Abstract: The focus of this paper is the revitalization of a heritage city center and the significance of retail trade and cruise ship tourism within this context. Fundamental concepts are presented in the literature review and the factors contributing to the decline of old city centers explored. The empirical section of the paper comprises a case study that highlights a specific municipality’s efforts to revive its heritage city center. The main attraction in Koper is its well-preserved medieval city center with five-centuries-old Venetian architecture. An analysis of the municipality’s initiatives is performed and a qualitative study that investigates the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders regarding the situation and the municipality’s actions to preserve commercial activity in the city center. The results of the semi-structured interviews conducted with three distinct stakeholder groups are analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method. The findings reveal that the chosen municipality has achieved relative success in revitalizing its heritage city center. Concurrently, stakeholders’ perspectives are utilized to identify potential drawbacks and explore opportunities for mitigating them. This paper concludes by presenting its theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of heritage city center revitalization, not only in the selected municipality but also beyond. These insights can inform the appropriate sustainable policy development and marketing strategy.

Keywords: revitalization; retail trade; marketing strategy; city center; stakeholders; heritage

1. Introduction

Revitalizing a heritage city center is like breathing new life into history. Preserving the cultural legacy while making it vibrant and relevant can be a delicate dance. Retail plays a crucial role; it is not just about shops but also creating an experience that resonates with the spirit of the place. Unique boutiques, perhaps echoing the craftsmanship of yesteryear, can thrive. Imagine cobblestone streets lined with quaint stores, each telling a story. It is not just commerce; it is about curating an atmosphere where every purchase feels like a piece of the city’s narrative.

Heritage town centers serve as significant cultural, architectural, and social landmarks, representing the rich heritage and identity of communities. However, over time, many of these centers have experienced a decline in economic vitality and cultural relevance, posing challenges to their sustainability. Revitalizing heritage town centers has become a critical endeavor to not only preserve their historical significance but also to promote sustainable development. One of the key challenges faced in the revitalization process is the integration of retail development within the heritage fabric of these town centers. Retail establishments play a crucial role in enhancing the vibrancy and economic viability of these areas. However, striking a balance between preserving the historical character of the town center and meeting the evolving demands of modern retail is a complex task.

Town Centre Management (TCM) refers to a comprehensive approach that focuses on the strategic management and revitalization of town centers. It involves cooperation and
coordination among various stakeholders, including local authorities, business owners, residents, and community groups, to improve the economic, social, and environmental aspects of the town center. As the municipality of Koper adopted this methodology in its attempt to revitalize the city center, the purpose of the study is to assess the success of this venture. Through the analysis of the case study, an interesting perspective on the sustainable development of a coastal city is offered, which can be an excellent example for many other scholars and also heritage city managers.

In their study, Carreras and Frago explored the concept of a retail-less city and its potential sustainability [1]. The conventional urban planning rule of “a place for everything and everything in its place” initially held considerable strength. However, with the passage of time and the dynamic nature of the multifaceted factors influencing urban life, this seemingly straightforward approach has gradually lost its efficacy. This article aims to explore the problems and opportunities associated with the revitalization of heritage town centers, with a specific focus on sustainable retail development. By examining the interplay between heritage preservation, economic growth, and environmental sustainability, insights into effective strategies are provided that can contribute to the long-term success of revitalization efforts. The first section of this article delves into the challenges faced by heritage town centers, including the factors that have contributed to their decline. Issues such as changing consumer preferences, competition from suburban developments, inadequate infrastructure, and the loss of community cohesion are examined. Understanding these challenges is essential to devising effective revitalization strategies.

Further on, the significance of retail development in the revitalization process is explored. The role of retail establishments in attracting visitors, stimulating economic activity, and creating a vibrant atmosphere in the town center is examined. Furthermore, the potential conflicts that arise when integrating modern retail into historic contexts and the importance of preserving the authentic character of these centers are discussed. Finally, the importance of sustainable development in the revitalization of heritage town centers is highlighted. Through such comprehensive analysis, this article aims to provide a foundation for further research and practical implementation of strategies that foster the revitalization and sustainable development of heritage town centers. By addressing the complex interplay between heritage preservation, retail development, and sustainability, it is hoped to contribute to the preservation and revitalization of valuable cultural assets for present and future generations.

2. Town Centre Management (TCM)

Many countries in Europe faced problems with the depopulation of urban centers due to changing consumer habits and the construction of shopping centers on the outskirts of cities as early as the 1980s and 1990s. Guimarães [2] affirms that retail establishments not only enhance authenticity but also play a crucial role in transforming the city center into a vibrant leisure and entertainment destination. As one of the practical solutions for a sustainable revitalization of urban centers, the Town Centre Management (TCM) approach or model has been developed.

2.1. Definition of TCM

The TCM model has been developed in many European countries—in Spain, Italy, Sweden, Austria, Germany, France, Belgium and the United Kingdom [3–5]. It first appeared in the UK, where the Association for the Management of Urban Centers [6] operates, which defines TCM as “a coordinated and proactive initiative to ensure the attractiveness of urban centers, acting as a public-private partnership involving a wide range of key interests” [7].

This relatively broad definition reflects the fact that TCM has been developed or implemented differently in different countries, taking into account local conditions. Irrespective of specific national forms, all the TCM approaches share the following common features: the same goal—revitalization of the city center; partnership cooperation; and
involvement of various and numerous stakeholders, both public and private (state, regions, municipalities and entrepreneurs, property owners, financial institutions and others).

In different countries, the specific elements are then more emphasized. In some places, there is a greater role for entrepreneurs who are more or less formally connected; in other places, there is more emphasis on the part of the public (local community). Authors [8] suggest that the approach in Poland should involve the enhancement of the social impact of TCM by fostering closer connections with the local community. TCM can also focus more on achieving economic benefits for urban entrepreneurs or more on attracting investors and creating a competitive environment for entrepreneurship in general [3].

According to some findings from the literature [9], traditional retail-focused strategies for revitalizing downtown areas are no longer adequate. Instead, there is a need to distinguish city centers from other commercial developments by leveraging the unique assets and characteristics they already possess. It has become evident that there is no universally applicable TCM model, and in Slovenia, TCM cannot merely replicate a model from another country. Its application needs to evolve in a specific direction tailored to local needs and operating within local conditions, as detailed below.

2.2. The City of Koper

The city of Koper developed on the former island at the mouth of the rivers Rižana and Badaševica. The area has been inhabited since the Middle Bronze Age, when the first forts (prehistoric settlements called kaštelir/castelliere) appeared. During the Roman Empire, the settlement became a trading post called Aegida, from which the city later developed. The first written mentions of the town come from Pliny the Elder in 129 A.C. as Aegida [10]; later, the settlement was called Caprae and Insula Capritana or Justinopolis [11]. The Istrian border counts later ruled here, followed by the patriarchs of Aquilea. They chose Koper as the seat of their feudal estates in Istria and named it Caput Histriae (Head of Istria), which was later Italianized into Capo d’Istria, its townscape from 1781 is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Townscape of Capo d’Istria, 1781 [12], public domain.

At the end of the 12th century, Koper was granted the exclusive right to “salt port” by the Venetian Republic, which greatly increased the importance of the town and reflected the great importance of the coastal location for its development [13]. The morphology of the town itself also began to change with the formation of salt pans on the southern edge of the town, which connected the island with the mainland.
Koper (Capodistria in Italian) experienced a real boom in the 15th and 16th centuries under the Venetian Republic, when it also began to acquire the architectural image that is still visible today. Within the walled city center on the former island, important buildings were built, which served the new authorities by transferring some administrative functions to the city of Koper [14]. They developed activities and services in the city that served primarily (maritime) trade and the surrounding rural population (Figure 1).

