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Maintaining the good store: lessons about caring practices from Swedish 100-year-old retail stores

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ABSTRACT

This article is about small-scale independent single-store retailers that have been in business since the first half of the 20th century – an overlooked group of actors in retail research. Research has mapped the broader structural changes in the retail industry that have benefitted large-scale operations during the last decade. Still, there is an absence of explanations for the continuous existence of small-scale retail businesses with product lines competing with large-scale actors. Retail research tends to take economic profitability and growth as starting points to interrogate the capacity of businesses to successfully compete. Against this background, the longevity of inner-city small-scale independent stores dating back to the early 20th century remains a puzzle, which calls for looking towards alternative theories to find reasons for the persistence of this line of retail. We engage with this puzzle by exploring practices of valuation engaged by store owners in a selection of small-scale, independent stores established in Gothenburg and Stockholm (Sweden) before the 1950s. We draw on understandings of values as produced through social practices and inquire how forms of caring practices figure in the day-to-day maintenance of the stores as means through which they produce value. The article builds on ethnographic fieldwork focusing on in-store interviews with store owners, employees, and customers complemented with observations. We find that care figures in these stores as expressions of attention and presence, of maintenance and of tacit knowledge, and suggest that the retailers' focus on the caring practices identified – rather than on prioritizing growth – is key to their continued, long-term existence. Anchored in an understanding of retail as situated in broader social and political processes, and as such also impacting society at large, we moreover emphasise the importance of attentiveness and valuation of, the caring practices that small-scale store owners engage in.

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Introduction

As in other Western countries, the retail landscape in Sweden has undergone major transformations in the last century (Gerentz and Ottosson 1999; Sjöberg 2008). During the 1950s, technical and organisational innovations led to a significant increase in the number of retail stores (Svensson 1998), while planning policies resulted in many being relocated from the city centre to the outskirts of town and close to major roads (Bergman 2008; Kärrholm and Nylund 2011). Across Europe, such rationalisation has led to retail businesses being concentrated to a smaller number of larger actors (Burt 2010; Kask and Prenkert 2018). There are fewer neighbourhood corner shops; instead, new developments are pushing the domination of large-scale, big-business retailers, often multinational in ownership and with global representation.

From an economic perspective, this is not surprising. In general, business scholars work with the assumption that the number one premise for for-profit organisations is to expand. But certain phenomena do not fit the pattern. Retail businesses that were established in the first half of the 20th century or earlier still exist in the city centres of Sweden's larger cities. These are small independent retailers whose businesses have lasted throughout the structural transformations mentioned above and often been in the same family from the start.

The general category of independent, small-scale stores has attracted limited scholarly attention in retail research (Smith and Sparks 2000). This also holds for 100-year-old independent stores, with some exceptions for studies engaging in 'retail nostalgia' (Logemann 2013). Studies of this line of retail have noted that small-scale stores have weaknesses, such as a tendency not to develop strategies to guide their growth (Clarke and Banga 2010). Contemporary analysis of urban retail has suggested that economic theories fail to explain the continued presence of small-scale, independent stores and the diversity of contemporary retail operations that exist in larger Swedish city centres (Sjöberg 2008). Such economic theories tend to take economic profitability and growth as starting points to interrogate the capacity of businesses to successfully compete, when analysing, among other things, the solutions for streamlining, rationalising and increasing profitability through digitalisation and scaling-up strategies (Fuentes and Hagberg 2013). Against this background, the longevity of inner-city small-scale independent stores dating back to the early 20th century remains a puzzle, which calls for looking towards alternative theories to find reasons for the persistence of this line of retail.

In this article, we engage with the puzzle of the endurance of small-scale, independent stores by exploring the activities of valuation that they engage in. We do this by drawing on the literature of valuation studies that takes an interest in values as produced through social practices (Helgesson and Muniesa 2013), and its interlinkages with the concept of care as one kind of such social practices that can produce value (Heuts and Mol 2013). We argue that these small-scale stores should be studied as a retail category of their own and thus as more than just curious anomalies in the retail landscape. To study and analyse such a category of retailers, we have selected stores that have existed throughout decades of retail restructuring while also having product lines in competition with large-scale retail actors. We inquire about important features – other than economic growth – that help explain how small-scale independent retailers sustain their businesses over time. Our research question reads: how are caring practices as valuations expressed in old

small-scale inner-city stores? The question is addressed through ethnographically informed methods performed in-store in 10 different stores in Sweden's largest cities, Stockholm and Gothenburg, where we interviewed and engaged in conversations with store owners, foremost, in addition to employers and customers. The fieldwork for the material presented in this article was carried out between autumn 2020 and autumn 2023.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. In the next section, we outline how we understand valuation as a social process and how it is interlinked with caring. Thereafter, we describe how we approach care as a theoretical framework, followed by a method discussion. Thereafter, we present our findings structured into three analytical categories subsumed under the concept of caring practices. In the last part of the result section, we discuss the more challenging, or negative, sides of the identified caring practices. Lastly, we conclude with a discussion about how our study provides insights into the role of caring practices for the continued existence of small-scale, independent stores. We also relate our findings to the feminist critique on caring as a devalued practice in society.

