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# **Beyond Concrete and Glass:** The exploration of city center consumption

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**Title**

Beyond Concrete and Glass: The exploration of city center consumption

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**Abstract**

City centers in Sweden and in many other countries have struggled to maintain their attractiveness over the past decade due to changing consumer behavior driven by factors such as e-shopping and out-of-town shopping centers. The purpose of this thesis was to understand how and why consumers nowadays engage with their local city center and to explore how and what value is created for them through their interaction with the city center. Based on previous literature, a conceptual model was developed to analyze the empirical findings. This model consists of three main areas: actors, interaction (co-creation), and value.

To collect empirical data, twelve interviews were conducted with individuals who have some form of consumption relationship with the city center, along with two observations within the city center. The findings revealed that city center consumption is a combination of functional, experiential, and symbolic consumption, which creates unique value for consumers through co-creation with the city center as another actor. The findings also indicated that the relationship consumers have with the city center from childhood significantly influences how and why they consume.

This thesis provides new insights into how the perspectives of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) should interact in consumer research within a city center context, and how the relationship between the consumer and the city center can be leveraged and developed to create a more attractive city center. Managers can use these insights practically in place marketing for a city center.

**Keywords**

City Center, Consumption, Co-creation, Value, Place Attachment

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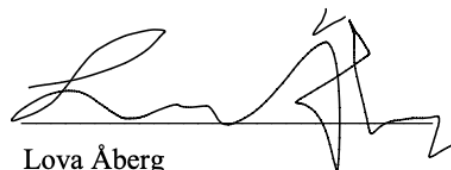
**Each other**

*For the friendship and support of each other. For sharing and making this process a memorable and enjoyable experience.*

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Noa Gripner



Lova Åberg

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# 1. Introduction

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*In this chapter, an overview of the significance of understanding visitors' consumption behaviors and the underlying reasons for their consumption of a city center will be provided. Furthermore, previous research and a problematization will be introduced to identify and clarify unexplored areas that this thesis intends to investigate. Finally, at the end of the chapter, the purpose, the research question, and the disposition of the thesis will be presented.*

## 1.1 Background

“The death of retail stores is emptying city centers”; claimed *Dagens Nyheter* (2020), which echoes the situation faced by several city centers located all around the world (Southworth, 2005; White *et al.*, 2023). This statement is further emphasized by many researchers (e.g. Wahlberg, 2016), who have found that city centers are on the decline and are struggling with multiple competing alternatives such as out-of-town shopping malls and e-shopping. To a large extent, the decline can be explained by the fact that out-of-town shopping centers and e-shopping provide consumers with easier, less time-consuming, and more convenient shopping alternatives, compared to city center shopping. The popularity of alternative shopping options causes the closure and relocation of many retail stores (Hart *et al.*, 2013; McDonald & Swinney, 2019; Wahlberg, 2016; Weltewreden & Rietbergen, 2007; White *et al.*, 2023).

The relocation and closure of city center retail stores can entail detrimental consequences for city centers since they play a crucial role in a city's economic health (Hart *et al.*, 2013). Empty stores can reduce the attractiveness of a city center and can thus prove to be the difference between a dying and a prospering city center (Hart *et al.*, 2013). The decline of city centers' attractiveness is evidently reflected in multiple countries, for example, the United Kingdom and the United States (Southworth, 2005; White *et al.*, 2023), but can also be seen in smaller countries such as Sweden (Svensk Handel, 2024).

Despite the recent decline, city centers have played a pivotal role in shaping modern society. Cities and city centers have enabled trade, culture, education, and economic opportunities, and cities have over the last hundred years served as economic centers for retail that have been considered beneficial for business and trade (Institute for Future Cities, n.d.; National Geographic, n.d.; Timemaps, n.d.). Today, cities are struggling to thrive, and some are even

struggling to survive; however, taking adequate actions to counteract the decline can serve as one possible solution. An important concept concerning place attractiveness is place marketing which can be used as a means to impact the attractiveness of a place (e.g. a city center). The concept consequently constitutes an important tool that can be leveraged to counteract the decline in attractiveness and ultimately to improve the perceived attractiveness of a city center (Eshuis *et al.*, 2014; Kavartzis & Ashworth, 2008; Niedomysl & Jonasson, 2012; Warnaby & Medway, 2013).

Nowadays, theories within consumer research focus on consumer preferences that are not only based on functional aspects, but also encompass, among other things, experiential, and symbolic dimensions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumer research can enhance the understanding of consumers and their behaviors which is a fundamental part of the marketing process (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020; MacInnis *et al.*, 2020). For example, when Sara (a fictional person) chooses to have a coffee in the city center of Kristianstad with a friend, she does so not only for the functional aspects of satisfying her coffee cravings. Sara chooses to have a coffee in the city center because she enjoys being surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the city, seeing people pass by, and feeling the pulse of city life around her. Sara chooses to have a coffee in Kristianstad's city center because it makes her feel something, and perhaps even strengthens her identity.

A collection of theories that embrace consumers' actions, feelings, and thoughts is Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Hartmann *et al.*, 2020). Researchers within CCT highlight its impact and significance for knowledge within consumption and market behaviors (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Cova & Cova, 2014; MacInnis *et al.*, 2020). The focus of the theory is that consumption is not based on rational evaluation, but on "experiences of what is regarded as socially desirable and acceptable within a specific cultural setting (i.e., within a specific group)" (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020, p. 170). However, its significance extends beyond theoretical aspects and provides practical and managerial tools for organizations when it comes to marketing areas such as brand authenticity, customer loyalty, relationship marketing, brand content, and more (Cova & Cova, 2014), which all can contribute to the marketing of a place and further to a place's attractiveness.

Furthermore, for the marketing of a place to yield results, marketers need to understand the value creation process of consumers (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020). Consumer value creation is not



always easy to pinpoint. The nature of consumption, which consists of for instance individual, social, psychological, and economic dimensions complicate the understanding of consumers' value creation (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020; Karababa & Kjeldegaard, 2014). Value can take many different shapes and vary among individuals and situations which means that city center visitors do not only assess value based on pure functional aspects, such as available shops or restaurants but also based on the feelings and experiences that the place evokes in them.

A relevant characteristic of the theory of value creation is value co-creation, which is based on service-dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and means that value is not created until consumers interact with the product, service, or brand in their own value-creation process (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). This means that, in a city center, value is first created when actors such as companies, organizations, and consumers interact. Arnould (2007) has acknowledged that there are some CCT researchers who are critical toward SDL, however, Arnould has also opposed this view and on the contrary, argued that the two fields in marketing are natural allies.

Given the current situation in many city centers, where retail and attractiveness are decreasing (e.g. White *et al.*, 2023), it becomes important to understand visitors' consumption behaviors (beyond economic and functional aspects) and thus calls for further exploration. This thesis will explore city center consumption through a case study of Kristianstad's city center. Extended knowledge in this area can eventually provide insights into how the marketing of a city center should be managed to subsequently enhance the city center's attractiveness.

## 1.2 Problematization

The decline in city centers' attractiveness and retail volume has been widely acknowledged and debated for several years; the topic does however appear to be more relevant than ever considering the rapid rise in online consumption and the vast popularity of out-of-town shopping centers (Hart *et al.*, 2013; Wahlberg, 2016; Weltewreden & Rietbergen, 2007). Theories regarding consumption behavior, value creation, and the decline in city center attractiveness (sometimes drastically referred to as "the death of city centers") has received a lot of attention in the research field and several studies have aimed to better understand these elements. In order for a city center to be perceived as attractive, there are multiple elements that need to be understood and taken into consideration. Some of the most important aspects are arguably the ones presented above, consumption behavior, value creation, and the experience

and feelings that the city center provides consumers with (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020; Krishna, 2012). The contemporary discussion about these aspects can be further investigated to enable a better understanding of how consumers consume a city center.

Several researchers have examined the attractiveness of a city center based on functional aspects such as access to parking and availability of shops (e.g. Merten & Kuhnimhof, 2023). Investigating such aspects is important for understanding what may influence the attractiveness of a city center. However, it is perceived that there is insufficient empirical material within scientific literature regarding visitors' actual consumption of a city, i.e., how the city is used by visitors and why, and whether there is any connection to self-expression, emotions, and experiences. There is currently a large amount of scientific research on the subject of consumer behavior through CCT which has been of great importance for both theoretical aspects and practical application (Cova & Cova, 2014). Yet, we argue that the field within CCT lacks empirical evidence from a city center context. However, one notable exception of some who connect the ideology within CCT to the city center are Visconti *et al.* (2010), who "explore the ways in which active consumers negotiate meanings about the consumption of a particular public good, public space" (p. 511). Still, we find that the number of exceptions is insufficient and consequently argue that there is a need for more research within this area.

Some researchers have suggested that there is saturation and a limit regarding consumers' need for self-expression (Chernev *et al.*, 2011). Despite this, it can be demonstrated that understanding consumers' emotions behind their consumption is important. This statement is exemplified by the potential for marketers to leverage insights garnered from consumer research in the promotion of a city center for it to become more attractive (Cova & Cova, 2014).

The research field of value creation is a well-researched and documented field that has risen in popularity over the last decades, especially concerning a customer-centric focus on value creation and service-dominant logic (SDL) (e.g. Galvagno & Dalli, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2018). A lot of research has been focusing on value creation from both a firm and consumer perspective, as well as from a functional and emotional point of view (e.g. Kato, 2021; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). However, we argue that a more extensive collection of empirical data is needed to better understand the process of co-creation within city centers, with a profound focus on the experiences and feelings that city center consumption provokes.

As Arnould (2007) has argued, we suggest that there is a need to include both the perspectives of CCT and SDL in order to fully understand consumers' consumption behaviors within a city center. It is not enough to focus on just one of the perspectives as they go hand in hand to a large extent. As Arnould (2007) has claimed that several CCT researchers are skeptical of this combination of theoretical perspectives, we want to provide the academic literature with a further understanding of the two fields as natural allies.

In summary, there are multiple arguments that highlight the importance of studying how consumers consume a city center. As previously declared, many city centers are struggling with a decline in attractiveness and retail volume, due to competing alternatives. In order for city centers to maintain and hopefully increase their attractiveness, it is vital to understand how consumers are consuming a city center. Hence, it becomes essential to look at and understand consumers' consumption behavior and their experiences and feelings awakened through their senses.

### **1.3 Research Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how and why consumers consume a city center and the perceived value derived from this consumption.

### **1.4 Research Question**

How and why do consumers consume a city center?

### **1.5 Disposition**

*Chapter 1* presents the background for the thesis and frames the relevance of the purpose and research question of this study. *Chapter 2* introduces the theoretical background and a conceptual model which serves as the foundation of this study. *Chapter 3* presents and discusses the methodology used in this thesis. *Chapter 4* displays the case of Kristianstad as its city center constitutes the focus of the thesis. *Chapter 5* presents the findings from the interviews and the observations, as well as an analysis of the findings. *Chapter 6* discusses the findings, and *Chapter 7* contains a summary of the thesis, theoretical and practical contributions, and a critical review including suggestions for future research.

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## 2. Theoretical Background

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*To explore and understand how and why consumers consume a city center, this chapter will consist of a theoretical background that includes relevant aspects to support the study. Aspects addressed in this chapter include what a place is and what place attachment is, the connection between CCT and SDL, value co-creation, and various types of consumption and values. The combination of these aspects can enhance the understanding of how individuals form connections with the city center and how this can impact the consumers' consumption behaviors. Furthermore, it can serve as a foundation for a better understanding of how consumers actively contribute to the creation of value within the city center environment.*

### 2.1 What is a place?

The concept of place is expansive, but most often defined as a geographic area depicted on a map (Tan & Tan, 2023). This geographic area encompasses various features such as regions, cities, city centers, villages, buildings, parks, or lakes. However, the concept of place transcends mere physical dimensions. Researchers have argued that a place can be defined by social and relational processes (Chang *et al.*, 2023; Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Tan & Tan, 2023). In other words, people play a pivotal role in shaping and creating the essence of a place. Further, Visconti *et al.* (2010, p. 512) described places as “fusions of human and natural order” that are “significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world”. Indeed, it is challenging to precisely define what a place is, yet it can be approached from either a physical or social perspective (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

However, one certainty is that a place can be experienced differently in different situations and among different individuals. This is clearly emphasized by the following quote:

The same place at the same moment will be experienced differently by different people; the same place, at different moments will be experienced differently by the same person; the same person may even, at a given moment, hold conflicting feelings about a place.  
(Tilley, 2006, p. 7)

Rosenbaum *et al.* (2017) have underscored that places can satisfy more than just utilitarian needs such as product consumption. They argue that a place positively can influence people's emotions and well-being. Consequently, a consumer's perception of a place can range from

indifference and a relationship solely related to product consumption to stronger love and commitment (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017).

