The Role of Digital in the Town Centre Experience

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Abstract

To date, omnichannel activity is studied between consumers and an individual retail brand or within a single retail setting, whereas consumer search activity and customer shopping journeys regularly involve multiple brands and multiple channels, both offline or online. This is particularly important for consumer choice consideration of a retail channel and shopping location. Town centres have been impacted visibly by the growth of online shopping resulting in reduced footfall and store vacancies. However, scope exists for an integrated digital high street to deliver an enhanced, seamless customer experience. While individual brands and major retail organizations are developing their digital capabilities, similar evidence is scarce for retail agglomerations and town centres.

This paper seeks to explore the role of digital in the town centre customer experience. Specifically, the research examines consumers' attitudes and behaviours regarding the use of digital in town centre journeys. To achieve this objective, a multi-method research approach involving focus groups, diaries and telephone interviews is developed to capture in-depth understanding of the factors that encourage or disrupt consumer town centre experiences. The research draws from a combined sample of 234 respondents.

The empirical findings reveal respondents use digital channels for various purposes before, during and after their town centre visits. However, consumers' restricted access to dynamic information limits the scope, enjoyment and quality of their town centre experience. The lack of free and consistent Wi-Fi in town centres is but one barrier to successful multichannel experiences, resulting in a fragmented physical and virtual customer experience.

Key words: Customer experience, digital, town centre, multichannel, omnichannel.

The Role of Digital in the Town Centre Experience

Introduction

Creating, delivering and managing the customer experience is a high priority for firms (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). From a consumer viewpoint, the connected customer can now access information and buy anything, anywhere, anytime (Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson 2014, 6; Beck and Rygl 2015). As a result, retailers are faced with managing an 'explosion' of customer touch points across multiple channels and complex customer journeys. This, together with social influences and social media means retailers have even less control over an increasingly peer influenced customer experience. Indeed, the retailer faces significant operational and marketing challenges, in managing their customers' needs and expectations cross channel and across business functions to deliver the physical products, service and experience.

Practitioners and scholars increasingly debate the progression from multichannel to omnichannel retailing (Verhoef, Kannan and Inman 2015). Further discussion considers how omnichannel and mobile channels will affect purchase behaviour and store performance, with growing speculation regarding the impact of digital on physical retail stores (Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick 2010). However, to date most multichannel or omnichannel activity is studied between consumers and individual retail brands or within a single retail setting. Yet, consumer search activity and customer shopping journeys regularly involve multiple brands and multiple channels, both offline or online. This is particularly important for consumer choice consideration of a retail channel and shopping location.

Town centres have been impacted noticeably by the growth of online shopping resulting in reduced footfall and store vacancies on the high street (Wrigley and Lambiri 2015). For town centres to survive, prosper and enhance their attractiveness, they need to understand and interpret consumers' changing behaviour and perceptions of the high street in order to compete for their loyalty. While individual brands and major retail organizations are developing their digital capabilities, the evidence for a seamless customer experience is limited in town and city centres (Hart et al. 2014). Given the reported challenge of managing the customer experience for individual retailers, the difficulties of managing the experience across town centres may appear insurmountable. Consumers' may receive inconsistent experiences when engaging in multichannel activity in their town centre visit. For instance, during their town centre journey, consumers may use one channel for collecting information

and different channels for purchasing, each managed by different providers. Furthermore, such experiences may be disjointed due to an inconsistent Wi-Fi connection, or digital platform with which to access the retail and service offer in that location (Verhoef et al. 2007; Chiu et al. 2011). As a result, consumers' interaction with digital channels is often slow and limited to single websites or stores despite the evidence showing that consumers are more likely to impulse purchase using multichannel services, thus generating revenue (Dholakia et al. 2005; Kumar and Venkatesan 2005). Nevertheless, towns and cities are seeking to expand their provision to address some of these digital deficiencies but due to complexities of channel selection and limited research insights to guide investment, the development of digital often relies on guesswork for town management teams.

