Small Retailers in Small Towns: An Explorative Study on Shopping Behaviour for Improving Social Sustainability in an Urban Centre

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Abstract Nomadism and social sustainability are becoming central phenomena in understanding the new shopping models. Small local shops are a key space in the life of neighbourhoods, both in terms of what happens in them and their relationship with other spaces in which daily life takes place. They are, therefore, fundamental spaces for socialising and supporting the community, with a view to social sustainability. Urban areas and physical shops have changed radically in recent years. We aim to contribute to the knowledge of the urban retailing context from the perspective of social sustainability, especially as regards the quality of life. The lack of research on the issues of social sustainability of retailing and, more generally, of urban community social sustainability is widely highlighted. This is a gap that this study aims to fill, introducing through field research on a historic town centre the consideration that every visit to an urban centre—for shopping or other purposes—can be read in terms of a social sustainability experience. The knowledge of various shopping profiles could help to develop platforms of opportunities based on communities of place in a socially sustainable perspective.

Keywords Retailing · Social sustainability · Quality of life · Small towns · Small retailers · Shopping behaviour

1 Introduction

In contemporary retail, the themes of nomadism and sustainability are becoming central phenomena in the understanding of new shopping models. The concept of nomadism, which expresses the continuous fluctuation between products, brands, places of purchase and physical and virtual windows, allows us to summarise the preference for transitional lifestyles and consumption in the name of discovery, excitement and novelty (Pomodoro, 2012b; Qualizza, 2006). The consumer makes

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choices based on opportunities that arise from time to time, in a condition of permanent mobility. For that consumer, it is relevant to feel ready to leave and change at any time (Levy, 1998; Dagnino, 1996). These existential metaphors have a significant impact on everyday life and on the different paths of consumption, online and offline. This can refer to both the physical dimension, for example in large shopping malls and urban centres, and the digital dimension, where the user/consumer can navigate from one place to another, chasing value offers through an increasingly experientially rich customer journey. Nomadism also underlies the phenomena of out-shopping and cross-border shopping (Castaño et al., 2010; Wong & Lam, 2016), driven by digital opportunities even in the critical period of the pandemic; while physical mobility has decreased, there has been an increase in online mobility (Bettiol et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2020). This phenomenon leads to several consequences for sustainability, in which a key area is sustainable consumption and production (UNESCO, 2015).

The concept of sustainability, with its economic, environmental and social dimensions, has been widely studied in the field of purchasing and consumption (Bălan, 2021). Social sustainability is one of the most critical issues facing retailers (Erez, 2019; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021; Widlitz, 2020; Wiese et al., 2015; Wilson, 2015). The literature engages with some issues about the deterioration of downtowns and neighbourhoods, rapid mall development and expansion to the suburbs, the death of older malls and the redevelopment of grey areas. The potential impacts of commercial developments and revitalisation on urban resilience, however, have been less studied (Dixon, 2005; Moreno, 2019; Ozuduru & Guldmann, 2013; Simó et al., 2018; Warnaby et al., 2005). In urban centres, small retailers can contribute significantly to supporting social sustainability. In addition to contributing to job creation (de Wit & de Kok, 2014), small stores play a significant role in ongoing urban regeneration. They are relevant for the life of neighbourhoods, both in terms of what happens inside them and their relationship to other spaces for daily life. Stores are key spaces for developing social life and supporting the community.

However, the role of urban space and the physical store itself is changing radically. Not only large post-industrial metropolises but also smaller towns evoke the image of a stratified city (Semprini, 1999). The traditional city made up of houses, streets and squares, where people meet daily and share meaningful experiences, is intersected by the dense network of infrastructures, both physical and virtual, that connect the urban centre to large global networks and flows. It is necessary to understand this dual dimension, because interaction with the urban environment expands beyond traditional space-time limits, thanks to the plurality of technological devices available to the consumer.

Many researchers have pointed out the lack of research on these issues, especially from the point of view of sustainable marketing (Castilhos, 2015; Rasouli & Kumarasuriyar, 2016). This is a gap that the present study aims to help fill, introducing—through qualitative research, based on a narrative method—the proposition that every shopping visit to an urban centre can be read in terms of an experience of social sustainability.

