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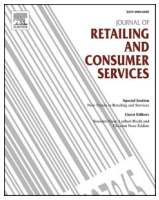

Orchestrating retail in small cities

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ABSTRACT

The structural transformation of retail is challenging for many small cities. Rather than seeing the retailer as a sole player, this article considers retail in small cities to be shaped in a retail eco system consisting of many different actors besides retailers such as municipalities, landlords, business/city organisations, customers/citizens. The key contribution of the article is to provide new perspectives on the challenges and management of retail in small cities by applying a metaphor from the culture and fine arts sector, orchestration. The article is based on a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observation at three small cities in Sweden. In total, 38 interviews have been conducted with representatives of retailers, municipality, business/city associations and landlords.

The general aspects of retail eco system as an orchestra are presented according to Klein and Kozlowski, (2000) multilevel constructs: compiled (bottom-up), composite (top-down) and emergent (culture, history). Thereafter, a number of *orchestration techniques,* structured around Pine and Gilmore, 1999 dimensions of experiences are presented. The article shows that the future of retailing in small cities is not merely dependent on the retailers, but on collaborations with other retailers, landlords and municipalities. An understanding of consumer culture and development of entrepreneurship culture and networks is crucial for survival and prosperity. Furthermore, rather than copying strategies developed both in and for metropolitan areas, there is a need to build on and strengthen the characteristics of the local retail eco system and the community brand identity.

1. Introduction

The structural transformation of retail is challenging for many small cities struggling with empty retail spaces (Powe, 2020), a development starting with the establishment of external malls (Fahrangmehr et al., 2001), continuing with the emergence of online shopping (Ingene, 2014) and reinforced by the pandemic (Grimmer, 2021). The restructuring has led to economic stress, especially for many small retailers within rural or semi-rural communities (McGee and Rubach, 1997; Runyan and Huddleston, 2006). In a study on retail decline in France's small and medium-sized cities over four decades (Delage et al., 2020), the decline in shop diversity affected about a third of the municipalities observed in each period. The closing of brick and mortar stores has been described as a "retail apocalypse" (Helm et al., 2018; Nihalani and Reid, 2018) that calls for a rethinking of retail, both at a business level and a societal level. The strategies to combat this development differ. Grewal et al. (2017) stress technology and big data collection as key tools in facilitating store versus non-store purchase decision-making. Others focus more on the "soft" values of physical stores, for example, Robaton (2018) suggests close and trustful relations with the consumers and engaging environments, as well as the conversion of shopping centres into communities and accelerated collaborations between retailers and other stakeholders. The new retail landscape we are experiencing at this time in history has changed not only the way goods are purchased, but also relations between customers, employees and retailers (Pantano and Migliarese, 2014; Fuentes et al., 2017).

McDonald and Swinney (2019) write that contemporary thriving city centres are characterised by a lower dependency on shops, but shops are still important, especially if they can provide social functions. In an overview of the role of small shops in a UK context, Clarke and Banga (2010) emphasise the key role of small shops in providing places for social interaction. Actually, the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of stores, and in particular small stores, as a social meeting place for people, maybe one of the few places in contemporary society where people from a diversity of backgrounds meet. The small stores' proximity to residents, in addition to being special vis-à-vis larger store

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formats, brings value to a diverse range of consumers. A recent study of customer experience in small businesses (Gilboa et al., 2019), found that communication and personal care enhances trust in the business and social relationship foster commitment.

In this way, local small shops can meet a variety of social, sustainability and ethical needs (Megicks, 2007) and be more flexible than large scale formats (Kyle and Blair, 2007). This competitive advantage may explain why many small firms still have a positive attitude to the future (Byun et al., 2020). They are able to adjust to changing market situations as the pandemic has illustrated by shops finding innovative solutions to selling products such as street selling or home delivery.

In a study of small retail firms, Runyan et al. (2007) found that both community brand identity and social capital were resources that helped the small retailers to be successful. Morris et al. (2007) even suggest that small businesses may benefit from "coopetition," i.e., cooperation between competing companies. It is thus important to acknowledge the local community and, more generally, the relational aspects of retail, if one wants to search for resources which may be utilised to create competitive advantages and improve performance (Pantano and Migliarese, 2014). A similar conclusion was reached by Ryu and Swinney (2013) emphasising that 'branding the downtown' is an effective strategy to increase the community's retail sales. Invisible city centres are less likely to attract visitors. Byun et al. (2020) stress the importance of cooperation, and an awareness that competition exists also beyond the local level and to acknowledge and embrace an innovation culture within the organization.

Furthermore, many different actors are involved in the creation of retail spaces. Apart from shopkeepers and consumers, architects, construction companies, city planners, landlords, policymakers, regulatory framework makers and many other actors create networks, which develop a retail eco system (Valiaparampil and Gupta, 2018). Well-functioning retail ecosystems may also give positive side effects, such as value co-creation and health effects (Gardiazabal and Constanza, 2021). The role of retail in small cities is thus multi-dimensional and involves many stakeholders. Retail has also an effect on the surrounding environment. (McArthur et al., 2016). Kärrholm (2012) highlights the material and spatial dimensions of retail. A similar conclusion is made in a recent study by Barata-Salgueiro (2021) claiming that retail clusters in cities can help to combat desertification and insecurity and suggesting that the relationship between retail and the city can be examined according to two dimensions; the material dimension of the city and its retail landscapes and the symbolic dimension of the mindscapes associated with them. Hence, the aesthetic component of retail in small cities and what it communicates should not be neglected.

