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Repositioning the High Street: evidence and reflection from the UK

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Vital and Viable Town Centres (URBED, PPG6 etc.)

• Pedestrian footfall	• Vacancy rates
• Diversity of uses and change	• Cultural and social events
• Quality of built environment	• Leisure and cultural facilities
• Recent and proposed investment Accessibility	• Town centre residential population
• Attitudes and perceptions	• Employment in the town centre
• Retailer representation and demand	• Street safety
• Commercial yields and retail rents	• Sense of place

Table 1: traditional metrics of town centre performance

Town	Areas of improvement	Link to Top 25 Priorities
Alsager	Improve connectivity and walkability, better customer experience and retailer representation, create vision for town	Retailers, Vision & Strategy, Experience, Walkable, Accessible, Liveable
Altrincham	Changing opening hours, ensuring the basics are right (like car-parking), make use of redundant retail space, attract key retail names	Activity Hours, Necessities, Attractiveness, Anchor Stores, Adaptability
Ballymena	Developing an evening economy, ensuring the basics are right (like car-parking), better marketing and promotion, building a more modern and positive identity for the town	Activity Hours, Necessities, Networks & Partnerships, Place Marketing, Recreational Space
Barnsley	Reviewing opening hours, attracting new retailers and development, merchandise and retail/tenant mix, customer experience, building more positive perceptions of the town	Activity Hours, Merchandise, Retailers, Diversity, Experience, Vision & Strategy
Bristol (St. George)	Changing opening hours, strengthen the evening economy, improving the connectivity and walkability of the street, attracting more fresh food retail and restaurants	Activity Hours, Liveable, Walkable, Diversity, Adaptability
Congleton	Signage and car-parking need improvement, reducing barriers to entry to encourage new businesses into the town centre, lack of merchandise and little retail offer	Necessities, Barriers to Entry, Retailers, Merchandise
Holmfirth	Signage, lack of office space, lack of engagement with young people, lack of support for the business community	Activity Hours, Necessities, Experience, Networks & Partnerships
Market Rasen	Changing opening hours, attracting a number of shops in town, more collective action and networking across all stakeholders	Activity Hours, Networks & Partnerships, Retailers, Merchandise
Morley	Changing opening hours, improving walkability, accessibility and street activity, lack of night-time economy, better marketing and promotion	Activity Hours, Walkable, Place Marketing, Accessible, Liveable
Wrexham	Improving evening economy, more restaurants and cultural events, improving the 'walkability' and connectivity of retail in the town, better marketing and promotion, more collective action and collaboration across all stakeholders	Activity Hours, Walkable, Accessible, Place Marketing, Networks & Partnerships

Table 2: Repositioning factors as identified from HSUK2020 project partners

Repositioning the High Street: evidence and reflection from the UK

Abstract

Purpose

Drawing on evidence from ten towns (across England, Wales and Northern Ireland) participating in the High Street UK 2020 (HSUK2020) project, the aim of this paper is to reveal how local stakeholders involved in place management respond to High Street decline through a strategy of repositioning.

Design/Methodology/Approach

This paper identifies the challenges faced by towns considering repositioning, and highlights examples of good practice of relevance to practitioners. First, it outlines perspectives on repositioning from academic research and theory, before drawing on evidence from across ten UK towns who participated in the HSUK2020 project, to reveal how repositioning involves more than just taking a snapshot profile of a place.

Findings

The research revealed major challenges faced by local stakeholders in clearly identifying and communicating their market position, in particular, the maintenance of up-to-date information on catchments was lacking in all of the locations. Despite having local knowledge and some data, stakeholders still did not possess a clear (or shared) understanding of the identity or function of their towns. This evidence reflects the complexity of analysing and understanding repositioning and developing coherent strategies.

Practical Implications

Knowledge exchange between stakeholders involved in place management can help inform the identification of new strategic objectives, appropriate interventions, and project planning and delivery. Where resources are limited, particularly in smaller towns and settlements, the research demonstrates the significance of collecting and sharing data and analysis with other stakeholders, because this can generate positive outcomes for all.

Originality/Value

By offering empirical evidence based on the experience of local practitioners, this paper provides a valuable insight into how town centre stakeholders collect, interpret and analyse data, revealing the challenges, opportunities and practicalities involved in developing and implementing repositioning strategies.