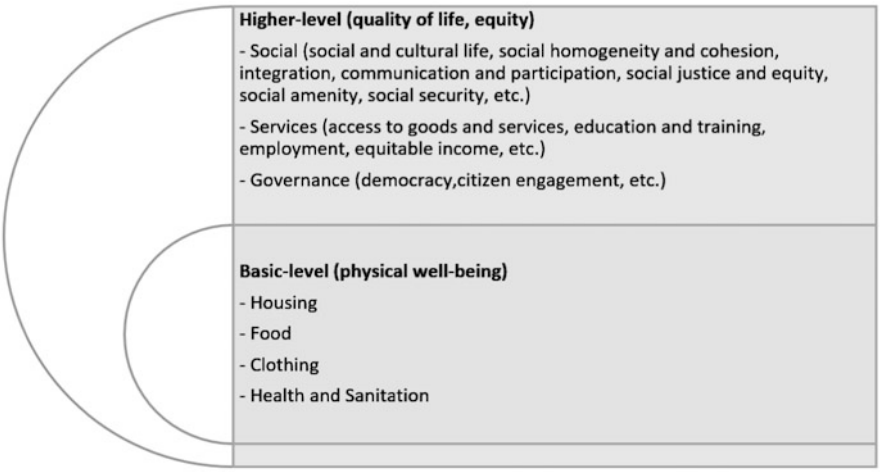

Fig. 1 Main themes of social sustainability

This study[1] was carried out with the following objectives. First, it sought to study how people experience urban centre spaces, giving them different and personal meanings, including traditional and digital shopping activities. Secondly, an attempt was made to describe the role of retailers in enhancing the social dimension of sustainability. In this sense, we aimed to identify opportunities for integration between commerce, tourism and creative crafts, able to contribute—also through specific initiatives promoted by local institutions—to the regeneration of the urban centre, spreading the economic benefits of these activities among the operators directly involved and throughout the whole territory and its production system.

2 Retailing and Social Sustainability

Within the broad framework of sustainability studies, this chapter focuses on the social dimension of sustainability in an urban retailing context (Dempsey et al., 2011; Hafez & Elakkad, 2020; Mehan et al., 2017).

Social sustainability has been defined in various ways and it is a rather complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic concept (Dempsey et al., 2011; Hafez & Elakkad, 2020). In general, social sustainability can be achieved by meeting basic human needs for current and future generations (Littig & Grießler, 2005). Rasouli and Kumarasuriyar (2016) mainly divided the key concepts of social sustainability into macro and micro levels. We propose an adaptation of this classification (Fig. 1),

[1] This work is the result of a shared effort. However, the authors divide it by attributing paragraphs 1 and 2 to Patrizia de Luca, and 3 and 4 to Gabriele Qualizza.

presenting some themes of basic level and higher level. The basic level refers to the physical well-being and basic needs of people, such as housing, food and clothing. The higher level refers to quality of life and equity regarding different aspects of social life, services and governance. The classification, here not exhaustive, is a complex issue, as it can vary in time and space.

In this chapter, the focus is on the role retailers could play in the sustainability of the community at the higher level of quality of life in an urban centre.

Sustainable communities can be defined as "places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all" (ODPM, 2006, p. 12). Many factors can contribute to the social sustainability of the urban community: physical factors, such as the quality of the local environment, accessibility and the elements that attract visitors and customers, and non-physical factors related to social relations and interactions (Dempsey et al., 2011).

Retailers can contribute to community sustainability by responding to the needs of current and future residents and visitors in a variety of ways at the basic and higher levels of social sustainability factors. They can respond mainly in terms of employment, the provision of goods and services, social interaction and the creation of shopping experiences, both at the level of the individual shop and at the level of the overall retail system. Retailing, even small-scale retail, contributes significantly to job creation (de Wit & de Kok, 2014). Small shops also play a very important role in the city and its ongoing regeneration, helping to slow down the trend towards urban desertification. There is no city without commerce, as it strengthens the urban structure and the social structure of the city. The loss of retailing activity is one of the most significant indicators of the decline of urban centres. Small local shops are a key space in the life of neighbourhoods, both in terms of what happens in them and their relationship with other spaces in which daily life takes place. They are, therefore, fundamental spaces for socialising and supporting the community, with a view to social sustainability (Delgado-de Miguel et al., 2019).

The urban scenario has changed profoundly in recent years: not only the large post-industrial conurbations, but also the smaller centres, evoke the image of a stratified city on many levels. Castells (1996) and Semprini (1999) speak in this regard of a space of flows and a space of places: the terrestrial city, made up of houses, streets and pavements, and squares where people meet every day, sharing experiences rich in meaning (space of places), flanked and superimposed by the dense web of infrastructures—physical and virtual—that connect the individual urban centre to the simultaneous and timeless horizon of the great global networks (space of flows). The need to establish a physical and conceptual bridge between these two dimensions is increasingly felt in the awareness that today's interaction with the urban environment expands beyond the traditional space-time limits, thanks to the plurality of technological devices available to the consumer.

In this context, the concept of consumer nomadism fits in well, expressing the continuous flitting between products, brands, places of purchase and physical and

virtual showcases, and allowing us to summarise the preference for "transitory" lifestyles and consumption, under the banner of discovery, entertainment and novelty (Pomodoro, 2012b; Qualizza, 2006). This phenomenon is in line with experience research (Hirschman, 1984) and with the motivational theories underlying shopping behaviour, which can be traced essentially to the theories of stimulation (environmental attributes), affiliation (social interaction) and cognition (learning on new trends and innovations) (Jarratt, 2000).