Existing research conceptualizes and explores aspects of the customer experience in marketing environments yet empirical evidence remains limited for retail environments. This paper seeks to explore the role of digital in town centres to identify the scope for a town centre omnichannel experience. Specifically, the research examines consumers' attitudes and behaviours regarding the use of digital in a town centre environment. To achieve this objective, a multi-method qualitative approach in the form of focus groups, diaries and telephone interviews was adopted to capture consumers' digital usage in town centre visits. The triangulation and complementary approach of these methods provided flexibility to ensure a much-needed in-depth understanding of the factors that either encourage or disrupt consumer town centre experiences (Creswell and Tashakkori 2007).

Theoretical background: Customer experience environments

Customer experiences occur in a myriad of settings, contexts and environments. Taking the brand perspective, customer experience broadly includes 'every service exchange…' (Schmitt, Brakus and Zarantello 2015), 'encompassing every aspect of a company's offering…' (Meyer and Schwager 2007, 117). Conceptualized as a psychological construct, customer experience is also defined as the consumer's 'internal and subjective response' to any direct / indirect contact with a retailer (Meyer and Schwager 2007, 118). In a retail setting, direct contact entails physical interactions with retail stores, products or services. The indirect contact may involve unplanned encounters with representations of the company, products and services such as advertising or product reviews, which occur increasingly online (Novak et al. 2000; Rose et al. 2012).

The customer experience is described as a journey involving a series of memorable interactions or touch points, which combine to form the overall experience (Lemke, Clark and Wilson 2011). This journey 'involves progression over time: anticipation, emotional involvement…. and it reaches some sort of completion' (Pullman and Gross 2004, 553). Thus, customer experience is a dynamic, interactive construct. The touchpoints represent key moments of intensive interaction, either physical or virtual, with people and technology, which can cut across multiple channels (Voss, Roth and Chase 2008).

The notion that consumers engage in and purchase an experience to 'spend time enjoying a series of memorable events' has clear application to town centres and high street environments (Pine and Gilmore 1998). The diverse experiences and interactions generated in town centres distinguish them from individual service encounters, because they encourage customers to activate their cognitive processes across their total shopping journeys (Dichter, 1985). Current literature conceptualizes the customer experience as the interaction with one brand, retailer or organization, across multiple channels (Verhoef et al. 2009). Yet the nature of the experience within an agglomeration of retail stores is relatively unknown (Hart, Stachow and Cadogan 2013). More recently, researchers define the town centre customer experience (TCCE) as comprising a combination of 'functional' and 'experiential' touchpoints that underpin consumer internal behaviour and act as drivers of the motivation to visit the town centre (Stocchi, Hart and Haji 2016).

Digital in town centres

During the last two decades, widespread adoption of the internet, followed by the introduction of mobile and social media channels has significantly changed customer experiences and increased the number of touchpoints that are encountered in a single shopping trip. While less is understood about how digital technologies affect consumer experiences in the context of a town per se (Verhoef, Kannan and Inman 2015), academics and practitioners concur that customer experience in the digital era is multichannel in nature and consists of many touchpoints, both physical and digital. As retailers' move towards offering seamless omnichannel customer experiences, the distinctions between physical and online becomes obscured (Rigby 2011) and the process of managing channels even more complex. Grewal and Levy (2007) suggest that by managing the customer experience across multiple channels (e.g. store, internet, and catalogue) provides retailers the opportunity to co-ordinate and manage how the combined channel approach might influence the customer experience.

Multichannel management can be defined as the design, deployment, coordination, and evaluation of channels (i.e. retail channels such as store, online website and direct marketing) to enhance customer value through effective customer acquisition, retention, and development (Neslin et al. 2006). From this perspective channels are represented as customer contact points, or a medium through which the firm and the customer interact. Omnichannel offers a further refinement of the multichannel concept and is defined as the synergetic management of the numerous available channels. Retail channels include store, online website, direct marketing and mobile channels (accessed through smartphones, tablets, apps). Customer touchpoints in a digital sense, may involve direct or indirect contact with a brand or a business (Baxendale, Macdonald and Wilson 2015; Court et al. 2009) such as, social media customer touchpoints and mass communication touchpoints (via TV, radio, printed media). The omnichannel process occurs in such a way that the customer experience across channels and the performance over channels is optimized (Verhoef, Kannan and Inman 2015). Channels become blurred as the natural borders between channels disappear e.g. click and collect and showrooming. Shoppers frequently search for information in the store and simultaneously search on their mobile device to get more information about offers and may find more attractive prices (see Rapp et al. 2015).

