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**Article**

## Elevating Shopping Experiences Through Digital Technologies - The Case of Retail Agglomerations

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# Marketing Review St. Gallen



6 | 2018 **SCHWERPUNKT** Interview mit Meik Krauthausen, Swisscom • Displays am PoS • Akzeptanz von Servicerobotern • Inspiration am PoS • Digitalisierung von Kundenerlebnissen • Technologien im Retail der Schweiz **SPEKTRUM** Social-Media-Marketing • Sportsponsoring • Zukunft des Luxus-Retail **INSIGHTS** DXC Technology: Innovativer und unabhängiger Technologiepartner • Sprinkl: Authentische Markenbotschaft dank Social Display **KOMMENTAR** Vom Branding zur Kaufauslösung: Damit sich die Werbung auszahlt

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## Digitalisierung am PoS

# Elevating Shopping Experiences Through Digital Technologies

## The Case of Retail Agglomerations

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Increasingly seizing the opportunities digitalisation offers, physical retail agglomerations such as city centres, shopping centres and High Streets draw on digital applications to elevate customer experiences. From a marketing perspective, the challenge lies in finding and implementing those types of digital applications that consumers find both useful and easy to use. Based on a series of qualitative interviews with shoppers, this article provides a guide to the management of retail agglomerations to successfully digitise their customers' shopping experience.

**Amela Dizdarevic, M.A., Prof. Heiner Evanschitzky, Prof. Christof Backhaus**

**W**hile online shopping is still on the rise, traditional retailing faces enormous challenges. This becomes particularly evident in the case of smaller cities, where once well-functioning traditional city centre and High Street retail agglomerations increasingly suffer from high vacancy rates and downgrading tendencies. Nevertheless, most buying decisions are still made offline. Instead of only considering innovative technologies as a threat, digitalisation – and in particular the convergence of online and offline retailing – might be viewed as an opportunity to enhance the traditional shopping experience and an agglomeration's overall attractiveness as a shopping destination. Through digital technologies, retailers can engage with customers in a different way, delivering additional benefits at the point of sale. For example, online shoppers are used to being provided with large assortments, in-depth information and easy and convenient product selection and thus increasingly demand such features when shopping offline as well (Stüber/Velden/Mischer 2016). In store environments, such features can be incorporated into the customer journey as well. Effectively supporting the creation of an authentic, engaging and inspiring shopping experience (e.g., Böttger et al. 2017), digital applications are therefore promising as a means to counter the crisis traditional retailing is facing.

This article investigates the use of technologies delivering digital services in a traditional retail environment along the customer journey (Berman/Evans 2013). By embracing emerging technologies, brick-and-mortar retailers can target appropriate customers by helping them to make better decisions and thereby make them more engaged. The qualitative-exploratory study focuses on three types of traditional retail agglomerations, namely shopping centres, High Streets and town centres. In particular, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- Which devices and platforms are expected to deliver digital services?
- Which digital services are considered as helpful by customers and at which stage(s) of the customer journey is their application preferred?
- What drives consumers' acceptance of using digital technologies?

By shedding light on the interplay between traditional retailing and digital technologies based on customer insights, guidance for decision-makers to strengthen the overall destination experience is provided.

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## **Theoretical Background**

### Definitions of the Examined Retail Agglomerations

Retail agglomerations can be defined as the spatial concentration of individual businesses like retailers and service providers in one place (Müller-Hagedorn/Toporowski/Zielke 2012; Teller/Alexander/Floh 2016; Teller/Reutterer 2008). Such agglomerations can consist of identical or dissimilar retail formats like department stores, specialised shops or supermarkets. The shopping centre format examined in this research is classified as a planned agglomeration with salesroom and central management. It is larger than 20 000 m<sup>2</sup> and is located in towns as well as out-of-town (International Council of Shopping Centers 2006). In contrast, town or city centres and also High Streets represent naturally grown commercial areas which can be classified as unplanned retail formats without exact borders (Berman/Evans 2013; Gomes/Paula 2017; Teller/Alexander/Floh 2016; Teller/Reutterer 2008). With re-

gard to High Streets, this study focuses on traditional large to medium-sized forms located in city centres.

### Retail Agglomeration Attractiveness

Taking into account the definition of identity attractiveness in the research context of omnichannel retailing (Li et al. 2017), retail agglomeration attractiveness is defined as a retail agglomerations' appealing characteristics that are able to satisfy the needs of customers.

