On-line Commerce and Town Centre Retailers' Experience

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to develop a new way to sell products or services for retailers within town centres. An analysis of the literature revealed that the use of the Internet and digital commerce strategies are rarely used as tools to revitalize urban retail and develop a multidimensional experience of place. Thus, this paper aims to highlight which new modes of online commerce—e-commerce, s-commerce and m-commerce—are more suitable than others to help town centre retailers revitalize the place where they work. The research questions are as follows: 1) What are the origins of the growth and development of new forms of selling? and 2) How might town centre retailers integrate new forms of selling with traditional retailing? In answering the previously stated questions, this paper provides a proposed model that, by combining physical and virtual means to sell products and services, can provide specific strengths in revitalizing town centres.

Keywords: town centre, electronic commerce, social commerce, mobile commerce

1. Introduction

The economic crisis that for some decades has been affecting economies all over the world had a particularly negative impact on town centre commerce, because in the course of the crisis many retail activities shifted out of town (Schiller, 1986, 1988, 1994; Oc & Tiesdell, 1998; Thomas & Bromley, 2003). Part of the market share in modern retail has been conquered by new forms of selling, which served to a degree to weaken the offer of some independent and traditional retailers, while also creating opportunities for retailers to move and integrate their offerings with new digital tools (via electronic commerce, social commerce and mobile commerce (Bhatti, 2007; Ickler, Schülke, Wilfling, & Baumöl, 2009; Curty, & Zhang, 2011;Yadav, De Valck, Hennig-Thurau, Hoffman, & Spann, 2013; Zhang, Lu, Gupta, & Zhao, 2014; Hajli, 2015)). The intensified use of the World Wide Web in recent decades (Foley & Sutton, 1998; Singh, 2001; Singh, Jayashankar, & Singh, 2001; Ickler et al., 2009) led to the development of the ability to purchase products and services online (Yadav, De Valck, Hennig-Thurau, Hoffman, & Spann, 2013). The direct implication has been that retailers on one hand suffered a reduction in traditional business, and on the other had to adopt new ways of doing commerce by positioning themselves on the Net. In particular, retailers within town centres experienced the problems mentioned above, while also needing to compete with other businesses operating in this new mode of commerce (Palmer, 2000). This may appear as a threat initially, but with careful management this position can become an opportunity able to revitalize the retailers' offerings as well as the town centre itself (Burt & Sparks, 2003). In fact, the ubiquity of the Internet and the penetration of technologies have already evoked changes in people's daily lives: from work to holiday time, from home activities to shopping, and so on (Barnes, 2002). Also, in the retail sector today, consumers often seek information online relating to purchases that ultimately are concluded through traditional retail channels (Bakos, 2001). Millions of people worldwide use the Internet to search for information about products, and many consequently purchase these products online (Terzi, 2011; Ackermann & Hartman, 2014; Want, Schilit, & Jenson, 2015). This is one of the reasons why retailers have been increasingly focusing their attention on electronic, social and mobile commerce in order to find new ways to sell their products or services, and to develop strong relationships with their customers and make new contacts through social networks (Sansone, Moretta Tartaglione, & Bruni, 2012). The Internet affords customers a more efficient buying process, because the cost and time required for acquiring information are low while the number options are ever-increasing (Bakos, 1997; Terzi, 2011). With information so easy to access, consumers can become fully

