

Public Discourse and Category Formation: A Topic Modelling Exploration of 'Historical Shops' on Italian Media

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Abstract

This paper addresses the role of public discourse in processes of category formation. Tracing the emergence and diffusion of a category on the media, and exploring the discourses generated on the media within and around the emerging category, the paper reflects on how these discourses concur in performing the very category they portray. The focus is set on the Historical Shops category, as part of broader processes of urban categorisations for local development and regeneration. By means of a Topic Modelling of a corpus of 3262 press articles collected from Italian news sources between 2009 and 2019, the paper finds that public discourse plays three main roles: *echoing* category creation processes by policymakers, *grounding* the rising category in wider discourses of retail crisis, urban degradation, regeneration and overtourism, and *narrating* it by explaining what Historical Shops are, where they are located, which issues they face and which responses they receive at different institutional levels. Overall, in this paper, the semi-automated techniques afforded by Topic Modelling offer a way to enter the meaning construction processes and elicit the agential role of public discourse in the formation of a category.

1. Introduction

Categorisation is one of the most basic functions of living creatures to order and make intelligible the complex reality around us (Mervis and Rosch, 1981; Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2011; Curchod, Patriotta and Neysen, 2014; Vergne and Wry, 2014). We embrace the view according to which categories are not simply sets of elements grouped together based on pre-defined properties but are socially constructed ways of ordering the world through symbolic

and material processes of meaning-making (Slavich *et al.*, 2020). These processes are not neutral because they promote and shape certain ways of looking at things (Durand and Paolella, 2013; Glynn and Navis, 2013). Studying the processes through which specific categories are formed is therefore particularly important to understand what is included, what is excluded, for which specific interests, and what influences these processes. Not surprisingly, category formation is attracting management scholars' attention for its potential to shape economic and social transformations (Granqvist and Ritvala, 2016; Durand and Khaire, 2017; Slavich *et al.*, 2020).

There is, however, an agent of category formation that has been only tangentially explored so far: public discourse on the media. Scholars recognise the existence of multiple agencies in the meaning-making processes of category formation (Navis and Glynn, 2010; Curchod *et al.*, 2014), but they have not directly addressed the agential role of public discourse in this process, rather treating the media as one of the textual sources in which to trace elements of category formation (Khaire and Wadhvani, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Slavich *et al.*, 2020). And yet we know that discourse in general (Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy, 2004; Hardy and Maguire, 2010) and public discourse in particular (Meyer and Höllerer, 2010; Di Maggio, Nag and Blei, 2013) plays an important agential role in various ways in institutional dynamics. Arguably, then, being categories an element of institutional dynamics (Ocasio, Loewenstein and Nigam, 2015), public discourse is a potentially relevant agent in processes of category formation. Therefore, we ask: *what is the role of public discourse in processes of category formation?*

To explore this issue, we select a category under formation, we collect the media that talk about it, and we conduct a discourse analysis to explore which discourses are generated and how they contribute to the formation of the category. In particular, we focus on the case of Historical Shops as an emerging category in Italy. Historical Shops are obviously not a novel phenomenon, but in the last decade, Italy has seen the diffusion of national, regional and municipal laws and regulations aiming at re-qualifying urban centres and commercial systems through, among others, the safeguard and valorisation of retails with particular historical value and consistent time continuity of their business. By assigning labels, definitions, logos, criteria of inclusion, lists, and the like, these policies initiated symbolic and material processes of creation of a category.

Empirically, we collected 3262 newspapers articles featuring the Italian keyword for 'Historical Shops' (and variations) from six media sources between 2009 and 2019. We analysed the temporal and geographical concentration of the articles and sources, and we used Topic Modelling (Blei, Ng and Jordan, 2003) as a semi-automated technique to extract meaning from big corpora of texts (Hannigan *et al.*, 2019) to elicit the discourses within and around the category.

Through this study, we learn something about the agential role of public discourse in forming a category. First, we find that the presence of talk of historical shops has increased and diffused over ten years on the media: the media thus play a first role of *echoing* the categorisation process conducted by local policymakers and trade associations. Second, we find that the talk of historical shops on the media is imbricated with other background urban discourses (discourses of retail crisis, urban regeneration and degradation, overtourism): while echoing policymakers' creation of a category, the media also *ground* the emerging category in other ongoing debated issues. Third, on this background, we find that Historical Shops has become a self-standing discourse: the media portray what Historical Shops are (different types of

shops, the values of quality, tradition and family dimension they embed), where they subsist (city centres, small provincial villages), which issues they face (closures or relocations for mass retail competition, unsustainable rents), and which political responses are given (municipal policies, regional policies, case-specific solutions). The media thus also make the category vivid; they tell its story, performing a third role of *narrating* the emerging category. By echoing, grounding and narrating a category, public discourse contributes to its creation.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review the main perspectives on category formation and the role of discourse (our theoretical lens), and we outline the case of Historical Shops in Italy (our phenomenon of interest). Second, in the methods section, we present our data collection and our Topic Modelling procedure. Next, we illustrate our findings on the role of the media in the creation of the Historical Shops category. In conclusion, we discuss our findings and draw the basis for wider reflections on the agency of public discourse in processes of category formation.

2. Category formation

Categories are groups of objects, actors, practices or events with similar properties, which an audience collectively attributes a shared meaning to (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Negro, Koçak and Hsu, 2010; Durand and Paoletta, 2013; Curchod, Patriotta and Neysen, 2014). They have crucial importance in the social and economic world. Category systems impose coherence and order by defining a common understanding of the reality, which is indeed made intelligible through the collective use of categories (Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2011; Curchod *et al.*, 2014; Vergne and Wry, 2014). While most of the research on categories had focused on established category systems and their effects, one issue that started attracting considerable scholarly attention is the very process of category formation (Corbett *et al.*, 2013), that is, the formative processes leading to new categories. Durand and Khaire (2017) distinguished between category emergence (when new categories emerge from elements extraneous to an existing market) and category creation (when new categories result from redesigning cognitive boundaries around a sub-set of elements within a pre-existing category system). Either way, a common tenet of this stream of research is that category formation processes rely on a bundle of material and symbolic acts of either meaning making, or meaning re-orientation, re-design, or re-interpretation – put short, politics of meaning (Slavich *et al.*, 2020)

In this stream of research, an important issue is the agency dimension of categories. The literature has so far analysed several sources of agency in category formation, such as new entrants – e.g., French chefs of new restaurants creating the ‘nouvelle cuisine’ category to carve out a niche in a saturated market (Rao, Monin and Durand, 2005); intermediaries – e.g., certification organisations for the creation and legitimation of the organic food category (Lee, Hiatt and Lounsbury, 2017), or art auctions houses introducing constructs to challenge institutionalised ways of categorising 20th-century Indian art (Khaire and Wadhvani, 2010); producers – e.g., architects’ attempts to expand category boundaries of ‘modern architecture’ based on the distinct clientele and dominant institutional logic associated to them (Jones *et al.*, 2012); or policymakers – e.g., regulators categorising Uber as ‘taxi company’, rather than ‘technology company’, to subject it to regulatory oversight.

Interestingly, the role of public discourse (the media) in forming a new category has not been given full consideration, if not tangentially. Khaire and Wadhvani (2010) do address the re-

interpretation of a category through discourse analysis, but they mainly focus on auction catalogues and webpages and only secondarily on media sources. Similarly, Jones *et al.* (2012) recognise texts as symbolic drivers of category formation; however they base their discourse analysis on architects' writings and professional periodicals. Instead, Slavich *et al.* (2020) employ press articles to map the frequency of use of various contested labels during a 20-year time span, hence tracing the struggle and final predominance of the "molecular cuisine" one. Although these studies acknowledge the importance of discourse in categorisation processes, none of them explored the actual role of media discourse as an agent in category formation, limiting it to a contextual or secondary source within their empirical analysis.

3. The agency of public discourse

It is by now widely acknowledged that discourse, and specifically media discourse, has an important agential role in institutional dynamics. Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004) argue that action alone does not provide institutionalisation, rather the recursive and reciprocal shaping of action and discourse through the production of texts institutionalise discourses that in turn shape and are shaped by further action. Supporting this argumentation, Hardy and Maguire (2010) show that texts produced within field-configuring events (technical and scientific reports, press releases) are able to construct new narratives that, in turn, can change an institutional field by mechanisms of domination, interpretation and translation. Ocasio, Loewenstein, and Nigam (2015) contribute to this literature by examining how communicative events (diverse, local, and ephemeral instances of communication) reproduce and change category conventions and, in turn, institutional logics, by acts of coordination, sense-giving, translation and theorising.

On this background, other scholars have emphasised various agential roles specific to media discourses. Meyer and Höllerer (2010) recognise the media as one of the arenas in which new ideas are negotiated, using newspapers to analyse the various framings of "shareholder value" in Austrian local, cultural and sociopolitical contexts. In a study on U.S. government assistance to the arts, Di Maggio *et al.* (2013) rely on media coverage as an embodiment of elite and public opinion. Others then highlighted how public discourse plays a role in (re)constructing asymmetric power relations, reproducing stereotypes and perpetuating institutionalised situations of inequality – e.g., gender inequality in the U.S. credit card system (Buchanan, Ruebottom and Riaz, 2018), or superior and inferior national identities in a transnational merger (Risberg, Tienari and Vaara, 2003).

Arguably, then, the media may be a potentially relevant agent also in other institutional processes, such as category formation, but how so, and with which specific roles, has yet to be directly addressed.

4. The 'Historical Shops' category

During the last decades, Italy witnessed the emergence of a number of resolutions at a national, regional and municipal level, aiming at reforming its cities' commercial system by safeguarding traditional and historical shops as strategic factors for the local economic and social development. This was particularly enacted by the introduction and implementation of

a label 'Historical Shops' (or similar variants in different regions) and associated lists and criteria of inclusion to be recognised as such. This act can be viewed as a source of category formation enacted by an authority with a strategic goal (Durand and Khaire, 2017). The following paragraphs contextualise and explain this phenomenon.

4.1. Legislative acts at different levels

At the national level, the issue of Historical Shops first appeared in the 1998 reform of commerce (D.lgs. 114/1998), in which the State urged the Regions to safeguard and qualify retails in historical centres and businesses with historical and artistic value to avoid the process of expulsion of commercial and artisanal activities from the urban areas. In parallel, the 2004 Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape (D.lgs 42/2004 and its 2013 modifications) gave the Municipalities the possibility to identify, promote and safeguard the places in which traditional artisan and commercial activities were carried out, representing collective cultural identity. More recently, Law 34/2019 included the safeguard of the "Made in Italy", by instituting the special book of "historical brands of national interest".

At the regional level, various Regions welcomed these dispositions by introducing the safeguard of historical and traditional shops in their policies for the development and re-qualification of commercial systems (e.g., LR 50/2012 in Veneto, LR 4/2019 in Lombardy) and by creating regional lists and a census of Historical Shops on their territory.

Similarly, at the municipal level, several cities instituted their own city-level lists and envisaged fiscal incentives as well as communication acts for the promotion of these sites (e.g., the Bologna deliberation 290088/2008 for the "promotion and valorisation of Historical Shops and historical markets", or the Rome deliberation 130/2005 for the "safeguard of Historical Shops"). In the second decade of the 2000s, several Municipalities produced more accurate regulations for the preservation and valorisation of historical and traditional retail activities. In particular, in two cases (the cities of Florence and Bologna), this explicitly derived from the implementation of the so-called 'UNESCO decree' (D.lgs 222/2016), which gave the Municipalities the possibility to pinpoint some areas of specific archaeological, historical, artistic and landscape value, where they could forbid the opening of commercial activities which are incompatible with the needs of safeguard and qualification of cultural heritage. In other cases (e.g., city of Naples, Lombardy Region, city of Rimini) the norms have been made more specific, for example by determining different sub-categories with different criteria for the inscription in the city list, as well as by imposing stricter constraints to the maintenance of the activity and the status of traditional and historical shops.