Introduction

Place positioning refers to the identification of unique or special attributes possessed by a place (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Paddison, 1999; Yanchula, 2008), which contribute to a clear understanding of a place's identity, or simply, what a place is known for (Baker, 2012; Martinez, 2016). Although places are multiple and complex entities, predominant images eventually surface where towns or cities are associated - perhaps with heritage, tourism or local industry and so on. Labelling places as a historic city, seaside resort or market town is useful in attempts to define and clearly articulate messages to both residents and external audiences. It can underpin place identity and belonging, in addition to establishing a comparative or differential advantage in relation to other places (Dennis et al., 2002).

Although a place might possess a strong market position (for example, in the retail hierarchy) and image, we should resist the assumption that this is necessarily the outcome of carefully devised place marketing and branding strategies. In many cases, such unique advantages possessed will have accumulated over decades, if not centuries, and will reflect long-standing expectations and deeply rooted perceptions of that place. Where this has produced strong and positive place image, civic leaders might well adopt a complacent attitude to place marketing, but the reputation of even the most attractive places can fade as user preferences shift, requiring places to refresh their appeal. The loss of key industries for instance, or trends in mobility and tourism, can profoundly undermine the reputation of a place. In contrast, processes such as globalisation may also strengthen a place's reputation (Fraser, 2016), as a city or region becomes more outward looking (Kuss, 2009).

Nevertheless, to counteract long term structural decline, rebranding will not be sufficient (Neill, 1995; Vanolo, 2008). To satisfy the expectations of place users requires the development of multiple place products before a cohesive and plausible place branding strategy can be implemented (Ntounis & Kavaratzis, this issue). Whereas the literature on repositioning places largely discusses citywide or regional strategies, the focus of this paper is on understanding the forces of change and the value of unique responses that reposition high streets. The plight of town centres in particular reflects the specific localised impacts of wider change (Parker et al, this issue). Resorts have lost custom as more people holiday abroad, whereas former industrial centres have lost key employment anchors. In addition, town centres face growing competition from out-of-town retailing (Thomas, Bromley and Tallon, 2004) and more recently the disruption caused by Internet shopping (Weltevreden & Atzema, 2006). Consequently, place managers need to engage in repositioning strategies to enable them to identify potential competitive advantages (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Smith, 2004). This may involve strategies for building on distinct capabilities (Martinez, 2016), reconfiguring the retailer and service mix (Teller, Wood and Floh, 2016) but may also involve the anticipation of, and adaptation to, more prosaic future trends (such as local demographic change). Understanding the current and future needs and behaviours of the catchment population is essential if high streets are to recover their vitality and viability. A difficulty arises in convincing local stakeholders to accept change is necessary. Their status in an imagined retail hierarchy might no longer be what it once was following restructuring of the retail sector. Likewise, there may be poor understanding of the degree of competition and complementarity with adjacent centres (Teller et al, 2016). Re-evaluating the role and function of places might require a fundamental shift from retailing to consider other functions that might thrive in town centres (Downs and Haynes, 1984). The stresses, volatility and fluidity of high street change remain difficult to predict. This project has made a first attempt to list all the factors that influence retail centre vitality and viability – identifying 201. (Parker et al, this issue). Before this, the lack of a solid and thorough evidence base concerning high street performance and the factors affecting change have remained obscure, patchy or simply absent.

Wrigley and Dolega (2011) suggest places who develop a strong evidence base about their current position, as well as an understanding of how future changes will affect them, are likely to be more resilient, although this raises important questions regarding capacity and skills of stakeholders responsible for managing the High Street. In this paper, therefore, we first outline perspectives on repositioning from academic research and theory, before drawing on evidence from across ten UK towns who participated in the HSUK2020 project, to reveal how repositioning involves more than just taking a snapshot profile of a place. Rather, places need to consider repositioning as a tool through which to gather data and build an understanding of their identity, but also to manage future change.

What is repositioning?

Can we apply repositioning from marketing theory to places?

