AI use. CRM explains why customer experience and relationship quality matter, while TTF clarifies how AI tools must be designed and deployed to support those outcomes. The conceptual model reflects this integration: AI use (technology) influences customer experience (task outcome), which in turn affects customer relationship quality (relational outcome). The mediating role of experience underscores the importance of designing AI not just for efficiency, but for emotional and contextual relevance.

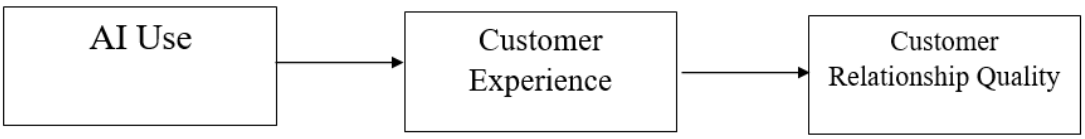

Figure 1: Proposed Research Model

3. Methodology

Research Design

This research used a quantitative cross-sectional survey to examine consumer perceptions of AI-enabled marketing strategies within Zara's retailing context. A quantitative cross-sectional study is appropriate to measure attitudes of perception and relational constructs within a diverse population of customers, and to statistically analyze other important variables such as trust and authenticity, and engagement.

Sampling and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling of active Zara customers in the UK, who had interacted with any of Zara's digital platforms such as a mobile application, Zara's website, or an AI bot chat support in the past six months. The online outreach took place over various social media channels, and email invitations were also sent through various fashion forums and a consumer research panel. Overall, 312 valid responses were received between

October 2024 and April 2025.

To achieve representation across demographics, quotas were placed to assess respondents through the variables of age, gender, and location. Entailing a valid survey, the study participants were required to be 18 years or older and provided informed consent before participating in the research. The final sample included a relatively balanced representation of urban and suburban consumers and attempted to capture variation in terms of digital literacy level and socioeconomic background.

Pilot Testing and Validation

Before realizing full-scale data collection, a pilot test was conducted with 30 participants to test the survey instrument for clarity, reliability, and flow of response. Feedback from this phase led to a few minor item wording and sequencing changes, which helped improve the validity of the tool and reduced measurement error.

Analysis of Data

The data were analyzed using SPSS (v29) and the PROCESS macro to test mediation. Descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, and regression-based path modeling were performed to investigate the relationship between the factors of AI-enabled personalization, perceived authenticity, trust, and engagement. Control variables included age, gender, and frequency of usage of the Zara app.

4.Results

Table 1

Demographic and Behavioral Profile of Zara Customers (N = 312)

Variable	Category	Frequency	(%)
Gender	Female	178	57.1
	Male	134	42.9
Age Group	18–25	96	30.8
	26–35	122	39.1
	36–45	58	18.6
	46–55	36	11.5
City of Residence	London	128	41.0
	Manchester	74	23.7
	Birmingham	62	19.9
	Glasgow	48	15.4
Shopping Frequency	Weekly	72	23.1
	Monthly	158	50.6
	Occasionally	82	26.3
Preferred Product Category	Casual Wear	126	40.4
	Formal Wear	54	17.3
	Accessories	48	15.4
	Footwear	84	26.9
What Customers Like Most	Trendy Designs	142	45.5
	Affordable Pricing	86	27.6
	Store Layout & Ambience	46	14.7
	Fast Delivery	38	12.2
AI Feature Awareness	Personalized Recommendations	264	84.6%

Variable	Category	Frequency	(%)
	Chatbot Support	225	72.1%
	Smart Fitting Rooms	128	41.0%
	Style Prediction Algorithms	198	63.5%
AI Feature Usage	Personalized Recommendations	213	68.3%
	Chatbot Support	171	54.8%
	Smart Fitting Rooms	88	28.2%
	Style Prediction Algorithms	148	47.4%