The importance and role of the city reached a peak in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the Habsburg monarchy finally broke the power of the Venetians in the Adriatic and Istria. With the proclamation of Trieste as a free port, Koper began to lose its role as the central Istrian port [13]. At the beginning of the 20th century, the production of salt in the salt pans around the town decreased drastically, and the salt pans began to be boned to prevent the spread of malaria and odors. This created extensive land areas onto which the city expanded [15].

Depending on the use of space and characteristics, the city of Koper can be morphologically divided into four or five parts. These are: 1. the heritage city center; 2. an area of predominantly central activities around the heritage city center; 3. a newer area of predominantly commercial buildings; 4. residential construction on Mark’s Hill; and 5. Port of Koper. Historical interconnection of town plans from years 1618, 1918, 1920 and 2014 can be seen in the Figure 2.

![historical interconnection](image)

**Figure 2.** Historical interconnection of town plans: 1618, 1918, 1920 and 2014 [16].

The latter is not functionally part of the city, but due to its importance for the development of the city and its wider surroundings, it is essential for understanding the modern development and the dynamics of changing the city.

Today, Koper is a modern and rapidly developing city, as evidenced by numerous new constructions and changes in space, the constant growth of the population and the economic success of some companies. The beginnings of today’s economic development date back to the second half of the 20th century, after the construction of a cargo port north of the heritage city center, with the construction of a railway connection with the interior and the construction of larger industrial complexes [15]. The increased need for labor in these plants was followed by large-scale immigration from the entire territory of Yugoslavia (Slovenia was one of the republics of Yugoslavia until 1990, authors’ note), which resulted...
in mass construction of residential buildings and accompanying infrastructure. Figure 3 shows the view of the city center of Koper today.

![Figure 3. Koper today [17].](image)

With the increased need for space and in the spirit of ambitious socialist plans, the construction of larger facilities on the outskirts of the city began [18]. This was mainly due to the lack of larger vacant spaces in the city center and unfavorable transport accessibility (with the growth of individual car traffic, the accessibility of parking spaces became increasingly important).

With the emergence of large shopping centers, combining a wide range of shops and leisure activities under one roof and being much more accessible from the transport point of view, the center’s attractiveness declined sharply, mainly due to the emigration of activities from the center to shopping malls. One of the main reasons for the relocation of activities from city centers is increasing consumption, as city centers do not provide infrastructure for the construction of larger shopping centers and accompanying parking areas. In parallel, due to the growth of the living standards and economic power of the population, a strong process of suburbanization took place. Residents focused their housing in nearby settlements in the form of individual houses, which were more modern and attractive compared to the old buildings in the city center [19].

As a result, the social structure of the population in the city center deteriorated markedly, as housing was occupied mainly by the weaker social classes, who were unable to make major investments in building maintenance, thus accelerating the collapse of the building stock in the city center. The city center is often recognized among the population as a lower-quality living environment [20].

The city of Koper shows a marked rift between the (former) city center and large shopping centers on the outskirts. The heritage city center retains its importance mainly due to the institutions located there (municipality, schools, state institutions, libraries, theatre, to a lesser extent health care), and it attracts mainly employees and users of these institutions, while trade, care and leisure activities condensed in shopping malls on the outskirts. The consequences for the city center are visible in the form of poorly maintained and dilapidated buildings, empty business premises and frequent changes of providers in business premises and the social structure of the population (especially the elderly,
immigrants and other socially and economically weak groups). Figure 4 shows the location of the city of Koper in Slovenia.

![Figure 4. Koper in Slovenia [21].](image)

The city center retains its central importance for the tourist offer of the area, as it is attractive to tourists due to the history of the city and the preserved medieval image of the city. With the development of maritime passenger transport (after 2005), tourist visits, especially of daily visitors, have been constantly increasing in recent years. The highest number of visitors was recorded in 2011, when 108,729 tourists visited via 78 cruise ships in Koper [22]. COVID-19 caused a sharp decline in numbers, but 80 cruise ships have announced their visits in 2023 [23]. Tourism represents one of the most important potentials for the development of the heritage city center.

It has already been proposed that the university program could play a central role in revitalizing of abandoned and empty buildings in Koper. This experimental approach involved implementing temporary programs in vacant spaces and buildings on Kidričeva Street, such as the student house in Tomos Skyscraper, faculties in the Toto ex-Gavardo, post office building, Armeria, and a library in the abandoned monastery. This strategy aimed to connect the main university square with the rectorate and the Faculty of Humanities to the city promenade, creating a vibrant pedestrian university street. However, the author [24] argues that while placing a university program in deteriorating urban areas is indeed a sophisticated strategy for social and physical renewal, prioritizing academic premises over broader developmental plans may limit the impact on urban development. The University of Primorska has lacked an overarching development plan that integrates structured city expansion and resident involvement. Instead, in collaboration with city politics, it has facilitated partial regulations without a clear vision or long-term plan based on contemporary urban design strategies.

2.3. Introduction of TCM and Activation of City Retailers

In Koper, in parallel to the trend of the city center’s depopulation, the municipal administration managed to develop a new segment of tourism, namely cruise ship tourism, which since 2010 has attracted hundreds of thousands of passengers a year [22]. Especially on weekends, a paradoxical situation arose, when the city center was crowded with tourists...
from cruise ships but they could not spend their money due to the many closed shops and empty spaces. This fact can be seen as an external push factor that stimulated the introduction of TCM in Koper. The turning point was the inclusion of the municipality in the pilot project for introducing TCM models in Slovenia, which took place through the Chamber of Commerce of Slovenia (CCS) and in cooperation with the Austrian consulting company CIMA, which has extensive experience in this field. A number of meetings between the municipality and local retailers took place, as well as expert excursions to Austria and Germany to show examples of good practice in the field of TCM. As part of the pilot TCM project, two more workshops were held on the topic of urban marketing, which concluded with the existence of the possibility and necessity of establishing TCM in Koper.

An analysis of the current situation in the pilot project found that almost every tenth business space in the city center is empty, that the total sales area of shopping centers on the outskirts of the city is almost 10 times larger than the total sales area in the city center, low quality of shops with poor presentation of goods and other negative factors. At the same time, many advantages of the center were identified, including cruise ship tourism, cooperation potential with the municipal administration and other nearby cities, excellent infrastructure and orderliness of the city as a whole and more. The final report of the TCM pilot project proposed the establishment of a special limited liability company that would take over the management of urban marketing or the TCM area, following the example of many Austrian cities. This did not happen, as a specific form of TCM cooperation was developed in Koper that was adapted to the given possibilities.

Merchants decided to transform their association by leaving the CCS and establishing a new legal entity, the Koper Island Institute for Sustainable Development—KII [25]. The decision to adopt an independent form proved to be a good one, as the new Koper Island Institute started implementing a larger number of activities in a relatively short period of time, and it also quickly gained membership.

The KII operates as a private and non-profit institution, as a kind of representative body of urban entrepreneurs and also as a partner in the management of matters related to the city center in relation to the municipality. The supporting role of the Municipality of Koper (MoK) is very important. The latter constantly supports the connection of providers from the city center, as in this way it provides a unified interlocutor with whom it is easier to cooperate and communicate. Among other things, one of the most important forms of support is that the municipality provides and pays the KII’s coordinator, who takes care of uninterrupted communication between entrepreneurs and the municipality and for the implementation of numerous activities. The formal independence of the KII and the deepened relationship of cooperation with the municipality enable a flexible form of TCM, where common interests are coordinated in the process of constant communication, conflicts are prevented and proposals for solutions and joint projects are submitted.