While the retail marketing literature provides a range of conceptual and empirical insights on the drivers of retail agglomeration attractiveness, the following aspects limit the transferability of existing insights to address the question if and how digital services can help to raise consumers' attractiveness perceptions in the context of a High Street or Shopping Centre visit. First, the literature focuses on physical attributes as antecedent to customers' attraction to retail agglomerations. Among the factors most widely covered are access, retail mix and atmosphere (El-Adly 2007; Teller/Reutterer 2008; Wong/Yu 2003; Wong/Yu/Yuan 2001). While a few approaches have explicitly considered the role of service in enhancing the perceived attractiveness (Wong/Yu 2003; Wong/Yu/Yuan 2001), little recognition is provided to assess digital touchpoints that customers consider as relevant in their journey. Second, existing studies typi-

cally consider one retail agglomeration format only (Anselmsson 2016; El-Adly 2007; El Hedhli/Chebat 2009; Finn/Louviere 1996; Hart/Stachow/Cadogan 2013; Wong/Yu/Yuan 2001) and thus do not allow for generalisations across different forms of retail agglomerations. Only few attempts have been made to compare multiple retail contexts (e.g., in shopping centres and High Streets: Teller/Reutterer 2008; in downtown areas and shopping centres: Nevin/Houston 1980). Third, many studies assessing agglomeration attractiveness are based on retail gravitation models arguing that a customer's choice of a retail agglomerations is mainly affected by the size of the selling area representing the assortment offer and the distance or travel time between the customer and the retail area (Anselmsson 2016; Dennis/Marsland/Cockett 2002; Nevin/Houston 1980; Severin/Louviere/Finn 2001; Wong/Yu/Yuan 2001). However, geographic approaches have been challenged for being too broad and unrealistic in terms of shopping behaviour (Hart/Stachow/Cadogan 2013; Timmermans 1981). Also, digitalisation tends to dilute the role of spatial distance in the given context, as it allows shoppers to engage independent from the location through an internet-capable device.

### Technology Acceptance

Studies examining the acceptance and usage of information systems, digital technologies and shopping through digital devices (Davis/Bagozzi/Warshaw 1989; Evanschitzky et al. 2015; Hubert et al. 2017; King/He 2006) typically draw on the technology acceptance model (TAM), which suggests that a customer's usage intention and actual use of a new technology is influenced by its perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis/Bagozzi/Warshaw 1989). In the case of shopping, perceived usefulness is defined as the extent to which a customer believes that using a digital service technology will enhance his or her task performance. The degree to which a customer believes that using a digital service technology will be free of effort refers to perceived ease of use (Davis/Bagozzi/Warshaw 1989; Hubert et al. 2017). Hence, to understand the acceptance and usage of information systems in retail agglomerations, predictors and antecedents of the intended and actual usage of service technologies are explored and analysed.

### Research Design

The empirical study draws on face-to-face in-depth interviews with UK-based consumers that were conducted be-

### Management Summary

1. No longer only physical factors like availability and tenant mix, but also digital technologies are considered as an opportunity to deliver value to customers of retail agglomerations along the customer journey.
2. A range of digital services facilitating the shopping experience can be provided through mobile and fixed devices, which are owned by the retail agglomeration or the customer, with preference for services delivered on own mobile devices.
3. Predictors and antecedents of the usage intention by means of usability and ease of use of information technologies are analysed to understand the acceptance process of digital services.

**Table 1: Overview of Digital Devices**

Type	Belongs to	Retail agglomeration	Customer
Mobile		Mobile phone Tablet Laptop	Mobile phone Tablet Laptop
Fixed		Display board Mounted tablets Self-service machines Customer service terminals	Computer

Source: Own table.

tween October and December 2017. In sum, 30 participants – ten for each retail agglomeration type – were interviewed, with the sample size determined on the basis of data saturation (Saunders/Townsend 2016). One interview took 24 minutes on average. Respondents were 18 to 56 years old (mean: 31.7 years). Gender distribution was 50.0% male and 50.0% female. The sampling process of the test subjects took place on a purposive basis, hence participants were chosen by the researcher's decision (Bryman/Bell 2015; Saunders/Lewis/Thornhill 2016). Considering the research aim of the project, a standardised interview guide was designed with open questions about a customer's latest shopping trip to a retail agglomeration. By following established guidelines (Braun/Clarke 2006; Saldaña 2016), the interviews were transcribed and evaluated by means of a qualitative content analysis with the help of the data analysis software Nvivo.

