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Town Centre Experiences in Digitally Enhanced Places

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Research has shown that towns serve different functions and in doing so create unique experiences for visitors, which can influence whether they return to a specific location (Hart *et al,* 2016). These experiences create both challenges and opportunities for place managers. A key problem being that for the most part visitors' town centre experiences are difficult to manage because they are complex to measure. There are many different variables to consider with few reliable measures to capture and provide insights into the facets of town centre experience. Footfall is used frequently as a measure of customer activity in a place but this is a very limited indicator for experience.

Overlaying the physical complexities of visitor experiences within a place is the influence of digital technology. Digital technology now shapes many aspects of visitor engagement with a place including product and service searches before a visit, communications, social media, e-commerce, wayfinding during a visit, review and feedback after a visit. While a significant body of research is available to better understand the behaviour of consumers and the web, we know very little about how this activity relates to a place (Doherty & Ellis-Chadwick, 2010).

This innovative study examines the connections between customers' town centre experiences and the digitally enhanced places they visit. The findings are part of a large empirical study investigating 31 towns involving over 8500 business in two counties in central England. By analysing the business offer of the towns in the study and visitor engagement with these places, the findings reveal a detailed picture of the scope of customer experience. By using multiple big data feeds the results provide detailed insights of where, when and how shoppers engage with different types of towns.