External malls have been discussed as a threat to city centre retail. However, a city centre that is dominated by chain stores may start to look like a big mall, which in turn pose a threat to the historical character of city centres (Litvin and DiForio, 2014). Hence, in order to create an attractive retail atmosphere, there is a need to balance chain and local retail to preserve the cultural appeal. (Litvin and Rosene, 2017). Coquillat Mora (2020) demonstrates the importance of the historical dimensions for understanding retail evolution over time. Also, Barata-Salgueiro (2021) emphasises that shops have cultural and heritage value that contribute to the specificity of the place by writing: "Shopping spaces are part of the townscape and everyday life, they are part of our image of places which can be a banal, standardized image or a special, characteristic, individualised one; but shops can also refer to images and past experiences in a distant time" (p. 395) This is also acknowledged in the development of the Slow City Movement wanting to preserve the cultural, natural, and historical heritage while improving the quality of life of residents, developing local economies, and preventing the homogenisation of urban areas (Cicek et al., 2019, p. 401). The Slow City Movement points to the value of temporality, which exceeds offerings such as "fast, efficient and convenient". Another concept, "consumer deceleration" has been introduced by Husemann and Eckhardt (2019) as a concept for understanding certain types of consumption emerging from the ambition to escape from a too fast pace of life.

Yet another concept for small cities to consider could be authenticity. It has been studied in relation to marketing of places (e.g., Bayraktar et al., 2017a,b), branding (Brown et al., 2003; Fritz et al., 2017; Sherry, 2015), but also from a macromarketing perspective (Kadirov et al., 2014). In a highly competitive retail sector where benchmarking is commonly used, authenticity is one way to profile a retailer and place for retailing. The synergies between retail and tourism (e.g., Lindberg et al., 2019) is also interesting to reflect upon for developing small cities. A German study by Hilpert and Merz (2022) suggests different event strategies for rural town centres.

It is clear that small cities need to consider new ways to rethink retail. The literature review has indicated that retail in small cities is multi-dimensional and the importance is way beyond the purchase of goods, as it includes authenticity, community building, social relations and potential health effects. It is also important to recognise that retail in small cities is shaped in a retail eco system including many different actors.

There is a need for more in-depth studies of how the retail ecosystems in small cities are dealing with contemporary challenges affecting retail, but also how they are managed. The key contribution of this article is to provide new perspectives on the challenges and management of retail in small cities by applying a metaphor from the culture and fine arts sector, orchestration. Even though the study is based on retailing in three small cities in Sweden, we believe that the metaphor and its framework is beneficial for developing local retail eco systems in small cities in many Western countries experiencing structural transformation.

2. Theoretical framework

In order to understand the role of the multi-dimensional retail eco system in small cities we have used theories dealing with cultural dimensions of retailing. A starting point is the ongoing intertwinement of culture and economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; DuGay and Pryke, 2002; Löfgren and Willim, 2005), The intertwinement happens at different levels, both at the entrepreneurial and consumer level.

The entrepreneurial level, the presence, or absence, of entrepreneurship culture (Stuetzer et al., 2018) can help explain the success or failure of retail in small cities. Existing opportunities (Samuelsson, 2004; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), market knowledge (Shane, 2000; Wiklund and Shepherd, 2003), and social capital (Wiklund, 1998) have all been found to be important when it comes to understanding the entrepreneurship culture. The ecosystem approach highlights the importance of networks, which are always culturally embedded. (e.g., Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1982, 2017; Putnam, 1995).

The retail ecosystem must always adapt to changing consumer preferences. The structural changes in retailing have occurred simultaneously with the progression of consumer culture. We are therefore inspired by theories of consumer culture and its development over time (e.g., Arnould and Thompson, 2005, Campbell, 2018/1987, Sassatelli, 2007; Trentmann, 2016).

Campbell (2018/1987) examines how consumer culture has emerged over time, and claims that modern consumption is driven by hedonism that involves pleasure via daydreaming and fantasy, rather than via direct physical sensations. Consumer dreams have also been emphasised in studies of new forms of retail, such as the introduction of department stores at turn of the century 1900s (Husz, 2004, Strasser, 2004), and the first generation of "mega malls" (Ritzer, 1999). Experiences have been claimed to be a key to competitive businesses and include four different spheres of experience; i.e. entertainment, education, escapism and aesthetics (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

The expansion of the consumer society in which consumers compose their identities in dialogue with objects and shopping places (Cachinho, 2011; De Simone and Liliana, 2017), explains why retail premises become supportive spaces for transactions in the symbolic realm (Goss, 1993) to meet the human desire of dreaming and escape from reality. In

the new retail environments people can enjoy themselves, make their dreams and fantasies come true (even just for a moment), and live experiences (Barata-Salgueiro, 2021).

The combination of the dimensions of the entrepreneurship and consumer culture points to the complexity of the interactions taking place in the local retail eco system. Successful retail in smaller cities involves diverse actors and includes both the entrepreneurial mindset and flexible consumer orientation. But how can such interactions be understood, and, perhaps even more importantly, be turned into lessons and strategies for retail in small cities? Based on our theoretical framework, we have chosen the orchestra metaphor to structure our analysis.

Metaphors make it possible to make the implicit more explicit and understandable. Richardson (1994, p. 519) writes: "Metaphor is the backbone of social science writing. Like the spine, it bears weight, permits movement, is buried beneath the surface, and links parts together into a functional, coherent whole." Metaphors can be used as a research method, as a means of finding hidden thoughts and feelings (Zaltman, 1997). The orchestra metaphor is useful for explaining complex organisations and sectors, e.g., retailing, but it is also useful for analysing the connections between the consumer culture, entrepreneurship and networks.

John Spitzer (1996) emphasises that the orchestra is one of the most commonly used metaphors for describing organisations and societies. It has been used to describe ideal (and failed) types of armies, nature, machines and society as a whole, to mention but a few of the phenomena described as orchestras. In this article, we are particularly inspired by the metaphor of orchestration, which first came into use during the second half of the nineteenth century. "As a metaphor, orchestration is characteristically used to describe purposeful and artful manipulation of some sort" (Spitzer, 1996, p. 252). The ability to orchestrate a positive shopping experience for a visitor to the retail destination serves, in this article, as an example of purposeful and artful manipulation.