Caring as practices of valuations

Retail literatures have asked questions about values with regards to different forms of, and relations between, actors in retail. Addressed topics include how to communicate business and product values to consumers as in consumer value propositions (Hokkanen et al. 2021; Payne, Frow, and Eggert 2017), how consumers perceive the value of specific goods and store operations (Davis and Dyer 2012; Lim, Yong, and Suryadi 2014), and how organizational values affect how employees interact with customers (Kwon, Beatty, and Lueg 2000). Across this literature, perceptions of values tend to focus on relationships between consumers and goods, and customers' experiences of shopping (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo 2007). While this research has some degrees of practice oriented (constructivist) understandings of values, they lean towards inquiring how profit can be increased by attending to values that appeal to customers. As such, they enhance assumptions that stores engage in value creation activities to grow and increase economic profit.

To complement this line of work, we explore the valuation activities in our selection of long-lived independent small-scale stores through a processual approach to the production of values, which differs from understanding values as inherent in, or located within, a store, a consumer good or other things (see e.g. Kornberger 2017). The approach to values as produced through situated and social practices is steeped in the sociology of economy that focuses on market activities (Vatin 2013), which makes it a suitable entry point for studying the plurality of value-producing activities – beyond economic growth – in small-scale operation oriented around the trade of goods. Indeed, the relations among store owners, employees, and customers that we detail in this article are embedded in monetary transactions and revenue streams. For instance, store owners' considerations of customer experience and of retaining employees who have learned the craft of their specific product lines include ambitions to create a good store to which customers return. However, as highlighted by Vatin among others, markets 'are plunged into a vast and shimmering universe of social values constantly under construction and discussion' (2013, p. 36). Our interest is to explore the question of what activities these small-scale

independent retailers engage in that sustain the stores through fierce competition, potentially as a result of valuations of *other* aspects than economic growth. A theoretical framework of care is useful for this endeavour because it allows analysing in-store relations 'as embedded in social relations within and outside the market' (Godin 2022, p. 399).

To distinguish practices of valuation, Vatin (2013) proposes that *valorisation* captures the production of values whereas *evaluating* is useful to designate the assessment of value. This is a helpful distinction to analyse, for instance, how different actors such as consumers classify the value of a retail store, or how values of long-lived stores may be enhanced through being described as authentic in tourist guides. In our study, we focus on *caring as a form of valuation*. Separating between valorization as creating value, and evaluation as assessing value, was less helpful as valorizing and evaluating activities overlap. Caring for someone or something is already a valuation of that being of worth, which in turn may produce value. Store owners' concerns about attending to customers as regulars and engaging in conversations about their lives beyond the product sale or transaction was a valuation of the customer being important. By engaging in this activity, (some) customers appreciated this kind of reception and returned, which resulted in a value production of sorts. It indicates customers valuing the stores, and in turn, expressing care towards store owners' engagements. Instead of sorting these into separate value processes, we follow Heuts and Mol's (2013) use of valuation as a notion to encompass both these processes. Care is thus interlinked with valuation, since 'caring is an activity in which valuing is implied – both caring about and caring for have a "good" at their horizon' (Heuts and Mol 2013, p. 130). What this good consists of might differ, and our ambition is not to conclude any general definitions of what a 'good store' entails. We contend that the retailers that we encountered were concerned with their practices contributing to a 'good' store and that these activities can be understood using the framework of care. So then, what do we mean by care?

Caring as an analytical concept

The concept of care has been widely used across social, humanistic, and medical sciences. We base our understanding of care from the well-cited suggestion by Fisher and Tronto that it is 'a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher and Tronto 1990, p. 40). In other words, care can be oriented towards ensuring the maintenance and continuity of the object or relations that caring is directed towards. Rather than being a set of norms or principles, this understanding emphasises care as a situated activity engaged in by and between humans and non-humans (Gillespie and Lawson 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). Moreover, it proposes care as relational, since the settings – or 'world' – in which it is enacted 'includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (Fisher and Tronto 1990, p. 40; see also Puig de la Bellacasa 2012).

