

My shopping place can also be my favorite place: an analysis of the experiences involved in an urban retail agglomeration

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Abstract: This manuscript aims to investigate whether shoppers in street retail agglomerations enjoy the experiences that the location can provide. It seeks to understand how the place (region) can help explain the shopping trip in these environments. Through a qualitative approach, 22 shoppers were observed and analyzed. The chosen location was a well-known street retail agglomeration at a local level, in the state of Espírito Santo, in Brazil. Coding techniques were used for data analysis. The findings demonstrate that all expected experiences were present, with only one having a negative element, noise, and all the others being positive. Another discovery was the possibility of the site acting as a frame, as a living room and as a stage. The study then brings both theoretical and practical contributions, advancing site marketing literature and supporting authorities and marketers.

Keywords: *Urban retail agglomeration. Regional experience. Customer experience.*

1. Introduction

Retail agglomerations are extremely important places, considering that the attributes of these locations directly impact consumer satisfaction (Teller & Elms, 2010). However, retail agglomerations are evolving retail environments composite of traditional and non-traditional shops, services, free spaces, places, that is, they arise naturally in a location without centralized planning (Teller, 2008). Thus, elements of the location can influence the dynamism of the retail environment, taking into account that the location, such as high streets, neighbors and city, itself can provide experiences (Yu & Kim, 2020). When we look at the role of location in the retail environment, urban centers, and retail are interconnected. Just as retail is influential for the attractiveness of the location, location is significant for retail. It is the region (city, neighborhood, or shopping street) that differentiates inner-city retail from other forms of retail and consequently makes the retail experience unique (Källström, Persson & Westergrens, 2021). Recent studies address some interesting points in relation to the location of retail centers, such as the study by Ballantyne, Singleton, Dolega and Macdonald (2023) and the research published by Dolega and Lord (2020).

Thus, considering that a place can provide different experiences, such as sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual (Yu & Kim, 2020), we argue here that as a motivation for going to physical places, local experiences are essential in the new post-pandemic (Verhoef, Noordhoff & Sloot, 2022). In this context, we ask in this manuscript the following research question: how can the region provide experiences that contribute to going to the place to shop in street retail agglomerations?

Therefore, we seek to investigate whether buyers in street retail agglomerations enjoy the experiences that the location can provide; aiming to understand how the place (region) can help explain shopping in these environments. To this end, observations and informal interviews were conducted in a retail agglomeration state in Brazil. Via a qualitative approach, an analysis of everyday social practices was carried out, including elements of field experiences, which made use of the “tacit” knowledge obtained from evidentiary practical experiences (Fook, 2002). Contributions can be useful for several reasons, as they can help authorities to boosting the economy of their respective regions, as well as make a more pleasant place for consumers, where they can have positive experiences, thus having a better quality of life. The theoretical contributions are due to the fact that it extends the application of the concepts of local brand experience to the retail environment, that is, it expands the scope of application of the theoretical concept of regional brand experience, allowing us to connect it to a context that is still lacking in studies, an advance for the area and for the phenomenon of going to shop in street retail agglomeration.

2. Theoretical backgrounds

Going to shopping locations is due to their attractiveness, where a distinction is made between the elements considered tangible in a region, such as culture, nightlife, shopping, infrastructure, housing, business parks, etc., on the one hand, and elements that are considered intangible, such as personality, emotions and perceived values, on the other (Zenker, 2011). Likewise, the general atmosphere or environment affects local attractiveness, as seen in studies carried out in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Hart, Stachow, & Cadogan, 2013). Possible experiences encompass reactions generated among customers in rational, emotional, sensational, physical, and spiritual terms (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). Yu and Kim (2020) cover all these experiences by presenting a new construct of local brand experience (city), in which they brought four experiences, which will be used as the basis of this work: i) Sensitive experience; ii) Affective experience; iii) Behavioral experience; iv) and Intellectual experience.

In the first aspect, concerning Sensitive experience, Yu and Kim (2020) ascribe elements associated with the human senses, connecting characteristics that emphasize the instigation of visual, sensory, and other senses by a place, comprising three items that can be used to measure

sensory experience dimensions. A place making a strong impression on an individual's senses, visually and in other ways, is referred to as the first type. Secondly, the place may be interesting to an individual on a sensory level. The third describes how a place appeals to the senses.