A well-explored scientific domain is that of place attachment, which concerns the relationship between individuals and places that hold personal significance for them (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Scannell and Gifford (2010) have argued that this scientific field is particularly significant, as place attachment can serve to encourage the utilization of places. They further stated that meaningful places stem from personal experiences such as insights, milestones, and instances of personal growth. For instance, a place may become significant because one met their life partner or best friend there (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The researchers thus suggested that it is not the place itself that creates meaning for the individual, but rather the “experience-in-place” that has the greatest impact on an individual’s relationship with the place. Furthermore, place attachment also exists at group level, wherein attachment is based on symbolic meanings of a place shared among members. For example, culture can link members to a place through shared historical experiences, values, and symbols (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

## **2.2 CCT and SDL – Natural Allies**

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and Service Dominant Logic (SDL) constitute two central and prominent research areas within academic literature and consequently constitute important aspects to take into consideration to enable a better understanding of how and why consumers consume. According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), CCT is a collection of theories that focuses on the relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings. Hence, CCT emphasizes that consumption is based more on aspects such as experiences and symbols rather than rational and functional consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). CCT finds that an individual’s consumption is closely linked to the person’s identity, culture, and the image that the consumer is trying to portray.

SDL suggests that value is derived from the interaction between multiple actors and proclaims that it is not the product nor the service in itself that creates value but rather that value is created in the consumers’ usage of the product or the service (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Thus, SDL advocates that value is co-created among different actors that together co-create the perceived value. This concept is referred to as value-in-use and highlights that value is initiated in the

interaction between the actors and is first fully created in the usage of a product or a service (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

As mentioned in the introduction, Arnould (2007) has highlighted that some researchers within the field of CCT have a critical stance toward SDL. This critical stance can be explained by the fact that those CCT researchers do not share SDL's strategic interests (Arnould, 2007). Nevertheless, Arnould (2007) has taken a different stance toward SDL and has argued the contrary by claiming that CCT and SDL serve as natural allies and that some of the propositions upon which SDL is based are ideas pioneered by CCT researchers. This statement is emphasized by Widjojo *et al.* (2020) who argued that some researchers view value co-creation from a cultural perspective where consumers' consumption gives symbolic meaning.

According to Widjojo *et al.* (2020), CCT and SDL have flaws; CCT focuses mostly on consumers and fails to acknowledge other actors within the market, whilst SDL fails to explain value co-creation through market-mediated networks (Widjojo *et al.*, 2020). The flaws of CCT and SDL show that the two concepts separately might be deficient, however, Widjojo *et al.* (2020) suggested that the combination of the two theories can enhance the understanding of concepts such as, for example, value co-creation. Further, according to Arnould (2007), researchers within CCT should bring trends in theory, practice, and method together, thus once again advocating the connection between CCT and SDL. Widjojo *et al.* (2020, p. 429) additionally claimed that "CCT elaborates on the relationship between community and consumer to build consumption patterns and cultures" and further suggested that SDL is needed to "explain other aspects, such as the source, mechanism, pre-requisite and impact of value co-creation in the service ecosystem". The importance of combining CCT and SDL was further corroborated by Arnould (2007) who has gone beyond Widjojo *et al.*'s (2020) view and stated that CCT and SDL, not only need but must be combined.

The connection between CCT and SDL is important to understand and acknowledge to better understand the consumption of city centers from a consumption and value creating perspective.

### **2.3 Co-creation of value**

Since the purpose of this study is to explore and understand how and why visitors of a city consume a city, it becomes vital to understand how value is created and how value affects and influences visitors' consumption of a city. Consumer value is a research area that has been

getting a lot of attention in academic writing, mostly due to the importance of understanding the concept in order to be able to deliver value to consumers in the best possible way. Hence, there is a profound amount of previous research on the subject of consumer value (e.g. Grönroos, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Previous studies have studied consumer value from multiple perspectives and the view of consumer value has developed and changed drastically over the years (Grönroos, 2008). From the beginning, consumer value was seen as something controllable and the common perception within marketing was that value could be created by businesses and organizations through their products and service offerings (Grönroos, 2008). Thus, the perception was that value was embedded in the product or service itself. This perspective on value creation is commonly referred to as value-in-exchange (Grönroos, 2008).

As time progressed, the view on consumer value developed and researchers suggested that value creation was a more complex area than previously proposed and concluded that the perception that business unilaterally could create value was too simplistic to describe the complex nature of value creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Consequently, value creation progressed to focus more on the consumer and how the consumer uses a product. The focus shifted more toward how consumers utilize the features and characteristics of a product in ways that make their lives more convenient (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2018). This newer view on value creation is called value-in-use in previous academic writing. One perspective often used in the context of value-in-use is SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2018), which will be further explained in a subsequent section.

Furthermore, some researchers (e.g. Chang *et al.*, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 2011) have suggested that the economy is moving away from a service economy and towards an experience economy, which indicates that there will be, or already has been, a shift in value creation as well. Pine and Gilmore (2011) found that in more recent years, the view on value creation has progressed further to focus more on individuals' feelings, emotions, and perceptions of products and services rather than the function and convenience they bring. This more experience-centered view will in this text be referred to as value-in-experience.

### **2.3.1 Value-in-use & Value-in-experience**

As aforementioned, there are two more recent ways to look at consumer value creation, value-in-use, and value-in-experience.

Value-in-use has arisen as an option to the previous view on value creation, namely value-in-exchange. According to Grönroos (2008), value can be difficult to define and measure, but suggested the following definition of value in a value-in-use context:

Value for customers means that after they have been assisted by a self-service process (cooking a meal or withdrawing cash from an ATM) or a full-service process (eating out at a restaurant or withdrawing cash over the counter in a bank) they are or feel better off than before.  
(Grönroos, 2008, p. 303)

This definition of value-in-use highlights that the service tends to take a central role in the creation of value. One concept often used within value-in-use is SDL, which stems from relationship marketing and advocates the belief that value is co-created among several actors that interact with each other, and further that value is created in the interaction between the involved actors (i.e. the consumer and the business) (Sandström *et al.*, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2018). SDL emphasizes that value is created in the experiences of consumers, and thus puts the consumer at center stage and highlights that the consumers act as both the creators and judges of the value (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Businesses and organizations are, unlike in the value-in-exchange perspective, only responsible for creating value propositions that are offered to consumers (Grönroos, 2008).

Value-in-experience can be considered an extension of value-in-use and finds that consumers are searching for experiences rather than products or services (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Even though SDL highlights that the service can be seen as an experience, the concept emphasizes that the value is created by the value-in-use of the service rather than viewing the service as an experience that creates value in itself. Pine and Gilmore (2011) have further emphasized that people living in the western developed part of the world already have all the essential products and services required to survive, and further suggested that many also have the products needed to live comfortably and some even lavishly. Therefore, these people buy products and services not based on value in the shape of function or comfort they bring, but based on the image that the product or service portrays. Hence, value is created and judged by the consumer, in the improved feelings, emotions, and experiences that are created by possessing a certain product or having a specific service conducted (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 2011). Pine and Gilmore (2011) argued that goods and services no longer are enough to satisfy consumers and have suggested that experiences create a greater sense of well-being that makes consumers happier than only



purchasing tangible goods. For example, the consumer's experience of a city center might be more valuable than the goods bought in the city since the experience of being in the city is more personal and thus more memorable.

Based on the two more recent ways of viewing value creation, value can be considered created in the interaction between actors and in the feelings and emotions evoked by owning a specific product, and in the consumers' experience. In the context of places, value in a city is initiated in the interaction between the consumer and the local business located in the city and is fully created through the experiences (e.g. feelings and emotions) that are felt and experienced within the city.

## **2.4 Consumption & Perceived value**

The two aforementioned perspectives on value creation, value-in-use and value-in-experience, both argue that value originates from the interaction between multiple actors. From a city center perspective, this might entail that the co-creation of value is initiated in the interaction between a consumer and a city center. According to Campbell (1987, p. 102), consumption is the "selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any good or service". From a CCT perspective, it is underscored that consumption transcends mere *functionality*, incorporating elements such as *experiences* and *symbols* (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Therefore, this section aims to explore consumption through these three perspectives (functional, experiential, and symbolic consumption) and examine the perceived values they can entail.

### **2.4.1 Functional consumption & Perceived value**

*Functional consumption* has been the main focus in scientific research contexts for a long time (Lanier & Rader, 2015). Functional consumption is the consumption of goods or services, serving to satisfy basic needs or practical problems, and can thus often be seen as the foundation of why consumers seek to consume (Chen *et al.*, 2016). This type of consumption frequently relies on rational assessments, where decisions or choices are made through logical reasoning and consideration of benefits (Chen *et al.*, 2016). Hence, functional consumption is highly connected to *utilitarian value*, which is gained by satisfying basic consumption needs (Chen *et al.*, 2016; Żyminkowska, 2018). Consumers driven by utilitarian value aim to accomplish a certain task by acquiring a product with minimal effort, whilst using minimal resources

(Żyminkowska, 2018). The creation of utilitarian value is thus best accomplished by acquiring the best possible product or service with minimal effort and resources.

One example of when utilitarian value is created in a city center context can be explained by the aforementioned fictional example of Sara and her friend. From a utilitarian value perspective, it can be argued that Sara chose to visit that particular café since she was low on energy and needed a coffee, and that particular café offered the cheapest coffee.

#### **2.4.2 Experiential consumption & Perceived value**

*Experiential consumption* is more about spending on *doing* than spending on *having* (Kumar, 2022), which means consumption of for instance travel, events, and a dinner out with friends. This kind of consumption extends beyond the functional consumption performed to satisfy utilitarian needs and instead possesses emotional and symbolic qualities (Jantzen *et al.*, 2012). Researchers have argued that individuals derive greater satisfaction from experiential consumption compared to functional consumption, partly because experiential consumption often is more naturally social (Kumar, 2022). That is to say, when individuals spend on experiences, they typically do so in the company of others (e.g., a family trip). This is rooted in the fundamental social nature of humans, who have an inherent need for belonging with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thus, experiential consumption is highly connected to *social value*, which can be described as the perceived benefit procured from an individual's contact with other individuals or social groups (Sadachar & Fiore, 2018).

Another important aspect of experiential consumption is researchers' belief that stronger emotions are anchored to experiential consumption (Jantzen *et al.*, 2012; Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014; Kumar, 2022). Compared to other consumption types, experiential consumption can be understood as generating more emotional reactions in consumers, such as creating or facilitating feelings of happiness, frustration, or anger (Jantzen *et al.*, 2012). Subsequently, experiential consumption is highly connected to *hedonic value*. Hedonic value focuses on the experience, feelings, and emotions that are felt and experienced by the consumer, and not so much on the product that the consumer intends to buy. Hedonic value tends to focus mainly on two aspects, entertainment, and exploration. Entertainment includes the enjoyment and excitement experienced by the consumer. In the context of a city, entertainment can be experienced through the atmosphere in the city, for example, the smells (e.g. a café), sounds

(e.g. music), and colors (e.g. symbols) (Żyminkowska, 2018). The exploration aspect is about exploration, adventures, and experiencing new things through the senses. Value is created in the excitement of exploring new things (e.g. new stores and new tastes) (Żyminkowska, 2018).

From a hedonic perspective, Sara in the fictional example, might have chosen that café based on the experience she seeks or previous experiences from that café. For example, Sara might like the smell of the bakery, the music that is played in the background, the staging and furnishing of the café, or simply the colors of the café's logo.

### **2.4.3 Symbolic consumption & Perceived value**

*Symbolic consumption* has arisen as an important aspect of individuals' consumption patterns (Kumar, 2022), and simply means consumption of symbolic qualities of products (Hartmann, 2018). Symbolic consumption reflects how individuals consume to construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meanings to both others and themselves (Prónay & Hetesi, 2016). The motivation can for instance be "status recognition, recognition of belonging to, or being different from, targeted groups, or recognition of compliance to one's self-image" (Witt, 2010, p. 24). Consequently, within symbolic consumption, the technological attributes of a product or service are of secondary importance (Witt, 2010). This further implies that consumption goes beyond mere functionality, as people seek products and services not only for their practical utility but also for the symbolic significance they hold and their role in reinforcing personal identity. Hence, consumption can be likened metaphorically to a language, illustrating its communicative nature (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020). It encompasses not only rational consumption but also satisfies emotional and non-utilitarian desires.