The nomadic consumer, who makes his or her choices based on the situations and purchasing opportunities that arise from time to time, is in a condition of permanent mobility, understood as a willingness to cross different realities, to immerse oneself in the continuous flow of information and to be here and elsewhere at all times. For this consumer, it is important to feel ready at all times to leave and to change (Dagnino, 1996; Levy, 1998). These are mental states and existential metaphors that have a strong impact on everyday life, as the logic of crossing over guides the consumer in his or her online and offline consumption patterns. This can happen both in the physical dimension, for example, in the large shopping malls and within urban centres, which are increasingly being likened to "show cities", characterised by the incessant offer of innovations and variations capable of arousing a surprise effect in visitors (Codeluppi, 2007, p. 74), and in the digital dimension, where the user/consumer can navigate from one site to another, chasing valuable offers through a customer journey that is increasingly curated and enriched from an experiential point of view.

The nomadic nature of the consumer encourages out-shopping, defined as the purchase of products outside the consumers' local shopping area. Marketing studies on out-shopping (Guo & Wang, 2009; Jarratt, 1998, 2000), a phenomenon that has been studied for a long time and influenced in recent years by the considerable increase in online shopping, have identified several reasons that seem to push people to shop outside their area or country (cross-border shopping), connecting with other communities and retailers. These consumers appear to be looking for better quality and assortment of products, higher quality of personal service, a more pleasant shopping atmosphere and more competitive prices. This search can manifest itself in the physical or digital dimension, resulting in out-shopping and cross-border shopping, including digital shopping, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic period (Bettiol et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2020).

The lack of research on the issues of social sustainability of retailing and, more generally, of urban community social sustainability is widely lamented in the marketing literature, both from an experiential and sustainable point of view. According to some scholars, the knowledge gap is partially explained by the lack of attention paid to the study of cognitive and behavioural mechanisms that characterise the relationship between consumers and the urban environment (Castilhos, 2015; De Nisco, 2010; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Turley & Millman, 2000). This study aims to fill that gap, introducing through field research the consideration that every visit to an urban centre—for shopping or other purposes—can be read in terms of a social sustainability experience.

3 An Exploratory Study in a Small Italian Town

In the present study, the following research objectives were pursued from the perspective of enhancing the social dimension of shopping in small urban communities:

- Firstly, it sought to study how people "appropriate" the spaces of the urban centre, giving them different and personal meanings, from the perspective of traditional and digital shopping activities. In this area we try to discover consumer profiles through which to interpret the shopping experience, in accordance with the social sustainability of the territory.
- Secondly, it sought to analyse retailers' perception of consumption behaviours in the urban centre and find out how retailers think about possible initiatives to improve the social dimension of sustainability.

3.1 Theoretical Approaches

To develop the research, reference was made to three different theoretical approaches—anthropological, symbolic-interpretative and experiential—which can help to explain, from different points of view, the support of retailing to community social sustainability.

The first strand comes from the socio-anthropological reflection on the concepts of "space" and "place" (Gans, 2002; Gieryn, 2000; Tuan, 1974; Urry, 2001). In the face of the extensive literature on "non-places" (Augé, 1992) and on the "mcdonaldisation" of consumption (Ritzer, 1993), the place persists as a constitutive element of social life and historical change (Friedland & Boden, 1994). In this regard, it may be useful to distinguish between two different declinations of localness: the first focuses on the concept of space, that is, space as a set of mobility and trajectories, defined by the physical coordinates of time, speed and direction; the second emphasises the concept of place, understood as a lived and narrated place, an environment constructed through the attribution of meanings, which vary according to the subjects that interact with it (Tuan, 1974). We can therefore speak of a plurivocal relationship between the actors of the experience and the space they occupy (Visconti et al., 2010). The relationship between places and social practices is always circular: if on the one hand the interpretation and organisation of space depend on the actions of the individuals who move within it, on the other hand, the actions of the same individuals are influenced by how this space is organised (Becchis & Genova, 2010, p. 137; Higgins & Hamilton, 2012). In the light of these considerations, we can recognise that places are not necessarily static and immutable (Massey, 1994, pp. 136–7), but involve a multiplicity of processes, in which relational networks and flows merge, interconnect and fragment (Urry, 2001; Castilhos, 2015). In other words, the space of "staying" is constantly crossed by the territories of "going": living in a place always implies the tension between the sense

of belonging to that specific territory and the desire to find another place as a possible field of action (Careri, 2006). In this sense, it is the act of walking that, by culturally modifying the meaning of space and thus the space itself, transforms it into a place: "Walking produces places" (Careri, 2006). It is the bodily activity that creates and is created *by* and *in* space. We are therefore talking about an embodied spatial experience (Yakhlef, 2015).