Theories of marketing management define positioning as a strategy for adding value to a product or service through the identification of specific target markets, which enables an organisation to differentiate or adjust what it has to offer relative to other competing products or services. As Tadajewski and Jones (2014) pinpoint, success or failure of the marketing strategy lies in marketers' ability in allocating their scarce resources on the S-T-P process (segmentation, targeting and positioning) which positioning is part of. As such, positioning becomes an integral part of the marketing strategy, and often represents the "sharp end" for marketers (Ries and Trout, 1981) in terms of translating the customers' needs and wants into products or services that will be perceived as superior from the competition (Dibb and Simkin, 1991). By communicating a clear and unique set of advantages, a business might anticipate consumers will be attracted to their offer ahead of their competitors (Doyle and Stern, 2006). A company, therefore, will aim to change perceptions of a brand through the rebranding of an existing product to emphasize or reveal new attributes that will appeal to a different target market, or it may introduce a new brand. Of course, market conditions are highly dynamic, implying that even well established products and brands might lose their appeal to consumers. Anticipating and adapting to change, therefore, and repositioning products and services to target markets, is key to successful branding and rebranding. By extending this concept, it can be argued that places also need to adapt and change in response to external forces (Warnaby et al, 2005), and their image needs to be constantly maintained and repositioned. As such, the S-T-P process is seen as an important aspect of successful place marketing strategies. Govers and Go (2009) for example, see place marketing as 'the traditional segmentation, targeting and positioning approach to the promotion of place …' (p. 19), whereas Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2008) indicate how place marketing strategies can be viewed as responsive mechanisms to improve a place's competitive position via discovering and creating uniqueness.

The transferability of marketing theory to place development, however, is neither simple nor straightforward, and we should avoid lapsing into a reductive view that treats places as just 'extended products' or a simple list of easily recognisable or branded values (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Medway et al, 2014; Turok, 2009). Places are complex assemblages of assets, resources and attractions, subject to multiple interpretations and understandings. Attempting to distil the 'essential' qualities of a place will always involve simplifying what that place is about, which will unavoidably exclude alternative or competing narratives. In addition, the communication of place images is not the sole preserve of place marketers. Through multiple mainstream and social media channels, people will draw on both direct and vicarious experiences of place. In the same way, the values attached to a corporate brand promiscuously circulate within wider culture, the same is true of place, only more so. Nevertheless, questions raised through marketing theory, such as understanding place identity and what differentiates one place from another, are important considerations for place managers, together with a need to anticipate change and an understanding of how to adapt (Kotler et al., 1999).

Towns and cities continually experience phases of growth, stagnation and decline. Although place promotion is a long established practice (Ward 1998), the structural economic problems arising in the early 1970s through deindustrialisation, sectoral shift and globalisation, provoked an outbreak of reflexive and instrumental local interventions designed to reposition places in terms of their economic competitiveness, identity or function (see, for example, the case of Town Centre Management in Ireland documented by McAteer and Stephens, 2011). Often, the desired outcome of these strategies is to correct negative stereotypes and change the image of a place to one attractive to managerial elites, corporate investors, property speculators and international tourists. Collectively this produced local economic development initiatives designed to re-orientate struggling places to external audiences and decision makers through incremental product replacement and diversification. Typically this involved large-scale ‘flagship’ regeneration projects, new attractions, improvements to civic realm and infrastructure (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990), with the desired outcome being to produce “substantial change to the features, benefits and experiences, relative to competitors, or targeting new audiences, or both” (Baker, 2012, 56). Faced with the dilemma of *compete-or-die*, local decision makers were perhaps left with little option than to pursue these interventions, resulting in the embedding of repositioning in regeneration strategies (Peel & Lloyd, 2008; Gilmore, 2002). Consequently, place marketing and branding has become normalised, through the establishment of marketing bureaus and inward investment agencies, together with a burgeoning sector of place branding professionals. Place branding has also become an academic sub-discipline in its own right, although much of this research focus on the city, regional and national scale, whereas relatively little is understood about the branding and repositioning of town centres or high streets (Yanchula, 2008). Moreover, the reality is that many smaller towns and centres, unless they possess special historical attractions, are unlikely to appeal to international audiences. As such,we go on to critically evaluate if any insight can be garnered from the repositioning research that might inform place management practice.