Thus, symbolic consumption is highly connected to *social value*. As stated earlier, this kind of value can be described as the perceived benefit procured from an individual's contact with other persons or social groups (Sadachar & Fiore, 2018). Furthermore, social value stems from the capacity of goods or services to enhance one's social self-concept, thereby elevating status, which often requires validation from others (Sadachar & Fiore, 2018). Put differently, consumption serves as a means of affirming one's social identity. Moreover, symbolic consumption can also be connected to *altruistic value*, which concerns how others are affected and impacted by one self's consumption behavior (Holbrook, 2006). Altruistic value can be

created through, for example, helping others, and acting for the greater good (Holbrook, 2006), which in turn can strengthen one's social identity.

From a social point of view, the fictional character Sara would probably have chosen that particular café since she believes that, that café portrays an image that shares some elements with her identity, that she can leverage to strengthen her identity. Further, from an altruistic point of view, the fictional character Sara would probably have chosen that café since she believes that her support of that café will benefit others and she acknowledges that she will get value from her actions. Sara believes that her action of supporting that local café also might strengthen her identity as her actions portray a supporting image.

#### 2.4.4 Summary of consumption perspectives & Perceived value

Table 1 presents a summary of the three previously discussed consumption types and the four different types of perceived value.

**Table 1**

Summary of the consumption types and the different perceived values.

	Description	Author(s)
<b>Consumption types</b>		
Functional	Consumption of goods or services to satisfy basic needs or practical problems.	Chen <i>et al.</i> (2016)
Experiential	Spending on <i>doing</i> rather than spending on <i>having</i>	Kumar (2022)
Symbolic	Consumption of symbolic qualities of products to communicate identity and social meanings	Hartmann <i>et al.</i> (2018), Prónay & Hetesi (2016)
<b>Perceived value</b>		
Utilitarian	Created by rationally satisfying basic consumption needs	Żyminkowska (2018)
Hedonic	Created by the experience, feelings, and emotions that are felt and experienced by the consumer	Żyminkowska (2018)
Social	Perceived benefit procured from an individual's contact with other individuals or social groups and the capacity of goods or services to enhance one's social self-concept	Sadachar & Fiore (2018)

Altruistic

Created through, for example, helping others, and acting for the greater good Holbrook (2006)

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Despite the identification of various types of consumption, which can subsequently be associated with different types of perceived values, it is crucial not to overlook the insight of researchers like Elliott (1997), who stated that consumption seldom is purely functional, experiential, or symbolic. Rather, there is always a mediated relationship between functionality, experience, and meaning. Thus, consumption is a result of the different dimensions and values, and sometimes difficult to precisely define (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020). Hartmann *et al.* (2020, p. 171) highlighted that some researchers argue that it is wrong to pose, for instance, functional and symbolic consumption as opposites, as the “symbolic properties of marketing offerings have a functional utility in that they help us to the language of consumption”. This further demonstrates the complex nature of consumption and entailed value.

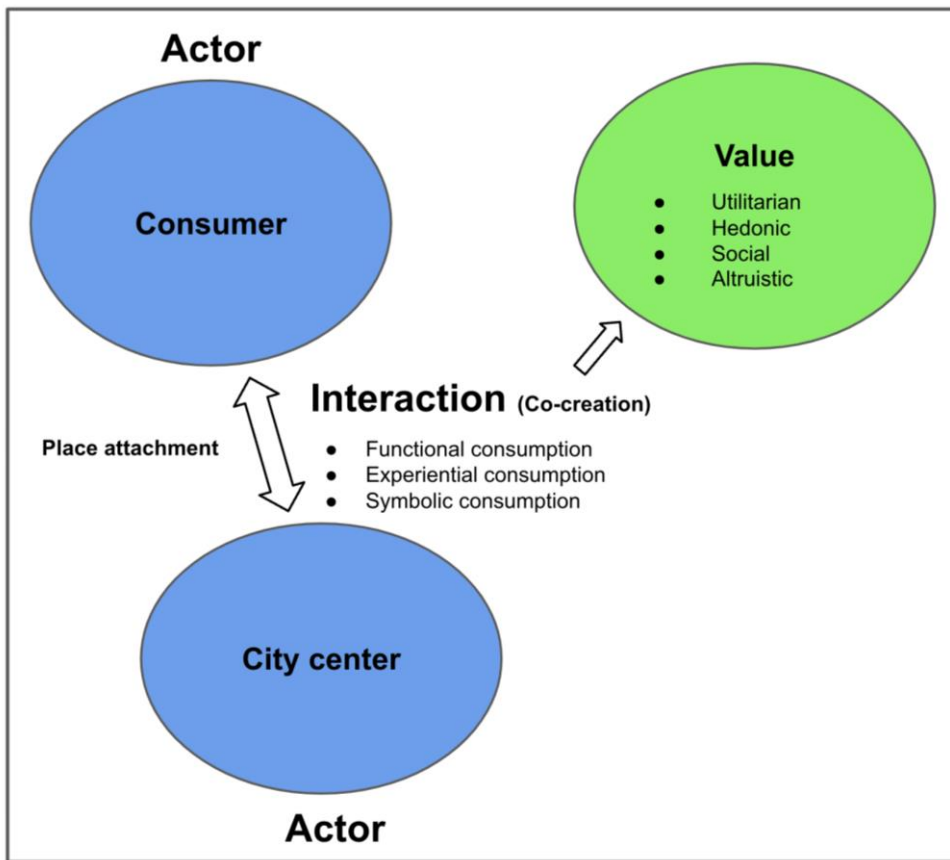
## 2.5 Conceptual model

The conceptual model presented in this section is based on the theoretical background and serves the purpose of illustrating important factors that affect how and why consumers consume a city center. Three areas have been identified as vital to describe and understand the consumption of a city center, namely, *actors*, *interaction (co-creation)*, and *value*.

The first area, *actors*, aims to illustrate that there are two main actors that play a central role in city centers, the consumers, and the city center itself (e.g. shops, cafés, restaurants, parks). In this area, the city provides products, experiences, services, and so on, that are used and consumed by the consumers. Hence, it emphasizes that consumption takes place in the interaction between the two actors.

**Figure 1**

Consumption of a city center



The second area is called *interaction (co-creation)* and illustrates the three types of consumption, functional, symbolic, and experiential. The types of consumption presented in the consumption area stem from the consumption that takes place in the interaction between the two actors. As aforementioned, consumption is seldom purely functional, experiential, or symbolic, but a combination of the three. It is in the interaction area that the connection between CCT and SDL becomes apparent since value co-creation can be seen from a cultural perspective where consumers' consumption gives symbolic meaning. Thus, the combination of the two can enhance the understanding of the interaction between the actors (Widjojo *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, it is in the interaction between the consumer and the city that place attachment is formed.

The third area, *value*, contains four types of consumer value, utilitarian value, hedonic value, social value, and altruistic value. The value that is initiated in the interaction is based on the combination of the consumption-types that is created in the interaction between the two actors.

That is, depending on the consumption types, there will be a unique combination of consumer values that is generated as a result of the consumption. The value gained from the consumption will be a combination of these four value-types.

In summary, the model aims to illustrate that the combined interaction (co-creation) between the consumers and the city center results in a total perceived value from the consumption of a city center.

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## 3. Methodology

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*In this chapter, the research philosophy, research approach, and research design will be presented. Furthermore, the method of data collection and the data analysis will be presented, followed by concluding the chapter with a discussion on the credibility, ethics, and limitations of the study.*

### 3.1 Research Philosophy

Bell *et al.* (2022) have suggested that there are two major philosophies regarding the nature of reality and how to properly study it, ontology, and epistemology. Ontology concerns the assumptions made about the nature of reality regarding what it means for something to exist. There are two positions within ontology, *objectivism*, and *constructionism*. The latter views reality as a socially constructed entity which is made by the actions and understanding of humans (Bell *et al.*, 2022). Hence, this thesis's view of consumption and value as a product co-created between multiple actors means that it has a constructionistic view of reality.

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge (Bell *et al.*, 2022). Bell *et al.* (2022) have presented three major philosophies within epistemology that explain consumers' assumptions and perceptions of the world, namely, *positivism*, *realism*, and *interpretivism*. *Interpretivism* views reality as a constantly evolving phenomenon that is created and impacted by the actions and interactions taken by humans. Hence, interpretivism's aim to understand complex aspects such as relationships, human behavior, and actions is in line with this thesis's focus on complex human phenomena such as personal experiences and emotional aspects. Thus, based on the need for understanding these complex aspects, an interpretivistic philosophy appeared to be the most suitable philosophy. Further, interpretivism's profound focus on subjective meaning and social actions meant that it could be used to provide useful insights into how individual consumers interpret things and how social interactions influence the consumption of a city center.

### 3.2 Research Approach

Three main research approaches are presented by Bell *et al.* (2022) and Lind (2019), the deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches. According to Bell *et al.* (2022), a deductive



research approach uses existing theories as a base and tests the validity and accuracy of it (Bell *et al.*, 2022).

This study aimed to find relevant aspects concerning the consumption of city centers both in theory and through empirical research. A deductive research approach is considered suitable and appropriate since it facilitates the investigation of how and why consumers consume a city center, and how factors such as consumption and value creation affect consumers and perceived city attractiveness (Bell *et al.*, 2022). The fact that there already is a comprehensive amount of research regarding, for example, consumption and consumer value-creation, means that the deductive approach enables the usage and application of these theories and can thus be used to analyze the empirical findings. The use of the deductive approach means that the profound amount of existing research can form the basis for exploration (Bell *et al.*, 2022).

### **3.3 Research design**

According to Denscombe (2018) and Bell *et al.* (2022), there are two major ways of conducting research, namely quantitative and qualitative. Qualitative research focuses on words and visual aspects. Qualitative research tends to be used in more complex and abstract settings and often aims to understand underlying aspects that are difficult to quantify (Bell *et al.*, 2022; Denscombe, 2018). Further, according to Denscombe (2018), qualitative studies generally include few samples which enables a deeper understanding of the chosen samples and are often used to get a holistic perspective where the aim is to understand a concept as a whole rather than smaller more specific parts of a concept. Furthermore, the analysis of data is often conducted during the gathering of qualitative data as well as after the gathering is complete (Denscombe, 2018).

This study aimed to understand complex and abstract contexts and further aimed to understand underlying aspects which are difficult to quantify, it also strived to understand this concept from a holistic perspective, thus indicating that the choice of a qualitative research strategy constituted the most suitable option. Further, factors examined in this study, for example, people's perceptions, emotions, experiences, relations, and thoughts, are all non-quantitative elements that require a research approach that acknowledges this, thus favoring the choice of a qualitative research approach. Moreover, as the study aimed to get a deeper understanding of individuals' perceptions, smaller sample-groups of people were gathered, thus once again

highlighting the relevancy of a qualitative approach. Furthermore, the purpose of this study included words such as “how” and “why” which are used to shape this study in its qualitative research design.

This study used a case study to better understand a unique and complex case. According to Denscombe (2018), a case study enables deeper descriptions of the researched phenomena. A case study is based on one of the following things, an organization, a location, a person, or an event (Bell *et al.*, 2022). This study focused on a location, Kristianstad, and studied how and why consumers consume the city center of Kristianstad. Bell *et al.* (2022) have further suggested that case studies tend to be used in combination with qualitative approaches, thus once again advocating the use of a qualitative approach.

### **3.4 Data collection**

To answer the purpose and research question of this thesis, empirical data was collected through twelve interviews, and two observations, which both are qualitative research methods (Denscombe, 2018).

#### **3.4.1 Interviews**

According to Denscombe (2018), interviews constitute an appropriate data collection method when the aim of the study is to explore complex phenomena (e.g. feelings, emotions, thoughts, experiences, and relationships), and interviews are especially suitable for small-scale research projects. The fact that this study used a qualitative research strategy and aimed to explore factors such as consumers’ feelings, thoughts, experiences, and emotions means that the choice of interviews for data collection can be considered appropriate. Data was collected through twelve semi-structured interviews, meaning that the interviews followed a predetermined set of questions and topics for discussion, often referred to as an interview guide (Denscombe, 2018). However, the use of semi-structured interviews allows follow-up questions to be tailored to the received answers, meaning that it becomes possible to further explore specific aspects that are brought up during the interview (Denscombe, 2018). The interviews lasted on average 20 minutes which according to Saunders *et al.* (2009) can be considered sufficient since the quality and detail of the collected data set is more important than the length of the interviews. Compared to observations, interviews facilitate a deeper exploration of underlying reasons that can be used to explain aspects such as how something is done. As the purpose of this study was

to explore how and why consumers consume a city center, interviews mainly served the purpose of answering why consumers consume in the way they do.