The symbolic-interpretative approach to the study of spatial practices and the meanings attributed to shopping activity takes its cue from the distinction between the *convenience shopper*, guided by utilitarian motivations, and the *recreational shopper*, oriented towards enhancing the playful and emotional components of the purchasing process (Bellenger et al., 1977). Over the years, there has been a proliferation of proposals for classifying consumer behaviour in retail spaces (Lesser & Hughes, 1986; Bloch et al., 1994; Finn et al., 1994; Kuruvilla & Joshi, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2002; Sandicki & Holt, 1998). In particular, Ruiz et al. (2004), in a questionnaire survey, have identified four groups of consumers in a shopping mall—recreational shoppers, full experience shoppers, browsers and mission shoppers—characterised by significant differences in activity patterns, socio-demographic variables, psychographic variables and atmospheric perceptions. Recently, Gilboa et al. (2016) empirically identified and validated four types of mall experience: seductive, social, recreational and functional. However, these studies have focused on the variables within the store environment and have paid little attention to spatial patterns of consumption and purchase—considering the whole store network—in the city shopping streets (Petruzzellis & Falcone, 2005) and to the relationship between consumers and the urban environment (De Nisco, 2010). The exploration of the reciprocal interaction that is created between the consumer and the shopping spaces, according to a symbolic-interpretative approach (Bonnin, 2003; Carù & Cova, 2003; Ferraresi & Parmiggiani, 2007; Floch, 1989, 1990; Laaksonen et al., 2008; Pomodoro, 2012a; Michaud Trévinal, 2013; Weijo et al., 2018; Yakhlef, 2015), is oriented to consider the environment from a different angle: no longer as a physical stimulus, but as the object of a process of "appropriation" (Aubert-Gamet, 1996; Bonnin, 2006; Carù & Cova, 2003, 2006) or "domestication" (Bradford & Sherry Jr., 2015) by the consumer, which can lead to the attribution of different and personal meanings. In other words, there is a need for research on shopping environments to include people as active components (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999), with the awareness that human beings produce space by inhabiting it. However, the studies that move in this direction (Floch, 1990; Pomodoro, 2012a) mainly make use of ethnographic approaches, with the limitations of the small samples observed (monitoring generally refers to a few dozen cases) and the exclusively qualitative nature of the survey instruments used.

Lastly, the study was intended to propose a reinterpretation in "narrative" terms of the shopping experience (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould et al., 2002; Fontana, 2014; Moisio & Arnould, 2005; Rahmanian, 2021), with a focus on what occurs in an urban context (Keskin et al., 2016). This is an interpretative key that is consistent with the most advanced research trends, which today emphasise the active role of consumers both in the co-generation of the product/service and in the elaboration of

the meanings that give meaning to the moment of consumption (Vargo & Lush, 2004, 2008). The reference to storytelling makes it possible to enhance a different cognitive mode (Bruner, 1991; Fisher, 1984), which feeds on symbols, myths, metaphors and analogies, dealing with what turns a simple behaviour into human action, endowed with intentions and meanings (Czarniawska, 1997). On the other hand, a narrative plot can never be reduced to a simple monologue (Boje, 1995), but presupposes an interweaving of full and empty spaces (Jenkins, 2006): openings for multiple passages, capable of stimulating the active participation of the interlocutors. In other words, storytelling can never be separated from story-listening (Scholes & Clutterbuck, 1998), that is, from a careful recognition of the personal experiences and sense attribution processes implemented by consumers (Qualizza, 2009).

3.2 The Context: A Small Italian Town and its Retailing

This study focused on the town of Sacile, a quaint urban centre with about 20,000 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2022), located in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, a region in north-eastern Italy. The present-day town, which developed from the fifteenth century onwards, dates back to the flourishing period of the Venetian Republic.[2] It was born on two islands in the bed of a river, along which ancient buildings and gardens lie, and it has bridges, "calli" and "campielli". That is why the city is called "Little Venice" or "Garden of the Serenissima".

In the last decades, the area of Sacile has seen phenomena of urban and territorial transformation, such as the settlement of large commercial fields, the development of relevant infrastructures (motorway junctions, reopening of the Sacile-Gemona railway line, etc.) and the integration into the social fabric of people coming from different European and non-European countries. The combination of these events is transforming Sacile and the surrounding area into a hyper location that can become a catalyst for the flows of goods and people (Agnoletto et al., 2007), capable of enhancing its potential as a tourist destination and as a meeting place for relations.

From the retailing point of view, the territory of Sacile presents significant differences between the historic centre and the peripheral area. The historic centre has more than 120 active commercial spaces (of the total 150, about 30 are currently inactive or closed). The retailing offering mainly concerns clothing, furniture, wellness, personal care, jewellery shops, art galleries, bars and cafés. Various services are also present, such as banks, insurance companies, professional offices and public offices. With this kind of offering, Sacile can be defined as an "open-air shopping centre".

