Designing a memorable in-store customer shopping experience: practical evidence from sports equipment retailers

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to detect the dimensions of the in-store customer shopping experience from the sports retailer perspective and to investigate how the role of sports equipment stores is changing.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory study performs semi-structured interviews with retail managers of sports equipment stores.

Findings – This research reveals the importance of the dimensions of immersive design, sensorial ambient elements, social relationships, trialability and real experience sharing in designing a memorable in-store shopping experience in sports stores, and it highlights that the store's role in the sports context is transitioning from sales space to an interactive, immersive, engaging and convivial place. It proposes a model to design the in-store customer shopping experience effectively.

Practical implications – Sports equipment managers can make their physical stores as experiential as possible by investing in expert, passionate personnel and technology in order to create a real in-store experience of the product and the sports practice.

Originality/value – While sports equipment retailers acknowledge the importance of providing customers with a memorable shopping experience by creating an evocative environment and placing multiple touchpoints in stores, management scholars have paid limited attention to sports stores. This study explores the ways in which sports retail managers can design their stores effectively in experiential terms.

Keywords Experiential design, Sport store environment, Sporting goods retailers, Sport global brands, Customer journey, In-store technology

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the current context of increasing market competition, the retail industry is highly exposed to the revolutionary changes imposed by the web, e-commerce and digitalization (Hagberg *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, many retailers are designing retail environments that provide their customers with a memorable customer shopping experience (CSE) (e.g. Verhoef *et al.*, 2009; Triantafillidou *et al.*, 2017) as competitive answer to the threat of online retailers.

Providing a memorable CSE resides at the core of the sports retail experience economy. Sports equipment retailers invest in creating a memorable in-store CSE by following distinctive strategic directions. They establish a customer's purchase journey in experiential terms by creating specific, evocative store environments, leveraging some atmospheric

elements and placing multiple touchpoints in stores (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), such as smartphones, monitors and digital video walls related to sports, to amaze, stimulate the senses of, involve and, in some ways, even excite, their customers.

However, sports, retail and service management scholars have paid less attention to the in-store CSE topic. Some studies have focused on the sports store's environment (i.e. servicescape, Bitner, 1992) both in physical and digital terms (Koontz and Gibson, 2002), and store atmospherics, especially music (Kapoor, 2016). Certain studies have examined the sports shopping behaviour by proposing a scale to measure sports CSE and identifying relationships with other elements, such as overall satisfaction and brand repurchase intentions (Mortimer et al., 2018). Other studies have considered the role of themed flagship brand stores in promoting a more pleasing experience of the brand itself and satisfying consumers who seek to combine entertainment and shopping (Kozinets et al., 2002). Given that the in-store CSE in the sports context draws on studies and models of service and retail management, the research conducted thus far about this topic in the sport context is in its infancy, and scholarly knowledge remains limited and fragmented, both from theoretical and practical perspectives. In this regard, the following questions emerge: how can sports retail managers design their stores effectively in experiential terms by making the store attractive? And how store is changing?

This study aims to detect the dimensions of the in-store CSE from the retailer perspective to investigate how the role of sports equipment stores is changing. In methodological terms, a qualitative research strategy was used. This exploratory study adopted the inductive research method and performed case studies through interviews with sports equipment retail managers. Content analysis was conducted to identify the in-store CSE dimensions of sports equipment stores, and text mining was performed to examine the role of these stores.

2. Literature review
The in-store CSE can be understood as "a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey" (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). To create a memorable in-store CSE (e.g. Bonfanti et al., 2020), retailers essentially leverage the sales environment by intervening in four dimensions in DAST (design–ambient–social–trialability) model (Roggeveen et al., 2020): (a) design elements, which include the functional and the aesthetic aspects of the store, such as its layout, design and furnishing; (b) environmental factors, which are based on the senses of individual consumers (e.g. sight, sound, smell and touch), and background conditions (e.g. lighting, music, smell, temperature, brightness/contrast, sounds, enhanced zoom feature and entertainment aspects); (c) social characteristics, that is, interactions with people present in the environment (e.g. store employees and other customers); and (d) trialability, which refers to customers' ability to try the product/service, such as by tasting a food sample, trying on clothes or using digital equivalent technologies through augmented or virtual reality, to explore products. In-store CSE is thus a holistic concept (Verhoef et al., 2009) that moves freely across physical and digital channels without distinction, given that their boundaries are always less defined (Verhoef et al., 2015) through the use of customers' mobile devices or interactive devices inside the stores (e.g. Pantano and Gandini, 2018).

Retailers create in-store CSE through multiple store attributes that they can control (Verhoef et al., 2009; Mohd-Ramly and Omar, 2017; Triantafillidou et al., 2017; Terblanche, 2018), such as pricing, assortment, product display, sales personnel, providing of knowledge, product trials, store layout and atmosphere, and several factors that are outside of their control, such as consumers' motivations to visit the store, their mood and time available to

purchase (Bäckström and Johansson, 2006), feelings of fun/entertainment (Lucia-Palacios *et al.*, 2016), and socializing (Bäckström, 2011; Triantafillidou *et al.*, 2017).