Critical perspective on place repositioning

Initially involving aggressive marketing of places to attract direct investment, or capture international flows of capital or tourism, many towns and cities became embroiled in an unsustainable “spiral of place competition” (Hall and Hubbard, 1996; Harvey, 1989; Lui, 2008; Metaxas, 2009; Sassen, 2002; Turok, 2009). In attempts to understand or analyse these conditions, academics have deployed various terms such as civic boosterism, urban growth machines, urban entrepreneurialism, and place marketing and branding (Molotch, 1976; Harvey, 1989; Gibson, 2005). Such accounts reveal a number of critical concerns about place repositioning. Harvey (1989) argues such strategies have resulted in urban monotony, through replication of the same policy solutions across multiple locations, such as ubiquitous and generic waterfront regeneration schemes, mega-projects, such as stadiums or airports, together with the construction of a similar mix of new attractions (conference centres, indoor arenas, covered shopping malls). The involvement of certain ‘starchitects’ and urban planning gurus has resulted in the replication of similar aesthetics and built forms (Ponzini & Nastasi, 2011). For Eisenschitz (2010), this is a zero-sum game, which undermines place distinctiveness or the USP of places, and is conducive to the production of corporatized non-places (Auge, 1995).

Town centres are not immune to such homogenising trends, with the accusation that many places are becoming Clone Towns (New Economics Foundation, 2004) where one high street provides the same range of retailer offer and brands as the next one. Such outcomes are not surprising given the propensity of localities to follow the same repositioning 'scripts' (Hubbard, 1996), which present simplified commodified messages about places to potential external users; typically decision makers responsible for inward investment decisions, or mobile consumers and tourists, or latterly the ubiquitous but ephemeral creative classes (Florida, 2017). Unfortunately, the pervasive *'compete-or-die'* mantra simply fuels a destructive spiral of place competition (Harvey, 1989), exposing places to the vagaries of globalisation, through intrusions of corporate capital and value extracting functions, which not only contributes to an undermining of local distinctiveness, but also weakens the power of civic institutions to affect local change as they become subject to remote decision-making.

The reconstruction of the built environment and civic realm, again to appeal to a corporate class or reliable consumer, is increasingly entangled with the commodification and regulation of public space, as centres become subject to surveillance and regulatory controls which serve to identify and exclude undesirable others (Minton, 2012). Recent debate concerning the emergence of POPs, privately-owned public space, underlines a growing concern about rights to the city (Mitchell, 2016). By exposing the high street to the logic of neoliberal regeneration, town centres are now subject to similar critical concerns regarding gentrification and social exclusion (Hubbard, 2017), together with anxiety about new forms of local governance involved in managing town and city centres. Critical responses to the growth of town-centre partnerships of Business Improvement Districts, suggest these actors are extensions of the neoliberal restructuring of the local state, which serves the interests of big business and property interests, rather than represent local people (Ward, 2006).

Consequently, rebranding places typically involves upscaling through transforming downtrodden places into "quality" or "world" destinations (Gibson and Davidson, 2004; Allport, 2005; Skinner, 2011) through services and facilities that will attractive lucrative external markets. But as many towns are perhaps now beginning to realise -typically smaller towns or peripheral places - the failure to consolidate local independent business capacity and adjust to meet local needs has resulted in the loss of a vibrant public and street culture on the high street. The mobile classes simply shop elsewhere, often where parking is free, whereas even Richard Florida (2017) brings into question the power of the creative class to drive economic recovery. As Hubbard (2017) argues, high street decline goes beyond retailing and economic development. The footfall that drives shopping also drives local employment, public services and transport. Symbolically, the high street is a meeting place, providing opportunities for socialising and leisure, and remains one of few places where a local community might come together and produce a shared sense of identity, in ways which are conspicuously absent within the regulated environments of the shopping mall or retail park. In this context, attempts to reposition the high street intersect with social and political concerns and require a "whole place" approach to address multifunctional uses.