Tronto's (for example 1998, 2013, 2017) and other scholars' engagements with what they refer to as 'thinking with care' (Cox 2010; Puig de la Bellacasa 2012), have set out to criticise, implicitly or explicitly, how contemporary neoliberal, capitalistic societies devalue yet simultaneously also exploit caregivers. The literature on care, and the ideas

underpinning the concept, present alternative ways of structuring society where economic profit is not necessarily at the centre. As Tronto puts it: 'embracing care as a part of human life, recognizing its role in creating interconnectedness [...] may provide us with a way to rethink some of the ways in which we now seem unable to cope with human vulnerability' (1998, p. 19). Relating to retail literatures, Godin (2022) emphasises how thinking with care in research on consumption is a means to explore alternative forms of consumer relations that cater to a more sustainable society. Ultimately, it is embedded in relations between the consumer as an individual, and the society as a collective impacted by harmful effects of consumption in the form of climate change (Fuchs et al. 2021), which raises questions about retailers' role in the need for transitioning towards a more just world (Godin 2022). Thinking with care, then, can be understood as a political and ethical stance in the sense of paying attention to (as a form of valuing) practices of maintenance that are fundamental to collective wellbeing, but oftentimes devalued when economic growth or monetary value guides valuations.

In the last decade, a relational and situated understanding of care has proven generative in consumption research. This body of literature has demonstrated how caring is embedded in diverse relations: between consumers and the intermediaries in which they put trust that goods are ethically produced (Shaw et al. 2017), between generations among a family (Kastarinen et al. 2023), and between customers and the spatial environments in which consumption occurs (Liu 2023; Pecoraro, Uusitalo, and Valtonen 2021).

We take our cue from these studies' emphasis on care as spatially situated and made meaningful through encounters between persons, objects, and environments in retail facilities. Meanwhile, we shift from the previous literature's attention to customers to instead inquire about store owners' caring activities in relation to employees and customers as they occur in the store space. In contrast to the claims made in literature on customer care about the delivery of caring through manualized and digitalised platforms (Bassano et al. 2018), we consider caring practices performed by store owners as situated and requiring embodied knowledge enacted in interpersonal encounters with customers.

Studying situated caring practices

Methods for in-store studies

In this study, we set out to inquire about alternative explanations for how small-scale independent retailers manage to sustain their businesses. This explorative entrance point, together with our assumption that store owners hold important knowledge for understanding how their businesses are sustained, called for an open-ended and qualitative methodology. We chose an ethnographic approach, which is suitable for exploring everyday situated activities and unpacking often taken-for-granted assumptions (Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2015). The aim of the methods we used, interviews and observations, was to allow for a contextualised and detailed understanding of key concerns among store owners. This choice of method carried out in local store operations situates the study among the relatively few examples within research on retail that build on data collected 'in-store' (Crewe, Gregson, and Brooks 2003; Fuentes 2014b; Minahan et al. 2013). The scarcity may be because in-store field studies are time-consuming, costly and require that relationships be established with store managers (Minahan et al. 2013), which our

experience supports. The in-store studies relying on qualitative methods that do exist tend to privilege interest in the motivations, behaviours, and experiences of customers (see e.g. Fuentes, Bäckström, and Svingstedt 2017; Högberg et al. 2019; Levy 2005; Valtakoski 2020), to which this article contributes with knowledge about those of retailers.

The empirical material of the article is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in 10 retail stores between autumn 2020 and autumn 2023. The stores were selected through a mapping carried out in 2020. We identified around 60 small-scale independent stores established before 1950 in the inner cities of Stockholm and Gothenburg. These stores have thus been active throughout decades of technical and organisational developments that favoured rationalisation and large-scale businesses (Svensson 1998), and they have outlived other challenges such as the financial crisis of 2008. The mapping was performed through a combination of the authors' decades-long familiarity with retail stores in Stockholm and Gothenburg, suggestions from colleagues and friends, and searches in online archives of the Swedish retail history. We visited 25 of the listed retailers to present our research project and ask about their willingness to participate. Of these, we selected 10 stores for in-depth study based on the criteria that they operate in a product line facing competition from large-scale actors, were willing to participate in the study, and that there were persons working in the stores with historical insights into the business (including retired people we identified from talking to the current store owners). Additionally, the selection was formed by the opportunity to study several retailers within a similar product line, which we categorise as clothing/shoes, selected/exclusive eatables, and sewing/gear.

While the selected stores share the history of longevity, they varied in other regards. Three of the stores are run by a single owner with no employees and seven are family-owned, where either family members also work in the store, or where they have employees. Across these stores, we made a total of 30 interviews representing three categories: current and retired store owners; employees; and customers. The interviews ranged in time between 15 and 90 minutes. Most interviews were recorded, with the consent of the interviewee, and totalled 770 recorded minutes that were transcribed verbatim. The interviewees are pseudonymised by referring to the product line they represent, which allows us to provide respondents with a degree of anonymity as agreed upon before the interviews, while still providing the context of the retail business in the analysis.

Table 1 summarises the number of stores studied per product line, the interviews within each category, and how these interviews are referenced in the result section. Whilst some of the interviews were conducted by one researcher alone, the majority were conducted jointly by two researchers from the team. This setup allowed for combined

Table 1. The studied stores and interviews made for each category.