informed about their options and thus can make better decisions with less effort (Bakos, 1997; Brynjolfsson & Smith, 1999). By considering the town centre as a community that changes over time, the retailers within the town centre must modify their selling strategies and their relationship with customers, taking into consideration the development of the Internet, through which they can make a more comprehensive value proposition (Osterwalder, Pigneur, Bernarda, & Smith, 2015), one that goes beyond simple product provision. In order to exploit new technologies for future survival, retailers must be aware that the technological innovation developed over the Internet (Porter, 2001) is changing the way people communicate and socialize (Roblek, Meško, & Bertoncelj, 2013) and buy goods and services. The Internet also affects how people search for the best deals, which may be the greatest threat for traditional retail in the town centre (Singh et al., 2001; Kim, Suh, & Lee, 2013; Roblek et al., 2013). In this scenario, electronic, social and mobile commerce offer consumers more choices than ever before, and can provide an avenue for retailers to maximize their online presence, drive sales, reduce customer service costs and increase Web traffic (Want, Schilit, & Jenson, 2015). This technological era has imposed on town centre retailers who want to overcome the economic crisis the adoption of digital strategies in order to continue to improve the relationship between retailers and customers on downtown streets. In a "social" proposal, all the Web tools that enhance town centre retail have the capacity to stimulate and maintain a relationship with the recipients of the value proposition. In the town centre the aim is twofold: It is necessary to establish a relationship between retailers and customers as well as between the town centre (considered as a urban system) and stakeholders. These stakeholders include parties other than the customers, and thus the responsibilities and opportunities for town centre retailers include building relationships with all categories of stakeholders, some of whom will become customers, some of whom will help build the reputation of the retailers and of the entire town centre. This paper aims to analyse the potentiality of some new forms of selling in order to understand how town centre retailers can exploit these tools to maintain a central role in the town centre and use them to develop aggregation between customers and retailers. Particularly, this paper tries to find answers to the following research questions: 1) What are the reasons behind the growth and development of new forms of selling? and 2) How might town centre retailers integrate these new forms of selling with traditional retailing? In exploring answers to the previous questions, this paper is organized as follow: the subsequent section is devoted to a literature analysis, adopting a bibliometric methodology. The third section highlights the main characteristics of e-commerce, s-commerce, and m-commerce in an attempt to understand if and in what way these technologies can help the town centre in its journey to revitalization. A proposal of a model will be presented. Finally, some conclusions are made.

2. Methodology

This conceptual paper presents and analyses two research questions by taking a qualitative and interpretative approach to the literature, hypothesizing future trends in the relationship between the Town Centre and new technologies applied to commerce.

3. Literature Review

This review was created by collecting papers published in peer-reviewed academic journals gathered from the following databases: IEEEXplore, Proquest Central, and Science Direct. The keywords used for searching the papers were electronic commerce, e-commerce, social commerce, s-commerce, mobile commerce, and m-commerce. The papers discussing new technology only in terms of technicalities were excluded. More precisely, papers were selected that discussed the development of new forms of selling over the Internet, and that focused on the analysis of electronic commerce and its further development, for instance via social commerce and mobile commerce, in order to consider the role that these instruments may play in the future both for retailers and for the experiential whole of town centre. Studying the main definitions ascribed by the literature enables researchers to trace the evolutionary trajectories and potential connections between new forms commerce and traditional retailers, particularly as integrated into a unified project of Town Centre. Because these forms of commerce are fairly recent developments, only lately has academic research brought attention to e-commerce, s-commerce, and m-commerce (Varshney & Vetetr, 2002; Nagai & Gunasekaran, 2007; Falk & Hagsten, 2015; Hajli, 2015; Pousttchi, Tilson, Lyytinen, & Hufenbach, 2015; Turban, King, Lee, Liang, & Turban, 2015). Articles in these areas are scattered across various journals (31) in several disciplines such as business, management, marketing, and information technology. The multidisciplinarity apparent in the highlighted journals clearly emphasizes that there are not yet shared points of view among scholars, nor standard accepted definitions (Kang & Park, 2009) related to e-commerce, s-commerce, and m-commerce. The implication of this is that applications can provide a multiplicity of opportunities for firms—and thus work for retailers—but these parties require on one hand knowledge of the potentialities of these new technologies, and on the other awareness of the practical benefits inherent in adoption of these technologies. To better illustrate the

dynamism that characterizes e-commerce, s-commerce, and m-commerce, Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide the most significant definitions given by scholars in recent decades.

