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Engaged Scholarship on the High Street: The case of HSUK2020

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Introduction

The High Street is widely established as a dynamic construct with a multitude of stakeholders and a plethora of factors that contribute to an 'endless litany of change' (Morganosky, 1997, p. 269). The complexities of dealing with the High Street have been well documented in the literature (Clarke et al., 1997; Hernandez et al., 1998; Peel, 2010; Pioch and Byrom, 2004; Wrigley and Dolega, 2011; Wrigley and Lambiri, 2014), and these complexities can constrain the attempts of local authorities, retailers, citizens, and other key stakeholders to plan and adapt effectively. This is an enduring situation in most places, and the abundance of academic research, market reports, High Street data, as well as the extensive interest from the media and the public, seem to have had little effect on the ground (Parker et al., 2016, p. 3), thus failing to alleviate the ongoing decline in the importance of the High Street, which impacts upon both retailers and communities.

These challenges have led to our understanding of the High Street as a 'wicked problem', which requires successful collaboration between place stakeholders, researchers, and practitioners to tackle the misalignments between academic and practitioner knowledge. 'Wicked problems' call for participatory approaches to research that can 'enable the mutually beneficial reciprocal-exchange of resources and knowledge' between the relevant parties (Phillips et al., 2013, p. 235). In this article, we present such an approach, influenced by the tenets of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), that guided the ESRC-funded High Street UK 2020 project. By situating engaged scholarship in the context of retailing and the High Street, we argue that such an approach can address the issues of the limited application of existing academic knowledge to the problem, as well develop and exchange new knowledge of relevance and rigour for High Street stakeholders, researchers, and practitioners (Pettigrew, 2001). Furthermore, we present how our collaborative relationship with place stakeholders helped us to provide a useful models of High Street performance that represent a more commonly-held 'reality' (Rescher, 2003), can be easily interpreted, and therefore be put into practice more easily (through, for example, towns' development or action plans). Based on our findings and dissemination of the High Street UK 2020 project, we suggest that engaged scholarship, as a form of research that requires 'researchers and practitioners (to) coproduce knowledge that can advance theory and practice in a given domain' (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 803), can be an alternative to dominant methodological approaches in the fields of retailing, town centre management, and place management in general.

What is Engaged Scholarship?

In academia, and particularly in business schools, finding ways to address the theory-practice gap and harmonise the scholarly pursuits of researchers with society's pressing concerns (Phillips et al., 2013) is a recurring issue. As King and Learmonth (2015) illustrate, the relevance, usefulness, applicability, and impact of original academic research has been questioned repeatedly (see e.g. Boyer, 1996; Learmonth et al., 2012; Shapiro et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2011; Starkey and Madan, 2001), and has led to the 'growing realization that so-called 'theory' and 'practice' cannot be bifurcated as separate domains' (King and Learmonth, 2015, p. 354). What is needed therefore, is a shift in how researchers approach the knowledge production problem, and how they can move from an 'unengaged process of inquiry in social research' (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 5) to an approach that is participatory, reflexive, transdisciplinary, collaborative, and directed towards accomplishing societal

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advancements while maintaining high-quality research standards (Cuthill, 2010; Gibbons et al., 1994).

Engaged scholarship is a participative form of research for obtaining the understanding of a complex problem in its particular context (Van de Ven, 2007) from key stakeholders (usually people actually affected by the problem). Its origins can be traced to the work of Boyer (1990), who argued that scholarly activities need to move beyond the conduct of original research (scholarship of discovery), in order to form a dynamic definition of scholarship that also helps building bridges between theory and practice (scholarship of integration), incorporates scientific discovery with problem solving that assists individuals and communities (scholarship of application), and promotes educational progress (scholarship of teaching) (Paynter, 2014). Ultimately, the scholarship of engagement entails the deployment of all the above activities from outside the campus to people and places, where the work of the engaged scholar can be directed toward larger, more humane ends (Boyer, 1990), and where collaboration in knowledge production can produce 'knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful than when scholars or practitioners work on the problems alone' (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 9).