## Empirical Findings

### Shopping Typologies

To ensure that the participants' answers correspond to retail agglomerations and not to single stores, an offline interview setting was chosen. Due to the abstract meaning of digital services, a proper understanding of the topic was facilitated by offering examples. To not limit the relevance of the results by only asking offline shoppers, the online shopping behaviour was enquired additionally. The results indicate that 97% of the subjects shop online and offline with a range of online shopping from 'rare' (once or twice per year) and 'occasionally' (once or twice a month) to 'heavy' (once or

twice a week). It was ensured that – despite the offline context of the research topic – the sample was heterogeneous with regard to the shopping behaviours of respondents.

### Value-adding Devices and Platforms

With regard to the different types of devices, respondents' answers indicate that both mobile and fixed devices, provided by the shopping area or by the customers themselves, can generally add value to the customer experience (see table 1).

Within the group of mobile devices, mobile phones as well as laptop- and tablet-based applications can add value. Typical fixed devices within the retail agglomeration are display boards, also called digital signage or – as larger format – digital walls (Stüber/Velden/Mischer 2016). These devices normally do not have an interactive function, but are electronically updateable and can serve as scoreboard to provide information on advertisements, promotions and routing. Fixed, interactive devices include self-service machines for automated checkouts, mounted tablets and customer service terminals. In contrast to self-service machines, mounted tablets and customer service terminals can deliver the same services-, but on devices that differ in size. Using mounted or mobile tablets provided by the retailer, the customer can browse through the information without having other passers-by looking at the display. Customer service terminals, also called virtual shopping shelves (Stüber/Velden/Mischer 2016), are usually of a larger size, with the information displayed for everyone around. For mobile technologies, there is a preference of customers to use their own devices, above all mobile phones, to access information digitally. Most fixed

devices are provided by the retailer, except for computers that can be used before the shopping trip to access specific information.

The platforms delivering information are also of importance. Here, participants pointed out that social media accounts, apps, websites and email newsletters are generally seen as value-adding platforms through which retail agglomerations can interact with consumers.

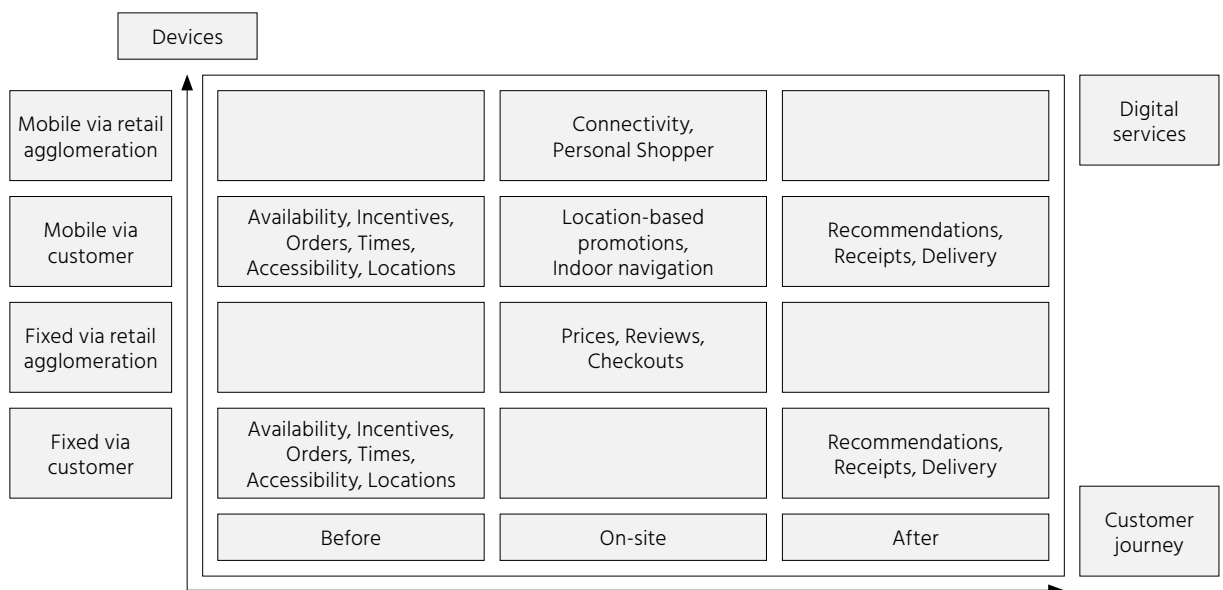
### The Use of Digital Devices Alongside the Customer Journey