Repositioning the high street: from place branding to placemaking

Repositioning the high street involves more than rebranding. The place product has to meet the expectations and desires established through development or reinvention (Theodoridis et al, this issue). For towns experiencing a decline in footfall and high vacancy rates, solutions extend into the realm of place shaping or making (Daramola-Martin, 2009; Warnaby and Medway, 2013). At one level, this may involve improvements to public realm through urban design, but placemaking as an approach calls for holistic, collective and participatory solutions to what might be considered traditional planning problems, which go beyond physical redesign to consider how people actually use places in contradistinction to top-down strategic approaches (Project for Public Spaces, 2009). Placemaking has its roots in Jane Jacobs' (1961) ideas about the value of street life and well-used public realm, which she argued were qualities of urban living under threat as places give up more space for traffic, together with de-densifying effects of suburbanisation and the planned decentralisation of cities in the post-war period. Instead, Jacobs saw value in dense, compact and walkable neighbourhoods in producing informal and spontaneous social interaction necessary to build community cohesion. These ideas continue to resonate within architectural movements such as the New Urbanism (Katz et al, 1994) in the 1990s, and more recently in the rise of subversive and community responses to local problems experienced by residents in their everyday life, broadly falling under the umbrella term Tactical Urbanism (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). Although often unsanctioned, and sometimes semi-legal, Lyons and Garcia suggest the growth of tactical placemaking reflects the increasing frustration with formal planning processes and place management, where institutions of local governance appear unresponsive and inflexible. Through the re-iteration of flexible, temporary interventions and events, Lydon and Garcia suggest communities can produce liveable and attractive places through grassroots action. Lydon and Garcia, however, acknowledge that in practice placemaking involves a middle ground between formal and informal action. Developing an understanding of multiple local needs, together with recognising the value of participatory approaches and engagement with the wide range of interested parties who share a stake in town centres and high streets, to "create a better fit between the town's competences and the needs and benefits that the customer seeks" (Whyatt, 2004, p. 348).

Understanding how people engage with centres, therefore, is essential to their success (Teller et al, 2016) and, therefore, any attempts to reposition the high street. For the vast majority of smaller towns, however, including many regional centres, there is a need to question their investment and marketing plans when the focus is on attracting new external audiences to their centres. Successful repositioning in many cases does not necessarily mean replacing existing markets or existing users of a place, but adapting local services to match their needs. This may involve down-scaling, or creating better value/experience for existing local users.

Broadly, a strategy for repositioning will involve shifting from external to internal objectives to focus on:

- Liveability (repositioning centres as places to live)
- Town centre activity (repositioning offer, services and activities, anchors e.g. markets, multifunctional)
- Connectivity (repositioning links, transport accessibility, integration of transport into place, infrastructure)
- Demographic change (repositioning to meet needs of changing catchment – younger families, older generations)

Repositioning, however, is a long-term strategy. The bricks and mortar infrastructure that constitutes the high street environment presents a major challenge to short-term adaptation. Store formats are constantly shifting combined with changing consumer preferences which might render major investments quickly obsolete, leaving town centres with empty shops and failing malls. Placemaking might provide a pathway to overcoming this rigid short-termism. Consequently, this paper begins to address these challenges and ask how towns can reposition themselves in order to be better enabled to identify distinct capabilities and develop competitive advantages and accommodate future trends.

Repositioning in practice

The changing nature of the retail environment and its impact on town centres indicates that all towns need to think about a repositioning approach. Throughout the lifetime of the HSUK2020 project, it became clear that identifying distinct capabilities and developing competitive advantages are two critical components of repositioning. However, the main challenge that all towns were facing was one of effectively understanding and addressing their current situation. Usually, identification of local variations and the problems and challenges associated with the town centre were based on anecdotal evidence. During the early stages of the project, this seemed to be enough for stakeholders to reach some primary agreement that repositioning was necessary. Such anecdotal data, though not robust enough to inform a strategy, provided rich descriptions and seemed to enable local partnerships to get some initial momentum for a repositioning strategy, which could lead to more purposeful market research (Mintzberg, 1979). A full methodology for the project can be found in Ntounis and Parker, in this issue.

During workshops, and relying on these soft data, we encouraged local stakeholders to start determining the town's current situation, based on their views about their town. This exercise can be seen as the start of a place audit, an accurate description of where a town and its community is, and the first step towards strategic decision-making (Kotler et al., 1999). Unavoidably, such a process tends to reflect the complex and multiple identities that people construct for their town. From a strategic management point of view, unstructured processes (Mintzberg et al., 1976) can lead to diverging interpretations of the town and the town centre, and subsequently to diverging opinions regarding which repositioning strategy needs to be implemented. Consequently, stakeholders with different interests, objectives, knowledge, and motivationally distinct values (Horlings, 2015; Peel, 2003) need to build a common ground of where the town is and where it needs to go. Especially in towns where little information about their present situation is available, such an approach ensured that the majority of stakeholders have a partial understanding of the town partnership's objectives (Le Feuvre et al., 2016; Moery and Novak, 2016), are aware of the challenges that their town centres encountered, and are willing to work together in order to alleviate the conflicts that stem due to the plurality of understandings and demands from the town centre and the town in general (Brand and Gaffikin, 2007; Hillier, 2003). However, in most cases, these understandings were backed up by some basic data information (e.g. retail sales from a limited number of shops, or unrepresentative surveys that portrayed a snapshot of the situation) that may, or may not, reflect actual performance. Traditional metrics that are based on historical data, such as vacancy rates and footfall are perceived to be most useful and easiest to collect, but were not available to all towns in the project. Henceforth, the towns were encouraged to start working toward collecting this data (see table 1) and bring evidence to the table regarding the future planning of their towns.

