

Understanding Brand Perception in the AI era: A ZMET-Based Study on Sustainability, Digitalization, and Customer Experience

Dr. Shivani Saini¹, Prof. Debasis Chanda²

¹Assistant Professor, Marketing Area, Management Development Institute, Murshidabad, India
²Dean-Academic & Professor, Operations Research Area, Management Development Institute, Murshidabad, India
Email ID: cdebasis04@yahoo.co.in
***Corresponding Author:**
Dr. Shivani Saini
Email ID: shivanisaini9119@gmail.com

Cite this paper as: Dr. Shivani Saini, Prof. Debasis Chanda, (2025) Understanding Brand Perception in the AI era: A ZMET-Based Study on Sustainability, Digitalization, and Customer Experience. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 2 (4), 2956-2967

KEYWORDS <i>Sustainability, Digitalization, Customer Experience, Brand, Perception, ZMET</i>	ABSTRACT In the face of frequent market disruptions, brands are increasingly striving to balance their resources to deliver value through sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience. Understanding how consumers perceive these elements is essential for building brand resilience, relevance, and long-term trust. This research explores whether these three dimensions are meaningfully understood by consumers or simply regarded as popular marketing buzzwords. To explore this, the study adopts the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), a qualitative research method developed by Gerald Zaltman in the 1990s. ZMET is particularly effective in uncovering both conscious and subconscious consumer thoughts through metaphor and imagery. The research sample consists of students from a premier educational institution, chosen for their familiarity with contemporary brand narratives and digital trends. To investigate the themes of sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience, the study conducts one-on-one interview sessions following ZMET's six-step process. During these sessions, discussions are facilitated using images collected by participants that represent their thoughts and feelings. This ZMET-based empirical study revealed key metaphors that can be interpreted as themes expressing people's perceptions of brands in relation to sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience. Positive brand perceptions, as reflected in the images collected from participants, highlighted the importance of these themes in their memory. Further research is needed to understand the various stimuli that influence people's perceptions of sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience. The study identifies major themes for brand positioning. Understanding people's perceptions through the deep metaphoric technique makes a significant contribution to execute various strategic decisions in brand-building. This study highlights that sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience are not just marketing buzzwords but reflect deeper societal values. Participants viewed sustainability as an ethical responsibility, digitalization as a necessary and human-centered transformation, and customer experience as essential to emotional and relational engagement. These insights suggest that brands must act authentically and responsibly in these areas to align with evolving public expectations and contribute positively to society. The study appears to be the first in-depth qualitative investigation into how people think about brands in the context of sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience.
--	--

1. INTRODUCTION

Brands coexist in this highly competitive world due to the persistence of their loyal customers (Sheth and Koschmann, 2019). Loyal customers choose one brand over others when their needs/expectations are met perfectly by that brand (Reistamer et al., 2024). Brands are perceived positively not only by their quality or performance but also by the emotional connection they establish with their target customers (Keller et al., 2022; Bahmanziari et al., 2003; Jiang, 2004). For instance, brands



like IKEA are not just furnishing people's homes but also promising a wonderful life. This underscores the importance of aligning a brand's tangible and intangible elements with customer needs, expectations, and beliefs. When brands align with the customer mindset, they become relevant in their lives. Brand relevancy delivers positive value to customers and creates a unique identity for the business (Keller et al., 2022).

The evolving business landscape is exerting pressure on brands to embrace sustainability (Davies et al., 2020), digitalization (Petruzzellis, 2010) and customer experience (Peppers and Rogers, 2022; Saini and Singh, 2020) in their strategies to remain relevant, exclusive, and connected with people. Managing consumer and business sentiments, demands, and behaviour in the current environment poses certain challenges. Hence, sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience emerge as paramount concepts that need careful and focused embedment in marketing theory and practices.

Incorporating sustainability-driven offerings (Sogari and Carbo, 2015), adapting to the transition towards a digital economy (Sparviero and Ragnedda, 2021), and ensuring the delivery of unforgettable customer experiences (Saini and Singh, 2020) are posing significant challenges to the brand marketers. Despite the recognition of the relevance of these three concepts by notable researchers, studies investigating brand perception across these areas remain scarce. To the best of the author's knowledge, no previous research study has explored this unique phenomenon of measuring brand perception from the perspectives of sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience.

The present study proposes the use of Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) developed by Gerald Zaltman in the 1990s, as an effective mechanism to delve into the deep emotions that underlie at conscious or subconscious levels of human behaviour. ZMET is preferred over survey-based quantitative methods as later often fail to capture the nuances of human thoughts and feelings on non-factual knowledge (Coulter et al., 2001). Surveys suppress the respondents' participation by asking them to share their opinions on certain statements or situations only. Qualitative methods such as ZMET communicate human thoughts through multi-sensory experiences, images, metaphors, and storytelling exercises (Zaltman, 2003; Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008). Previous studies in the marketing literature have explored the application of ZMET in education, hospitality, telecommunication, and tourism sectors, however, research on its application in brand marketing from an academic standpoint is limited, so this might be the first study to explore this unique phenomenon within a real marketing context.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to answer two research questions:

Research Question 1 (R1): How do people perceive brands from sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience perspectives?

