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Young retail shift workers (not) planning their future: working with customers in the 24/7 service society in the transition to adulthood

Annalisa Dordoni

*Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca,
Milan, Italy*

Abstract

Purpose – The retail sector is not largely studied in Italy. The study offers a comparison between youth retail shift work in Milan and London. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate on the one hand on youth work and on the other hand to the debate on agency and structural factors in life planning, representation of the future and the transition to adulthood, observed in the United Kingdom's and Italian labour market. Even if the second one is a Southern European Country, these contexts are both characterised by a service-oriented economy and the widespread of precarious and flexible jobs.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative methods were used: one year of ethnographic observation, 50 interviews and two focus groups were carried out between 2015 and 2018 with retail workers and trade unionists. The contexts are Corso Buenos Aires in Milan, Italy, and Oxford Street in London, United Kingdom. Analysing young workers' discourses, the author identifies narratives that allow to grasp their present agency and imagined future.

Findings – Observing the crisis of the narrative (Sennett, 2020) allows to highlight the social consequences of working times on young workers' everyday life and future. The author argues that young workers struggle with the narrative of their present everyday life and the representation of the future. This relates to the condition of time alienation due to the flexible schedules and the fast pace of work in retail, both affecting the work-life balance.

Originality/value – The social consequences of flexible schedules in retail and fast fashion sector, which are new issues not yet sufficiently explored, are here investigated from the perspective of young workers. The study is focussed on the representations of young people working with customers in social and economic contexts characterised by flexible schedules and the deregulation of shop openings, the so-called 24/7 service society, not largely investigated in the sociological scientific literature, above all in the Italian context.

Keywords Retail work, Service work, Time, Flexibility, Youth work, Transition to adulthood, Narrative, Agency, Future, Discourses, Representations, Low-paid jobs, Low-qualified jobs

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Recent research has underlined the importance of the concept of work-life balance, and of its reconceptualisation in a context that is more flexible and changing every day (Carreri *et al.*, 2022). Many studies have showed that flexible working times condition retail workers' lives because they face increasing levels of unpredictability (Hadjisolomou *et al.*, 2017; Fullin, 2021).



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Empirical research conducted between 2015 and 2017 on the times and rhythms of working in retail sector in two well-known shopping streets in two European global cities, Oxford Street in London, and Corso Buenos Aires in Milan, gives evidence of the consequences of working times on young people discourses and lives. This research shows the working experiences and conditions of young workers in the retail sector, which is not deep enough in the literature, above all in the Italian context.

In particular, the results of a research on young retail shift workers (RSW) focussed on perceptions and lived experiences and analysing young workers' discourses and storytelling, on everyday life and the future, is here presented. The plentiful empirical material collected, transcriptions of 50 interviews and two focus groups, allows us to observe, in the context of the shopping streets of Milan and London, the new dimensions of contemporary work related to *temporal flexibility* and its consequences on everyday life.

The young RSW work with flexible schedules, face fast-paced rhythms and de-structured times, because every day they can have different working times. As we will see, although they are often employed with permanent contracts, they work in a condition of extreme availability requested, of powerlessness and of alienation, which affect their representation of the future and agency.

A wide proportion of current youth employment in the service sector is characterised by a condition of absence of structured times during the day and during the week. These employees do not exactly know when they work and when they will not; on the one hand in retail they have flexible schedules, and on the other the shifts are often communicated at the last moment, even the day before.

However, this situation is prevalent not just in retail, but also in other jobs in the tertiary sector, for example in hospitality, food service, restaurant industry and delivery work. The inability to plan long term is widespread and covers the situations of many students in pre-university education and many young workers who have completed tertiary education.

Sennett (2020) highlighted that the crisis of modern capitalism is a *crisis of the narrative*, describing how work flexibility and precarity in the age of neoliberalism affect people's everyday life, representations, discourses and above all narratives: the capability of storytelling ourselves. He refers to job flexibility, the large use of temporary and non-standard contracts and not to time flexibility.

Other essays based on this research but focussed on different aspects of retail shift work – i.e. aesthetic and emotional labour; gender inequalities; de-structuration processes (Dordoni, 2017, 2018, 2020) – underlined that the time and pace of work in the accelerated late-modern society can have many social consequences. A specific condition of *time alienation* linked with flexible working times and fast rhythms was identified, highlighting that retail is a privileged sector to study the processes of time contraction and acceleration (Rosa, 2013), and of “time flexibilisation” and de-structuration.

Research results show that the flexibilisation of working times, as well as of contracts, influences life choices, identity processes in the transition to adulthood and the planning of the future.