It is important to say that the KII is most active in the field of joint promotion and implementation of events. Its activities are mostly aimed at animating and informing the local population, as the revitalization of the city center is based primarily on the return of locals to the center, while tourists are more than welcome, but at the same time, mostly they represent a one-time additional consumption.

The KII started a new project of introducing a city gift voucher, which is the first and only such product in Slovenia’s city centers. Similar to gift vouchers held by shopping centers, the Koper city gift voucher was also introduced. The city gift voucher operates on a non-profit basis, as the KII does not take a commission from the vouchers sold but fully finances the production of the voucher, transaction costs and administrative tasks. The goals of the voucher are to introduce an additional offer in the city center and to provide benefits for the associated companies involved.

The deepening of cooperation in the field of TCM is also evident from the more frequent involvement of the KII and thus urban entrepreneurs in the preparation of strategic documents. The KII was invited to participate in the preparation of the Regional Development Program for the South Primorska region by the Regional Development Centre, which
testifies to the fact that more and more actors recognize the importance and significance of connected urban retailers. For example, the municipality involved the KII in the preparation of the Sustainable Urban Development Strategy for the city of Koper (hereinafter: SUS Koper), where united retailers could defend and represent their interests [26]. This is one of the reasons why the strategy contains a specific strategic goal of revitalizing the heritage city center and envisages various measures to strengthen entrepreneurship and smaller providers in the city center.

3. Materials and Methods

This research focuses on a specific town, utilizing a case study to investigate this phenomenon and ensuring the findings are applicable to the town in question. The empirical part of the paper adopts a content analysis method, examining the town’s policy documents to identify and understand the types and characteristics of municipal activities aimed at revitalizing the old town. By reviewing internal sources and municipal actions chronologically and substantively, a comprehensive understanding of the city center’s revitalization efforts was obtained. Furthermore, the research employed semi-structured interviews to gather insights from three different stakeholder groups. These interviews provided valuable opinions and experiences, shedding light on the effectiveness and impact of the revitalization activities from diverse perspectives.

The questionnaire was prepared based on a literature review and the analysis of documents, through which we explored specific activities for the revitalization of the discussed old city center. We structured the interviews with open-ended and general questions (e.g., What are your thoughts on revitalizing old city centers? Do you think it is necessary? What significance does it hold for the public good?) in the first part, and then we supplemented them with some closed-ended questions and basic demographic questions in the second part.

Three distinct groups were interviewed for this study. The first group consisted of twenty owners of businesses located in the city center. The second group comprised ten policymakers, predominantly from the municipality and related bodies responsible for decisions concerning business premises, revival policies, and entrepreneurial support. Finally, the third group consisted of 30 interviewees from the public, including both residents and visitors to the city. This triangulation of interlocutors allowed for a comprehensive examination of the subject matter from three different perspectives, providing valuable insights into the revitalization efforts of the city center, and increased the validity and reliability of the data.

The interviews were completely anonymous for the protection of personal and business data. The interviews with the first and second groups of participants lasted longer due to the in-depth questioning, lasting an average of 25 min per interview. During the weekends, interviews were conducted with random passers-by who were stopped on the streets in the city center of Koper. These interviews were shorter in time, from 10 to 15 min per interview.

The empirical data were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method [27], while the creation of a marketing strategy for revitalizing the city center of the selected municipality was guided by the grounded theory approach [28].

Based on positivist ideals of objectivity, content analysis serves to gather data, quantifying the frequency and diversity of the analyzed information. It translates specific symbol frequencies into summarized evaluations and content comparisons within the text or discourse. Drawing on our previous research and understanding of the theoretical framework, we employed tools for observation and analysis. Our method included reading interview transcripts, evaluating key elements, establishing broad categories, and cross-referencing with previous ones. Subsequently, we gauged the quality and quantity of the information, considering omissions and segments deemed irrelevant to the current focus. This iterative exploration and comparison refined our sampling procedure, guiding data collection. The emerging categories from this process are detailed in the following section.
We also conducted a SWOT analysis, which is often used to assist in strategic directions, to assess which activities need to be accelerated or abandoned. It is an extremely useful and easily understandable tool, making it applicable to any area.

4. Results

To enhance transparency, we have categorized the analysis and interpretation of the data into distinct content sections, which are presented in the following topics.

4.1. Reasons for the Decline of the Koper Center

The topic “Reasons for the decline” was discussed as why it happens, what are the reasons for the actual situation, what has changed from the past, etc.

Each of the three groups was queried about their opinion on whether the city of Koper required revitalization. Upon receiving affirmative responses, we proceeded to inquire about the primary factors they believed contributed to this need for revival. Every interviewed representative and owner of a business entity in Koper’s city center shares a unanimous view that the city is in dire need of revitalization. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of them believe that this need for revival still persists. Person 1I points out: “People don’t take time for anything, not even for shopping, shopping malls attract everyone because they offer everything quickly”. In response to the question about the primary cause of the old town’s decline, all the interviewees unanimously pointed to the establishment of large shopping centers on the city’s outskirts.

The interviewees were probed with more specific questions to ascertain whether the factors mentioned in the literature for the decline of city centers also played a role in the events observed in Koper. According to the owners of business entities in Koper’s city center, the advent of shopping centers, with their convenient schedules and diverse range of leisure activities all under one roof, constitutes the primary reason for their businesses’ lack of success. Some express the conviction that they are utterly unable to compete due to the large volume of purchases and subsequently lower prices offered by the malls. Conversely, a different belief prevails among others, emphasizing the artistic aspect, uniqueness, and authenticity of the shops in the city center. These shops, offering handicrafts, souvenirs, and tradition, are seen as distinct from the large shopping centers, providing a unique experience for visitors. Person 1I claims: “We absolutely cannot be competitive, due to the quantities of purchased goods I do not reach such a low-price range as shopping centers for similar products can”. IJ adds, “We have authenticity”, and 1B says, “We represent tradition”. The majority of interviewees perceive shopping malls as highly competitive. However, interviewees also note that visitor footfall is influenced by daily activities and errands in the city. For some, operating in the old part of the city is considered prestigious and aligns with their tradition and marketing philosophy, which motivates them to continue working in the town center.

Among the responses, some interviewees point out that while the primary reason for the decline of foot traffic in old towns is attributed to the Internet and online sales, in Koper, another contributing factor was the highly anticipated renovation of the promenade. This renovation attracted a large number of pedestrians solely to the seaside area, resulting in reduced foot traffic in the town center.

Half of the interviewees identify the lack of parking spaces and car accessibility as key factors contributing to the decline of the city center. Opinions diverge regarding the driving habits of the population. While half of them firmly believe that enhanced car accessibility would have a positive impact on the city’s performance, the other half argues that traffic is not a significant issue and, in fact, considers Koper to be relatively unproblematic in terms of traffic. Person 1B is convinced: “There are more than enough parking spaces in Koper, the problem is that we humans have become extremely lazy”.

In summary, an important observation from the first group of interviewees is their belief that the problems within the city center lie with people. They note that the pre-
vailing culture is at a low level, and the allure and convenience of shopping centers have significantly overshadowed everything the city itself has to offer.