However, there are some disadvantages with interviews that should be addressed. For instance, according to Bell *et al.* (2022), qualitative interviewing is not very naturalistic, which means that the interview disrupts the “normal flow”, even in an informal interview. This disruption could mean that the participant does not answer in a way that he or she would normally do in a natural situation. Additionally, interviews provide limited insight into social interactions and behavior (Bell *et al.*, 2022). In the case of this study, the use of only interviews would have limited the possibility of exploring the participants’ real interactions and behaviors in the city. Thus, the interviews were complemented with two observations, which is a method considered to be more naturalistic and which can catch social interactions (Bell *et al.*, 2022).

#### **3.4.1.1 Participant Selection: Interviews**

The participants who were interviewed were chosen by use of convenience samples, meaning that they were hand-picked by the researchers. A convenience sample entails that the researchers are able to steer and fully control who the participants included for interviews are, meaning that the researcher can ensure that all participants are suitable and meet the requirements for the study (Bell *et al.*, 2022). To ensure relevancy in this study, participants were required to have at least a consumption-relation to Kristianstad city. Hence, participants’ connection and relation to Kristianstad city was considered of high importance and thus meant that the choice of convenience samples enabled an accurate, fast, and cheap way of gathering participants for interviews. However, according to Bell *et al.* (2022) and Denscombe (2018), there are negative aspects of convenience samples since it is impossible to generalize the findings due to the fact that it is unclear what part of a population the sample represents. Nevertheless, this was not considered problematic in this study as the study does not aim to be generalized.

The people included in the convenience sample consisted of people with a consumption-relation to Kristianstad and were selected from our personal network. The participants were contacted through text messages and verbally. Further, the use of a convenience sample ensured that a broad variety of participants were picked. Out of the twelve interviews, six participants were female, and six participants were male. The interviews included participants who were born in

or near Kristianstad, participants who had moved to Kristianstad, as well as participants living nearby Kristianstad, which ensured that demographic differences were taken into consideration. All of the people who were contacted accepted the invitation which made the gathering of participants easy and convenient.

**Table 2**

Interview participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Date
A	22	Male	24-04-22
B	22	Male	24-04-22
C	21	Female	24-04-23
D	24	Male	24-04-23
E	23	Female	24-04-23
F	51	Female	24-04-28
G	49	Male	24-04-28
H	22	Female	24-04-29
I	73	Female	24-04-29
J	56	Female	24-04-29
K	55	Male	24-04-29
L	52	Male	24-04-29

### 3.4.1.2 Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews follow a pre-set structure, also known as an interview guide (Bell *et al.*, 2022; Denscombe, 2018). An interview guide is a list of questions that are to be asked during the interview and ensures that all aspects that the researchers find important are brought up during the interview. Hence, it becomes important to understand what information that is to be gained from the interview in order to ask appropriate questions. According to Bell *et al.* (2022), one way to structure an interview guide can be through dividing the interview guide into different areas related to the research question. The interview guide used in this thesis followed this structure and was divided into four areas (Appendix 1). The areas were, *demographics*, *relation to the city center*, *consumption of the city center*, and *future consumption*. The first area, *demographics*, was used to open up the respondent and to gain a better understanding of the respondent's background. This area also served the purpose of getting the respondent comfortable. The remaining three areas were based on the conceptual

framework and had a prominent focus on the individual's consumption of a city center. For example, the area *relation to the city center* in the interview guide is connected to *place attachment* in the theoretical background. The questions asked in these three areas were more open-ended than the ones asked in the *demographics* area and thus gave more detailed information.

### 3.4.2 Observations

According to Denscombe (2018), observations serve as an appropriate way to gather data when a study aims to understand how something is done, but they can also be used to understand why something is done in a particular way. Denscombe (2018) have further highlighted that there are two major types of observations, systematic and participating, whereas the latter tends to be used during qualitative research. Participating observations do, contrary to systematic observations, focus more on the underlying meaning behind actions rather than the actions themselves. Participating observations aim to give an inside perspective, as well as deep and detailed information, from the natural environment in which the observation occurs (Denscombe, 2018). The deep and detailed information combined with an inside perspective indicates that participating observations are a suitable way to collect information for this study. Data was collected through two participating observations where consumers visiting the city center of Kristianstad were observed. The first observation tends to be broader while the following observations tend to be in more specific contexts (Denscombe, 2018). Hence, the first observation (observation A) was made to gain a more holistic perspective on city center consumption whereas the second (observation B) was done in a specific context and thus gave more in-depth information about that specific context. Compared to interviews, observations facilitate a better understanding of how consumers consume the city center whilst simultaneously providing insights into why consumers consume the city center.

According to Denscombe (2018), there are some disadvantages of participating observations. One major disadvantage of observations is that they can cause ethical problems as the researchers lack permission from the observed people. Another disadvantage with observations is the fact that the notes taken by the researcher might cause a lack of verifiable data, thus to some extent invalidating the trustworthiness of the observation (Denscombe, 2018). These two disadvantages were however not considered critical in this study as the ethical problems of

observing people in a city center were considered minimal, and the fact that the observations were complemented with interviews enhances the study's trustworthiness.

#### **3.4.2.1 Participant Selection: Observations**

The participants who were observed were randomly selected based on their presence in Kristianstad city at the time of the observations. According to Denscombe (2018), participating observations tend to have a broad focus at the beginning of the observation to ensure that the researchers get a holistic perspective of the environment in which the observation occurs. Hence, the first observation (observation A) included a wide group of people consuming the city center.

Denscombe (2018) further stated that observations tend to become more specific depending on interesting aspects found by the researchers. The major aspect of city center consumption that was highlighted during the interviews was experiential consumption. Further, from the interviews it was concluded that one recurring way of consuming the city center experientially was through attending handball games. As a result, the second observation (observation B) focused on one particular consumption event that was highlighted during the interviews, namely a local handball game. This entailed that the group of people who were observed were more specific than during observation A.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The two types of data collection, interviews, and observations were analyzed together. This enabled a better and more profound connection between the findings from the interviews and the observations and consequently meant that the two methods could complement each other.

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed to facilitate an easier analysis of the collected data. According to Bell *et al.* (2022), the transcription of interviews can be very time-consuming, which also proved to be the case in this thesis. The transcription of the interviews resulted in a total of 46 pages of transcribed material. The transcribed material was then analyzed using a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis is a method that aims to identify recurring themes within the transcriptions and use the themes to code the data into different themes (Bell *et al.*, 2022). In this thesis, a theme can be considered an identified patterned response that appears to be interesting in relation to the purpose, research question, and conceptual model. A thematic analysis constitutes an appropriate analysis method when

analyzing qualitative data since it is a flexible method that can give detailed descriptions of complex data (Bell *et al.*, 2022).

The analysis process was based on the deductive approach (Bell *et al.*, 2022) which meant that the quotes were connected to the categories of *actors*, *interaction (co-creation)*, and *value* which are the overarching categories of the conceptual model. During the coding of the quotes, the focus was put toward similarities, repetitions, and differences, in the data. The quotes were later further divided into the subcategories presented under the main areas of the conceptual model (i.e. the consumption types and value types). These categories were connected to relevant literature presented in the theoretical framework. The connection between the categories and the literature enabled the connection between the selected quotes and existing knowledge and theories. Table 3 presents an example of how the coding and categorization of quotes was made. This is just an exemplification that deals with one category; however, the same pattern applies to the others. However, it must be acknowledged that this only constitutes an example and that these quotes can be interpreted otherwise.

**Table 3**

An exemplification of coding from the interviews

Theme	Sub-category	Quote
City center consumption	Functional consumption	“This [consumption] is probably very practical; I buy whatever I need. Not having to travel long distances motivates me, and I have everything within the length of an arm” (Participant L)
	Experiential consumption	“I usually take lunches, eat, lately there has been a lot of partying, going to various nightclubs in Kristianstad” (Participant B)
	Symbolic consumption	“I attend the games both for myself, but it is actually for IFK’s sake as well, since I want to support the team” (Participant J)

During the participating observations, field notes were taken in order to document the observations (Denscombe, 2018). The field notes were written down immediately and consisted of descriptions of the place, accounts of behaviors, and the researchers’ initial reflections. The

notes were then written clean right after the observation, which facilitated the analysis of the observations. According to Denscombe (2018), field noting is an important part of the process, as it is easy for the researchers to forget important observations, and especially small observations and fleeting thoughts.

The field notes were subsequently utilized as a basis for the data analysis and as a complement to the empirical material from the interviews. Thus, the same thematic analysis as of the interviews was made, which means that the material was connected to the overarching categories of *actors*, *interaction (co-creation)*, and *value* and then further divided into subcategories. The analyzed material from the observations and interviews formed a successful combination to better understand the interaction between the two actors (consumers and the city center) and further in what ways consumers consume the city center and perceived value from the consumption. Table 4 presents an example of how the coding and categorization of quotes was made. However, it must be acknowledged that this only constitutes an example and that these observations can be interpreted otherwise.

**Table 4**

An exemplification of coding from the observations

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Observation</b>
City center consumption	Functional consumption	Someone goes in and out of the coop to buy a salad. (Observation A).
	Experiential consumption	The restaurant is packed with people which all seem to socialize with other people. Some have gathered to have a drink and eat with friends and relatives. There are no empty tables within or outside of the restaurant. (Observation B).
	Symbolic consumption	Almost all supporters [over 4150 people] wear orange clothes, which gives you a familiar feeling and the arena feels like a big supporter family. (Observation B).



### 3.6 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study indicates whether the study can be regarded as valid and of high quality and was therefore of high importance in this thesis. According to Bell *et al.* (2022), there are four criteria upon which trustworthiness is based, *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*.

Credibility refers to how well the researchers are showing support for and arguing for the believability of the study's findings. It also includes whether the findings are credible enough to be accepted by other researchers. Credibility can be gained from conducting a study in accordance with good practice (Bell *et al.*, 2022). In this study, the usage of two data collection methods served the purpose of validating the findings and thus increased the credibility of the findings. Further, the findings from the interviews and observations were connected to academic literature to enhance and validate the findings.

Transferability concerns how generalizable the findings of the study are and the extent to which they can be applied in other contexts and situations (Bell *et al.*, 2022). According to Bell *et al.* (2022), it can be difficult to generalize a qualitative study since qualitative studies tend to study small samples on deep levels, hence the results are highly dependent on the specific context in which the study is conducted. Transferability in a qualitative study can be achieved through a detailed account of the aspects of the study since this allows other researchers to judge whether the study is transferable to other contexts (Bell *et al.*, 2022). This study's focus, on how and why visitors consume a city center, entails that the findings possibly might be transferable to other city sizes (e.g. big or small cities). However, the findings in this study might be difficult to transfer into completely different contexts, due to that the study only includes a limited amount of interview- and observation-participants, and the study's profound focus on a particular city.

Dependability focuses on the degree to which the study can be repeated or reviewed. Hence, dependability concerns the reliability of the findings in a long-term perspective, that is the reliability that the findings will have in the future. Dependability can thus be achieved through saving and storing important records of the research process (Bell *et al.*, 2022). To enhance dependability in this thesis, the interview guide, interview recordings, transcripts, coding-scheme, and other relevant documents, were saved on the researcher's private devices, and are

to some extent presented in this thesis. Further, the transcriptions of the interviews and notes taken from the observations was handed in for review by the supervisor, thus enhancing the dependability of the study.

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the study and the findings (Bell *et al.*, 2022). The researcher's objectivity as well as their strive to act in good faith are important aspects of a study to ensure that the study is as objective as possible (Bell *et al.*, 2022). To be as objective as possible the researchers of this study have tried to keep a neutral position as well as to follow good research practice.