Past research has examined the adoption of multichannel retailing in a single retail setting in the following ways: focusing on the effect of multichannel retailing on brand equity and loyalty (Hsieh et al. 2012); comparing multichannel retailing with pure e-tailing (Jin and Kim 2010); researching consumers' channel preferences (Dholakia et al. 2010) and switching behaviour (Coughlan et al. 2001). Consumers may use services in one channel but purchase from another store, whether in the same or a different channel. For example, consumers use 'showrooming' to search retailer's websites for information but then buy in store or from another retail site that offers lower prices (Carlton and Chevalier 2001). Furthermore, customers are known to switch across channels to buy products, in the case of 'webrooming', especially when confronted with the financial, psychological, security, and performance risks that inhibit online shopping compared with offline shopping (Bobbitt and Dabholkar 2001). Further benefits can occur after the purchase decision is made. Click and collect provides a convenient means for shoppers to receive their goods and as the approach is now widely recognized, consumers feel confident in buying this way. As a result, click and collect is becoming an increasingly widespread practice (Wrigley and Lambiri 2014).

Researchers conceptualise and categorize multi- cross- and omnichannel retailing (Verhoef, Kannan and Inman 2015; Beck and Rygl 2015). Further research examines the

drivers and barriers associated with multichannel implementation in retailing (Lewis, Whysall and Foster 2014). Yet for some retailers' operationalisation of multichannel management is still undeveloped. Despite the wide diffusion of technology in retailing, to date no research has investigated the consumers' use of digital across town and city centres. This paper seeks to explore consumer perceptions, attitudes and experiences of digital usage in town centre journeys. In turn, this will help identify the challenges and barriers that limit the integration of digital in the town centre customer experience. The following sections present the research methodology. Following an examination of the results, we conclude with managerial and research implications.

Methodology

The UK is considered a suitable context to explore, due to its complex urban environments with multifaceted functions that comprise both retail and non-retail purposes (Hart, Stachow and Cadogan 2013), and thus formed the context for this study. Three methodological approaches, focus groups, online diaries and telephone 'exit' interviews, were used to capture the customers' attitudes and experiences with the use of digital technologies in different town centres. The triangulation and complementary approach of these methods provided flexibility to ensure a much-needed in-depth understanding of customers' lived experiences across multichannel services (Creswell and Tashakkori 2007; Mason 2006).

Focus groups were initially conducted to gain specific information about customer experiences of town centres and informed the subsequent stages of the exploratory study. Focus groups allow for group interaction among participants, thus peer pressure can support honest disclosure and spontaneous, unfiltered input from participants. When participants hear about the experiences of other members of groups they are motivated to expand and refine their own ideas and perceptions of the topic. As a result, meanings and emotions surface that may not have been articulated elsewhere (Bloor et al. 2001; Morgan 1997), providing insights into the sources of complex behaviours and motivation (Herstein and Zvilling 2011)

A focus group interview schedule was designed based on a review of the academic and practitioner literature. This was tested and amended following a pilot focus group of postgraduate students before roll out to six consumer groups, one conducted in each of the study locations. The groups were organized and recruited through a market research company.

Diaries were of particular interest to this study as they reflect on personal experiences, behaviours and events (Milligan, Bingley, and Gattrell 2005). Diaries also capture the immediacy and spontaneity of a particular experience, thereby facilitating the accuracy of future recall and minimising retrospection bias (Alaszewski 2006; Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli 2003; Symon 2004). Additionally, diaries can provide access to the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life, including activities that may be easily forgotten or overlooked (Corti 1993), and issues that may not have surfaced through face-to-face research methods. The diaries were completed using a structured pro-forma in which diarists recorded full and detailed commentaries in their own words by answering questions regarding their town centre journey experiences. Entries were completed during a 4-week period.

The final stage involved each of the respondents in an 'exit interview' to assess the respondents' perceived importance of the touch points identified in the previous two research stages and their use of digital in their recent town centre journeys. This involved telephone interviews after respondents had completed the tracking study and diaries over the preceding 4-week period. Given that digital adoption in a town centre setting is under explored, this method was designed to complement the other qualitative approaches to probe further the motivations for multichannel behaviour.