Regarding the second aspect, the concept of affective experience is viewed as a matter of connection between a person's emotional side and a place (Yu & Kim, 2020). In other literature, the positive emotional and affective bond with a particular place has been conceptualized as "place attachment" (Karlsson & Nilsson, 2017). Yu and Kim (2020) also bring three items to establish the dimension of the affective experience. Whether a place induces feelings in an individual is referred to as the first type. The second refers to an individual having strong emotions about a place. The third concerns the place being an emotional place for an individual.

When it comes to the third aspect, behavioral experience, it includes practices that involve activities carried out in the region, consisting of three items capable of highlighting this dimension. According to Yu and Kim (2020), these items are the individual's involvement in physical activities and behaviors in that location, the individual's bodily experience in the location, and the orientation of it for the activities.

As a fourth and final aspect, which concerns Intellectual Experience, Yu and Kim (2020) state that it is associated with issues that involve intellectual effort and problem-solving (i.e., cognitive issues). The first measure of this dimension is related to an individual overthinking when they are living experiences at a place. The second describes the place's ability to make people think. The final one refers to how a place stimulates an individual's curiosity and problem-solving skills.

This study goes further by researching the experiences of a place in connection with retail agglomeration environments, which means looking at the phenomenon from a new angle. In this direction, the perception of experiences influences going to a place to make purchases. It is noteworthy that Yu and Kim (2020) bring the experiences to a city context, but here they employ them for a smaller region a strong commercial neighborhood.

In addition, as an analysis complement, the role of the place in retail environments has already been verified by Källström, Persson & Westergren (2021), where it became clear that the place can play three roles: as a frame, as a living room and as a stage. Based on the authors, the place as a frame refers to the role that the physical structure can provide to the attendant in relation to the characteristics and familiarity provided; as a living-room, it referred to a coziness that can make the visitor have reasons to attend because of feeling strong social ties, leisure and in connection with the atmosphere of the place; finally, the site as a stage refers in terms of giving visibility to those who seek it, because there, the participant can see other people and be seen, meeting with other people, in addition to events that may happen on the site.

3. Methods

In this study, a qualitative approach was employed, which allows the researcher to have a good idea of the phenomenon being studied through the description of details (Bansal & Corley, 2011). Qualitative data and methods were essential to achieve the proposed objectives, considering the need for observation and specific questions conducted via informal interviews. The research covers an analysis of everyday social practices (Gherardi, 2009), including elements of field experiences. It utilized coding techniques to allow access to "tacit" knowledge obtained also from the data, resulting in the disclosure of practical experiences (Fook, 2002).

Observational techniques were used for data collection since this type of procedure aims to examine the relationship between reality and the phenomenon studied, making it possible to obtain different explanations based on an inductive observation by the researcher (Angrosino, 2007). The non-participant observation of reality was carried out in a retail agglomeration considered one of the most prominent in Grande Vitória, the metropolitan region of Espírito Santo (Brazil). The observation was carried out in May 2023, with approximately 16 hours of non-participant observation, divided into four days, roughly 4 hours each day. Observations

occurred in the afternoon. In total, 22 people were studied, only 1 of whom did not meet the main criteria for buying locally. The selection considered people who could encounter any of the possible experiences already mentioned, without demographic filters, for instance.

As the study focused on consumers, that is, people who buy at the location, interaction with those observed was necessary to ensure that they were, in fact, people who were enjoying the experiences that the location provides while also being buyers.

As a first step in data analysis, an open coding analysis was carried out, in which events (i.e., observations) are compared in terms of similarities and differences, allowing for conceptual labeling (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The categories were defined based on the study of Yu & Kim (2020) and based on them subcategories were defined. Then, the memos were analyzed to highlight the differences and connections that could only be underlined after an in-depth analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Having defined the categories and subcategories, it was necessary to focus on axial and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Thus, it was possible to reach the central category called going to a place to make purchases.

4. Findings

4.1 Sensitive Experience

Two people observed verbally indicated that they frequent the place because of palatable issues. It shows that they go to the location due to the possibility of being able to eat. The first (observed 6) spontaneously declared when asked if he was just going to buy. The second (observed 16), in turn, did it when asked if he always went to the place. Table 1 shows some excerpts from their experiences.

