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THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ROLE OF SMALL STORES:

A REVIEW OF UK EVIDENCE

Ian Clarke*
Professor of Strategic Management & Marketing
Newcastle University Business School
Citywall Building, St James' Boulevard,
Newcastle, NE1 4JH
Email: i.clarke@newcastle.ac.uk
Tel: +44 191 243 0875

Sunil Banga
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster, LA1 4YX, UK
Email: sunilbanga@yahoo.com

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*To whom all correspondence should be addressed.

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Abstract

There is considerable concern in the UK regarding the growing power of supermarkets, a concern that culminated recently in a UK Competition Commission enquiry in the grocery sector. Against this backdrop, some suppliers, independent retailers and societal groups have been critical of the investigation, implying that it did not do justice to the role of small stores in society, and that this issue is insufficiently understood by policy-makers. To address this need, this paper reviews and assesses the available UK evidence on the social and economic role of small independent stores, and the values that are attached to them by the communities they serve. This is achieved using the Systematic Literature Review methodology. The purpose of the paper is to gauge the evidence as a platform for wider debate on how the role of small stores can be maintained and enhanced. The paper identifies key themes and gaps in the literature as a basis for identifying research priorities, and highlights implications for public policy and planning.

Key words: Small stores, social and economic role, independent outlets, evidence, systematic literature review, retail regulation, planning policy, UK

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Introduction

A frequent criticism of research on the retail sector is that it is disjointed, and tends not be theoretically driven, with the result that it has limited impact on policy and practice. In response to this criticism, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK recently commissioned a business engagement study of the sector, carried out by researchers from the Advanced Institute of Management Research (Wood *et al.* 2008). Through literature searches and discussions with senior executives, nine key themes were identified as being of importance to the sector: retail productivity and innovation, retail planning and the effects on local economies, internationalisation, global supply chains, changes in consumer behaviour, store and service design, e-commerce, environmental issues and performance, and improving academia-retail links. The report highlighted four key characteristics for prioritising future retail research, emphasising that: (1) the research needs to be relevant to policy-makers; (2) it should have the potential for commercial impact; (3) it should be carried out by independent researchers' without an "axe to grind"; and (4) the research should strive to make findings accessible to users. A presupposition of these nine themes – as well as in much published research – is that most of the work reviewed concentrates on the operations and needs of the major retail multiples and gives little attention to the part of the sector made up of independent stores and smaller operators which are an important ingredient in the vitality and viability of the retail sector.

This paper begins to address this shortfall, with its primary purpose to undertake a systematic and rigorous review of the research evidence available on the small store sector. The review focused on isolating and linking together findings concerning a single question – what can academic research tell us about the economic and social role of small stores? The purpose of the paper is to distil key issues as a basis for discussion and articulation of the retail research agenda on the role of small stores in society. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the social roles of small stores, including their impact on social inclusion/exclusion and community leadership, particularly in relation to specific groups such as the elderly, less mobile, ethnic groups, groups of varying affluence;

2. To examine the economic value of small stores in respect of other local businesses and services, and local sustainability; and
3. To identify how these economic and social roles and values are dealt with in terms of public policy and planning and assess the implications for policy and future research needs.

Method

This study aims to improve our understanding of the role of small stores in society by exploring existing literature, chiefly empirical evidence available on the sector in U.K. The paper reviews published evidence available on the social and economic role of small stores using a 'Systematic Literature Review' process, an evidence-based approach that has increasingly been adopted in management and business research following much wider utilisation in the healthcare field (Denyer and Tranfield 2009; Tranfield *et al.* 2003). Systematic literature reviews are a specific and precise methodology by which existing studies are located, selected, analysed, synthesised and reported. The major advantage of the methodology is that it permits the researcher to develop a clear understanding of what is known, and how it can be applied to the issue being studied. The process is transparent and objective since pre-specified inclusion/exclusion criteria are applied to select appropriate and robust published evidence in a transparent and unbiased way. The process has three stages: planning the review, conducting the review and reporting the findings. The procedure and progress of the review was performed iteratively between the two researchers who worked together to check findings and interpretations of the evidence.