Data Collection

Data collection was outsourced to an independent market research company specializing in qualitative data collection. Respondents in each focus group initially completed a paper exercise to capture their rationale for, and journey process for their last town centre visit. The interview schedule then discussed respondents feelings about their local town centres, probing 'how', 'where' and 'what' town centre experiences were encountered and the type of journeys undertaken. The moderator explored the consumers' motivations and attitudes towards shopping online, how they used the internet before, during and after their town centre visits, types of digital services, channels and devices used. In total, six focus groups of regular shoppers were conducted in different UK locations, involving a total of 54 participants of ages ranging from 18-66 years. These locations were Huddersfield, Loughborough, Watford, Swindon, Bury St Edmunds and Sandbach. Each focus group lasted for an average of 90 minutes. The discussions were recorded and transcribed. Notes were also taken throughout the focus group discussions to cross validate key themes discussed as well as to ensure that the correct meanings of discussions were conveyed during the analysis stage

(Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2013; Krippendorff 2004). All respondents were internet users with 50% being smart phone owners.

The pro-forma questionnaire for the online diaries was designed to capture every shopping activity during the 4-week period, whether in town, convenience or online, with whom, the duration and money spent. A total of 180 respondents participated in the diary study with 445 diary entries and a total of 1869 shopping trips recorded.

The final 'exit' interviews were conducted by telephone and included a 100-item interview to probe further the customer experiences and attitudes towards multichannel and digital interactions with town centres. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Not all participants completed the different stages of the tracking study, hence the sample varied according to the stage. 154 respondents participated in the telephone interviews. Respondents were encouraged to provide as much detail as possible and to recount their positive and negative shopping experiences alongside the reasons for those experiences encountered and the consequences this had on their future town centre visits. This resulted in a rich description of customers' experiences across multiple encounters and interactive channels in a town centre.

Data Analysis

As qualitative information is intricate and diverse, the data were analysed following Spiggle's (1994) recommended qualitative analytical techniques. That is, data were first categorized into 'critical incidents', 'direct experiences', 'indirect experiences' and 'internet use across a consumer's journey'. A detailed coding approach was then conducted through a content analysis method, which drew from traditional analytical techniques (Kolbe and Burnett 1991; Kassarjian 1977). Direct and indirect experiences in town centres were identified from transcripts along with the type of digital interaction customers encountered in a single town centre visit. By carefully reading and rereading the content of the interviews, the researcher assessed what typically constituted a town centre journey. This was carried out using the partial open coded method (Straus 1989), and was completed alongside Krippendorff's (2004) content analysis by reading in-between the lines of the transcripts being assessed. Abstraction was then used to gain a deeper understanding, allowing for themes to be modified and additional themes to be identified.

Three other experienced researchers were involved in coding and analysing the data, which increased the reliability and validity of the emerged themes. A coding template was prepared for the additional researchers that helped code the large volume of data. The

telephone interviews included exploratory open-ended unprompted responses supported by quantitative data. From all phases of the study, the qualitative comments were analysed using content analysis as detailed above and quantitative data were analysed using Excel and SPSS.

Results and Discussion

As a starting point, participants' diary activities were content analyzed to establish the extent of digital or online usage compared to physical shopping in town centres or other locations for the same 4-week period. Despite increasing competition from online shopping and out of town retailing, town centres were still the most popular shopping destination attracting nearly 32% of all shopping visits compared to 13% online shopping activity. However, the average spend by respondents per town centre visit (£55.86) was narrowly exceeded by the spend per online visit (£56.51). When considering the average duration of town centre visits (98 minutes), it is clear why online shopping is preferred for speed, convenience and access to a wider retail offer, with respondents taking only 38 minutes per average online visit. Clearly, town centre visits may also include wider social, leisure, entertainment or cultural activities, beyond retail.

> *"Ease of access, ease of information. If you can find out what's happening on your phone then you are much more likely to do it".*

The findings revealed respondents accessed digital channels for various purposes before, during and after their town centre visits. Product related searches on tablets, laptops or mobile phones generated most online activity before visiting the town centre (reported by 73% of respondents), followed by product previews (70%), price comparison (63%), checking availability (63%) and click and collect ordering (50%).