Research Question 2 (R2): What distinct themes or insights emerge in brand marketing concerning sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience?

The present paper is organized as follows. Following this introduction, in the theoretical framework; concepts of sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience have been presented. In the research methodology, sampling procedure, and use of ZMET in mental mapping have been detailed. Next, the data analysis with ZMET has been presented for interpretation. Finally, the paper offers discussion, implications, limitations, and future research directions. The use of term 'brand perception' in the present article refers to viewpoints from individuals, people, consumers, or customers.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A critical yet often underexplored aspect of consumer perception lies in how individuals conceptualize abstract ideas such as sustainability, digitalization, and experience. Metaphor Theory, as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and further advanced by Mark J. Landau et al. (2017), posits that people understand abstract and complex concepts through conceptual metaphors—cognitive mappings such as “*Sustainability is a journey*” or “*Digital transformation is a tool*” or “*Customer experience is an emotional reaction*”. This metaphorical thinking is not merely linguistic; it reflects deep cognitive structures that shape how consumers feel, judge, and behave toward brands. In consumer behaviour, metaphors play a crucial role in revealing the subconscious framing of brand values, which significantly influence emotional engagement and trust.

2.1 Brand Perception from the Sustainability Perspective

Sustainability from the triple-bottom-line framework revolves around people, profits, and the planet (Elkington, 1997). It emphasizes that every nation, organization, and individual should take responsibility for their actions in a manner that should not negatively affect society, the environment, and financial considerations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Therefore, sustainability in businesses is to perform in congruence with commercial, social, and environmental goals. Businesses need to be ethical and responsible in their actions related to the procurement, production, distribution, marketing, and disposal of goods (Belz and Peattie, 2012).

Many companies in the fashion industry such as Zara, H&M, and Shein doing their best efforts to increase the customer engagement in adopting sustainable products/services (Pucker, 2022). But still, due to overproduction and over-promotional activities, these brands are perceived more as fast-fashion brands. Consequently, sustainability seems a myth in the fashion industry. This suggests that brand positioning from a sustainability perspective requires alignment with customers' needs, expectations, and behaviour.



Understanding customer perception is crucial for promoting sustainability within the brands. Marketers must be aware of the various stimuli that promote positivity in consumer minds toward sustainability (Belz and Peattie, 2012). Research indicates that a positive brand perception of sustainability enhances consumers' readiness to pay higher prices for technological products (Bask et al., 2013). However, it is much required that sustainability promises should be authentic, practical, and visible to make a good impression on customers (Amos et al., 2019). Knowledge about people's perceptions regarding sustainability is crucial for effective brand management (Belz and Peattie, 2012). Understanding consumer perceptions through metaphors allows marketers to tap into the deeper meanings that consumers associate with brands (Landau et al., 2017). By identifying and leveraging these metaphors, marketers can craft brand narratives that resonate more deeply with consumer identities and values. Integrating metaphor-based insights into branding enhances the authenticity and relevance of sustainability communications, ultimately contributing to more effective brand management (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

2.2 Brand Perception from the Digitalization Perspective

The advent of mobile technology has ignited a revolution in business marketing. As digital technologies become accessible, faster, and cheaper, customers find it easier to shift to online purchasing. This shift in consumer behaviour regarding the adaptation of technological innovations has transformed their actions across pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages (Schiffman et al., 2019). Digital integration in customer lives encourages businesses to revitalize brand (Keller et al., 2022) and embrace omnichannel retailing (Von Briel, 2018; Yang and Hu, 2024). A growing interest in digital technologies encourages businesses to offer superior digital experiences (Yang and Hu, 2024). Brand revitalization initiatives need to be aligned with consumer preferences and their comfort levels with technology (Schiffman et al., 2019).

Consumers' interest in technological products is deeply shaped by how they perceive brands (Petruzzellis, 2010). Acceptance of technology is influenced by various known and unknown factors, so there is a fundamental need to invest in the right technologies and skill sets to navigate digitalization (Verhoef et al., 2015; Cham et al., 2022). Brand positioning is an important function of the digitalization process (Conti et al., 2023). To excel in brand management, prioritizing consumers' perception from a digitalization viewpoint is crucial. Consumers' perception displays their subconscious thoughts and feelings that may play a vital role in creating a strong brand identity (Keller et al., 2022). According to Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), brand perception can be understood as a lens through which consumers interpret and evaluate a brand's identity and value. This metaphorical lens filters both conscious and subconscious impressions, making brand perception a central mechanism in forming brand image (Li, 2022).

