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Tell me a story about yourself: The words of shopping experience and self-satisfaction

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**Tell me a story about yourself: the words of shopping experience and self-satisfaction**

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<sup>†</sup> This project was started before the demise of Jean-Charles Chebat and carried out in his memory.

- We shed light on the concept of self-satisfaction after a shopping experience
- We apply a linguistic analysis on texts verbalizing consumers' experience
- Self-satisfaction does not come directly from purchasing or consumption
- Self-satisfaction relies on emotions and sensations aroused by shopping experience

## **Tell me a story about yourself: the words of shopping experience and self-satisfaction**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, we investigate the verbal expression of shopping experience obtained by a sample of customers asked to freely verbalize how they felt when entering a store. Using novel tools of Text Mining and Social Network Analysis, we analyzed the interviews to understand the connection between the emotions aroused during the shopping experience, satisfaction and the way participants link these concepts to self-satisfaction and self-identity. The results show a prominent role of emotions in the discourse about the shopping experience before purchasing and an inward-looking connection to the self. Our results also suggest that modern retail environment should enhance the hedonic shopping experience in terms of fun, fantasy, moods, and emotions.

**Keywords:** shopping experience; satisfaction; self-identity; text analysis; semantic brand score.

## **Introduction**

Shopping is much more than the simple purchase of products and services. It is a way of self-expression, individual identity formation, a social experience (Ekici et al., 2018; Picot-Coupey et al., 2021; Sirgy et al., 2016; Terblanche, 2018). It involves experiential and instrumental outcomes, which means that the socio-psychological characteristics of individuals and the observable behaviours are powerful cues to influence the consumption model (Babin et al., 1994; Lerou-Werelds et al., 2014). On the one hand, individuals shop to satisfy their utilitarian needs due to extrinsic motivations, while on the other, to satisfy the need to self-express due to intrinsic motivations (Ekici et al., 2018).

Irrespective to the utilitarian dimension, the shopping experience is associated to recreation and entertainment (Guiry et al., 2006; Picot-Coupey et al., 2021). The personal expressiveness resulting from it also relates to perceived quality of life (El Hedhli et al., 2021). As a consequence, shopping has not only to be investigated from the perspective of the utilitarian/hedonic dichotomy, but for its ability to provide individuals a chance to express their own personal identity (Guiry et al., 2006). Unfortunately, despite the vast literature on hedonic shopping value we still have limited knowledge on how a self-defined and meaningful engagement in shopping, namely a self-expressive shopping experience, may contribute to self-satisfaction (Leroi-Werelds et al., 2014; Picot-Coupey et al., 2021; Sirgy et al., 2000).

During a shopping experience, consumers buy products and brands congruent to their own self-concept, generating a subjective experience referred to as self-image congruity that in turn affects customers' satisfaction towards brands, brand preferences and purchase intentions, and facilitates positive word-of-mouth and attitudes towards products (Sirgy et al., 2016).

Previous research (Chebat et al., 2006; Kaltcheva et al., 2010; Sirgy et al., 2016; Sirgy et al., 2000) has found a causal link between the consumer self-concept and their shopping behavior, that is mediated by the store atmosphere (Babin and Darden, 1995). In fact, some of the atmospheric elements may shape consumer's shopping experience (Picot-Coupey et al., 2021). This, in turn, may impact the individual evaluation of products (Chebat and Michon, 2003; Morrin and Ratneshwar,

2003) as well as affect the recreational dimension of the shopping experience (Baker et al., 2002; Guiry et al., 2006).

However, the in-store shopping experience is influenced by different cognitive and affective cues (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020; Manthiou et al., 2020; Visentin and Tuan, 2021). Therefore, the self-image congruity theory does not fully explain the possible manifestation of satisfaction before experiencing products. Despite the number of studies on the effect of shopping experience on life satisfaction (Davis and Hodges, 2012; Ekici et al., 2018), very few studies (e.g., Atulkar and Kesari, 2017; Sirgy et al., 2000; Chebat et al., 2006) have looked into the extent to which self-image congruity can lead to customer satisfaction.