Table 1. Electronic commerce definitions

Authors	Year	E-commerce Definition
Harrington	1995	The exchange of information, goods and services, and payment by electronic means
Aaron, Decina & Skillen	1999	Commerce that is about building better relationships among customers, producers and suppliers—its implementation harnesses networked resources to foster the exchange of business transactions in a more efficient and cost-effective manner
Palmer	2000	A form of commerce used to connect key suppliers and retailers along the retail pipeline to support existing distribution schemes, customer interactions and product displays
Singh et al.	2001	The online exchange of value, without geographical or temporal restrictions, between companies and their partners, employees or customers
Wilson & Abel	2002	The use of electronic media such as the Internet to transact business
Burt & Sparks	2003	An innovation in process that provides the capability to transform traditional tasks and activities and the associated costs, all within the retail channel
Jason & Cecez-Kecmanovic	2005	A commercial transaction between buyers and sellers over the Internet
Jascanu, Jascanu & Nicolau,	2007	A form of commerce that imitates the process of negotiation that takes place between human beings
Turban et al.	2008	A process of distributing, marketing, buying, selling, or exchanging products, services and/or information using the Internet; doing business transactions electronically
Yang, Chandlrees, Lin, & Chao.	2009	One of the most important Internet applications that changes the way people shop—shopping online gives people more flexibility in time and place
Khoshnampour & Nosrati	2011	Buying and selling products or services on Internet or other networks
Terzi	2011	The use of the Internet to conduct business transactions nationally or internationally
Zaker & Ansari	2013	The use of electronic information technology to conduct business transactions among buyers, sellers, and other trading partners
Huang & Benyoucef	2013	Commerce undergoing an evolution through the adoption of Web 2.0 capabilities to enhance customer participation and achieve greater economic value
Sun, Xu & Su	2014	A special type of web application designed for online shopping; plays an important role in the modern world
Turban et al.	2015	A business model in which transactions take place over electronic networks, mostly the Internet; includes the process of electronically buying and selling goods, services and information

Table 2. Social commerce definitions

Authors	Year	S-Commerce Definition
Jascanu et al.	2007	A combination of social networking and e-commerce
Dennison, Bourdage-Braun & Chetuparambil	2009	The concept of word-of-mouth applied to e-commerce; marrying a retailer's products and shopper interaction with content
Ickler et al.	2009	Digital commerce focusing on the interpersonal relations (recommendations, feedbacks, information, etc.) that influence a business transaction before, during, or after it happens
Wang	2009, 2011	"Social shopping" (or social commerce), an application of Web 2.0 in electronic commerce to reap benefits from users' social networks, combining shopping and social media
Stephen & Toubia	2010	A form of Internet-based social media that allows people to actively participate in the marketing and selling of products and services in online marketplaces and communities
Curty & Zhang	2011	Social commerce can be briefly described as commerce activities mediated by social media
Liang & Turban	2011	A place where people can collaborate online and get advice from trusted individuals, and can find goods and services and subsequently purchase them; three major attributes are *social media technologies, community interactions,* and *commercial activities*
Shen	2012	A technology-enabled shopping experience where online consumer interactions while shopping provide the main mechanism for conducting social shopping activities
Wang & Zhang	2012	A form of commerce mediated by social media where online and offline environments converge
Yadav, De Valck, Hennig-Thurau, Hoffman & Spann	2013	Refers to exchange-related activities that occur in, or are influenced by, an individual's social network in computer-mediated social environments, where the activities correspond to the need for recognition, pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages of a focal exchange
Hajli	2015	A new development in e-commerce generated by the use of social media to empower customers to interact on the Internet