Undoubtedly, engaged scholarship advocates a fundamental shift in the relationship between researchers and other stakeholders (Van de Ven, 2011). This starts with a recognition that the problem under study cannot be answered with one person's limited resources and capabilities, which leads researchers to adopt a participant frame of reference and engage in a reflexive, collective learning process that respects all other kinds of knowledge production (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Hendrickx, 1999). In addition, engaged scholarship requires researchers to adopt a pluralist view of science and practice, and take part in conversation and discourse with different people, with the goal to produce new, but complementary knowledge outputs that can help answer complex problems (Van de Ven, 2007). In this sense, engaged scholarship can be understood as a collaborative research method that advances scientific knowledge, helps understand real complex problems, and has emancipatory potential (Huzzard and Johansson, 2014; Strumińska-Kutra, 2016). Therefore, engaged scholarship has strong bonds with critical management studies, collaborative inquiry, and participatory action research, as it is also advocating that academics be actively involved in practice and in the creation of practice-based knowing to achieve transformative goals in society (King and Learmonth, 2015; Willmott, 2008; Wolfram Cox et al., 2009).

This deviation from traditional, self-referential scholarship is also reflected in the philosophical underpinnings of engaged scholarship, which favour a 'more inclusive research philosophy that is open to and integrates some of the differences of alternative philosophies of science' (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 63) instead of choosing one that fits the researcher's view and values. Thus, engaged scholarship adopts a realist position that includes elements from different philosophical approaches (e.g. critical realism, pragmatism, constructivism, critical theory), and allows researchers to better coordinate the multiple models, theories, and perspectives that are constructed and identified during the research process (Azevedo, 1997). In this way, engaged scholarship favours the use of multidimensional methods and theories, and obtains findings by triangulation through engagement, which 'increases the richness (and complexity) of problem representation, and

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decreases the likelihood of myopic representations that other stakeholders may perceive as being biased and misdiagnosed views of the 'real world' situation (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 285). Whereas engaged scholarship attempts to connect different research approaches that can lead to theoretical and methodological contradictions and inconsistencies (for a review, see Strumińska-Kutra, 2016), it allows an evolutionary growth of knowledge via the development of models that 'better fit the problems they are intended to solve' (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 70). Thus, as Wells (2016) describes, engaged scholarship does not attempt to seek generalisability, but rather aims for relevant theorisation and explanation in a specific situation, through an immersive, interactive, and emergent collaborative learning process (Wells, 2016, p. 43).

Engaged scholarship and partnerships in the context of the High Street

When comparing the underlying assumptions of engaged scholarship with the High Street and its academic disciplines or areas (e.g. retailing, marketing, geography, planning and public administration), a degree of similarity is evident. High Street performance and development, which, in the UK, is often investigated under the labels of 'town centre management' and 'place management' has long been associated with different types of engagement, such as business engagement (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2005; Dawkins and Grail, 2007; Parker et al., 2014; Wrigley and Dolega, 2011), multiple stakeholder engagement (De Nisco et al., 2008; Omholt, 2013; Warnaby et al., 2005) and community engagement (Coca-Stefaniak and Carroll, 2015; Woolrych and Sixsmith, 2013)), which are integral in place decision-making. Engagement between established town partnerships, such as Business Improvement Districts, Local Development Companies, Community Interest Companies, town teams, and the local government, can 'create more efficient, inclusive and pluralist local governance, bringing together key organizations and actors (from the three spheres of state, market and civil society) to identify communities' top priorities and needs, and work with local people to provide them' (Geddes, 2006, p. 87).

In addition, working in partnership is long recognised as an important objective in local community agendas, and as a way for addressing so-called complex and interrelated issues such as the future of the High Street through trust-building and knowledge-sharing exercises (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Raco, 2000; Taylor, 2006). In this sense, researchers' engagement within these partnerships is not only aligned with the tenets of engaged scholarship, but also consistent with current policies regarding local governance in the UK (e.g. DCLG, 2009). Therefore, merging engaged scholarship into the already well-established processes of town centre and place management can be a step towards the strengthening of stakeholder participation in the management of the High Street, and can also stimulate opportunities for learning, dialogue and knowledge production for everyone involved (Peel, 2003).

Furthermore, when examining the literature of collaborative planning and strategic spatial planning (Brand and Gaffikin, 2007; Depriest-Hricko and Prytherch, 2013; Healey, 1998, 2006; Innes, 1996), valuable outcomes that fit with engaged scholarship can be drawn regarding stakeholder/community interaction, conflict resolution, and consensus building in a pluralistic environment. Indeed, engaged scholarship can mesh well in participatory projects and town partnerships, where the multitude of understandings and the constant conflict of values and interests that are entailed in all stakeholder interactions need to be recognised and eventually legitimised (Albrechts, 2015; Hillier, 2003; Mouffe, 2005).