2. Theoretical framework

The literature in the field of youth studies, and the sociology of time and everyday life, well showed how times and rhythms of life are closely connected with the processes of identity construction, that is the basis for the transition to adulthood and allow young people to imagine and plan the future (Leccardi, 1999, 2005, 2012; Feixa *et al.*, 2016). Having the time to reflect, holding power and control over their own time, is necessary for young people. Imagination and planification processes need slow time and take place through representations and narratives of the future.

Young workers are deeply conditioned by structural factors: their economic condition, social status and the economic condition and status of their families affect their future, especially in times of austerity or economic and social crisis (Bradley, 2005; Furlong, 2009; 2012; Crompton, 2010; Furlong *et al.*, 2011; Farrugia, 2013; Furlong and Woodman, 2014). In addition to this, working experiences also have consequences on young people's choices regarding the future. Structural aspects, such as the characteristics of labour, contracts and working times, deeply affect their biographies.

Youth unemployment and precarity have increased significantly in Europe in recent years. Because of difficulties due to the flexibilisation of the labour market and the job insecurity, young people are getting more exposed to the risks of poverty, material deprivation, lack of autonomy and social exclusion. Many scholars are working now on these topics, from different perspectives.

Since 2018, the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action YOUNG-IN, "Transdisciplinary Solutions to Cross Sectoral Disadvantage in Youth", has provided a framework to improve academic exchange on youth facing the risk of social exclusion. Numerous studies focussed on the pathways of young people in Italy and in Europe: the EXCEPT Project, "Social Exclusion of Youth in Europe: Cumulative Disadvantage, Coping Strategies, Effective Policies, and Transfer"; the CUPESSSE Project, "Cultural Pathways to Economic Self-Sufficiency and Entrepreneurship: Family Values and Youth Unemployment in Europe"; the STYLE Project, "Strategic Transitions for Youth Labour in Europe" and many other local projects (e.g. Colombo and Rebughini, 2019; Unt *et al.*, 2021).

The age of leaving the family, of marriage and creation of new families, the decision about whether and when to have children, all mostly depend on structural economic factors, and above all on economic stability (Bobek *et al.*, 2018). Also, numerous cultural studies underlined how work flexibility (usually conceptualised as contractual – and not time – flexibility) and precariousness of life have consequences on young people's trajectories of life, projects and biographical pathways (Smith, 2005; Leccardi and Ruspini, 2006; Silva, 2012; Côté, 2000, 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

Precarious representation and narrative of the future, as already largely discussed by the literature (Bessant *et al.*, 2017; Bessant, 2018; Cook, 2016, 2018) affects everyday life decisions and plans, especially during the transition into adulthood, and depending on young people's and their families' capitals and resources (Savage *et al.*, 2005; Heinz, 2009; Roberts, 2016; Wierenga, 2008; Woodman, 2011, 2012; Woodman and Wyn, 2015).

Furthermore, in addition to contractual flexibility, also time flexibility can create conditions of instability and precarity that do not permit young workers to have enough autonomy, and control on their life, to become aware adults. Thus, the concept of time is central in understanding the consequences of flexible work schedules on everyday lives and plans, above all in youth work.

Private time, time for themselves, is crucial for young people and young adults in the phases of transition to adulthood. In a society characterised by speed – condition of immediacy, social acceleration, time contraction and de-structuration of social times – the private time, dedicated to the introspection and planning for the future, is necessary for the self-consciousness (Nowotny, 1987).

Time is necessary in order to be able to recognise, and to reflect on the self and the other-than-self (Mead, 1913, 1934), on our condition and social position, as well as acting consciously, choosing and planning the future, building a family and a career, becoming adults. The dynamic identity-building process, which is the basis for the transition to adulthood, needs time for introspection.

Not having private or social time and having difficulties in managing the time of their life due to flexible work schedule is a structural factor, and not an individual choice of young workers.

This study aims to observe these dynamics and processes in the context of retail work, in particular retail shift work, analysing how schedule flexibility (as opposed to contract duration) and working on Sundays and holidays influence their perception of precariousness, young people's biographies and plans for the future in their transition to adulthood. As we will see in the results section, young RSW need to cope with flexible, ever-changing times and quick rhythms when working with customers, and have no "structured time" to reflect on themselves and on their future.

The service sector is a paradigmatic example of time flexibility, due to customers' demand for instant gratification (Dordoni, 2017) and the pressure to achieve sales targets (Fullin, 2021). Sales assistants work shifts, usually also on Sundays and holidays. The research contexts are two global shopping streets, in European global cities (Breward and Gilbert, 2006; Sassen, 2001, 2018) characterised by flexibilisation, social acceleration (Rosa, 2013; Wajcman, 2014) and fast capitalism (Agger, 1989), marked by flexible schedules, contracted and de-structured times and fast-paced working rhythms.