Against this background, the main objective of the present paper is to shed some light on the concept of self-satisfaction, under the assumption that consumers may experience a form of satisfaction based on their in-store shopping experience and not based on their purchase or consumption of products or services. To this end, we invited 70 people to verbalize their shopping experience. Then, we applied a linguistic analysis to identify the linguistic drivers and associations regarding their shopping experience and their self-satisfaction. By using a sample of tattooed people known for their higher confidence with their self-concept (Velliquette et al., 1998), we illustrate how self-satisfaction is connected but separated from self-concept, and that it relies mainly on emotions and sensations aroused by the shopping experience.

The relevance of this study is threefold: first, this study offers empirical support to the importance of the in-store consumer experience in real brick-and-mortar contexts, mitigating the claim of big online platforms to be able to provide a higher shopping experience; second, by applying linguistic analysis, the present research provides a novel picture of the mental associations of individuals about their elaboration of the link between their self-satisfaction and their mental representation of the experience; third, we offer interesting new avenues for marketing research on the uncharted territory of verbal representation of an individual's shopping experience.

## **Theoretical background**

The shopping experience is influenced by several factors in a store, among which psychological, social and sensory cues have a relevant influence (Michon et al., 2005; Visentin and Tuan, 2021). All atmospheric elements are key to emotional states and customer satisfaction in the retail environment (Puccinelli et al., 2009). Burns and Neisner (2006) found that both cognitive evaluation and emotional reaction explain the level of satisfaction that customers experience in retail.

Traditionally rooted in Bagozzi's (1992) "appraisal – emotional response – coping" framework, the effect of perceived value on the early evaluation of the experience in the appraisal stage leads to satisfaction in the emotional response stage that determines behavioral intentions (e.g., engaging in shopping, re-patronage and word-of-mouth) in the final stage of coping (Atulkar and Kesari, 2017; Terblanche, 2018).

The experiences consumers live in a store influence, or better evoke, the self-concept components, namely dispositional characteristics and traits; perceptions of the ongoing or past experiences, social roles, and behaviors; self-related attitudes and affect (Ed Hedhli et al., 2020; Sirgy et al, 2016). Generally speaking, people associate their self-concept with one or more attributes, such as traits (e.g., vain, strong), behaviors/activities (e.g., choosing, shopping, thinking), physical characteristics (e.g., elegant), social categories (e.g., me, we, team), objects (e.g., brand, music), among others (Greenwald et al., 2002). Chebat et al. (2006) found that upscale shopping mall environments elicit upscale self-relevant attributes. Since people are likely to view themselves as more upscale than they actually are, consumers feel higher self-congruity with upscale shopping malls and evaluate the stores located in such malls more positively (Chebat et al., 2006).

Previous studies on the effects of self-congruity on shoppers' behaviors (Chebat et al., 2009; El Hedhli et al., 2017) have only considered actual self-congruity. However, this study extends prior research by conceptualizing self-satisfaction as a construct related to self-expressiveness that may lead consumers to experience positive affect while engaging in shopping.



### *The influence of identity on self-satisfaction in shopping*

The self-image congruity theory has widely demonstrated that consumers define their self-concept through their product/brand choices, thus affecting their behavior, including purchase intentions, attitudes toward brands and customer satisfaction (Sirgy et al., 1997; 2016; Matzler et al., 2005; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

However, in retail environments customer experiences may vary according to rational, emotional, sensorial, and physical involvement, being an interplay between individual expectations and the interactions with the retail/brand (Verhoef et al., 2009; Guiry et al., 2006). Consumers develop various impressions of their in-store experiences by assessing their array of intrinsic cues (e.g., taste, texture, aroma) and extrinsic cues (e.g., price, brand name, packaging, color) (Visentin and Tuan, 2021).

Service marketing literature (e.g., Luoh and Tsaur, 2009; Söderlund and Julander, 2009) has found that the aesthetics of employees influences consumer's attitude toward the service worker, perceived service quality, customer satisfaction, and the pleasantness of a consumption experience. In addition, patrons often interact more effectively with physically attractive service providers, leading to higher consumer satisfaction and stronger purchase intentions (Ahearne et al., 1999). Both visual appeal and the entertainment dimension of the aesthetic response offer immediate pleasure for its own sake, irrespective of a retail environment's ability to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific shopping task (Wan and Wyer, 2015). Noteworthy, satisfaction based on emotions has been found a more robust predictor for future behavioral buying intentions than cognitive measures (Martin et al., 2008). Against the common assumptions on satisfaction (e.g., Oliver, 1980; Cronin et al., 2000), customer satisfaction can be categorized as the feelings of happiness, fulfillment and pleasure towards a service provider and its services (El-Adly and Eid, 2015), based on the strong link between hedonic shopping value and satisfaction and, in turn, loyalty (Babin et al., 2005; Atulkar and Kesari, 2012; Chebat et al., 2003). This can happen during the shopping process through sensory and emotional elements thus generating self-satisfaction without the actual purchase or use. Consequently, we expect that

individuals may experience some forms of excitement or arousal that galvanizes satisfaction even in absence of purchase during a shopping trip.