Store categories (3)	Studied stores (10)	Interviews (30)	Coding references
Clothing/shoes (CS)	1 shoe store	4 store owners	CS1–CS11
	1 men's clothing store	1 employee	
	2 knitwear stores	6 customers	
Selected/exclusive eatables (EE)	1 tea store	4 store owners (1 retired)	EE1–EE9
	1 chocolate store	4 employees	
		1 customer	
Sewing/gear (SG)	1 watch store	6 store owners (2 retired)	SG1–SG10
	1 fabric store	2 employees	
	2 sewing supply stores	2 customers	

observations while interviewing, which was more challenging when conducting interviews individually. In addition to interviewing, we made 12 in-store visits to six of the stores. During these visits, we combined informal talks with owners and employees with observations of interactions between customers, owners, and employees. These visits generated a total of 20 pages of transcribed field notes taken during and/or directly after these visits.

The interviews with store owners took place in the stores, often over the counter or on the store floor. This allowed us to ask questions about the details in the store that could prompt reflections and shared memories from the interviewee about the particularities of the business, as a form of ethnographic interviewing that considers the interviewees' responses in the context in which they are exchanged (Davies 2012). During the interviews, we asked questions related to themes focusing on ownership structure (historical and present), challenges encountered and 'crises' (historical and present, including the covid pandemic unfolding during the fieldwork), drivers for and challenges with running the businesses, relationships with property managers/landlords and suppliers, qualifications of and relationships with employees, and characteristics of encounters with customers and products. The interviews 'often blurred over into socializing,' as Crewe et al. (2003, p. 80) described their experience of in-store interviewing with retailers. This approach helped us to ask follow-up questions, and discuss examples of similar situations, based on the exchanges that occurred. Among the interviews with employees, two were held in the store space, while the remaining five were telephone interviews. Six customer interviews were held in a location other than the store space and three were telephone interviews.

The original research design included more in-store observations than we were able to perform. We started this research during the COVID-19 pandemic (a crisis also for retail, that the stores we studied outlived as of autumn 2023), when there were nationally imposed restrictions on the number of persons allowed per square meter in commercial facilities. As the stores studied had relatively small facilities, only a few customers were allowed, making this a period of financial pressure for the owners. This made it challenging for us to spend longer time in the stores, not to disturb their business and add pressure in an already challenging situation. We adjusted the design to the conditions for presence in the stores by increasing the number of shorter in-store visits combined with informal talks. However, this meant less opportunity to observe interactions and practices in the store spaces, among persons and the materialities of the store environments and products. In other words, while our initial intention was to grasp socio-material dimensions of caring practices, as practices in retailscapes are both material and social (Fuentes 2014a), the agentialities of other than humans are little attended to in this study.

Data analysis

The analysis of the interview transcriptions and field notes was a process that shifted between reading the empirical material, coding and writing (Liu 2023). Through a first reading of interview transcriptions and fieldnotes, we coded the empirical material into two rough themes focusing on historical reflections on how the stores had been run, and the practices and relationships in the contemporary running of the stores that interviews addressed. These two themes reflected our starting point to understand the

longevity of the stores both through historical and contemporary factors. Although we selected the studied stores based on access to persons with a longstanding insight into the store, interviewees were less wordy when asked about historical aspects, and had easier at hand to elaborate on concerns with the day-to-day running and maintenance of the business, and how they handled relationships with customers, employees, and suppliers. Moreover, archives on Swedish retail that we consulted had very little on small-scale stores, and more on larger retailers. This formed our working hypothesis that the store owners were occupied with present-day concerns and focused on the (near) future of their businesses. Rather than speaking of growth strategies and plans for changing ranges (Clarke and Banga 2010, p. 195), the interviewees shared descriptions of how encounters with customers and employees unfolded, what they appreciated with these encounters, and how they reasoned around the needs to which they catered with their specialty products and knowledge. In other words, they were focused on the day-to-day maintenance and flows of encounters among store owners, customers, employees (for several, not all, of the stores), and products. This led our attention to care as an analytical approach for the following coding work. Across the coding, the fact that several interviews were jointly performed and that we had several meetings to discuss the emerging empirical material across the fieldwork, facilitated our joint coding across the research team.

In the second round of coding, based on our analytical starting point of care as a situated, embodied practice (rather than norms or principles) that tends towards maintenance, we reread the empirical material with attention to ways in which key actors in the stores – store owners, employees, and customers – described their encounters. Attention to relationships between these actors was grounded in our understanding of caring practices as relational. It was also grounded in our starting point of care as something *embodied*, as a practice that is not necessarily verbalized but rather is possessed in the body based on the experience of having done something for a long time. In a third round of coding, we elaborated on three aspects of caring practices that we found prominent in the empirical material. We consider these three aspects of care as being:

- a *form of attention and presence*, to be present in the situation and interpret what the customers need in that specific situation, and fine-tuning in relation to the specific situations, where every meeting is unique.
- a *work of maintenance*, an everyday activity that was done continuously, a concern for what already exists rather than a drive towards ‘the new.’ It is not a hunt for the latest products or business models, but rather a maintenance of the already existing.
- a *form of tacit knowledge* that comes from experience and cannot be learned from only reading manuals. It is thus not merely a cognitive knowledge, but one that is learned through repetitive practice over time by being present in situations. Tacit knowledge becomes embodied by means of doing and recurrently encountering customers and colleagues in the store space (rather than through reading manuals or acquired by being told about how to do). In the stores, this was shown, for example, by how the store owners navigated between *proximity and distance* (when to get close to a customer and when not to), about *timing* (when to ask a personal question and open up for a conversation) and about *rhythm and gestures* (how to orient in the room).