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Engaged scholarship's theoretical and methodological pluralism can be utilised in order to support what Brand and Gaffikin (2007) label as the 'smart pluralism' approach, which shifts away from coercive dominance and aims to maximize the chance of positive outcomes via compromise and knowledge exchange (Le Feuvre et al., 2016). Whereas strategizing in pluralistic contexts raises various challenges (e.g. inflationary consensus, collective paralysis, inertia, dilution of town initiatives, (Denis et al., 2007) that are consistent with criticisms regarding the ability of engaged scholarship to produce valuable results in the long term (McKelvey, 2006), the 'splicing' of methodological, theoretical, and 'on the ground' pluralisms can be a vehicle towards the production of more insightful knowledge for academics, and both emergent and intended strategies for town partnerships (Arkesteijn and Volker, 2013). In the next part of this article, we will demonstrate how our approach to engaged scholarship corresponded to the participatory processes that took place during the life of the High Street UK 2020 project.

High Street UK 2020: A model of engaged scholarship

To best explain our approach to the High Street UK 2020 project, we will use Van de Ven's (2007) diamond model of engaged scholarship (figure 1) as a guide for the milestones and outcomes that stemmed from our engagement with stakeholders. Van de Ven's model is appropriate for this purpose, as it is a knowledge production model that advises collaboration with stakeholders and the researchers at every stage (problem formulation, theory building, research design, problem solving, (Hunt, 2008). It is also an iterative model, which allows us to show how our method enabled 'simultaneous problem solving of lower level issues within the greater research question at hand' (Phillips et al., 2013, p. 236). Our model of engaged scholarship differs slightly from Van de Ven's, as it takes numerous case studies and a plethora of stakeholders into the knowledge transfer/exchange loop (see also Wells, 2016). However, Van de Ven's model follows a step-by-step approach that allows us to frame the research in a simple and effective way. We will now present each stage more thoroughly. An outline of milestones and outcomes at every stage can be seen in Table 1.

Problem Formulation

In the initial stage of the project, and prior to the production of the bid, we started to engage with key stakeholders (retailers, town centre partnerships, local authorities, property owners/developers and residents), getting their views of the high street knowledge problem. This approach requires from the researcher to adopt a journalist's approach, by being open to the interpretations of others, being able to answer the basic questions of why, when, what, where, who, and how the problem exists, and learn to appreciate the problem's multiple dimensions and manifestations (Van de Ven, 2007, pp. 77–79). What was clear from our discussions with stakeholders, was the uncertainty of how to manage or develop a high street could meet the needs of its community, perhaps not immediately, but in the fairly near future (2020 and beyond. From our initial collaboration, it was clear that academic and professional knowledge was fragmented, and that the study of retail change in particular geographic locations was limited (Wang, 2011), thus making it difficult to those experiencing the problem to ensure the future of their town centres. With this in mind, we started developing a project bid that would help the local agents of change to identify and understand their information requirements, get access to accurate and relevant academic knowledge, to improve the quality of decision making, and provide solid academic underpinning to their plans for action. The bid was developed as an ESRC

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knowledge exchange project for a large-scale retail sector initiative, and addressed the following key project questions:

1. Why haven't high street stakeholders acted on the research and data that has been available to manage change in a more effective way?
2. How can research and data be delivered more effectively to high street stakeholders so that it is used to inform decision making?

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Theory Building

Once we had agreed a common knowledge exchange problem, we started further discussions with retail experts, academics, and place stakeholders, in order to enhance theory building. At this stage, we wanted to help our project towns understand their information requirements and get access to accurate and relevant academic knowledge, which could improve the quality of decision making and provide solid academic underpinning to future plans of action. According to Van de Ven (2007), the knowledge exchange 'anomaly' can be resolved by creating a theory/model through processes of abduction, deduction, induction, which can provide a coherent resolution that can also be applicable in subsequent situations (Agar, 1986). During the stage of problem formulation, we came to the realisation that the fragmentation of the retail literature, and the complexity of factors that impact upon the High Street, leave little room for existing theories to influence change. Therefore, our goal was to develop a model of retail centre change that would stem from a review of the literature and existing theories, as well as from conversations with retail experts that have previously addressed the High Street problem (Van de Ven, 2011). After discussions between the research team and our retail experts regarding the future of the High Street, we identified that High Street performance is mainly a reflection of retail performance, with footfall and vacancy rates as key indicators. This 'strongly-held assumption' (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 110) served as our initial theory and it appeared to be plausible and worthy of further investigation, as it stemmed from the knowledge and experiences of diverse stakeholders.