4.2. Criteria of inclusion

The criteria of inclusion into the Historical Shops regional or local lists, although varying from place to place, have common traits. First, a certain time continuity of retail's activity is always required, in most cases around a minimum of 40 or 50 years. Second, generally, the shop should display a historical, artistic, or architectural value, visible in its furniture, tools, documents and/or also by the local, typical or traditional products sold. Third, the business location – generally urban centres – should be of cultural and historical relevance, so that the shop can both contribute to the historical identity of the city, and offer a service the resident

citizens. These criteria are generally evaluated by a commission of experts and public officers nominated by the Region or the Municipality, who provide the inscription in the list and a logo which identifies the membership. This enrolment determines some constraints, too: any modification or restoration of the physical structure of the shop or major changes in terms of products sold or business is subject to the commission's approval.

4.3. Envisaged goals

The creation of the Historical Shops category is aimed at protecting historical centres from standardisation and urban degradation. The City Council of Rome, through resolution n. 130/2005 for the "Approval of Safeguard Measures of Historical Shops of the city of Rome", declares that these measures are needed to face the increasing standardisation of the commercial system of the city, the decline and the distortion of the historical centre. Indeed, the penetration of big industrial, financial and commercial groups has expelled many traditional and historical small retails. Additionally, the recent actions carried out by the Municipality of Florence and Bologna arise from the degradation related to the extreme diffusion of bars, restaurants, mini-markets, take-aways, money transfers, developed as a result of the demand exercised by the increasing tourist flows in the cities' historical centres.

4.4. Labelling

Despite the commonalities of objectives and contents, the plurality of regulations – at various administrative levels – produced a number of terms to identify these entities. We may encounter: 'Negozzi Storici' (trans.: 'historical shops'), 'Botteghe Storiche' (trans.: historical 'small stores' or 'ateliers'), 'Locali Storici' (trans.: 'historical places', referring especially to food retails), "Attività Storiche" (trans.: 'historical businesses), or 'Luoghi Storici del Commercio' (trans.: 'Historical Places of Commerce'). Furthermore, these words are sometimes also connected to the adjective 'traditional', above 'historical'. Despite the variation in labelling, we consider these instances as part of the same phenomenon. For clarity's sake, for the purpose of this paper, we chose to keep only the label "Historical Shops", including retail businesses and/or craft ateliers, food retailing businesses (bars, restaurants, groceries, bakeries, pastry shops, delicatessen, butcheries, etc.), pharmacies and drugstores, accommodation facilities (hotels, B&Bs), and public markets.

5. Methods

In order to understand the agency of public discourse on category formation, we looked at the trend in time and space of articles from Italian newspapers mentioning Historical Shops ('Botteghe Storiche' or 'Negozzi Storici', in the Italian language) and we performed a Topic Modelling on the same data. We used descriptive statistics and spatial analysis to have a first glance on the temporal emergence and the spatial diffusion of the category in public discourse; then, we decided to employ Topic Modelling to freely explore the cognitive content of those texts.

Arguably, Topic Modelling is an adequate technique to study the role of public discourse in category formation for the following two main reasons. First, a theoretical reason: Hannigan

et al. (2019) underline the usefulness of Topic Modelling for detecting novelty and emergence phenomena, given this technique's ability to discern the cognitive content of documents expressed by language without the aid of any pre-defined dictionaries. Hence, considering categorisation as an ongoing social process of meaning construction undertaken by multiple agents (Kennedy, Lo and Lounsbury, 2010; Navis and Glynn, 2010), Topic Modelling – when used on media data – can reveal latent meaning structures arising from media discourses, potentially uncovering their agency in this process.

Second, a methodological reason: in contrast with other manual coding methods, Topic Modelling allows analysing a wide amount of data – which would be impossible to read without large time consumption – and to extract from them a series of topics that human readers would be unable to discern. However, it does not exclude entirely the role of researchers, which is anyway fundamental for topics' inductive interpretation and further theorisation. Given this hybrid characteristic, Topic Modelling fits well media studies, which are based on textual big data, and categorisation studies, which have been increasingly adopting interpretative research designs (Chliova, Mair and Vernis, 2020).

5.1. The sample

We collected data from Nexis Uni™,¹ a rich database available at our institution for academic research, which includes, above legal and business sources, also journals, television and radio broadcasts, blogs, newswires, local, regional, national and international newspapers. We set our search with two Italian keywords 'Botteghe Storiche' or 'Negozi Storici' – which are the most used expressions in common Italian language to indicate the English 'Historical Shop'.² We limited the search results only to Italian language, given the necessities, the scope and the context of our study. The database produced a result of 4093 articles mainly from newspapers, newswires and press releases, from 1992 till today.³ After a first exploration of the results, we decided to exclude 1992–2008 documents from our analysis to avoid sample bias, because Nexis Uni™'s coverage of the main sources resulting in our search started from 2009. Similarly, we excluded the first months of 2020 to give a coherent range of time: articles in our sample start from beginning 2009 and finish at end 2019. This 10-year span is suitable for capturing the phenomenon under investigation, especially considering that the first legislative acts concerning Historical Shops date 2004 (at the national level) and the 2005s–2010s (at the regional and municipal levels).

We chose to retain newspapers counting at least 100 results in our sample, that is, the first six sources for number of results. We excluded secondary newswires or magazines, to keep our focus on wide circulation media. The sources with the highest number of tagged articles are Italian newspapers with local attention: *La Nazione* (with news mainly about Tuscany Region, Umbria Region and province of La Spezia, in Liguria Region), *Il Resto del Carlino* (gathering

¹ See also the website page of Nexis Uni™: <https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/support/nexis-uni/default.page> (last accessed: February 28, 2020).

² We decided to use as keywords just 'Botteghe Storiche' or 'Negozi Storici' since these are the most used expressions to indicate these shops. The labels given by regulations are less used in common language and gave just few results in the search; furthermore, the articles using those labels also included the aforementioned keywords. A specification of the use of these labels is also in the paragraph 'labelling'.

³ Last accessed: February 28, 2020.

news mainly on Emilia Romagna Region and Marche Region), *Il Giorno* (mainly reporting news on Milan and Lombardy Region). They are followed, in a smaller percentage, by two Italian National Newspapers – *Il Corriere della Sera* (founded in Milan) and *La Stampa* (founded in Turin) – and ANSA, the first information agency in Italy. Figure 5.1.1 shows their proportion in our sample.⁴ We downloaded .docx files with the texts of the articles, their titles, their publication date and the section whose they were part in the newspaper. We transferred the articles in .xlsx format to eliminate duplicates with Excel and OpenRefine Software. A constant manual double-check within these operations has been done. Furthermore, R – the software we used for Topic Modelling – automatically excluded some too short articles from the computation of topics. In order to give coherence to our sample, we decided to delete them from our database as well.

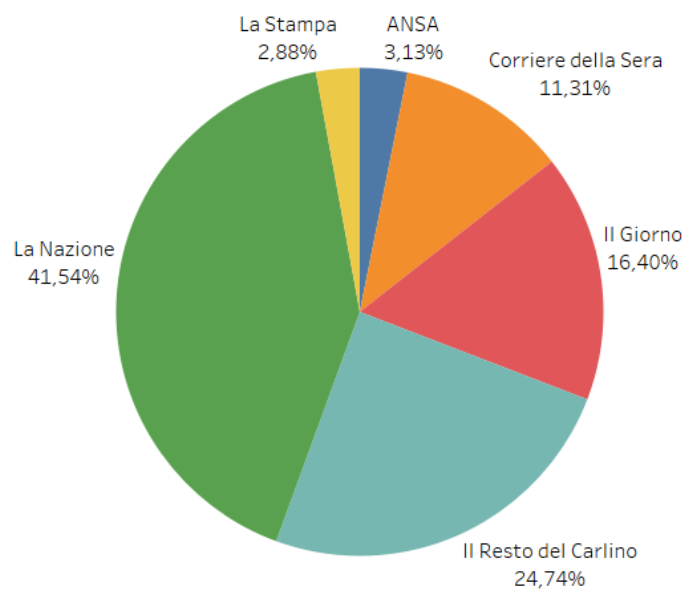


Figure 5.1.1. Source proportion in our sample.

5.2. The dataset

The aforementioned procedures allowed us to build our own dataset. It is composed of 3263 documents and has additional metadata describing: source (6 Italian Newspapers), section (when available), and publication date (in a period comprehended between January 2009 and

⁴ Two important national newspaper, *La Repubblica* and *Il Giornale*, are unfortunately not available in our institution's database, Nexis Uni™. We acknowledge this is a limitation of our study, however, given the smaller percentage of national newspapers' tagged articles in our search, we argue that the 'Historical Shops' phenomenon in the media is more connected to local newspapers than to national ones, probably given its urban dimension. We had a confirmation of this issue by informally looking at other newspapers' online archives. For example, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, another wide circulation Italian newspaper, has very few articles with our interest's keywords, while among other local newspapers, those of our sample were still the ones with the highest numbers of tagged news.

December 2019). We used these variables to explore the dataset through basic descriptive statistics employing Excel for descriptive analysis and Tableau Software for data visualisation.

We also noted that many 'sections' of the newspapers were called with the name of the city, the province or the geographical zone they referred to in the corresponding article. For example, *Il Resto del Carlino – Bologna*, *La Nazione – Agenda Lucca*, *Il Giorno – Valtellina*. Thus, when needed, we cleaned the section's title by transforming it in the precise geographical name (e.g., 'Agenda Lucca' became 'Lucca'). This enabled us to use the section as a proxy for a first exploration of the locations of the articles in our sample. We input the names of these locations in GPS Visualizer,⁵ an online tool able to geo-localise addresses. Then, we obtained the geographical coordinates using a Bing Map key.⁶ We finally visualised them on QGIS Software⁷ and Tableau Software, through which we drew a map based on the concentration of articles in the locations we were able to infer from the section name. Although not all the articles have been geo-localised, this helped us in having a first view on the geographical distribution of our sample, something relevant considering it is mainly composed of local newspapers.

5.3. Topic modelling

We deepened our analysis through Topic Modelling. We used the Software R with the packages Quanteda (Benoit *et al.*, 2018) and stm (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2014, 2019).

We used Quanteda to create and manage our corpus in order to prepare it for Topic Modelling.

Indeed, we imported our dataset and transformed it in a corpus, a collection of texts and relative metadata which is the basis for performing a Topic Modelling technique.

Then, Quanteda toolkit helped us in processing data for text analysis. The first fundamental step was tokenisation, through which we were able to split the corpus into single units (i.e., in our case, words). Not all of these units are useful for topic creation: first, we removed punctuation, numbers, symbols and URLs from our corpus with the same Quanteda tokenisation function; next, we manually inserted a stop words list, that is, words to be excluded from topic modelling being useless for meaning construction. We included in this list not only the traditional recurrent words in the Italian language as articles, prepositions, pronouns, neutral adverbs, numbers in letters, verbs "to be", "to stay", "to have" in different times and declinations, but also:

- the keywords of our initial search on Nexis Uni™ and related synonyms, which we soon realised would have altered the topic model. For example, we excluded 'historical shops' but also 'historical retail', 'retailers', 'commerce' because, even if actually different words, they were ubiquitous to all topics and they neither added distinction among the topics nor helped in defining the various shades of meanings among them. Probably this can be due to Italian journalist jargon and its tendency to use synonyms to indicate the same entity;

⁵ GPS Visualizer: <https://www.gpsvisualizer.com/geocoding.html> (last accessed: February 20, 2020).