### *Tattoos as a sign of identity*

As individuals use symbols to express something about themselves in order to social interact and express meanings, appearance affects perceptions of a person's competence, expertise, trustworthiness, personality, and intellectual capabilities (Wan and Wyer, 2015). Among people with the highest confidence with their self-concept, tattooed people stand out since tattoos are a form of marking identity (Velliquette et al., 1998). In fact, as the body increasingly participates to the construction of an individual's self-identity, it enriches with new meanings and new statuses recognized and learned through socialization (Sweetman, 2000).

Tattoos are a vehicle for human expression; they are signals of art, fashion, individuality, personal narrative, cultural tradition, group identity, individuality, freedom, and uniqueness (e.g., Burgess and Clark, 2010; Rodriguez Cano and Sams, 2010). Most of the literature associates the tattoo with the extended self; the tattoo reflects an image of the self that has positive symbolism rather than the inner self (Bengtsson et al., 2005; Velliquette et al., 1998). Tattoos also signal a connection to others, which structures perceptions and experiences (Diprose, 2005). Since they are rich in rhetoric, all these elements may shape the construction of consumers' self-congruency and self-identity (El Hedli et al., 2020; Sirgy et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the number of tattoos a person has may signal different personality traits. In fact, people with more than 3 tattoos signal their belonging to tribes, subcultures or groups or their affection by a sort of mania, while people with at most 3 tattoos use these symbols as cues of fashion/style and self-confidence (Goulding et al., 2004).

### *The words of shopping*

Individuals tend to encode their external experiences through the feelings (Berger et al., 2020; Kübler et al., 2020; Netzer et al., 2019; Ziemer and Kormaz, 2017). A person's preferred sensory representation system could be also evidenced from the way in which they use language (Humphreys and Wang, 2018). Literature suggests that *what* people say and *how* they say it reveal how they construe their world (e.g., Aletti et al. 2019; Berger et al., 2019). Therefore, the psychological mechanisms of this construction emerge from their writing styles, being the words used also a way to discover one's personality (Berger et al., 2020; Humphreys and Wang, 2018; Netzer, Lemaire and Herzenstein, 2019). In fact, there is a strict relationship between the words people use and their personality traits and identity, as well as their emotions (Hirsh and Peterson, 2009; Kosinski et al., 2013; Netzer et al., 2019). The language is also fundamental to understand the way individuals interact with others, since people use words to understand and represent impressions of others (Berger et al., 2020; Xu and Zhang, 2018). Given that an audience is more receptive to a message arousing affective states, emotional language is more likely to be shared with others (Akpinar and Berger, 2017; Xu and Zhang, 2018).

Moreover, as the linguistic style is usually unconscious, it reveals more accurately than the content the attempt to manage individual impressions and relationships with other objects in their world (Ludwig et al., 2013). For example, during their first stages of online shopping, consumers are more likely to use abstract language, while the opposite is true for the last stages (Humphreys et al., 2020).

## **Methodology**

In this study, we focused on tattooed shoppers to uncover the relationship between the shopping experience and the concept of self-satisfaction. Our choice ensures that interviewees have already reflected to the rhetoric of symbols building their personal identity and can provide useful insights about self-satisfaction, when asked to verbalize their perception of a shopping experience. We interviewed 70 Italian people bearing at most 3 tattoos in order to avoid excessive focus on tattooing

(Goulding et al., 2004; Velliquette et al., 1998). They were asked to freely verbalize how they feel when they enter a store and what galvanizes their attention during shopping.

Ranging from 30 to 90 minutes, semi structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The main focus of the data collection process was to obtain data to deductively answer the study's main research question about the influence of shopping experience on self-satisfaction.