The demographic and behavioral data reflect a diverse and engaged customer base. Most respondents were female (57.1%) and aged between 26 and 35 (39.1%), aligning with Zara's core market segment. London accounted for the largest share of participants (41.0%), consistent with Zara's retail footprint. Monthly shopping was the most common frequency (50.6%), and casual wear emerged as the most preferred category (40.4%). Customers valued trendy designs most (45.5%), followed by affordability. Awareness and usage of AI features were notably high for personalized recommendations and chatbots, suggesting that Zara's digital tools are well-integrated into customer journey.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Pearson Correlations (N = 312)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*α*	*1*	*2*	*3*
1. AI Use	3.87	0.74	.86	—		
2. Customer Experience	4.02	0.68	.88	.62**	—	
3. Customer Relationship Quality	4.15	0.65	.90	.55**	.59**	—

Note: *α = Cronbach's alpha; SD = Standard deviation.* ***p < .01***

All constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .86 to .90. The mean scores suggest generally positive perceptions of AI use ($M = 3.87$), customer experience ($M = 4.02$), and relationship quality ($M = 4.15$). Pearson correlations revealed significant positive associations among all variables. AI use was strongly correlated with customer experience ($r = .62$, $p < .01$), and both were significantly linked to relationship quality ($r = .55$ and $r = .59$, respectively). These findings support the theoretical assumption that AI enhances customer experience, which in turn strengthens relationship quality.

Table 3

Regression Results from PROCESS Macro (Model 4)

Path	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
AI Use → Customer Experience	.62	.07	8.86	< .001	[.48, .76]
Customer Experience → Relationship Quality	.59	.06	9.83	< .001	[.47, .71]
AI Use → Relationship Quality (Direct)	.21	.08	2.63	.009	[.05, .37]
AI Use → Relationship Quality (Indirect via Experience)	.37	.05		< .001	[.28, .47]

The regression analysis using PROCESS macro (Model 4) confirmed all hypothesized relationships. AI use had a significant positive effect on customer experience ($\beta = .62$, $p < .001$), and customer experience significantly predicted relationship quality ($\beta = .59$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of AI use on relationship quality was also significant ($\beta = .21$, $p = .009$), but the indirect effect via customer experience was stronger ($\beta = .37$, 95% *CI* [.28, .47]), indicating partial mediation. These results suggest that while AI contributes directly to relationship quality, its impact is more pronounced when it enhances customer experience.

Discussion

This study sets out to examine how AI use influences customer experience and relationship quality within Zara's UK market. The results offer compelling evidence that AI-enabled tools are not only functional but emotionally resonant in shaping customer perceptions and loyalty. Hypothesis one (H1) supported the idea that AI use has an overall positive influence on customer experience. Customers that used Zara's AI features and options like personalized recommendations, chatbots, and smart fitting rooms were pleased and more engaged with the shopping experience from the AI integration within the store. These tools were viewed as responsive and intuitive from the customer, especially for younger consumers that have a preference for speed and personalization. These findings agree with previous research that emphasizes the AI experience in retail by making experiences more relevant and less frictional (Pantano et al., 2020) and in the case of Zara, AI acted as a quiet enabler of convenience allowing customers to feel a sense of understanding without the feeling of being inundated by automation.

Hypothesis two examined the customer experience and its link to relationship quality, and again, the data controlled for the brand relationship experience showed a significant positive relationship. Customers with the smooth, pleasurable, and emotional descriptions that customers made about their shopping experience led to positive expressions of trust, commitment, and loyalty in the brand. This supports the concept that retail relationship quality is not related to product satisfaction but requires creating emotional and experiential value through the customer journey. Zara's continual provision of a consistent and enjoyable experience for their customers - both online and in brick-and-mortar locations, appears to provide the retailer with relational strength.

The third hypothesis (H3) evaluated Customer Experience as a possible mediator between AI use with Relationship Quality. The mediation simply reached a significant level ($p < 0.1$) demonstrated that AI's effects on Relationship Quality were primarily channeled through AI's ability to improve customer experience. Specifically, AI tools do not do relationship work but providing impetus for the customer to have different experiences and create the conditions to foster trust and loyalty. This study adds depth to the fast-growing conversation in the harmonization of AI in retail, that any technology needs to be integrated with human-centered design to foster relational capital (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Altogether, the findings suggested that Zara utilized AI as a strategic tool to ensure that the engagement and operational front of using AI also lent itself towards relational quality. It did not just suit Zara's ways of operating, but how they could continually personalize for their customers responsibly in regard to engagement, responsiveness, and emotional connection. However, the study does show that balance is needed in both personal service support versus machine efficiency in hybrid service models of digital and human-based engagement. For the purposes of this research, AI tools were favorably ingrained in people's minds although some customer participants noted that where they had a more unique and complex decision-making situation, they would prefer human support; hence they considered hybrid service models more favourable.