The policymakers who were interviewed unanimously agreed on the need to revitalize the old part of Koper. They attribute the decline of the old town primarily to the emergence of shopping malls and the changing habits of consumers. As Person 2A explains, the charm of strolling through the city’s streets has been overshadowed by the appeal of shopping malls, which offer convenience and the ability to find everything in one place quickly. Person 2B believes that consumers often make unnecessary purchases in these centers. The interviewees are also cognizant that smaller shops in the city have struggled to adapt to the new reality, shaped by the strong influence of globalization and rapid consumerism. Additionally, they acknowledge that higher rents in the city center have made it challenging for business owners to sustain their businesses successfully.

Certain individuals hold the belief that the financial crisis and various historical events have contributed to the current situation. Notably, they often highlight the immigration of the lower-income population to the city, the relocation of the main bus station to the outskirts, diverting traffic away from the city center, and the presence of heavy industries in close proximity to Koper’s center. Person 2C explains: “In the 1970s and 1980s, residents moved out to the suburbs, mainly to houses, while the city center was primarily settled by people from lower social classes or lower socioeconomic status, and they did not feel a sense of belonging to the city”. 2D adds: “City centers have been subject to the wrong settlement policy”.

The interviewees firmly believe that visitors come to Koper with a purpose, making deliberate visits to the city. Policymakers share the view that Koper has a well-organized parking system, making it easily accessible to visitors. Furthermore, they emphasize that the city center is within a 7 min walk from all the outskirts, and affordable parking lots are conveniently located next to the old part. Some interviewees also note that local authorities consistently take these needs into account and having plans to provide additional underground garages. Contrary to popular belief, most interviewees are of the opinion that the traffic regime of Koper is not the root of the problem. Instead, they assert that the issue lies solely in the habits of the people.

The overwhelming majority of interviewees emphasize the significance of distinguishing retail in the old part of the city, emphasizing the value-added and unique atmosphere that shopping malls can never replicate. Person 2B elaborates, stating, “Shopping malls promote conformity, creating a sense of uniformity among people. In Koper, we quickly realized that our local offerings hold the key to our distinctiveness”. Local authorities share the belief that the trend of urbanization is on the rise, and visitors seek out traditional shops and characteristic products. They advocate for a boutique-like experience in the city. The interviewees are mindful that shopping malls cannot be entirely phased out, as they contribute to the economy and development. However, they observe a gradual reversal in trends, with Koper transforming into an alluring tourist destination that attracts customers with higher purchasing power to its center.

In the third group, all the interviewed passers-by express the opinion that the city center of Koper requires revitalization. They firmly believe that the main culprit of this decline is the emergence of shopping centers on the city outskirts, offering deceptive deals and exploiting people’s shopping desires. It is evident that the public is also aware of the psychological impact that shopping malls have. The majority of respondents also mention a shift in lifestyle, especially the fast-paced nature of life and the adjusted working hours offered by shopping malls. As explained by visitor 3R, “I simply don’t have enough time, so I go to the mall later to complete my entire shopping, as they have extended hours and I can quickly solve everything with ample parking available”.

The interviewees identify several factors contributing to the decline of the city center. These factors include the limited supply of restaurants and shops, unattractive shop windows, the process of suburbanization, leading to an influx of lower social and economic class residents with insufficient purchasing power to sustain services and shops in the city.
Retail closures, lack of tourist attractions, and the winter dead season are also mentioned as contributing factors. Surprisingly, only a few interviewees bring up car accessibility, attributing it primarily to the psychological effects of the car as a status symbol and a preference for comfort. As resident 3C states, “Parking is not a concern for me”, while resident 3L adds, “Parked in Koper has no impact on my mobility”.

All the individuals interviewed while passing by acknowledge that they visit shopping malls for shopping purposes frequently, although they express regret that this is the case. The reasons for choosing shopping centers are consistent among all the respondents: affordability due to promotions and discounts, convenience as everything is available in one place with a wider selection, and ease of access with free parking facilities. They state that the fast-paced nature of their lives sometimes prevents them from shopping during weekdays, leaving weekends as the only available option. Unfortunately, the shops in the city center are closed during weekends, leaving them with no choice but to go to shopping malls. Furthermore, many interviewees mention that their choice of shopping location depends on the specific products they are looking for. For certain items, they prefer shopping at local stores in the city center, but for other needs, they opt for shopping malls. Some even express a desire to shop in the city center if they had more time available.

The great majority of interviewees express a strong preference for shopping in the city center due to the unique and charming ambiance it offers, especially when the weather is pleasant. They find joy in strolling between shops, socializing, and enjoying conversations by the sea. Walking in the open air and supporting small local shops are also reasons that attract them to the city center. Moreover, they appreciate the experience of savoring coffee at a bar on the promenade. For many, the city center offers a delightful environment with a special atmosphere and an idyllic setting, making it a preferred destination for visits, events, official errands, and access to various services. Local residents also take pride in showing the city center to their guests. Some visitors from other areas mention that they occasionally visit the center of Koper to witness any changes or developments in the area.

All the interviewees express a preference for spending their free time in the city of Koper due to their fondness for its tidiness and seaside setting. However, they note that this preference is contingent on good weather. Unfortunately, when the weather is unfavorable, the city lacks leisure activities that can be enjoyed indoors. Consequently, they find themselves compelled to spend their free time in shopping malls, where various indoor leisure options are available.

Some interviewees express a desire to engage in activities such as going to the cinema in the city center, even in bad weather, but the absence of such offerings limits their choices. As a result, they end up spending their leisure time in malls out of necessity rather than preference. Resident 3F explains, “While I prefer spending my free time in the city center, the lack of certain leisure activities there forces me to choose the malls for entertainment”.

4.2. Cooperation between Owners of Business Entities in the City Center and Policymakers

The topic “Cooperation” arose from discussions about the need for social action, responsibility for changes, more cooperation, etc.

The next set of questions focused on the collaboration between the owners of business entities and policymakers, and on whether this participation is also perceived by members of the public. An overwhelming majority of the owners of business entities confirm that they are actively cooperating with the Municipality of Koper. They express awareness of all the activities undertaken to revitalize the heritage center of Koper and feel included in these efforts. Additionally, more than half of them confirm that the local government seeks their opinion on various matters. Furthermore, all the interviewees are able to name the specific individuals working in the local self-government, highlighting a clear and personal connection between the business owners and the municipal authorities.

Many interviewees express enthusiasm and emphasize their willingness to collaborate, acknowledging that such cooperation strengthens their association and collectively makes them stronger. They also recognize the importance of collective responsibility, acknowledg-
edging that the burden of revitalization does not solely rest on the local authorities. One interviewee, 1M, emphasizes the significance of individual engagement, stating, “A lot depends on ourselves, on our own commitment. The municipality can offer assistance, but they can’t do the selling for us”. However, a few interviewees mention that due to the small sizes of their businesses, particularly for self-employed individuals, attending meetings can be challenging. Some participants state that they do not participate in all the collaborative efforts if they are not relevant to their particular business or industry.

An absolute majority of representatives from the local authorities confirm that they actively cooperate with owners of business entities to keep them informed about all the activities aimed at revitalizing the old town of Koper. They use various means, such as in-person meetings, emails, and media communication, to involve them in events and activities. The authorities also seek the opinions of the business entities, as they believe that long-term success depends on their active participation in the revitalization efforts. Moreover, all the interviewees personally know the individuals representing the business entities in the old part of the city, reinforcing the strong and personal nature of their cooperation.