In order to fully understand the multifaceted nature of the roles small stores play in society and in the wider economy, it was decided to categorise these into a number of themes. In order to identify manageable themes, we developed a list of key words based on prior experience and knowledge of the sector, and were validated with reference to academic colleagues with expertise in the same area. These words were identified through 'brainstorming sessions' and were constructed into 'search strings' for searching the literature (see Appendix I). The sessions were organised using 'PQR' statements[1], which were developed to structure the process (Appendix II) using soft systems methodology (Checkland 1990; 1999; Checkland and Scholes 1999). PQR statements were used in combination with a 'CIMO'[2] approach (Denyer *et al.* 2008) to identify key words, which helped in a more careful consideration of the nature of small stores, and in adopting a structured approach to assess characteristics which facilitate the performance of an economic and social function. (Appendices III-IV).

Four electronic databases were utilised to conduct the search (Appendix V) and specific inclusion/exclusion criteria developed for the study (Appendix VI). A cut off date for evidence of 1996 was chosen, as the purpose was to assess evidence published since the publication of the influential Public Policy Guidance Note 6 that year, a major landmark in the policy field affecting retail activity. Hence, the study is largely limited to evidence published since 1996. In order to take account of key contributions before this date, references at the end of the limited number of landmark publications were scanned. These were then assessed for relevance to the themes of the review. The extended process yielded a number of additional references – including books, book chapters, Government publications and HMSO articles – and served to overcome the tendency of the systematic review methodology to ignore wider landmark studies that are nonetheless pertinent to tightly defined research themes.

The selected evidence was limited to those containing primary or secondary empirical insights from the UK for two reasons. First, we were interested in summarising the insights from research that were directly pertinent to the retail policy domain in Britain. Second, while the findings of an international study would have been relevant, the scale and complexity of such a search and the differing terminologies used to describe small retail outlets in different countries would have made an international review difficult to operationalise. Rather, our study was meant to be a precursor to a wider set of studies across different countries. Hence, we imposed search term limiters (e.g. 'Great Britain', 'U.K.', 'England', 'Wales', 'Scotland', and 'N. Ireland' on our search of publication databases. In databases where this was not possible, the retrieved papers were scanned and excluded if they did not include empirical evidence from the UK. The effect of this process was to tailor evidence to the UK policy context, in a field dominated by empirical studies in the USA (more than 50% of the references contained in our original search were from the US, prior to introducing this criteria).

Furthermore, bespoke studies conducted for specific retailers or brands were also excluded as the review focussed on the independent retail sector, particularly small stores not part of a larger retail group. This exclusion makes sense given the 'post-PPG6' entry of large multiple retailers into the convenience store sector. As a result, the evidence covered in the review focuses on independent outlets and excludes multiple-owned small store formats and convenience outlets, as well as evidence on the food operations of department stores, so that the evidence is directly aimed at the policy and planning implications for the independent retail sector.

The quality of the research is central to the review and initially only peer-reviewed studies were included, defined using 'fit for purpose' (Denyer and Tranfield 2009) assessment criteria to categorise each study based on whether the evidence could be regarded as of 'central importance' to the study theme, 'peripheral' or 'not relevant'. These categorisations were applied after the full text of each article had been read and assessed. The review consciously refrained from 'scoring' or 'rating' the articles on quality to eliminate any potential bias, though arguably this process has the limitation that some articles may have been deemed to be more relevant than others. In addition, as mentioned earlier, a manual search of references cited in those papers categorized as 'central evidence' was carried out to identify influential earlier studies (i.e. prior to 1996) that were pertinent to the scope and focus of the study.

Finally, each study was summarised using individual evaluation forms (Appendices VII and VIII). Overall, the search strings in the four databases initially yielded 1,422 citations, which reduced to 180 by applying exclusion criteria and removing duplicates.