Retail work, characterised by 7/7 days shift work, allows for a theoretical focus on the structural aspects of the working life in the transition to adulthood, and in representations, discourses and narratives (Roberts, 2011, 2013), with respect to working time flexibility, time uncertainty and the contemporary everyday de-structured times of life, already investigated in the literature (Carmo *et al.*, 2014), as well as the so-called life out of sync (Woodman, 2012). Adopting a cultural "time" perspective, in the intersection between youth studies, sociology of time and sociology of work, can allow us to better understand RSW's experiences and representation.

Finally, this study gives evidence on youth job uncertainty in the Italian context, characterised by a service-oriented economy – an example of Southern European economy in terms of non-standard, flexible, precarious, low-paid and low-qualified youth work (Bello and Cuzzocrea, 2018; Colombo *et al.*, 2018; Unt *et al.*, 2021), in comparison with another high flexibilised context such as the UK – in particular, the London Area.

3. Empirical research

In order to investigate workers' perceptions and representations, qualitative methods were chosen, in particular 50 semi-structured interviews, two focus groups and one year of ethnographic observation – six months in each research context: Oxford Street in London, and Corso Buenos Aires in Milan.

The interviewees were approached directly in their workplaces, observed during precedent phases of ethnography in the two streets, and the interviews were then carried out in subsequent meetings, always located close to the shops, during lunch breaks, before or after their shifts, in both weekdays and weekends, according to their availability. Saturation was reached by meeting, interviewing and organising focus groups with all the workers who agreed to participate in this research.

The empirical material was fully transcribed and analysed using the CAQDAS – computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software – MAXQDA. I have used pseudonyms for study participants. The analysis consisted in the identification of categories, a coding phase and a phase of interpretation.

Adopting a methodological approach of integration of different qualitative methods is very useful, because they can shed light on different aspects. The ethnographic observation shows more results than other methods on the relationships with customers and the pace of work and give the possibility to know the context and to observe and meet the future research participants. Focus groups let to better understand the capability of young people working in different retail companies and subsector (phones and clothes shops) and to discuss together their practical conditions, on working times, contracts and benefits. In this paper we will focus in

particular on semi-structured interviews, because they allow us to deepen the representations and narratives of young RSW.

Regarding the participants and the two contexts chosen for this research, most of the workers interviewed were young (under 28 years-old) or young adults (over 28 and under 35 years-old), with an average of 20 years old in London and 30 years old in Milan. In the case of Milan, the average is higher because there were more young adult women (Dordoni, 2018). Interviewees were for the majority employed with permanent contracts. The arrangements were very similar in the two countries: dismissal for economic reasons is permitted in both contexts, and in both cases the fear of losing the job emerged. Only a few of the employees interviewed were hired on fixed-term contracts.

Moreover, it has to be highlighted that none of the respondents in London were employed with a *zero-hour* contract, an arrangement which can be compared to the *on-call* employment contract in Italy. Although this contractual form has been largely studied in the literature (Ikeler, 2016, 2018; Henly and Lambert, 2014), in this research it seems to be not so widespread, at least in these two contexts.

With regard to shops' opening times, although many decisions on the opening of commercial activities are delegated to local authorities, in the United Kingdom (UK) there are limitations on Bank Holidays and Sunday openings on a national level, according to store square footage and type of business. However, the touristic areas (such as London) are more deregulated. Moreover, the national law states that workers can choose to opt out of Sunday work, but as we will see the majority of workers do not know this right. In addition, in UK all the workers have two days off per week.

The Italian case represents a paradigmatic example of deregulation of shop opening hours. These are currently completely deregulated as a result of the "Salva-Italia" Decree, implemented in 2012. In this context, all stores can be open 365 days a year, 7 days a week, and potentially 24 h a day, without any regulations. Commercial space square footage, number of employees or being located in tourist areas do not represent criteria for differentiation. In Italy, there is no right to opt out of Sunday work, and the law allows employers to grant workers only one day off per week.

4. Research results

Although Italy and the UK are extremely different contexts, e.g. in terms of institutional framework and welfare state regimes, they present numerous aspects in common. Both these countries have been affected by deregulation and privatisation processes for many decades, the flexibilisation of the labour market has gone hand in hand with the dismantling of welfare state and public services, after the neoliberalist turn of the 1980s. In summary, the two main aspects of differentiation that must be underlined to understand young workers' experiences are: (1) the dynamism of the labour market in the UK, and instead the stagnation in Italy – which makes young people in London more often able to change places and "jump" from one job to another, albeit precarious and poorly qualified – and (2) the greater drive towards self-reliance in UK, with respect to Italy, whereby young people in London more often live outside the home of their family of origin and need a salary to support themselves, in opposite to Italian young workers who often live with their parents.