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In order to investigate these factors that would support our theory, we conducted a systematic literature review (see Appendix 1 for search process and review parameters for this study) in order to form a reliable knowledge base from a range of studies that can be relevant to academics, practitioners and other stakeholders (Tranfield et al., 2003). We initially identified 156 factors that may influence the performance of the High Street. During our first project meeting, and in line with the engaged scholarship model, we presented these initial factors to academic and retail experts and our town team partners. Participants were asked to comment on the factors and also to identify additional performance factors that were not present. Partner towns identified 50 additional factors (Parker, Ntounis and Quin, 2014) that influence the High Street, which led to the review of 33 additional studies. For 12 of those factors that we could find no evidence of their effect on High Street performance, we outlined a research agenda to engage academics on furthering the research on retail change (Parker et al., 2014). Such a scholastic process outlines the foundation of theory building in engaged scholarship, which is based on deductive, literature-based, literature gap formulation and application, that is modified inductively through co-production with practitioners. Moreover, the combination of literature-based and practitioner-based engaged scholarship helped us develop an initial theory and identify 201 factors that can interest researchers and also help practitioners and place stakeholders in their everyday work (Nielsen, 2010, pp. 402–403). The findings of each stage of the research are presented in the second article in this Special Issue.

Research Design

At this stage of the research process, we needed to develop the appropriate methods and obtain empirical evidence from our retail experts for evaluating the factors that influence High Street performance (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). Given the multitude of interpretations, research philosophies (conceptual, empirical etc.) and methods used to measure these factors, a meta-analysis would not be possible. In addition, the studies have not conceptualised 'performance' (or any other dependent variable) in any comparable

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manner. It is only fairly recently researchers have been interested in the collaboration activities of stakeholders on the High Street – so we knew little about the type of factors these initiatives seek to influence. This led us to two research questions.

RQ1: How much influence does each factor have over High Street performance?
RQ2: How much influence could the High Street have over the factor?

Addressing these questions requires an understanding of the dynamic concept of the High Street as a social phenomenon. Therefore, model development needed to take into account not only how much these factors influence High Street performance (RQ1), but also how people respond and adapt to High Street change over time because of these factors (RQ2) (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 145), and under which circumstances or contingencies High Street transformation occurs over time (Bruner, 1990; Tsoukas, 1989). Based on these questions, we used the Delphi technique for scoring all factors that may influence the performance of the High Street, following their identification from our systematic literature review. The Delphi technique is unique in its method of eliciting and refining group judgement as it is based on the notion that a group of experts is better than one expert when exact knowledge is not available (Paliwoda, 1983). To establish the amount of influence the High Street may have over the factor we asked 22 retail experts to: 1) classify each one of the 201 factors as spatial, macro, meso or micro (See Figure 2). Then we asked respondents to 2) rate how influential each factor was on the vitality and viability of the High Street. A 5-point Likert scale was used for rating the influence of each factor on the High Street, with 1 being "not at all influential" and 5 "extremely influential". Participants were also free to write additional comments on each factor. The result of the Delphi exercise, after plotting each factor, can be seen in figure 3.

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Whereas the purpose of a Delphi study is to establish sufficient expert consensus to make a forecast or assignment of values believable or useful (Shields et al., 1987), this did not limit us from treating it as a collective learning process that would enhance our perspectives on the issues of the High Street (Peluchette and Gerhardt, 2015). Discussions during the Delphi exercise and the experts' comments unveiled that from the long list of 201 factors, many had either the same meaning/definition, or were conceptually related. This prompted us to use a novel exploratory approach and statistical tests in order to combine factors that effectively meant the same thing or could be related such as 'visual appearance' and

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'cleanliness' (Parker et al., 2016, p. 8). The end result was a more coherent representation of factors and scales, based on the advice from retail experts. In addition, we realised that in order to bring further clarity, we needed to identify the Top 25 priorities for change (see Figure 4), based on the results from the "Get on with it!" quadrant, as these micro factors could be influenced by High Street stakeholders, and can also have the greatest influence on vitality and viability. This decision was mainly informed by the interests and perspectives of the town partnerships involved in the project (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 193), which, given their lack of time and resources, were looking for a model that could help them to focus activity and resources on action that will have the most impact on vitality and viability (Parker et al., 2016).