⁶ Bing Map: <https://www.bing.com/maps> (last accessed: February 20, 2020).

⁷ QGIS: <https://www.qgis.org/it/site/> (last accessed: February 20, 2020).

These three tools used for geo-localization are open source.

- words characterising journalism jargon like ‘yesterday’, ‘today’, and time adverbs, which were very common throughout the whole corpus and added no distinction to the topics;
- quantitative adjectives (e.g., ‘many’, ‘few’), which did not add any significance to topics, but just created disturb being transversal and ubiquitous within them (as in the previous case);
- personal forenames, because they were very common and did not add actual meanings to the topics (note: when referring to individuals of particular importance – e.g., names of ministers or mayors – we compounded them with the related family name).

We developed our stop words list after a long iterative process, which we directly supervised thanks to various Quanteda functions such as the computation of the most frequent words in the corpus and in the topics (within various models we further performed), and the explorations of the words within their context.⁸ We also compounded many words forming common expressions, so that the algorithm could recognise them as unique units and not as single words (e.g., ‘European Union’, ‘Shopping Mall’).

After the tokenisation and the stop words’ exclusion, we created the document-feature matrix (dfm), a fundamental input for Topic Modelling. The dfm is a matrix whose rows represent all the documents in the corpus and whose columns lists every word in the corpus.⁹ Its cells contain the words’ occurrence in every document so that each text can be seen as a ‘bag of words’ without any syntax (Hannigan *et al.*, 2019), deprived of terms of no significance (stop words, in our case).

Furthermore, we set our document-feature matrix to remove from topics’ computation those features that were too rare (appearing in less than 7.5% of all documents) and too ubiquitous (appearing in more than 90% of documents).

Finally, we used Structural Topic Model (stm) R package (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2014, 2019) to estimate topic models from our corpus. Similarly to other topic modelling techniques – e.g., LDA (Blei, Ng and Jordan, 2003) –, stm uses data to find the most likely values for the parameters within the model. A topic is defined as a mix of words where each word has a probability of belonging to one topic. In parallel, a single document can be composed of multiple topics. Therefore, the sum of the topic’s proportions across all topics for a document is one, and the sum of the words’ probabilities for a given topic is one (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2014, 2019).

As aforementioned, we used as input the document-feature matrix elaborated in Quanteda and a number of topics to be estimated by the algorithm, chosen by us through various attempts and interpretations, whose details are explained in the following paragraph.

5.4. Rendering topics

On these premises, we started our ‘rendering topics process’ (Hannigan *et al.*, 2019) by running models at 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20 topics.

⁸ Quanteda provides functions to explore texts using keywords-in-context and to discover multi-word expressions through collocation scoring (Benoit *et al.*, 2018).

⁹ Benoit *et al.* (2018) call the columns ‘feature’ to underline the unit of analysis can be as much generic as possible (not only terms but also part of speech, terms after stop words’ removal, dictionary classes, etc.).

To choose the 'best fit' model among them and to interpret each topic within the different tentative models, we printed a list of the first 40 most probable words in the x topics for each of the computed models. The model selection was mainly based on researchers' interpretative and iterative work (Blei and Lafferty, 2007; DiMaggio, Nag and Blei, 2013). However, we also took into consideration other stm visualisation tools showing topics (and related most indicative words) proportions within the corpus¹⁰ and depicting differences between two topics.¹¹

We first looked independently at the lists of words for every topic, and we noted that some of them were stable throughout the various models. However, we soon excluded models at 10 and 12 topics because words seemed to overlap and aggregate too much. Similarly, we excluded also the 20 topics model, which produced too detailed solutions, adding no meaningfulness to the other stable topics. In order to find a solution between models at 13-, 14-, 15-topics, we extracted the 5 most representative articles for each x topic. Although aware that these articles were not exclusively pertaining to the assigned topic, we read them individually to better delve into the topics' cognitive content. We used these texts and the list of words composing each topic to make sense of our first-order concepts (Croidieu and Kim, 2018). Hence, we first created our own labels individually for the meaningful topics we found. Then, upon discussion and after comparison between the one's own created labels, we agreed that, while the 13-model seemed to overlook a small but interesting topic, the 15-model was adding one too similar to previous ones. This is why we decided to opt for the model with 14 topics, which we believe it is the solution with the best explicative power: on one side, it has a good level of detail and internal validity (Di Maggio *et al.*, 2013); on the other side, its parsimony makes its interpretation clearer and avoids complexity. Table 5.4.1 and Table 5.4.2 show the lists of words composing the 14-model solution,¹² while its deeper interpretation is provided in the findings' sections.

¹⁰ Function 'summary' (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2014, 2019).

¹¹ Function 'perspectives' (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2014, 2019).

¹² For visualisation issues, Table 5.4.1 and Table 5.4.2 show only the first 20 highest probability words for every topic. The full words list is available upon request. The tables report the original Italian words and their English translation. The English translation specifies, when applicable, the singular/plural and masculine/feminine forms of adjectives. Please note that two slightly different Italian words have a unique English translation (e.g., *via* and *strada* are both translatable just as 'street').

1 - Rents		2 - Closures		3 - Case-specific solutions		4 - Overtourism		5 - Regional policies		6 - Urban Regeneration		7 - Milan	
EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT
president	<i>presidente</i>	street	<i>via</i>	Municipality	<i>Comune</i>	Florence	<i>Firenze</i>	territory	<i>territorio</i>	city	<i>città</i>	Milan	<i>Milano</i>
mayor	<i>sindaco</i>	street	<i>strada</i>	project	<i>progetto</i>	Rome	<i>Roma</i>	enterprises	<i>imprese</i>	history	<i>storia</i>	fashion	<i>moda</i>
Conf-commerce	<i>Conf-commercio</i>	place	<i>posto</i>	plan	<i>piano</i>	tourists	<i>turisti</i>	Region	<i>regione</i>	culture	<i>cultura</i>	Italy	<i>Italia</i>
assessor	<i>l'assessore</i>	open	<i>aperto</i>	spaces	<i>spazi</i>	tourism	<i>turismo</i>	services	<i>servizi</i>	heart	<i>cuore</i>	world	<i>mondo</i>
rents	<i>affitti</i>	owner-manager	<i>titolare</i>	erstwhile	<i>prima</i>	city	<i>città</i>	sector	<i>settore</i>	future	<i>futuro</i>	space	<i>spazio</i>
together	<i>insieme</i>	Few (plur.)	<i>pochi</i>	particular	<i>particolare</i>	world	<i>mondo</i>	value	<i>valore</i>	big	<i>grande</i>	place	<i>luogo</i>
moment	<i>momento</i>	closed	<i>chiuso</i>	mayor	<i>sindaco</i>	way	<i>modo</i>	centres	<i>centri</i>	citizens	<i>cittadini</i>	reality	<i>realtà</i>
citizens	<i>cittadini</i>	few (sing.)	<i>poco</i>	space	<i>spazio</i>	streets	<i>strade</i>	job	<i>lavoro</i>	past	<i>passato</i>	tradition	<i>tradizione</i>
citizen	<i>cittadino</i>	home-house	<i>casa</i>	Italy	<i>Italia</i>	better	<i>meglio</i>	economic	<i>economico</i>	place	<i>luogo</i>	first (sing.)	<i>primo</i>
way	<i>modo</i>	avenue	<i>corso</i>	initiatives	<i>iniziative</i>	big (plur.)	<i>grandi</i>	young	<i>giovani</i>	life	<i>vita</i>	home-house	<i>casa</i>
problem	<i>problema</i>	square	<i>piazza</i>	example	<i>esempio</i>	true	<i>vero</i>	reality	<i>realtà</i>	important	<i>importante</i>	beautiful (fem.)	<i>bella</i>
period	<i>periodo</i>	clothing	<i>abbigliamento</i>	municipal	<i>comunale</i>	example	<i>esempi</i>	president	<i>presidente</i>	tradition	<i>tradizione</i>	events	<i>eventi</i>
municipal	<i>comunale</i>	mean	<i>mezzo</i>	together	<i>insieme</i>	erstwhile	<i>prima</i>	particular	<i>particolare</i>	events	<i>eventi</i>	better	<i>meglio</i>
initiatives	<i>iniziative</i>	streets	<i>vie</i>	service	<i>servizio</i>	quality	<i>qualità</i>	together	<i>insieme</i>	reality	<i>realtà</i>	spaces	<i>spazi</i>
out	<i>fuori</i>	big	<i>grande</i>	market	<i>mercato</i>	culture	<i>cultura</i>	market	<i>mercato</i>	tourists	<i>turisti</i>	big	<i>grande</i>
important	<i>importante</i>	erstwhile	<i>prima</i>	way	<i>modo</i>	nowadays	<i>adesso</i>	headquarter	<i>sede</i>	value	<i>valore</i>	headquarter	<i>sede</i>
job	<i>lavoro</i>	streets	<i>strade</i>	important	<i>importante</i>	by now	<i>ormai</i>	important	<i>importante</i>	together	<i>insieme</i>	big (plur.)	<i>grandi</i>
ahead	<i>avanti</i>	by now	<i>ormai</i>	public	<i>pubblico</i>	citizens	<i>cittadini</i>	big	<i>grande</i>	citizen	<i>cittadino</i>	example	<i>esempio</i>
mean	<i>mezzo</i>	nowadays	<i>adesso</i>	along	<i>lungo</i>	less	<i>meno</i>	first (plur.)	<i>primi</i>	beautiful (fem.)	<i>bella</i>	mean	<i>mezzo</i>
erstwhile	<i>prima</i>	evening	<i>sera</i>	problem	<i>problema</i>	Italy	<i>cultura</i>	project	<i>progetto</i>	once	<i>volta</i>	well	<i>bene</i>

Table 5.4.1. Chosen Topic Model (Topics 1-7).