A successful retail eco system, in this case a small city, can be compared to an orchestra which is not only dependent on a good conductor, or a brilliant solo violinist in the shape of an excellent retailer, but on all the members of that orchestra. An understanding of the customers' (the audience) backgrounds and preferences is also crucial for an orchestra's survival in the long run. While an orchestra can be successful when performing a certain repertoire, and popular within a certain period of time, performances may lose their magic when that repertoire changes and/or when the popularity of their genre of excellence vanishes. Successfully orchestrated repertoires, or the techniques used by city centres or shopping malls, may lose their functionality during a new era. In the three cases studied, we have tried to analyse which *orchestration techniques* are used by orchestras or different places, as well as how this affects the retail eco system.

3. Methodology

Small cities with seemingly similar preconditions develop in different directions. This calls for a detailed study of different cases. We have chosen to study orchestration of retailing in three small cities in Sweden that differ somewhat from each other, but experience challenges similar to many small cities in the Western world. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork whereby studies of both the actors and the material environment take place on an individual and concrete level (e.g., Davies, 2008; Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). The qualitative approach chosen contributes to our understanding of orchestration. Ethnographic studies are relatively uncommon in retailing, with a few exceptions (e.g., Welte et al., 2021).

More specifically, our study is a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995, 1998). This is also referred to as a multi-locale ethnography (Hannerz, 2001). A multi-locale ethnography is not only about including several fields, but the fields are linked together in what Hannerz (2001) calls a network of localities involving patterns of social relations. In our study, the orchestration of retailing in the small cities involves different relations between the orchestra and the audience. Marcus (1995) emphasises that multi-sited ethnography is used in new spheres of interdisciplinary work. Our focus on retailing from the lens of our respective backgrounds in ethnology and marketing is well suited for this type of study.

The choice of localities to include is crucial for a multi-sited ethnography. Marcus (1998) discusses that it varies whether the localities are comparable in a multi-sited ethnography since sites are not always uniform. Instead, the comparative dimensions develop during fieldwork (Marcus, 1998). In our study, the comparative dimensions consist of understanding different perspectives of orchestration of retailing in the three small cities studied such as the municipalities, the landlords, the retailers and the citizens/customers representing macro, meso and micro-levels.

However, instead of just focusing on macro, meso or micro levels, we are inspired by Klein and Kozlowski's (2000) multilevel theory building that considers and bridges the different levels. They suggest three types of constructs: composite (top-down), compiled (bottom-up) and emergent (culture, history etc.) that are relevant for our study. The composite concerns how municipalities and landlords affect the eco-system of retailers. The compiled focuses on how demands from citizens/customers influence retailing. Finally, the emergent is about how culture and history affects the retailer's eco system.

The ethnographic fieldwork is based on a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observations at the three small cities studied. In total, 38 interviews were conducted, i.e., 11–14 interviews at each location (see Table 1). In 2019, observations were made three times at each place, and for two days during each stay. The interviewees were selected in order to represent a multitude of relevant stakeholders (see Table 2). Retailers and employees were selected following initial scanning and dialogue with representatives of the Advisory Board of the research project, with representatives from the municipalities, retailers and the national retail organisation.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 and 75 min. The questions were open-ended and adjusted to each interview. People working in the retail sector were asked about their experiences of retail, their main challenges and opportunities, and whether, as well as how, they interact with other actors (both private and public) in the local area. The interviews with the landlords and representatives of the municipalities focused more on the roles of these two groups in the local retail networks and on how they saw their roles and potential contributions to the development of the retail sector. With a few exceptions, the authors have carried out the interviews and observations jointly.

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. As in many qualitative studies, our data collection is limited in terms of cases and informants. While we strived for a wide range of interviewees representing diverse perspectives, there is a potential bias in the collection of interviewees, which was based on a snowball sampling technique originating from people engaged in retail at the local level. Further, the geographical limitation is important. The study is based on Swedish cases.

4. Description of the small cities studied

Swedish retail consists of about 32,000 shops. The number of shops decreased between 2017 and 2019 by nearly 6 percent (Svensk handel, 2021). This trend has continued during the pandemic. Sales was in 2019

Table 1
Overview of material.

Place	No of Interviews	Observations (hrs)
Ullared/Falkenberg	14	20
Vingåker	13	16
Eslöv	11	14

Table 2
Position of interviewees organised by level.

Interview persons	Retailers	Municipalities	Business/city associations and landlords
Eslöv	Manager clothing shop Manager furniture shop Manager pharmacy Manager grocery store Manager interior decoration Manager delicatessen and coffee shop	Chairman of the municipal board Business manager of the municipality	Head of city centre association Property owner 1 Property owner 2
Falkenberg/ Ullared	*Gekås Ullared* Purchaser Employee working in toys dept. Employee working in clothing dept. Education manager Head of camping site *Other interviews:* Manager flower shop Manager goldsmith shop Manager restaurant Manager leisure business shop	Chairman of the municipal board Director of the municipality Business manager of the municipality Destination developer Rural developer	* Gekås Ullared owns most of the properties therefore no interviews in Ullared
Vingåker	Manager VFO Employee VFO Employee porcelain and glass outlet shop Manager grocery store Manager petrol station	Chairman of the municipal board Director of the municipality Business manager of the municipality Communications manager of the municipality Chairman for the culture and leisure committee	Head of village community association Property owner 1 Property owner 2

distributed as follows: city shopping centres (4%), e-commerce (11%), shops in cities (9%), external shopping centres (16%), retail areas (19%), other physical retailing (41%) (Svensk Handel, 2021). Many of the Swedish retail shops are small and have a low turnover. In 2019, 90 percent of the shops have a turnover of less than 50 million SEK and a little more than every third shop has a turnover between 1 and 5 million SEK (Svensk handel, 2021). During the last decades, shopping at retail destinations has increased in Sweden which is linked to the fact that shopping has become a major leisure activity, just as in many other Western countries.

In our study, we have chosen three small cities that represent a diversity of experiences and challenges relating to retailing in small cities. Two of them are retail destinations in small cities even though they differ significantly from each other. Ullared is the largest shopping destination in Scandinavia with a history of successful retailing, located in a small city. Vingåker is also a successful retail destination that sells branded clothes while retail in the city centre undergoes major challenges. It exemplifies the structural transformation of retail in small cities. Eslöv is a small city that aims to have both a flourishing city centre and an external shopping mall. In other words, struggling with tensions between a city centre striving to have vibrant retailers and an external shopping establishment offering free parking and goods with lower prices, just as many other small cities do. The cases are described in detail below.