### **3.7 Ethics**

According to Denscombe (2018, p. 433), researchers are “expected to approach the task in an ethical way”. Two main principles relevant to this study are the protection of the participants' interests and the guarantee that participation in the research is voluntary and based on informed consent (Denscombe, 2018). Protection of the participants' interests means for example that the participant must not experience any personal harm from the study by for instance revealing their identities. This principle has been followed in this study by replacing the interview participants name with letters. Their information was thus handled in a confidential manner. Furthermore, the collected data from the participants was deleted after the final passing grade of this thesis was received. Participation in the research was ensured to be voluntary and based on informed consent by receiving written consent forms from the participants before the start of the interview.

As aforementioned, one major disadvantage of observations is that they can cause ethical problems (Denscombe, 2018). In this study, ensuring consent from all observed participants was not realistically feasible. The observation focused on general consumption behaviors in a city center, where numerous individuals were simultaneously observed passing by. Nevertheless, Denscombe (2018) has claimed that if the data collection barely means any personal risks for the participants, or if it is not realistically possible to receive such consent, which has been the case in this study, exceptions of written consent can be accepted.

### 3.8 Limitations

This study has five limitations, mainly concerning the method used. Firstly, the use of a convenience sample for the interviews might have entailed that individuals who might have been able to add important insights were excluded (Bell *et al.*, 2022).

Secondly, it can be argued that the study has a limitation concerning the length of the interviews. In comparison to other studies that use interviews as a collection method for qualitative data, the average interview length of 20 minutes in this study can be considered somewhat short and thus a hindrance to the collection of deep insights. Hence, it can be argued that the average length of 20 minutes of the interviews featured in this study can be considered too short.

Thirdly, the fact that only twelve interviews were conducted means that the gathered empirical material was limited to the perspectives of only twelve individuals. This might have entailed that there were other perspectives regarding the consumption of a city center that not were highlighted in this study due to the lack of empirical material. Thus, the lack of material on other perspectives might have affected the findings from the study and ultimately led to misleading conclusions.

Fourthly, there were two major age-groups represented in the empirical material from the interviews, individuals in their twenties, and individuals in their fifties. Only one individual over the age of 56 was featured in the interviews, and no one under the age of 21 were included in the interviews. The prominent focus on only two major age-groups can be seen as a limitation since these groups do not represent the whole population and thus might give an inadequate picture of the whole population's consumption of a city center. Therefore, the inclusion of other people over the age of 56 and under the age of 21 might broaden the perspectives on city center consumption.

Fifthly, only two observations were done which limited the empirical material collected from the observations to only two occasions. The limitation of only conducting two observations might have entailed that other findings could have been drawn from doing more observations. The inclusion of more observations could have led to broader insights concerning consumers' consumption of a city center and thus to more nuanced findings.

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## 4. The case of Kristianstad

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*The purpose of this thesis is to explore how consumers consume a city center and to explore the perceived value derived from this consumption. This thesis constitutes a case study of Kristianstad's city center, meaning that the empirical data of the thesis will be based on the consumption of this place. Thus, this chapter will provide a background of Kristianstad and its city center.*

Kristianstad is a city over 400 years old, founded by the Danish king Christian IV in 1614 as a military stronghold during troubled times in Skåne (Kristianstad Kommun, 2023), proudly naming the city after himself. Kristianstad has therefore a military history and traces from this time remain inside the city center. Kristianstad is further famous for its geographical location below the water surface and closeness to the water and nature, the city's France architecture (thereby the city's nickname "Little Paris"), food production, and sports organizations such as the handball club IFK Kristianstad, the ice hockey club Kristianstad IK, and the female football club Kristianstad DFF (Svensson, 2019; Kristianstad Kommun, 2023).

According to Kristianstad Kommun (2023), Kristianstad serves as the northeastern trading hub of Skåne County, with approximately 86,700 residents in the municipality and 46,000 residents within the city. The city center includes numerous shops and dining options, more precisely over 175 shops and 40 restaurants, cafés, and pastry shops (Kristianstad City, n.d.). The city was awarded the City Center of the Year in 2014 (Kristianstad Kommun, 2023), and the third best retail city in 2018 with a total turnover of 2,236,000,000 SEK (Kristianstad City, n.d.). Hence, it can be proved that the city center of Kristianstad has had much success.

The general retail situation in city centers has become increasingly challenging, and for Kristianstad City, it has been no exception. For example, in Kristianstad, the popular store H&M moved out from its premises in early January 2020, after operating in the city center for 47 years (Wallin, 2019). This is just one example among several. The opening of C4 shopping in 2018 (a shopping mall located outside of the city center), increased online shopping, the coronavirus pandemic, and changing lifestyle habits in today's society, can be seen as understandable factors that negatively have affected the retail sector in the city center in recent years (Guwallius, 2021). However, it can be argued that shopping is not the only thing that sustains a city center. Futurists have argued that city centers will become more experience- and

service-oriented to survive, and will include elements that can create more social value than just functionality (Guwallius, 2021).

It has been an unwavering focus for the organization Kristianstad City to strive to keep the city center attractive (Guwallius, 2021). The organization is fighting with the vision of once again becoming the City Center of the Year before 2025. The organization's executive director has optimistically viewed the current tough situation and suggests that people might go to C4 shopping to run errands and then come into the city center to enjoy restaurants, culture, entertainment, unique small shops, and recreational areas (Guwallius, 2021).

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## 5. Findings and Analysis

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*The fifth chapter of this thesis will present an analysis of the empirical data collected from the interviews and observations. Quotations from the interviewed individuals and material from the observations will be presented, analyzed, and linked to the theory. Firstly, findings regarding co-creation within the city center will be presented, followed by the findings regarding interaction in terms of consumption and perceived value types within the city center. Finally, findings concerning place attachment will be presented. The analyzed empirical data will form the basis for the discussion introduced later in this thesis.*

### 5.1 Actors in interaction

As value is argued to be co-created between two or more actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2018), this part of the chapter presents findings regarding the different actors and their interactions. The findings from the interviews highlighted that all respondents find that there are certain stores and restaurants that they like to visit within the city center. Some places and restaurants that participants often visit during city center consumption are, for example, Ekbergs, Åhléns, Clas Ohlson, Kjell & Company, Dressmann, and Borgmästargården. The findings from the interviews emphasized that one of the reasons why these locations are popular among the respondents is the interaction they have with and in the store. For example, participants E, F, and L highlighted that one of the major reasons why they choose to visit certain stores and restaurants is a pleasant interaction with the store personnel. The importance of interaction with the store personnel at a restaurant is highlighted by participant E in the following quote:

*“I think that the staff are very nice and knowledgeable, the food is good, but most importantly the nice staff”*

Further, respondents found that the municipality is an important actor in providing an attractive city center. For example, participant L stated:

*“Besides the primary purpose of my visit, my errand, I often find myself appreciating the pleasant environment I am in”*

This sentence emphasizes that there is an interaction between the city center and the consumer and the fact that the consumer appreciates the environment in the city center. Thus, the

municipality constitutes another actor in city center consumption. Furthermore, participants F, J, and L stated that they particularly like Lilla Torg and Tivoliparken which both are properties of the municipality. These two actors, the stores, and the municipality, are both featured within the city center actor in the conceptual model. Further, from the interviews, it can be concluded that the consumers themselves are key actors in value creation within the city center since they actively engage with stores and the municipality. The interviews highlighted that there is a need for multiple actors for city center consumption to create value for consumers.

Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2018) have suggested that it is not a product, service, or place in itself that creates value, but rather that value is initiated in the interaction between multiple actors and first fully created in the use or experience of the product, service, or place (Sandström *et al.*, 2008). The importance of interaction could be seen from the interviews as all respondents seemed to get value from the interaction with the actors within the city (e.g. a store or a gym) and not from only being in the city. For example, participant A explained that he likes being in the city center to socialize with family and friends, which indicates that he gets value from this interaction. Participant H expressed that she appreciates being at a music concert, it can thus be interpreted as if she gets value from attending the music event.

*“I know a lot of people in this part of Skåne. So, it often becomes a bit nicer and more social”* (Participant A)

*“The music was good, and I met a lot of people I know. It was nice. There were many people, so it was cramped, but that had a positive effect on the atmosphere and experience”* (Participant H)

Vargo and Lusch (2004) have argued that there tend to be two major actors, an organization or business, and a consumer. The findings from the interviews highlighted that there are many actors involved in city center consumption which all play a part in the creation of value. Thus, the findings from the interviews reflected the academic literature’s view of interaction as a vital part of consumption and value creation. The value derived from interaction within the city center was also seen during observation A where it became evident that people visiting the city center not only interact with other people but with the city itself (e.g. the stores and places). In observation A, some people were interacting with a grocery store and seemed to mostly get utilitarian value from the interaction while others were interacting with the town square, Lilla

Torg, and seemed to get more hedonic value from the atmosphere, smell of newly baked churros, and vibrant sounds of the city center. At observation B, people were interacting with the IFK organization, the shops attending the game, and restaurants after the game. The visitors appeared to create utilitarian value through eating food, and hedonic value through the interaction with the environment (e.g. the sounds of people talking, music, and the smell of newly cooked food). They seemed to create social value through interacting with other supporters and other familiar people. Through attending the game, it can also be interpreted as if they created altruistic value by supporting the team. Hence, the observed people seemed to co-create all four types of value from the interactions at the event.

## 5.2 City center consumption

This section of chapter five presents the three different kinds of consumption, functional, experiential, and symbolic consumption, within the city center. For each type of consumption, a table with common activities is presented. After each presented type of consumption, the perceived value that the consumption entails is analyzed.

### 5.2.1 Functional consumption

As previously mentioned, functional consumption of certain goods can be considered the foundation of consumption, i.e., the primary reason why consumers choose to consume (Chen *et al.*, 2016). This was to some extent reflected in the gathered empirical data. The interviewed individuals were asked about their most common activities when visiting the city center. The answers to this question often revolved around engaging in shopping. Shopping, indeed, constitutes a form of consumption of the city center, but to align with functional consumption, shopping would largely need to be motivated by fundamental needs (Chen *et al.*, 2016). Through the collected data, it can be observed that shopping in the city center often stems from people needing to purchase necessities such as food and clothing to satisfy basic needs. For instance, participant D stated:

*“Mainly, I buy groceries but sometimes also other items. Sometimes a cord breaks and then you have to buy a power strip or some internet cable. Then I also buy clothes and other common products like detergent and fabric softener”*



Furthermore, indications are suggesting that functional consumption often leads to other types of consumption. For example, participant I noted that she often goes into town to carry out an errand, such as visiting the optician, but then takes the opportunity to “wander around and if I see something, I slip into the store”. Nonetheless, there are other participants (e.g. participant E), who sometimes consume oppositely, meaning that functional consumption, such as purchasing groceries in the city center, is performed because one happens to be in the city center for activities like meeting a friend (which would be more of an experiential or symbolic consumption). Thus, the findings suggest that functional consumption seems not as straightforward as some literature portrays it (Chen *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, functional consumption often relies on rational decision-making (Chen *et al.*, 2016). Many of the interviewed persons described how they choose to visit a shopping mall or online shopping instead of going into the city center for shopping. For example, participant G stated, “I rarely go into the core and shop, then I’d rather go to C4 [the shopping mall]”. Further, participant F stated, “In the past, the shops in the city center were closer to each other and there were no large distances between them”. This indicates that the convenience of having many stores under one roof in a mall significantly influences consumers’ rational decision-making, leading them to prefer shopping at malls. However, there are also indications that convenience is a significant factor within Kristianstad’s city center. Due to its compact size, all necessary amenities are within reasonable walking distance, and the area is easy to navigate. This suggests that while shopping malls offer convenience through the proximity of stores, the city center’s small, navigable layout also provides a level of convenience that can attract consumers and facilitate their value creation. For instance, participant D states the following:

*“In Kristianstad city center, everything is concentrated in a relatively small area, making it feel like you have everything in one place”.*

Another aspect that surfaced during the interviews was the functional role of the city center as a transportation hub. Several participants emphasized its utility in facilitating travels from one point to another within Kristianstad. They particularly seemed to value the infrastructure including bus routes and bike lanes. Moreover, the interviews indicated that visits to dentists, doctors, and opticians are common activities in the city center connected to functional consumption. Hence, the functional aspect of consuming the city center seemed to be important

for many participants. Below, table 5 presents the identified main activities connected to functional consumption. Still, it must be remembered that the example presented below only constitutes one example and that the presented quotes can be interpreted through the lens of other consumption types (Hartmann, 2020).