2G emphasizes the importance of connecting with retailers for the successful revitalization of the city center. Based on the responses from both the first and second stakeholder groups, it is evident that there is indeed robust and close cooperation between the local authorities and the business entities. This level of connection and collaboration is facilitated by the relatively small size of Koper’s population compared to other European cities, allowing for the development of more intimate relationships.

The authorities view the revitalization of the city center as a positive and fruitful process, fostering collaboration between the public and private sectors for the greater benefit of all involved. However, they recognize that there is always room for improvement, understanding that a city is a dynamic and ever-changing entity. Person 2I aptly describes it as a “living organism” that is constantly evolving. Over the last decade, significant progress has been made in the revival of the old core of Koper. It is viewed as a successful project that the authorities are committed to and are gradually accomplishing. They diligently monitor its effects on an ongoing basis, ensuring that the revitalization efforts yield the desired results.

In the third group of interviewees, the focus was on gauging how the public feels about the revival of the heritage center in Koper. We aimed to understand if they have noticed any noticeable changes in the city and if they are aware of the specific activities being undertaken to revitalize Koper. Additionally, we sought their assessment of how the local authorities are caring for the old part of the city from their perspective. Furthermore, we inquired about their views on the overall offer of shops and catering to gain insight into retailers’ standing from a public perspective.

The vast majority of passers-by interviewed have observed significant changes in Koper. They describe the city as notably livelier compared to what they were accustomed to in the past. One visitor, 3A, expresses, “Koper is now more vibrant, and there are more activities happening”. Another visitor, 3E, mentions that they had perceived the city as a somewhat deserted place before but now notice a positive shift, stating, “There were times when I thought it was a ghost town, but that’s no longer the case”. The locals have rediscovered their love for strolling around Koper, whereas previously they would prefer to visit other seaside destinations, avoiding Koper. This change is attributed to Koper’s increasing attractiveness to tourists, and the interviewees themselves notice a rise in the number of visitors from other places. The majority of the interviewees express their fondness for attending events in Koper, which indicates that the city’s efforts to revitalize the center have been well-received. However, nearly half of them point out that, unfortunately, the city still tends to be quiet during winter, which could be an area for further improvement in the city’s revitalization efforts.

The assessment of the shops and catering offer proved to be more challenging for the interviewees. While they express satisfaction with the variety of restaurants in the city, many
of them note the lack of certain types of restaurants, particularly those offering homemade food. However, as they do not shop extensively in the city center’s stores, it is more difficult for them to evaluate the overall retail offerings. Overall, the interviewees express a desire for more diverse and unique offerings in the heritage center. They specifically mention a preference for handicrafts and local crafts, suggesting a desire for a more distinct and authentic shopping experience. This feedback highlights the potential for further development and expansion of the city’s retail landscape to better cater to the preferences and interests of both locals and visitors.

4.3. Cruise Ships

The topic “Cruise ships” has been formed through the town’s development plans analysis and discussion, tourism development, Port of Koper passenger terminal, etc. Enthusiastically, the owners of business entities share with us that the arrival of cruise ships in Koper is the most welcomed novelty and the most effective activity initiated by the local government. According to person 1E, “The arrival of cruise ships is crucial for our survival”. During the interviews, we discovered that all the interviewees maintain a list of ship arrivals to prepare accordingly. Many seize the opportunity to offer additional services and experiences not available during regular sales, such as organizing tastings. The majority of interviewees believe that tourists arriving by cruise ships significantly boost their foot traffic, and for some, these visitors are even essential for their business’s survival. They notice tangible effects and describe the impact as “added value”. However, a small number of interviewees do not perceive cruise ships as an improvement for their business. As person 1C explains, “They mean nothing to us; we don’t have offerings that appeal to these visitors”. Upon examining the services offered by the interviewees with negative feedback, we found that their products or services do not align with the interests of these particular visitors, such as the sale of curtains and bedding.

The interviewees highlight that tourists from cruise ships generally make for good customers, although it also depends on the demographics of the guests on board the ships. They observe that ships arriving very early in the season may not bring tourists with high purchasing power. However, overall, the arrival of cruise ships leads to an increase in the number of visitors and overall foot traffic in the city. The locals also enjoy witnessing the grand cruise ships as a landmark and are attracted to the lively atmosphere created by the influx of tourists. According to representatives of the local government, the arrival of cruise ships has proven to be of paramount importance for the further development of Koper. They consider it a tremendous success with significant economic implications for the city. However, during the initial phase, the arrival of cruiser ships faced considerable resistance and negativity, as the city center became overcrowded at certain moments. As a result, both retail owners and the general public were initially skeptical and apprehensive about the scale of the project. However, as time passed, the positive effects of the arrival of cruise ships became evident, reflecting positively on both the local economy and tourism industry. Person 2D emphasizes that today, the tangible benefits of the cruise ships’ arrival are visible and acknowledged by all stakeholders.

The local authorities experience a high demand and numerous applications for the area at the passenger terminal to accommodate the arrival of ships. Interestingly, many of the interested parties are companies that do not have stores in the city center. Person 2A explains that the majority of the interest comes from companies that are not established in the city center. By becoming one of the destinations for cruise ships, Koper has gained recognition, as confirmed by person 2B, who states, “We can confidently say that Koper and Slovenia have gained recognition, precisely because of cruise ship tourism”. The arrival of these ships has not only contributed to the city’s economic growth but also to enhancing Slovenia’s appeal as an attractive tourist destination.

The representatives of the public, as the last group of interviewed stakeholders, also express a positive attitude toward the arrival of cruise ships in Koper. They commonly comment on how the newcomers bring life to the city streets, creating a vibrant and lively
atmosphere on the day of arrival. Many respondents praise the current city authorities for the decision to welcome cruise ships, considering it an excellent move by the municipality’s leadership. Some even regard it as one of the best decisions that have positively transformed Koper.

From the responses, it is evident that the public is well aware of the positive effects brought about by the arrival of cruise ships. They acknowledge that it has a favorable impact on the local economy, benefitting business owners and caterers, and increasing tourist activity and consumption. Overall, they believe that this development enriches the city and contributes to its prosperity. The public is cognizant of the importance of creating a positive first impression for tourists, understanding that it influences their likelihood of returning. Therefore, they fully support the arrival of ships, recognizing it as one of the significant steps in the development of Koper, attributing to the city the well-deserved adjective of being a tourist destination. This, in turn, has a positive ripple effect on the entire coastal tourism industry.

4.4. Rent Reduction

The topic “Rent reduction” was formed from the analysis of development documents of the city of Koper, conditions for doing business, facilitation of business, rents, etc.

Business owners view the decision to reduce the rent for business premises in Koper’s city center as a sensible and supportive move by the local authorities, greatly benefitting their businesses. They perceive it as a gesture of understanding and commend it as excellent support during challenging times. However, not all the business entities in the city center benefit from this measure, as some operate in premises owned by private landlords who have not shown interest in reducing rents.

Policymakers are confident that the decision to lower rents has yielded positive results. They observe a decline in store closures, an increased demand for business premises, and a notable rise in new store openings. However, the interviewees also draw attention to the problem of numerous empty bars in the city. While the public may attribute blame to the local government, the interviewees clarify that these empty spaces are under private ownership, leaving the government with limited options. The immediate positive reception of the rent reduction decision prompted its extension. Local authorities understand that this decision alone may not single-handedly improve business, although it has successfully prevented the closure of several shops during difficult times.

4.5. Events

The topic “Events” arose from increasing the flow of visitors, the need for events that attract people, festivals, celebrations, decorating the city, etc.