8 – Retail Crisis		9 – Types of Shops		10 – Municipal Policies		11 – Urban Degradation		12 – City Centre		13 – Values		14 – Villages	
EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT	EN	IT
crisis	<i>crisi</i>	café	<i>bar</i>	retails	<i>esercizi</i>	square	<i>piazza</i>	centre	<i>centro</i>	clients	<i>clienti</i>	village	<i>paese</i>
less	<i>meno</i>	local	<i>locale</i>	sale	<i>vendita</i>	zone	<i>zona</i>	shop windows	<i>vetrine</i>	family	<i>famiglia</i>	big (plur.)	<i>grandi</i>
closure	<i>chiusura</i>	palace	<i>palazzo</i>	municipal	<i>comunale</i>	neighbourhood	<i>quartiere</i>	avenue	<i>corso</i>	erstwhile	<i>prima</i>	province	<i>provincia</i>
situation	<i>situazione</i>	first(sing.)	<i>primo</i>	points	<i>punti</i>	residents	<i>residenti</i>	events	<i>eventi</i>	products	<i>prodotti</i>	small (plur.)	<i>piccoli</i>
to close	<i>chiudere</i>	picture	<i>foto</i>	public	<i>pubblico</i>	problem	<i>problema</i>	streets	<i>vie</i>	job	<i>lavoro</i>	market	<i>mercato</i>
well	<i>bene</i>	avenue	<i>corso</i>	plan	<i>piano</i>	problems	<i>problemi</i>	initiatives	<i>iniziative</i>	quality	<i>qualità</i>	rest	<i>resto</i>
few (sing.)	<i>poco</i>	clothing	<i>abbigliamento</i>	particular	<i>particolare</i>	streets	<i>strade</i>	citizen	<i>cittadino</i>	home-house	<i>casa</i>	centres	<i>centri</i>
difficult (sing.)	<i>difficile</i>	square	<i>piazza</i>	presence	<i>presenza</i>	market	<i>mercato</i>	heart	<i>cuore</i>	big	<i>grande</i>	well	<i>bene</i>
moment	<i>momento</i>	open (fem.)	<i>aperta</i>	spaces	<i>spazi</i>	evening	<i>sera</i>	square	<i>piazza</i>	tell	<i>racconta</i>	future	<i>futuro</i>
difficulty (sing.)	<i>difficoltà</i>	once	<i>volta</i>	economic	<i>economico</i>	people	<i>persone</i>	by now	<i>ormai</i>	tradition	<i>tradizione</i>	big	<i>grande</i>
closed	<i>chiuso</i>	erstwhile	<i>prima</i>	small (plur.)	<i>piccoli</i>	by now	<i>ormai</i>	closure	<i>chiusura</i>	life	<i>vita</i>	way	<i>modo</i>
by now	<i>ormai</i>	headquarter	<i>sede</i>	products	<i>prodotti</i>	citizens	<i>cittadini</i>	along	<i>lungo</i>	once	<i>volta</i>	out	<i>fuori</i>
unfortunately	<i>purtroppo</i>	together	<i>insieme</i>	quality	<i>qualità</i>	erstwhile	<i>prima</i>	problem	<i>problema</i>	service	<i>servizio</i>	young	<i>giovani</i>
few (plur.)	<i>pochi</i>	life	<i>vita</i>	different (plur.)	<i>diversi</i>	presence	<i>presenza</i>	streets	<i>strade</i>	clientele	<i>clientela</i>	important	<i>importante</i>
period	<i>periodo</i>	big	<i>grande</i>	tradition	<i>tradizione</i>	young	<i>giovani</i>	example	<i>esempio</i>	people	<i>persone</i>	example	<i>esempio</i>
tour, round	<i>giro</i>	hand	<i>mano</i>	to open	<i>aprire</i>	true	<i>vero</i>	rents	<i>affitti</i>	times	<i>tempi</i>	erstwhile	<i>prima</i>
owner-manager	<i>titolare</i>	open	<i>aperto</i>	café	<i>bar</i>	few (plur.)	<i>pochi</i>	to open	<i>aprire</i>	world	<i>mondo</i>	small (sing.)	<i>piccolo</i>
sector	<i>settore</i>	place	<i>posto</i>	local	<i>locale</i>	different (plur.)	<i>diversi</i>	big (plur.)	<i>grandi</i>	owner-manager	<i>titolare</i>	open	<i>aperto</i>
times	<i>tempi</i>	ahead	<i>avanti</i>	example	<i>esempio</i>	place	<i>luogo</i>	city	<i>città</i>	hand	<i>mano</i>	life	<i>vita</i>
people	<i>persone</i>	owner-manager	<i>titolare</i>	citizens	<i>cittadini</i>	few (sing.)	<i>poco</i>	out	<i>fuori</i>	ahead	<i>avanti</i>	reality	<i>realtà</i>

Table 5.4.2. Chosen Topic Model (Topics 8-14).

6. Topics and discourses of Historical Shops

In this first section of findings, we report our interpretive analysis on the contents of the emerging topics and discourses of Historical Shops on the media.

Our Topic Modelling produced 14 topics that represent the first-order concepts of our inductive process of ‘rendering theoretical artefacts’ (Hannigan *et al.*, 2019), represented in Table 6.1. By reading the documents in our corpus and the words related to each topic, we soon distinguished two wider aggregate dimensions: a background dimension and a foreground dimension. Not all the topics regarded our object of interest directly: some of them represented wider discourses that do concern Historical Shops, but incidentally. We considered them *background discourses*.¹³ All other topics directly related to the Historical Shops category and were thus considered as our *foreground discourse* of Historical Shops. Within this latter dimension, we identified some second-order themes – namely *What*, *Where*, *Issues* and *Responses* – which helped in better characterising some more abstract patterns within the main discourses about the category. Specifically, this is the topics’ structure resulting from our interpretive process (Table 6.1):

- *Background discourses* (broader instances in which the Historical Shop discourse is rooted)
 - Retail Crisis (Topic 8): a widespread crisis of any kind of shops in cities and towns;
 - Urban Degradation (Topic 11): neighbourhoods’ social and structural issues (crime, migration, viability, traffic);
 - Urban Regeneration (Topic 6): ideas for a future relaunch of city centres or neighbourhoods;
 - Overtourism (Topic 3): mass tourism impacts and management in big cities like Rome and Florence.
- *Foreground discourses* (specific instances directly concerning Historical Shops)
 - *What* (topics qualifying the nature of Historical Shops)
 - Values (Topic 13): stories of historical retails highlighting their quality, their traditional products, their strong relationship with the clientele;
 - Types of Shop (Topic 9): description of many Historical Shops in towns and cities (cafés, clothing shops, groceries, butchers, etc.);
 - *Where* (topics relating to the spatial dimension of Historical Shops)
 - Villages (Topic 14): Historical Shops’ role in small villages as social cohesion points;
 - City Centres (Topic 12): Historical Shops’ in city centres facing issues and organising initiatives;
 - *Issues* (topics relating to problems specific to Historical Shops)

¹³ In support to this interpretation, three of these topics (Topic n. 6, 8, 11) are more geographically distributed in the sample, meaning that they treat themes of ample interest regarding widespread matters of which Historical Shops are just one instance (Figure 6.3).

- Closures (Topic 2): Historical Shops close due to crisis, changing consumers' habits, shopping malls;
- Rents (Topic 1): Historical Shops cannot survive due to high rents to be paid to owners, especially during crisis periods.
- Responses (topics concerning policy acts undertaken for Historical Shops)
 - Regional Policies (Topic 5): regional funding and plans for the strategic development of tourism, cultural heritage and retail sector, comprehending support for Historical Shops;
 - Municipal Policies (Topic 10): direct municipal interventions for the safeguard of cities' or towns' Historical Shops;
 - Case-specific solutions (Topic 3): solutions given to circumscribed issues of Historical Shops in neighbourhoods or in specific urban locations.
- Other (i.e., residual topic on the specific case of Milan Historical Shops)
 - Milan (Topic 7): stories of ancient shops in Milan, often included in events within contexts of Fashion, Design or creative industries.

To better sustain our interpretation, we performed some analyses relating topics to our sample (Figure 6.1), sources (Figure 6.2), as well as to their geographical (Figure 6.3) and temporal distributions (Figure 8.1, Figure 9.3.1, and Figure 9.4.1).

Figure 6.1 compares all topics' proportion within our sample (note that a document represents more topics in different percentages) with the proportion of topics just considering the first most representative topic per document. Not surprisingly, topics concerning specific cases (Topic n. 3 *Case-Specific Solutions* and Topic n. 7 *Milan*) are less present than the ones which describe the real nature of the category (Topic n. 13 *Values*) and the broad context of the sector (Topic n. 8 *Retail Crisis*). Figure 6.2 indicates the proportion of topics among the sources. Notwithstanding the prevalence of the newspaper *La Nazione*, which is the most present in our sample, it seems that topics are rather widely distributed among sources. However, some specific discourses seem to emerge particularly in some sources. Beyond topic interpretations, this is also due to the local character of the newspaper in our sources. As a matter of fact, by looking at topics' geographical distribution in percentage (Figure 6.3), we also found that some topics cover many Regions (Topic n. 13, 8, 12, 6, 2), while others are specific to one or two Regions (Topic n. 4, 14, 7).

Furthermore, Figure 8.1, Figure 9.3.1, and Figure 9.4.1 show background and foreground topics' distribution in time. Most of them increase or remain stable during our sample's time range. There is just one notable exception, which will be further explained in accordance with the topics' interpretation. An interesting growth is notable in foreground topics about Responses (in particular, for what concerns Topic 5 *Regional Policies*).

<i>Aggregate dimensions</i>	<i>2nd order themes</i>	<i>1st order concepts (Topic label)</i>	<i>Topic n.</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Topic % Overall</i>
Background discourses (broader instances in which the Historical Shop discourse is rooted)		Retail Crisis	8	A widespread crisis of any kind of shops in cities and towns	11.45
		Urban Degradation	11	Neighbourhoods' social and structural issues (crime, migration, viability, traffic)	6.44
		Urban Regeneration	6	Ideas for a future relaunch of city centres or neighbourhoods	7.98
		Overtourism	4	Mass tourism impacts and management in big cities as Rome and Florence	4.82
Foreground discourses (specific instances directly concerning Historical Shops)	<i>What</i>	Values	13	Stories of historical retails highlighting their quality, their traditional products, their strong relationship with clientele	12.77
		Types of Shop	9	Description of many Historical Shops in towns and cities (cafés, clothing shops, groceries, butchers, etc.)	8.20
	<i>Where</i>	Villages	14	Historical Shops' role in small villages as social cohesion points	4.67
		City Centre	12	Historical Shops' in city centres facing issues and organising initiatives	9.09
	<i>Issues</i>	Closures	2	Historical Shops closes due to crisis, changing consumers' habits, shopping malls	10.69

<i>Aggregate dimensions</i>	<i>2nd order themes</i>	<i>1st order concepts (Topic label)</i>	<i>Topic n.</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Topic % Overall</i>
		Rents	1	Historical Shops cannot survive due to high rents to be paid to owners, especially during crisis periods	4.47
		Regional Policies	5	Regional funding and plans for the strategic development of tourism, cultural heritage and retail sector, comprehending support for Historical Shops	6.31
	<i>Responses</i>	Municipal Policies	10	Municipal direct interventions for the safeguard of cities' or towns' Historical Shops	5.29
		Case-specific solutions	3	Solutions given to circumscribed issues of Historical Shops in neighbourhoods or in specific urban locations	3.75
	<i>Other</i>	Milan	7	Stories of ancient shops in Milan, often included in events within contexts of Fashion, Design or creative industries	4.06

Table 6.1. Topic model interpretation.

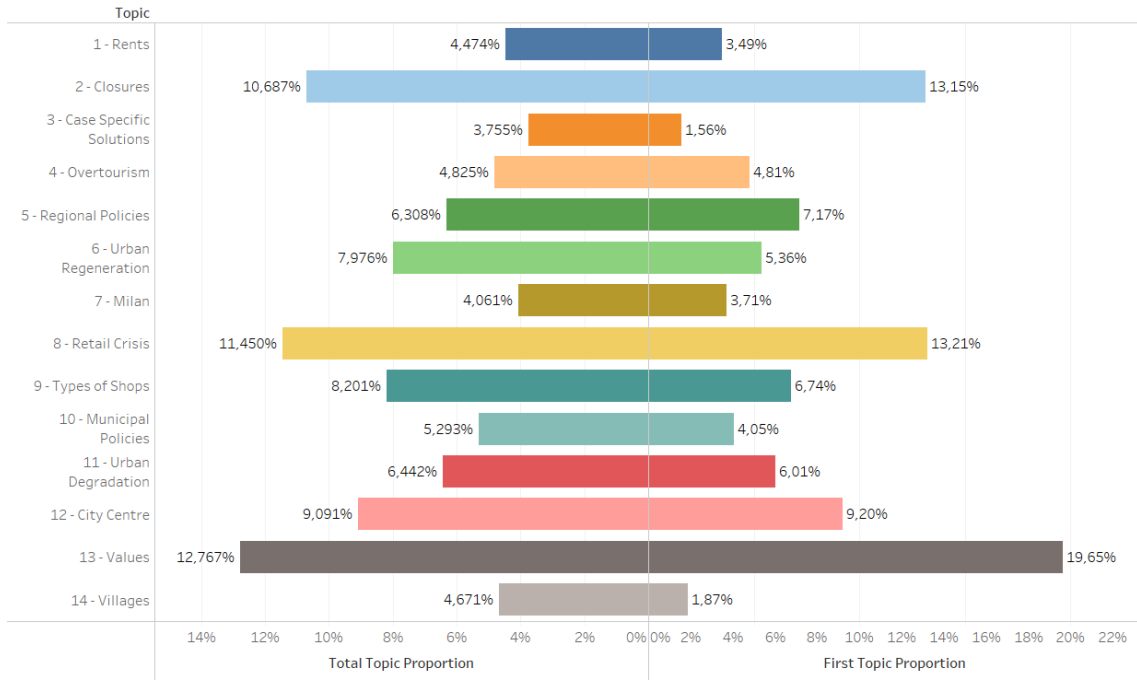


Figure 6.1. Total topic proportion vs First Topic proportion.