There is the risk of romanticizing certain care practices as a better or truer way of doing retail. However, the practices they have developed also entail challenges. In the third round of coding, we included a category regarding challenges and difficulties that the identified caring practices entailed. In the following result section, we organize the empirical material through the three identified caring practices as separate headings. We conclude each subheading with discussions about the challenges generated by each practice.

Caring practices in stores

Care as expressions of attention and presence

In a stereotypical capitalist economy, those customers buying the most expensive goods would also receive the most attention according to a general 'time is money' logic. However, in the stores we have studied, all store owners emphasized how they ensure to receive customers with attention irrespective of the size of the transaction at hand; those customers who bought cheaper items, or even left without buying anything, would receive equal treatment to those buying more expensive, and from the store owner's perspective, more lucrative items.

This is a practice about seeing individuals rather than money. The caring practice here is a social skill, a skilled form of attention. Employees we interviewed from different stores expressed that the store owners themselves appreciated taking time with each customer, seeing them as unique individuals rather than examples of a generic customer category. One employee made a comparison with her time in a fast-food chain, a polar opposite experience because no social skills and hardly any attention to the particular individual in front of her was needed (EE3). A customer of a clothing store gave an example of this attentiveness to the individual. In need of a suit for her husband and without time to go physically to the store, she called, and the owner replied that 'I know the size that your husband has, I can send the suit' and the customer concluded satisfied; 'it fit perfectly – that's service!' (CS6).

One store had become a sort of meeting place where people dropped by to talk about various topics – sick relatives, work or the weather. These things were often unrelated to what was sold in the store. Another explained that they had 'built a customer relationship where our customers support us. They purchase things of course, but they can also open the door and say, "how nicely you've decorated the storefront," and continue walking' (EE7). In this store, the established customer relationships were visible in the fact that the store space had many functions beyond a point of purchase: neighbours left their keys and children living nearby could sit and do their homework until their parents arrived to pick them up.

Asked about what she enjoyed about running her store, one owner answered without hesitation: 'the customers, hearing what they are working on, and they often come to show us their clothes' (SG6). Her relationships with customers went beyond store encounters, as she regularly received calls from customers asking for suggestions about where to find particular goods that she did not sell. Such social encounters are captured by a store owner who said: 'I am sort of a therapist. I get to hear people's life stories, something that online shopping can never replace, whatever people say' (CS4).

But more than just a social skill, this kind of caring practice is about a different approach to time. Several emphasised that they saw customer encounters as more than a one-time event. One owner explained that:

It can take between one and 40 minutes to attend to a customer. You have to ask questions and recognise the customer; many of them come in and say 'I'll have the usual' without specifying what that is. So, you need to know the customer, who they're married to if they don't come together, their kids. [. . .] It has never been like that in other jobs [I've had] where it's just about selling and nothing else (EE6).

The quote indicates that the encounters with customers go beyond the here-and-now purchase moment, but rather connects the past and the future. As it also suggests, it was an expectation from some customers to be remembered, which the store owners related to. The store owners are building long lasting relationship. This is evident in how all stores had a solid base of regulars. One storeowner elaborated: 'A wedding dress can take 1–1.5 hours. And perhaps that's not profitable, but then she comes back 20–25 years later and says, "My daughter needs a dress for her graduation and I've bought from you before"' (SG4). Similar to what this quote suggests, the store owners were concerned with relationships over time. They described the point of purchase not only for the momentary monetary transaction. They positioned customer exchanges on a horizon that connects the past and the future of their store operation.

This kind of caring practice – the attention and presence with customer – became clear in our field material as many store owners talked negatively about the opposite, that is, having too little time with customers, where encounters focused only on the purchase at hand. This caring practice is thus tightly intertwined with size and the scale of business. For example, two store owners talked about their respective experiences of running a retail business located in one of Stockholm's oldest, biggest and busiest department stores. After having closed down this branch, one of them described in negative terms how the retail operation was forced to be streamlined according to the directives coming from the department store, and above all: there was not enough time with customers (SG4). Customers became a constant, fast-moving current of people rather than intimate, social and individualised meetings in a secure and secluded environment. Two store owners and several employees expressed, with a sigh of relief, that they were happy they ended the contract with the department store and instead focused fully on the 'mother store' (SG3, SG4, CS1, CS2). Another person said that the highly cherished person-to-person work would be impossible with the distance to employees that would emerge, should she expand the business through more stores or additional service offerings.