2.3 Brand Perception from the Customer Experience Perspective

Since the 1980s, the concept of experience has been widely discussed across various contexts including consumption experience (Holbrook et al., 1982; Coulter, 2006), brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009), retail experience (Grewal et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009), online experience (Schouten et al., 2007), and service experience (Edvardsson, 2005; Jüttner et al., 2013). However, very few studies have focused on customer experience in the context of how customers sense, feel, think, act, and relate to a brand or company in experiential terms (Schmitt, 1999). The studies of Verhoef et al. (2009) and Shaw and Evans (2005) conceptualize customer experience as *"a set of interactions between a customer and product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction"*. The experience cues at pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase involve the consumers and companies in direct/indirect conversations (Saini and Singh, 2020). Customer experience is a holistic concept that connects the company and customers at various touch points. Understanding brand perception is crucial for designing the right consumer experiences (Fairbanks and Buchko, 2018). Effective communication enables companies to engage with a broader audience, potentially turning them to be their prospective customers. Customer perception influenced by personal factors plays a pivotal role in experience design. Every individual is different; a deeper understanding is required to segment and cater to diverse customer groups. Understanding customers at both conscious and subconscious levels is primary for prioritizing various brand management activities (Gorgoglione and Panniello, 2018). Metaphors help in explaining how people understand complex ideas by relating them to something familiar (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Landau et al. 2017). In the case of brands, metaphors shape how customers think and feel about their experiences, often without realizing it.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Empirical Application of Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

The current study proposes to explore the concept of brand perception in the context of sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience. To investigate this unique phenomenon, empirical research with a qualitative method; Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, developed by Zaltman (1995) and Zaltman and Coulter (1995) has been preferred over traditional qualitative approaches. The traditional qualitative approaches such as the interview method lack in capturing respondents' deep thoughts and behaviour (Mulvey and Kavalam, 2010).

ZMET is a six-step process of interviewing participants on collected images/metaphors to represent their thoughts, feelings, and emotions about a topic (Coulter and Zaltman, 1994; Zaltman, 2003; Zaltman and Zaltman 2008). In this research, participants were asked to select a brand from the list of Interbrand 2022 Best Global Brands. Thereafter, they were advised to collect five images that represent their brand perception regarding sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience



concepts and bring them for discussion in interview sessions. ZMET technique consists interviewing of participants in six key phases; Storytelling, Kelly Grid, Changing the Picture, Sensory Metaphors, Vignette, and Digital Imaging (Coulter and Zaltman, 1994; Zaltman, 1995). The participants were given the option to choose their preferred brand and advised to collect the images in either print or digital format that represent their thoughts, feelings, and emotions towards that brand. However, brand-related marketing campaign pictures were not preferred instead participants can choose related themes. Such as if a participant chooses Dove Brand, they were not allowed to use Dove's packaging or advertising images but could choose related themes from print or digital media sources.

A researcher and two research assistants transcribed the interviews based on image analysis and later conceptual themes were derived from keywords. Following the discussion with participants, key themes in the domains of sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience domains were identified. To source the appropriate images, participants were given a timeline of 15 days. After this period, they were asked to be part of ZMET's six-step process. All the participants were invited to a pre-arranged location on a specific date for face-to-face interview sessions on an individual basis. They were asked to bring their PowerPoint presentation prepared according to the instructions provided to them on the ZMET six-step process. This entire process took four months to complete.

ZMET six-step process:

1. **Storytelling:** In this step, participants were prompted to elucidate the reasons behind their selection of the five images. They were encouraged to articulate their thoughts using short stories or metaphorical descriptions.
2. **Kelly Grid:** To identify the similarities and distinctions, participants were asked to choose three similar and two distinctive pictures (3:2 Ratio) concerning the topic.
3. **Changing the Picture:** In the third step, participants were given the option to widen the frame, allowing them to make a replacement or change in one of the five chosen pictures.
4. **Sensory Metaphors:** The discussion on related sensory metaphors such as colour, smell, taste, and sound (Coulter, 2006; Zaltman, 2003) concerning selected images has been initiated to understand the reasons behind their choices.
5. **Vignette:** This phase involves translating the motion-based representation into a short story, act, or play. During interactions with participants, it became apparent that creating a video or audio-visual representation posed challenges. Therefore, upon request, this step was kept optional.
6. **Digital Imaging:** Digital imaging summarizes the participants' viewpoints about the collected images. The participants performed this step by presenting the pictures of collage along with verbal descriptions.

