Editorial

Urban Retail Systems: Vulnerability, Resilience and Sustainability. Introduction to the Special Issue

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Contemporary urbanization process threatens our environment, challenges the livability of cities, their ability to build localized competitive advantages, to attract investment, to create jobs and ensure the well-being of people in a sustainable development path. However, in recent years, several experiences from both communities and public policy on governance, mobility or in the supply system of goods and services can be seen as signs of change in how we are dealing with urban problems.

The need for sustainable transformation of cities is reinforced by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [1], particularly Sustainable Development Goal 11, which is dedicated to making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. It is likely that cities will be greener and healthier, built around a more sustainable paradigm, which will be characterized by compactness and polycentrism, regeneration of the built environment instead of sprawl, walkability and soft forms of mobility, new combinations of scales of activity (from physical proximity to online presence) and more intense use of digital technologies embedded across all city functions.

Retailing has always played a key role in cities and in people's relationships and quality of life. Mediating production's conditions and consumers' needs makes retail and consumer services dynamic activities constantly adapting to changes in supply and demand, along with innovations in technology and in the industry itself. It is possible to see changes in retail and consumer services systems as a succession of periods of growth and decline in the number and diversity of retail and services categories and business formats, of centralization in the core and decentralization toward peripheries. These waves go together with population distribution, systems of mobility and transportation, consumer values, patterns of life and industry's organization [2], as is now generally acknowledged.

In the long run, urban retail and consumer services change has offered the consumers a wider and more diversified choice at better prices. However, it has also created large imbalances in the economic structure and spatial organization of urban retail systems, besides negative environmental impacts. Some shifts challenge the economic viability of many retail concepts, jeopardize the vitality of the traditional shopping streets that makes the provision harder for some groups of consumers and puts at risk the sustainability of the cities [3,4].

With the entrance of the new millennium, one has seen rising concerns with the planet and the climate change, on the ways we are using natural resources, on globalization, over-consumption, over-travelling, over-tourism. The ideas on resilience and sustainability of the retail and services systems and urban form come to the fore, boosted by international organizations, namely the UN and EU, adding new concerns both to decision making, policy design and social behavior. Retail and consumer services change is influenced by the planning and legal tradition of each country. However, the recent evolution is deeply affected by the increasing integration of local and national economies into the global economy, as most of the texts in this Special Issue show.

More than one year ago, *Sustainability* challenged us for publishing a Special Issue on *Urban Retail Systems: Vulnerability, Resilience and Sustainability*. In addition to the topics

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proposed, our intention was to bring together scholars from different fields of research and different geographies concerned with the changes of urban retailing, the threats they bring to a city's sustainability and the need to foster the resilience of the urban retail systems. All these topics require attention from businesses, managers, scholars and policymakers. Urban policy has new concerns and new forms of governance have been tested, as the articles in this Special Issue well address.

This Special Issue counts on the collaboration of scholars from many backgrounds and different approaches, with a strong presence of geography, marketing and management, architecture, planning and sciences of information and communication, which explain the important focus on territories (town center, neighborhood retail and service centers, suburban retail developments) and policies (retail and urban planning). The authors manage to address the concern with growing inequalities between people, firms and territories, and the necessity to focus policy aims on peoples' real needs framed by the values of sustainability and materialized in the cities' organization and operation.

The studies have a strong emphasis on qualitative research methods using policy and planning documents, in-depth interviews and field observation, and they bring examples from cities that span over Asia, the Americas and Europe: Seoul (South Korea), Wuhan (China), Melbourne (Australia), Nitra (Slovakia), Naples (Italy), Barcelona and Zaragoza (Spain), Lisbon (Portugal), Santiago de Chile (Chile), Edmonton (Canada), Portland (Oregon) and several cities in the UK. Beyond this, they show the importance of local contexts in terms of socioeconomic, cultural and institutional conditions to understand how the global processes materialize locally in each place, fitting in the local structures. This local–global interplay requires adaptation and brings out problems rooted in the growing presence of corporate capital, which impose distant rationales and images to local interests.