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Problem Solving

After the completion of the model and the formulation of the top 25 priorities, we embarked on a variety of activities in order to communicate and apply the HSUK2020 model to our 10 towns (Van de Ven, 2007). At the problem-solving stage, which entails the dissemination, interpretation, and application of empirical findings (Phillips et al., 2013), the impact of the study is the criterion that outlines the usefulness of research findings (Hunt, 2008). Consequently, we sought to warrant that HSUK2020 will leave a suite of legacy products (such as the HSUK2020 modelling tool, podcasts from academic experts, intervention place templates, reports, this special issue, etc.), which can eventually facilitate change in behaviour, conditions, and in the way communities interpret co-produced knowledge in their own High Streets (Franz, 2009).

Naturally, amplifying HSUK2020's impact and legacy involved continued interactions and discussions between the research team, our retail experts and practitioners, and our 10 towns. Half-day workshops have been run in all 10 locations, in which local partners were introduced to the 201 factors and top 25 priorities for change, and offered their feedback and also their own perspectives on how these can inform town centre decision making. In addition, action planning seminars proffered an update on the reflection of our findings, including a new forecasting tool that enabled each centre to consider different scenarios, based on footfall data provided by one of our project partners. Appropriate place

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interventions, under the broad categories of “repositioning”, “reinventing”, “rebranding”, and “restructuring”, were also contextualised in partnership with our 10 user communities, helping individual high streets to identify an alternative, sustainable future for their high street in 2020 and an action plan for achieving that aim.

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At this stage, a greater sharing of power and activities (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 274) between the research team and our town partners allowed us to take advantage of their skills in engaging with the best possible audiences and even in designing some of the research activities. Taking a back seat during workshops and presentations made all activities a collective learning experience, and allowed us to concentrate on “problem solving and action, looking for ‘what works’ not just on participation and communication of new voices and categories” (Strumińska-Kutra, 2016, p. 879). However, we did not hesitate from being critical, challenging the established conventions (Huzzard and Johansson, 2014) of town centre management in many occasions, and highlighting the necessity for developing applicable action plans to our project towns, based on the novel contributions and knowledge that our continuing engagement with them produced.

Consequently, a more ‘positive’ story about town centre change emerged, one of ‘hope’ rather than ‘doom and gloom’. In turn, this encouraged more collaboration across stakeholders, was a clear message that was cascaded throughout the project. This engaged a number of media (local press, national radio, local radio). The coverage of the local workshops and subsequent interviews all helped disseminate the priority actions that had been agreed by the towns, through the HSUK2020 project. In addition, the project was acknowledged in Wrigley and Lambiri’s (2015) report, “British High Streets: from Crisis to Recovery?”, and research findings have been presented to numerous conferences, symposiums, and meetings in the UK, Europe, Latin and North America, furthering HSUK2020’s impact internationally.

Conclusion

In an era of transformative retail change (Millington et al., 2015), forces such as internet retailing, multichannel/omnichannel retailing, the rise of different convenience cultures,

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and car ownership and its relationship out-of-town developments, have already permeated and altered the fabric of our High Streets and town centres. The complex nature of the High Street requires all stakeholders (insiders and outsiders) to work together effectively, in order to develop the basic knowledge and resources that can explain how we can create sustainable town centres in the near future (Louis and Bartunek, 1992). In this respect, collaborative forms of engaged scholarship, as the one described in this paper, can 'generate knowledge on big questions and issues by testing alternative ideas and different views of a common problem' (Peluchette and Gerhardt, 2015, p. 416). As we argued in this paper, the joint knowledge production between the research team and the community, enabled us to improve our understanding of factors affecting high streets amongst a diverse group of stakeholders, rather than remotely draw our own conclusions of what factors will influence our high streets (Lewis, 2012).