Vital and Viable Town Centres (URBED, PPG6 etc.)

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• Retailer representation and demand	• Sense of place
• Commercial yields and retail rents	

Table 1: traditional metrics of town centre performance

Addressing place management issues

A direct outcome of our engagement with participants was the assessment of factors that influence a town centre's current position. Here, emphasis was given to the top 25 priorities for change that were identified during the HSUK2020 project (Parker et al, this issue). These were presented to participants prior to dialogue regarding the challenges town centres face and, as table 2 illustrates, guided people's discussions regarding areas of improvement in their respective towns. This exercise highlighted that prior to considering repositioning as a potential strategy, improvements in the tangible and material elements of the place product (Warnaby and Medway, 2013) need to be addressed. Yanchula (2008) suggests a relative hierarchy of activities, which firstly focus on the operational side of place management that underpins the safety and overall appearance of the place. Getting the basics right has to be the initial step of all place management interventions (Parker et al., 2015), which then will allow places to build upon and develop other activities, ranging from temporal events and festivals to long-term solutions (beautification and business retention). This level of commitment obviously requires a range of stakeholders working mutually to achieve holistic change within the centre, a point that was raised by a participant in Ballymena:

"We need to work together towards becoming a destination of choice and tackle the negative attitude from retailers and citizens regarding the town centre… Improving customer service, evening economy, and bringing the next generation of entrepreneurs can help towards that goal".

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Table 2: Repositioning factors as identified from HSUK2020 project partners

Partnerships can address all these points from the bottom-up, meaning that actions need to be gradually developed and involve the community. Such was the case in Market Rasen with Market Rasen Business Improvement Group (MR BIG), a now-dissolved Community Interest Company (CIC) that spearheaded repositioning attempts by focusing their actions on improving the main shopping areas of the town. Among these, the major facelift and tidying up of the High Street, and the reinstatement of markets in the heart of the town, aimed to change the perception of both locals and visitors. The goal of MR BIG was to put Market Rasen back on the map, by re-establishing its identity as a market town with participation from local traders and businesses. Their repositioning attempts were not only reduced to the local catchment, but also to potential visitors. The geographical position of the town (near the coast) means that there is an opportunity to "make Market Rasen a gateway from which visitors will explore the whole region" (MR BIG, 2013, pg. 17), with the market as the main anchor:

"A lot of people drive by Market Rasen, but do not stop, and some of the activities that we are putting into place are giving people a reason to stop, shop, enjoy themselves, have a bite to eat and really experience all the things our town has to offer".

Anticipating and managing change: towards multifunctional town centres

A combination or permutation of the 201 factors identified in this project (Parker et al, this issue) alter micro-scale conditions and cause local structural changes in towns and city centres (De Kervenoael et al., 2006). This means that adaptive alignments need to be made to the existing urban form and structure of towns, with an emphasis on more permanent and temporary uses other than retail, making many of them multi-functional (Millington et al., 2015), but in contradistinction to forces that propagate their comprehensive redevelopment and masterplanning (Bishop and Williams, 2012).

Subsequently, repositioning attempts needed to address all the changes that any of our project towns were dealing with. For example, Morley is in the middle of an important demographic change, as young families and a growing young professional population are emerging due to an increase in urban housing developments within the area (ATCM, 2014). This warrants potential change in Morley's town centre performance, and poses a big challenge for the Morley Town Centre Management Board on how to capture the needs of the changing catchment population. Major issues for Morley town centre are centred around a weak retail mix, lethargic street activity, and the lack of night-time economy. The board's current approach focuses on strengthening Morley's image as an independent town with a growing number of independent retailers, service providers, cafes and restaurants (ATCM, 2014).