Many trends on retail change and city–retail relationships were amplified with the COVID-19 disturbances on economy and citizens' life, with the collapse of the consumers' mobility at multiple scales. Produced under the pandemic, almost all the texts are sensible to its effects on urban retail, mainly accelerating the trend toward online shopping and the rediscovery of proximity, determining a new crisis in the city center, particularly serious in cities with a strong tourist economic base, such as Barcelona, studied by L. Frago, but also threatening many large retail formats. There are changes that have accelerated and will last. However, it is not yet clear the extent of the discontinuity introduced in the urban retail system nor how deep the crisis will be.

The articles in this Special Issue (see Appendix A) bring important contributions to the discussion of resilience and sustainability of cities and the urban retail and service systems. For practical reasons, we have organized their presentation in three basic strands: concepts, urban retail and policy.

1. On Conceptual Questions

The spread of concepts such as resilience and sustainability, with a danger of losing meaning and operationality, requires a discussion on their interest for urban retail and consumer services systems and proposals for possible indicators to assess their evolution [5]. In one way or another, almost all the authors discuss the concepts chosen to frame this issue, especially resilience and sustainability.

Vulnerability, the first concept of the title, refers to the weaknesses in the face of threats. They may be structural or circumstantial, such as the ones associated to COVID-19, although these normally bring to light problems already in place. The vulnerabilities of the retail fabric may affect individual businesses or the site, e.g., the spatial dimension. The area that called for attention worldwide in the last 40 years was the city center/high street, but the center shares many problems with other retail concentrations.

The concern with sustainability comes from both pressure of international bodies (UN, EU) and from consumers who may engage in the promotion of more sustainable forms of provision, as M.G. McEachern, G. Warnaby and C. Moraes recall. There is a general

agreement about the importance of sustainable development and change in consumers' and firms' behavior to make more sustainable cities and communities. The growing consumer awareness of environmental questions explains how retailers and the big corporations advertise their good practices, the greeneries of the buildings and, much less frequently, the regional scale of the supply chains, despite their harmful effects on the urban ecosystems, as L. De Simone and M. Pezoa observe.

The concept of sustainability has grown beyond the natural environment to include social as well as economic goals. The acknowledgement of these three dimensions of sustainability, the focus on equity, the promotion of walkability, the role of proximity to stores to the comfort of people, to strengthen the sense of community and cohesion, are topics mostly referred to in the articles. So, R. Sommella and L. D'Alessandro underline that for the enhancement of urban livability and the development of sustainable lifestyles, retail places and activities cannot be separated from the goals of cohesion and social inclusion.

Urban resilience is increasingly becoming a major overarching goal for cities around the world, but the concept receives less agreement, although most of the texts underline one point, the impossibility to accept the idea that comes from physics and even psychology that defines resilience as a movement to bounce back to the previous position. Common in administration bodies associated with disaster recovery and civil protection, this meaning points to the protection and reconstruction of the current situation, without considering if it is more suitable for all, as [6] questions.

L. Spark is aligned with the stronger critiques of the use of the concept of resilience in social science that ignore issues of space and scale, power relations and their consequences and view protection of the prevailing status quo. The author claims for a conceptualization that is broader but more locally adaptable and one that recognizes that the current system and position of towns and town centers were created within a system geared to do just that, and that, consequently, resilience might well be about creating a new, more locally engaged situation, *"a different definition of resilience to encompass local networks and inter-relationships and to view these as integral to the resilience of a town. Developing resilience thus becomes a local matter about building capacity and diversity. This is readily applicable to towns and retailing"* (Contribution 1).

Almost all the contributions reveal a preference for the concept of adaptive resilience due to its dynamic and multidimensional nature; a movement of "bounce forward" within a dynamic and evolutionary process of the high street evolution rather than "bounce back" to the pre-shock configuration [7]. F. Rao also claims that *"the resilience of the retail system is hardly based on a static equilibrium. Rather, it is more geared toward a strong adaptive capacity, a continuous evolution"* (Contribution 2). Involving change or reinvention, adaptive resilience may act as *"a precursor to securing a more transformative future"* (De Verteuil and Golubchikov (2016) in Contribution 3).