Moreover, this study focusses on working time flexibility and the fast pace of retail work, and in particular in two of the most renowned shopping areas of Europe: Corso Buenos Aires and Oxford Street. These are *global shopping streets*, and, despite the differences of the two countries where they are located, they are extremely similar to each other mainly for these three points: (1) the same shops are here located, and often the same multinational companies; (2) companies' and customers' demands are the same, flexible schedules on a 7/7-days basis and high speed service and (3) job contract legislation and the penetration of trade unions are similar, the employees are either on a temporary basis or in any case they can be dismissed

even if they are permanent (also in Italy after the Jobs Act), and there are very few unions members, in retail and above all among young workers.

In fact, in both cases the RSW work experiences are very similar. Research results also show the same difficulties in planning their everyday life and in reflecting on their future. In this section, we will observe and discuss the implications of time flexibility conceptualising them in the theoretical framework of what Sennett recently called *crisis of the narrative* (2020).

The empirical material collected show this crisis of the narrative and give evidence of how this relates to a *crisis of the agency*. Young shift workers face serious difficulties in thinking and telling others a story about their working life and their plans for the future.

I argue that the crisis of the narrative conceptualised by Sennett is intertwined with a *crisis of the agency* of young people: they grew in a flexible and accelerated context that undermines their possibility to have time, to manage their time and to have control on their own time. Consequently, this undermines their capability to think and talk about themselves, to give a *coherent narration* of their own biography, history and experience – working or otherwise –, to imagine and to choose, *to reflect on what they are doing with their life and to act accordingly*. In summary, *to affect their own life*.

This condition is not due to individual choices. On the contrary, as we will shortly see, it is caused by the absence, the impossibility, of choice: an extreme difficulty, a lack of consciousness, experienced by these young workers. The structural factors that led to these crises and difficulties can be reconnected to the deregulation, the flexibilisation of labour contracts and of working times.

As Sennett stated, contract flexibility can create the narrative crisis. In this study, the accent is posed on the uncertainty due to working shifts 7/7 days with flexible schedules, in a situation of very scarce autonomy of definition of working hours and days – also on Sundays and on holidays.

Sennett wrote in several essays that part of society “jumps” from a low-skilled and often low-paid *job* to another, without ever starting a real *career*, like someone who jumps on an unstable and unsafe frozen lake trying not to break it (Sennett, 1998, 2020).

Anne was the only one, among all the retail workers interviewed, who stated that she was seriously *aspiring* and *planning* to change position to work in an office with a fixed working time, Monday to Friday, 9 to 5.

Her aspiration was to marry her boyfriend, and she was looking forward to having a position that could fit with having a family and managing childcare and domestic labour.

She said that she did not work overtime and did not work for free in the shop. Anne said something interesting about the representation of the sales assistant job. Regarding her colleagues, she told me:

It's really sad, I think, because they don't look at it as a career, they just look at it as a job.
(London_A1_Anne_F22)

In the next sections the research results will be presented and discussed, divided into three parts: *Being always available* (section 4.1); *Living in an eternal present* (section 4.2); *Do not waste time to know labour rights* (section 4.3). In the first part, the experiences of young people working shifts with flexible schedules, on Sundays and weekends, in constant availability, will be showed. In the second one, we will deepen the consequences of flexible and de-structured working time on the life planning and the biographical trajectories of young workers. In the third part, the implications of not having time for themselves on the awareness and consciousness of young RSWs about their rights will be explored – always giving voice to their own perceptions, representations and lived experiences.

4.1 *Being always available: “you just need to schedule your life around your shifts”*

Retail workers must be always available for work schedules changings. In this case, the flexibility is not about the end of the contract, but it is a temporal and schedule flexibility: young RSW tend not to know when they will work and when they will have time for social relations and for themselves – and they adapt to this situation.

Mark told me that his company had recently changed its shifts *unilaterally*, but *he does not mind* because he is young. However, he said that it is a big problem for those who have a family:

If I'm working from Monday to Friday and my company says to me “Listen, we changed your shift, now you'll be working on the weekends” - *well, I don't mind*, because I live by myself (...) but if someone's got a family and now they've been told that they have to work weekends, it definitely ruins their plans. (London_A11_Mark_M21)

None of the interviewees seriously consider long-term careers in retail, store and chain management, because they represent store managers as “at work every time and every day”, “every day nervous and anxious” and “always available” to fulfil area managers' requests and companies' needs, and because, they told me, “The store managers are not paid that much more for such a job and level of responsibility”.

However, for Martin and Mike, 21 years old, the youngest, “you must be glad you have a job”. The ever-present fear of losing their job causes them to put off their life projects and only think about the immediate *hic et nunc*, to increase sales and companies' profits:

Today, in my opinion, we don't even think about saying: “I do not want to work on that day, or that other day”, *because there's no jobs, or rather, it's difficult to find one, so if you have a job ... and they tell you to work on Sunday ... I work on Sunday (...) we complain so much that there are no jobs and then ... we don't want to work.* (Milan_T6_Martino_M21)

This happens even if in the dreamlike, vague and uncertain, suspended idea of the future, there is something else: higher education or a different career.