Given that in-store CSE incorporates multiple touchpoints that result from engaging all consumer-retailer interactions, technology and digitization, especially interactive technology (Verhoef *et al.*, 2015; Siregar and Kent, 2019), play a key role in facilitating experiential store management by enabling the creation of an attractive environment that makes the CSE engaging and memorable. This is particularly true in the sports retail context, as argued in studies on sports consumer behaviour (Funk, 2017), which highlighted that sports consumption involves experiences based on interactions between individual consumers and the sports environment, which are mediated physically, technologically and digitally (Funk *et al.*, 2012). New technologies help retailers improve the functions of services and allow them to understand and manage their customers' requirements effectively before, during and after purchase as well as to improve their understanding of the competition. These technologies can also help to reduce operating costs and to provide a positive CSE, such as through 24-h access to comprehensive experiences and constantly updated information on sports equipment. In-store technologies used in sports stores, such as radio-frequency identification (RFID), near field communication (NFC) and iBeacon, include multiple retail touchpoints that customers may encounter during their shopping experience. Precisely, RFID technology uses electronic labels, which have tiny chips embedded, to locate and track distant objects by transmitting data wirelessly through radio waves. In addition to lowering costs, the RFID applications are used in CSE improvement perspective. For example, in retail stores RFID tags can be used in place of locking systems for products on sale to improve customers' touch sensation (e.g. Hayes *et al.*, 2011), and RFID antennas can be integrated into informative, advertising or promotional panels to eliminate metal-detector barriers (e.g. Bonfanti, 2016). In the apparel retail industry, RFID hardware devices enable to capture customer shopping behaviour and preferences, to provide customers with intelligent and personalized services in order to enhance the overall CSE (e.g. Choi *et al.*, 2015). In the fashion retail, RFID technology is used to track customer behaviour in real-time to deliver "best practice" shop stewardship and create a more personalised retail experience (Landmark and Sjøbakk, 2017). Further, RFID are used inside the smart fitting rooms in order to gather consumer data for a better personalized shopping experience. Results from two studies indicate that RFID-based smart fitting rooms have a positive effect by increasing purchase intentions only for high-quality brands (Mukherjee *et al.*, 2018). In sport context, RFID is used in communications with tourists and in adventure tourism, as well as in sporting events to automate the timing function and provide accurate race times to all participants (Lee *et al.*, 2008).

NFC allows simple, secure communication between two devices by offering several benefits. Specifically, NFC can make payment transactions easier since consumers only need to have their phones to make a payment (Bradford and Hayashi, 2014). Customers can upload coupons and offers on their smartphones for easy access during transactions (Chen and Chang, 2013). Retailers can place NFC points in their stores to answer consumer questions. A customer just needs to swipe the device over the code to view product information. The ease of use reduces their wait time and increases satisfaction with their experience (Dutot, 2015).

iBeacon uses a low-performance Bluetooth sensor to transmit a universally unique identifier that is captured by a compatible application or operating system. An app distributes messages to a specific point of interest, such as a store or a room, or to a more specific location, such as a cloth, a ball or a vending machine. Because a single iBeacon area can represent multiple iBeacons, monitoring the iBeacon area supports several interesting uses. For example, when a user approaches a store, the app detects the store beacons and uses the significant and secondary values of those beacons to reveal additional information, such as the specific store located or the part of the user's warehouse (Zafari *et al.*, 2017). Stores will

be able to send a message about a product that is near a customer or design notifications to direct customers to another section of the store in order to increase their sales (Inman and Nikolova, 2017). Retailers can also gather information about customers' purchase history and develop offers tailored to their personal interests. "Smart sales" enrich customer experiences and thus enhance the market competitiveness.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study conducts inductive research (Leitch *et al.*, 2010) through case studies to detect the dimensions of in-store CSE from the sports retailer perspective and to investigate how the role of sports equipment stores is changing. This method is employed to make a solid contribution to the limited literature on the topic of in-store CSE in sports stores.

For this study's theoretical sampling, multiple cases were employed in line with Yin's (2003) case study guidelines. Precisely, cases were consciously selected from data sources that met both the unfolding theorizing and the following specific criteria: (a) inclusion of sports equipment retailers active in the European and global market including sports apparel, footwear and equipment manufacturers and retailers, as well as specialist sports retailers; (b) exclusion of general retailers; and (c) inclusion limited to sports equipment retailers investing in experiential – not functionalist – store environments. Thus, 11 sports retailers were identified based on these selection criteria. After contacting them via email for an interview, six owner-managers/directors responded that they were not available to their corporate policy. The five following sports equipment retailers became the eligible target of this study: "Decathlon", "EuroAthletic", and "Tranos Sport" as the specialist sports retailers, and "Adidas" and "Nike" as global brands. Table 1 presents their profiles.