[2] In: comune.sacile.pn.it, published 9/4/2021—History of Sacile

3.3 *Research in the Historic Centre*

In accordance with the theoretical framework presented in Sect. 3.1, the present study intends to enhance the meta-theory of the "hero's journey", used by Vogler (1992) as a guide to the analysis of the basic structure of film scripts. The idea behind Vogler's study is that all narratives resort to "topoi" or permanent patterns (Propp, 1928; Campbell, 1949): vectors of meaning through which human cultures construct life experiences (Fontana, 2009). Regarding shopping places, it can be hypothesised that—in the light of Vogler's scheme—each visit experience is divided into four phases (Fontana, 2014): from the "threshold crossing", stimulated by elements and messages of attraction (shop windows, signs, advertising, etc.) to the "emotional co-optation" of the visitor within a world perceived as different from that of everyday life, but with which the consumer is prepared to familiarise themself; and from the "central challenge", a moment in which the subject's anxieties and desires are measured against a series of constraints and limitations (budget, available time, breadth and depth of the offer, etc.) until the exit from the shopping area and the "return to habitual life".

In turn, this scheme can be declined in a multiplicity of variations and contents, according to the different meanings ("core stories" or "main narratives") attributed by the subjects to the experiences in which they are protagonists (Welte et al., 2021). In this regard, as suggested by Fontana (2014, 2016), personal events, encounters and events that one is confronted with in everyday life can be traced back to certain "founding myths" that is, "archetypes", basic scripts, to which correspond as many narrative lines and as many spatial practices: "myths of strength" (tales of power and security); "myths of care" (tales of healing and protection); "myths of escape" (tales of fun and discovery); and "myths of salvation" (tales of liberation and rebirth). In practice, each of these scripts offers the subject the opportunity to live a transformation experience and to enter "a qualitatively different state of consciousness" (Sturm, 2000).

The research process consists of two parallel phases, addressed to actual and potential visitors/consumers of the retailers in the historic centre. The analysis considers, beyond the customer, also the simple visitor, who moves for the necessity of acquaintance and comparison before proceeding to the purchase, and the frequenter, who interprets the place of purchase like an occasion of relaxation and socialisation (Bäckström, 2006). In fact, shopping venues lend themselves to an activity that is not directed solely at purchasing, but also concerns documenting or even contemplating the merchandise in its elective place. For some it may be enjoyable to walk around the place, to look, to consider the products; these are behaviours relatively independent of the immediate purchase (Carmagnola & Ferraresi, 1999).

Even visitors who do not purchase, but are nevertheless subjected to the commercial offer, can benefit from the commercial service through shop windows, a visit to the point of sale, direct information provided by the sales staff, etc. In addition, this analysis may include potential consumers who, although not belonging to the

specific community, pass through the city centre, appreciating it for business, tourism or shopping reasons.

This study, carried out in the period January 2020–January 2021—a long period due to the forced interruptions induced by the COVID-19 health emergency—was divided into two main phases:

- The desk research, dedicated to the literature review concerning both the processes of symbolic "appropriation" of the urban centre and the themes of socially sustainable innovation in the retail sector.
- The field research, for the collection and analysis of primary data, which were acquired in two different ways: a naturalistic observation of the activities carried out by the different users during the surveys developed in the historic centre of Sacile; in-depth interviews with nine qualified witnesses, owners of commercial activities located on-site, interpreted as the dual role of regular users of the centre and potential protagonists of initiatives and projects aimed at improving its sustainability.

Naturalistic observation, which was used during this study, is a "non-intrusive" technique that allows the examination of a phenomenon that is still little explored (Delli Zotti, 2004). The observer is not identified as such by the subjects observed, who therefore feel free to move and behave without being conditioned and without feeling the need to justify their behaviour. In the course of the observations, two survey instruments were used: an outline for the micro-narrative and a structured form. Based on the outline, the surveyor drafted a text in the form of a "micro-narrative" concerning the path and the activities in which the subjects observed were engaged. This avoided breaking down complex consumption practices of a processual nature into a mechanical sequence of artificially disconnected gestures and behaviours. The urban route is thus translated into a "narrative text", capable of acquiring meaning in the eyes of the observer, regardless of what might be the declared intentions of the subject. The structured form was used for the analytical description of the cases (composition, age group, relationship, etc.) and the activities observed (walking, telephoning, window shopping, entering a shop, etc.), for which a survey form was used as a basis, organised in the form of a closed-ended questionnaire.

The in-depth interviews to collect the comments and testimonies of the retailers were carried out based on an outline of questions to guide the route, but leaving the respondent free to answer and tell his or her own story. The outline, used as a basis for the topics to be dealt with and the questions to be proposed, was enriched during every single interview to stimulate the spontaneous narration by the interviewee. For this work, the interpretative keys offered by the interviewees are relevant to explain the peculiar characteristics of the shopping experience in the centre of Sacile.