Business owners express positive opinions about the events organized in the heritage center. During the interviews, it became evident that these events have a favorable impact on their businesses. Events draw in a large number of visitors, resulting in increased foot traffic and liveliness in the streets, particularly benefiting those in the hospitality industry. Although retailers may not experience immediate sales during the events, they acknowledge the promotional value of the increased number of visitors.

Several interviewees firmly believe that events serve as an opportunity for exposure and brand recognition. Many people attending events notice the businesses and become acquainted with their offerings, leading to potential future purchases. As explained by 1F, attendees who may not usually pay attention to the city’s shops have the chance to discover what businesses have to offer during the events. Subsequently, they often return after the events to make purchases, realizing that the items offered align with their needs and preferences. Overall, business owners appreciate the positive impact of events on raising awareness and generating interest in their establishments.

When inquiring about the events that left a notable impression, most interviewees acknowledge the effectiveness of all events. However, upon analyzing their responses, two events stood out as the most frequently mentioned: the St. Nicholas Fair and the
New Year’s lights lighting ceremony. Several interviewees go beyond mere attendance and actively participate by setting up their own stands, and they observe significant benefits from such engagement.

On the other hand, some attempt to partake in these events but find their products to be ill-suited for such occasions, leading them to skip subsequent events. As IS states, “We have made several attempts to participate, but our products simply do not align with the purchasing preferences at these events”. However, business entities located in remote streets may not experience a substantial influx of visitors during events, as the crowds may not reach their vicinity. Nevertheless, they wholeheartedly support these activities and recognize the positive impacts they bring for the broader environment. Overall, the consensus among the interviewees is that the events are well-received and contribute positively to the atmosphere and dynamics of the heritage center.

Policymakers acknowledge the pivotal role of events in revitalizing the city center. They view these events as crucial for marketing the city and creating a sense of liveliness among the populace. However, the interviewees also recognize the importance of considering the event locations strategically, possibly opting for less crowded areas to ensure a better flow of people. Representatives of the local authorities fully comprehend that events add value to Koper. Although specific events are not explicitly highlighted by the interviewees, the St. Nicholas Fair and the lighting of New Year’s lights frequently appear in the responses, primarily due to their popularity during the winter season, attracting a substantial number of visitors. Moreover, the respondents reject any claims that the city lacks activities during the winter. Instead, they see the events as a means to keep the city vibrant and dynamic throughout the year, dismissing any concerns about the winter months being dull or uneventful. Overall, policymakers and local authorities recognize the significance of events in enhancing the city’s appeal and ensuring its vitality throughout different seasons.

The representatives of the public, constituting the third group of stakeholders, responded positively regarding the events in Koper. The interviewees are well-acquainted with the events, and a majority express their fondness for attending them. For many, these events serve as a compelling reason to visit the city center of Koper. Among the mentioned events, the lighting of New Year’s lights, the St. Nicholas Fair, and the Carnival Showcase during the Istrian Carnival are particularly highlighted. Some even propose extending the Carnival Showcase to a month-long celebration. Additionally, the Children’s Festival garners significant interest, with many expressing a desire to attend if they had children or when they were younger.

While our research focused on events involving retail owners, visitors also mention various other events regularly held in the old town of Koper, such as Sweet Istria, Revived Street, Open Kitchen, concerts, Carnival Parade, and the Jeff Festival. Events catering to children garner special attention from the interviewees. Regarding consumption during events, almost all the interviewees report spending on various items, including drinks, food, gifts, handicrafts from stalls, and items desired by their children, such as balloons and sugar foam. Few individuals mention not always spending money during events, doing so only occasionally or when they have cash on hand. The economic impact on providers, retail owners, and caterers in the old part of the city is evident through the spending patterns observed during these events.

4.6. Introduction of Cards

The topic “Cards introduction” has been identified in the literature review as good practice, as a card has been introduced by the KII and is often mentioned by the business owners.

The introduction of benefit cards, as discussed in previous sections, by representatives and owners of business entities in Koper’s city center, aiming to increase customer visits, has not yet achieved the expected sales effect. Stakeholders express that the Koper Card Adventure Card, the Koper Card + bus card, and the City Gift Certificate have not gained
significant traction among customers yet. When asked about the reasons for this, the majority of interviewees share a similar opinion: not enough time has passed since their introduction. Stakeholders believe in the concept and are convinced that the project requires more time for the public to become acquainted with these benefit cards. Despite the initially slow progress, business owners are making continuous efforts to offer these benefit cards to their customers regularly. They are confident that with more information and promotion about the benefits, customers will become more excited about using them. Among the listed cards, the Koper Card + bus card is particularly highlighted, as it is expected to achieve maximum utilization thus far.

Merchants firmly believe that these benefit cards should remain a consistent part of their long-term offerings, expecting them to prove their effectiveness over an extended period. They acknowledge that such initiatives take time to yield significant results, and they remain committed to offering these cards for several years to assess their impact accurately.

Policymakers also share the sentiment that it is too early to observe concrete effects of the benefit cards. In the interviews, they emphasize that such projects are designed for the long term and are expected to continue evolving in the future. The cards have become a collective product of the city center, offering an easier and more comprehensive way for visitors to explore the various offerings. The interviewees believe that such projects are unavoidable, given the widespread use of various benefit cards in other locations, and Koper needs to adopt them to demonstrate flexibility and keep up with modern trends. Moreover, the benefit cards are seen as a product of collaboration, fostering synergies that benefit all the stakeholders involved.

However, the City Gift Certificate has faced some challenges in gaining traction due to media coverage issues. Despite this setback, policymakers highlight the significance of the cards in enhancing public passenger transport, mobility, and accessibility. They firmly believe that the combination of these services will eventually yield positive effects and contribute to the overall improvement of the city center’s offerings.

The analysis of the interviews with the public confirms that the Koper Card is only familiar to a limited number of individuals, and they are not yet using it. Similarly, the majority of people are unaware of the Koper Card + bus card, and those who are aware of it use it solely for transportation, without availing the other benefits it offers. The City Gift Certificate remains completely unknown to all the interviewees. As of now, the cards are not acting as a motivation for visiting the city center.

In addition to the negative responses about the cards, more than half of the interviewees express their willingness to use the cards if they were better informed about them. This further reinforces the findings from the earlier stakeholder groups, indicating that the lack of promotion and insufficient time for the matter to develop are key factors hindering the effective use of these cards. Based on the public responses, it is evident that there is a positive inclination toward using the cards if they are made more widely known, which could lead to increased usage in the future and to them fulfilling their intended purpose.

4.7. Free Parking Hours

Another topic was “Free parking hours”, as it was a measure introduced by the town’s policymakers to ease visits to the city center; the awareness and efficiency of this measure were inquired about.

The idea of offering two free hours of parking in the town garage as a means to increase the number of shoppers in the old town has not yielded the expected results, according to the representatives and owners of business entities in the interviews. They share that this benefit has not had a significant impact, partly because people are not well-informed about it. Moreover, the interviewees believe that parking in Koper is already well-organized, and visitors and customers do not necessarily need to take advantage of such benefits.

While a few interviewees mention that their regular clients do use this offer, they find it challenging to assess whether it significantly influences the frequency of visits to the old
town core. Overall, the perception is that the two hours of free parking have not had a substantial effect on increasing foot traffic in the old town area.

Policymakers share with us that the intention behind offering free parking hours was to improve accessibility to the city center of Koper, especially for those who perceived parking as a problem. However, they discovered that parking lots in Koper are, in fact, not as inaccessible as previously thought, and the perceived parking issues were often mere excuses. They emphasize that the local authorities have been making efforts to maintain frequent bus connections, which people can use as an alternative to driving. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that using public transportation is not yet ingrained in people’s habits and needs further promotion and awareness-building.