With regard to workers' rights, a sort of lack of awareness emerges, a lack of self-awareness about the condition, rights and the importance of knowing these rights. For example, scheduling the life around work shifts becomes normal: throughout the year, Sundays, public holidays, every day.

Marina said that she did not think of working on Sundays and holidays as a problem; however, she later said she wanted to change jobs, then stated that her job “paid”, therefore, at the time, it fitted into her plans:

[What do you think about working on Sundays and holidays?] *You just need to kind of schedule your life, you know, around your shifts, and then it's fine.* [What are your plans for the future?] I'll say ... I don't know. I would like to find another job, like an office job from Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, but obviously it's more difficult. So, yeah, that's my plan, but ... (London_A6_Marina_F26).

Marina seemed very confused and her reflection about the future was vague. Implicitly, she took for granted that planning her life around her job over the years was not going to be easy. In the future she would like to think about creating a family, having children, but it is a future that is in some way suspended (Cuzzocrea, 2018).

She said that shifts did not cause distress, but immediately contradicted herself by answering the next question, saying that she felt alienated, stressed and anxious. Then, when asked again later, she again said that her job was all right, it was “ok”.

Marina, when replying to the question about her opinion on Sunday and holiday work, put herself in the customer's shoes and answered confusedly.

The alienation from emotions (Hochschild, 1983) is here associated with *time alienation* (Rosa, 2013; Dordoni, 2017, 2020). The difficulties in reflection emerged in the numerous contradictions, corrections and opinion changings:

[About shops open on Sundays and on holidays] I think it's normal. Because, if I were a customer, I would like to go shopping anytime I want, so ... and I guess that if you work more hours they pay you more, if you have to work more holiday days, they're going to pay you more, so ... [So, you are paid more in holidays, when you work on holidays?] In *some* of the holidays, yes ... [And on Sunday?] No, *Sunday is the same* ... (London_A6_Marina_F26)

She said, at first, that the company paid the employees more for working on holidays, but when she was urged to better explain herself and be more precise, she declared, on the contrary, that they were not paid more for all holidays, but only for some national holidays.

Then, again urged by the interviewer, she specified that, verily, for Sunday working they received standard pay, the same as weekdays, without any additional rate. This research shows that these RSW, and especially – but not only – the youngest, are unaware of their rights and of laws about salaries and increases in hourly rates according to working time (night-time, overtime) and working days (Sundays and holidays).

Many described the different criticalities related to temporal flexibility, but they said they had become accustomed to the times and rhythms of work. Young RSW have difficulty in speaking about their future, in the storytelling about their working life.

As Sennett (2020) wrote, this is a *crisis of the narrative* caused by work flexibility and neoliberalism, and specifically by working time flexibility in this case. For example, Ana said:

Oh my god, my plans for life ... at the moment I am ... I am very lost, very lost. I have no idea what I am going to do in one year, so for life ... I cannot imagine (...) I used to ... At the beginning, because it was super busy, a lot of customers, sometimes you don't have anyone to help you so that makes you feel distressed. But now, you get used to it (...) I am confused, very confused. (London_A2_Ana_F26)

Ana said she was very confused; she did not want to stay in retail but had no plans for the future. She stated she had no idea what she was going to do in just a year.

4.2 *Living in an eternal present: "if you have to work, you work"*

To understand youth work in the retail sector, it is first necessary to frame the topic with respect to young people and young adults' educational and training path. The choice to drop out of school or university is often made while *unaware* or *unconscious*, as opposed to a moment of conscious choice or decision making (Chesters *et al.*, 2018).

In both case study locations, young RSW dropouts claimed to have "temporarily set aside" the idea of continuing their education. Although it may sound like a choice, it is actually a consequence of structural factors:

Well, right now I can't really go to university, because as you know I work from Monday to Friday and it's just, I wouldn't be able to afford living in London working part time and studying. Because that would be impossible. Some people might. My friend, she studies at university, she works full time. But the thing is, she starts her lectures in the morning, so after the lectures she has time to go to work. So, she's always busy. (London_A11_Mark_M21)

Mark, a young 21-year-old worker, first says he needs to work, then he claims he wants to enrol in a university course the following year, but soon reveals that he is not actually planning anything, he is working in the store and cannot change from part time to full time for economic reasons.