As successful as our approach was, we are not arguing that engaged scholarship model is the new "golden standard" on how to conduct research in retailing and town centre change (Van de Ven, 2007). Like any approach, engaged scholarship can suffer from the biases, and the disparities between the goals and problem-solution cycles, of academics, field experts, practitioners, and local communities (McKelvey, 2006). However, engaged scholarship can pave the way for beneficial collaboration that can 'produce research findings that make more significant advancements to theory and practice than the traditional approach of going it alone' (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 296). The ongoing impact of HSUK2020 on our project towns' action plans, and its success in securing further funding for extending our research on High Street change, are testaments to how engaged scholarship research can drive the agendas for both academics and communities. As scholars, we have benefitted enormously from creating relevant knowledge for our High Streets with the people who work, shop, live, and use them every day, who in turn carried the torch of knowledge to their local councils and other networks. This shows that engaged scholarship can become a valuable tool for researchers, but also has the potential to motivate communities to become more involved in the revamping of their centres. Hopefully, such a development will make a difference to the vitality and viability of our High Streets (Millington et al., 2015).

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Appendix

Review Parameters

1. Type of study (empirical, exploratory, conceptual)

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2. Methodological evidence
3. Data source (primary, secondary, tertiary)
4. Dependent variable (retail area performance measure)
5. Independent variables (factor affecting performance)
6. Significance (major findings and statistical significance if available)
7. Limitations (flaws, weaknesses etc.)
8. Author, date, publisher
9. Geographical location (UK, US, Europe, e.g.)
10. Size of retail/shopping centre (Different geographical scales of place, e.g. city centre, town centre, high street, neighbourhood centre, district centre, suburban centre)

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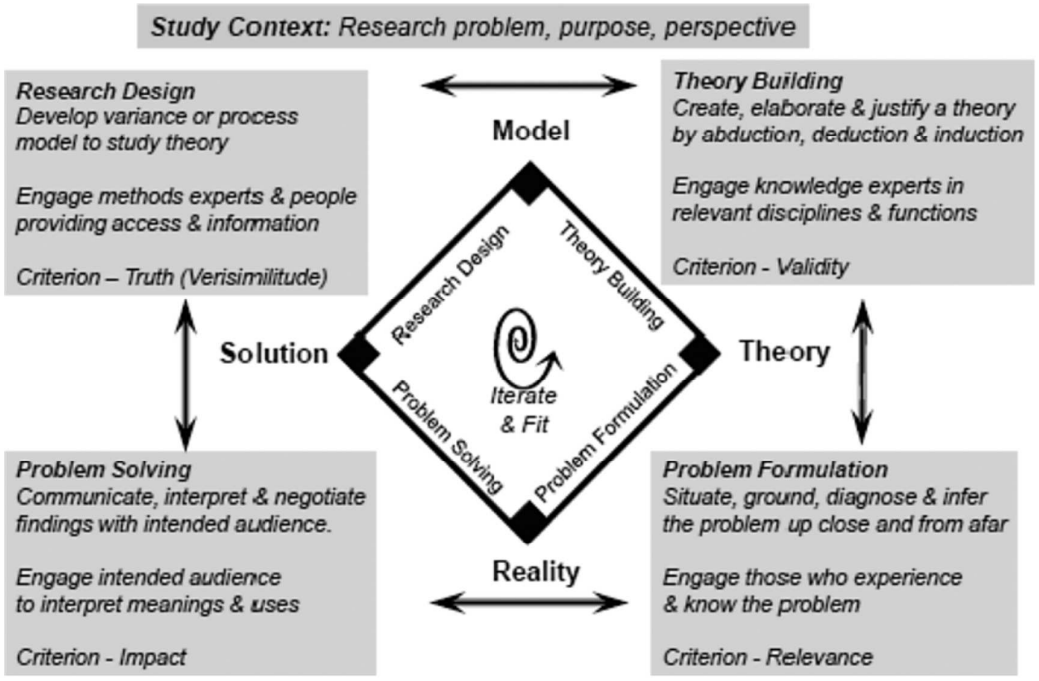

Figure 1: Van de Ven's model of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007)