Table 3. Mobile commerce definitions

Authors	Year	M-Commerce Definition
Clarke	2001	Refers to any transaction with monetary value that is conducted via a mobile network
Barnes	2002	Mobile commerce—the new range of mobile technologies offers the Internet 'in your pocket', for which the consumer possibilities are endless, including banking, booking or buying tickets, shopping and real-time news
Balasubramanian, Peterson & Jarvenpaa	2002	The use of mobile (handheld) devices to communicate and conduct transactions through public and private networks
Kalakota & Robinson	2002	Typically designates the use of wireless devices (particularly mobile phones) to conduct electronic business transactions, such as product ordering, fund transfer, and stock trading
Elliott & Phillips	2004	Wireless B2B and B2C exchanges of operational and financial data within a supply chain at different stages of the life cycle of a business relationship
Bigné, Ruiz-Mafé & Sanz-Balz	2007	The buying and selling of goods and services using wireless hand-held devices such as mobile telephones or personal data assistants (PDAs)
Ngai & Gunasekaran	2007	The conduct of commerce via wireless devices
Chang, Chen & Zhou	2009	Includes a vast variety of activities comprised of transactions with monetary value conducted via a mobile phone
Cyr, Head & Ivanov	2009	Commerce with the potential to serve customers in wireless environments for both business and pleasure
Khalifa, Cheng & Shen	2012	Conducting any transaction involving the transfer of ownership or rights to use goods and services that is initiated and/or completed by using mobile access to computer-mediated networks with the help of an electronic device
Zhang et al.	2012	Business activities conducted via wireless telecommunication network
Agarwal, Agarwal & Bhatawal	2015	The exchange of goods over the Internet via mobile phones; about the explosion of applications and services that are becoming accessible from Internet-enabled mobile devices; involves new technologies, services and business models

Source: Data collected by author.

Following a review of the main definitions of the tools and technological approaches of online sales, some contributions that compare traditional retail within the town centre with the tools of online commerce will be presented. Despite the great potential in this area, there are few contributions that discuss the advantages that can result from the use of new technologies to improve the performance of retail networks, particularly town centre retail networks. The use of e-commerce by town centre retailers would permit them to address a main goal of business activity: "*not simply to bring the customers* in *the door but also to retain these customers for future purchases*" (Reibstein, 2002, p. 465). The possibility of reaching this goal is becoming more and more of a reality, thanks to the potentialities e-commerce offers. These potentialities provide town centre retailers with the possibility to build customer loyalty and acquire new customers (Reibstein, 2002). This is why e-commerce can be thought of as the future of retailing. The challenge of the future for retailers within town centres is to acquire the skills necessary to facilitate collaborative experiences and relationships between customers (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Mobile commerce could become increasingly important for consumers and retailers within town centres. Through m-commerce, consumers have opportunities to research product information, run price comparisons and even make online purchases using their mobile devices (Siau, Lim, & Shen, 2001; Siau, Sheng, & Nah, 2004). When this mode of commerce is engaged by brick-and-mortar town centre retailers, consumers can connect online and offline worlds, as shown in figure 3. By implementing mobile technologies in their business strategy, then, retailers can connect their online and physical presences in order to combine the strengths of e-commerce and traditional shopping (Siau et al., 2004). One of the technologies retailers can use to achieve their goal is Quick Response Technology (QRT), which helps retailers connect physical stores with mobile applications (Okazaki, Li, & Hirose, 2012; Okazaki & Mendez, 2013).

4. Technological Commerce: Retail Trends in Town Centre

A qualitative and interpretative study of the multiple definitions related to e-commerce, s-commerce, and m-commerce reveals the roles that each of these technological systems can play for town centre retailers (Hart, Doherty & Ellis-Chadwick, 2000; Dawes et al., 2014). The main identifiable role emerges as a continuous process of stimuli around participation and sharing with customers and local stakeholders. For example, value co-creation in an SD-Logic approach (Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008) can certainly consider the models of trade technology as tools to enhance the exchange of resources between actors and advanced skills for the benefit of

various local stakeholders (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). This exemplifies an advanced level of enhancing relations and integration between a retailer and the town centre in the characterization of unitary organism management of an urban area organized in a marketing perspective. Technological innovation on the side of retail favours the integration of the actors responsible for the value proposition and enables faster communication, promotion and implementation of the overall strategy of the town centre.