On the visitor/consumer side, 249 field observations were collected. The survey units consisted of individuals, but also couples, family groups and groups of friends. This choice is dictated by the fact that, as pointed out in the literature (Enghel et al., 1990; Cova, 2003; Miller, 1998), the purchase of a good never takes place "in a social vacuum, without structure, without group dimensions, at the mercy of

advertising suggestions alone", but always "within a social relationship" (Cova, 2003, pp. 133–35), which contributes to giving meaning to the purchase itself. Shopping does not involve individual "monads" in movement, self-sufficient and isolated from the rest of the world, but involves—even physically—a plurality of actors, with different roles and responsibilities, who can be likened as a whole—as "consumption units"—to multi-cellular aggregates.

Within the framework of this qualitative research, data collected from field observation and audio-recorded interviews were faithfully transcribed and subsequently examined, making use of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Langdridge, 2004). According to this approach, the researcher never loses sight of the meaning of the conversation as a whole (Breidbach et al., 2014; Thomsen et al., 1998), encoding significant portions of text capable of expressing an articulated concept (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis of the empirical material constituted by the texts derived from the "micro-narratives" and in-depth interviews was developed with a symbolic-interpretive approach, concerning three different levels of investigation (Pomodoro, 2012a; Michaud Trévinal, 2013):

- Interaction with the physical space and the social environment (rhythm, trajectory, consumption behaviour, modes of relating between subjects, etc.)
- Recurring themes traced back to the narrative pattern traceable in the behaviours implemented by the users (elements of recall, objects of desire, challenges and rewards, etc.)
- The axiological dimension, with specific regard to the meanings attributed to the spaces of the city centre.

3.4 Main Findings

A first analysis, purely descriptive, highlights the wide range of activities in which those who frequent the historic centre of Sacile are involved. Visits to one or more shops and the classic "window shopping" do not seem to be interesting. More relevant—on the whole—are the behaviours linked to the leisure sphere, presumably connected to the search for a slow lifestyle: for example, going for a walk, allowing oneself to stop now and then, even for the simple purpose of enjoying the panoramas. Activities linked to socialisation and meeting people are also of great importance: frequenting the city centre appears to be characterised by a relevant relational component. In most cases, people walk around in company or meet face-to-face with other people along the way.

The analysed data suggest a plurality of paths, complex forms of interaction with the urban environment, with different meanings each time. Qualitative observations suggest the opportunity to trace the micro-narratives developed during the surveys to five consumption profiles, in each of which the urban environment acquires meaning based on a specific narrative analysis (Fontana, 2014, 2016).

The shopping profiles identified were named as follows: the passer-by, the strategist, the explorer, the convivial, the collector of experience. The description of the different profiles is presented in Table 1.

Regarding the second objective, retailers' perception of user behaviour in terms of shopping and visiting the centre was analysed, and the set of proposals launched by retailers on possible initiatives to improve the social sustainability of the urban community was explored.

For the retailers interviewed, the strategist model prevails. The typical customer is usually a high-wages person, fond of the traditional concept of assisted selling, who enters the store without even glancing at the shop window, to make pre-programmed purchases, claiming the convenience of parking and location. Respondents are aware of the opportunities this offers, particularly the possibility of a solid base of loyal customers and a higher conversion rate. However, some respondents also perceive the risks and limitations of this approach: focusing only on "old" and high-spending customers effectively alienates a large proportion of the public who shop in other nearby "marketplaces".

There are three types of explanations for this behaviour:

- First of all, it should be noted that the commercial offer system in the centre of Sacile is characterised by the presence of specialised shops, usually high-profile, which interface with a medium-high level target: exclusive prestigious brands, emerging designers, limited series and, sometimes, unique pieces constitute the core of the product offer. Proposals and assortments are constantly being renewed. The customers who enter such a space are more select—and more determined to buy—than those who usually frequent the fast fashion brands available in a shopping centre.
- Secondly, there is the influence of the pervasive spread of digital communication tools. The triumph of the web, in particular, has led consumers to adopt a webrooming logic, whereby entry to the physical shop is preceded by a long phase of online research of data and information relating to the product to be purchased. The choice is, therefore, more conscious: once the purchase decision has been made, it is difficult for the consumer to deviate from the destination or let him/herself be diverted by stimuli and suggestions of various kinds encountered along the way.
- Thirdly, the "habitual" character of those who frequent the centre of Sacile is underlined: the search for fixed points and reassurance seems to prevail among users, so they prefer not to move too far from consolidated behavioural patterns. Even the visit pathway seems to conform to a logic of this type.