5. Ullared

Ullared is a small town with about 800 inhabitants located close to the west coast of Sweden in Falkenberg municipality. The town is dominated by Gekås Ullared, which is the largest (and continually growing) department store in Scandinavia. The store was visited in 2018 by 4.8 million customers and the turnover was SEK 5.3 billion (approx 500 million EUR). The store is constantly expanding, but the latest figures show a floor space of 43,000 m^2, with 82 cashiers and room for 7500 customers at one time. The record number of visitors for one day is 29,200 people, more than thirty five times as much as the residents of the town. During the peak seasons, summer and autumn, there can be queues of people with trolleys stretching for hundreds of metres, awaiting their turn to enter Gekås. In the retail area, there are bars, restaurants and two hotels. A hundred metres or so away from the outlet area, there are cabins and camping sites to accommodate the visitors who are staying overnight. Low prices, in combination with friendly service and unique experience, distinguish this department store from other budget department stores. During recent decades, the store has grown from being one of a number of successful discount stores into becoming a department store that also sells branded items, but most of all into a destination where people not only shop but also mingle, party, socialise with friends and family, and even get married. This successful evolution can mainly be attributed to new and visionary leadership, further boosted by a popular TV reality show called “Ullared”, which was launched in 2009 and has run for more than ten seasons.

A cluster of retail companies have established themselves in the outlet area surrounding Gekås Ullared and over time become integrated into the Gekås consortium, which consists, apart from the department store, of two hotels (named the hotel and Ulla), a motel, a camping site and day-care for dogs. The success of the department store has led to public services and transport being developed to an extent not experienced by any other Swedish city of a similar size. The massive flows of visitors have also led to small-scale entrepreneurship in the surrounding area and influenced retail culture of the entire municipality. The overall impression of the municipality is one of entrepreneurship and creativity.

6. Eslöv

Eslöv is by Swedish standards, a rather typical small city and has about 34,000 inhabitants, including 19.000 in the central city area. It is located in southern Sweden at a railway junction, and has less than half an hour commuting time to Lund, Malmö and Helsingborg (the three main cities of the region) and less than an hour to Copenhagen. The city centre is near to the station and the main square is being rebuilt to encourage more public life and fewer cars. There are a number of stores in the centre, both smaller independent ones, as well as larger chain stores and restaurants. Even though there are some empty premises, it is not a deserted place. The retail in Eslöv central city is, however, facing competition from nearby cities as well as from a newly established external shopping centre, Airport City (Flygstaden) on the outskirts of Eslöv. This shopping centre is aiming to target more of the inhabitants’ spending within the municipality.

Eslöv’s location in the middle of one of the fastest growing regions in Sweden is both a blessing and a challenge for local retailers. Many of Eslöv’s inhabitants work in nearby major cities, and do quite a lot of their shopping in large malls or supermarkets outside of the municipality. Contrary to the Ullared case, no single actor dominates the city centre. The City Centre Association, a non-profit association whose members mainly consist of the retailers, landlords, representatives of the municipality and associations operating in the centre, was recently

established in order to take joint action relating to the development of Eslöv.

During the 1800s and early 1900s, Eslöv saw its most successful years. Food and chemicals were the main industrial sectors and the city still hosts one of Sweden's biggest food production plants. The area is among the most fertile in the whole country, and the combination of agriculture and traditional industry gives Eslöv the look of a rather traditional (some would say cosy, others boring) small city. The overall sense you get is that the city is struggling to find a new identity in the post-industrial area.

7. Vingåker

Vingåker is about 90 min by car to the south of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, and within an hour of several major surrounding cities. The municipality has 9000 inhabitants, about half of whom live in the city centre. For decades, there has been a flow of people moving out of the municipality and into big cities nearby, but there has also been a small influx of people from the 1990s and onwards, many of whom have been immigrants coming to Sweden.

The city centre is divided into an outlet area, containing the Vingåker Factory Outlet (VFO) and two other outlet stores, and the traditional city centre itself. The VFO is a former clothing factory that now houses the largest branded outlet in the Nordic countries. It attracts about 400,000 visitors a year, making it the county's largest visitor attraction. While the local inhabitants shop in the centre, visitors from Stockholm and the other main cities of the region visit mainly the outlet area. The city centre has not been able to capitalise on the flow of people to the outlet. The city centre and the outlet area are divided, albeit there is only a few hundred metres between the districts. The main street is characterised by a number of service actors (barber's shops, tattoo parlour, massage studio, estate agent, undertaker), with very few traditional shops remaining. There are quite a few empty premises that formerly hosted shops in the centre.

Vingåker is in a region dominated by SMEs and agriculture and was also one of the early centres of the Swedish textile industry. While most of Sweden's textile industry collapsed in the 1970s, the last production plant in Vingåker remained until 1997, when the owners moved production to Eastern Europe due to high labour costs. The railway between Sweden's two principal cities, Stockholm and Gothenburg, passes through the city and some trains stop at Vingåker. Vingåker has picturesque surroundings, leading to some development of hospitality and leisure businesses. The municipality is hoping that a newly-renovated castle situated next to the outlet area will attract both tourists and locals.

8. Results and analysis

The results and analysis are arranged in accordance with the orchestra metaphor where the orchestra is the retail eco system and the musicians consist of the municipality, landlords, and retailers. First, the general aspects of retail eco system as an orchestra are presented according to Klein and Kozlowski's (2000) *multilevel constructs*: compiled (bottom-up), composite (top-down), and emergent (culture, history etc.) Thereafter, we present and discuss a number of *orchestration techniques,* structured around Pine and Gilmore, 1999 dimensions of experiences.