The caring practice of being socially skilled and paying equal attention to everyone is to an important degree premised on the generosity of time and consideration by owners and employees and could be an annoyance and burdensome, as illustrated through a reflection made by one store owner.

Since this type of store is disappearing all the more, many people come to us because they know that they will get help here. And often it isn't to buy shoes but to talk, and that's very nice but then you don't really have time. But they're our customers. (CS1)

We identified that one result of such social skills and attentive manners was the steady number of regulars. But regulars can also become a dependent relationship, as the stores rely on returning customers to sustain their operations. If the regulars are tied to a specific generation of customers, the stores need to make sure the cohort of regulars transcends

generations, or a big part of their customers will likely disappear within the foreseeable future.

Caring practices a work of maintenance

Another caring practice we identified in the stories told by the store owners themselves was how they sought to maintain their stores rather than expand. Most of the stores have remained in the same facilities for almost a century without expressing a concern with hunting for new goods to sell or expansive and lucrative businesses. However, this does not mean they were uninterested in selling or lacked a sense of doing business – the store owners were all running a for-profit retail business and needed to make ends meet. Rather, maintaining should be seen as a caring practice in its own right, and not just a lack of expansion. One store owner said: ‘Of course, you need to have a drive, but not just for earning money. I think that it’s important not to be too greedy, but to be humble, grateful and proud of what you do’ (EE6).

Maintenance as a caring practice became evident in our field material in how they reasoned about the goods they sold. For example, several store owners talked about the quality and selection of products as situated in a continuity of quality and product selection that they maintained, which also meant that they put effort into maintaining supplier relations and focusing on particular goods, rather than the standard supply. A standard supply would be easier to scale up and expand on, whereas focusing on a selection of what they referred to as quality, is a practice of maintaining. At one point, maintaining did become the opposite of expansion as when one store owner received an offer to sell their products through a large-scale high-end store in London. The Swedish store owner decided to turn down the offer and explained:

It was a great offer, it’s just that many steps need to work out and it became too big for us. It felt sad to say no [...] but I have to consider the quality of my products and I think that it’s easy to lose control when you grow too much and work with other business partners and employees. No, I want to be there myself to ensure that our customers get the service they deserve and that everybody is satisfied and happy. (EE6)

If the caring practice is about maintaining the quality of both services and goods, sometimes, maintaining becomes equal to downsizing. Three of the studied businesses had had several stores in Stockholm during the 20th century and decided to downsize for various reasons before realising that the small-scale focus benefitted caring for customers which was perceived as key to the business. One owner recalled that his father had downsized in the 1980s from three stores to one as his employees retired and realised that ‘it was really nice and we were able to make a living out of one store, or actually even better with just one store and thereby get away from many [management] problems’ (CS2). Several store owners were similarly reasoning about why they preferred to maintain one store operation, and two clothing and shoe stores had in previous owner generations been several-store businesses and related to that experience. In other stores, such as the knitting stores, the owners were not explicitly reasoning about alternatives to the one-store operation they were running.

Maintaining might be understood as a harmony between size and revenue – not overgrowing yet still surviving. However, such harmony is becoming increasingly hard

in a world that favours fast expansion. Several store owners noted how suppliers disappeared and large-scale standardised goods dominated the market while transport costs increased. Several interviewees expressed concerns about their goods in terms of being trustees of a history of quality, both in their products and their engagement with the customer (SG3, SG4, EE1, EE6, EE7). One store, for example, had signed a written agreement with the former owner to maintain the character of the store with its high-quality range and level of customer service, and she remained committed to honour that agreement. Maintaining it might be securing harmony, but it might also mean having your hands tied.

Care as tacit knowledge

Our third kind of caring practice identified in the field material relates to different kinds of knowledge that the store owners and their employees possess. These are different kinds of tacit and practical knowledge, forms of knowledge that cannot be standardized or manualized and cannot be incorporated into a management system. Rather, these are know-hows that are situated, requiring long-time practice and repetition in relation to customer encounters.

This form of tacit knowledge is partly about timing, knowing when to approach a customer, in what way, and when to let them browse the store. It cannot be transferred in a manual stipulating it in seconds or minutes, but something you have to feel and know in your body. The tacit knowledge became visible for example when one store owner knew exactly when to enter a dressing room where a customer was trying on a bra. The customer, obviously in an intimate and fragile position with hardly any clothes on, was calmed by the sturdy yet tender movements of the store owner, making sure the bra was put on correctly. In a knitting store, we observed the difference between senior and junior employees' when a customer came in asking about a nightgown that would fulfil her expectations of being warm and without patterns that risked itching the skin. The junior employee ran back and forth between the storage and the counter providing suggestions without managing to suggest a gown model corresponding to the customers' need. When the customer shared her need with the senior employee, the latter came back with another gown model from the storage upon which seeing the customer exclaimed 'that's what I want, I take it!' We learned from several customers in this store that they had noted how the senior employees were skilled in translating customers' requests into product suggestions, whereas a junior employee still had a bit to go to embody that kind of knowledge.