In order to evaluate the importance of the key concepts related to the shopping experience and self-satisfaction, we used the Semantic Brand Score (SBS) indicator (Fronzetti Colladon, 2018), a measure of semantic importance applicable to any term/concept in a discourse. The SBS comprises three dimensions (Fronzetti Colladon, 2018): prevalence, diversity and connectivity. Prevalence represents the frequency with which a concept appears in a set of text documents (interviews in our case). The more frequently a concept is mentioned, the higher its prevalence. The second dimension, diversity, relies on the analysis of word co-occurrences, that is the textual associations of each different term in the text. It measures the heterogeneity of the words co-occurring with a term, assigning higher diversity to concepts/terms embedded in a rich and distinctive discourse. Measuring diversity entails using social network analysis and in particular the distinctiveness centrality metric (Fronzetti Colladon and Naldi, 2020). The higher the number of textual associations a term has, the more heterogeneous the semantic context in which it is used. Diversity is higher when textual associations with a concept are more diverse and is consistent with previous research showing the positive effect of a higher number of associations on brand strength. The third component, connectivity, expresses how often a term serves as an indirect link between all the other pairs of words, while considering the co-occurrence network. It reflects the embeddedness of a term/concept in a discourse and can be considered as the expression of its connective power, such as the ability to indirectly link other words or topics. While a term could be frequently mentioned (high prevalence) and might have heterogeneous associations to other terms (high diversity), its concept could still be peripheral and not connected to the core of the discourse. By contrast, a concept of high importance will get more attention: it will be mentioned with high frequency, embedded in a rich discourse (diversity), and will

act as a bridge across different conversation topics (connectivity). Connectivity has been operationalized through the metric of weighted betweenness centrality (Brandes, 2001).

### *Data analysis*

All analyses were carried out using the SBS BI web app (Fronzetti Colladon & Grippa, 2020). First, we pre-processed text data to remove stop-words (e.g., ‘and’), punctuation and special characters. Then, we changed every word to lowercase and extracted stems by removing word affixes and using the NLTK Snowball Stemmer algorithm (Perkins, 2014).

After pre-processing data, text documents were transformed into a semantic network where nodes are words that appear in the text. An arc exists between a pair of nodes if their corresponding words co-occurred at least once; arc weights are determined by the frequency of co-occurrence. We filtered out negligible co-occurrences, retaining only the arcs that had a minimum weight of 2. We adopted a five-word window for the determination of co-occurrences maximum range (Fronzetti Colladon, 2018).

The SBS was calculated as the sum of the standardized values of its components (Fronzetti Colladon, 2018). According to this standardization procedure, SBS scores can either be positive or negative – based on the importance of a certain term has. If a term had a negative score, it means that its unstandardized value is below the mean of the scores obtained by the other significant words in the discourse.

Two experts in the consumer behavior field analyzed an initial set of keywords (Packard et al., 2018; Pennebaker et al., 2015; Rocklage et al., 2018). The experts met twice to select and cluster those words related to the shopping experience and to the concept of (self-)satisfaction. Eight clusters emerged from the analysis, related to the concepts of: price (“prezzo” in Italian), the individual dimension (including words like “me”, “my”, “I” and “mine”), pleasure (“piacere” in Italian), choice (“scelta” in Italian), sensation (“sensazione” in Italian), shopping and buying (“acquisto” in Italian), satisfaction (“soddisfazione” in Italian), and style (“stile” in Italian).

## Results

On average, answers were of 764 words, with a type/token ration of 43%. The language used was of an average/low complexity, with 31% of words being of six letters or longer. Moreover, in relation to words expressing emotions the interview answers were positive overall, with positive emotions being about 70% more frequent than negative emotions. The answers also contained a number of informal terms – such as laughs, bad words or slang terms – indicating that the language used by the interviewees was mostly direct and informal. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of our corpus.

- insert Table 1 about here -

The SBS analysis provides a ranking of the semantic importance of the key concepts on the three dimensions of connectivity, diversity and prevalence. Results are reported in Figure 1.