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with the managers of sports retail stores who agreed to contribute to the research. Appointments were finalized for interviews, which were conducted via the telephone or Skype conversations between January and June 2020, each lasting about an hour. The interview protocol included the following three questions: (1) What activities do you perform in your sports store to create a memorable in-store shopping experience? (2) Is real sports experience sharing important today for driving purchases? If so, how does such sharing take place in your store? (3) How has the role of the store changed over time? The purpose was to give extraordinary voice to the informant (Gioia *et al.*, 2013) to inductively codify and categorize emerging aspects about the in-store CSE topic from the sports retailer perspective. With reference to the two global brands investigated, the retail managers contacted have directly suggested consulting specific secondary sources (magazine articles, corporate websites and video-interviews

Sport equipment retailer	Type of sport retailer	Firm's portfolio	Sport store investigated
Adidas group	Sport global brand	Sports apparel, footwear and equipment	Milan (Italy)
EuroAthletic	Specialist sports retailer	Sports', track and field, gyms' and stadiums' equipment	Thessaloniki (Greece)
Decathlon	Sporting goods retailer	Mountain sports equipment, water sports equipment, cycling equipment amongst numerous other products	Villesse, Gorizia (Italy)
Nike	Sport global brand	Sports apparel, footwear and equipment manufacturer and retailer	Milan (Italy)
Tranos Sport	Sporting goods specially for sport clubs	Sportswear, footwear, accessories and fitness equipment	Evosmos, Thessaloniki (Greece)

Table 1.
Profiles of interviewed sports equipment retailers

published on YouTube). This two-step data collection method highlights the behind-the-scenes actions for CSE management and, in contrast, also offers an overall picture of the topic, as Niemi and Pitkänen (2017) have asserted.

Content analysis using the NVivo 11 software to identify the in-store CSE dimensions from the sports retailer perspective was performed according to Gioia's methodology (Nag and Gioia, 2012; Gioia *et al.*, 2013), which enables the detection of patterns in qualitative data as a means to open up nascent research lines or emerging concepts (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Codes were compared to identify similarities and differences and were thus reduced to a manageable number. Each researcher carefully checked and coded the collected data separately to derive first-order concepts. After comparing and sharing coding schemes, any discrepancy was eliminated to obtain a unique coding scheme. An iterative process was undertaken in the second phase, which comprised the development of second-order concepts by reflecting on the first-order categories to identify more abstract constructs, namely, themes. The themes emerging from the second-order concepts were organized on the basis of the extant theory (the DAST model of Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020) in terms of key aggregate dimensions.

A text mining analysis was carried out to examine the changing role of sports equipment stores. Specifically, a correspondence factor analysis was performed via IRaMuTeQ (Interface *R* for the Multi-dimensional Analysis of the Text and the Questionnaires) software that uses functionalities provided by the *R* statistical software. All the interviews and texts were included into a single file that was revised to remove typing and punctuation errors as well as jointing compound words with an underscore. This method enables to examine long texts written or collected without interpretation (Lebart and Salem, 1994) by condensing, classifying and structuring them in comprehensible way.

4. Findings

This section presents immersive design, sensorial ambient elements, social relationships, trialability and real experience sharing as the dimensions of the in-store CSE of sports stores, and proposes engagement, entertainment, education and conviviality as the factors that express the role of the sports equipment stores (Figure 1). A model for effective design of a memorable in-store CSE for the sports store context is provided (Figure 2).

4.1 Dimensions of in-store shopping experience in sports stores

4.1.1 Immersive design. The immersive design dimension that emerged in the interviews about sports stores includes functional and aesthetic elements. In functional terms, sports equipment retailers emphasize on store layout to create a memorable CSE. Some sports equipment retailers invest in generating the "wow effect" by creating unusual and amazing internal architectures that customers do not expect to find when they shop. Specifically, sports stores are designed as themed settings in such a way that they surprise customers, thus giving them a feeling of satisfaction that the online shopping experience is unable to offer. In other words, the sports store layout is built to excite customers – and other visitors to the stores – by immerging them in the sports context. In this regard, the Adidas store manager described as follows:

> The Adidas brand store in Milan reproduces the model of a stadium where visitors, renamed creators, feel they are the absolute protagonists. Customers have the perception of being immersed in a stadium, not simply in a shop. Those who enter our store must feel themselves as in the house of sport. Hence the name of the store: "Home of Creators". The layout of the space favours the use of industrial materials, such as iron, steel nets and concrete for the floor, with metal displays and light wooden seats to create a dressing-room effect.
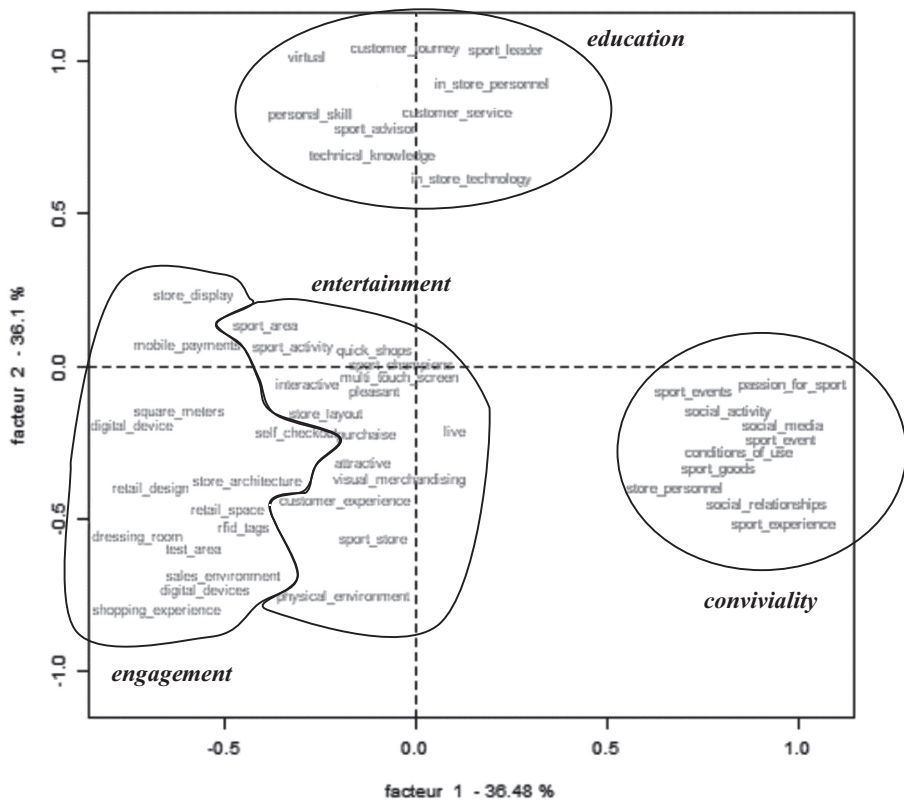
Figure 1.
The role of sports
equipment store
emerging from text-
mining analysis

Nike has also created the stadium concept in its Milan store (the Nike Stadium), as the store manager explained:

> At the layout level, the Nike store develops on two levels to enrich the sales environment with spatial expressiveness. In addition to the steps to attend the games of different sports, the Nike store offers a space for the customization of footwear models and a large area dedicated to women, a segment normally reluctant to identify with the Nike man.

Not only these global sports brand retailers but also sports goods retailers are investing in creating immersive stores in terms of the layout. Precisely, the various sales areas have been organized in such a way that they complement the traditional sales spaces with product test areas. For example, Decathlon's store manager stated:

> Some of our stores propose test areas that are open to the public to allow customers to live an innovative and immersive shopping experience. For example, the store opened in 2016 in Villesse (Gorizia) includes different test areas such as an area of 160 m^2 dedicated to testing skates and rollerblades, a 120-m hiking trail with a multi-surface to simulate different types of terrain, a 60 m^2 swimming pool for exposing and testing kayaks, an area of ski test on a 10 m^2 simulator with a 50-inch monitor, and a multi-sports field of 230 m^2 where you can try football, basketball and volleyball with regulation goals and baskets.

Another functional aspect of CSE improvement regards the checkout barrier that is destined to contract: in many of the stores investigated, the checkout process has been transformed
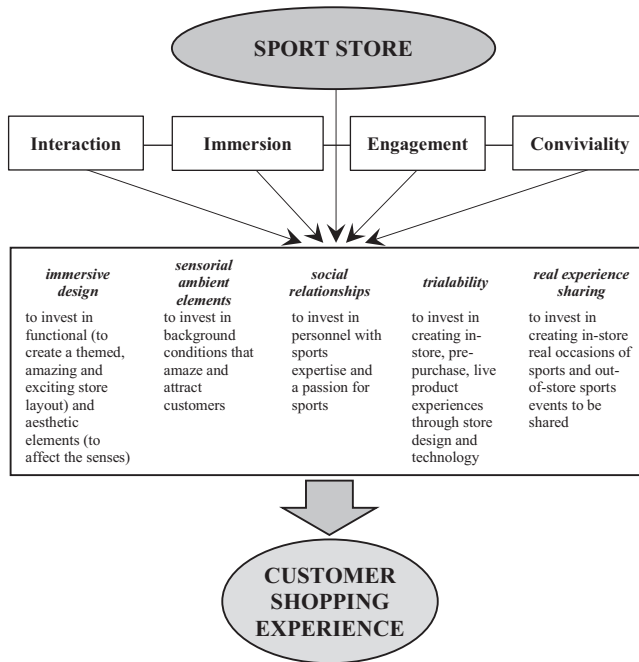
from "stop-and-go" to "scan-and-go" that requires customers to spend as little time as possible on payments for their shopping. The Decathlon store manager explained this:

> Through RFID tags and mobile payments, we enable our customers to use self-checkout kiosks without scanning the products' barcodes when they place items in shopping basket. Leaving the store without checking out will be normal.

In aesthetical terms, all these sports retailers outline the importance of colour and style as well as accessories and merchandise presentation (display organization) to design a memorable in-store CSE. All these elements guarantee a powerful impact on the visual and touch senses. For example, the Adidas store manager outlined:

> To create the immersion feeling as in a stadium, all store architectural elements, such as the steps and corridors, along with atmospheric aspects, such as colours and graphical styles of the walls, are designed to reproduce the stadium idea.