Given the complications in transferring such tacit knowledge, recruiting was a delicate matter for store owners. Store owners who had employees, which was the case for six of the ten stores, emphasised the importance of staff retention. It could be difficult to find dedicated staff and employees were not easily exchangeable. It takes time to build up knowledge about the products and a concern for the business, which translates into considerate encounters with customers. A recurrent comment across the interviews was that owners expected employees to take time with customers, unlike the experience of working for larger stores and department stores, which several employees had done. They also testified to a desire to attend to the specific needs of customers, to ensure that they find the products that suit them. This was particularly pronounced in the clothing stores.

A former employee of the clothing store underlined the importance of being able to attend to a customer throughout their visit, which she described as different from larger stores 'where they just point you in the direction of what you asked for' (CS3).

One former retailer argued that continuity of employees 'is very important in our business because you cannot sell a special product without knowledge' (SG2). Knowledge about the products was key for gaining customers trust and ensuring their (re)turn to the store. Another store owner made a similar statement:

The staff must have some education in textiles to be able to provide advice, come up with suggestions and know about the materials [...] It's part of our mission to have the knowledge, give advice and recommendations or even say 'We don't think you should do this' when the customer has an idea the store owner deems unfeasible (SG7).

The knowledge about what they were selling was crucial. It could lead store owners or employees to give advice that did not necessarily lead customers to buy more, but rather make customers think in new ways. One interviewed store employee described this as instead of buying something new I advise them about how to repair something they already have to re-use it [...] and we often suggest something that the customer hadn't thought of by saying 'Do this instead,' which can lead to a better result (SG8). Again, the caring practices we have identified point to how expansion and economic growth are not at the forefront.

The caring practices as tacit knowledge also has less positive sides. The difficulties of recruiting the right staff could lead to store owners working night shifts to make ends meet. One store owner described staying up until 4 AM several nights in a row to manage a big order that was due – because there was no one else around to do the job. There might also be a fear of letting people in. One store owner shared her concerns about taking on new staff since the recipes that they used were business secrets. She feared that once a newly hired person had learned the craft, they would leave and thus become a 'competitor instead of a colleague' (EE6). The tacit and embodied knowledge about the goods being sold can also turn into a sort of control where letting go is hard. Some store owners simply could not imagine passing the torch over to someone else, not even their kin. If it is your life work, how will you ever find anyone competent enough to know what has to be taught over generations? This was a question that, in different ways, several of our interviewees brought up (EE6, EE1, SG6, SG8).

Concluding discussion

In this article, we addressed the question: how are caring practices as valuations expressed in old small-scale inner-city stores? We interviewed owners, employees and customers of long-lived inner-city stores to learn about reasons that could explain their longevity. We encountered concerns and practices that emphasised retaining employees, attending to customers with patience, and treating the store facilities as spaces for social, long-term interactions. We identified three aspects of what we consider caring practices: *attention*, *maintenance*, and *tacit knowledge*. The caring practices entailed constant tinkering, time-consuming, continuous work that did not have a clear measurable goal, and that could not be standardised, manualised and presented as a checklist. Such practices are embedded in long-time relations that the store owners and customers have built up over

time, which relies on encounters where both owners and customers tend towards including a personal touch beyond an encounter charged with transactional value.

Ultimately, the stores' focus was on creating and maintaining a 'good' store. To them, 'good' did not immediately correspond to monetary value and growth. The caring practices were entangled with the economic situation and the stores were indeed concerned about securing sales but not primarily to facilitate expansion and growth. It was rather about the economy in the sense of carefully using available resources to sustain the store over time, in line with how caring has been theorised as an activity striving toward maintenance and continuity (Fisher and Tronto 1990; Puig de la Bellacasa 2012).

Our starting point was that a traditional economic value approach, which primarily takes an interest in the production of economic value, fails to capture the diversity of activities that store owners in our study engaged in. We argue that the retailers have survived throughout decades of rationalisation and fierce competition by keeping their businesses small and engaging in caring practices. The capacity to engage in the kinds of caring practices that we identified was facilitated by the small scale of their business, and ultimately helped the stores maintain their operations over time and outlive diverse crises. Using a broader valuation approach helped us see other values, beyond solely economic growth. By attending to caring practices, we shed light on a diversity of relationships that the store owners and employees engage in in various ways. These relations are connected to economic gain, but they do not necessarily equal continuous growth. Nevertheless, the efforts put into the caring practices might partly explain why these businesses have survived over decades. This challenges the dominant presumption, often taken for granted, that economic growth is the main inherent drive for businesses.