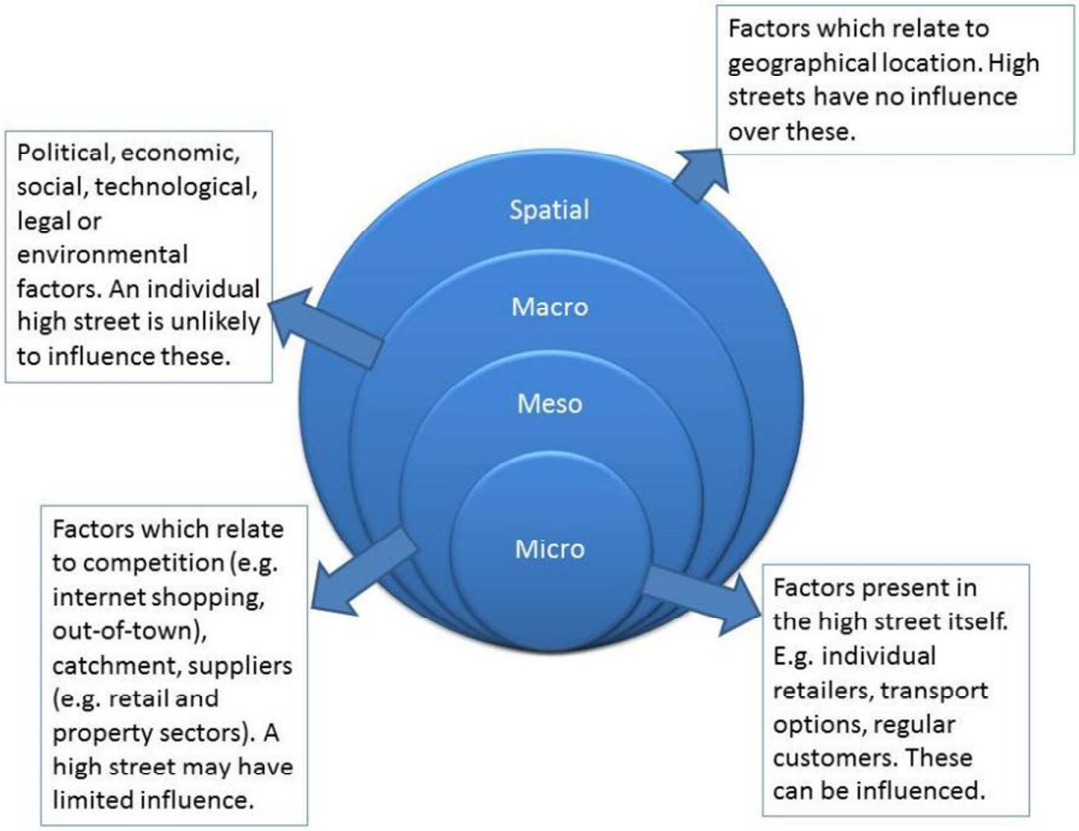

Figure 2: Level of influence high streets have over high street performance factors