Retail AI systems often work with large amounts of data that may unintentionally reinforce existing biases, leading to disparate outcomes for shoppers including price, recommendations, or service quality. Consumers express increasing concern over the ways that they share personal data with AI-driven platforms and how their data is held and used by these systems. Maintaining ethical integrity and trust in the application of AI systems is crucial moving forward regarding transparency, fairness and compliance with data protection laws such as GDPR (Adanyin, 2024).

The findings have clear implications for fashion retailers wanting to establish a customer relationship dynamic through AI, retailers can implement AI solutions that enhance human interaction, and where necessary they should ensure that staff are trained to provide human service alongside AI assisted solutions. Future research could explore cultural differences in the understanding of AI or maybe look to extend the model to other industries where customer experience is central.

Limitations

Although this research provides interesting updates on the impact AI has on customer experience and quality of relationship with Zara, there are some limitations to consider. First, the research was limited to Zara's UK market. This presents challenges of generalizability since other geographic regions or cultural contexts may not have the same finding as the UK market does. Here, consumer and AI interaction and digital engagement may be very different in geographical sub-segments. Secondly, the research relied on self-reported measures. The data is subject to recall bias or influenced by social desirability reasons. Even with validated scales in the survey instruments, even if the participant accurately provided measures relatively to each other, the flawed perception would still only be representative of actual behavior assessments. Thirdly, the cross-sectional research design does not allow researchers to make causal inferences. A longitudinal research study would be more appropriate to assess how the customers' relationships evolve over time as AI tools continue to develop.

Implications

The findings of the research have implications for fashion retailers who operate at the intersection of technology and consumer engagement. Zara's ability to utilize artificial intelligence capabilities while preserving the human experience provides a way to see what balance can look like in terms of increasing efficiency but still satisfying the consumer's desire for an authentic human experience.

Retail management needs to see artificial intelligence as a method to enhance personalization, responsiveness, and flexibility, and not as a way to eliminate human service options. Training front-line employees to be engaged with the technology platform is critical to maintaining relational depth, as well as take advantage of the efficiencies afforded through automation. Equally, brands should examine the way consumers perceive the capability of artificial intelligence so that brands can adjust to meet evolving desire and comfort. Zara should have a hybrid AI strategy that will give it an advantage of both automation as well as human turns. There should be both chatbot and live human interaction covering both types of customers. Thus, AI interface should be appropriate for all types of customers segments.

Future Research Directions

Following on from this study, potential research could evaluate comparative studies between fashion brands and across international markets to understand how culture affects AI acceptance and relationship processes. Longitudinal studies could enable the researcher to evaluate as AI tools become more sophisticated, how customer perceptions change alongside the growing use of AI in typically routine, everyday engagement with retailers. Moreover, qualitative studies may provide more detail on emotional responses to AI, especially in situations where human aspects of interaction are valued. Evaluation of generations' engagement with AI can provide useful segmentation opportunities for retailers. Future research should also look into cross-cultural replication to see if cultural orientation - such as individualism versus collectivism - would shape AI acceptance and relational outcomes. It may also be useful to conduct longitudinal designs that can measure change in consumer perceptions as AI technologies are diffused into retailers' ecosystems.

Conclusion

This study adds to the expanding literature about AI-enabled customer

engagement by showing that technology, when applied thoughtfully, can positively impact both the experience and quality of the relationship. The example of Zara's UK operations shows how AI-enabled tools can create convenience and relevance such as the recommendation engines, smart fitting rooms and emotional connection using AI-enabled tools. Finally, the study highlights that customer experience is emerging as a key connector between AI use and relationship outcomes. This is critical as the evolution of fashion retail continues. The brands that develop human-centered design in their digital strategies will be more likely to build long-term relationships with customers in an increasingly automated world.

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