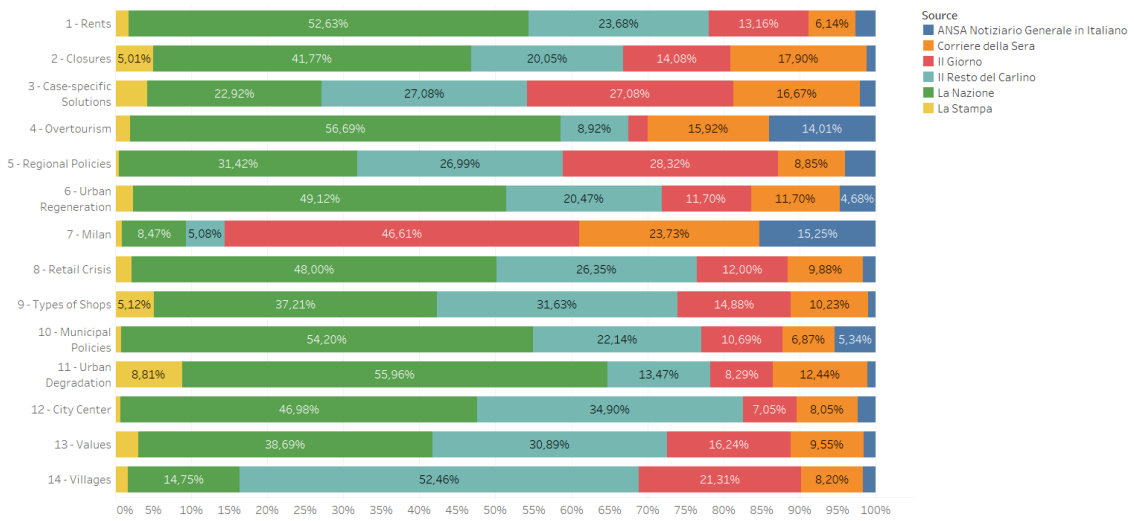


Figure 6.2. Topics distribution per source.

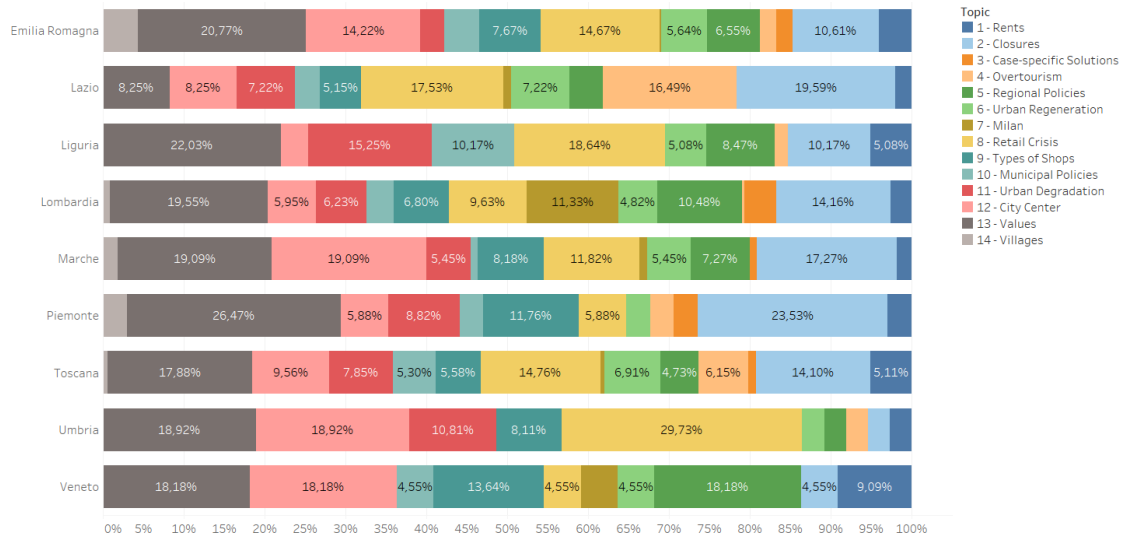


Figure 6.3. Topic distribution per Region (proxy: section).

After having interpreted the topic landscape of our model, we can address our research question: what is the role of public discourse in category formation?

7. Echoing a category

The press sources at our disposal and the considered timeframe (2009–2019) offered us the possibility to explore temporal and geographical patterns of category formation, hence uncovering a first agentic role of public discourse in this process.

Our sample of news mentioning Historical Shops shows a positive, although moderate, increasing trend in the time range 2009–2019 (Figure 7.1). This pattern seems to witness that the latest legislative discourse around Historical Shops’ safeguard and enhancement in Italian cities is followed, or reflected, by increasing usage of these theme in media discourse. This trend’s downfall in 2014 is given by a gap in sources: in this year there is no mention of the keywords in *Il Resto del Carlino*.

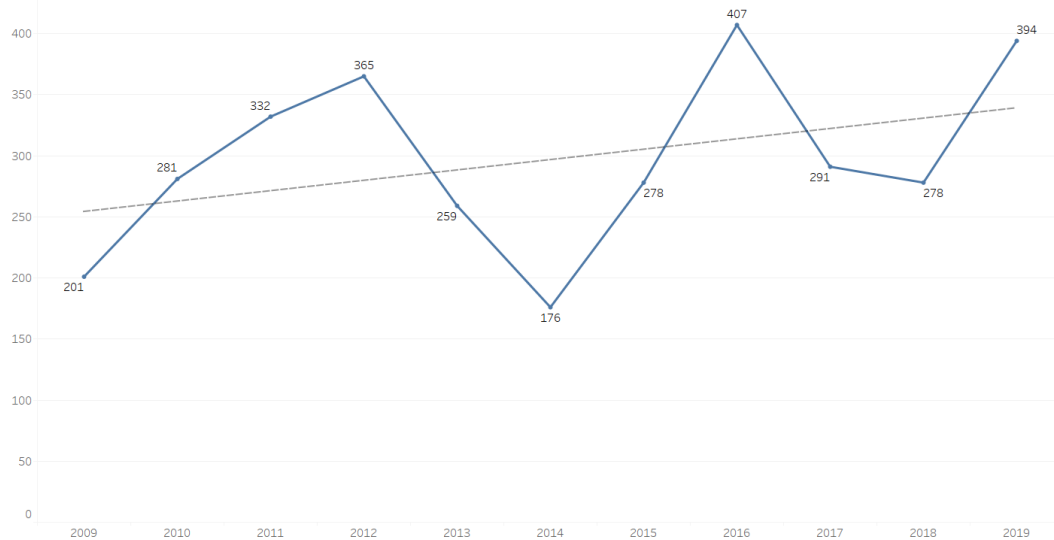


Figure 7.1. Articles with Italian keywords for ‘historical shop’ in years 2009–2019.

The sources’ distribution per year (Figure 7.2) shows three interesting peaks of documents in 2012 and 2015 for *Il Resto del Carlino* and in 2016 for *La Nazione*. These three moments correspond to special issues dedicated to Historical Shops. In the former case, an *ad hoc* section called ‘Botteghe Storiche’ (i.e., Historical Shops) was dedicated to single stories of Historical Shops in Emilia Romagna Region. Similarly, the latter corresponds to an initiative of *La Nazione* consisting in attaching to the newspaper’s Prato¹⁴ edition a series of postcards portraying old images of the city’s Historical Shops.

Except for these three moments, the category is mentioned mostly in a stable or slightly increasing fashion by our sample’s sources. In particular, in *Il Giorno* and *Il Corriere della Sera*, the trend seems starker than in the other newspapers.

¹⁴ A city in Tuscany.

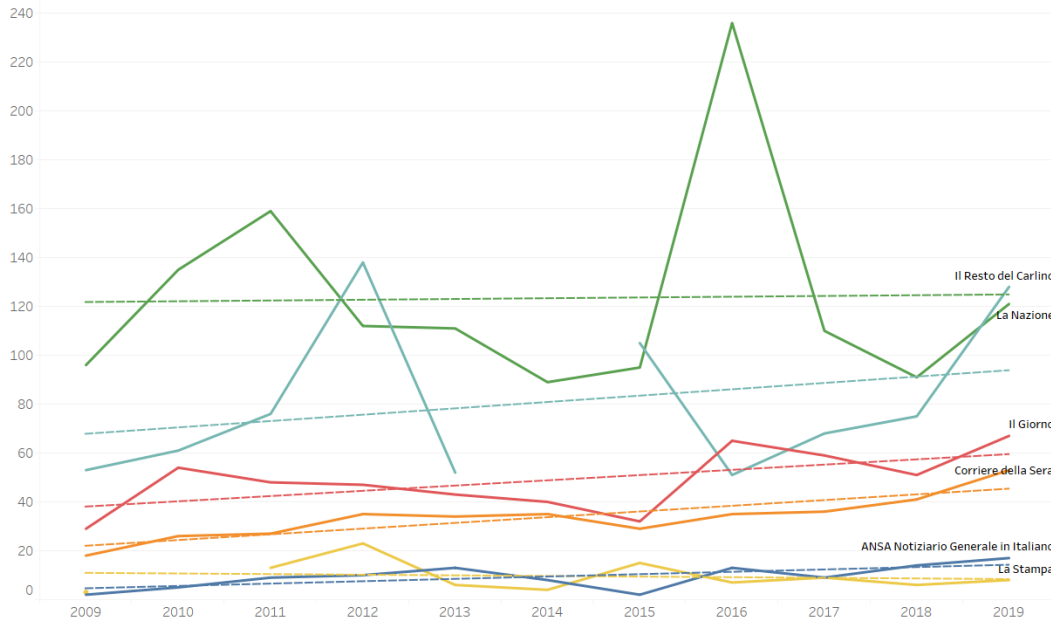


Figure 7.2. Sources distribution per year.

We can also obtain a first idea about where the public discourse of the category is spreading by taking as a proxy the representation of the keywords in local sections –when available – of our sample’s newspapers. Figure 7.3 shows that the highest concentration of Historical Shops media discourses is located in Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Lombardy Regions, and this obviously depends on the geographical focus of our sample’s local newspaper. Anyway, the analysis witnesses that the phenomenon is strictly connected to urban and territorial contexts: cities such as Florence, Milan, Prato, Bologna and Rome are highly represented in media discourse, but a number of smaller towns are concerned too, albeit less intensively.