A revision of literature allows T. Barata-Salgueiro and P. Guimarães to highlight similarities and differences between the concepts of resilience and sustainability and conclude that, *"when both concepts integrate spatial planning and urban management, they reinforce each other. The resilience thinking in urban retail is very much related with both sustainability and the territorial dimension"* (Contribution 4). The study of two malls in Chile also points to the complexity of the retail resilience concept when used without a relationship with sustainability. Indeed, from the urban retail perspective, the resilience idea works better when focused in retail areas. It is quite interconnected with sustainability and conceptually close to the adaptive resilience, the ability of a system to anticipate or recognize shocks and to adapt or reorganize in the face of them without failing to perform its functions of assuring the satisfaction of consumer needs in a sustainable way [8,9].

2. On Retail Changes

The main factors attributed to street retailing decline are out-of-town retailing and shopping (a locational shift) and the rise of online or internet shopping (a channel shift), as L. Sparks puts it (Contribution 1). One could add changes in the urban environment

(physical decay, accessibility reduction) or in the neighborhood composition. The channel shift threatens all shops and not only the street ones. In the articles that compose this Special Issue, retail change is discussed mainly under these main topics: the challenges brought by online retailing, problems associated to consumers' access to retail and services, commercial gentrification, the city center and attitudes and discourses on sustainable consumption.

While in the background of most of the texts, internet retailing is explicitly focused by F. Rao, and J.F. Delgado-de Miguel, T.M. Buil-López, M.A. Esteban-Navarro and M.A. García-Madurga. Placing retail resilience in the context of the challenges brought to retail systems by online sales, the aim of the research conducted by these last authors is to identify the expectations offered by local online selling platforms to small retail businesses. Through interviews, the authors found a positive attitude toward digitalization but the existence of multiple barriers to digitize the businesses. The most important factors that determine the attitudes toward online shopping platforms are the size of the company and its previous presence and experience in the online world. To offer a local online marketplace can mean a real change in the status quo in terms of the commercialization models of small local retail in big cities to overcome the barriers some small retailers find in the access to e-commerce, and thus to enhancing their survival, while stimulating their cooperation (Contribution 5).

Nobody anticipates the end of brick-and-mortar retail space with the expansion of online retailing. On the contrary, F. Rao employs the concept of retail resilience to explore the ways in which different material forms of shopping may persist as online retailing proliferates. Observations, interviews and mapping allow this author to find that brick-and-mortar retail space is being increasingly developed into various shopping spaces geared toward the urban experience "*through diverse changes, experiments, and adaptations*". Underlining the importance of urbanity, a combination of density, mix of uses and walkability that enhances social interrelationships, F. Rao looks for the transformation of retail at two scales, the individual shop and the agglomeration of shops in the main street, suburban malls and retail parks, and shows that the trend toward the urban experience leads to different impacts on these retail groupings (Contribution 2).

Some types of retail change may increase vulnerabilities of people, often associated with gentrification. The authors in this Special Issue denounce the risks of gentrification associated with retail-led regeneration due to its effects on real estate values, replacement of traditional shops by corporate stores with homogenization of retailscapes, marginalization of residents and threats to the very identity of places.

Aiming to carry out a critical analysis on the retail policies associated with the urban commercial change of the Naples city center, R. Somella and L. D'Alessandro consider that the changing relationship between consumption practices, retail dynamics and policies creates a sort of hybridization of commercial and consumption central cityscapes, produced by the coexistence between retail-led phenomena of regeneration and forms of local resistance, and identify several tensions and paradoxes. Tensions are due to the pressures from below and punctual interventions from above, forms of glocalization of retail and consumption and regeneration mixed with formal and informal entertainment. Urban renewal leverages on post-modern forms of retail and consumption but, because of the recall to authenticity, uniqueness and typicality, it seems to threaten the traditional connection between the historical fabric, its shops and its inhabitants. In general, the relationship between processes, actors and projects seems fragmented in the absence of an adequate response in the urban retail forms of governance, weakness and dispersion of policies and lack of coordination of planning and retail (Contribution 6).

There is agreement that public policy must search for solutions that guarantee the access and supply of basic goods and services to local communities, either preventing the spread of "food deserts" or city forms that increase distances and make access to services difficult. Two articles point to the danger of "food deserts" spreading due to the replacement of traditional retailers by corporate retail and gentrification. M. Trembošová and I. Jakab compare the spatial distribution of food deserts measured by the time availability of food stores in a medium-sized city, Nitra (Slovakia), between 2008 and 2019. These

authors found an increase in the distance to the nearest grocer and identified two areas where supply problems are most likely to occur, the southern periphery and the eastern fringe of the city center. They explain these trends mainly by the entry of foreign chains with concentration of retail businesses, the extensive housing construction and process of gentrification. This is taking place mainly in the second area in which middle-class families occupy the older inner-city districts originally occupied by the lower-income population (Contribution 7).