Table 1. Excerpts from the palatable experience

Palatable experience	Excerpt from Observation number 6: I asked her if she only went to buy. She said no, as she also likes to bring her children to play and eat.
	Excerpt from Observation number 16: He said he always goes once a week with his granddaughter. He takes her for walks and plays and enjoys the opportunity to eat something.

For visual issues, three situations are prominent, namely quotes that they like to see people, renovations, and selfies. In turn, it is noteworthy that a renovation carried out on-site was crucial for changing the environment. The people under observation mentioned these factors. They praised them, demonstrating that the post-renovation location pleased their visual senses. Regarding selfies, it is meaningful that a sculpture in the place pleased the visual senses of those being observed, as shown in the following excerpts in Table 2.

Table 2. Excerpts from the visual experience

Visual experience	Excerpt from Observation number 6: She said she enjoyed the place because it became gorgeous after the renovation.
	Excerpt from Observation number 8: When I asked him if he liked the place, he replied that he liked seeing people there.
	Excerpt from Observation number 10: She took selfies with her cell phone at the sculpture. A friend of hers took photographs of her in various poses.
	Excerpt from Observation number 15: She responded that she liked seeing people.
	Excerpt from Observation number 20: They were sitting where the tattooed guy was holding his cell phone and taking a selfie at the scene. After a while, they get up, go to the sculpture, and take additional selfies. I also asked if he was taking a photo to keep as a souvenir. He

	replied affirmatively, that he wanted to record the moment at the place, as he found the art interesting and the location beautiful too.
	Excerpt from Observation number 22: Asked if she liked the place, she replied that it was very good after the renovations and was attractive and beautiful.

One situation highlights a hearing issue, which appears negative. The person being observed complained about the noise, as seen in Table 3. One finding of the observation was that there are many people and store announcers, so the place becomes noisy, which can cause discomfort to the auditory senses.

Table 3. Excerpts from the hearing experience

Hearing experience	Excerpt from Observation number 6: I asked if she enjoyed advantage of the place and she said more or less, as there is a lot of noise.
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It was possible to see that the olfactory experience occurred when people mentioned the air conditioning, praising it as fresh. In fact, the place is remarkably airy, with a lot of air and breezes, as it is open and spacious, which is considered positive by those under observation. They can breathe pleasant air, delighting the olfactory senses. Table 4 presents some excerpts exemplifying the aforementioned experience.

Table 4. Excerpts from the Olfactory experience

Olfactory experience	Excerpt from Observation number 9: She also said that the place was pleasant because it was fresh.
	Excerpt from Observation number 15: She replied that she liked to see people and that the place was very fresh.
	Excerpt from Observation number 21: He said always goes there to get some fresh air when he leaves work.

Concerning the sensory experience, the last situation identified corresponds to elements that indicate tactile issues. This experience presents the same excerpts as those observed in the olfactory experience since both cases express circumstances in which people mention air conditions, praising them as fresh, pleasing the tactile sense. Because these experiences stand about air conditions, which is a broad aspect, it connects with elements that can be seen as tactile, as there are requirements for body freshness. The observations took place in the context of high temperatures. The fact that it is windy means that people can cool off in the observed place since staying there can stimulate their tactile senses, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Excerpts from the tactile experience

Tactile experience	Excerpt from Observation number 9: She also said that the place was pleasant because it was fresh.
	Excerpt from Observation number 15: She replied that she liked to see people and that the place was very fresh.
	Excerpt from Observation number 21: He said always goes there to get some fresh air when he leaves work.

4.2 Affective experience

Regarding the affective experience, two situations were noticed: attachment for commercial benefit and attachment for emotion/feeling. As it is a large place from a commercial point of view, including diverse stores, those observed cited the variety the location presents, which becomes a reason for their attachment to the place. This characteristic can be associated with the fact that they praise the place (they often mention verbs such as like and enjoy). It can

be connected to the benefits perceived by being in the location, such as the aforementioned variety, as can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Excerpts referring to attachment for commercial benefit

Attachment for commercial benefit	Excerpt from Observation number 1: I asked if she liked shopping there. She said yes, and that she goes several times because of the variety.
	Excerpt from Observation number 3: I also asking him if he liked the place. He replied yes, as it has a lot of options and variety.
	Excerpt from Observation number 6: She said that it looked pretty cool and that, if she could, she would come several times, but she prefers to go to buy there.
	Excerpt from Observation number 13: I asked her if she liked the place. She replied affirmatively, as there was plenty of variety.
	Excerpt from Observation number 17: I asked her if she enjoyed the place. She said yes and that she likes shopping there.