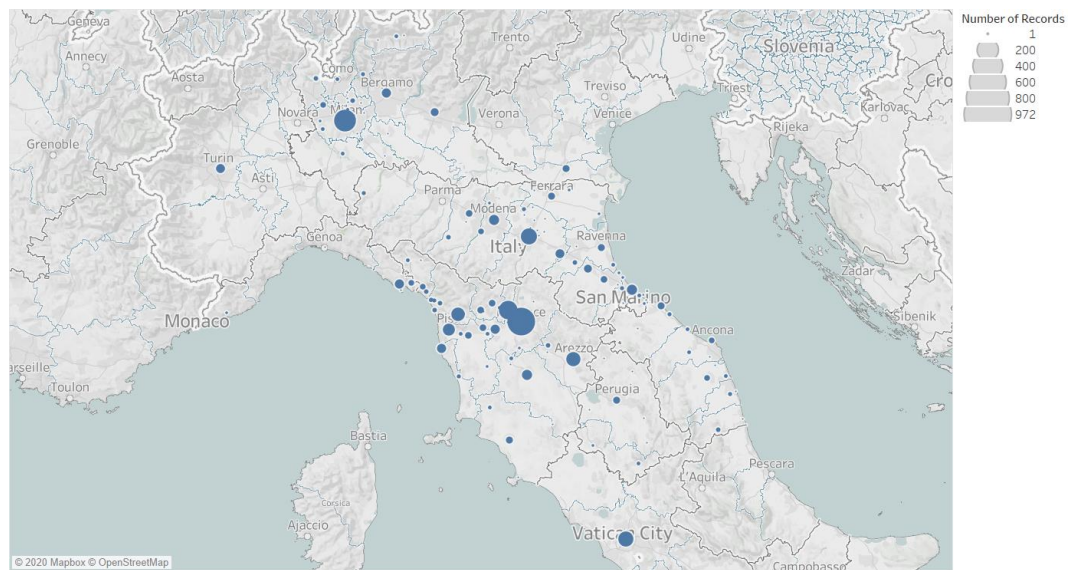


Figure 7.3. Locations in newspapers’ sections.

These first descriptive statistics and geographical analysis show that Historical Shops category is part of media discourses, its presence has slightly increased in the past decade in parallel to this category's legislative formalisation, and it is quite diffused in certain Northern and Central Italian regions.

Even if the category is not explicitly created within the media, these discourses intercept it and contribute to its spreading in time and in space. Hence, we argue that public discourse has a first role of *echoing* the category, that consists in reflecting it and acting a sounding board for its diffusion in space and time beyond legislative acts.

8. Grounding a category

The application of Topic Modelling on our sample of news disentangled a more latent role of public discourse in category formation. Among the 14 Topics emerged from this analysis, four of them refer to broader issues where the category is not a protagonist; rather, it is just touched tangentially.

Background discourses (Topic n. 4, 6, 8, 11) allow us to trace a picture of the contexts in which the media ground the category of Historical Shops.

Among them, the discourse of *Retail Crisis* (Topic 8) is a dominant one, also in terms of proportions within the documents (Table 6.1). In our model, Topic 8 lists words as *crisis, less, clients, closing, to close, situation, difficult, difficulties, moment, unfortunately*. A deeper reading of the most representing articles of this topic shows that this situation concerns the whole retail sector, which faces many difficulties: the competition with shopping malls, a decrease of clientele and sales as well as high taxes and debts to be paid. Interestingly, this is the only topic in our model that decreases in time (Figure 8.1). A possible explanation of this phenomenon can be found in the 2008-2009 economic crisis, impacting on the retail sector and, hence, on media news of those years.

This background topic intercepts the Historical Shops discourse, because, within this broad crisis context, Historical Shops manage their survival thanks to a loyal clientele:

Retail in Bolano, an 'ill patient' in serious but stationary conditions. One can summarise in this way the critical moment occurring in the commercial fabric of the Municipality of Val di Vara. Fewer clients, a decrease of the sales and taxes to be paid are the common grounds which have brought in these years many *ceparanesi* [residents of Ceparana] to close their shops in order not to be burdened by debts. [...] retailers hold on notwithstanding many difficulties. [...] *Historical shops survive thanks to their attached clientele*, but almost all the newly opened retails closed after some months [...]. (*La Nazione*, February 25, 2011) [excerpt from Topic 8, emphasis added].

Being long-standing points in the city, Historical Shops are witnesses of wider phenomena which touch do not only their category directly, but also the broad context in which they are situated. Indeed, Topic 11, *Urban Degradation*, clustering words as *neighbourhood, zone, square, residents, problem, problems, streets, people, young people*, explicitly focuses on neighbourhood social dynamics and material issues. Articles report local situations of drug dealing, migration,

lack of initiatives for young people and events for residents in general; but also concrete problems, such as garbage, lighting, parking, and viability:

Everything is collapsing, by now [the neighbourhood] has become a dorm for immigrants, which have become the real bosses of the neighbourhood. Streets and sidewalks are in terrible conditions, and we do not have green areas, let alone when it rains: streets and basements get flooded. (*La Nazione*, February 23, 2010) [excerpt from Topic 11].

In the worst cases, in this context, Historical Shops are just a nostalgic memory of the past:

Ms Bonvini does not agree with the restyling of the square, pedestrianised after the accomplishment of the underground parking: “*this was a beautiful place, full of trees, with many historical shops and the local market.* [Now] everything has disappeared with a re-organisation according to an idea of ugliness (*Il Giorno*, July 24, 2017) [excerpt from Topic 11, emphasis added].

In contrast with this pessimistic view, Topic n. 6, *Urban Regeneration*, gathers more positive ideas for a future relaunch of cities in decline by re-discovering their culture, history and their identity.

Indeed, *city, history, culture, heart, future, citizens, past, life, traditions, events* are the most frequent words within this topic.

Walking in an empty city [Viareggio], no, it is too much. This is why, for 2013, I hope for a small revolution, which can revitalise the atmosphere and, in particular, tourism.” [...] “I will fight to make our city understand that we cannot lose our traditions and our culture. Since a city without an identity is a dead city. (*La Nazione*, January 3, 2013) [excerpt from Topic 6]

Hence, Historical Shops are part of these various suggestions, projects and initiatives aiming at regenerating cities starting from their past.

Historical retail businesses, today perfectly integrated into Prato’s urban fabric, are a repository of a very important treasure of history and tradition. This initiative of *La Nazione* has indeed the objective of valorising them, triggering a reflection on the possible city of the future from a commerce point of view. [...] It is fundamental to let emerge past as an outburst towards the future: to look at where we come from to have insights and ideas about where we want to go. [excerpt from Topic 6, emphasis added]

Not far from the topics regarding the urban decline and relaunch, historical retails are also a backdrop part of another wider discourse: the one concerning *overtourism*, which in our sources is particularly focused on the cities of Florence and Rome (Topic n. 4, *Overtourism*). Despite constituting a small proportion within the whole sample of articles, this topic is clearly identified by words as *city, Florence, Rome, tourists, tourism, world, culture, street, citizens*. Articles not only denounce the negative impacts mass tourism has on these two cities but also

lists institutional policies to face them in terms of tourist flows management, branding and sustainability.

In this broad discourse, Historical Shops play two roles: some articles mention their disappearing,

The city [Florence] has changed – explains Lucia Lazic – *historical shops have been disappearing* and our same tourists, who maybe have come back after years, do not recognise any more the same postcard”. “By now – goes on Siro Chini – there are squatters in every corner, and the commercial offer has been homologated: food, leather and souvenirs. (*La Nazione*, June 30, 2017) [excerpt from Topic 4, emphasis added].

while others see them as being part of a new cultural tourism offer enhancing territorial identity and excellences:

We [Rome Tourism Assessor and Rome Convention Bureau] have prepared a video representing the “New Face of Rome’s tourism”. We think to advertise abroad a wider offer’s range, *also enhancing local excellences as historical shops, artisans and typical products*. [...] We are struggling against overtourism, so that we can polarise the interest of a different typology of visitors: we want to govern flows, we do not want to stop anyone. (*Il Corriere della Sera*, January 24, 2018) [excerpt from Topic 4, emphasis added].

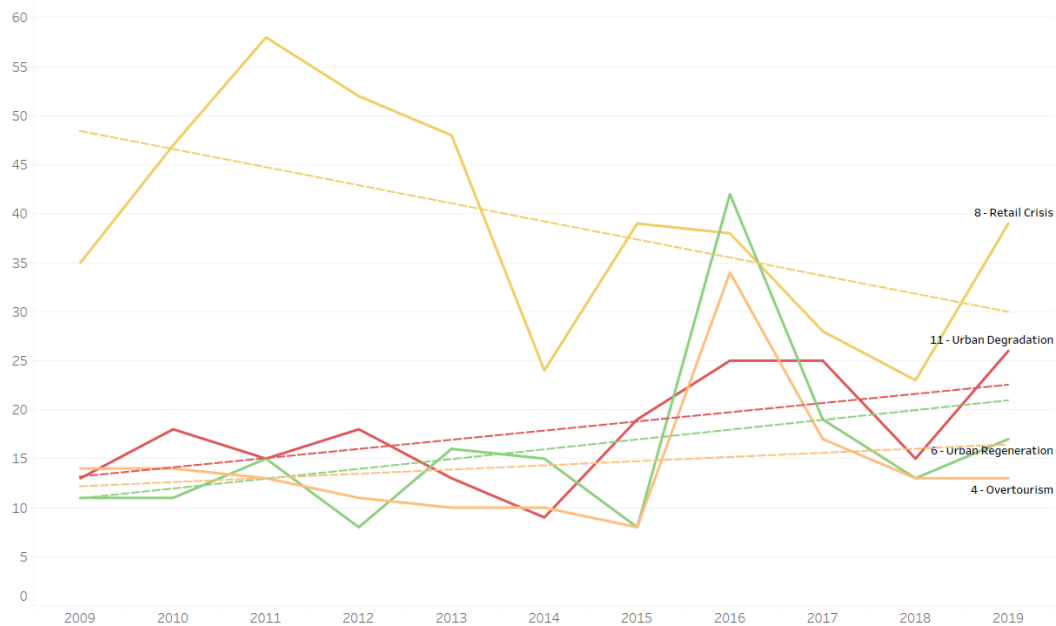


Figure 8.1 Background topics distribution per year.

Hence, the category finds a place, even if a concealed one, within broader issues more largely treated by the media. In this way, public discourse anchors the category to other larger themes, which are different yet related to the category, with legitimising effects. While echoing a category by serving as its soundboard, public discourse is at the same time grounding the category in wider discourses, as far as it treats it as part of broader debated issues.

9. Narrating

Besides the aforementioned background discourses which host Historical Shops as part of larger matters, our Topic Model detected a number of topics specifically focusing on Historical Shops. These *foreground* topics are fundamental to qualify a specific narration of Historical Shops where the category is the protagonist.

9.1. Foreground discourses – What

Firstly, our model pinpointed two topics that specifically define the real nature and meaning of Historical Shops (What): Topic 13, *Values*, and Topic 9, *Types of Shops*.

Topic 13 is the most present within our sample. It collects words as *clients, family, products, job, quality, tradition, time, service, people*, which represent the distinctive values of Historical Shops, allowing to outline them as a meaningful category. Articles within this topic describe nowadays' single Historical Shops, mostly through the story of the people behind them: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, whole families, generation after generation, working as retailers and/or artisans for decades. They tell the origins of the shop, how it evolved through time, but also what has been preserved to make it become a point of reference in the city or town.

In 1855 Adriano Serra left San Giovanni in Persiceto to learn the job of coppersmith in Vicenza area. Serra family refers to this first travel to find back in time the origins of their shop. As a matter of fact, the Serra and Son's Hardware store has become since those times a century's certainty in San Giovanni's panorama". Clients are never omitted in these stories; the relationship with them is a fundamental element of distinction of these shops. The same is worth for the products: homemade, traditional, high-quality, various, and specialised. (*Il Resto del Carlino*, March 14, 2015) [excerpt from Topic 13].