With a full-time contract, he said, he would not have enough time to study and therefore preferred to work and set the idea aside for now, however not knowing until when. The condition of being trapped in the retail sector, especially with a permanent contract, and given the competition in the job market, for some even leads to renouncing just a few exams away from graduating:

I am 26 years old. I live alone. I have no children, I'm not married. I'm alone, let's say, yes. Yes, I rent. I'm from Milan and I have a secondary school diploma in languages. I also attended Law for 4 years, then I left. 4 years and then I left because I could not keep up with exams when working, so . . . [I've worked] in this sector since 2011 and in this shop for a couple of years. In September 2011, yes. It has become definitive, you see, after three months it became permanent. (Milan_T10_Romina_26)

Romina left her Law degree just before writing her dissertation, and she now works in a shop in Corso Buenos Aires. It is worth highlighting that this is a four-year degree. Martino also left his studies, again motivated by economic reasons:

I am 21 years-old, I have a secondary school diploma in social sciences. I started Sociology in university, but I dropped out. I have been working in this company for a year and a half. Two at most. I live with my parents. I am single. Well, I've been working in this sector for a year and a half, in this shop for 4 months. (. . .) I wanted to have some independence, I was studying, but I wanted to pay for university by myself and I didn't want to be dependent on my parents. (Milan_T6_Martino_M21)

The interesting evidence is that all the young respondents between 20 and 28 years old who said that they wanted to resume their studies were not actually planning, practically. They were in a sort of *limbo*, not making projects for their lives, and living day by day, as if that was not the time to decide for their future (Cuzzocrea, 2018). They did not choose *consciously*; they often said they had stayed in the sector “by chance” when in fact it meant for economic needs, but also for lack of planning.

This is also determined by not having power over their own time, by the condition of alienation (Rosa, 2013; Dordoni, 2017) which generates a lack of reflection and introspection, the time itself necessary for growth and decision making (Nowotny, 1987). Indeed, the condition of alienation has profound consequences on identity, reflection and self-awareness. For example, said Romina, the girl who left her Law studies:

With the company I work for I also have a very close emotional relationship, so . . . that is, it has become part of my days and . . . I have never even looked around to be honest, so for what I do and also for the relationship I have with colleagues it's okay, for now . . . Most of all, I don't know if I would look for anything similar to this. It started as an experience, so it continued (. . .) [Are you looking for something else?] No, no, not at the moment no . . . Maybe later. I don't have that motivation to quit (. . .) There are some who would want to do this job all of their life, and think: “I have a family, so it's okay with me.” . . . I am their age, but being alone, as I told you earlier . . . I have the opportunity to reinvent myself whenever I want. (Milan_T10_Romina_26)

These are mechanisms that, day after day, trap these young people in the sector. “I have the opportunity to reinvent myself whenever I want”, Romina affirmed, but she had already sacrificed her Law degree.

Romina stated that she would not look in the same sector if she were to look for another job, but she is not actually looking for it. In addition, she had started “by chance” but was still working there at the time of the interview. Chiara said:

I studied in Urbino, despite being from Rome, I studied Marketing and Sales, I have an undergraduate degree, immediately after graduation I actually wanted to do a master's degree, but I found a job, so when you find a job, it's unlikely that you leave working to go back to studying. For a while I also tried to balance the two things, except that when I moved to London, it was difficult to carry on with university. Now, unfortunately, I have to give up my studies (. . .) So, I started working in retail when I was 22–23 years old. When I started, I said: “Never again”. Then . . . [I am here]. (London_A3_Chiara_F28)

Chiara, as well as Romina, left her studies to work in retail. She had started “by chance” too and remained entrapped. She was still working shifts in the service sector at 28 years old – after five to six years.

Furthermore, they were often afraid to quit a *job* to look for more qualified or better-rated work as a *career* because they have now internalised the perception of instability of the labour market. They play to the downside, often saying “you just have to thank for having a job”. They are not satisfied; they settle because they are afraid of becoming unemployed.

In the research emerged that young shift workers are focussed on competition, not so much on business *targets* to be achieved, but on demonstrating managers that they are always available – instead of reflecting on themselves, instead of dedicating time to their life projects, to imagining the future in daily practice, instead of consciously choosing for themselves and their possibilities and act accordingly.

Only the eternal present is important, the here and now. The past is not characterised by clear and defined turning points (Cuzzocrea, 2018) and the future is far, distant and inconsistent, because it is not characterised by clear and defined paths to follow, by decisions that must be taken and implemented in order to imagine and plan for it.

Research results show a narrative of young RSW as “forever young”. More than social actors in tension between youth and adulthood, who plan the future and make choices, they wait in a state of uncertainty and suspension, in which changes are not clearly defined and everything seems to happen “by chance” (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2006; Cuzzocrea, 2018).