Up to 40% of respondents also reported using the internet for store finding, getting directions and checking information for town centre events, activities etc. Few respondents (14%) accessed town centre websites before going to town, due to low awareness, and the perception these websites lacked up to date information regarding the stores, goods or events on offer. Customers' limited access to information regarding current events and where to find specific products, services or retailers, inhibited the scope, enjoyment and quality of their town centre experience.

> *"I like you can look at some [towns], Google the town centre and they've got their own town centre website. I like when they have a store directory and you can see what stores are there because then you make the effort to go and find them. If there was a*

store directory and I knew that there was this shop here, I'd make the effort to go. I'd walk from one end of town to another end if I knew there was a shop I liked."

During the town centre visit, 51% of respondents used their mobile phones for various activities. The highest use was for price comparison (26% of respondents), followed by texting / phone calls (23%) and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, email 23%). Price comparisons helped support buying decisions in town with very few respondents using this information to assist purchasing online while visiting the town centre.

> *"I always compare prices. If I see something in town, I would compare prices, because it's so easy to do".*

While product search and checking stock availability were prominent activities prior to the town centre, this dropped markedly during the town centre visit (9% and 7% respectively). A small number (4%) collected vouchers or accessed online offers while in the town centre and a few shoppers checked opening times or directions while shopping (5% and 7%). This low engagement is largely due to poor mobile connectivity, lack of availability of town wide free Wi-Fi, poor Broadband capacity and limited access to accurate information from within the town centre. This is a critical factor when considering the respondents' most frequently cited causes for unfulfilled shopping trips were due to lack of choice and poor stock availability. Thus, digital connectivity is key to fulfilling the consumers' functional touchpoints of stores and products, by providing access to information.

In contrast, respondents reported enhanced experiences using various mobile apps during town centre journeys (including voucher apps, banking, Google maps, physical and online store apps, barcode scanners etc.).

> *"When I've been in Waterstones and on the Amazon app on the iPhone, there's a scan utility, so you can browse around the shelves, find the book you want, scan the barcode and it will come up with how much it costs in Amazon. Or there's another app that tells you which online store is selling it the cheapest, and then you can just click by if that's the one you want. So, you get the tactile experience of browsing, shopping and saying, yes, that's the one I want, but rather than taking it to the till you just click on your phone and it comes to your door. So, [stores] lose out because of that, I suppose, if you go down that route."*

Combining both physical and digital channels, click and collect was rarely initiated during shopping trips, but was a popular option (over 50% of respondents) for pre-ordering products prior to the town centre trip to secure price offers and availability;

> *"The reason why I like click and collect from places like Argos is that sort of [nailed] that item for you so that when you arrive, it's still there in store, rather than there might have been a rush on that product between you ringing up and getting there and there being none left."*

> *"I have looked up things online, ordered them and collected them from stores like Argos and ...New look because they have texted me offers 20% off etc... they also email you the stuff so I go and have a look, but more than that if you shop online you get a bigger discount"*

Respondents indicated that Wi-Fi is a potential barrier to successful multi-channel experiences in town centres. Retail stores provide free Wi-Fi connection to facilitate a seamless brand experience across channels, in part to reduce consumer uncertainty during the search or purchase stages of the consumer decision-making process. Due to the lack of free and consistent Wi-Fi in town centres, online connectivity is often confined to individual stores, which influences where and for what duration customers shopped to exploit the free connectivity.

> *"Having Wi-Fi becomes a bit addictive and you wouldn't use it if it wasn't. You don't need it but it's just, you kind of grow to not be able to live without it. I always try to go into stores that have Wi-Fi so that I can do comparative shopping or browse online for locations or stock availability. I know you're supposed to only use the Wi-Fi connection exclusive to that store but not everyone has Wi-Fi and so I do feel a bit cheeky walking round the shop scanning things seeing which other store does it cheaper and I'd buy it from the other store".*

Interestingly, Wi-Fi connectivity was a linking factor to the Experiential touchpoint of refreshments and coffee shops in the town centre customer experience (Stocchi, Hart and Haji 2016).