Gualtiero Franceschini [...] started to work here in 1980, as shop boy, almost 40 years after the grandmother. He sells fruit and vegetables, but not only. [...] There is the need for a specialisation able to attract clients and to grant high quality. The strength point of Ortofrutta Franceschini is mushrooms and truffles. "Clients want to see many things [...]. Then they ask for quality, because at the supermarket things cost less, but do not always satisfy taste as they should. [...] We give guarantees which large retail channels cannot provide. I have many clients who order what they want from home [...]. They trust what we bring them; by now there is a strong relationship for years". (*Il Resto del Carlino*, December 13, 2012) [excerpt from Topic 13].

The smile and the attention for the customer are regular, for family tradition, at Sanitaria Levante. [...] Silvia and Marina cuddle the client. "We have an ancient concept of sale, which for us is the end phase of a trust relationship which is established with whoever chooses our shop". (*Il Resto del Carlino*, March 14, 2015) [excerpt from Topic 13].

Many of these articles come from a special issue published in Resto del Carlino in 2012 and 2015 called 'Historical Shops'.

Similarly to Topic 13, Topic 9 *Types of Shops* describes Historical Shops. However, instead of focusing on single specific stories of shops, its articles mostly list series of historical retails in a city or a town's streets, squares, avenues. Hence, this topic shows a variety of typologies of shops which are indeed part of the same category. *Café, pub/place, palace, street, avenue, open, clothing* are indeed a part of the most frequent words of this topic, which however cannot contain, actually, the multitude of shops names within the articles. For example:

[...] in Polesella a rich commercial fabric. In Matteotti square one can walk behind the colonnade to discover the historical café "il Cremlino", the supermarket "Franchin Brothers" and Antonella flower shop. Clothing shops outline a frame for the centre, as the grocery shop "All'Angolo del Gusto". Then there are two family-managed historical shops, Paolo Zadra hardware shop and not far, Rasconi optical store, born in the '50s. (*Il Resto del Carlino*, February 25, 2018) [excerpt from Topic 9].

9.2. Foreground discourses – Where

This topic introduces the next set of topics depicted in our model: the ones about places in which historical retails are situated (Where). Indeed, in the discourse of Historical Shops, two typical locations emerge: part of the discourse describes the role of these retails in villages in the province (Topic 14, *Villages*), and part of it describes these retails' situation in cities' historical centres (Topic 12, *City Centre*).

Despite its small proportion within the whole sample, Topic 14, *Villages*, highlights a particularly positive role of Historical Shops in small provincial towns, which is witnessed by words as *village, province, small, market, centres, life, traditions, well*. In these contexts, historical retails are very rooted in social life since they represent fundamental references and aggregation points for people. This is why they seem to survive the crisis more than other newer shops. In some ways, they are not only part of the commerce fabric of these places, but they even contribute to their citizens' economic and social well-being.

The mayor explains: "Closures concern mostly new businesses, historical shops have the ability to resist. Sometimes the shops which open and close after a year lacked a study on the kinds of product which can be integrated into the village". (*Il Resto del Carlino*, November 30, 2013) [excerpt from Topic 14].

The same cannot be said for what concerns life and commerce in the historical city centre: Topic 12, *City Centre* is defined by words as *centre, avenue, street, events, initiatives, citizens*, but also *problem, closures*. It seems the two contrasting background issues regarding *Urban Degradation* and *Urban Regeneration* are reflected and emphasised in the restricted delicate area of the historical city centre. Sometimes articles about Historical Shops refer to issues of closures, de-centralisation, de-localisation of shops which struggle for the crisis or the creation of malls.

Every time, a blow to the heart. Every time the closure of shutters by another shop, for Casentino people, is a source of sadness. This time they accuse the historical city centre of Bibbiena and mayor Bernardini, blamed of being promoter of concretising his town

through the building of supermarkets at the detriment of its historical centre which seems to be left in abandon. (*La Nazione*, November 26, 2015) [excerpt from Topic 12].

9.3. Foreground discourses – Issues

The negative connotation of commerce we noted in Topic 12 brings us directly to some core topics characterising our sample: the ones about Historical Shops' problems (Issues): Topic 2, *Closures*, and Topic 1, *Rents*.

Topic 2, *Closures* – one of the most prominent in our sample – gathers articles which talk about specific *topos* of the city (*street(s)*, *road*, *avenue*, *square* are frequent words of this cluster) and their shops in a nostalgic way (*by now*, *erstwhile*, *nowadays* recur as well), signalling mostly their closure after many years of activity, their de-localisation or transformation. As aforementioned, these situations are more frequent in bigger city centres, often touched by mass tourism.

For example, in Rome:

Recently even Pietro Stecchiotti, historical butcher of Panisperna Street, – where Giorgio Napolitano used to buy meat – has closed. “It would have become a meatball shop, but it did not get the permission”, they say. Soon after the butcher, it happened to the last grocery shop of Leonina Street: it became a take-away pizza. Thus, in Monti neighbourhood, 17th-century zone in Rome, still inhabited by lots of families, there are no more shops where to do grocery shopping. (*Il Corriere della Sera*, December 23, 2016) [excerpt from Topic 2].

Or in Florence:

Today Nazionale Street is a border bypass which runs along Florence pedestrian area. Starting from Cicli Bianchi, which was in the corner with Guelfa Street, the first shop in the city selling bicycles with stick brakes. The same used by police. Then the historical body shop Citroen, tens of shoe shops and Apollo Cinema erected on Politeama, today an abandoned giant. In Florence, everything used to pass by here. The change arrived with the depopulation of shops and the rise of congestion. A slow revolution which brings the sign of the Made in China: more than 12 are the businesses taken over by Asian citizens in the last 10 years, more than 30 the ones which have closed. (*La Nazione*, August 7, 2014) [excerpt from Topic 2].

Even if more specific than the one about closures, another problem affecting Historical Shops is the one related to rents (Topic 1 *Rents*). Behind the costs related to crisis, lack of clientele and change of habit purchases, which are mainly responsible of shops' closure (see Topic 2), another problem undermining Historical Shops' survival consists in the high costs of rents which retailers have to pay when they do not own their store. In some cases, for example, when Historical Shops are situated in old buildings or in strategic locations, the owner may want to impose higher rent prices, or other bidders, often important brands, may offer the owner a higher income. However, when representing some kind of heritage or cultural identity for the city, Historical Shops may be safeguarded by laws against this mechanism. In general, small retailers ask their representatives to carry on the struggle for the whole category with the other economic and legislative actors. Topic 1 – listing words as *president*, *mayor*,

Confcommercio, assessor, rents, citizen(s), way, problem, together, economic, public – outlines that many institutions are recognising this issue as worth for city’s Historical Shops; however, its articles depict a phase of dialogue in which they still seem not finding a solution to it.

Despite the crisis, owners still continue to increase [rents]. We know that some of our associated in Marconi Street, Europa Avenue and Nuova Appia Street have been asked a double price. In Europa Avenue from 5,500 euro/month to 11,000: of course, the retailer had no other choice than closing and going away. [...] The issue of high rents is today a cornerstone problem behind shop closures – add Valter Gianmaria – there is actually a decrease of consumptions, and businesses have no more earnings to face costs; however, the problem of high rents does not regard only the city centre, but also the suburbia: because, with or without crisis, real estate owners ask impossible rents. (*Il Corriere della Sera*, September 8, 2009) [excerpt from Topic 1].

We can envisage incentives – goes on Confcommercio President – but we could also identify other solutions. Sangalli thinks about a new edition of Tremonti-ter¹⁵ for bookshops. [...] In Milan, the problem of bookshops is particularly felt. Either for the high rental costs compared to low mark-ups, or for the competition of innovative forms of sale [...]. (*Il Corriere della Sera*, August 29, 2009) [excerpt from Topic 1].

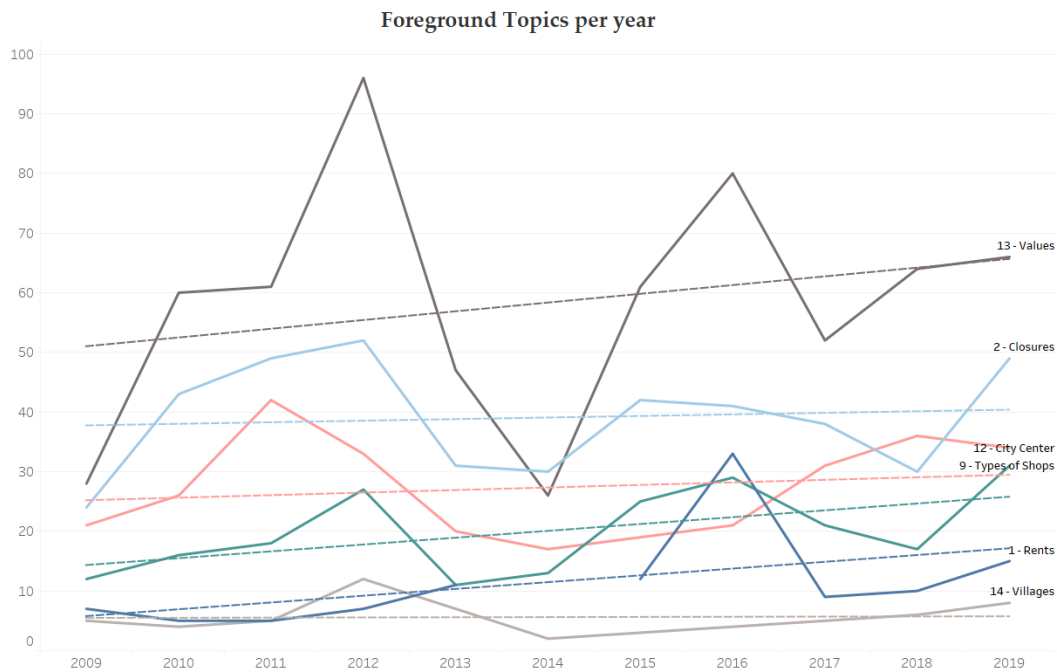


Figure 9.3.1. Foreground topics distribution per year (What, Where, Issues).

9.4. Foreground discourses – Responses

Even if in Topic 1 *Rents* solutions seem still to be negotiated, we have identified a set of topics outlining three possible levels of Responses to Historical Shops’ issues.

¹⁵ Expression used to define a tax incentive on equipments’ investments (introduced by art. 5 of D.L. 78/2009).

First, Topic 5, *Regional Policies*, as it is evident from words as *territory, enterprises, region, services, sector, value, economic, job, young, tourism, initiatives, project, tradition*, gathers a series of articles about Regional Government and Regional Confcommercio's initiatives for supporting and valorising retail and artisanal businesses, developing tourism, safeguarding and promoting cultural heritage. Among the targets of these wider policies, there are also Historical Shops, which, in order to receive incentives and funding, must be inscribed into specific regional lists attesting their historical, artistic and architectural value.

Enhancing and promoting historical businesses and shops of the territory. This is the objective of the project promoted by Liguria Region and Liguria's Chambers of Commerce, whose protagonists are the retails and artisanal businesses with a historical-artistic architectural, environmental value. In order to enhance traditions and cultural heritage of commerce and handcraft, the Chamber of Commerce Riviere di Liguria has published a call for the identification of historical enterprises in the provinces of Imperia, Spezia e Savona with more than 50 years of activity also with changes of management or owner. The initiatives are comprehended in the project "Discovering Liguria historical enterprises and shops" and uses the financial sustain of the Region. (*La Nazione*, January 15, 2017) [excerpt from Topic 5].

Second, Topic 10, *Municipal Policies*, concerns the application of similar measures by municipalities, hence on a more local level. The topic is represented by words as *businesses, sale, municipal, public, plan, particular, economic, small, quality, tradition, citizens*. Sometimes local administrations become intermediaries between Regions and Historical Shops creating their own lists of Historical Shops as to better channel funding.