D. Kim and J. Park examine the equity of pedestrian accessibility to neighborhood retail and service (NRS) establishments in Seoul, Korea, highlighting the main retail changes from 1993 (the large discount stores, the online retailing and commercial gentrification). The quantitative analysis shows that access to NRSs is equitable in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics; it also allowed the identification of different types of shopping behavior across residents, differentiated by age group, income, household size and architectural environment. Once accessibility and equity can be influenced by urban planning and urban form, the authors suggest that urban planners and designers should contemplate ways to enhance the walkability of the residents and continually monitor accessibility to prevent urban problems, such as food deserts and retail deserts (Contribution 8).

Framed by formal rehabilitation or regeneration policies or informally triggered by stakeholders' decisions, many districts are in stages of gentrification processes through culture, art and cafes, which may have positive effects on the vitality of these neighborhoods but also well-known negative impacts. H. Ryu, D. Kim and J. Park bring examples from Seoul. Applying cluster analysis to data (photos to identify types of industries and vacancies) on 13 commercial streets, from 2015 to 2019, the study identifies the different phases of the commercial gentrification in residential areas corresponding to the increasing presence of shops with large-scale capital; therefore, these authors consider that *"different policies are needed for different stages and pre-emptive management measures to prevent the growth of franchises and the homogenization"* (Contribution 9).

L. De Simone and M. Pezoa discuss the discrepancies between the environmental effects of large retail buildings to the surrounding areas, in terms of deforestation and the rise in surface temperature, and the corporate discourses these retailers have on the environment and sustainability to the public and local authorities, looking at two of the biggest shopping centers in Santiago de Chile. The research starts a discussion to understand the disruption in retail systems, both from socioeconomic and environmental indicators. The authors recall that, in past decades, the most significant private investments in urban real estate have been retail-led developments by local and foreign capitals, supported by marketing campaigns to revert public opinion concerns and obtain the local authorities' construction permissions, discourse the authors consider a case of *"greenwashing"*. Furthermore, the reaction of the retail system through the replacement of small-scale businesses by bigger stores, in the surroundings of the malls, can be seen, *"has adapted in economic terms but has challenged the system equilibrium in sustainable ways, both social and environmental"* (Contribution 10).

In contrast to the damaging environmental impacts of large food retail organizations, M.G. McEachern, G. Warnaby and C. Moraes highlight the alternative brought to food retail provision by the social sector, represented by the community-led food retailers (CLFRs) in the UK. Using spatial and relational resilience theories, and drawing on interviews, these authors establish the complex links between community, place, social relations, moral values and resilience in the concept of community resilience and examine the extent to which community-led food retailers contribute to the resilience and sustainability of urban retail systems and communities in the UK. Furthermore, these authors suggest more attention be paid to small, independent retailers as they possess a broader, more diffuse spatiality and societal impact, local embeddedness. CLFRs challenge the dominant modus operandi of large food retailing and contribute to efforts to re-embed food production and consumption within a social system (Contribution 3).

The COVID 19 pandemic helped to rediscover the interest of physical proximity with basic goods and services accessible in a radius of a 15- or 20-min walk. L. Frago presents the text more centered in the effects of the pandemic in Barcelona, a city that has been considered an example of over-tourism, with the collapse of international visitors. This author underlines the variation of the effects in different retail categories and different retail areas. Neighborhood stores captured part of the income that, before the pandemic, went to coffee shops and eateries and have been favored by public ordinances, as they have been classified as basic service. In two specialized areas of the city center, the text shows the lower impacts on the luxury retail compared with the ones on a street specialized in eating and drinking places (Contribution 11).