Care as a devalued practice

In our analysis we combined theories of valuation with theories of care, which helped us inquire how the small-scale stores have survived over almost a century, while not primarily focusing on economic expansion. Combining valuation and care enabled us to frame care as a kind of valuation practice. However, we may also use the literature on care to analyse how the kind of caring practices we illustrate, also risk being *devalued*. Building on Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) and feminist critique tied to care, we argue that the practices these stores engage in are not only alternative and different to expansive, large-scale rationalization, but have also historically been devalued, marginalized, and seen as less important. Cox (2010) argues that the marginalization of care reflects ideologies that reinforce individualistic conceptions of the self and competitive relationships with others.

As stated in the introduction, we approach the stores studied as examples of a retail category in its own right, and not just anomalies in a rationalized retail landscape. Care as a theoretical concept has usually been associated with practices within the private sphere, and often disparaged as labour performed by women. But such a limited view of care causes us to miss the radical potential the concept has, to explore and explain different domains in society. The small-scale stores we have studied express various forms of care practices that have helped them survive in a society that favours fast growth and economic expansion. We have also discussed the cost at which caring comes – these stores are economically vulnerable, and their work risk being devalued as of less importance from a retail perspective and society at large.

By paying attention to how caring practices are crucial for these stores' survival, our ambition is also to put forward how these stores engage in forms of care that are crucial for human and collective wellbeing. By recognizing that we are all recipients of 'care,' we expose and begin to appreciate our interdependence and reject notions of care that situate it in the private family, domestic spaces or intimate relationships alone. Inspired by Tronto (2013), we suggest that our findings call for bringing in ideas of care to analyse retail activities and to shift from valuation of retail based on economic growth towards its impact on societal relations and wellbeing. This is different from considering how care transmitted through customer service can improve sales (see e.g. Bassano et al. 2018). Instead, thinking with care in consumption and retail is a way to engage with questions about how retail could be reorganized to contribute to a more just and sustainable society, as Godin (2022) powerfully suggests. The organisation of retail as markets impacts how caring practices are allocated, and how they are valued. Retail studies have convincingly demonstrated that care figures in relationships among family as consumers (Kastarinen et al. 2023), and between costumers, products, and stores' spatial setups (Liu 2023; Pecoraro, Uusitalo, and Valtonen 2021; Shaw et al. 2017). In this study, we have shown how also retailers engage in caring practices, and store owners suggested that the smaller scale of their stores was crucial for their capacity to engage in these practices. Our finding thus support previously established evidence of the important societal and social role of small scale stores that transcends performing a 'utilitarian function' of economic growth (Clarke and Banga 2010, p. 91).

Challenges to care and suggestions for future studies

At the same time as we want to uphold care practices and show their importance for society as a whole, we also acknowledge the challenges and tensions in which they are situated. While we suggest that the store owners' engagement in caring practices are crucial to the stores' survival over time, we hold no illusions that they will guarantee their future. 'The term care suggests enduring work that seeks improvement but does not necessarily succeed,' as pointed out by Heuts and Mol (2013, p. 141). For instance, some store owners' concerns with control over the business and thus a reluctance to include other people put at risk the alternatives for future owners. The caring practices that we have identified are time-consuming and fragile in the sense that the stores are dependent on their owners.

Future studies in retail focusing on small-scale stores would benefit from taking our findings one step further. For instance, what more, and perhaps different, practices of care are present in retail stores? And are there tensions between the different practices of care? For instance, does one practice emerge at the expense of another? We would also encourage future studies to inquire about relations across a variety of actors beyond the scope of this article, to study how they influence the conditions of the stores. From our material, we see for instance property owners, competitors, city retail collaboration networks, and supplier and transport actors. Future studies should also analyse how vulnerable these small, independent stores are, not only to contextual changes (they have proved they can survive several economic and political crises and changes) but to smaller, local changes, such as rent levels and urban planning policy. Our study focused on a selection of small-scale stores that are doing relatively well for

the moment. During our fieldwork, other similar stores closed down for reasons including increased rents and the lack of successors. These examples highlight that the caring practices that we have identified are not, in their own right, explanations for continuity; there are also other components that affect the stores' capacity to continue the business. We hope that this study can inspire further research to gain deeper knowledge about the conditions for the small-scale retailers that differentiate from the dominant retail landscape.

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Ethical declaration

The required name of the ethics committee and approval number are not included in the article. However, the research presented in the article is funded and approved for its research design and ethical considerations by the Hakon Swenson Foundation and the Swedish Retail and Wholesale Council respectively, as well as the Stockholm School of Economics Institute for Research (SIR) that handles the administration of the project. The research is conducted following the ethical research guidelines of the Swedish Research Council and details on how appropriate informed consent was obtained are detailed in the manuscript. All empirical material has been pseudonymised; no names of organisations or persons/titles/positions can be identified.

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