The other situation identified was that visitors become attached to the place because it involves personal feelings, which appear in contexts that bring peace of mind, where those observed feel good and in living special moments, such as resting, interacting with family, reading, engaging in agreeable informal dialogues (chatting). The agglomeration seemed similar to a therapy session room, where those observed revealed strong emotions when quoting it or moments of peace lived there. Table 7 presents some excerpts to exemplify the elements mentioned.

Table 7. Excerpts referring to attachment by emotion/feeling

Attachment to emotion/feeling	Excerpt from Observation number 3: When I asked him if he enjoyed the place, he replied he did, in part, because he could play with his daughter there since it is unsafe to play on the street.
	Excerpt from Observation number 8: When I asked him if he liked the place, he replied affirmatively, as he likes seeing people there, and he likes to sit down to talk, read, and spend time.
	Excerpt from Observation number 14: I asked her if she liked the place, and she replied that she did.
	Excerpt from Observation number 15: She replied that she loved the place.
	Excerpt from Observation number 18: I asked if he liked the place. He responded he did. As he is retired, he always comes to the location to have fun, buy something, and chat.
	Excerpt from Observation number 19: When asked if she liked the place, she said she liked it. It is a special area for her, and she has been going there for some time.
	Excerpt from Observation number 21: I asked him if he liked the place, and he positively replied. He said he always goes there to rest, to think, and to get some fresh air when he leaves work.

4.3 Behavioral experience

When it comes to the behavioral experience dimension, two situations could be identified, which were involvement in physical activity and in a diverse (playful) activity. Regarding involvement in physical activity, it was possible to notice that it always appeared in contexts with more than one individual, whether in partnership with the activity or waiting for someone. The practice does not seem to be a regular habit, a pattern settled in people's routines, just a

way of moving and not staying stopped at the location. According to the excerpts in Table 8, physical aspects are highlighted, showing body-gymnastics equipment interaction behavior.

Table 8. Excerpts referring to involvement in physical activity

Involvement in physical activity	Excerpt from Observation number 3: He went up and down the slide, at his daughter's request.
	Excerpt from Observation number 4: After finishing eating and not talking on her cell phone anymore, she headed to the workout equipment, where she interacted with it. She did not seem focused on exercising at first. After a while, she actually started her physical exercises, while her son played.
	Excerpt from Observation number 5: The boy was working out. I asked if they always go there and if they always exercise. He replied always going to purchase something, but only trains when there is time. Whenever he has time, he doesn't miss the chance to exercise in that location.
	Excerpt from Observation number 7: Excerpt from Observation number 7: I also asked if they liked exercising in that place, and they answered yes. She said does, although the devices do not help much. According to her, it is "a device more aimed at the elderly".

The situation that concerns involvement in diverse/recreational activities appears in the context of leisure behavior, where those under observation seek solutions to escape their laziness and idleness states. Excerpts in Table 9 indicate that it occurs when those observed are focused on activities that involve mental and not physical effort.

Table 9. Excerpts referring to involvement in a diverse activity (leisure)

Involvement in a diverse activity (leisure)	Excerpt from Observation number 15: After a while, she tried to assemble the Rubik's cube. She sat down to try this mission.
	Excerpt from Observation number 18: The man held a pen and a magazine, as he was playing crosswords. He was very focused on completing the game. About 15 minutes later, he managed to finish it.

4.4 Intellectual Experience

Regarding intellectual elements, two situations arise. First, the area is a place to think. Second, it is a place for individuals to solve problems. Concerning the first, it was possible to notice that, in all observations, a phone was being used. Also, the behaviors were similar, which shows typical gestures of people concentrating and thinking, similar to the statue/sculpture ("The Thinker") at the location. Table 10 shows what is mentioned.