9. Orchestras and relations with visitors - the compiled construct

Just as an orchestra needs an audience, the retail eco system is dependent on visitors and customers. It should also be easy to get to the shopping area. Several of the store owners interviewed emphasised that the absence of parking spaces means that customers prefer external shopping centres that are easy to reach by car. A property owner from Eslöv added that, in a large city, you are prepared to walk for longer, but that, in a small one, you expect parking to be available. Accessibility also includes accommodation in the case of retail destinations, something which was stressed during the interviews in Ullared. Functioning infrastructure is thus important when it comes to visitors being able to reach concert halls or stores. How easy or difficult is it to get where you want to go? Among the three cases studied, Ullared has an advantage of having a large car park. In Vingåker, parking is also easy accessible, but in Eslöv the situation is different. 19 parking spaces around the main square have been removed and it upset retailers. One of them expressed: *"If you have lost a customer, you have lost a customer"*.

The consumers are the sovereigns of retailing today. The head of a pharmacy in Eslöv emphasised: *"I consider our customers as our real owners. A long as they are here, we will be here. If they do not come to shop, no owner can save us"*. A grocery manager from Eslöv also expressed: *"Politicians must listen to the voters and we must listen to the consumers. The consumers have the power nowadays."* These are examples of customer orientation that includes listening to both existing and potential customers. It includes observation of and reflection on purchasing patterns, but also consumer behaviour overall, as well as competitors and the continuously changing consumer culture.

Municipalities are also interested to hear what the citizens think. Both the municipalities of Vingåker and Ullared have initiated a dialogue with their citizens. The municipality of Falkenberg has apart from a destination developer, employed a rural developer who tries to capture the voices of the inhabitants in Ullared. The approach to involve citizens in the development of the small cities can contribute to the fact that they feel involvement in a similar way as we experienced that the employees at Gekås Ullared felt when they participated in the development of the company. One of the employees even expressed that it was her company even though the owner of Gekås Ullared was not aware of this. This illustrates a loyalty to the company.

Customer orientation involves development of service and hospitality. The head of training at Gekås described Gekås' vision in terms of *"delivering the world's best shopping experience"* and its mission in terms of *"exceeding customers' expectations"*. This does not necessarily mean exceptional ideas or products. A landlord in Eslöv said that there was no need to have clowns or someone doing cartwheels; instead, it is customer service that is a crucial for an entertaining shopping experience. The customer must feel that he/she is not only recognised, but wanted. A furniture retailer in Eslöv said: *"The staff are very important. You must feel valuable and welcomed, and meet someone who, for example, can tell you something about the city. You have to have an experience."* Hence, investing in customer service can also be considered a strategy for enhancing entertainment. The furniture retailer also said: *"We have an expression about 'incredibly satisfied customers. It's the only way for me to compete. It's the level of service that's important. It costs, but a person who smiles is as expensive as one who doesn't. Smiling is the first step. Being personable, reliable, and genuine are important things."* The retailer emphasised that the biggest competitor was not other furniture retailers but travel companies. This shows the importance of understanding competition in a broader perspective: Will consumers choose to spend their money on travel, furniture or anything else related to the lifestyle they have, or want to have? To succeed, retailers need to compete using something special that people will remember.

It appears as though many retailers' overall focus is on consumer groups who are early adopters. A destination developer from Falkenberg emphasised that there had been too many retail actors wanting to focus on a "cool" target group with lots of money and said that Gekås Ullared purposefully "fires under the radar" and does not target the 5G generation, but 3G customers instead. In a competitive market such as contemporary retail, a re-thinking of the target groups may be useful for many retailers in small cities.

Furthermore, many of the retailers appear to target customers working regular office hours. However, less than half of the population of Sweden has a steady job. All the others, e.g., the elderly, parents on maternity/paternity leave, students, the unemployed, and newly-

arrived immigrants, also go shopping and desire good retail experiences. In Eslöv, we found a growing awareness that visitors to the city centre largely consist of the elderly, parents with young children, and others who do not work during the day. Addressing urban mobility is a pressing issue for small cities post-COVID, something which will include breaking the dependence on cars for shopping in the city centre (Barbarossa, 2020).

10. Orchestras and relations with municipalities and landlords – the composite construct

A general theme of the interviews was the mutual interdependence of the different actors. A number of different business/city associations were established in the small cities studied. For example, in Eslöv, a city centre association was established as a co-operation between the retailers, landlords, representatives of the municipality and associations. They met regularly and different forms of collaboration were initiated as well as education in for example, service, display, digitalisation, business plans and safety in shops. The person in charge expressed: *"Success is achieved through good collaboration, together"*. Another example is Vingåker where a few business people had initiated a business organisation called "The collaborators" which consisted of a limited number of businesses. They arranged different activities such as flea markets and farmers' markets on the main street in order to make it more attractive to visit.

The number of empty premises is a major problem in many small cities, including Eslöv and Vingåker. The CEO of one of the landlords in Eslöv expressed: *"A city centre is actually a mall without a roof. The problem is that no one has ownership of this mall"*. His statement illustrates the lack of coordination. If we consider the city centre, not as a mall without a roof, but using another metaphor, i.e., that of the orchestra, we can then ask how such an orchestra is to be managed. In particular, the municipality and the landlords both play a major role.

A city centre with empty premises is a threat not only to landlords and retailers, but for the entire city. Falkenberg has successfully contested this by stimulating a collaboration between retailers, landlords, politicians and officials and by providing opportunities for pop-up stores, i.e., a new business actor testing a concept in an empty retail premises or a larger company testing a new product or market. The aim was to prevent empty premises from being perceived as the beginning of an empty city centre, and to instead arouse curiosity regarding what will open up on the old premises and what will happen next.

The role played by the municipalities when marketing small cities and attempting to make them attractive to visitors and retailers needs to be highlighted. This was also emphasised by a landlord who was a member of the business organisation "the collaborators" in Vingåker, mentioned above. The landlord had initiated a project group with representatives of landlords and the municipality that met to discuss the city's look including street furniture, for example pots for plants. Finally, the role of the municipality is also important for giving retailers support. We got the impression that the municipalities in general listened to the voice of the retailers. For example, the chairman of the municipality in Falkenberg emphasised the importance of Gekås for the local economy and job market.