The Nike store manager clarified:

> The atmosphere of the stadium is reproduced through different aesthetic elements, especially visual, recovering pre-existing walls and architectural elements, sandblasting the walls and columns, creating steps in painted perforated sheet metal, placing concrete walls and using backlit display volumes.

The merchandise presentation is specific in Decathlon, as the store manager said:

> All the equipment is used to make the product clearly visible together with the brand and allow the customer to collect all the technical characteristics on the product itself. The visual order is guaranteed through a vertical display of the products. The gondola head houses 1 product – 1 price.

The lane opens with a panel indicating the information of the sport practice and with the offer of the lowest price blue products.

In terms of the immersive design dimension, all sports retailers are investing on a themed, amazing and exciting store layout both with functional and aesthetic elements in order to create immersive and engaging CSE.

4.1.2 Sensorial ambient elements. The sensorial ambient elements dimension in sports stores comprises the background conditions (as Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020 entitled them) that each customer processes subconsciously. As regards Tranos Sport, the store manager explained that it improves the store environment in this way:

> We try to achieve this with pleasant music, daily cleaning and scenting the space. We want the products to be visible, neatly arranged and sorted by category so that customers can easily find what they want.

More generally, the elements that emerged in the interviews are especially focused on the visual level, as the Adidas manager explained:

> The exhibition path is illuminated by fluorescent tubes on the ceiling to lead the customer to the areas dedicated to the different sports in which the most represented are training, running and football. In the Home of Creators, customers can quickly pass from the stadium steps to the living room at home: between the spaces, they encounter corners where giant screens and armchairs with a vintage design appear and relaxation corners in which to see the sports champions in action.

In the investigated stores, design and ambient elements are organized in terms of the layout and the merchandise to achieve two objectives: to create "quick shops" that enable customers to quickly find goods based on their sports passions and, by contrast, to guarantee the "best free choice" to allow customers to understand the offering independently and to choose the best product for the desired use. The principle followed is ensuring that information regarding the offering is clear, that stocks are available and that the customer is influenced to purchase through all the store design and ambient elements. In this last regard, as the EuroAthletic manager mentioned, the following managerial activities are performed:

> Continuous market research for better quality, more modern products that meet new market needs, continuous improvement of product categorization for easier customer access, and promotion and advertisement for the announcement of new arrivals/products.

In the dimension of sensorial ambient elements, all sports retailers are investing on background conditions, especially lighting, music, smell, brightness/contrast and sounds, to favour customers' purchases and, at the same time, create an interactive, immersive and engaging CSE.

4.1.3 Social relationships. A key role to create a memorable CSE is through the social relationships with in-store personnel. They can improve the experience delivery by communicating directly to customers not only about services, assistance and courtesy but also about competences. The Tranos Sport manager affirmed:

> Nowadays, we can shop with one click from the Internet from everywhere in the world and be able to choose from a huge range of products. What a store and its staff offer is an immediate and specialized service, customer guidance according to our experiences and understanding of their needs and particularities.

The in-store personnel leverage their sound technical knowledge to communicate information on the features or the high value of specific products or the in- (or out-of-) store technologies, which are complex or unknown and can be difficult for customers who lack specific skills or expertise to understand. In this sense, in-store personnel perform a customer education

function. In addition, they welcome in-store customers through the "sporting spirit" that is transferred in a sports proposal of strong appeal, as claimed by the Nike store manager:

> Each Nike store is structured like a sports team. The store's manager is the Head Coach, and each store employee is an Athlete. Together, the store team seeks to foster a positive environment of coach ability, growth and career advancement, in addition to outstanding customer service and support.

Decathlon invests in the passion of in-store personnel for the specific sports practice that each employee develops daily during private life. The store manager explained:

> The staff personnel is not named seller or sport advisor as until a few years ago, but he/she is called "sport leader" to underline how each person involved in the relationship with the customer must be positioned according to the sports discipline that he/she practices and which, therefore, is of his/her greatest competence.

These store managers revealed that a new idea for the sales staff is being developed: instead of the customer asking whether the in-store personnel (not sales staff) an assist in the purchase, they can push the customer to experience the product first-hand.

According to social relationships dimension, not only are sports retailers investing on in-store personnel, but on their technical and relationships skills and also their sports expertise and passion for sports in order to create an interactive, engaging and convivial CSE.

4.1.4 Trialability. The sports equipment retailers interviewed are developing an increasing interest in the trialability dimension to create a memorable CSE in their stores. Specifically, they are investing in providing customers with different opportunities to experience the products before purchasing them. Not only customers try the products but also receive customized services in all stores investigated, as the Adidas store manager referred:

> In Adidas stores, computers and tablets are available to visitors to customize every detail of the chosen product or favourite model of sneakers, from the colour of the upper or sole and the lacing, to the materials. After creating their own style, the visitor can order the clothes and share the image on social media.