**Table 5**

Main activities - functional consumption

<b>Consumption</b>	<b>Main activities</b>	<b>Quotations</b>
<b>Functional</b>	Buying necessities	<i>“Mainly, I buy groceries but sometimes also other items”</i> (Participant D)
	Transportation	<i>“The city center is like a hub for public transport. Often when you have to get somewhere, you go to the city center and then you go out to the other villages”</i> (Participant D)
	Medical visits	<i>“There have also been doctor visits”</i> (Participant F)

Functional consumption can, as previously mentioned, be linked to utilitarian value as it can be perceived by satisfying basic consumption needs through the purchase of goods intended to complete or solve a specific task (Żyminkowska, 2018). Although the empirical material reflected this, for instance through participant D’s quotations mentioned before, there are indications suggesting that other perceived values can be created through functional consumption. For instance, participant L articulated the following to explain a visit in the city center:

*“Besides the primary purpose of my visit, my errand, I often find myself appreciating the pleasant environment I am in”*

This quote not only highlights that participant L’s main focus of consuming the city center is to gain utilitarian value by completing his errand but also emphasizes that participant L is creating hedonic value as a byproduct of functional consumption.

### 5.2.2 Experiential consumption

According to Chang *et al.* (2010) and Pine and Gilmore (2011), the economy is moving away from a service economy and towards an experience economy. The authors have further suggested that consumers are searching for experiences rather than products or services. To consume for reasons beyond mere functionality constitutes for instance experiential consumption, which includes, for example, attending events, and dinners with friends (Kumar, 2022). From the answers received from the interviews, it became obvious that the major recurring reason for city center consumption was experiences which also highlights the relevance and accuracy of Chang *et al.*'s (2010) and Pine and Gilmore's (2011) statements.

The respondents were all more or less in unison around the thought that one of the major reasons for the consumption of a city center is experiential aspects, however, the extent of the importance of the consumption type seemed to differ between the respondents. Some of the respondents expressed that they only consumed the city center for experiential purposes whilst others said that experiential consumption served as one part of their total consumption of the city center. Nevertheless, the importance of experiential consumption is highlighted by the following quotes:

*“I'd say that I'm mostly in the city center, and that's a little bit because of the nightclubs and to eat lunch”* (Participant B)

*“When I go into the city center, I do it to do some shopping or to meet a friend [. . .] So a little more social gatherings for socializing”* (Participant D)

These two quotes not only indicate that experiential consumption is an important part of city center consumption but also highlight that experiential consumption tends to be done in the company of others. The findings from the interviews pointed in this direction and participant J found that functional errands usually are done alone whilst experiential activities tend to be done in the company of others. This finding is further emphasized by the observations where it during both observations became obvious that experiential consumption usually is done in groups. The people visiting the city during observation A, for what appeared to be experiential consumption (e.g. visiting a cozy French or Asiatic restaurant), tended to do so in groups of a minimum of two people, whilst the people visiting the grocery store usually did so solely.

Furthermore, observation B also highlighted this as a vast majority of the people visiting the sports event did so in the company of others. This finding from the interviews and the observations is in line with Kumar's (2022) belief that experiential consumption tends to be done in the company of others and that humans naturally have the desire to belong to others. Below, table 6 presents the identified main activities connected to experiential consumption. Still, it must be remembered that the example presented below only constitutes one example and that the presented quotes can be interpreted through the lens of other consumption types (Hartmann, 2020).

**Table 6**

Main activities - experiential consumption

<b>Consumption</b>	<b>Main activities</b>	<b>Quotations</b>
Experiential	Night life	<i>"Lately, I have been visiting the city center a lot to party, the nightlife has been the focus, going to various nightclubs in Kristianstad"</i> (Participant B)
	Restaurant and café visits	<i>"Above all, it is about going out to eat with friends"</i> (Participant F)
	Cinema	<i>"I shop, eat at restaurants and go to cafés, but also go to the cinema"</i> (Participant H)
	Sports events	<i>"I've been here a lot to watch and play handball"</i> (Participant A)
	Music events	<i>"In recent days, it would probably be these music activities that are very much appreciated"</i> (Participant G)

Furthermore, researchers have suggested that consumers derive more value from experiential consumption compared to functional consumption (Kumar, 2022). This might be a result of the fact that experiential consumption tends to be more social and that consumers usually find that they are better off than before when they have engaged in socially experiential activities (Kumar, 2022). Observation A highlighted this as a group of friends waiting in line for churros looked happy and were laughing together, illustrating the co-created social value. On the contrary, consumers who visited the grocery store on their own seemed to be more emotionless about their consumption. This is also in line with Sadachar and Fiore's (2018) finding that social

value often is created from experiential consumption. The following quote by participant B serves as one additional example of the social importance of experiential consumption:

*“I think it’s a fun social thing to do, I have a lot of friends where it’s fun, I know a lot of guards, so it has become a thing to go out and say hello to everyone, it’s has become a meeting point to go out and meet people you might not always meet”*

Furthermore, it became evident from the interviews that the feeling of being surrounded by many people in the city center gives rise to a sense of familiarity, which appears to be an aspect that influences the place’s attractiveness. For example, participant D states that:

*“It feels very familiar when everyone gathers in the same place, and where all the people are different and from various cultures, enjoying themselves together”*

Many also expressed that they are entertained and excited in the city center, from activities such as going to the cinema, music events, and sports events. The following quote by participant J highlights this in a sport events context:

*“You are very expectant, you are very enthusiastic, there are a lot of people, it is a very good atmosphere, it is a real mood lifter and energy booster”*

The hedonic value aspect of experiential consumption also became obvious in observation B since it appeared as if the supporters were entertained by multiple things, such as the game, the social interactions, the togetherness, and familiarity of supporting the same team, and the food and beverages. Hence it could be understood as if consumers experienced improved entertainment from the environment and the atmosphere of the sports event. For example, one supporter seemed to enjoy the taste of his shrimp sandwich and his beer, others seemed to enjoy the supportive IFK-chants and decided to sing along, and almost all the supporters seemed to enjoy wearing the iconic neon-orange color of the home team. Some people who were visiting the event seemed to do so for the first time and it can therefore be viewed as a form of exploration in itself. These expressions of hedonic value are connected to Żymkowska’s (2018) finding that hedonic value can be created through smells, colors, and sounds.

Moreover, the interviews indicated that experiential consumption often entails emotions in the shape of happiness and social belonging. Żymkowska (2018) has suggested that the emotions felt and experienced during experiential consumption strongly are connected to hedonic value. This can for example be seen through another quote by participant B:

*“Joy, and it comes from the friends, because you have a lot of friend-joy there and a lot of community”*

This finding, that experiential consumption awakens emotions further aligns with Kumar’s (2022) finding that emotions and feelings often are connected to experiential consumption and that experiential consumption often evokes more emotions compared to other consumption types (Jantzen *et al.*, 2012; Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014). This is further emphasized by the interviews which highlighted that consumers derive greater feelings of entertainment and excitement when they are consuming in the city center compared to other locations such as out-of-town shopping centers. The enhanced entertainment and excitement might possibly be explained by the *uniqueness* of the city center, which was an important and appreciated aspect of city center consumption highlighted through the interviews. It became clear that the city center offers a uniqueness compared to other cities and shopping malls, in areas such as architecture, available shops, city layout, and cultural activities. The importance of city center architecture is highlighted by participant A who stated the following quote:

*“Just the way it looks in the city center of Kristianstad makes you want to be there more than at C4, with all the nice houses and the feeling you get when you’re there”*

Further, participant E, F, and H highlight the importance of having a large variety of shops and participant C, J, K, and L preferably want small unique shops in the city center to increase its attractiveness. The combination of these elements creates a unique experience of being in the city center, and thus helps consumers co-create value and memories. A word that was commonly repeated by the participants is “*coziness*”, often referred to the feeling they have when visiting the city center. This seemed to in many cases be based on the architecture of the city center, its unique character, but also from visits to cafés and restaurants, such as the confectionery Duvanders. The uniqueness of the city center thus seems to be an important factor

in consumers' experiential consumption as it contributes to the co-creation of hedonic value, including the feeling of coziness.

### 5.2.3 Symbolic consumption

Another important aspect of city center consumption that was identified during the interviews is consumption beyond functional and experiential purposes, namely consuming the city center for symbolic qualities. This type of consumption, known as symbolic consumption, often serves the purpose of helping the consumer to express and strengthen that individual's identity (Prónay & Hetesi, 2016). Apart from functional and experiential consumption, symbolic consumption constitutes a consumption type that has risen in popularity in academic literature (Hartmann, 2018; Kumar, 2022). The participant's answers from the interviews showcased that symbolic consumption constitutes one part of city center consumption, albeit a smaller part compared to functional and experiential consumption. Some participants' answers (e.g. participant J and L) indicated that the consumption of the city center serves as symbolic consumption since these people feel as if Kristianstad is part of their identity.

One recurring way of consuming the city center symbolically, which was highlighted during the interviews, is to support the local handball team. Four of the respondents explicitly said that they identify as supporters of the handball team, and thus it can be implicitly found that they consume the sports games and events for symbolic purposes. Participant J stated the following:

*“Of course handball is symbolic”*

This quote emphasizes that participant J identifies as a handball supporter and highlights the fact that being perceived as a supporter is important for her. The quote indirectly expresses that handball games are symbolic for her as she can express her identity as a supporter, hence it can be interpreted as if she consumes handball games for symbolic purposes. Observation B showed that consumers consume the handball game symbolically by expressing their identity of being an IFK-supporter by, for example, attending the event, socializing with like-minded individuals, and wearing the neon-orange IFK-merch. Furthermore, by attending a handball game and supporting the team, consumers can express and strengthen their identity as someone with a strong connection and relation to Kristianstad, as the team is highly connected to the city and its center.

Another aspect of symbolic consumption that could be identified through the interviews and observations was the consumers' consumption of certain stores and locations which reflects their personal interests. For example, participant I expressed that she often chooses to visit a sewing store. This is probably done for reasons beyond functionality and experience. For example, when she visits the sewing store, her identity of being someone who is interested in sewing is enhanced and this consequently helps her to express and strengthen her identity. Her enhanced identity can further be used to show belonging to groups of people who are interested in sewing. Elliott (1997) and Prónay and Hetesi (2016) have found that symbolic consumption can reflect how consumers communicate their identity and social meaning to others and themselves and Witt (2010) has suggested that this can be used as a way to express belonging to a specific group. Thus, the findings from the interviews and the observations validated these researchers' previous findings, by proving that consumers consume to show belonging to a specific group. Below, table 7 presents the identified main activities connected to symbolic consumption. Still, it must be remembered that the example presented below only constitutes one example and that the presented quotes can be interpreted through the lens of other consumption types (Hartmann, 2020).

**Table 7**

Main activities - symbolic consumption

<b>Consumption</b>	<b>Main activities</b>	<b>Quotations</b>
Symbolic	Sports events	<i>"I attend the games both for myself, but it is actually for IFK's sake as well, since I want to support the team"</i> (Participant J)
	Visiting personal favorite stores and locations	<i>"There is also a good sewing store in the city. They have a lot of things in knitting, there are zippers, straps, and all of that. I sew a lot"</i> (Participant I)

Symbolic consumption is strongly connected to social value and can be achieved through interaction and contact with other individuals (Sadachar & Fiore, 2018). According to Sadachar and Fiore (2018), social value can be gained from the capacity of goods or services to enhance



one's social identity. That is, by consuming in certain stores or specific events, consumers are able to express their identity which is seen by others and therefore creates social value for the consumer by helping the consumer to express their identity. Consequently, individuals might not always be aware that they are consuming symbolically and might not highlight it explicitly. The creation of social value could also be seen from the interviews as respondents highlighted that they visit the gym and consume a city center sports store, which helps them to express their identity of being healthy and sport interested. For example, participant C stated that she consumes the city center mainly for exercising at a gym, which portrays an image of her as being sporty and as a result helps her create social value.

Furthermore, the findings from the interviews pointed out that consumers consume the city center not only for creating value for themselves but for the local actors as well. Participant J expressed that it is important for her to support IFK and to be seen as an IFK supporter, but she also mentioned that it is important for the team:

*“I attend the games both for myself, but it is actually for IFK’s sake as well, since I want to support the team”*

This quote emphasizes that whilst she gains value from social value, she also derives value from supporting the team. Thus, this can be connected to altruistic value, which concerns how others are impacted by one’s consumption, and which can be gained by helping others and acting for a greater good (Holbrook, 2006).