4.1 Electronic Commerce

Electronic commerce or e-commerce (Singh et al., 2001) can be considered as an innovation process and as one of the main Internet applications that offers attractive opportunities for retail growth (Palmer, 2000; Wilson & Abel, 2002; Yang et al., 2009). As highlighted by Wilson and Abel (2002), e-commerce is related to the use of electronic media like the Internet to transact retail activities, and has changed the way people shop by involving commercial transactions between buyers and sellers over the Internet (Janson & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2005; Yang, 2009). E-commerce has the ultimate goal of imitating the process of negotiation that takes place between human beings (Jascanu et al., 2007) by offering the possibility for retailers to transform in an innovative way the traditional activities that take place within the retail channel (Burt & Sparks, 2003). Through e-commerce, shoppers have the opportunity to find both products and information relating to products and retailers, and subsequently to complete the buying process. As defined by Harrington (1995), e-commerce can be considered as the exchange of information, goods, services and payments through the Internet (Singh, 2001; Terzi, 2011), which offers a wide array of options in relation to content, products and services (Bakos, 2001; Wilson & Abel, 2002), and which affects the perception and attitudes of traditional market retail (Rosen, 2000; Jascanu *et al.,* 2007). This range of choices creates important benefits for both retailers and buyers (Terzi, 2011), offering available information and online services at lower costs and allowing high-speed transactions. In fact, buyers benefit from the convenient access to information without intermediate services (Khoshnampour & Nosrati, 2011), and they can acquire information about product characteristics and compare prices before purchase (Janssen & Van der Noll, 2002). On the other hand, sellers benefit from the ability to sell to consumers any time and anywhere with low costs and in real time (Janson & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2005; Khoshnampour & Nosrati, 2011). E-commerce also provides new opportunities for retailers (Palmer, 2000) to reproduce a physical shopping experience in the virtual store (figure 1): in fact, the virtual store is able to evoke the physical analogy of buying products or services in a brick-and-mortar store (Khoshnampour & Nosrati, 2011).
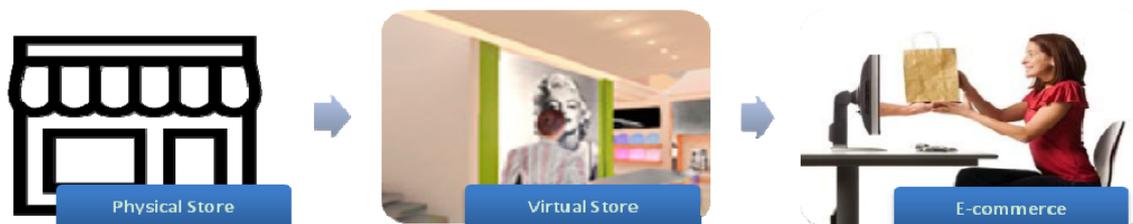
Figure 1. From physical to virtual store

Source: Data collected by author.

One of the winning features of e-commerce is related to the fact that transactions no longer require physical coordination between buyers and sellers, but rather participants find each other through their personal computers. Through this kind of online commerce, consumers can conduct a transaction directly with sellers in another part of the world without travelling to the seller's fixed-location store (Terzi, 2011).

Within town centres the role of e-commerce is functional for traditional stores. E-commerce tools could be used individually by shops within the town centre as well as by the town centre management for wider use. E-commerce could be used for purposes of solidarity or communication (e.g., collecting the contributions of associated retailers in an e-commerce site selling products and services for a variety of non-profit economic activities with the objective to increase town centre popularity). It could also be used for promotional purposes or simply to promote products/services that would be difficult to market in-store for short periods or to customers who rarely visit the town Centre. It could likewise be used to sell rare, antique, or precious products to users who are physically very distant from downtown streets. The relational component in e-commerce must remain in all these uses as the strongest connection between customers and retailers in a straightforward process

that, in the case of town centre retail, is guaranteed by the identification of a particular physical commercial space.