Aware of the advantages, but also the risks, that such an approach entails, some of those interviewed suggest working on some levers: greater care for the shop windows to transform them into real communication tools; but also a redefinition of the philosophy of the sales point, which should increasingly be likened to a concept store, that is, a multi-functional space, built around a key idea, to be declined in a variety of ways: areas dedicated to the presentation of products, refreshment points, exhibitions, events, etc. An environment of this kind, rich in sensory stimuli, would

Table 1 Main shopping profiles and characteristics

Shopping profiles	Main characteristics
The passer-by	He/she simply walks through the historical Centre, following a linear trajectory and without interacting with the stimuli along the way. He/she usually moves alone, usually at a fast pace. While walking, he/she sometimes uses his/her smartphone or other technological device, abstracting him/herself from the surrounding context, conceived exclusively as a transit space. In this case, we can speak of a kind of "zero-degree" of storytelling: Urban space is configured as a white page, as a gateway to "narratives" that will develop their senses elsewhere. At first glance, it seems difficult to talk about "social sustainability" in this case. However, we are still dealing with actors on stage, trajectories in motion, bodies meeting other bodies, basic needs to be satisfied, such as ease of transit and freedom of access (e.g. free Wi-Fi hotspots) to the physical or virtual destination of one's pathways.
The strategist	He/she comes to the city Centre to make "programmed" purchases, following a planned route and trying to optimise time. The gaze appears direct, focused on the goal to be reached, with a linear trajectory. In this case we can speak of a narrative of power and strength, which presupposes a performative approach to the urban environment, understood as a purchasing space and conceived as an opportunity to exercise actions aimed at improving personal performance, through the reassuring exercise of forms of control over the external environment. In this case it is important that the commercial offer enables the efficient execution of a "shopping task". We can therefore speak of "social sustainability" in terms of response to the basic needs of people, such as food and clothing or health and sanitation.
The explorer	He/she frequents the city centre to enjoy the free time, ready to be intrigued by all the stimuli he/she encounters along the way. He/she walks slowly and turns most of the time in company, often following a diagonal trajectory. His/her gaze is wide and receptive. In practice, he/she carries out a window shopping activity, guided by exploratory and recreational motivations and not aimed at buying. In this case we can speak of a care story: The urban environment—Understood as a window space, or rather as a mirror onto which to project dreams and desires—Performs a "therapeutic" function, that is, it is argued as being a device capable of restoring to the subject a condition of well-being, linked to the acquisition of new knowledge and the overcoming of the anxieties and uncertainties that characterise daily life. We can therefore speak of "social sustainability" in terms of response to higher-level needs linked to quality of life, such as self-care, psychological Well-being, easy access to various amenities and cultural life.
The convivial	He/she interprets the centre as a space for relations, where friends and acquaintances can meet. They are open-minded and curious about their environment, usually lingering for a long time at the tables of a bar, a café or a pastry shop. In this respect, we can speak of a narrative of escape, where the urban environment is "appropriated" as a space for relationships, an opportunity to respond to a need for leisure and entertainment. Consumers seeking a social experience go to the city centre to immerse themselves with, and among, others and to feel a sense of belonging to the local community. In this case, social sustainability is defined in relation to non-physical factors (social cohesion, integration), connected to human relations and interactions.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Shopping profiles	Main characteristics
The experience collector	He/she is a hybrid subject who uses a plurality of strategies during the same visit. For example, he/she will head at a steady pace to a selected shop, where he/she will make planned purchases. After this phase, he/she transforms, wandering around, making unplanned purchases, going in and out of shops. Or, vice versa, he/she inserts the purchase of a basic necessity in the context of an exploratory visit. We are therefore faced with a story of liberation and rebirth, where the urban environment is re-signified as a multi-functional space, a battleground between opposing inner tensions: Here the subject has the opportunity to transition from the limiting role of convenience shopper to the gratifying condition of recreational shopper. In this case, social sustainability should be understood as a holistic experience, able to involve body and mind, referring both to basic and to higher-level needs. The city centre plays the role of energy catalyst (e.g. participation, civic engagement), that is, a place where people want to live and work, now and in the future.

be able to act as a pole of attraction for explorers and experience collectors, driven by recreational and playful needs, ready to be surprised by novelties and original proposals. Also important is the idea that the point of sale should expand its boundaries, entering into dialogue—through participation in trade fairs, events and conventions of various kinds—with the potential buyer in the places and contexts in which they live their interests and passions.

This need is accompanied by the propensity to broaden one's horizons, to grasp the characteristics of the urban context in which the point of sale is located. This kind of approach implies synergies with other players, such as retailers, local authorities, trade associations, etc., with a view to social sustainability. In this large context, it is possible to identify opportunities for integration between commerce, tourism and creative crafts, able to contribute—also through specific initiatives promoted by local institutions—to the regeneration of the urban fabric, spreading the economic benefits of these activities not only among the operators directly involved but also over the whole territory and its production system.