### **5.3 Consumers’ relationships with the city center**

Place attachment is the relationship between an individual and a significant place for this individual (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). According to Scannell and Gifford (2010) places often become significant for individuals through the individuals’ personal experiences and memories associated with the place. Furthermore, Scannell and Gifford (2010) suggested that place attachment can serve to encourage the utilization of places. During the interviews, the participants were asked questions about their origin, their current place of residence, and their relationship with Kristianstad city, enabling an analysis of the significance of these factors for individuals’ consumption of a city center. This part of the chapter thus presents the consumption of individuals with different relationships with Kristianstad’s city center.

### 5.3.1 Stronger relationships

Several of the interviewed individuals experienced a strong connection to the city center but for various reasons. For example, participant G explained that he has a rather strong bond with the city center. Participant G does not live in Kristianstad and was raised in smaller towns a few miles from the city. Nevertheless, he has formed many memories in the city center, primarily through his time in school, but also through new experiences via work and personal life. The memories were often associated with experiences such as “Kristianstadsdagarna” (the city festival) and music and food activities. His consumption primarily revolves around an experiential dimension, with clear connections to emotions and social significance. He stated:

*“People made pilgrimages to Kristianstadsdagarna. Everyone went there at least one of the days. It was a big event for us who were younger. You met and hung out, so it was joy”*

Similarly, participant A stated that he has a deep relationship with Kristianstad’s city center, although he has lived all his life in another city nearby. He stated that “The best memory I have was when I was little and we went here [Kristianstad] and I got to go to BR toys”, which indicates that a strong relationship with the city center can be based on strong childhood memories. This further supports the theory of Scannell and Gifford (2010) who suggested that personal memories lead to stronger bonds. Thus, it can be suggested that a feeling of nostalgia can enhance the attractiveness of a city center for individuals, which means that long term relationships are important to foster and maintain. Participant A also has a big interest in handball and is an IFK-supporter, which could be seen as another reason behind a strong place attachment. Apart from watching matches, participant A usually consume the city center by “going out to a restaurant or going to a club”.

Participant L on the other hand, was both born in Kristianstad and currently resides there. He considers himself to have a strong relationship with the city and the city center, which stems from it being his hometown and the place where he lives. In contrast to the aforementioned participants, participant L seemed to consume the city center primarily to fulfill utilitarian needs such as purchasing groceries and clothes more than anything else. However, this participant was one of the few who really considered himself to consume the city center for altruistic aspects, that is, consumption to cherish the life of the city center. He stated:

*“My role is to support the traders that are in here as much as I can”*

Moreover, findings suggest that the uniqueness of a city center significantly contributes to strengthening the bond between the consumer and the city center. This uniqueness appears to be a compelling reason for consumers to choose to consume the city center over other locations for their activities. For instance, participant A describes that

*“A city center has personality compared to a shopping mall”*

### **5.3.2 Weaker relationships**

Some of the interviewed individuals expressed that they have a weak connection with Kristianstad’s city center. For instance, participant C acknowledged a weak relationship with the city center. The person is originally from another city relatively close to Kristianstad but has been living in Kristianstad for some years. She described that she seldom visits the city center as she has both studies and work outside of it, and when she visits it, it usually involves going to and from the gym. Nevertheless, the participant admitted that she might go out and party and eat dinner once a month. She essentially never visits the city center for shopping, but shared the following:

*“If I know I can quickly stop by there on my way home from the gym or in connection with some other activity, I think there might be a bit of shopping too”*

In general, participant C’s consumption behavior in the city center reflects a pragmatic approach. The attachment to the city center is influenced by practicality rather than deep emotional ties. There are indications suggesting that her consumption can be affected by this relationship in that it is mostly functional as she visits it to get from point A to point B. However, there are some traces of experiential consumption through restaurant visits. According to the theory of place attachment, experiential consumption can consequently lead to a stronger relationship with the city center (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). This means that participant C may possibly develop a more profound connection with Kristianstad’s city center over time if she continues to engage in experiential consumption activities, such as dining out or attending events.

Participant E has similar demographic conditions and a similar relationship with Kristianstad's city center as participant C. Even their consumption behaviors look much alike. Unlike participant L who lives in Kristianstad and has a strong relationship with the city center, participant C and E admit that they do not choose to consume the city center to support its well-being and its survival, which indicates a significant difference between people with a strong or weak relationship with the city center.

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## 6. Discussion

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*This chapter will discuss the most interesting aspects of the findings and analysis, including aspects regarding the different types of consumption and values, the role of place attachment, and additionally the connection between CCT and SDL and its significance for a better understanding of the consumption of a city center.*

The findings from the interviews and the observations highlight that different participants consume the city center for different reasons and that all participants had individual purposes for visiting the city center. Some respondents consume the city center mostly through experiential consumption, some mostly through functional consumption, and others consume the city center through symbolic consumption. The interviews and observations further emphasize that these three consumption types, functional, experiential, and symbolic consumption, were prominent in city center consumption. Findings showed that the most common way of consuming the city center is experiential, the second most common type is functional consumption, and the least common type is symbolic consumption.

The prominence of experiential consumption in the city center can likely be explained by the analysis, which indicates that experiences often facilitate social interactions. The social aspect of consumption further emerged as the most significant reason for engaging with the city center. This aligns with Kumar (2022) who suggests that individuals derive greater satisfaction from experiential consumption compared to functional consumption, partly because experiential consumption often is more naturally social. An important aspect concerning experiential consumption of a city center, highlighted by the interviews, was that a city center offers a uniqueness compared to other cities and shopping-malls. This aspect of city center consumption, which entails feelings such as coziness, does not constitute an adequate part of the literature on the topic of co-creation.

Nevertheless, the complex nature of symbolic consumption entails that symbolic consumption is difficult to directly express, explain, and interpret. Thus, participants might possibly be less aware of their symbolic consumption compared to the other two types. This might further entail that it becomes challenging for researchers to correctly and precisely analyze symbolic consumption. Consequently, it is possible that symbolic consumption constitutes a bigger part of consumers' consumption of the city center than what is indicated by the findings from this

study. Nevertheless, the prominence of experiential consumption highlighted in the findings contradicts the theory suggesting that functional consumption can be considered the foundation of why consumers seek to consume (Chen *et al.*, 2016). Hence, the findings of this study are in line with Pine and Gilmore's (2011) claim that the economy is moving towards an experience economy and that consumers are searching for experiences rather than products.

However, the findings further indicate that even though consumers might visit and consume the city center mainly for one type of consumption, they will most likely consume the city center in other ways as well. Hence, the total consumption of the city center is often a combination of the three consumption types. For example, if the main purpose of the consumption of the city center involves functional consumption, there will likely be some sort of experiential consumption involved in the total consumption since the experience of being in the city center is connected to the functional consumption. One situation in which this could occur is when a consumer is visiting a restaurant. On one the hand, it can be argued that the consumer is visiting a restaurant to consume functionally by eating to prevent the consumer from starving, on the other hand, the atmosphere, interactions, smells, and sounds, in the city center and at the restaurant can be seen as experiential consumption. Thus, the findings suggest that consumption is not as straightforward as some literature portrays it (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2016). Rather, the findings are in line with Hartmann *et al.* (2020), who stated that consumption is seldom purely functional, experiential, or symbolic, but that there always is a mediated relationship between the different types of consumption.

Additionally, findings indicates that the combination of the consumption types gives rise to a unique combination of values derived from the consumption of the city center. Hence, depending on the total combination of the consumption types, the value created from the consumption will differ.

The findings further shows and confirms academic literature (e.g. Holbrook, 2006; Sadachar & Fiore, 2018; Żyminkowska, 2018) regarding that consumers who consume the city center mostly for functional consumption often co-create utilitarian value from the consumption, consumers who consume the city center for experiential consumption tend to get more social and hedonic value, and consumers who consume symbolically usually get social and to some extent altruistic value as well. Therefore, depending on the composition of the consumption types, the value derived from consumption of the city center can constitute of one to four value

types. For example, if the main purpose of consuming the city center is functional consumption but also includes some elements of experiential consumption, the main value gained from the consumption will most likely be utilitarian with some influence of hedonic value and possibly even social value. For example, participant L expressed that he engages with the city center in terms of accomplishing an errand (which can be considered to possess utilitarian value), yet the interaction with the urban environment of the city center experienced during the functional consumption can evoke emotions such as comfort and enjoyment. Consequently, this type of consumption may serve as a catalyst for enhancing stronger emotional responses among consumers. Thus, the main purpose of functional consumption could potentially also result in another type of consumption that in turn creates hedonic value, which is associated with experiences and emotions.

Further, the findings showed that it is not necessarily required for individuals to live in the city or in its center to have a strong relationship with the city center. This aligns with Scannell and Gifford's (2010) argument that an individual's bond with a place can be based on factors beyond residential proximity. However, the findings suggest that consumption patterns differ between residents and non-residents who both have strong relationships with the city center. Despite its significance for understanding consumer behavior in a place, this nuance appears to be overlooked in the existing academic literature. The findings of this thesis highlight that for individuals who consider themselves to have a strong relationship with the city center but do not live there, consuming the city center appears to feel more exciting and experiential. The consumption of these individuals seems to be more experience-based, which might evoke more emotions. For those who reside in the city or its center, consumption seems more mundane and less experiential. However, there are indications that those who have Kristianstad as their home and consider themselves to have a strong relationship with the city, care more about cherishing the city center, which might be a factor influencing their consumption habits. In other words, the findings suggest that these individuals consume the city center in a way that supports the local area more than those who do not reside in the city despite feeling a strong connection to it.

Scannell and Gifford (2010) suggested that place attachment can serve to encourage the utilization of places and thus highlighted its importance. However, one aspect that these authors insufficiently have discussed is the significance of nostalgic feelings in the relationship between

a place and a consumer. To understand value co-creation in the interaction between multiple actors it is important to acknowledge that feelings of nostalgia are important in city center consumption, a factor existing literature fails to aptly explain. The findings of this study show that nostalgia, which can be associated with a long-term relationship between the place and the consumer, can be a crucial factor in consumers' willingness to engage with the city center. Consumers' past memories of consuming the city center create nostalgic feelings that influence the present consumption and value-creation in the city center. The creation of memorable experiences for mainly children and young people can thus be a pivotal factor for increased attractiveness of the city center.

Furthermore, regarding place attachment, the results indicated that individuals residing in Kristianstad who perceive themselves to have a weaker connection to the city and its center tend to engage in consumption that is mostly functional. However, this consumption does not seem to be based significantly, if at all, on a concern for the well-being of the city center. Nevertheless, there are indications that these consumers are aware of the importance of them interacting with the city center and that they may create some type of altruistic value when they consume it. Moreover, the findings suggest that persons who live in the city and appear to have a weak relationship with its center may lack personal memories and experiences associated with the city center. It can also be argued that these individuals lack emotions of nostalgia connected to the city center. Consequently, it can also be suggested that these individuals possibly could develop a more profound connection with Kristianstad's city center over time if they continued to engage in experiential consumption activities. This reinforces our argument that the relationship between an individual and a place is a crucial aspect to consider when analyzing consumption behavior, yet it remains underemphasized in the literature.

The findings of this study also indicates that CCT and SDL are natural allies as Arnould (2007) has suggested. Firstly, the results of this study showed the importance of co-creation in the consumption of a city center. Kristianstad's city center is a place that means a lot to many people, however, the findings showed that the value does not reside in the city center itself, as even people who live in the city do not feel any strong relationship with its center. On the contrary, it is in the interaction between the city center and the consumers, when the consumers are actively consuming the city center, that value can be created. In this way, value is co-created



and can shape new meanings and memories for the consumers, consequently leading to stronger bonds between the two actors.

Secondly, from a CCT perspective, the interaction between the two actors makes it possible for the consumers to develop hedonic and social value, which means value beyond utilitarian (without the co-creation, no type of value could have been created). Based on the findings, it became evident that consumers have the opportunity to derive meaning by engaging in experiences and creating memories during their interactions with the city center, consequently fostering a sense of place attachment and loyalty. This further underscores the importance of co-creation.

Arnould (2007) highlighted that there are critics who doubt the strong connection between CCT and SDL. What these critics fail to recognize is the symbiotic relationship between these fields. This study provides evidence that CCT and SDL complement each other: CCT explains the experiential, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of consumer behavior, while SDL focuses on the co-creation of value through interactions. Together, they offer a comprehensive understanding of consumer engagement and value creation in the context of city center consumption. Thus, the findings of this study highlight a significant connection between CCT and SDL that must be acknowledged. This integration provides a richer, more nuanced perspective on consumer behavior, particularly in the context of city center consumption and the co-creation of value.