3. On Policies

Retailers have a significant role in sustainability and resilience due to their position in the supply chain between producers and customers, in the employment, in the social life and livability of places. So, the use of retail by policymakers to structure cities and promote economic growth and livable places is well understood. Policy toward city retailing tends to encompass and swing between the enforcement of retail modernization and the protection of retail spaces, mainly represented by the opposition between the modern out-of-town retail and the town center. The first is supported by ideas of competition and efficiency that bring advantages for consumers, despite some negative impacts on the spatial structure of cities, both environmental and social. The second focuses on some stores (basic goods shops, historical shops [10]) and retail spaces, mostly at the neighborhood level, that offer convenience, and the city center, for plenty of well-known reasons.

Policies have changed over time, following the dynamics of the retail industry and variation in consumers' ways of life. Progressively, policy and planning goals became more clearly related with sustainable economic growth and resilience, trying to enhance the viability and vitality of town centers as important places for local economies and communities.

Concerned with the policy for towns and town centers in the UK, and especially in Scotland, L. Sparks recognizes they had success in protecting town centers, trying to improve their viability, but this approach *"does not go far enough, when new National Outcomes based around the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are considered"*. This leads the author to point to the *"need to revisit the reasons we intervene in the market, particularly in the light of demand for places (towns) to be healthier, greener, and more sustainable, given the climate emergency and sustainable goals"*, and the author enounces five tensions that need to be considered in this process (Contribution 1).

The knowledge of the vulnerabilities and the level of local capabilities are important for the design of resilience strategies to overcome them. The most common examples of dealing with spatial vulnerabilities are met both by rehabilitation policies and by collaborative forms of governance, such as the BIDs (Business Improvement Districts). New forms of shared governance between local businesses and public authorities were applied to deal with threats to retail areas, especially in the anglophone countries, spreading to other contexts afterwards. The interest of knowing the activities of these forms of urban governance led D.G. Silva and H. Cachinho to perform an analysis of 72 BIDs' plans to identify the activities programmed and how they evolved in time. Contrary to the idea that *"clean green and safe"* were the first priorities for BIDs in their early operations, the authors found not very important changes in the relative weight of the priorities' clusters, in general. While there was not a strong need to invest in *"clean, green and safe"* services in the BIDs surveyed, recent environmental concerns with sustainability may contribute to reverse this trend. Two other recent changes were also identified by these authors. The first aimed at *"introducing 'socioeconomic hygiene practices' ... mostly making increased use of surveillance capitalism tactics to enhance the 'place coolness' and 'business atmosphere' of the area"*. The other deals with the advent of digital marketing. Although few, *"some*

plans start reporting digital marketing services, such as mobile apps and click and collect services” (Contribution 12).

R. Somella and L. D’Alessandro mention that, in many cities or districts, the “vulnerability has become even more differentiated and selective not only because of the recent urban change but also, because commercial change has not found an adequate response in the retail policies . . . often characterized by weakness and fragmentation and not based on a real harmonization of the policies for the city and those for retail” (Contribution 6).

Without denying some specificities of retail regulation, several observations point to the advantages of integrating retail with the spatial policy at different scales, from town centers to neighborhoods or communities and regions. Local authorities have promoted retail-led regeneration schemes on deprived inner cities, integrating retail and services to attract new businesses and users, aiming to improve their vitality and enhance creativity. T. Barata-Salgueiro and P. Guimarães discuss how cities have coped with retail changes, giving special emphasis to public policy and the value of resilience and sustainability for the analysis of urban retail systems’ change on the Lisbon city center. They look at two scales focusing on the change of the commercial fabric of the city center and a specific retail format, a traditional market also located in the central city, to show how the evolution of both come from the same policy will. The Lisbon center shows several changes on the retail fabric and the study points both to the importance of policy decision at different levels of government and the links between public initiatives and private entrepreneurship, and their impacts for the transformation of the image of the city and the vitality of the core. However, over-tourism and the renovation of the commercial fabric, with the evolution from shopping space to consumption spaces polarized by culture and entertainment, the increasing presence of chains and brands can question the identity of the city core in favor of a more standard international retailscape which may threaten its resilience (Contribution 4).

4. Shall We Rethink Our Narratives?

Some articles in this issue point to the need to deconstruct certain narratives, either the “death of the city centre” (L. Sparks), the homogenization of retailscapes (R. Somella and L. D’Alessandro), the discourse of big retailers in terms of greenery and sustainability (L. De Simone and M. Pezoa), as they may blur the understanding of cities’ complexity and hinder the necessary intervention.