> *"A lot of the restaurants do have internet but it's so slow – it's often easier to use my data on my phone which in actual fact charges me. But coffee shops always have internet and I always feel obliged to use their internet to browse offerings in the town centre. But the downfall is I have to do my entire search in that one place and then walk the town centre with that knowledge. I can't really update my knowledge when I'm walking the town centre because there's no central Wi-Fi connection that I can use across the length of the town centre."*

Customer journeys continued after leaving the town centre with respondents reporting further online price checking and showrooming (viewing a product in the town centre and buying it online). A significant proportion (57%) of the respondents use showrooming to various extents.

> *"I used the internet after my visit to town to find out whether I could get a cheaper deal for a new phone online".*

The findings also demonstrate the two–way interactive dialogue with retailers and social community where consumers communicate, share, post and create content in real time.

> "A lot of websites now use web chat. So you can just click and actually have, like, a back-to-back conversation with them so you can check you're doing the right thing. They've got your information on the screen and you can sort of say, "Have I done this right? Am I really going to Tenerife or am I going elsewhere?"

> "You go to the retailer's store, just Google something, and then if you're not sure you go to Amazon and have a look at it and there'll be a good description there, or eBay, and then if you don't like it, you can Google something else and get some reviews, customer reviews. So, I know you can't trust everything that's on the internet, but if you use your initiative, I think you can get a more balanced view than from a [commission led] salesperson in a shop".

The results illustrate that although consumers frequently use digital, it is not well integrated into consumers' town centre journeys and experiences. Online use and access, in any channel, remains fragmented between the customer touch points of assortment and customer service. Notably the strongest influence of digital as a touch point was social interaction in the form of social media.

The results identify three broad elements that influence or inhibit consumers' engagement with digital channels in their town centre experience; retailers, consumers and technology. Ultimately, the interconnectedness of these elements will determine the future development of omnichannel in the town centre experience (Melero, Sese and Verhoef 2016).

Retailers

Town centre retailers and service providers aim to deliver multiple touchpoints to shoppers through digital channels using an array of diverse connected devices (Oppewal, Tojib and Louvieris 2013). However, this growing variety of digital channels often fragments consumers' town centre experiences into separate interactions because the digital connections are specific to retailers and their customers, as opposed to between retailers and town centre touch points. There is currently little infrastructure to centralise the technologies to achieve a smooth transition of the customer journey.

Existing multichannel systems in town centres also lack technological infrastructure and connectivity between retailers and services. Instead, retailers focus on satisfying consumers' needs in a micro retail context. The consumer may appear satisfied with the standalone micro level of multichannel adoption but this is not enough for consumers' wider

satisfaction and utility of the town centre visit. Thus, retailers also need to recognise their collective and individual roles in delivering the town centre experience, which ultimately influences customer attraction to, return visits and satisfaction with that town location.

Consumers

It is evident from the data that some digital solutions to consumers' town centre experiences lack the required interconnectivity between consumers and retailers. This is due to a lack of retailer skills and digital infrastructure to serve consumers' needs. For example, not all digital interactions are necessarily appropriate, or sufficiently personalised to customers' needs in their town centre journeys. Furthermore, the consumer has clear digital needs to reduce uncertainty, such as when searching for information during the purchase journey. When town centres do not support the consumers' need to engage across channels, they also lose opportunity for a 2-way dialogue with that consumer.

Retailers assume that more digital facilities are better for consumers' experiences in a town centre. Whereas consumers prefer fewer, smoother and more efficient digital infrastructure to complement as opposed to replacing the physical retail offer with fragmented or broken channels. Essentially, the consumer perceives the multichannel service in town centres has a broken synergy between the physical and digital experience.

> *"I've had problems – I think it was at PC World – where I got there and they couldn't find [my order] and it took them forever to get it out. So, it's probably, you know, [their system]. Argos is pretty good."*

Technology

The quality of the digital experience is not only hindered by poor connections to a virtual service, but also inconsistent digital services which influence the town centre experience. Consumers not only require standalone multichannel provision in the store environment to support their decision making process, but also cohesive informational services at a town centre level. This is illustrated by respondents' frustration when searching for town centre information regarding accessibility, store locations, brands or product availability in the town centre. This is likely due to the varied provision of digital services ranging from basic town centre web sites to dedicated apps. Further confusion is added with in-town websites provided by shopping malls, BIDs or town centre partnerships.