In terms of retailing and leisure, partnering with the White Rose shopping centre has proven to be successful for the promotion of both locations, as the White Rose creates a positive link to Morley according to town representatives. This collaboration aims to establish a new town profile for Morley as a key destination for shopping, leisure, and culture, with a focus on independents, since 89 per cent of all Morley's businesses are independently run (Morley Observer, 2016a). Understandably, White Rose's close proximity to Morley town centre can prompt people to visit both locations, albeit for different reasons. In this case, complementarity of the retail offer (Teller et al, 2016) is crucial (unique independent shops on the one hand and national multiples coupled with leisure on the other), and the high level of synergy between White Rose and Morley reflects a certain degree of cohesion in their respective action plans, with a common aim to enhance visitation and shopping linkages (Hart et al., 2014; Lambiri et al., 2017). In this case, knowledge-exchange and data sharing on catchment profile have been proven essential towards both centres' cooperation. This also highlights how effective market research processes can reveal ways in which competitive places can complement instead of substitute each other (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008).

Moreover, new planned developments in town such as increased parking provision, park and ride schemes, new train services and improvements to Morley Railway Station (Morley Observer, 2016b; Morley Observer, 2017a) are aiming at eliminating previous connectivity constraints within the town. These can create more routes within and into the centre, meaning greater levels of porosity, particularly in disconnected zones and squares that are underperforming compared to others. Boosting trade and increasing uses in quieter areas is also in Morley's repositioning plans, and a new outdoor food market (Morley Observer, 2016a) that offers Yorkshire produce is already bringing vibrancy and improving the less-noticeable town centre image attributes of busyness and crowding (Hart et al., 2013) in a quieter part of the town centre. Finally, the future production of a Neighbourhood plan (Yorkshire Evening Post, 2016), and thoughts about achieving Fairtrade Town status (Morley Observer, 2017b) further showcase Morley's town council to have some sort of control towards future development, while also differentiating their offer due to new trends at the same time. Such strategic actions highlight the intention of the town council to become an effective advocate for sustained transformational change (Yanchula, 2008, p. 95), which with collaboration with other partnerships can reposition the town.

Conclusion and recommendations

Although places might begin to consider repositioning triggered by high street decline, repositioning needs to be thought of as a broader and proactive approach underpinning place adaptation and management. This can enable local stakeholders to understand what is special about their place, what is happening elsewhere, and also help them to plan for future changes that are likely to have great impact on centres. Planning for the future also highlights the importance of building evidence to underpin both strategic and operational decision-making, as well as sharing data that will bring benefits to all stakeholders on the high street. Our work with the ten local centres who participated in the HSUK2020 project reveals the challenges faced by local stakeholders in clearly identifying and communicating their market position. Poor understanding of place identity or how a place functions, and mismatches between functionality and visions and action plans, is the key challenge to effective repositioning and the development of coherent strategies. Such challenges further demonstrate the practicability of the market research approach, and the need for thorough market research in the beginning of every place management process (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Zenker et al., 2013).

Based on our interactions with the project towns throughout the lifetime of HSUK2020, three recommendations can be made in relation to the design of a repositioning strategy. First, it is essential to complement local knowledge, basic metrics, and “soft” data with more comprehensive data collection and data analysis approaches, as well as data sharing between partners. These approaches can include analysis of traditional key performance indicators (KPIs) such as footfall, retailers’ representation and performance, car parking provision, vacancy rates, property rents, retail and housing investments (Hogg et al., 2007), but can also transcend towards more sophisticated approaches aiming to evaluate consumers’ perceptions and shopping behaviour (De Nisco and Warnaby, 2013). These will generate metrics for performance and also lay the foundation for mutual understanding that everyone will benefit from interventions that are effective in increasing footfall in town centres. Second, there is a need for towns to bring together relevant stakeholders with the necessary skills and capacity to effectively self-organise as a decision-making forum. This requires towns to develop organising capacity (van den Berg and Braun, 1999) and fluid local governance networks that will generate new ideas and also reduce barriers to participation, but nevertheless retain qualities of leadership and vision in order to implement action plans (Peel, Notounis and Parker, this issue). Third, and finally, the repositioning strategy needs to deviate from prescriptive models and become more dynamic, evidence-based, and aligned with structural changes in towns centres and retailing. It is evident from the research that shifting consumer shopping behaviours, enhanced mobility, the advent of e-commerce, and demographic changes, are challenging assumptions about how places are functioning. A dynamic repositioning approach can reveal how and when places are actually used, which could lead to their effective repositioning to the right audiences and to realignment of town centre action plans.

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