11. The retailing eco system - the emergent construct

Socio-cultural patterns of consumption are important to consider when studying retailing from a commercial as well as a social perspective. The marketplace needs to be understood in relation to its historical roots by considering class, communities, gender, ethnicity, the role of influence, control and power struggles in the orchestra. This involves also an understanding of the place for the orchestra, both from a historical and contemporary perspective. It is important to recognise what has made the orchestra unique historically as well as today. Studies of socio-cultural patterns include thinking about how authenticity is achieved. By continuously developing a unique repertoire, the orchestra will be better equipped to compete with external shopping malls and digital retailing.

Central for developing the orchestra is entrepreneurship culture. We noticed that this differs significantly between the places studied. In particular Gekås Ullared and its surroundings are characterised by a strong entrepreneurship culture. The CEO at the time of our study is a good example of a brilliant conductor who continuously developed the department store to be attractive to visitors. The small cities are dependent on entrepreneurs to develop. The manager of the petrol station in Vingåker emphasised that new competencies are needed and that cooperation with different actors in the city was important. He said that it is important to be brave and cooperate with people whom you normally do not work with. The destination developer in Falkenberg said that rather than seeing other firms as just competitors, they talked of them as "konkullegor", a combination of the Swedish words for competitors and colleagues. This is similar to "coopetition" strategy, discussed by Morris et al. (2007).

Two of the small cities studied, Eslöv and Vingåker, need to think about how to decrease the number of empty premises in the city centres. One reason for an increasing number of empty premises in cities, in general, is the fact that the rent usually is much higher in cities compared to external shopping centres. This is a disincentive for businesses. Landlords may be unlikely to lower the rent since it will affect the market value of the property. This is likely a hot topic for discussion in many small cities and new ideas are needed for solving this problem. In Eslöv, the two main landlords interviewed were aware of this problem and both said that they have a clear strategy to try to find retailers and other businesses that not only can pay the rent but will be of value for the atmosphere of the street or city centre. They also claimed to be willing to lower rent during the first years for a promising retail concept if it has potential to add value to the street and city centre.

12. Orchestration techniques

We will now discuss potential orchestration techniques, all of which entail a combination of individual and joint actions by the members of the orchestra. Different orchestration techniques affect the experience gained by the audience, both in terms of repertoire and how the music is performed. Applied to our study, this means different ways of organising the retail experiences in different places. We describe below how different techniques enable orchestras to succeed, as inspired by Pine and Gilmore (1999) four spheres of experience; i.e., entertainment, education, escapism and aesthetics.

12.1. Entertainment

A reason for someone to prefer one orchestra or retail place over another may be entertainment; in other words, some value being added to the purchase of goods. Among the three places studied, Ullared is the most successful. Gekås Ullared's transition from an ordinary discount store to a tourist destination is the result of strategic work taking a number of years to complete. A down-to-earth friendly image, attractive product offerings, the constant development of social spaces, accommodation and camping facilities, and, not least, a popular reality show on TV have all contributed towards making Gekås Ullared the most popular shopping destination in Scandinavia. Their ability to develop a new repertoire is a key aspect of being successful. New products and new developments, both inside and outside the department store, make it possible for visitors to gain new experiences. This highlights the importance of retail destinations constantly having to think about how they can change a place without losing its features or historical connection.

Entertainment can also be interpreted in terms of continuously updating the store. This was mentioned by the manager of a petrol station in Vingåker. Changing the range gives the consumer a chance to

be surprised when visiting. This was also highlighted by the owner of a clothing store in Eslöv who said that the customers in the store expect things to happen between the visits. It is not exciting enough if a store looks exactly the same every time. However, any changes made must not be too surprising; the customer needs to recognise the place. If this is applied to a city centre, it means understanding the importance of changing the impression that it gives from time to time.

The successful retailers interviewed in our study told similar stories of their perceived success factors. It was about creating an experience and thereby a willingness for the customer to return. They emphasised that the customers must feel welcome. In other words, retailers acted like hosts and not merely as salespersons, similar to the hospitality industry. While this relationship with consumers has been noted in earlier research as success factors for small retailers (e.g., Robaton, 2018; Pantano and Migliarese, 2014; Gilboa et al., 2019), this study shows that also a large store like Gekås Ullared can develop close relations with customers. This may be connected to how they have been inspired by the hospitality industry, both in terms of destination-thinking and hospitality. The importance of recognising the customers is continuously communicated to the employees.

12.2. Education

In our study, many of the retailers expressed the value of knowledge development in order to meet the needs of more educated consumers. They emphasised that the consumers of today demand information on how, where and when something was produced, as well as expecting store managers and employees to be able to provide the answers to their questions. Although the requirements of the consumers varied with the location and nature of the stores, the importance of proactive knowledge development was still stressed.

A grocery store manager from Eslöv had launched a program of coaching for staff in order to increase commitment and knowledge. The manager said that personal knowledge transferred in dialogue with the consumer is an important competitive factor and continued: *"Having dedicated and trained staff is the best means of competing, now and in the future. Knowledge is power."* In the store, knowledge development was also used as a strategy for marketing that store as a supporter of sustainability and health. By offering sustainable and healthy products, also from a wide range of local suppliers, the manager wanted to show consumers how their purchases of such products contribute towards sustainable development and a circular economy and create jobs for the local labour market. The manager emphasised that many stores had missed the importance of making value-based statements. According to him, it was, in particular, the younger consumers who made choices based on values. This is important to recognise since they are the customers of the future. The manager provided a digital "sugar checkpoint" on the store's social media platform where the sugar content of different products was compared, making it possible for consumers to make more informed decisions.

The knowledge development was not always a part of formal staff training. However, Gekås Ullared has an explicit strategy whereby the CEO and managers are expected to spend time in the store in order to be able to study in-store buying patterns. This was also mentioned by a purchaser who said that an important part of the job was to spend a lot of time on "the floor" in order to be educated about consumer preferences. The chairman of the municipal board in Falkenberg noted about Gekås, that: *"They're always very fast-paced when it comes to change, enormously good at seeing trends. For example, they built a lot of charging points (for electric vehicles) before we, I mean the municipality, had even thought of it. We had to make a big effort to install two, and they already had fifty."* This illustrates the importance of being receptive to a continuously changing consumer culture.