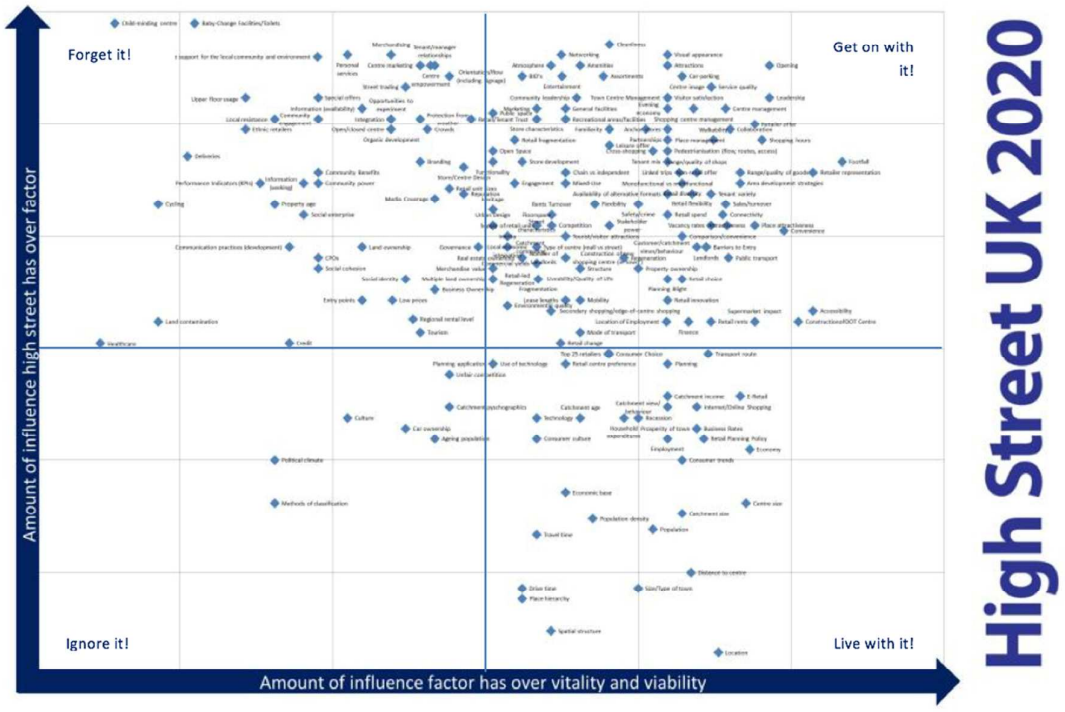

Figure 3: 201 Factors affecting vitality and viability

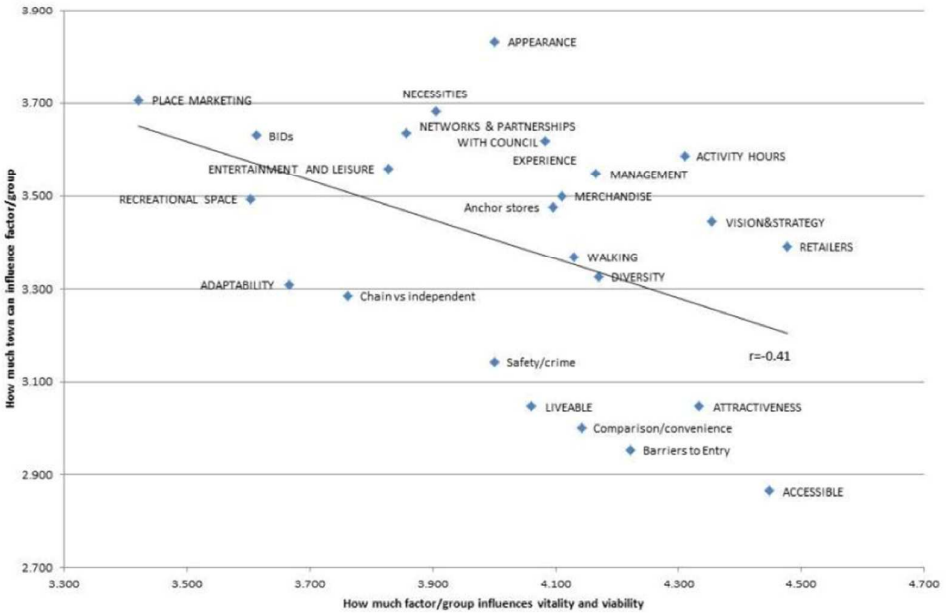

Figure 4: Top 25 priorities for change

Research Project: High Street UK 2020: Transferring knowledge to facilitate the repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring of sustainable retail centres.

Research aim: To channel the existing academic knowledge relating to retail and high street change directly to individual locations, as well as work directly with the end users of research to identify gaps for further investigation and research.

Research Stage	Stakeholders Involved	Activities	Outcomes
Problem Formulation	High Street stakeholders	Discussions with key stakeholders	Grounding the problem in the context of sustainable High Street Production of research bid based on stakeholders' perspectives
Theory Building	Research team Retail Experts Project Partners	Systematic Literature Review Initial theory of High Street Performance 201 Factors identified	Setting the parameters influencing high street performance Factors influencing high street change identified deductively Collaborating with stakeholders in identifying additional factors of high street change Inductive co-production of theory
Research Design	Research team Retail Experts Project Partners	Sample selection Delphi Technique Quantitative/Statistical Analysis Theoretical Model designed Top 25 Priorities of Change	Creating a collective learning process by engaging retail experts in research design Collaborating with retail experts to finalise the HSUK2020 model
Problem Solving	Research team Retail Experts Project Partners Communities High Street stakeholders	Presenting the HSUK2020 model Top 25 Priorities of Change explained Workshops Meetings Reports Conferences Radio Interviews	Development of forecasting tool based on footfall data Engaging a wide range of stakeholders towards prioritising actions for town centre change Disseminating findings to anyone who is interested in high street change internationally

Table 1: Summary of project activities and outcomes, based on Van de Ven's model