Sales assistants often cited the flexibility, the extreme turnover of the personnel and the competition in the workplace and outside in the labour market:

I haven't been here for long and therefore, looking at other people's numbers, I'm always a little bit lower, so I could always give more, but I see it as a positive thing to improve (...) *if you have to work, you work. We're lucky we have a job, so that's okay (...) I'm a twenty-year-old guy, I have a job, so the more I work the better.* Or better, it's not like the more work the better, but *I have a job and I keep it.* (Milan_T6_Martino_M21)

Unfortunately, I have noticed, also speaking with colleagues, that they take great advantage of people being in probation period, not confirming, hiring another, trying her out, not confirming her either. They do an excessive turn-over. (...) However, it is a very competitive environment, you must always be in top form, *you have to sell, sell, sell a lot, otherwise you're not in the team.* (Milan_A7_Melissa_F27)

I am flexible if you ask me to stay two hours over time, that's absolutely fine. That is flexibility. *Not because I'm expecting to be paid*, but if I'm there for two more hours, my time costs. If you ask me to stay an hour and a half to pair the shoes because they are unpaired, you're not paying me and you do it just to see if I want this promotion, this is not flexibility, not at all. (Milan_A7_Melissa_F27)

In the Italian case, there is a great pressure due to the fact that workers know that it would be difficult to find another job. The fear to lose this job does not only affect the few hired on a fixed-term contract but also who is employed with a permanent contract.

Regarding this, Martino said:

In this shop I see a little more competition, but I think it's because we are all a bit young. [Why? Are there workers employed with temporary contracts?] One. (...) Perhaps among the young I see a little bit more ... Well, the shop actually had very few interim employees in its history. Before I started it was 1 out of 10 (...) there is competition when you see that someone else is selling more (...) you see another who works more, more than you and ... it triggers such a mechanism that you end up seeing them differently, you see them in a more negative light (...) I think it depends on the fact that everyone is still young. (Milan_T6_Martino_M21)

Martino (the only interviewee with a temporary employment agency contract) said that in the shop where he worked there was a high level of competitiveness, even though almost all the team were employed with a permanent contract.

This creates a situation in which many workers work extra hours for free. Managers appreciate those who are inclined to work “pressed for time” (Wajcman, 2014) and accept last-minute changes to the hours and days in their work schedule:

Tidying up the storage room was a discriminating factor when in doubt of keeping a person or not. I'll explain, little anecdote: in the evenings, we often had to stay overtime to tidy up the storage room. The girls who aspired to a promotion or an improvement of the contract were those that put the most effort in the storage room (. . .) I remember a girl who wanted to change from 30 to 40 hours (. . .) It is very important to show yourself off (. . .) Of course, ** does not pay for overtime work (. . .) you need to work like a slave to have a contract improvement (. . .)* I once said: "Do I have to do it now? It's 9:30pm". "No, you can go." They say so, but then everything is written in their mental notebook. [9:30 . . . that means that you were already working for free, given your shift finished at 9] (. . .) that's just . . . slavery. (Milan_A7_Melissa_F27)

This condition is intertwined with working times and rhythms: who wants to compete must work fast, over time and constantly change schedule, in order to fit with the company's and customers' needs. They do not reflect on their condition; they work often for *free*.

4.3 Do not "waste time" to know labour rights: "is it actually something serious?"

Temporal flexibility creates a condition of alienation caused by the fact that these young people chase their work shifts day by day, shifts they were often informed about shortly in advance and without any agreement, without being able to structure their time, to plan their future and everyday life.

Moreover, it is important to underline that fear and entrapment also derive from the lack of knowledge of labour rights. Working times should follow the labour legislation, but these young people are not aware of this. In the UK, as mentioned before, RSW have the right to opt out of Sunday work, but sales assistants are unaware of this.

Regarding the debate about holiday and Sunday openings, Martino said:

This certainly reminds me of everything that has to do with the right of people to work, with dignity and all that. At the same time, it also reminds me that we often complain about many *-too many-* things, so . . . I would like to read this kind of [newspaper articles on the public debate on Sunday work in retail] headlines *to understand if it is actually something serious* or something like "I don't want to work the evening shift because I'm tired" or whatever. (Milan_T6_Martino_M21)

For these young workers only the present exists. Especially the youngest reported having a representation of their rights as something distant. "Rights", in their representation, are not related to reality and daily work.

When asked to reflect upon the problems linked with time flexibility and de-structured time, Martino replied that "It's nothing serious", but later said that it could be difficult to work in retail for people who are not so young anymore, as he will inevitably become in the future.