3.2 Sample

Zaltman's Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) was used for data collection and analysis. The study was conducted between June 2023 and September 2023. Interactions were carried out in either English or the respondents' native language. An initial pool of 60 participants was approached, from which a purposive sample of 18 respondents was selected for the final qualitative research. All participants were familiar with the concepts of sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience, which is considered a prerequisite for the effective application of the chosen technique. The sample has been chosen from a group of management graduates who were pursuing their postgraduation diploma in business management from a reputed institute in the Eastern region of India. Four participants were female and fourteen were male. Their age ranged between 20 and 30 years. A small sample is appropriate for ZMET because the technique emphasizes depth over breadth, aiming to uncover rich, subconscious insights rather than generalizable trends. Each interview produces detailed qualitative data, allowing researchers to identify deep metaphors and achieve thematic saturation with relatively few participants (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Cluster of Brands

Participants selected their preferred brands from the list of valuable global brands in 2022, sourced from www.interbrands.com. A total of six brands were selected by eighteen participants. The research assistants administrated the brand selection process, ensuring that one brand was allocated to a maximum of five participants only. Thereafter, two clusters of brands have been formed based on the nature of the products. These two brand clusters are Foods & Beverages and Retail. The brand names were kept anonymous. To maintain anonymity, the brand names were kept confidential in the writing of this paper.



Brand Clustering

Food & Beverages	Retail
Brand U	Brand X
Brand V	Brand Y
Brand W	Brand Z

Sample Proportion as per Clusters

Food & Beverages	Retail
Brand U (n=3)	Brand X (n=2)
Brand V (n=5)	Brand Y (n=2)
Brand W (n=3)	Brand Z (n=3)
Total participants=11	Total participants= 7

Note: n= No. of Participants, Total Sample=18

4.2 Metaphor Analysis

The images collected by participants are the metaphors of this research. The images express the participants' conscious or subconscious expressions and thoughts towards the brands. Since the three themes; Sustainability, Digitalization, and Customer Experience have already been communicated to the sample, an in-depth study with ZMET helps in stating the central constructs. The constructs were presented to display the central metaphors based on three constructs. Out of fifty-four ($18 \times 3 = 54$) collected images, fifty-one across the three constructs; Sustainability, Digitalization, and Customer Experience were analysed respectively. During the analysis, three images were rejected due to the direct representation of the brand or its marketing campaign. Extended sessions with participants in the ZMET six-step process help in narrowing down the central metaphors. The central metaphors under these three themes reflect the participants' thoughts/feelings. The process of narrowing down has led to the identification of keywords and subsequently with the abstraction methodology, the major metaphors have been presented under sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience constructs.

Construct 1 Sustainability: The concept of sustainability has been interpreted by participants in diverse forms. A collage of images collected by participants has been analysed with interview sessions as per ZMET process. It has resulted in identifying the keywords. Based on keywords central metaphors representing the people's perception about sustainability are Environment, Social Value, and Product Mix. The list of keywords has been presented in table 1 and a collage of sustainability pictures collected by participants is presented in figure 1.



Figure 1: A Collage of Images to represent People's Perceptions of Sustainability

Table 1 Sustainability-related list of keywords across two clusters

Keywords	Central Metaphors in Foods & Beverages and Retail
Environment	Environment
Recycle	Social Value
Positive emotions	Product Mix
Group activity	
Equity	
Outdoor brand promotion activities	
Product quality	
Product packaging	
Togetherness	
Green products	
Pollution free manufacturing	
Product ingredients	
Animated pictures	
Responsible disposal	
Brand colour	

Construct 2 Digitalization: The concept of digitalization has been analyzed through collected images. Subsequently, central metaphors have been drawn from the list of keywords. The keywords about digitalization are displayed in table 2 and a collage of digitalization images has been shown in figure 2. Based on brand perception on digitalization, two conceptual metaphors have been constituted: New Technology and Digital Convenience.



Figure 2: A Collage of Images to represent People's Perceptions of Digitalization

Table 2 Digitalization-related list of keywords across two clusters

Keywords	Central Metaphors in Foods & Beverages and Retail
Digital Entertainment options	New Technology
Connectivity	Digital Convenience
Animations	
Product-specific new technologies	
Space station and research technology	
Access to a range of products	
Home delivery	
Modern display in retail stores	

Construct 3 Customer Experience: The customer experience in Food & Beverages and Retail clusters has been displayed with a set of images. The collage of images depicting customer experience has been further helped in drawing central metaphors (Table 3 & figure 3). The key concepts that emerged from keywords are; Functional Experience, Affective Experience, Brand Experience, and Ease Experience.