Further, the Decathlon store manager told:

> All the products are on display and available, and customers can try everything they see. Customers can save time by checking the availability of a product on the screens, choosing to have it arrive in-store or sent home, or by requesting different sizes to try from the dressing room through the internal digital mirror. Employees, equipped with digital devices, can access all the information to respond immediately to customers, such as providing information on the status of orders or on stocks.

Customers want to participate in product trialling not only physically but also actively. Therefore, large-scale projections, interactive displays, and virtual and augmented reality are some of the tools that sports retailers use to engage customers in trying the products live. For example, Adidas and Nike make it possible in relation to specific sports activities, such as the use of the latest generation treadmills, to run facing an interactive (multi-touch in some stores) screen with racing scenes, allowing the consumer to be psychologically immerged in the run as well as to analyse the run and the stride. These sports retailers create a solution of continuity between physical and digital aspects to enable customers to personally trial the product, the atmosphere and the brand values.

Another way to develop engagement in product trialling in-store is through iBeacons. For example, Adidas created CheckBonus, a smartphone app that simulates the use of a loyalty card. It not only allows customers to earn points each time they enter a partner store and unlock the promotions made available by the retailer but also allows retailers to improve the communication mechanisms between the customer and the store and, thus, to increase the footfall in stores. The Adidas store manager clarified:

Persons who are walking in the vicinity of the store and who use this technology will receive a notification informing them of a particular promotion to entice them to enter. Once they enter the store, they will receive a welcome message, accompanied by a coupon for a discount. When they will approach a shelf with certain type of goods, for example a t-shirt, it will be possible to send them a suggestion about a combination with a pair of shoes. At the exit, they will receive the instructions to complete the payment: they will be able to accept the request and can avoid pulling out the wallet or getting too close to the cashier.

Conforming to trialability dimension, sports retailers are investing on creating in-store pre-purchase, live product experiences through store design. Especially, multiple technologies enable to create an interactive, immersive and engaging CSE.

4.1.5 Real experience sharing. Sports equipment retailers are creating real occasions of sports sharing. An increasing number of stores have become places to really experience favourite or unknown sports inside (or outside) the store. In this way, product knowledge transforms into a real discovery of sports practice for the customer, as the Adidas store manager explained:

> A large area has been set up to allow customers to live the experience of their favourite sport. In this area, customers can try on shoes and kick the ball in a small sports field created specifically.

Another example is provided by the Nike store manager:

> To experience the excitement of the World Championship, a spectacular foosball table was also created, where visitors of the store can play up to 11 against 11.

The Decathlon store manager stated:

> The current trend consists of setting up particular structures that allow customers to try the product as much as possible in conditions of use. For example, in some stores it is possible to have an experiential hint of sports practice, such as archery, or try a mini golf putting green. In other stores, however, in addition to experimenting with the use of the paddle racket, a special field is set up so that customers can play a real paddle game.

Moreover, Nike always organizes in-store social occasions for customers to share their passion for sports and culture. As the manager said, the store has:

> a large space for events and twinning with the territory on the underground level, while at street level several points are created for artists. The bleachers are used to watch matches, attend concerts and various events, and not just sports.

To provide live sports experiences, some sports retailers also organize out-of-store events that offer customers the opportunity to experience a positive sports emotion that they can share on social media, as well as to share the practice and passion for a certain sport, which for various reasons (e.g. economic) they had not decided to undertake until then. The Decathlon manager explained as follows:

> Customers can participate in sports days, that is, those free events that take place on the same day at all points of sale, aimed at promoting the spread of sports, offering opportunities at various levels to the whole family: during the event, the shop teams have the opportunity to convey their passion for sports to the participants in order to create unique moments of sharing. The web portal on which registrations are made includes the "gallery", "reviews" and "information on the type of events" sections, constituting a small exchange and relationship community based on the sharing of experiences and sports passions.

The role of social media is key for exchanging sports experiences, as the EuroAthletic manager claimed:

The exchange of sports experiences is considered the most important today for expenditure, as through the customers' feedback we learn from our mistakes, evolve the ways of service and promotion, but also, at the same time, the name of the store becomes more and more recognizable. This happens both with the customer's comments via social networks (Facebook, Instagram and Google), and more personally, via email or phone.

In consonance with real experience sharing dimension, sports retailers are investing on creating real in-store occasions or out-of-store sports events to be shared in order to be created interactive, immersive, engaging, and convivial CSE.

4.2 Role of sports equipment store
The cases examined for this study show that the point of sale has evolved. The sports store is not a standardized place dedicated only to shopping but is designed as place of immersion and socialization in the sports world at the emotional, physical and intellectual levels. As shown in Figure 1, the sports store is designed to create a customer journey in terms of engagement, entertainment, education and conviviality. Specifically, sports stores engage customers by enabling them to not only touch the products before buying them, but to also try them live – in some cases, in "real conditions" of sports – check them and immediately evaluate them.

Because customers shop in sports stores not only for goods and services but also for experiences, they favour for their purchases the store that is able to attract, intrigue and entertain them. Consequently, sports retailers attach importance to the CSE by investing in pleasant and attractive layouts and visual merchandising, as well as in-store technology.