The majority of the public we interviewed are not aware of the two free parking hours, and even those who are aware do not utilize them. This serves as a third confirmation that Koper does not face significant issues with accessibility by car. Some interviewees state that they personally do not encounter parking problems, finding the existing one-hour free parking sufficient. However, a few individuals admit that they actively avoid paid parking, and if they had known about the benefit of two free hours, they would have gladly taken advantage of it. One visitor expresses, “I know about it, but I haven’t used it”, while another remarked, “I wasn’t aware, but that’s great. I would use it if I had known...”.

5. Discussion

5.1. Relation of Study Findings with the Literature

A city is fundamentally a space for consumption, and historically, its development was driven by the need for commerce and trade [29]. In the present-day context, the old town of Koper primarily serves as a retail hub, and this aspect holds significant importance, as confirmed by the interviewees. However, the decline of the city center is a concerning issue that needs attention, as it has deviated from its original role as a vibrant place of consumption.

The reasons behind the decay of Koper’s center align with those found in the studied literature worldwide. The emergence of large shopping centers [30–33], the transformation of transportation patterns [34–36], and changes in consumer behavior [37–40] have all contributed to the decline of city centers, and the same applies to Koper and the surrounding municipality.

Interestingly, the impact of motoring on Koper’s center appears to be less pronounced compared to other parts of the world. This can be attributed to the relatively small size of the city, which has shaped the development of transportation and the mobility of its population. While accessibility by car remains essential in terms of consumer habits in Koper, the lack of parking spaces does not deter survey participants from visiting the city.

To revitalize the city center and restore its original role as a bustling place for consumption, policymakers need to address the challenges posed by large shopping centers, evolving consumer preferences, and ensure a balance in transportation and parking infrastructure. Understanding the unique context of Koper and implementing suitable measures will be crucial in bringing back its vibrancy and economic vitality.

From the studied literature [41,42] and study findings, it becomes evident that the municipality in question enjoys certain advantages, particularly in terms of accessibility and the psychological appeal it holds for consumers. Large shopping centers in the area have a competitive edge due to their diverse offerings and pricing strategies, which makes it challenging for retail representatives in the old town to compete.

Consumer habits have become entrenched and are difficult to alter, as indicated in the literature [43–48]. Therefore, the revitalization of old city centers requires a collaborative effort between the public and private sectors. In this municipality as well, both sides have recognized the urgency and inevitability of working together toward the revitalization of the city center.

When comparing the approaches to revitalizing city centers globally, we observe that the municipality in question has adopted a suitable strategy, given its available resources. While financially stronger cities might opt for costly infrastructure projects, this
municipality has chosen a different path by collaborating with the retail sector. Through this cooperation, they have successfully restructured the offerings to align with existing consumer habits, acknowledging that these habits are not easily changed. This approach has proven effective in achieving the desired revitalization of the city center.

5.2. Development and Marketing Strategy

The TCM approach emphasizes the importance of developing a long-term vision that considers the perspectives and desires of all stakeholders while also taking into account the unique characteristics of the local environment. The mission of the MoK aligns with this approach, aiming to establish a thriving city center that is economically prosperous and appealing to tourists. Their goal is to create an environment where both locals and visitors are enticed to explore and make purchases while providing a conducive setting for businesses to thrive.

The MoK has already set several goals to revitalize the old town of Koper. These include increasing the number of visitors and their spending, diverting foot traffic to the side streets, fostering the growth of businesses with distinctive, boutique, and locally oriented offerings, and enhancing the success of various business events in the area. Using the study results, we have conducted a SWOT analysis (Table 1), summarizing and presenting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Koper’s city center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>− The largest and most commercial town on the Slovenian coast</td>
<td>− Large number of shopping centers near the city and their location beneath the most important traffic entrances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Diverse hinterland with local products</td>
<td>− Lack of beaches and accommodation compared to other cities on the Slovenian coast (presence of a port in the city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Compact medieval city center</td>
<td>− Empty premises and dilapidated privately owned buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Coastal location</td>
<td>− Insufficient awareness of the existence of benefit cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Tidiness and cleanliness</td>
<td>− Bad reputation of the empty city in winter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Renovated attractive promenade</td>
<td>− Insufficient boutique retail offer and catering offer in the city center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Connection of retail with the public sector, trust between stakeholders, cooperation</td>
<td>− The impact of bad weather on the visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Cruise ships tourism</td>
<td>− Inappropriate opening hours of shops on weekends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Numerous events</td>
<td>− Overcrowded city center due to the large number of cruise ships’ visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Traffic order, sufficient number of parking lots</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− University and public institutions in the city center</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>− Rich architectural heritage</td>
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<tr>
<td>− Spatial opportunities for leisure activities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>− Proximity of the city center to the shopping centers with their parking lots</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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<tr>
<td>− City itself could become a venue (market niche—e.g., shooting movies)</td>
<td>− Attendance could increase, without the increase of consumption,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Proximity to traffic entrances, which could represent a place for additional advertising of the city</td>
<td>− Visitors could get the impression of overcrowded place,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Long promenade by the sea could offer an extension of the services</td>
<td>− insufficient purchasing power for the boutique offer in the city center, due to the changes in the economy and society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− Stadium, sports and recreation park Bonifika, which are not exploited enough</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>− Weekend destination for visitors.</td>
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Cities and their centers should aim to become renowned destinations capable of hosting events, festivals, and markets that contribute to creating a distinctive city brand.
By focusing on events that foster a local spirit and sense of belonging, city centers can stand out and attract more visitors [6]. The suggested strategy for the MoK is to position the city as a marketing hub in this direction. In formulating the strategy, it is essential to concentrate on the defined goals and the identified strengths and weaknesses. The MoK should prioritize its efforts in areas where it has the highest likelihood of achieving success.

A SWOT analysis provides solid bases for setting a strategy, which can diminish weaknesses and enhance strengths through setting goals and objectives. The identified strengths should be exploited to a maximum by offering upscaled tourist packages visiting pristine hinterland with local products; emphasize the walkable medieval city center excelling its tidiness and cleanliness; special offers with spatial opportunities for leisure activities, etc. To resolve the identified weaknesses, the city management could eliminate the lack of beaches with an appropriate development plan for the unused walking path to the neighboring town of Izola; the lack of tourist accommodation with a suitable way of stimulating residents and investors to increase this type of offer; organizing more events in the winter time; and improving the communication and informing different groups of stakeholders about the venues through appropriate channels.

In order to take advantage of the identified opportunities, it is necessary to find suitable investors; represent the city at professional trade fairs; invite tourism journalists; offer appropriate arrangements for filmmakers, sports clubs, etc. In order to avoid potential threats, it would be good to take care of maintaining a diverse offer in the city center so that it does not give the exclusive impression of a prestigious location and to implement strategies to maintain control over the number of visitors, also by increasing the number of locations with events and attractions offered.

The proposed strategy suggests that the MoK should continue all its current activities. Based on the findings of the qualitative survey involving key stakeholders, it has been identified that the revitalization of Koper’s city center is necessary, and positive changes are already evident. The initial steps have been successfully implemented.

The MoK should maintain and, whenever feasible, expand its activities. The KII is already witnessing growth in its membership, and all stakeholders are content with its establishment and performance. It is anticipated that this positive trend will persist in the future. The MoK should continue fostering successful collaborations with business owners through the institute.