4.2 Mobile Commerce and Quick Response Technology

The development of mobile commerce (m-commerce) is very recent and it is related to the conjunction between wireless telecommunications and Internet applications (Khalifa & Shen, 2008; Khalifa et al*.,* 2012; Lu, Lee, & Tseng*.,* 2012; Zhang et al., 2012) that has rapidly increased the growth of the mobile variant of e-commerce (van de Kar, 2000; Siau et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2012). The emergence of this new mode of commerce is particularly related to the growing number of consumers with smartphones or other Internet-capable mobile devices (Siau et al., 2004). In fact, by the end of 2015, mobile commerce is projected to grow to around $119 billion of the global industry (Khalifa et al., 2012). Consumers in recent years have thus acquired another way to access worldwide information about products or services from anywhere and at any time (Bhatti, 2007; Lu et al., 2012), and consequently have another way to conduct electronic business transactions (Kalakota & Robinson, 2002; Mahatanankoon, 2007; Li, Dong & Cheng, 2012). M-commerce can be considered an extension of e-commerce (van de Kar, 2000; Siau et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2012), and it is a mode of commerce that retailers within town centres consider and learn to integrate with traditional retail. The main characteristics that m-commerce offers to consumers are mobility and broad reach. Mobility, in particular, implies that people can purchase something through their mobile devices and that they can be reached at any time via a mobile device (Ngai & Gunasekaran, 2007). Town centre retailers have to exploit, in the best possible way, the potentialities offered by m-commerce to connect their online presence and fixed store by the use the new technologies. M-commerce could help retailers combine the strengths of e-commerce and traditional shopping, connecting the virtual and physical world to interact with clients.

Figure 2. QR technology and mobile commerce

Source: Data collected online and elaborated by the author.

Quick response is a technology that permits the implementation of technologies such as bar-coding, scanning, and so on, and through a QR code retailers can obtain profits in return for delivering satisfaction through improved store attributes (Ko, 1993; Ko & Kinkade, 1997; Meydanoglu, 2013). To achieve the goal of better operational efficiency and retain effectiveness, quick response (QR) could be part of a retail strategy for town centre shops. Town centre shops with QR Technology can connect their physical shop to the e-commerce world via mobile devices. The literature analysis showed that m-commerce is a very flexible system of contact between value proposition and the consumer. If the assumption can be made that any person interested in a modern relational experience and in an exchange of value-added propositions has a mobile device connected to the Internet, a system of opportunities and advantages for mutual-benefit activities could be imagined for town-centre retailers. M-commerce is very closely related to e-commerce and s-commerce, and for this reason the ability to sell is just one of the opportunities of value co-creation that could be systematized. M-commerce also provides a marketing system with strategic and operational components, a system that well managed could be exploited both online and offline. This therefore creates more opportunities for contact with consumers that otherwise (physically or through fixed devices) might not have been exposed to the value offer of the town centre. The use of an m-commerce system can provide the locations of consumers, record and provide data useful to the organization of routes between and in stores, and above all, can complete the value proposition of the city and the town centre regarding services offered for the benefit of a higher-value experience (within and at the edge of the town centre). M-commerce can boost the experience of visiting the town centre through augmented reality or enhance the information available through the integration of information and social platforms for mobile users. At this point, therefore, m-commerce is evolving towards a collection of services and opportunities that expand beyond simple commercial transactions, and it is certainly a tool useful to town centre management.