- insert Figure 1 about here -

The most relevant concept resulted “piacere” (*pleasure*), followed by “me/io” (*me* and *I* respectively) and “sensazione” (*sensation*). These three elements resulted the most frequent (from the calculation of prevalence) and heterogeneous in use (as they have the highest ranking on diversity) and able to connect networks of words (as the connectivity index indicates). This suggests a verbalization of the shopping experience focused on hedonic dimensions related to the self. A second group of words – namely *shopping*, “prezzo” (*price*) and “soddisfazione” (*satisfaction*) - illuminates a more utilitarian dimension of the verbalized experience that includes an evaluation (e.g., *satisfaction* cf. Oliver, 1980). Finally, and marginally, a third group of words (“stile” and “scelta”, respectively *style* and *choice*) suggests the presence of a behavioral dimension. As *attitude* is a three-dimensional mental construct that includes affective, cognitive and behavioral elements, we can conclude that participants

verbalized their attitude toward the shopping experience by emphasizing the affective dimension with a clear inward-looking perspective.

This interpretation is further supported by the analysis of the semantic image of each concept. Figure 2 visualizes the most important associations of each concept node.

- insert Figure 2 about here -

From the words graph, “piacere” (*pleasure*), “me” (*me*) and “sensazione” (*sensation*), *shopping* and “senso” (*meaning*) represent separate and connected concepts resulting from the shopping experience. Noteworthy, *pleasure*, *shopping* and *me* are strongly connected as well as *sensation* and *meaning*. Overall, this pattern is consistent with a highly arousing experience evaluated from the individual perspective of the self, which provides self-satisfaction as the hedonic gratification resulting from the shopping experience (Matzler et al., 2005). A different concept of satisfaction (“soddisfazione” in Italian) results from “vedo” (I see) and “volevo” (I expected), consistent with the Oliver’s (1980) conceptualization of transactional satisfaction. Satisfaction is weakly connected to shopping and sensation, but it is disconnected from me. Finally, the two distinct concepts of satisfaction and self-satisfaction are connected through the overall meaning (“senso” in Italian) of the shopping experience. In a nutshell, the network of concepts resulting from our data provides the existence of two distinct but connected forms of satisfaction experienced by the customers during shopping. To corroborate this analysis, we study the similarity of our key concepts in the mind of the interviewees, by looking at their distance in the map of Figure 3.

- insert Figure 3 about here -

In details, “stile” (*style*) and “soddisfazione” (*satisfaction*) as well *shopping* and “me” (*I or me*), are the two closest couples of words. They are, at the same time, clearly differentiated from the other

words, indicating that when verbalizing their experience, the mental representation of individuals translates into a discourse that deeply and spontaneously looks inward to provide a genuine story of their shopping trip. Noteworthy, “prezzo” (*price*) is distant from the other words and, in particular, from “scelta” (*choice*), which is closer to “sensazione” (*sensation*) and “piacere” (*pleasure*). As a result, it appears that shopping is experienced from the personal perspective of the self, with a prominent role of sensations and pleasure. The genuine verbalization of this experience overlooks price and indicates an instinctive dimension.

Lastly, we consider the concepts with the highest connective power (i.e., most central in the discourse), which are “piacere” (*pleasure*), the first person *I* or *me* and the concepts related to arousal (grouped into “sensazione”, *sensation*). Overall, it appears that the individuals tend to verbalize their experience through a mental representation of the arousing felt during shopping by choosing those expressions that better constitute a link to their self-image.

## **Discussion**

Results show a prominent role of emotions in the discourse about the shopping experience and an inward-looking connection to the self. In fact, as suggested by the literature (e.g., Lyons et al., 2018), the use of first-person singular pronouns (“I”, “me”, “my”) signals the focus on the self.

The concept of self-satisfaction has been highlighted in terms of emotions and sensations aroused by the shopping trip. The act of shopping arouses not only sense of (self-)accomplishment or reward, as already known in the literature (El Hedhli et al., 2015; ), but also a strong connection with and reinforcement of the self-identity. This generates positive emotions that could give a different meaning to shopping activities, more related to self-expressiveness and well-being.

Generally speaking, the results suggest that modern retail environment should enhance the hedonic shopping experience in terms of fun, fantasy, moods, and emotions. Managerially, this approach will motivate and attract consumers to physically patronize stores regularly. Retailers could then develop shopping environments that stimulate self-satisfaction and, more widely, the well-being implications



of shopping activities and of consumers. Our data show that shopping value is not explicitly relevant in the textual associations and frequencies but comes as a result of the link between the aroused emotions and the self.

Although the study suffers some limitations, including the small sample and the population of tattooed people, it opens possible, interesting avenues of research that deserve attention.