Retailers can also educate their customers by changing their approach to sports through the information on the display and the competent assistance of in-store personnel: customers can learn about one or more aspects related to the sports that they play and desire to improve at playing, or to those that they do not know and want to learn to play.

Lastly, sports stores create the conditions for customers to enjoy a social activity in terms of conviviality, ensuring that their shopping experience is shared with others and that this experience is based on relationships and active customer involvement.

5. Discussion
This research divulged the dimensions of the in-store CSE from the sports retailer perspective as well as the developing role of sports equipment stores. In relation to the dimensions of the in-store CSE, the sports retailers interviewed for this study argue the importance of the five following dimensions in designing a memorable in-store CSE: immersive design, sensorial ambient elements, social relationships, trialability and real experience sharing. This result confirms that sports equipment retailers are investing in the creation of a memorable CSE, as usually suggested in the retail management literature (e.g. Foster and McLelland, 2015; Sachdeva and Goel, 2015), for differentiating themselves from competitors and for improving their competitive advantage (e.g. Bagdare and Jain, 2013; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In addition, while this study confirms that these retailers create in-store CSE by using the same dimensions as those of other retailers operating in other industries, it also adds a dimension that is still unexplored in previous studies, namely, real experience sharing.

This study provides practical evidence on all these dimensions, and in particular, on the trialability dimension, which is the least investigated in the literature (Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020) and, obviously, on real experience sharing, which is the dimension that this study has added. Precisely, all respondents improved their stores in experiential terms by creating physical and digital touchpoints in such a way that customers feel themselves unique and in the centre. Their investments in immersive design, sensorial ambient elements and social relationships

aim at creating immersion, engagement, interactivity and conviviality to surprise and capture customers' interest, without forgetting to sell. In line with other studies (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009), this research finds that stores that have strong aesthetic, sensory and emotional effects create experiential shopping. Notably, some sports equipment retailers create experiential architectures and internal stores that are as evocative of the sports world as possible, such that the interactive store elements can create an amazing and memorable experience for customers (Siregar and Kent, 2019). As appeared in the retail management literature (e.g. Arnold and Reynolds, 2003; Wang and Hsiao, 2012), these structures are built to create the feelings of evasion, immersion and absorption among customers in a (sports) environment that is as realistic as possible. In practical terms, while sports equipment retailers who participated this research invest in all the elements of immersive design, such as layout and aesthetical elements, in relation to the sensorial ambient dimension, they emphasize only some atmospherics, such as in-store lighting. This result is in contrast to those of previous studies according to which music, scent, temperature, noise and air quality are equally developed atmospheric variables across retailers (e.g. Hynes and Manson 2016; Kapoor, 2016). Specifically, the use of music and scent is not so developed across all the sports retailers investigated. Temperature, noise and air quality did not emerge during the interviews as stimuli within the shopping environment, almost as if they are implicit elements.

In terms of social relationships, even in sports stores, customers' shopping experiences can be physically, emotionally and cognitively influenced by interactions with the people in-store (staff and other customers), as the retail management studies have usually argued (e.g. Bagdare and Jain, 2013). Precisely, the staff's ability to listen is expression of empathy with customers: sports retail personnel perceive, interpret and respond to customer needs and expectations by actively developing trust. In contrast to some previous studies (e.g. Miller and Johnson, 2008) that indicated how the staff's passion for service can elicit the dedication to satisfy customer service needs apart from the technical skills of the staff, this study reveals the importance of recruiting not only trained personnel who know the sports product but also passionate personnel who love sports. These interactions of customers with the employee, who, in many sports stores, is an athlete or sports fan, is a more or less spontaneous source of sociality that contributes to a memorable CSE creation, thus affecting customer satisfaction. Sharing opinions or knowledge about the product or its use with other enthusiasts in a sports store can create moments of comparison that affect CSE.

The trialability dimension of a new product or service in-store reinforces the purchase. This opportunity increases in all sports stores and it is extended to all categories of products, from trying on shoes to using skates and experiencing sports at the store. In line with previous studies, this result outlines how the acquisition of new knowledge about and the interaction and involvement with the product (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003) contribute to customers experiencing it in-store and, consequently, deciding whether to buy that product.

All these dimensions affect customers' experiences in cognitive, emotional and social terms by contributing to strengthening their real experience sharing. This sharing is realized through their in-store interaction and engagement. As previous research highlighted, this study also underlines the importance of ensuring that in-store experience can be characterized as fun (Lucia-Palacios *et al.*, 2016) and socializing (Bäckström, 2011; Triantafillidou *et al.*, 2017) by not only approaching but also retaining customers within events.

To improve the relationship with the customer and promote personalized communication in sports equipment retail environments, technological innovation, especially digital, should play a catalytic role in the physical dimension of stores. Smart mobile devices and their software are the most commonly used technologies in sports stores, whereas virtual and augmented reality are used to a lesser extent and only by some global sports brands. Only one of the interviewees is developing the customer–technology relationship through proximity

marketing based on connecting the customer's smartphone with the in-store iBeacon. Nevertheless, other retailers intend to invest in this technology in the near future because it enriches in-store CSE from a multisensory point of view. Although the interviewees argued that technology changes the CSE and this view is in accordance with that of previous studies (e.g. Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2013), the use of various technology tools is still less developed across sports equipment retailers. Technology could help to communicate the brand values to customers' in-store and intervene in the product sales process, thus facilitating shopping.