The municipal administration support to commerce has concretised in the emission of funds from the Region towards some historical businesses of the town. [...] Thanks to the call, three shops in Sendriano have been recognised as historical, obtaining the access to regional contributes for modernising their interiors. (*Il Giorno*, September 29, 2010) [excerpt from Topic 10].

Other times, the Municipality acts applying specific measures envisaged by the Italian Government, as in the case of UNESCO Decree in Florence:

Florence becomes a laboratory of regulations for the safeguard of quality and typicality. [...] The resolution acts on two sides: on one side [enhancing] short chain and typical products to defend our city centre from the invasion of mini-market e Asia-market without identity and quality. On the other side, a new list that introduces systems for the safeguard of 80 survivors historical shops avoiding their extinction [...]. (*La Nazione*, April 3, 2016) [excerpt from Topic 10].

In both cases, the Municipality, being a local actor, seems to know more in-depth city's retails problems, hence providing more operative solutions regarding this category.

Further, our model identifies another finer kind of response to Historical Shops issues. In fact, media discourses not only report news about regional or municipal laws, but give also voice to specific Historical Shops problems. This is what emerges from Topic 3 Case-Specific

Solutions, which still sees *Municipality* and *municipal* among its words but also *project*, *plan*, *spaces*, *before*, *particular*, *service*, *initiative*, *market*, *problem*, *rents*. Articles within this topic intercept local discussions regarding *ad hoc* municipal projects (for neighbourhoods, streets) or particular cases which are often accompanied by city-level polemics, whose issues are not always resolved positively for Historical Shops. This happens for example for the discourses around Milan’s Vittorio Emanuele Gallery’s and various legal controversies between businesses and municipality (*Il Giorno*, January 19, 2019) or with an ex-bookseller’s project to face the closure of a bookshop in Bologna (*Il Resto del Carlino*, March 16, 2012). Not surprisingly, this topic occupies just a small part of the total number of articles in our sample (Figure 6.1).

Another small topic in terms of proportion (Figure 6.1), but still of some interest to our analysis, is Topic 7 *Milan*. Gathering words as *Milan*, *fashion*, *Italy*, *world*, *space*, *tradition*, *places*, *house/home*, *events*, *headquarter*, *past*, *value*, *project*, the articles of this Topic either talk about this city’s most ancient retails (*Il Giorno*, December 16, 2009) or are particularly focusing on events or projects involving historical and artisanal shops in Milan. Many activities are comprehended in mega-events such as Milan Fashion Week, Milan Furniture Fair (ANSA, February 28, 2013) or are anyway related to creative sectors, traditional neighbourhoods or the fashion world in general.

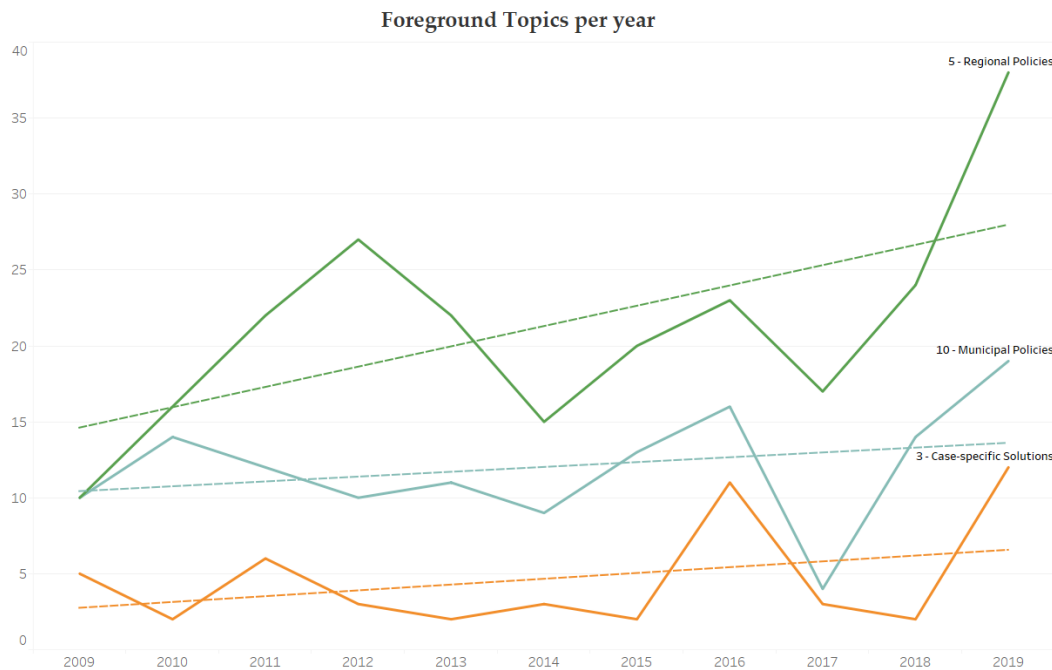


Figure 9.4.1. Foreground topics distribution per year (Responses).

Topics within *foreground discourses* tell a story about the category, which is their protagonist. They describe its deeper qualities (*What* – Values) and its various typologies (*What* – Types of Shops) and contextualise its field of action (*Where* – City Centre, Villages). Not only, they chronicle the challenges it faces through its existence (*Issues* – Closures, Rents) and the actions undertaken to overcome them (*Responses* – Regional Policies, Municipal Policies, Case-specific solutions), also reporting smaller scale stories (*Other* – Milan and, still, *Responses* – Case-specific solutions).

Hence, a third public discourse's agentic role on category formation is the one of the *narrating* the category, characterising its deeper meaning and the various shades and details around it.

10. Discussion and conclusion

Positioned in the literature on category formation (Granqvist and Ritvala, 2016; Durand and Khaire, 2017; Slavich *et al.*, 2020), this paper aimed at highlighting the role of public discourse as a potentially influential agent in the symbolic and material processes of meaning-making that constitute the formation of a new category. For this purpose, we used the case of the formation of the Historical Shops category in Italy, a process initiated by policymakers and furthered by trade associations in the past years to both protect the urban heritage and enhance the local commerce in many Italian cities and regions. We collected the newspapers articles that in the 2009–2019 time span featured the words 'Historical Shops' (or variants) and, by Topic Modelling, we explored the discursive landscape therein created by the media. Topic Modelling is a suitable technique for this purpose, in that it allows eliciting the latent meaning structures from a great amount of textual data. Specifically, Topic Modelling allowed us to uncover the topics related to the Historical Shops category on the media, which we used as a basis for our interpretative analysis, as we identified the discourses that different topics composed, and for our theorising process, as we speculated about the agential role of public discourse in category formation.

First, we found that a talk of historical shops has increased and diffused over ten years on the media: not only do the category's mentions increase in our time span of analysis, but they also diffuse geographically, touching different cities, towns and territories. The media thus play a first obvious but not trivial role: by reporting about policymakers' discussions or local historical retailers' views, and reproducing them on a larger scale while increasingly employing the label of 'Historical Shops' (or variants) coined in the legislative acts, the media contribute to the existence of the category. In other words, the media act as a soundboard for policymaking, allowing a new category to reverberate and establish in readers' minds. We view this *echoing* of a new category as a fundamental role of public discourse that has the power to make a category exist (or sustain its existence) by means of reproduction and diffusion of its labels and debates. A similar echoing role in category formation was previously found by Slavich *et al.* (2020) in their analysis of the emergence of progressive dominance of the "molecular gastronomy" label, but it was attributed to the work performed by the chefs' stakeholders who "act as a sounding board for their innovation efforts" (Slavich *et al.*, 2020: 269).

Second, we found that some of the topics determined by our Topic Modelling concerned broader instances of urban life (retail crisis, urban degradation, urban regeneration, and overtourism). Indeed, when the media talk about Historical Shops, it is in association with these background discourses. This is interesting, because it suggests another important role of public discourse: while echoing a new category, the media also ground it in more general and ongoing debates. *Grounding* a category in overarching discourses or more general debates is another powerful role of public discourse, because it has the power to make a new category immediately important and thus legitimate, hence furthering its existence in peoples' minds. Legitimacy dynamics in category formation have been extensively studied, but they have been mainly attributed to the role of various actors both internal to the category (e.g., entrepreneurs)

and external to the category, like various interested audiences in the case of the satellite radio category (Navis and Glynn, 2010), or standards-based certification organisations, like in the case of the emergence of the organic food category (Lee, Hiatt and Lounsbury, 2017). Our findings show that public discourse may contribute to these legitimacy dynamics too, specifically by means of grounding a category in more established and recognised debates.

Third, we found that a self-standing discourse of Historical Shops was emerging from the media, in that several topics were directly addressing the nature of Historical Shops (the types of shops considered to be historical and the values that they embed), their spatial dimensions (characterising especially urban historical centres or small provincial towns), their main challenges (facing closures, unaffordable rents) and the main political responses at different administrative levels. Therefore, we realised that the media, while echoing and grounding the new category in background discourses, were also at the same time *narrating* the category of Historical Shops (the what, the where, the challenges and the responses). This is another role of public discourse in itself, one that gives sense to a category, makes it vivid and fills it with meaning, thus further sustaining its existence. This narrating role that public discourse also bears is important, because it is probably the one that mostly allows the meaning-making process that category formation is essentially constituted of (Slavich *et al.*, 2020). Besides, the power of narratives in institutional dynamics (Hardy and Maguire, 2010) and in category formation (Ocasio, Loewenstein and Nigam, 2015) is well acknowledged, but is most commonly attributed to other types of texts, such as scientific reports and other instances of communication, and very rarely to public discourse on the media.

All in all, through this study, we set the spotlight on the role of public discourse as an agent of category formation that is usually overlooked, and we find that the media, while *echoing* a new category created elsewhere (e.g., by policymakers in our case), also perform *grounding* and *narrating* roles, which give legitimacy and meaning to what might otherwise remain “only” a floating or empty label.

To our knowledge, this is the first study in category formation that takes public discourse as its very object of investigation as an agent of categorisation and not only as one of the contexts in which category formation is explored. This contributes thus to the category formation research by extending the debate on the multiple agencies of categorisation to the role of the media.

Besides, being aware of the echoing, grounding and narrating roles of public discourse has practical implications. Category creation is an issue of relevance itself in our time, because top-down processes of labelling and categorisation by laws and regulators are currently increasingly performed in our societies and in policy making, in different fields (not only in cultural or urban policy making, but also in many organisational fields, in economic markets, in the labour market, and so on). We show that the media play a role in this process and can be used strategically by other agents in the process of social construction of a category for pre-determined goals. Being critically aware that public discourse is not a neutral vector of communication, but a co-agent in itself, is important.

The study however bears some limitations. The media sources we used to perform our analysis are mainly local. If, on the one side, this is due to the local matter of our study, on the other side we cannot deny that the presence of national newspaper – also from various editorial lines – would have widened the analysis, both in terms of topics’ content and evidence of category’s diffusion. Similarly, further local media sources could have highlighted

different territorial nuances in the topic model and in the geographical analysis. The latter showed an interesting potential, which here is however still limited by the use of the “section” as the proxy for this kind of mapping. The time span could be broadened as well, in order to track public discourse’s attention on the phenomenon before and after the emergence of the parallel legislative discourse coining the category.

Future research overcoming these limitations, or extending this analysis to other categories, could provide a more processual view highlighting temporal and spatial dynamics around the roles that public discourse has on category formation processes, whose agency has been firstly revealed and explored in this study.

Keywords:

category; category formation; media discourses; historical shops; topic modelling

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