Despite the limited sample size, our analyses suggest that listening to customer *outside* the digital world could have relevant and potential implications. In particular, by selecting a population of tattooed people, we strove to exacerbate the self-consciousness of participant and their tendency to visually communicate their personal self-identity to others through their body. Giving them the possibility to *talk* about themselves, we found a tight relationship between their self-identity and the verbalization of their arousal during shopping. Consequently and consistently with previous literature (Akpınar and Berger, 2017; Berger et al., 2020; Xu and Zhang, 2018), we expect that, in telling a story about themselves in the future, they will likely mention their shopping experience. This conclusion may apply to all people (irrespective to be tattooed or not), with different nuances and different strength, and deserves further investigation by marketing scholars.

While online textual data offer unprecedented opportunities to analyze the language individuals use to express themselves in consuming contexts (Kübler et al., 2020; Ziemer and Kormaz, 2017), they limit the richness of the language in natural, offline, conditions. In particular, since social-media and digital providers are unwilling to allow free access to data after the Cambridge Analytica *affaire*, the literature is teemed with studies on Twitter. Unfortunately, tweets are limited in length and likely to clip the wings of individuals' full and genuine self-expression. It is likely, in fact, that some few words are not enough to express self-identity, experience verbalization and their link. With our study, instead, we suggest that research should return to let people talk about themselves, without time or space constraints, providing really reach information on customers' personality, shopping experience and their way to express them. A fruitful avenue for research, in this perspective, could be the analysis of the transcript of the calls to a customer service or to a call center.