4.3 Social Commerce

Social commerce (s-commerce) can be seen as a commerce activity developed through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or other platforms (Ickler et al., 2009; Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban 2011; Liang & Turban, 2011) where people are able to explore e-commerce in a collaborative online environment (Curty & Zhang, 2011). S-commerce as acknowledged by several scholars (Ickler et al., 2009; Wang, 2009; 2011; Wang & Zhang, 2012; Curty & Zhang, 2011) is a new form of Internet sales developed in the last ten years by stimulation of the Web 2.0 wave (Curty & Zhang, 2011; Roblek et al., 2013). The term "social commerce" was introduced for the first time by Yahoo! in 2005 (Jascanu et al., 2007; Ickler, 2009; Wang, 2009; Curty & Zhang, 2011; Wang & Zhang, 2012). Despite the rapid emergence of the s-commerce phenomenon (Shen, 2012), academic studies are still in early stages (Curty & Zhang, 2011; Shen, 2012), and scholars have only recently attempted to establish a definition of social commerce—at the moment "*there is no standard definition of this phenomenon*" (Liang & Turban, 2011, p. 6). S-commerce is a combination of social media and e-commerce: the former encourages people to share product information and experiences and opinions about shopping experiences with their friends (Liang et al., 2011; Jascanu et al., 2007; Wang, Yeh, & Yen, 2015); the latter allows for the sale of products or services. More broadly, s-commerce is an extension of e-commerce (Liang & Turban, 2011) through which both consumers and retailers can obtain several benefits. If e-commerce can be considered as a static form of selling where people (as consumers and sellers) can buy and sell without interaction with each other, s-commerce is a form of selling that creates a relationship among consumers (C2C) and between consumers and retailers (B2C). The s-commerce process modifies e-commerce in that in this case there are three stages of shopping. The first, as in e-commerce, is related to searching for products or information about products or sellers; the second is sharing information, content, or recommendations through social media (Roblek et al., 2013) in order to interact not only with sellers (B2C) but also with other consumers (C2C); and finally, the third involves the actual purchase. It is interesting to note that the s-commerce process can actually begin with the second stage: in fact, consumers often do not have a specific product or service in mind, and ask for help from friends or the s-commerce community. Consumers benefit from being able to get information not only from retailers but also from other online consumers before purchase, and retailers can improve their profit by attracting and maintaining customers through recommendations (Curthy & Zhang, 2011). Unlike e-commerce, s-commerce websites are not simply places where something can be bought; rather, they are places where each consumer can interact with one or many others, and the shopping process becomes social (Leitner & Grechening, 2007; Kim & Srivastava, 2007; Kang & Park, 2009; Shen, 2012). S-commerce websites can be considered a virtual square, similar to a small village square, as customers communicate and share information about products, prices, and deals, write comments on goods and services, create a shopping list to share with friends or other customers, and build relationships with retailers (Leitner & Grechening, 2007). S-commerce, in its use of social media (Roblek et al., 2013) to permit people to share opinions, has changed the way people shop: *"people have the power to share and make the world more open and connected"* (Roblek et al., 2013, p. 3). For this reason, town centre retailers have to redesign their commerce strategy in a social way by connecting e-commerce with social media tools to create new types of connections (figure 3).

Figure 3. From physical to social store

Source: Data collected online and elaborated by the author.

Through s-commerce, consumers can interact (Kim & Srivastana, 2007) while shopping (Shen, 2012), and even take a compatibility test to find his or her "shopping soul mate" with similar shopping tastes (Schen, 2012). Consumers today become active producers of content over the Internet (Ickler et al., 2009) and are no longer passive, as in the past. Social interaction (Kim & Srivastana, 2007) has become the predominant element in the s-commerce process, and the creation of the relationship between consumers is now what drives the conversation:

consumers are signalling the way that businesses have to follow. Customers are increasingly familiarizing themselves with social media and retailers cannot ignore the phenomenon. S-commerce is the evolution of the online commerce that can represent the soul of the aggregation of economic activity in a town centre. Through the use of social networking platforms, online purchase is only the formal conclusion of a long process of socialization, communication, and exchange of information that goes beyond the single purchase. S-commerce is for town centre retailers (and perhaps even more so for management) a system of autogenerated services that allow retailers to create (or destroy) the positioning of individual stores and the entire town centre.

5. The Digital Footprint within Town Centre Retail

Each of the e-technologies discussed above possesses special characteristics that, appropriately applied, can help town centres. More precisely, considering that e-commerce, s-commerce and m-commerce possess relevant specific applications and tools, town centre retailers can adopt a combination of them to create an offer with strong competitive advantages compared to the out-of-town malls. The town centre can combine these three e-technologies, starting from a personal computer or a mobile device, to arrive at the final point (that is, "purchase") in the short run and the value creation for the stakeholders of the TCM in the middle and long run. Clients today are increasingly interested in emotional involvement with retailers by sharing their own experiences and opinions on the products or services they have purchased or have the aim to purchase (Hsiao, Lin, Wang, Lu, & Yu, 2010; Lee & Ma, 2012). Thus s-commerce merits broad consideration in conjunction with the more technical tools of e-commerce and m-commerce. The implication is that town centre retailers could revolutionize town centre commerce by embracing the potentiality of these three models of virtual commerce. For example, one can become the promoter of a community (on Facebook, or similar), sharing with "friends" (members of the community) not only information regarding products or services, but the historical, cultural, social, and environmental heritage that is embedded in the town centre. Adequately communicated, this value-added factor constitutes an inimitable competitive advantage. Drawing from the previous reflections, a virtuous circle can be highlighted, as illustrated in figure 4:

1) In the past, the strength of the town centre was the physical shop; today, while the physical dimension is maintained, areas of strength are shifting to e-commerce dimensions;

2) The subsequent commerce evolution saw sellers shifting from e-commerce to s-commerce, further reducing the strength of the physical shop but increasing relationships with customers;

3) The increasing diffusion of mobile devices raised another challenge for sellers: how to communicate information on products and services via mobile devices. The answer lies in the technology—that of QR codes, for example—providing new, increasingly direct forms of mobile communication.

The proposed model exhibits that physical shops and e-technologies are part of the same virtuous circle, and that together they have the potential to both increase the sales in shops in the town centre and stimulate value co-creation in particular places (Sansone et al., 2015).
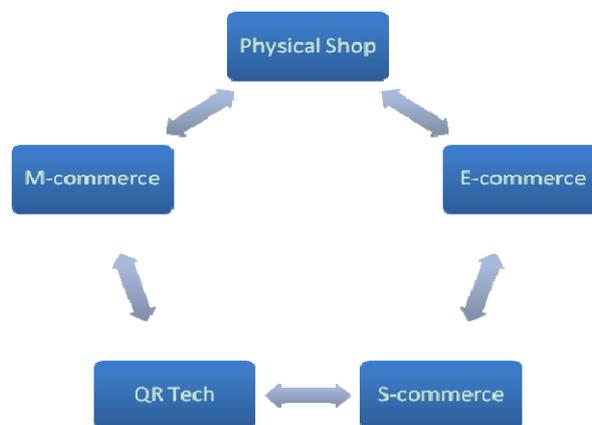
Figure 4. Virtuous circle

Source: Data collected by author.

6. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper and the interpretative approach on the uses of TCM tools underscores that town centre retailers need to understand that traditional modes of selling must be revitalized with the implementation of Internet tools and new technologies to enhance the possibility of selling products and services, to create strong customer loyalty, and to increase the possibility of attracting new customers. Internet is here to stay and for this reason the virtual and physical worlds must be joined to create a place where people can go physically while also staying connected virtually—for example, when they are in another part of the world, or simply at home—enhancing the place experience (Maggiore & Buonincontri, 2014; Pocock, 2014) within and outside the town centre. Particularly, through the implementation of digital tools, small Town Centres and small businesses have a new chance to revitalize their commercial life. Only the potentialities offered by the Web allow retailers to reach people anytime and anywhere. Retailers must involve customers in the experience of shopping by using every kind of innovative tool at their disposal. For this reason, it is not sufficient to create websites to sell products or services. It is important to offer instruments that support real-life commercial activities. Inasmuch as the act of commerce has become a social one, people choose and buy based on their emotions, impressions, or feelings—which are shaped by the Internet marketing landscape (Militaru, 2007). From this perspective, Town Centre retailers can revitalize the urban market by discovering technological means of attracting consumers, creating strong relationships through the opportunities offered by s-commerce, and driving customers' attention to Town Centre activities, events, special offers, and similar attractions. Therefore, the main challenge for town centre retailers is to provide consumers with a richer shopping experience, to encourage them to linger in a retailer's physical store, but also creating the possibility for them to engage in store life even when the store is closed. With an interactive role between the physical and virtual, it is possible to create events that stimulate people to simultaneously buy online and become physically involved in the community. This study offers an interesting point of view not only for researchers that have a new framework to discuss and develop new theories, but also for practitioners that have a possibility to implement digital tools in their Town Centre strategies able to revitalize the town center experience. Taking into consideration the reasons presented above, in the further studies will be analyzed specific case studies in order to understand on one hand if and in which way the Internet and digital tools are utilized by retailers and businesses owner within Town Centre in order to increase their presence online and offline and to enhance the attractiveness of the Town Centre, and on the other hand to expand the virtuous circle presented in this first stage of study in order to develop a specific measurement scale and type of establishments that apply.

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