A summary of the relevant themes from the retailer interviews is schematically represented in Fig. 2.

4 Conclusions

Since this is a purely qualitative and exploratory survey, the results collected are obviously not generalisable, but can still offer some indications—immediately translatable into operational implications—with respect to the two research questions that are the basis of this contribution.

With regard to the practices of spatial appropriation, and further in the perspective of traditional and digital shopping activities, the survey highlights the wide range of

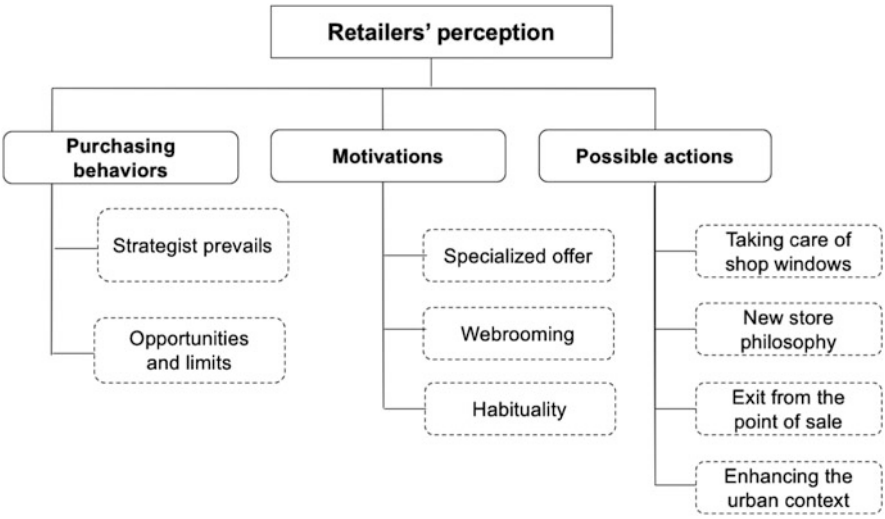

Fig. 2 Retailers' perception of the shopping experience

instances that guide users, oriented to move according to changing and diversified paths. On this basis, it is possible to identify narrative lines, existential themes, anxieties to be overcome, ideal "treasures" and rewards of which consumers go in search. In particular, this study highlights that the goal of desire is not as much the material possession of a product, as the possibility of responding to a set of needs and motivations of a profound nature, which operate as mediators of the link between the environment, perceptions and behaviours of consumers. In addition, an additional figure (the passer-by) emerges who was not adequately considered in previous surveys (Gilboa et al., 2016; Ruiz et al., 2004): a subject who apparently abstracts himself or herself from the urban context, but who could also play the role of mediator between physical and virtual spaces.

In the light of these considerations, the urban centre seems to be called upon to better define its own mission, also from the point of view of social sustainability, proposing itself not only as an alternative to the cold and anonymous system of large commercial structures and e-commerce platforms, but also as an area in which to recover the ancient idea of commerce as a moment of socialisation.

With regard to the role of retailers in improving the social dimension of sustainability, what emerges from the interviews is the need to develop a public space with mixed and shared use. To this end, it will not be sufficient to return the streets of the centre to the people, eliminating vehicular traffic, but it will be necessary to transform streets and squares into "platforms of opportunity", where a plurality of initiatives can be developed, such as play areas for children, places for events and concerts, meeting spaces and gardens (Manzini, 2021; Moreno, 2019). This project also requires the development of networks of relationships among a plurality of actors, oriented to generate "communities of place", active in issues that connect

environmental, economic and social dimensions. On the retail front, this implies a redefinition of the commercial offering, enhancing the possible synergies between complementary centres of interest. For example, a bistro, a record store and a clothing store could create, in collaboration with the public library, an initiative linked to a particular lifestyle. From this perspective, customers are no longer contested, but shared in the context of coherent paths of meaning.

Thinking about the opportunities for integration between commerce, tourism and creative craftsmanship that are capable of regenerating the urban fabric, there are interesting areas of opportunity capable of restoring vitality and excitement to the city's main shopping streets. In front of a consumer moved by recreational and playful instances, constantly looking for novelty and surprises, there is a significant presence of vacant stores in the centre. The solution could be to give space to a new generation of "craft stores", intercepting emerging phenomena, such as that of the makers and the circular economy: master goldsmiths, creators of Venetian masks, owners of ateliers dedicated to ethical fashion, creators of bags and accessories from waste materials, etc. Proposals of this type could make more attractive—also from a tourist point of view—urban centres of small dimensions, such as those examined in the present investigation.

We can even hypothesise that the rules of attraction, which push similar talents to meet in places with a different creative density, will solicit the formation of a small community of people interested in delocalising their activity in an urban context of particular suggestion, in which can be found a balance between personal and professional life.

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