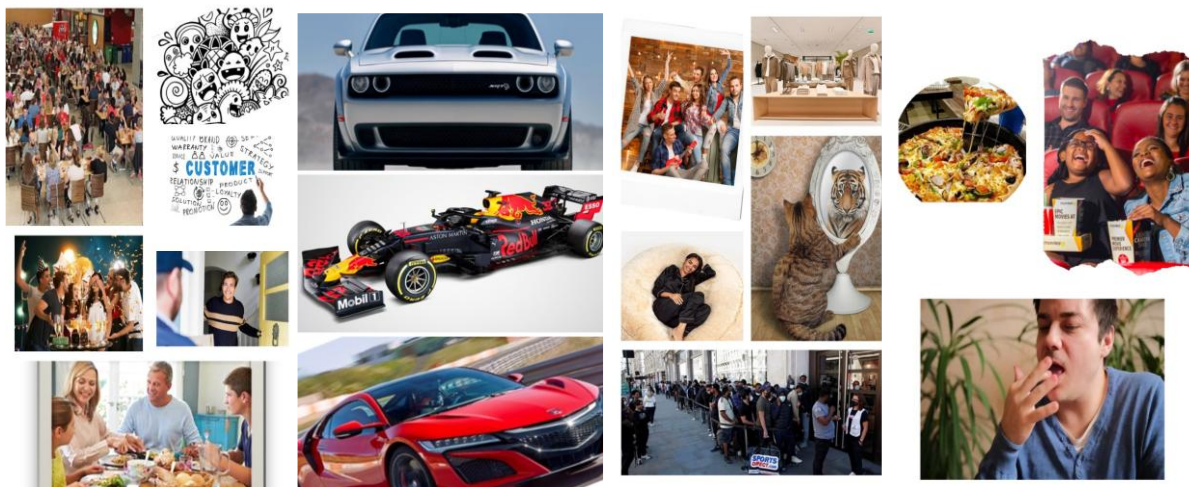


Figure 3: A Collage of Images to represent People's Perceptions of Customer Experience



Table 3 Customer Experience-related list of keywords across two clusters

Keywords	Central Metaphors in Foods & Beverages and Retail
Happiness	Functional Experience
Togetherness	Affective Experience
Product utility	Brand Experience
Brand following	Ease Experience
Seamless delivery	
Seamless service	
Brand superiority	

5. DISCUSSION

The present study utilized qualitative research to explore people's perceptions of brands concerning sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience. Employing a method that delves into both conscious and subconscious thoughts and feelings enabled a deeper exploration of individuals' perceptions of brands (Zaltman, 2003). Conceptual metaphors serve as powerful cognitive tools that frame consumer perceptions (Landau et al., 2017). ZMET provided rich insights into these metaphors and how people associate brands with sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience. The study revealed positive perceptions of brands regarding these three concepts.

The findings of the study suggest that sustainability in people's minds is characterized by three significant metaphors; Environmental Preservation, Social Value, and Product Mix. The images related to environmental preservation highlight the outer environment, mindful disposal, recycling, pollution-free manufacturing, and adherence to a green planet philosophy. The second metaphor, social value, is portrayed with togetherness, equity, and positive emotions. Lastly, Product Mix emphasizes people's perception of connecting sustainability with product ingredients, quality, and packaging. The findings suggest that brands are perceived positively when they align with efforts to save the environment, foster a sense of community, and prioritize products produced and processed following sustainable standards.

The study findings partially vary from the literature particularly where the triple bottom line framework is being encouraged to maintain the sustainability on economic, social, and environmental aspects (Elkington, 1997; Belz and Peattie, 2012). The present research shows that in comparison to economic, environmental, and social sustainability place priority in people's minds. These findings are supported by studies Nichols et al., 2023 that indicate the economic dimension of sustainability does not weigh more in the consumer perception of sustainability. This might be due to the reason that perceptual selectivity induces people to recall certain stimuli to which they are frequently exposed (Schiffman et al., 2019). Brands usually engross their environmental and social sustainability efforts in print or digital media. Economic sustainability, on the other hand, is more underlined with emotional appeals, such as asking for donations and extra payments for sustainable products. However, it is important to consider that brands like Aldi and Walmart succeeded in retailing because of their low-price market strategy (Chatterjee, 2017). People perceive low prices or discounting as a steady motive to be associated with a brand. So, the economic dimension, which focuses on cost savings aspects should be included to promote sustainability in consumer lives (Belz and Peattie, 2012). Brands need to promote their recycling and other sustainability efforts not just by environmental and social appeals but also through cost-saving initiatives. To change people's perceptions, brands should strive to balance across three dimensions of sustainability. Sustainability should not be viewed merely as a promotional activity aimed at environmental preservation or social development practices (Belz and Peattie, 2012), the financial aspect also warrants significant attention and consideration. In certain cases, the overpromotion of environmental and social sustainability claims adversely affects consumer perceptions (Pucker, 2022). Therefore, brands should demonstrate credibility across all three areas of sustainability-people, the planet, and profits to mitigate the risk of greenwashing criticism.