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## 7. Conclusion

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*The seventh and last chapter of this thesis will present a summary of the thesis and conclusions regarding how and why consumers consume a city center. Additionally, the chapter will introduce the theoretical and practical contributions provided by this study. Finally, the chapter will present a critical review of the thesis and suggestions for future research.*

### 7.1 Summary of thesis

This thesis aimed to explore how consumers consume a city center and the perceived value they derive from this consumption. A conceptual model was developed based on previous research with a connection to the purpose. The model was based on theories of CCT and SDL as a foundation and is further complemented with theories regarding place attachment and value creation (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The model is made up of three main areas, *actors*, *interaction (co-creation)*, and *value*, and facilitated the analysis of the empirical data. This study used a qualitative research design where twelve semi-structured interviews and two observations were conducted. The interviews and observations aimed to explore how and why consumers consume a city center and what types of value they derive from the consumption.

The empirical material was thematically analyzed with help from the conceptual framework, which contributed with interesting insights to the research question of how and why consumers consume a city center. Experiential consumption, often involving social interactions, is identified as the most common consumption, followed by functional and symbolic consumption. An important aspect regarding experiential consumption is concluded to be the uniqueness of the city center, which contributes to feelings of coziness among consumers. However, the city center consumption seems to always be a result of a combination of the three consumption types, indicating them all to be significant for the survival of the city center. Moreover, it is found that consumption behaviors significantly vary based on a consumer's relationship with the city center. The experiential consumption can potentially create feelings of nostalgia for consumers which they carry into future value creation, consequently leading to stronger bonds between them and the city center.

## 7.2 Conclusions

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how and why consumers engage with a city center. The empirical data highlighted that consumers visit the city center for various reasons, leading to different consumption patterns. Three main types of consumption were identified: functional, experiential, and symbolic. Experiential consumption emerged as the most common, followed by functional and then symbolic consumption. Experiential consumption often involves social interactions, which the empirical material identified as a predominant aspect of city center consumption, possibly explaining its prevalence. For many, the city center is significant primarily, and sometimes solely, as a meeting place where opportunities for interaction and socialization arise.

Moreover, the unique features of the city center, such as its architecture, contribute to creating memorable experiences and a sense of coziness for consumers, which is concluded to be the most important perceived feeling for the attractiveness of the city center. Symbolic consumption, however, proved difficult to identify precisely due to its complex nature, which may explain its less visible presence. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that overall city center consumption is a combination of these three types, with any given instance of consumption potentially involving one to three types.

Further, it was found that value is co-created in the interaction between the city and the consumer. Two more specific actors in the city center that seem significant for consumers are identified as stores and the municipality. Depending on the combination of the three consumption types, there is a unique combination of values co-created from the interaction and consumption. There are four types of value derived from the consumption of a city center, utilitarian, hedonic, social, and altruistic value. Hence, the value created from the consumption of a city center can consist of one to four different types of values. Thus, the findings from this study confirmed that previous research and theories concerning consumption and value creation (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) also are applicable in a city center consumption context.

Furthermore, the findings show that consumers' consumption behaviors differ depending on the relationship which the consumer has with the city center. Even among consumers who consider themselves to have a strong relationship with the city center, there are notable

differences in consumption patterns between residents and non-residents. Residents tend to exhibit a more mundane, functional, and less experiential consumption pattern compared to non-residents. Still, it can be concluded that residents who live in Kristianstad and have a strong relationship with the city center prioritize cherishing and supporting the local area through their consumption habits. This clearly differs from individuals residing in the city who appear to have a weak relationship with the city and its center, as their consumption (which seems to be mostly functional) rarely or never appears to be based on the preservation of the city center's well-being. Moreover, it can be concluded that memories and experiences play a certain role in the engagement of the city center. Especially, it is demonstrated that nostalgic feelings are crucial for the long-term relationship between the consumer and the city center. Thus, for individuals with weak relationships with the city center, there is a potential to develop a deeper connection over time through continued experiential consumption.

### **7.3 Theoretical contributions**

Previous academic literature (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2016; Hartmann, 2018; Kumar, 2022; Lanier & Rader, 2015) has shown that there are three major ways in which consumers tend to consume, functional, experiential, and symbolic. The findings from this study confirm this and emphasize that these three consumption types are prominent in city center consumption. Further, this study finds that experiential consumption tends to be the biggest consumption type in city center consumption, followed by functional consumption in second place, and symbolic consumption in third place. This aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (2011) and Chang *et al.*'s (2010) suggestion that the economy is moving towards an experience economy. Additionally, this study confirms previous research regarding the suggestion that a consumer's total consumption is a combination of these three consumption types (Elliott, 1997).

Furthermore, this study finds that there is a unique combination of values co-created in the interactions and consumption of the city center. Four values, utilitarian, hedonic, social, and altruistic are identified as prominent in this study. This finding is in line with academic literature (e.g. Holbrook, 2006; Kumar, 2022; Żymkowska, 2018).

This thesis further finds that the uniqueness of a city center serves as an important aspect of city center consumption. Findings from this study highlight that experiential consumption within the city center is influenced by unique features of the city center, for example,

architecture, available shops, city layout, and cultural activities. The importance of a unique city in city center consumption appears not to be acknowledged in co-creation literature. Thus, this study complements the existing theory with the insight that city center uniqueness, which entails feelings such as coziness, does not constitute a sufficient part of co-creation literature.

Further, this study indicates that a consumer's relationship with the city center affects the consumer's consumption of the city center. This finding confirms Scannell and Gifford (2010). However, this thesis finds that there is a connection between a consumer's relationship with a city center and the consumer's way of consuming the city center. This aspect has not received a sufficient part in co-creation literature. Furthermore, this thesis finds that a consumer's long-term relationship with a city center can create a feeling of nostalgia that affects the consumer's willingness to engage with the city center and that nostalgic feelings might influence the consumer's present consumption and value-creation in the city center. This finding is however not aptly explained in existing co-creation literature.

This thesis has shown that there is a prominent connection between CCT and SDL concerning city center consumption. Hence, given the dissension between researchers highlighted by Arnould (2007), this study contradicts researchers who are critical of the connection between the two fields. Thus, it confirms the findings of Arnould (2007) who suggests that CCT and SDL constitute natural allies, by providing more empirical material that supports the connection between CCT and SDL.

## **7.4 Practical contributions**

The analysis of the findings in this thesis revealed that the ways in which consumers consume a city center, and the reasons behind their consumption vary between individuals based on their place of residence, personality, and relation to the city center. However, the more predominant way of consuming a city center is through experiential activities like eating out at a restaurant or café, going out at night and experiencing the nightlife, attending music events, and attending sports events. Even though this study finds that the most prominent way of consuming in a city center is experiential, the other types of consumption (i.e. functional and symbolic) constitute a big part of city center consumption.

The knowledge gained from this study is relevant for actors in the city center to be aware of and can be used to increase the attractiveness of the city center, by taking appropriate actions.

The prominence of experiential consumption and the importance of social value highlight that city planners, in the future, can design the city in ways that encourage social interaction through experiences, for example, more open plazas with seating. These places dedicated mostly to social interaction and experiential consumption can also serve as the host places for events (e.g. music or sports) thus enabling consumers to engage in even more experiential consumption within the city center. However, as the city center develops, it is important to acknowledge the nostalgic aspects of the city since this is what creates the city center's identity, and consumers' feelings of nostalgia when visiting a city center can increase the attractiveness of the city center. Furthermore, the creation of memorable experiences mainly for children and young people can give rise to future feelings of nostalgia which can increase the attractiveness of the city center.

Further, the actors within the city center, both commercial and governmental, could partner up to create even more grand experiential consumption alternatives in the city center, for example, big public music concerts.

Additionally, actors in the city center could leverage the prominence of experiential consumption and social activities and the importance of nostalgia and city center uniqueness in the city center in their place marketing to increase the attractiveness of the city center. By highlighting ways in which the city center can be consumed experientially a broad interest in visiting the city center for consumption would be created. Consequently, the increase in consumers of the city center would mean that more people create memories and a relationship with the city center, and thus also serve the purpose of creating a profound relationship with consumers which might entail further consumption of the city center.

In summary, the city of Kristianstad could use the findings from this study to increase the attractiveness of the city center. For instance, for Kristianstad city to increase its attractiveness and attract more consumers, the city center actors (e.g. stores and the municipality) need to focus their marketing mainly on experiential consumption to meet the needs and wants of the consumers, but also to grow stronger bonds between the consumers and the city center. One concrete way in which this study can be useful for the city of Kristianstad is through the knowledge that individuals with a weaker relationship with the city might become more attracted to the city center through experiential consumption and might also create personal memories, thus increasing the likelihood of future consumption.

## 7.5 Critical review and suggestions for future research

The purpose of this study was to explore how consumers consume a city center and the perceived value they derive from this consumption. Even though findings from this study can be of relevance for city centers to increase their attractiveness, only one city center was explored in this thesis. Consequently, it would be of interest to study another city center using a similar research approach to test the transferability of the study.

Further, the small number of respondents in the interviews (12) can be considered insufficient as it can be argued that the inclusion of even more participants would have generated a more comprehensive amount of data. However, the answers given by respondents at the interviews started to be repeated, thus indicating theoretical saturation (Denscombe, 2018). Additionally, the participants of the interviews were mainly in their twenties and fifties which entails that the whole population was not represented in the interviews. The limited diversification of age groups might have entailed that the findings to some extent can be viewed as insufficient. Hence, future research could be done in a similar city center context with the inclusion of more individuals of more diverse ages.

Furthermore, findings from this study highlight that there are three major consumption types of a city center where experiential consumption is the most prominent. Based on this finding, it would be of interest to focus more on city center consumption from an experiential consumption perspective and to investigate more specific factors that enhance or hinder experiential consumption. Thus, future research could focus on how and why consumers experientially consume a city center.

The importance of city center uniqueness which was highlighted in this thesis, and the lack of inclusion of this aspect in existing co-creation literature means that it would be of interest to further study city center uniqueness from a city center consumption perspective. Future research could also delve deeper into the city centers' uniqueness to more precisely define what specific aspects of a city center create the uniqueness.

This study further finds that coziness often constitutes an important aspect of city center consumption and is a product of the uniqueness of the city center. However, the aspect of

coziness seems not to be acknowledged in co-creation literature. It would therefore be interesting to further investigate the coziness of a city center in future research.

Another factor that influences consumers' consumption of a city center is place attachment and a consumer's relationship with the city center. This thesis finds that the consumption of a city center is highly dependent on the relationship which the consumer has with the city center. Hence, it would be interesting to focus on the development of a stronger relationship between a consumer and a city and how the consumer consumes a city center at different stages of the relationship.

Further, this thesis finds that feelings of nostalgia can create a long-term relationship between a consumer and a city center, which can affect the consumer's willingness to engage with the city center. Further, nostalgic feelings can influence the consumer's present consumption and value-creation in the city center. This finding is not aptly explained in existing co-creation literature nor is it thoroughly investigated in this thesis. Hence, further exploration of the topic of nostalgic feelings in place attachment in the context of city center consumption would be interesting.



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## Appendix 1 – Interview guide

### Introduction

This thesis aims to understand how consumers actually consume a city center, with the empirical material focusing on Kristianstad's city center. The purpose of this interview is thus to find out about your consumption habits within Kristianstad's city center, as well as your experiences and feelings regarding the consumption.

Areas	Questions
<b>Demography</b>	1. How old are you? 2. What is your profession or occupation? 3. Where do you come from? 4. Where do you live?
<b>Relationship to the city center</b>	5. What is your relationship to Kristianstad and its city center? 6. How often do you visit the city center? 7. Would you say that you have a weak or strong connection to the city and the city centre? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why?</li> </ul>
<b>Consumption of the city center</b>	8. Do you usually consume the city center on your own or in the company of others? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why?</li> </ul> 9. What are your most common activities when visiting the city center? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why?</li> <li>• How do you feel when doing these activities?</li> </ul> 10. Can you share an experience or a memory you have from the city center? 11. What is your biggest motivation for consuming the city center?
<b>Future consumption</b>	12. Are there any improvements or changes you would like to see to continue attracting you to visit the city center?

	13. How do you perceive your role in the development and well-being of the city center?
<b>Other</b>	14. Do you think we have missed to ask something to better understand you consumption and perceptions of the city center?