Anne said:

To be honest, I don't ever read . . . when they change our policy, *I never read it, because I don't care. I mean, I do care, but then I might, you know . . . you're giving me something that is about 30 pages long and it's about maternity care and I don't care about . . . I'm not pregnant, my partner's . . . I mean, these things are not concerning me*, but then maybe the things that really are important now, I don't read about them, that's the problem. (London_A1_Anne_F22)

Anne had never read the company regulations in which, by law, union rights are listed. If there is no imminent reason, the research participants tend not to reflect on their life and working conditions, even when young adults, between 28 and 35 years old.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study, including the inability to conceptualise the future or make plans for it; the discourse related to neoliberal competition and to the threat of being fired, because of which RSW are often entrapped into focusing narrowly on the present; the lack of

knowledge about work regulations, the scarcity of activism in trade unions and the lack of interest in labour rights, support the Sennett thesis.

This paper presents research focussed on young RSW and gives empirical evidence of the temporal flexibility that emerged as a key issue for them, and its impact on their everyday life. Qualitative methods were used: one year of ethnographic observation in the two shopping streets, 50 interviews and two focus groups, with sales assistants and union members.

De-structured working times, holiday and Sunday work are reasons for a feeling of precariousness which is therefore linked not only to the flexibility stated by the contract but also to temporal flexibility. In this labour activity, shift work is characterised by Sunday work, working on holidays, schedule flexibility and continuously changing of weekly and weekend working times, and this generates in the young workers interviewed difficulty in thinking and above all speaking about their working life and their future, in planning their adult life – a crisis of narrative.

This uncertainty causes problems that affect young people's and young adults' plans for their future, life projects (Bobek *et al.*, 2018) and construction of identity. Especially for them, who are engaged in the processes of construction, design and redefinition of identity and life, flexible and changing working times and rhythms profoundly affect their everyday life, their future, their agency, and makes it difficult for them both to build meaningful social relationships and reflect on their own choices.

Young RSW struggle to analyse their situation, they imagine a future which they desired and dreamed of; however, they do not implement any practices or strategies to make it become real. No medium-term objectives, definite choices or life projects emerged during focus groups and interviews. On the contrary, these young people and young adults have a representation and propose a narration of the future as uncertain and precarious; they experience a transition to adulthood without conscious or defined choices or clearly represented turning points (Cuzzocrea, 2018). The cause is structural: work flexibility and precarity affect their perception, representation and storytelling of the future. The fragmentation, de-structuration and alienation are shown in the lack of power, deficit in control over their life and "crisis of narrative" (Sennett, 2020). These young workers have difficulty in speaking about their future, in the storytelling about their life, in reflecting and accordingly act, caused by work flexibility and in particular by the flexibility of time.

Research results show that work flexibility in the 24/7 service society – in terms of flexibility of working time as well as of contracts – has consequences in the transition to adulthood and life planning of young retail workers. They do not have control over their own time, they have no time to reflect, and act accordingly, because of flexible schedules. This uncertainty due by structural factors – working times and rhythms – deeply influence their life and have negative implications for the dynamic process of becoming mindful adults.

Job uncertainty and schedule flexibility affect workers and in particular young people, who are facing the construction of their identities and are planning their adult life. This research allows to highlight how the power over their time, the possibility to have time for themselves and to manage their time, extremely influence the capacity to choose, to decide, to imagine and plan the future.

Young RSW because of the deregulation of shop openings have great difficulty in projecting themselves into the future and in being aware of their present. On the one hand, this is intertwined with flexible schedules in the 24/7 service economy, because often doing shift work means changing shifts every day or every week and working on Sundays and on Holidays. On the other hand, this is connected with the fast rhythms and the pressure to be always available for customer's needs (Hadjisolomou *et al.*, 2017; Fullin, 2021).

Actions to contrast these conditions could be implemented at different level: at the micro level, tutoring activities and mentoring paths in schools, university and workplaces can be obstacles of the drop-out phenomenon and could help the youngest in choosing and planning

their job/career; at the meso level, local/national companies and administrations could try to implement workers autonomy and change organisational processes, in order to decide and manage flexible arrangements, shifts and working times – bilaterally, together with workers and national trade unions; at the macro level, supra-national/national institutions, unions and companies could invest on the wellbeing at work, in terms of both working times and rhythms, in order to let the *quality of work* increase, along with the *quality of life* for the employees. At all the level, policies and/or benefits for unemployed people and working poor are needed. In-work poverty is highly increasing for the youngest generations, as well as in low-qualified work and flexible schedules – above all in the Southern EU and Italian context.

Finally, this study gives evidence on the young workers' experiences in low-skilled jobs before the pandemic. These issues are even more relevant today, after the outbreak of the crisis due to the COVID-19. Recent research shows that young people are now more often comfortable with thinking about changing activities, workplaces and leaving what they perceive to be a meaningless job. It would be extremely interesting to compare representations of young workers on working times and rhythms in low-skilled jobs and their future, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Corresponding author

Annalisa Dordoni can be contacted at: annalisa.dordoni@unimib.it

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