A few key points can be made regarding the evidence produced in this review. Firstly, the review concentrates on the social and economic role of small independent stores, and assesses the implications for planning and policy to ensure the vitality and viability of this sector. There is a considerable amount of evidence that explores a wider range of issues relating to the decline of the small retail sector, particularly relating to pricing issues, but this was not the purpose of the review. Secondly, there have been a significant number of studies in the retail sector, focusing particularly on large retailers, urban regeneration or retail parks in general, but there is comparatively little empirical evidence in the UK on the small independent retail sector. The reason could be that recent economic development has been achieved through large firms and economies of scale, with the result that the small independent retail sector has remained largely ignored in organisational studies. Finally, considering the heterogeneity of the sector, it was anticipated that evidence would be spread across a mixed assortment of retail stores. Contrary to expectations however, in the small retail sector in the UK is dominated by grocery and convenience stores, and the evidence seems to be distinctly biased in favour of this sector. There is extremely little work done in the UK on other retailers in the non-food sector, and though the citation search on databases identified a small number of articles relating to fashion, clothing retailers, co-ops, charities, tyre retailers, consumer goods, tobacconists, liquor outlets and pharmacies to name a few, most were excluded because either they were studies from outside the UK or because they proved not to be relevant to the review themes.

Findings

Over the last two decades retail strategy and change has been a major research theme in the retail literature (Bromley and Thomas 1993; Johnson 1987; Wrigley and Lowe 1996; Wrigley and Lowe 2002), and within this there has been an underlying concern about the decline of small stores in the UK, especially independents (Davies 1976; Dawson 2000; Dawson and Kirby 1979; Maroney 1976). The major causes for this decline have been identified as the undermining of their local markets by the large retailers superstore expansion programmes and entry into the convenience store sector (Baron *et al.* 2001; Guy 1996), and the perceptions of customers who view small stores as having ageing infrastructures and staid shopping environments (Paddison and Calderwood 2007). The evidence underlines the fact that small and independent stores are vital for the social and economic health of society. For example, the 1971 Committee of Inquiry on Small Firms (the 'Bolton Report') in Britain put a spotlight on the valuable contribution that small businesses make to the economic and social well-being of a nation (Bolton 1971). Small stores particularly make a unique contribution by providing for the needs of a *variety* of consumers (Dawson and Kirby 1979). It is not surprising therefore that the decline has reduced retail diversity across UK towns, with direct economic and social repercussions (Thompson 2007). Closure of small community shops has been shown to lead to a reduction in social contact (Hare *et al.* 2001) and more fragile local economies, especially in inner-city communities (Guy and Duckett 2003). Comparisons with other European regions where the tradition of independently owned small stores has been maintained and where the small store sector has been defended through politically-driven support (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.* 2005; Guy 1998b) has shown, however, that the decline of the small store sector is not inevitable when their economic and social role is fully understood, valued, and supported by regulators, planners, and the communities they serve. What then, does the published evidence say about the role of small stores?

Social role of small stores

A 'hub' for communities

Historical studies emphasise the central role of small stores in providing a place or 'hub' for social interaction and advice to communities by virtue of their proximity to residents as well as specialisation, compared to larger store formats which tend to appeal to a diverse range of consumers through the value and innovation they offer (Alexander 2008; Alexander and Phillips 2006; Alexander *et al.* 2008; Glennie 1998; Hilton 1998; Lyon *et al.* 2004; Shaw and Alexander 2008; Stobart and Hann 2004; Wallis 2008), a function that appears to have changed little over time. Recent studies of the role of shopping facilities serve to underline the inherently social nature of the shopping process and the critical role which small stores play in this regard as a fundamental 'building block' of customers' retail activities (Holbrook and Jackson 1996), which they achieve through: *fostering interaction* by promoting local events and utilising local heritage (Anonymous 2006a); *developing familiarity and building relationships* (Pioch and Byrom 2004) with local customers which allows them to offer residents benefits (Byrom *et al.* 2003); and *creating 'emotional connections'* in a friendly environment (Baron *et al.* 2001). Their ability to meet the needs of a diverse range of customers (Kirby 1987) stems from the variety of ways in which small stores perform a social function: for some they are the only store available, for others they are a source of emergency supply, and for most they are a focal point and source of specialist supplies (Smith and Sparks 2000a). Rather than just performing a utilitarian function, therefore, small local stores meet a variety of social, sustainability and ethical needs (Megicks 2007), and this is evidenced through interventions in regeneration areas where small shop openings have been shown to alter shopping habits by fostering a sense of security, reducing isolation and supporting the independence of residents, as well as responding to shoppers needs by selling in flexible and smaller quantities (Kyle and Blair 2007).