Table 10. Excerpts referring to making you think

Thinking	Excerpt from Observation number 2: She was using her cell phone, but she was not typing, just reading something. She seemed to be thinking about something, looking into space. She was biting her nails, seeming to be anxious. She picked up her cell phone again as if she was reading (or watching something).
	Excerpt from Observation number 8: He was reading something on his cell phone. He was focused on it while using a toothpick. He was just reading and dragging the cell phone screen down. He stayed concentrating and attentive to his phone for a long time.
	Excerpt from Observation number 17: She continued her tasks, using her cell phone and concentrated on them. I asked if she was solving any problems, and she replied that she was just resting and thinking about life a little bit while waiting for time to pass.

	Excerpt from Observation number 21: He was focused on reading something on his cell phone. He was very thoughtful, with his hand supporting his face. The boy stayed like that for a long time. I asked if he was reading something and if he liked reading. He replied by saying he was reading the news and thinking a little while waiting for time to pass.
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When it comes to the situation in which the place is to solve problems, it occurs in two circumstances, which are serious and idle. The first shows focused and serious people. They calculate, read, think, and sort out problems. The second happens when people are solving problems as a pastime. Despite being fun, there are difficulties to tackle. Problem-solving situations in serious moments also reveal the constant use of cell phones, indicating that it is a necessary tool for people to fix their troubles. Leisure situations also demonstrate that the site is a pleasing space, where people can engage in pastimes without being disturbed. Thus, based on the excerpts seen in Table 11, it can be inferred that the place provides comfort and tranquility so that they can unravel their issues calmly, thus being able to dedicate themselves to their mental effort to reach solutions to their concerns.

Table 11. Excerpts related to problem solving

Problem solving	Excerpt from Observation number 1: When I asked her if she enjoyed writing, she replied that she did. As she explained, she does, but at that time, she was writing out of obligation because she was solving a problem.
	Excerpt from Observation number 12: She looked around, went back to using her cell phone, and seemed to be solving something on her cell phone. She looked very thoughtful, with a doubtful expression, placing her hand on her head as if she were thinking hard. She scratched her head and remained thoughtful. I asked if she was resting. She replied positively, and she said that she was also taking care of some personal matters there.
	Excerpt from Observation number 13: As she talked on her phone, she looked around as if she was impatient. I then asked if she was solving a problem with her phone. She replied affirmatively, reporting that if she did not, no one would take action to fix it (implying that her family members are "useless").
	Excerpt from Observation number 15: After a while, she tried to assemble the Rubik's cube. She sat down to try this mission.
	Excerpt from Observation number 14: The woman was looking at her phone. I asked her if she was reading anything and if she was enjoying it. She stated that she was in the process of solving some things, implying that she was sorting out a problem.
	Excerpt from Observation number 18: The man held a pen and a magazine, as he was playing crosswords. He was very focused on completing the game. About 15 minutes later, he managed to finish it.
	Excerpt from Observation number 19: A girl under observation has a card in her hand, a piece of paper that appears to be an invoice, and her cell phone. I asked if she was resolving something personal, and she said yes, a problem with the invoice, and she pointed out that she stopped there to solve it.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis regarding the sensory experience shows that the place has a vast influence on fostering experiences that trigger the senses of visitors. To illustrate, the open place is extensively ventilated and has a pleasant architecture in the eyes of those observed. The sculpture is also an attraction, leading to praise and reinforcing that the place is agreeable and generates satisfaction. This atmosphere leads individuals to go to the location to buy, as can be

identified in the observation notes, except for the hearing aspect, as it is an environment with a large volume of people and cars, which increases noise disturbance.

Thus, you have the place acting as a frame (Källström, Persson & Westergren, 2021), in which people frequent aiming not only the shopping, but also the experience with the physical environment by its visual characteristics, strengthening the experience of visiting and shopping. That is, the place has worked as a frame that makes people look, find it beautiful and decide to record such a moment in that place, creating a familiarity and having for themselves a register to share with other people (the photograph or the story itself). Besides, another role that the place had was the stage role (Källström, Persson & Westergren, 2021), because, based on the reports, it became clear that people like to go to see people, as well as being seen, have exchanges and relationships.