The death of the city center is a cyclic problem, coming from new developments either of the city-built form, technological challenges (mainly on mobility and information) and patterns of life and consumption, which require new models for planning, policy and governance. The “death of the high street” narrative in the UK reflects a socially constructed situation, but one that is not inevitable; it can be reversed by rethinking and stating what is important in our social, economic and cultural identities at the town level (Contribution 1).

The homogenization emerges from the replacement of “unique shops” by franchise stores and large capitalized corporations (Contribution 9) rooted in gentrification processes, sometimes facilitated by urban regeneration policies inspired “*in the global processes of urban competition, city branding, and commodification of the city*” (Contribution 6). Retail gentrification is sometimes connected with creative lifestyles or touristification that leads to displacement of both the traditional users and the previous convenience retail and services, placing new problems to the most vulnerable people still staying in the place.

The contradictory tension caused by retailers’ corporate and retail discourses in Santiago de Chile versus the environmental effects of their buildings in their urban surroundings brings many questions into how marketing discourse can be measured, acknowledged and accountable. There are still no clear public policies that guide the planning and installation of these urban megaprojects to pursue a sustainable future (Contribution 10).

Emerging from urban regeneration of the city center or the reuse of buildings, urban policy tends to integrate retail policy in a framework aiming to increase resilience and build

a transition toward sustainability, although it is not effective in Naples and looking for a ‘radical shift’ in Scotland.

The articles in this Special Issue bring important observations on city retail systems’ resilience and sustainability, but still many questions remain open for research and inquiry. The more we discuss and encourage resilient and sustainable approaches to urban retail systems, the greater the likelihood of our cities growing toward more sustainable paths of life.

To accomplish this Special Issue of *Sustainability on Urban Retail Systems: Vulnerability, Resilience and Sustainability* took more time than planned, partly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now that the articles are already published, it is time to express our recognition to our author colleagues for their much valuable contributions to this Special Issue. We extend our appreciation to peer reviewers for their availability to work on the previous versions of the texts and the valuable suggestions made which enabled a real improvement on the articles. Finally, our gratitude to the MDPI *Sustainability* Editorial Office for their support in all the tasks to achieve the goals proposed, with a special mention to Ms. Joan Wang, the most dedicated and helpful contact editor we could have.

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Appendix A

List of Contributions:

1. Sparks, L. Towns, High Streets and Resilience in Scotland: A Question for Policy?
2. Rao, F. Resilient Forms of Shopping Centers Amid the Rise of Online Retailing: Towards the Urban Experience.
3. McEachern, M.G.; Warnaby, G.; Moraes, C. The Role of Community-Led Food Retailers in Enabling Urban Resilience.
4. Barata-Salgueiro, T.; Guimarães, P. Public Policy for Sustainability and Retail Resilience in Lisbon City Center.
5. Delgado-de Miguel, J. F.; Buil-López, T. M.; Esteban-Navarro, M-Á; García-Madurga, M-Á. Proximity Trade and Urban Sustainability: Small Retailers’ Expectations Towards Local Online Marketplaces.
6. Somella, R.; D’Alessandro, L. Retail Policies and Urban Change in Naples City Center: Challenges to Resilience and Sustainability from a Mediterranean City.
7. Trembošová, M.; Jakab, I. Spreading of Food Deserts in Time and Space: The Case of the City of Nitra (Slovakia).
8. Kim, D.; Park, J. Assessing Social and Spatial Equity of Neighborhood Retail and Service Access in Seoul, South Korea.
9. Ryu, H.; Kim, D.; Park, J. Characteristics Analysis of Commercial Gentrification in Seoul. Focusing on the Vitalization of Streets in Residential Areas.
10. De Simone, L.; Pezoa, M. Urban Shopping Malls and Sustainability. Approaches in Chilean Cities: Relations between Environmental Impacts of Buildings and Greenwashing Branding Discourses.
11. Frago, L.C. Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Retail Structure in Barcelona: From Tourism-Phobia to the Desertification of City Center.
12. Silva, D. G.; Cachinho, H. Places of phygital shopping experiences? The new supply frontier of Business Improvement Districts in the Digital Age.

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