Digitalization plays a significant role in people's lives. The images representing people's views under the digitalization concept present two significant metaphors; New Technology and Digital Convenience. New technology is depicted by images of entertainment equipments, animations, space technology, and the latest developments in digitalization. It shows that brand perception concerning digitalization emphasizes the importance of equipping products/services with the latest technologies. Technology drives significant changes in brand strategy to create a positive impression on consumer mindset (Keller et al., 2022). Advancements in technology transform companies' interactions with customers and market intermediaries. Virtual exchanges are more promoted through technological advancements (Mauri, 2020). These developments provide opportunities for brand relevancy which is essential to foster bonds and gain consumer loyalty (Sheth and Koschmann, 2019). For Example, brands Like RedBull may not directly sell technological products but their involvement



in racing and other sports events gives an impression of a technologically advanced brand. The second metaphor is digital convenience, which encompasses images depicting worldwide connectivity, online retail, digital display, and easy online access. Being digital implies that customers expect an effortless experience with a brand. Customers seek digital convenience in their lives. A digital experience characterized by security, speed, and convenience is essential for a brand to remain relevant. Brand positioning with attributes that appeal to customers will be invaluable to increase brand visibility and relevancy in consumers' lives (Keller et al., 2022).

Customer experience states company-customer interactions at various touch-points. The images reflecting people's perception of customer experience revealed four central metaphors; Functional Experience, Affective Experience, Brand Experience, and Ease Experience. The images associated with the customer experience include happiness, togetherness, product delight, brand superiority, and delivery-related interactions. Functional Experience implies the significance of fulfilling the buying purpose. Cognition facilitates the importance of brands in consumer lives and it stays in their memory for a longer period. Next, the affective experience emphasizes the importance of a positive emotional response in the consumer's mind (Saini and Singh, 2020). Customer positive/negative expressions in contact with people, processes, equipments, and other environmental elements create memories. Positive emotions during company-customer interactions bring hedonic pleasure. The centrality of the metaphor "brand experience" evokes a customer's positive associations with a brand. Management of brand elements such as name, logo, characters, slogans, packaging etc. plays a crucial role in leveraging the brand identity. Lastly, the Ease metaphor encourages the brand's approach to bring practicality to consumer lives. The findings support the phenomenon that consumers' comfort in buying or continuing the relationship with a brand induces them to recall and recognize. The perceptual selectivity of people's perception of experiences reflects the influence of stimuli on their mindset (Schiffman et al., 2019). This may include the motive (functional and ease), environment (affective), and stimuli (brand) that consciously/subconsciously affect people's experiences. People's perceptions based on certain stimuli are essential for effective brand positioning. A brand can do the best marketing when it offers unique and memorable customer experiences (Keller et al., 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

The ZMET reveals the key considerations for brand managers. Sustainability, which has been a central focus of the United Nations 2030 Agenda in addressing environmental, social, and economic challenges, has been examined from a brand perspective. Key themes such as Environment, Social Value, and Product Mix emerge when people see a brand from a sustainability perspective. Digitalization has been much appreciated with the two themes; New Technology and Digital Convenience, standing out from people's perceptions. The customer experience perspective has been receptive to various aspects such as purpose of buying (Functional), emotional connectivity (Affective Experience), brand name (Brand Experience), and practicality (Ease Experience) in people's minds.

7. IMPLICATIONS

The study offers significant managerial implications for brand perception in the context of AI-driven transformation. Communication plays a pivotal role in brand marketing, and therefore, brand managers focusing on sustainability-oriented branding must center their appeals around environmental and social issues, which continue to resonate strongly with consumers (Belz and Peattie, 2012). Additionally, the economic aspect—highlighting cost savings and profitability—should be strategically communicated to align with the triple bottom line framework (Elkington, 1997).

In the AI era, where consumers are increasingly exposed to data-rich, personalized brand messaging, brands must clearly position themselves across environmental, social, and economic dimensions to shape a strong and relevant brand perception. The current emphasis on only environmental or social appeals may not be sufficient; AI-powered customer insights can help brands better understand which sustainability drivers matter most to specific consumer segments and tailor messaging accordingly.

From the digitalization perspective, the study presents two-fold implications. First, companies must innovate new practices, equipment, and technologies in their offerings. As AI technologies increasingly influence how people perceive brands, it becomes essential to prioritize research, development, and smart acquisitions that advance a tech-driven brand image. Secondly, AI-powered solutions and digital tools should be introduced in a way that enhances or simplifies people's lifestyles. Since ease of use is a prerequisite for adoption, brands must prioritize user-friendly, accessible innovations that create meaningful connections. AI can also help personalize product experiences, support predictive service offerings, and anticipate consumer needs. Furthermore, partnerships with AI and technology providers can reinforce a brand's image as digitally progressive and innovation-focused. These developments also contribute to broader sustainability efforts (Mauri, 2020), making AI a dual enabler of digital transformation and environmental progress.