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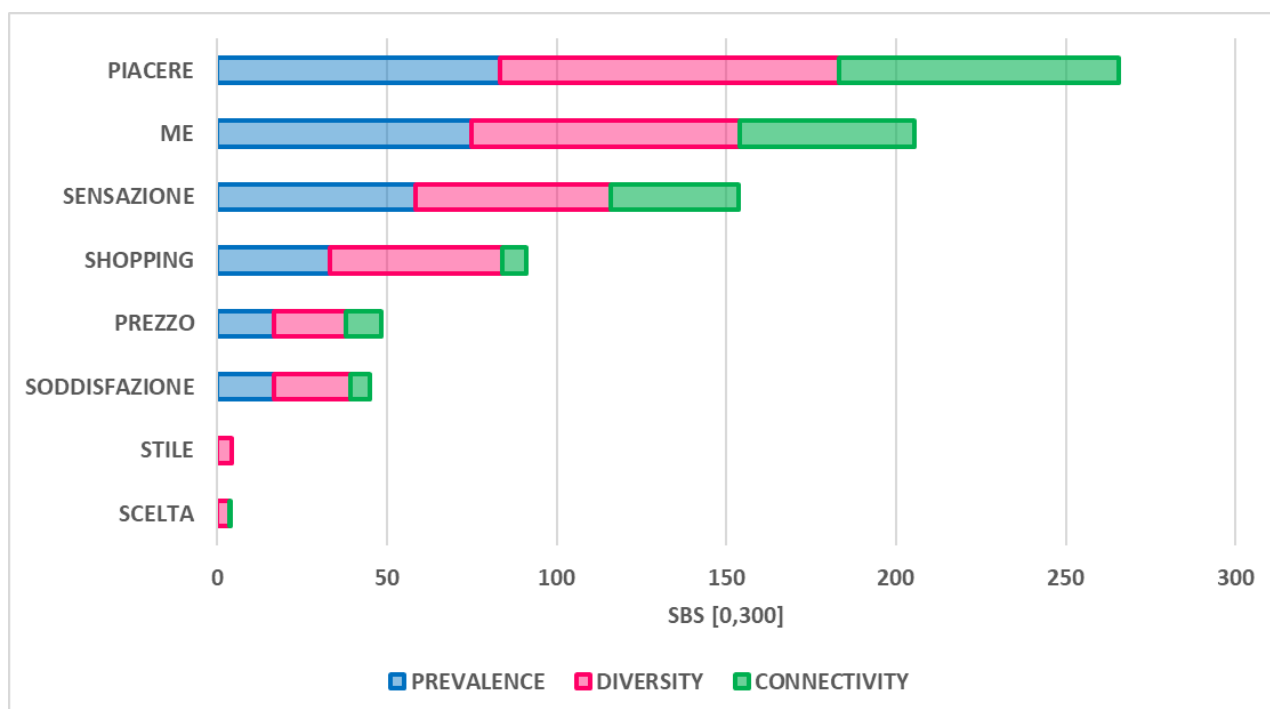
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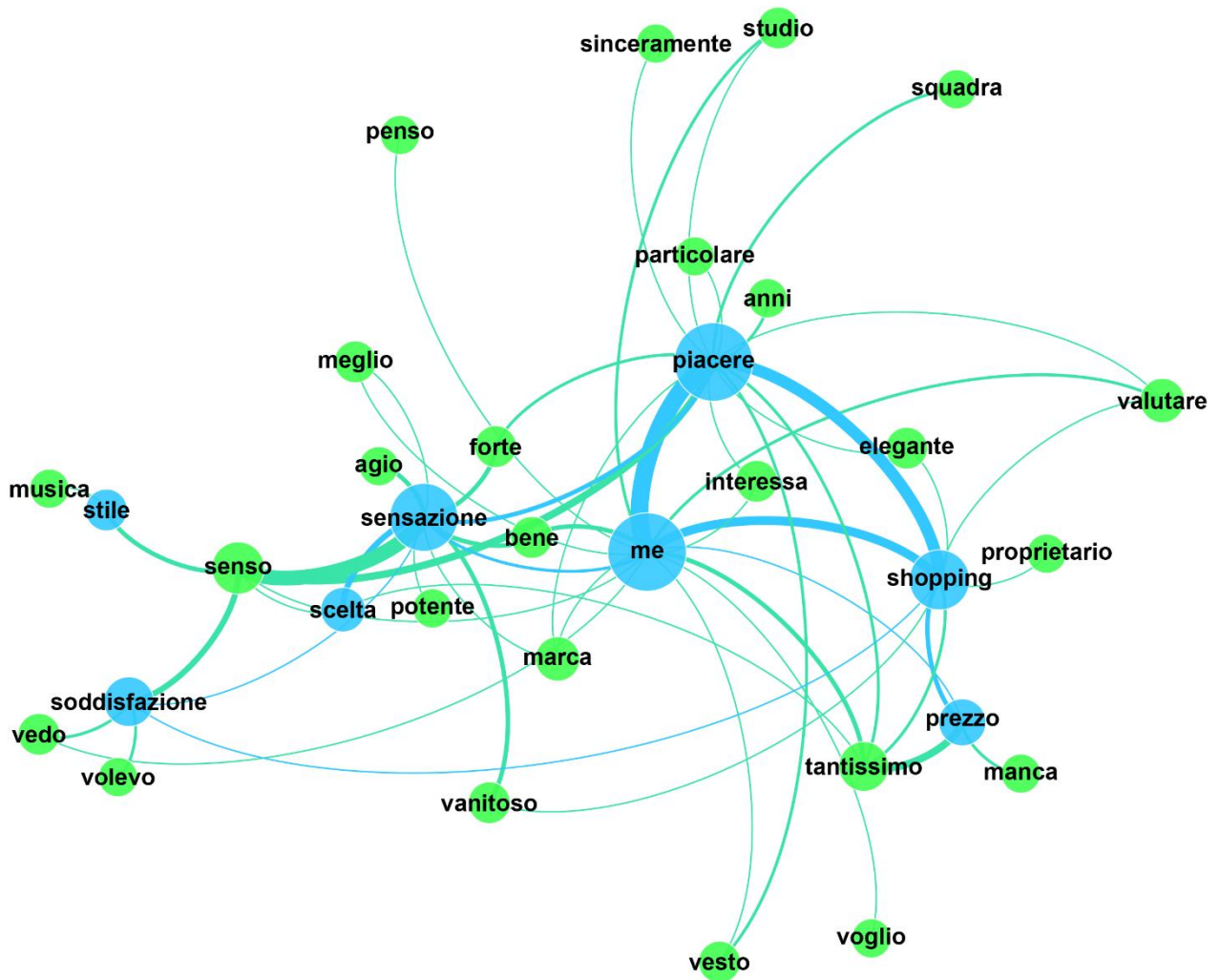
**Table 1.** Corpus descriptive statistics.

<b>Measure</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Number of Words (Tokens)	764.1	194.9
Number of Unique Words (Types)	254.5	53.5
Type/Token Ratio	42.97%	4.62%
Six-Letter Words	31.33%	2.79%

**Figure 1. Semantic importance**



**Figure 2. Semantic image**



**Figure 3. Image similarity**