Vital for the disadvantaged and socially excluded

Research findings have particularly emphasised how small grocery shops help meet the needs of disadvantaged groups like the elderly, financially deprived, socially excluded (Broadbridge and Parsons 2003; Bromley 1995) and less mobile by acting as a flexible 'pantry' (Broadbridge and Calderwood 2002), a 'topper-up of larders' (Dawson 1976) for the communities they serve. Needy contexts include: (a) *geographically isolated communities and rural areas* (Dawson 1976; Smith *et al.* 1997), such as the socially excluded in deprived inner city areas, who, because of their lack of mobility, tend to have rely on convenience purchases from local stores which tend to be more expensive (Guy and Duckett 2003; Piacentini *et al.* 2001; Strugnell *et al.* 2003), as well as dispersed and remote rural areas where the dependence on small stores is reflected in the pressure to open longer hours, offer a wide range of general merchandise and food, and meet specialist needs (Byrom *et al.* 2003; Dennis *et al.* 2002; Paddison and Calderwood 2007); (b) *elderly consumers*, for whom small stores within city centres are especially valuable since they make frequent use of these locations during the daytime (Bromley *et al.* 2005) and therefore when such stores are lost to communities, this can have an extreme effect by reducing their social contact (Hare *et al.* 2001); (c) *agricultural workers* who suffer when local store access is poor (Fitch 2004); and (d) *disabled consumers,* who have been acutely affected by the decline in local shops and who are particularly vulnerable to this change in retail provision, because many traditional outlets in older street premises, unlike newer builds, have been built with little thought to people with disabilities (Gant 2002; Schmidt *et al.* 2005). Such findings underline the centrality of small shops to a variety of disadvantaged groups, and highlight just the how little is known about the *processes* that shape shopping routines (Williams and Windebank 2003; Williams and Hubbard 2001) and leading to social exclusion by constraining access to stores.