The study also reinforces that customer experience is a holistic concept shaped by every interaction and touchpoint between a customer and a brand. These experiences span functional, affective, brand identity, and operational dimensions (Berry et al., 2002; Saini and Singh, 2022). In the AI era, brands have unprecedented opportunities to enhance customer experience by leveraging AI-powered tools such as chatbots, recommendation engines, behaviour prediction, and sentiment analysis. To effectively manage these touchpoints, brand managers should ensure collaboration across departments that directly or



indirectly interact with consumers. AI can assist in identifying pain points, customizing journeys, and optimizing interactions across the customer lifecycle. This allows brands to stay agile, meet evolving expectations, and deliver emotionally and functionally fulfilling experiences that strengthen brand perception.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The present study adopts the ZMET as a suitable method to understand people's perspectives about a brand on three major domains: sustainability, digitalization, and customer experience. While the study contributes significantly to brand marketing literature, it has several limitations. First, the ZMET being a qualitative approach, possesses certain challenges and performance issues. To perform the ZMET with accuracy, high competency in interview skills is necessary. In certain cases, limited availability of time for both the interviewer and interviewee makes it difficult for in-depth analysis, and it may result in a 'depth deficit' (Mulvey and Kavalam, 2010). Thus, conducting the study with a larger sample size and considering various stimuli that shape people's perceptions would give better insights.

REFERENCES

- [1] Amos, C., Hansen, J.C. and King, S. (2019), "All-natural versus organic: are the labels equivalent in consumers' minds?", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 36 No. 4, pp. 516-526. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-05-2018-2664>
- [2] Bask, A., Halme, M., Kallio, M. and Kuula, M. (2013), "Consumer preferences for sustainability and their impact on supply chain management: The case of mobile phones", *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, Vol. 43 No. 5/6, pp. 380-406. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPDLM-03-2012-0081>
- [3] Bahmanziari, T., Pearson, J.M. and Crosby, L. (2003), "Is trust important in technology adoption? A policy capturing approach", *The Journal of Computer Information Systems*, Vol. 43 No. 4, p. 46.
- [4] Belz, F.-M. and Peattie, K. (2012). *Sustainability Marketing: A Global Perspective*. Second Edition. Wiley
- [5] Brakus, J. J., Schmitt, B. H., & Zarantonello, L. (2009). "Brand Experience: What is It? How is it Measured? Does it Affect Loyalty? *Journal of Marketing*, 73(3), 52-68. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.73.3.052>
- [6] Chatterjee, S. (2017), "Two efficiency-driven networks on a collision course: ALDI's innovative grocery business model vs Walmart", *Strategy & Leadership*, Vol. 45 No. 5, pp. 18-25. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SL-06-2017-0057>
- [7] Cham, TH., Cheah, JH., Memon, M.A., Fam Kim-Shyan and László, J (2022). "Digitalization and its impact on contemporary marketing strategies and practices". *Journal of Marketing Analytics*, Vol. 10, pp. 103–105. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41270-022-00167-6>
- [8] Conti, E., Camillo, F. and Pencarelli, T. (2023), "The impact of digitalization on marketing activities in manufacturing companies", *The TQM Journal*, Vol. 35 No. 9, pp. 59-82. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TQM-11-2022-0329>
- [9] Coulter, R. (2006), "Consumption experiences as escape: an application of the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique", in Belk, R. (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 400-418
- [10] Coulter, R.H. and Zaltman, G. (1994), "Using the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique to understand Brand images", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 21, pp. 501-507.
- [11] Coulter, R.A., Zaltman, G. and Coulter, K.S. (2001), "Interpreting consumer perceptions of advertising: an application of the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 30 No. 4, pp. 1-21
- [12] Davies, I., Oates, C., Tynan, C., Carrigan, M., Casey, K., Heath, T., Henninger, C., Lichrou, M., McDonagh, P., McDonald, S., McKechnie, S., McLeay, F., O'Malley, L. and Wells, V. (2020), "Seeking sustainable futures in marketing and consumer research", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54 No. 11, pp. 2911-2939
- [13] Edvardsson, B. (2005), "Service quality: beyond cognitive assessment", *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 127-131. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09604520510585316>
- [14] Elkington, J. (1997). *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*. Capstone, Oxford.
- [15] Fairbanks, S. and Buchko, A. (2018), "The Brand Perception Tool", *Performance-Based Strategy*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 221-232. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78743-795-120181019>
- [16] Grewal, D., Levy, M., Kumar, V. (2009). Customer Experience Management in Retailing: An Organizing Framework, *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 85. No.1, pp.1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2009.01.001>