The continuation of cruise ship arrivals should be prioritized to benefit all stakeholders, including informing business owners, and provide sales areas at the Koper passenger terminal. The analysis of stakeholder perspectives has confirmed that cruise tourism is a successful industry with positive economic effects.

The extension of the reduced rents is proposed based on the positive response from business entities and the fact that the measure has not yet achieved the desired level of success, as indicated by the research findings.

Events are a unique feature of Koper and have the potential to enhance the city’s recognition. The SWOT analysis reveals that while Koper may not match other coastal cities in terms of accommodation and beaches, it excels in organizing successful events. These events attract numerous visitors who contribute to the city’s economy, as supported by our research. Expanding event-related activities to less frequented areas could be a wise approach. Additionally, Koper boasts sports facilities and a stadium, making it an ideal city for hosting events. Even those who do not actively participate in events still appreciate and support them, as evident from our analysis.

Our research findings indicate that the benefit cards and two free parking hours, as introduced by the MoK and KII to encourage visits, did not yield satisfactory outcomes. Since the promotion was limited, and as the public emphasized the need for time to familiarize themselves with such initiatives, we propose the continuation of these activities. A logical step would be to consolidate the benefits into a single card and maintain a consistent and simplified format in the long term. This approach could enhance the effectiveness and visibility of the benefits, ultimately leading to a more successful outcome.
When defining the target market, it is advisable for the MoK to consider visitors who typically frequent shopping centers. Given the difficulty of altering consumer habits and the presence of accessible shopping malls near the city, it would be beneficial for the MoK to attract these customers to the city center. After completing their shopping at the malls and benefiting from promotions and discounts, visitors can be encouraged to explore the city center for additional activities such as enjoying ice cream, sightseeing, or leisurely walks—activities that align with their preferences according to our findings.

While aiming to attract more visitors to the city, it is equally crucial to prioritize the sustainable utilization of space. To avoid the danger of an overcrowded city center due to cruise ship visitors, the MoK can consider implementing the following strategies:

(a) Visitor spreading: Encourage cruise ship operators to stagger their arrivals, spreading out the flow of visitors throughout the day, rather than having all the ships arrive simultaneously. This will help prevent congestion in the city center.

(b) Alternative venues: Develop and promote alternative attractions and activities outside the city center that can divert some cruise ship visitors away from the central area. This could include guided tours to nearby towns or natural attractions.

(c) Off-peak promotions: Offer incentives and promotions for cruise ship passengers to explore the city during off-peak hours when the city center is less crowded. This can include special deals at restaurants and shops during quieter times.

(d) Limit ship numbers: Work with cruise ship operators to establish a maximum number of ships that can dock in the port on any given day. This will prevent overwhelming the city center with too many visitors at once.

(e) Improved transport: Enhance public transportation options and encourage visitors to use public transport or organized shuttles to access the city center. This can reduce the number of private vehicles and tour buses in the central area.

(f) Diversified activities: Organize a variety of activities and events throughout the city, not just in the central area, to disperse the crowds and encourage visitors to explore different parts of Koper.

(g) Communication and education: Educate cruise ship passengers about responsible tourism and the importance of respecting local communities and their living spaces. This can help prevent overcrowding and ensure a positive experience for both visitors and locals.

By implementing these strategies, the MoK can better manage the influx of cruise ship visitors and maintain a pleasant and sustainable environment in the city center. The competitive advantages of the city are therefore recognized in the event activities, traffic regulations and special retail offers in the city.

To assess the strategy’s effectiveness, we will adhere to the TCM guidelines, which instruct city managers to evaluate the success of the urban revitalization strategy based on the increase in new businesses in the city center, the reduction in vacancies, the growth of participants in the KII (in our case study), the influx of visitors, positive public feedback, and the overall perception of improved business vitality in the city center.

6. Conclusions

Cities represent our living spaces, embodying our past, future, and identity. They are living organisms shaped by consumption, which has also contributed to their decline over time. Although our consumer habits have evolved with changing trends, we still yearn for the romanticized cityscape with bustling shops and vibrant streets. Unfortunately, this once self-evident image has faded in modern times. Yet, we are now striving to restore what cities have lost over time, seeking to revitalize and rejuvenate these vital urban centers.

6.1. Use of the TCM Approach in Setting the Strategy for the Heritage City Center Revitalization

After studying the decline of heritage city centers and exploring the case of the Municipality of Koper, we conducted a survey to gather insights and experiences from stakeholders regarding the municipality’s efforts to retain retail in the city center. The
research yielded positive results, indicating that the revitalization of Koper’s city center is showing signs of success. However, despite the favorable evaluations by business entities and visitors regarding the existing offerings and activities aimed at promoting consumption in the city center, there has not been a concrete increase in consumption.

By analyzing the proposals, critiques, and praises concerning the existing strategies for revitalizing the municipality’s city center from various stakeholder groups, we arrived at final conclusions that provide both theoretical and methodological contributions to the revitalization of the old town in the municipality. These findings serve as valuable insights for further improvements and advancements in the city center revitalization efforts.

The TCM approach, known for its success and widespread adoption globally, was chosen by the municipality to revitalize the city center, as we discovered in this study. Continuing with this approach in the future is a logical step. The strategy also includes suggestions for improved marketing positioning, aiming to establish Koper as a vibrant venue. Moreover, the strategy addresses certain shortcomings and explores opportunities to attract untapped potential visitors, including those who usually visit shopping centers. Implementing these proposals can further contribute to the successful revitalization of the city center.

6.2. Limitations and Future Studies

This paper highlights that cities worldwide have been actively involved in revitalizing their city centers over the past few decades. Various approaches, managerial techniques, and studies have been undertaken in this regard, leading to successful outcomes in several cases. Numerous examples [49,50] exist of cities that have reclaimed their true essence through innovative offerings and effective marketing strategies. Evaluating each project’s success is vital, considering the unique organizational structures, administrative laws, historical attributes, and locations of different cities. Measuring the effectiveness of revitalization efforts and monitoring the efficient utilization of funds invested by local authorities would be beneficial. However, such a detailed analysis would require a separate and more comprehensive research effort.

This research provided the Municipality of Koper with evidence of the successful approach to connecting business owners and valuable insights from all the stakeholders involved in revitalizing the city center. These findings have offered valuable guidelines for formulating a strategy. It is important to note that this research is specific to the case of the Municipality of Koper and cannot be generalized or directly compared to other municipalities in Slovenia or abroad. Each city’s revitalization efforts are unique and context-dependent, making it essential to tailor strategies to their specific circumstances, which suggests numerous possibilities for future studies.

Other lines for future research on the revitalization of city centers using the TCM approach should focus on several key areas to enhance sustainability and effectiveness. Long-term impact: Investigate the long-term effects of revitalization efforts on the city center. Analyze trends in business growth, visitor numbers, and consumer behaviors over an extended period to assess the sustainability of the revitalization strategy. Sustainable urban development: Explore how the revitalization efforts align with broader sustainable urban development goals. Evaluate whether the city center’s transformation contributes to environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Marketing and branding: Investigate the effectiveness of marketing and branding strategies in positioning the city center as a unique destination. Analyze how branding impacts visitor perceptions and spending behaviors. Comparative studies: Conduct comparative studies with other cities that have adopted the TCM approach to revitalization. Identify best practices and lessons learned to inform future strategies.

By addressing these research areas, future studies can provide valuable insights for city authorities and stakeholders seeking to optimize the revitalization of city centers, ensuring their sustainability and continued growth.
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