Although most retail management scholars are aware that stores are transforming to relational places (e.g. Kang and Park-Poaps, 2011), it is less known that sports stores are becoming places where sports can be experienced live. Specifically, they are no longer simply points of sales where customers buy a sports product but have become places of socialization and entertainment in which sports practice along with games and fun are stimulated through the equipment and spaces offered by the store. The possibility of living conviviality moments in sports stores suggests that managers should not only design the store with spaces dedicated to sociality but also enable sharing experiences via social media. This aspect reveals that even the sports store is active on social media, especially on Instagram. Essentially, shopping in a place that makes customers feel good, facilitates life and creates curiosity not only attracts followers but also pushes them to share photos. In this way, a community of people passionate about the brand and the store, who feel they are a part of the shopping experience, is created.

Sports retailers operate in a changing environment, in which customers' needs are evolving in relation to the information they possess and the available technologies and customers are combining traditional and online channels in all their smart shopping phases (e.g. Pantano and Gandini, 2018). This aspect leads us to think that the physical store is, and will also always be, very important to customers. Accordingly, the competitive advantage of sports retailers depends on their ability to develop the store according to customers' needs and expectations. The physical and the digital worlds are no longer separate from each other, and customers consider the purchasing experience holistically, aiming to integrate the various channels and to use multiple devices (Zhang *et al.*, 2010).

6. Implications
6.1 Theoretical implications
This study makes several theoretical contributions to advance the knowledge about in-store CSE in sports stores. First, while most studies on this topic focus on the sports shopping behaviour (e.g. Funk, 2017; Mortimer *et al.*, 2018), this study adopts the retailer's perspective by exploring the ways that sports equipment retailers create memorable experiences. Specifically, it offers practical evidence on some sports equipment retailers and global sports brands.

It advances the literature on memorable in-store CSE with reference to sports equipment retailers by accentuating their specificities and differences. Previous studies have extensively explored the sports store environment (e.g. Koontz and Gibson, 2002), store atmospherics (e.g. Kapoor, 2016) and themed flagship brand stores (e.g. Kozinets *et al.*, 2002). Conversely, this study examines the in-store CSE creation related to sports stores and the use of new technologies as a disruptive innovation in this direction.

Further, this study proposes a model that includes four dimensions for designing memorable in-store CSE in line with past research (e.g. Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020) and adds a new dimension – that of "real experience sharing".

Lastly, this paper suggests a model to design memorable in-store CSE by using together the five dimensions mentioned, which introduce new research directions.

6.2 Managerial implications

The results of this study suggest to sports equipment retailers to invest in an immersive design, the sensorial ambient elements and social relationships because these factors are the key CSE elements. Particularly, this research recommends investing in functional elements to create a themed, amazing and exciting store layout; in aesthetic elements to influence customers' senses; and in background conditions to surprise and attract customers. This study confirms in general (e.g. Verhoef *et al.*, 2009; Wang and Hsiao, 2012; Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020)—and reveals with specific reference to sports stores—that store design is an aesthetic element that must be addressed independently of its content. Store design should follow a philosophy to make the experience itself perceptible to stores' visitors/customers. In terms of social relationships, investing in personnel who are experts and passionate about sports is critical to delivering an effective service to customers. The personnel's skills are a highly competitive factor, which competitors will find more difficult to imitate than the product, the technology or the store environment, in the continuous improvement of the CSE.

This study also reveals that it is important to pay attention to trialability and real experience sharing: sports store managers can invest in creating in-store live experiences of products, before customers buy these products, through store design and technology. Further, sports equipment retailers must allow customers to touch and feel the product in their physical stores, which would provide customers with instant gratification (Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2013). In addition, sports store managers can invest in creating in-store and out-of-store real sports events for their customers.

Hence, this study recommends investing in technology and digital tools to allow customers to access in-depth product information through in-store devices and to guide them during the purchase process, as suggested by previous studies (Funk, 2017). For example, the store personnel can use smartphones, which would enable them to constantly access the entire catalogue and answer questions asked online about products and services, moderate reviews and trigger marketing actions. Satisfaction with integrated marketing communications was shown to have a direct effect on relationship quality and behavioural intentions, including revenue raising, increasing participation, raising awareness and enhancing public perception providing practical and theoretical benefits (Whitburn *et al.*, 2020). In addition, smartphones can be used along with in-store iBeacons to send reminders, information on promotions and coupons to customers in a personalized way for guiding them through the purchase process and improving their shopping journey. Further, it is possible to design digitized stores that have web workstations for customers, which allow them to ask the price of a product, order it and pay for it online, and to give importance to exponential technologies, such as robotics and artificial intelligence. After all, every touchpoint in the customer journey within the sports store can represent an opportunity to generate emotions.

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