12.3. Escapism

Escapism was a technique that some of the retailers in the study were excellent in carrying out. A small designer boutique established in an old blacksmith near Eslöv had an elaborate concept to materialise a longing for slowness and authenticity. In Vingåker, the Vingåker Factory Outlet provided the opportunity to dress like a successful city dweller. Gekås Ullared also worked with escapism, seen in their slogan to "feel like a king for a day" and mentioned by all the staff interviewed at Gekås. Feeling like a king for a day means to be able to afford a lot of purchases to a reasonable low cost.

The escapism is not solely created by the staff and less so by the products on sale. It is also based on the expectations that are built up between visits. A purchaser from the toy department at Gekås emphasised that a major value of the visit was in the preparation. A visit to Gekås is rarely spontaneous. Groups of friends, families and others visiting Ullared meet up and talk about what to do, write lists of things to do and what to look for. This creates expectations prior to the visit. The head of training at Gekås believed that this is something that e-commerce can never compete with and said: *"You don't gather the girls to go online shopping*." Hence, escapism does not necessarily have to be linked solely to the goods on sale, but can also concern the place and be developed through social interaction, not least when customers queue up to enter the department store, which they would never do to get into a regular department store (the record for the longest queue at Gekås is 1.4 km!).

A purchaser from Gekås emphasised that there is a social dimension that continues after the shopping itself, while discussing things with other visitors. In tourism and hospitality, this is called pre- and post-travel and has been presented, not least, as one of the competitive advantages of culinary tourism (Hall et al., 2003). In our study, we can see that pre- and post-shopping is important when it comes to understanding the escapism aspects of retail.

Retail stores as places of escapism are not a new phenomenon. Studies such as Susan Strasser's of the new department stores (Strasser, 2004) or George Ritzer's of the then new mega malls in the US (Ritzer, 1999) both stress the ability to create spaces of enchantment. However, exactly what works in terms of enchantment has changed over time. Hogg and Banister (2010) discuss how an undesired end-state serves as an incentive to avoid products with a negative image. In our study, we noticed that the centres of the studied small cities have empty retail premises. These may, instead of being places of allure become places of disgust or the undesired self (Hogg and Banister, 2010). The challenge lies in turning these empty spaces into positive aspects of consumption which maintain or create a positive sense of self. The municipal director in Falkenberg (the municipality where Gekås Ullared is located) mentioned that they are working actively with pop-up concepts to make things happen in store that are empty. The strategy was to turn the negative image of an empty store window covered with brown paper into something exciting – "what is about to happen here?"

12.4. Aesthetics

During recent decades, we have been able to notice an increased degree of aestheticisation in many areas (Featherstone, 2007; Löfgren and Willim, 2005), in both private and public environments. Everyday life has been aestheticised and an increased level of welfare has made it possible for aesthetics to play an increasingly crucial role in people's lifestyles, as an expression of their identity and experiences. This role of aesthetics in the retail areas of small cities, but also in the interior and exterior of the individual store, is important since localities and shop environments need to be attractive to both residents and visitors. The chairman of the board of Eslöv Municipality emphasised this: *"Design is important, if you want to keep up, the city centre must be attractive"*. The ongoing restoration of the main square in Eslöv is about making it more attractive to more people; here, aesthetics play an important role.

Aesthetics are not necessarily about making something exceptionally beautiful. The aesthetics of Ullared are largely characterised by the Gekås department store. Here, it is above all a conscious aestheticisation of the simple and popular that has been successful. Things should not be too nice, but nice enough and affordable.

A landlord in Eslöv believed that skills development is needed in the case of both landlords and retailers when it comes to the art of window display as a part of a strategy to meet the competition from digital retailing. Within the city centre association of Eslöv, a joint program aimed at increasing the attractiveness of that city centre had been discussed. Finally, different kinds of aesthetic considerations can be used to attract new visitors. Both Eslöv and Vingåker have railway stations which many trains pass through. It would be possible to attract the attention of railways passengers passing through by highlighting the historical characteristics in an aesthetically pleasing way.

13. Discussion

The transformation of retailing is challenging, in particular in small cities. In this article, we have discussed the *local retail eco systems* (Valiaparampil and Gupta, 2018)in three small cities in Sweden that represent a diversity of experiences and challenges; Ullared, Eslöv and Vingåker. An orchestra metaphor has allowed us to better understand how retailing is organised in a small city context. The results and the metaphor itself can be applied to small cities in many other Western countries that are facing competition from the Internet and external shopping centres.

We have described how different orchestration techniques can strengthen the local retail ecosystem, inspired by Pine and Gilmore, 1999 four spheres of experience, i.e., entertainment, education, escapism and aesthetics. Entertainment is necessary for orchestras to be able to compete with other orchestras. Retailing in small cities needs to offer something other than on-line shopping or external shopping centres provide. This requires all the actors in the orchestra to critically investigate what they have to offer or can develop in terms of being attractive. Here there is a need for interactions between the retailers, but also between the retailers and the surroundings encompassing cultural events and tourism. By seeing retail through the lens of a socio-cultural context, it is possible to recognise that retailers may have a role as hosts, similar to the hospitality industry. By reinserting the connections between retail and the hospitality industry, in line with recommendations from Lindberg et al. (2019) and Hilpert and Merz (2022), an opportunity for local retail to retain its attractiveness appear. This technique has already been applied by retail destinations like Ullared, and to a limited extent Vingåker, but can also be applied for average small cities such as Eslöv.

We also found education or knowledge building to be an important aspect to develop. The retailers interviewed said that, as consumers become more knowledgeable, retailers will need to provide them with information. Knowledge was also used as a marketing strategy relating to sustainability and health, issues that are highly relevant to many consumers of today. In our study, knowledge could be a part of formal training, but it could also mean stores being observant regarding trends and changing consumer cultures. In actual fact, policy decisions may encourage store employees to become more observant and to share their observations with management.