- [17] Gorgoglione, M. and Panniello, U. (2018), "Beyond customer experience models: identifying idiosyncratic perceptions", *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, Vol. 36 No. 7, pp. 1311-1328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJBM-06-2017-0124>
- [18] Holbrook, Morris B. and Elizabeth C. Hirschman (1982), "The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9 (September), 132–40.
- [19] Interbrand (2022), "Best global brands", available at: <https://interbrand.com/newsroom/interbrand-launches-best-global-brands-2022/>
- [20] Jiang, P. (2004), "The role of brand name in customization decisions: a search vs experience perspective", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 73-83
- [21] Jüttner, U., Schaffner, D., Windler, K. and Maklan, S. (2013), "Customer service experiences: Developing and applying a sequential incident laddering technique", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 47 No. 5/6, pp. 738-769. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561311306769>
- [22] Keller K. L., Swaminathan, V., Parameswaran M. G., & Jacob I. (2022). *Strategic brand management: Building, measuring, and managing brand equity*. Pearson Education India.
- [23] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- [24] Landau, M. J., Zhong, C., & Swanson, T. J. (2017). *Conceptual metaphors shape consumer psychology*. *Consumer Psychology Review*, 1(1), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.1002/arcp.1002>
- [25] Li, Z. (2022). Research on brand image evaluation method based on consumer sentiment analysis. *Computational Intelligence and Neuroscience* <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/2647515>
- [26] Mauri, C. (2020), "What comes to mind when you think of sustainability? Qualitative research with ZMET", *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 459-470. <https://doi.org/10.1108/WHATT-05-2020-0021>
- [27] Mulvey, M.S. and Kavalam, B.E. (2010), "Mining deeper meaning in consumer decision maps", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 372-388.
- [28] Nichols, B.S., Kirchoff, J.F., Confente, I. and Stolze, H. (2023), "When brands behave badly: signaling and spillover effects of unethical behavior in the context of triple bottom line sustainability", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 32 No. 6, pp. 908-926. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-07-2021-3569>
- [29] Peppers, D. and Rogers, M. (2022). *Managing Customer Experiences and Relationships-A strategic Framework*. Fourth Edition. Wiley.
- [30] Petruzzellis, L. (2010). "Mobile phone choice: technology versus marketing. The brand effect in the Italian market", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 44 No. 5, pp. 610-634. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561011032298>
- [31] Pucker, K.P. (2022). The myth of sustainable fashion. <https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-myth-of-sustainable-fashion>
- [32] Reitsamer, B.F., Stokburger-Sauer, N.E. and Kuhnle, J.S. (2024), "How and when effective customer journeys drive brand loyalty: the role of consumer-brand identification", *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 35 No. 6, pp. 109-135. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOSM-08-2023-0374>
- [33] Sogari, G. and Corbo, C. (2015), "Consumer attitudes towards sustainable-labelled wine: an exploratory approach", *International Journal of Wine Business Research*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 312-328.
- [34] Sparviero, S. and Ragnedda, M. (2021) "Towards digital sustainability: the long journey to the sustainable development goals 2030", *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPRG-01-2021-0015>
- [35] Schiffman, L.G. Wisenblit, J., and Kumar, S.R. (2019). *Consumer Behaviour*. Pearson Education.
- [36] Schmitt, B. (1999). Experiential Marketing, *Journal of Marketing Management*. Vol. 15, Issue 1-3. Online 01 Feb. 2010 <https://doi.org/10.1362/026725799784870496>
- [37] Schouten, A., Valkenburg, P. M., and Peter, J. (2007). "Precursors and underlying processes of adolescents' online self-disclosure: Developing and testing and "internet-attribute-perception" model". *Media Psychology*, Vol.10, pp. 292–315.
- [38] Saini, S. and Singh, J. (2020). *Revolutionizing Business Marketing through Experience Mix: Designing and Managing the Perfect Customer Experiences*. India, Chennai: Notion Press.
- [39] Shaw, C. and Ivens, J. (2005). *Building great consumer experiences*. Palgrave MacMillian.
- [40] Sheth, J. and Koschmann, A. (2019), "Do brands compete or coexist? How persistence of brand loyalty segments the market", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 53 No. 1, pp. 2-



19. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-07-2018-0489>
- [41] Von Briel, F. (2018). "The future of omnichannel retail: A four-stage Delphi study, Technological Forecasting and Social Change", Vol. 132, pp. 217-229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2018.02.004>.
- [42] Verhoef, P. C., Lemon, K. N., Parasuraman, A., Roggeveen, A., Tsiros, M., and Schlesinger, L. A. (2009). "Customer Experience Creation: Determinants, Dynamics and Management Strategies", Journal of Retailing, Vol. 85 No.1, pp.31-41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2008.11.001>
- [43] Verhoef, P.C., Kannan, P.K. and Inman, J.J. (2015), "From multi-channel retailing to omni-channel retailing: introduction to the special issue on multi-channel retailing", Journal of Retailing, Vol. 91 No. 2, pp. 174-181.
- [44] World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). Our Common Future. The Brundtland Report. United Nations, New York, NY. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/139811?ln=en>
- [45] Yang, Z. and Hu, D. (2024), "Digital technology-empowered omnichannel integration: a review and research agenda", *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol. 52 No. 4, pp. 407-424. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-09-2023-0560>
- [46] Zaltman, G. (2003), "How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market", Harvard Business School Press, Boston.
- [47] Zaltman, G. and Zaltman, L.H. (2008), "Marketing Metaphoria: what Deep Metaphors Reveal about the Minds of Consumers", Harvard Business School Press, Boston

fffff