As part of the decision-making process whether to purchase in a particular store, consumers search for information and evaluate other store alternatives beforehand (Spiggle/Sewall 1987). The same approach can be applied to decision-making regarding visiting a retail agglomeration. Figure 1 gives an overview of the service applications preferred alongside the temporal stages of the retail agglomeration visit (before, on-site and after) and the type of the device utilised. Customers want to get access to different kinds of information before the shopping trip, on the way to the shopping destination, on-site and afterwards. These findings give evidence that retailers should not only focus on delivering digital

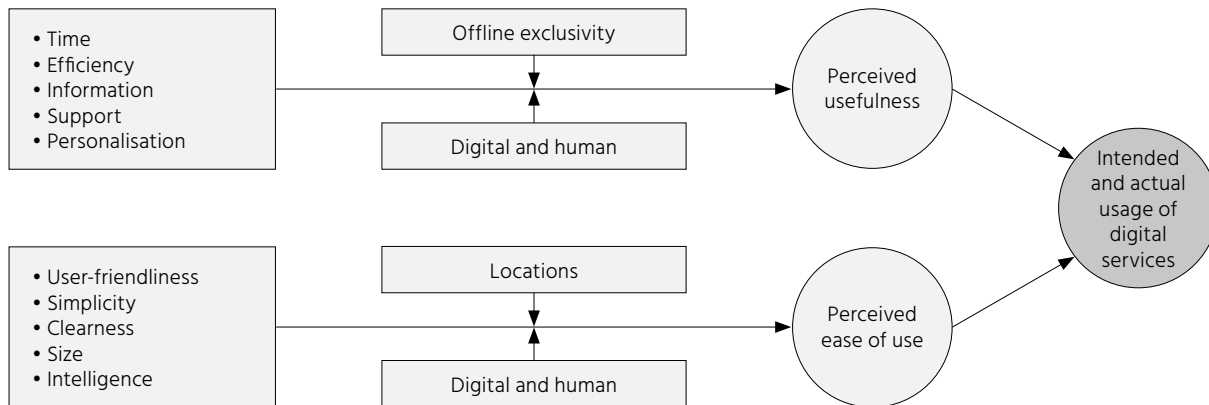
touchpoints at the actual point of sale, but alongside the entire customer journey.

Before traveling to a retail agglomeration or on the way to it, availability checks play a major role. One of the key benefits of traditional retailing is the possibility to check items physically, potentially try them on and take them home immediately. Customers making an effort to travel to a physical retail area do not want to face an out-of-stock situation. Hence, availability checks of stores, brands, products, and also for services such as restaurants and bars are seen as valuable. Further, by providing information about discounts, sales, promotions, offers and events, retailers give customers a reason in advance to visit their shops. When browsing products, customers want to get the possibility to order items online and afterwards collect them offline. By offering such click and collect services or self-service kiosks like Amazon Locker, retailers ensure that customers have a reason to visit the retail agglomeration, with the possibility to engage in offline shopping. Information about opening times, peak times and waiting hours are also appreciated. Customers want to know how to avoid large crowds when visiting a shopping centre or High Street. Further, the locations of all facilities and stores in the area as well as reliable information about connections to and

**Figure 1: Digital Services Alongside the Customer Journey**



Source: Own figure.

**Figure 2: Antecedents of the Usage of Service Technologies in Retail Agglomerations**

Source: Own figure.

traffic around the retail area can be provided to facilitate the journey to the destination.

During the shopping trip, an agglomeration's digital services offering should be similar to the range of services offered before the trip, especially for availability, price and review checks. The main difference in services required by customers during the trip is the increased demand for services delivered on mobile devices, also on their own devices, through an app. With geolocation functions, retailers can notify customers about promotions based on their location. In addition, instead of directions and navigations to the destination, now assistance in form of orientation is required in the retail agglomeration. Especially, digital interactive maps and navigation services offered via mobile phones are an innovative way to lead customers to particular shops, restaurants, or the products they desire. A service gaining more and more attention is the provision of a digital personal shopping assistant through a mobile device owned by the retail agglomeration. By the use of tailored filters, this service helps the customer to locate the most suitable product within the retail agglomeration. In addition, other amenities like charging stations for mobile phones, free Wi-Fi access or self-checkouts are valued by customers.