Escapism may be too narrow a term to capture all aspects of the techniques used by the retailers we interviewed. We therefore suggest that a combination of Pine and Gilmore's term escapism (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and Colin Campbell's (2018/1997) theory that shopping provides the opportunity to daydream and an outlet for the desire to be somewhere else, or someone else, for a short while is a better way to describe this orchestration technique. Almost all the successful retail concepts investigated at the various locations have had the ability to materialise daydreams and to create desire. This is nurtured by the expectations given before the visit. Based on our study we thus propose that *dreams, desire and expectations* is a more accurate term than escapism. Aesthetics is an important technique in itself but can also be seen as a part of a technique, both in store and external to the store, to create dreams, desire and expectations.

We have considered the small city retail ecosystem as an orchestra consisting not only of retailers, but also of other musicians, including landlords, municipalities, citizens etc. This challenges the notion that entrepreneurship is only connected to an individual retailer or a sole musician. The study has illustrated that a successful orchestra requires a network of good musicians. Hence, an understanding of networks and the local entrepreneurship culture can help explain the success or failure of retail in small cities. In line with Granovetter (1982, 2017), we advocate that stimulating networks and productive interactions between actors on the local level are important.

We also acknowledge the importance of seeing the local retail eco system as multi-levelled, in accordance with the multi-level theory developed by Klein and Kozlowski (2000). A contribution of our study to the multi-level theory by applying the orchestra metaphor is that we challenge the supposed hierarchy between the levels. In Eslöv, the city centre association and the municipality took on the role of the conductor. This is in line with a common sense model of top down, where the municipality takes a leading role. However, in Ullared it was clearly a single retail company, Gekås, that was the conductor. Other actors, both the municipality and the small independent firms in the outlet area were adapting to the low-key, low-price repertoire of Gekås. In Vingåker, there was no clear conductor, rather many ensembles trying to play different repertoires. In future studies of local retail eco systems, we recommend that the role of the conductor must not be taken for granted. It is an important question to be investigated and determined by each small city.

Combining the perspectives of eco systems thinking and culture (both entrepreneurship and consumer culture) opens up for new ways to think about retail strategies at the local level. In line with Runyan et al. (2007), our study confirms that community brand identity and social capital are resources which can help small retailers to be successful.

While the general orchestration techniques are applicable in all cases, every small city needs to adapt them to the socio historic patterns and community brand identity of the specific place. If we apply this on the studied small cities, starting with Eslöv, there is a need to balance chain and local retail for the downtown area in line with Litvin and Rosene's (2017) suggestion, to preserve the cultural appeal and an attractive retail atmosphere. This is applicable to future work with the aesthetics and escapism dimensions in Eslöv, that also should consider the Slow City Movement to preserve the cultural, natural, and historical heritage and prevent the homogenisation of the urban areas (Cicek et al., 2019). This will promote an aura of authenticity, which is a strong competitive advantage for brand identity, as discussed by Brown et al. (2003); Fritz et al. (2017); and Sherry (2015).

For Ullared, there is already a strong community brand identity that all musicians can benefit from. This reaffirms Runyan et al. (2007) claim that this may help small retailers to be successful. In addition, we can add from our study that this is an important success factor also for the big retail store (Gekås) and the whole municipality of Falkenberg. The entrepreneurship culture is strong, and the firms apply the "coopetition" strategy, recommended by Morris et al. (2007). It also reaffirms Byun et al. (2020) conclusion that an awareness of competition beyond the local community and to acknowledge and to embrace innovation culture within organisations may improve competitive advantages and improve performance. For Ullared, the orchestrations techniques should be directed to prevent and develop the unique features of the local retail eco system. Examples of applications are to continue to develop the entertainment aspects of the visit, to extend education for staff and managers, to continue with the low-key aesthetics and not least to nurture the escapism atmosphere of coming to Ullared, as noted in the "King for a day" slogan.

In Vingåker, by contrast, the entrepreneurship culture is weaker, and

the different actors work parallel, rather than join forces in the creation of a community brand identity. The sharp divide between the outlet area and the city centre (although very close in geographical distance) is a good example of the consequences of not complying to Litvin and Rosene's (2017) conclusion that there is a need to balance chain and local retail for a thriving city centre. There is potential in the combination of the history as a node for the textile industry and the picturesque surroundings to work with escapism as a technique to nurture the dreams, desires, and expectations of the customers, both locals and visitors. But this needs to be combined with much work to improve the entertainment, education, and aesthetics aspects. Vingåker can also benefit from a stronger synergy between retail and tourism.

14. Conclusions

Local retail eco systems consist of a diverse set of actors at different levels. The future of retailing in small cities is not merely dependent on the retailers, but also on collaborations with other retailers, landlords, politicians and administrative staff at the municipal level, citizens and not least the ability to co-create an attractive retail atmosphere with customers. Understanding consumer culture and aiming to continuously develop entrepreneurship culture and networks will benefit the development of retail in small cities. The managerial implications are that retail in small cities in the future should not copy strategies developed both in and for metropolitan areas, but rather build on and strengthen the characteristics of the local retail eco system and the community brand identity. This calls for more and detailed multi-level studies of local retail eco systems. Small cities need to find their own visions for the future. To do so, the orchestration techniques described in this article may be a useful starting point. Rather than seeing the retailer as a solo player, the stakeholders at the different constructs: composite, compiled and emergent, may jointly contribute to the orchestration of successful retail in small cities.

15. Limitations and further research

The results call for further research, based on the limitations of this study. The small cities were selected to get a broad view of challenges for retail in small cities and to develop an overarching framework for managing the challenges, i.e., orchestration. For a more specific strategic management of small cities retail, more detailed studies of the character of the specific places are needed. National and cultural differences exist and the selected cases in this study all came from one nation, Sweden. The acknowledgement of the importance of culture is also an important starting point for potentially successful orchestration. As demonstrated in this article, an important strategy is to build upon the cultural characteristics of the specific place.

Declaration of competing interest

We hereby confirm that we as authors have no competing interests to declare.

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