> *"I think it would be good to have a page that tells you exactly where it is along with reviews. I always look at the 'what's happening', like when I book a weekend away and it's going to be for shopping I always look at what's on, you know if there is a*

market on and if there is something different happening that weekend. Like for example if you don't like the fair, a 'what's on' page gives you the dates of what is happening in the centre and if the town centre is going to be closed off. The last thing you want to see is if you arrive at the town centre and then you're taken by surprise, they are closing early today due to cut in electricity."

The series of unconnected experiences across the town centre, fragments the customer journey. Consequently, the fragmented digital approach limits the scope of the physical town centre experience, due to the lack of integration or customization to customers' needs. Consistent with previous studies (Hseih et al. 2012; Seck and Philippe 2013), consumer evaluation of multichannel service quality derives from aggregating the quality of each service encounter. The flexibility of switching between different channels at any location in a town centre contributes to consumers' positive perceptions. Town centres need to develop strategies to rectify the current digital fragmentation. A starting point would be to introduce a centralised digital information platform whereby consumers could search for locations, stores, brands, services availability and information to complement the physical town centre offer.

> *"I would, to be honest now because I don't come that often I'd probably have a look, just probably Google [Town Centre] and see if there's any new shops because I don't make a mental note of what shops there are, I just tend to wander around and go into the shops that I come across. So if I knew that I was going and planning ahead I'd look at what shops were there so I didn't miss any that I wanted to go in".*

Consumer adoption of multichannel in town centres is likely to depend on consumers' digital skills, experiences and access to alternatives in town centres. It is also dependent on the digital fit to a shopping task and during the purchase stages. Town centres thus have to deliver capabilities that either support the shopping process or deliver value beyond this. To create a holistic shopping experience, touch points have to be seamlessly integrated.

> *"I shop online all the time. Even if I don't buy what I am looking for on the website, you know if I am checking if it's there or just having a look to see what I want to buy when I am in the shop, I'll buy online as well. On either the store websites or eBay, you know Play.com or anything like that, I just use the internet all the time. But I think there is a big big craze with online shopping where everyone was doing it but after a while it is nice to go to the shops again and start using the shops. I don't think you can shop online all the time".*

Conclusions and implications: The role of digital in town centres

Debate abounds regarding the evolving role or even the end of the physical high street. While some sectors have suffered more disruption than others, it is clear from the findings that consumers still desire a physical experience and interaction with the high street. Yet, physical and digital retailing too often competes for the same spend when they should be viewed as an integrated experience, driving customer satisfaction.

The results indicate that at present, both the physical and digital customer experience are fragmented in the town centre. However, digital has the power to create the joined up, seamless experience desired by consumers. Town centres thus need to invest in integrating different channels as opposed to concentrating on improving each channel separately. Importantly, the integration across town centre providers and between retailers and consumers needs strengthening. Accordingly, this will increase the patronage, dwell time of customer visits, leading to greater vitality and viability of the town centre.

The findings suggest that an effective combination of multichannel usage in a town centre is determined by the interconnectivity of technology with retailers and consumers. Providing an efficient technological infrastructure will help expedite efficient service delivery in town centres. Consumers prefer fewer but efficient digital channels across the town centre journey as opposed to too many digital platforms that fragment and detract from their experience. Therefore, the role and use of digital in the town centre experience is determined by the dialogue that interconnects technology, retailers and consumers.

A number of questions remain unanswered. If technology implementation requires aligning with the customer, retailer and product manufacturer, then who is responsible for the integration and management, particularly in town centres involving a diverse range of stakeholders? (Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson 2014). If omnichannel management requires the synergetic management of numerous channels *and* customer touchpoints, is this achievable for the town centre experience when multichannel is still evolving?

The risk is that technology will lead when the consumer should be at the heart of and lead the experience. A missing link to experience creation is that consumer information is limited and disconnected for the high street. Large retail chains generate considerable data on sales and customers' buying habits, which is only accessible to that individual retailer. Aggregate data includes footfall and movement around town centres. Information tends to be un-dynamic, disjointed and unconnected with other data streams. There is no shared data on high street customer behaviour, available in real time, accessible to place managers or high

street organizations. An integrated, digital town centre would allow access to this information, enabling any small or large retailer or service provider to understand and communicate with their prospective customers.

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