After completion of the shopping trip, retailers can stay connected with their customers by introducing the possibility to give feedback or recommendations and write reviews about a product or an experience. Also, receipts can be sent digitally for instance per email and delivery times of on-site ordered items can be checked.

### Main Propositions

1. To remain competitive in the digital age, traditional retailing needs to be linked with digital offerings.
2. The selection of the digital device and service depends on the stage of the customer journey.
3. Customers prefer to use their own devices, above all mobile phones.
4. Only digital services that are perceived as timesaving, efficient and exclusive are considered useful.
5. The location of the device and the possibility to complement digital assistance with human help is key.

Due to different customer preferences, it is advisable for retail agglomerations to offer an assortment of devices varying in particular in display size. However, figure 1 shows that for the choice of the service, the stage of the customer journey is more significant than the device. Before and after the visit of the point of sale, customers' access services considered as beneficial via their own devices, with a preference for mobile ones. Independent of the device, the applied services are similar per stage. Within the retail agglomera-



## Lessons Learned

1. Do not consider emerging digital technologies as a threat and do not try to ignore them, but embrace them as a chance to interact with your customer in a new way.
2. Try to provide digital services along the whole customer journey since not only their application and use on-site while shopping, but also after and especially before the trip is appreciated.
3. Offer tailored and personalised digital services to your customers through filters and queries, enabling the screening of the interests and needs of the user.
4. As customers appreciate the combination of digital and human assistance, staff needs to be trained to work with the technologies.
5. Keep in mind that customers want to be able to decide for themselves when and how to use the offered services – so do not overwhelm them with digital assistance.

tion, customers prefer to use their own devices, provided that the desired service is available that way. For specific services like checkouts or personal shoppers, customers are willing to use fixed or mobile devices provided by the retail agglomeration. Hence, management decision-making regarding device selection plays a greater role at this level.

## Acceptance of Digital Innovations

Frequently, innovations of any kind are first viewed sceptically by customers (Stüber/Velden/Mischer 2016). Based on the TAM, figure 2 shows a summary of predictors and antecedents of the intended and actual usage of service technologies in retail agglomerations based on the interviews.

To accelerate the acceptance of fixed and mobile technologies, the digital services provided need to be useful rather than entertaining, with time and efficiency being key. When using such technologies, customers want to get ‘their work’ done easier and faster with the device, rather than having to approach staff. Digital technologies are mainly considered useful due to the possibility to browse products and apply filters. Personalising the experience allows for an easier decision regarding what to find and buy. As these functions are also available while shopping online from home or work, the sole application of digital

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services that already exist in online retailing is not sufficient. Delivering exclusivity through, for instance, on-site promotions that are only available for visitors opening the app while physically present in (or close to) the retail agglomeration are considered as an incentive to visit an offline retail environment and use the service technology delivering such benefits.

Further, customers do not want to queue to get information from a device. They consider it beneficial to be able to help themselves so that the usage of their own devices or devices that can be operated without the assistance of staff are preferred. However, participants view the combination of digital and personal assistance as complementary. Thus, digital devices like service terminals could be equipped with a function to locate or call employees nearby. Such features can only be presented offline and are a big plus compared to pure online retailing.

Ease of use has a further direct impact on the usage and acceptance of digital services. Devices need to be user-friendly and easy to operate. This is ensured by designing a proper screen with an intuitive menu allowing the customer to navigate easily through the software. Most importantly, the device should ‘understand’ and complete the desired task immediately as customers are reluctant to spend time learning how to operate it. In this case as well, the possibil-

ity of providing all choices from digital application to a human service encounter is considered as the great advantage of a physical store environment in comparison to pure online shopping. Additionally, in the case of digital technologies provided by retail agglomerations, well displayed devices in multiple locations are essential.

### Conclusion and Implications

One aim of this study is to support decision makers in retail agglomerations regarding the use of digital services delivered through mobile and fixed devices along the customer journey. Management has the most influence with device selection within the retail agglomeration, whereby the preference of customers visiting retail agglomerations is to use own mobile devices. Independent of the device, the services are similar per stage with a focus on availability checks before, exclusive location-based promotions while and reviews after the customer journey. By concentrating on the potential of digital services and the understanding of the customer acceptance process, strategies in dependence of the respective retail agglomeration and target group can be adjusted as well as newly developed to strengthen the overall destination experience and enhance economic performance. 

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