Concerning the affective experience, the place exhibits a large volume of stores, which allows experiences that facilitate shopping and lead to moments of peace, as it is a place that has been operating for a long time, which brings back nostalgic memories for regulars.

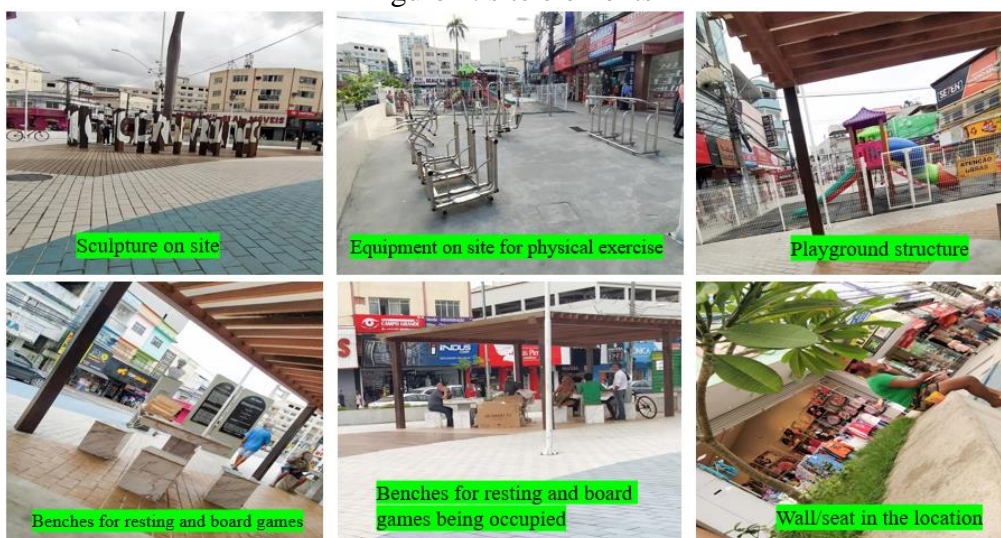
Regarding the behavioral experience, the place can facilitate experiences such as the practice of physical and diverse activities. It has new equipment suitable for exercising and physical activities, a playground structure, and benches with chess boards and similar games that provide comfort and the possibility of practicing recreational activities. The contentment with these aspects of the place leads people to praise it.

Thus, it has to be that, for this case, the place has been acting as a living room (Källström, Persson & Westergren, 2021), in which it strengthens the social and leisure ties. Therefore, it turns out that people frequent to do exercises with close people and to play and socialize with other people, known or not; that is, they concentrate on the spot in search of strengthening social ties through physical or playful activities, seeking leisure. By quoting that the place can be like a living room, it is that the site refers to a comfort that strengthens exchanges and establishes strong social and leisure ties (Källström, Persson & Westergren, 2021), that is, because it is an environment considered as good by the visitors, it has that the other visitors also make it a good place, being not only the physical perception of this place, but also the social environment, built due to the structure of the place contribute, interconnecting then.

Regarding intellectual experience, the place serves as a provider of experiences that facilitate problem-solving and thoughts, since people there feel they are not usually bothered and because of its structure with several seats.

Figure 1 shows all the elements of the site mentioned above, in which the notes can be confirmed.

Figure 1. site elements



Source: Own work.

Thus, it is concluded that local experiences make consumers come back to buy; and having several options that can be equivalent in price and quality, by having a place as a differential (attractive), the region gains competition, because the place can function as a frame, living room and as a stage (Källström, Persson & Westergren, 2021), in which the visitor can have a relaxation and comfort, not opening up the place for the realization of their shopping, thus becoming one of their favorite places.

Theoretically, the study allows shedding light on aspects related to the brand experience of a region and to the retail context. It allows extending the academic discussion in this sense, since it shows that the concept of urban brands play a fundamental role in the movement of consumers into the environments of urban retail agglomerations. Also lead to a practical contribution, as they generate relevant information for government authorities so they can invest in street retail agglomerations. By placing, for example, gym equipment, seats for resting and playing games, and visual attractions, such as sculptures and the like, the number of visitors can be increased, as in addition to the shopping experiences, they will also have interaction with the place.

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