Enhancing consumer choice and access

Despite almost 30 years of continued retail development and expansion in the grocery sector in the UK (Humphery 1998; Seth and Randall 2001), many consumers still do not feel they have convenient access to a local food store (Fitch 2004). While there has been a growth in awareness of Government of the importance of consumers being able to make 'informed choices', social exclusion has continued to exist in many areas caused either by poor access to stores or by the existence of local retail monopolies (Clarke *et al.* 2006). Although choice and access have improved for many car-owning consumers, there are still inequalities with some consumer groups being faced by poor economic and physical access (Furey *et al.* 2002). In response, researchers have sought to better understand the social role that small stores occupy in the shopping process, reconceptualising choice in the context of consumers' changing and busy lifestyles and their respective level of disadvantage (De Kervenoael *et al.* 2006; Woodliffe 2004). For example, many older shoppers have been shown to feel excluded from large supermarkets either because of difficult micro-access problems (e.g. getting across a dual carriageway to a store) or because they perceive such stores to sell only large pack sizes that they do not want (Kirkup *et al.* 2004). Another stream of work has focused on the impact of new retail developments on so-called 'food deserts' – neighbourhoods with no immediate access to substantive retail provision. In such localities, consumers are highly dependent on convenience stores as they often provide the only remaining access to grocery stores, with the consequence that consumers in these areas tend to pay higher prices and have a more restricted diet (Whelan *et al.* 2002). At the other extreme, a handful of major studies have explored the effect of provision interventions from the opening of major multiple-owned superstores in food deserts in Leeds (Wrigley *et al.* 2002a; Wrigley *et al.* 2003; Wrigley *et al.* 2002b) and Glasgow(Cummins *et al.* 2008), attempting to assess the effects on diet. These findings provide contrary evidence that such large-scale initiatives have a positive effect on the dietary patterns of local households. Similar studies in London suggest that having physical access to shops does not necessarily imply having access to healthy food (Donkin *et al.* 1999; 2007), as these may be too expensive for the local population. In addition, other studies in Glasgow have challenged the existence of 'food deserts' (Cummins 2002; Cummins and Macintyre 1999). Clues to why this might be the case lie in major spatial interaction modelling studies in Cardiff, Leeds and Bradford, where it has been demonstrated that a series of smaller stores as opposed to a few larger stores, are better suited to improving consumers' perceived shopping choices and accessibility (Clarke *et al.* 2002). The 'quality' of these local neighbourhood stores should be a key indicator of the success of regeneration interventions (Rex and Blair 2003). Why is this so? Longitudinal studies of household shopping behaviour provide strong evidence that consumers perceive shopping choices they have available in terms of the balance of *between*-store choices they have available (e.g. in terms of retail brands, price positions, store types and locations) and *within*-store choices open to them (e.g. in terms of number of products and product brands) (Jackson *et al.* 2006). This research has shown clearly that the 'repertoire' of venues consumers frequent varies significantly between different groups, depending on how their shopping practices are bedded within and determined by their daily routines and domestic circumstances. For instance, poorer groups of consumers with lower levels of car ownership in food deserts tend to shop more locally and more frequently than their higher income counterparts, making them more dependent on smaller local stores, where prices tend to be higher (Strugnell *et al.* 2003). Higher prices tend to occur as independent stores find themselves in a position unable to offer competitive prices, because of market distortions and because they compete on unequal terms with larger retailers. The causes include capital investment inadequacies, higher operating costs over a low customer base, locational difficulties, a disadvantage in prices on offer from wholesalers, sophisticated pricing strategies and attractive 'brand' positioning of large stores leading to loss of custom, and an insecure and imbalanced supply chain structured for large multiples (Smith and Sparks 2000a). A section of 'time poor-cash rich' consumers feel higher prices at local convenience stores are offset by the fact that there are no 'travel/time' costs associated with small local store shopping (Piacentini *et al.* 2001).

Others, particularly the mobility constrained and those with cash flow restrictions attach significant value to 'smaller pack sizes' and non-functional benefits such as social interaction, but find themselves put at a disadvantage by the 'premium' placed on convenience. This is particularly true in the UK context, where historically the dependence on convenience store or local shop is higher due to the relatively less mobility of population, and lack of specialist storage facilities, as compared to the USA (Kirby 1976). Recent empirically research published in 2008 found strong evidence that, rather than having a preference for a particular choice of store – be it in terms of size, operator brand, or location – what consumers seek from an optimal assortment of stores locally are three key ingredients: (a) a combination of accessible superstores owned by different brands (J. Sainsbury, Tesco, Asda, and Morrisons) rather than multiple outlets owned by the same operator; (b) complementary retail propositions (e.g. a combination of quality outlets such as J. Sainsbury together with discount operators such as Aldi or Lidl); and (c) the presence of a small store within five minutes walk of where they live (Clarke *et al.* 2007; Oppewal *et al.* 2008). This unequivocal finding provides strong evidence of why consumers need small stores as part of their preferred store choice assortments, because they enable them to make full and varied (as opposed to restricted) choices at the local level. These findings have begun to influence recent Competition Commission thinking on local choice. It is useful to note that this study also corroborated that consumers do not see online grocery shopping as a significant part of their choice sets at the local level, either because such a shopping option fails to compensate for limited physical choice, or because some consumers do not have access to the internet (Dennis *et al.* 2007).

Creating consumer value

Within this broader requirement of consumers to have a range of store choice options, including small outlets, how is it that small stores create value for consumers? Evidence shows that small retailers have their own unique capabilities and distinctive competencies (McGee 2000), and they create value in three main ways: by virtue of certain features *generic* to smaller outlets; by the development of *specialist* store formats; or by *targeting* their activities on specific consumer groups. In terms of their generic features, small convenience stores meet the needs of consumers by adapting to the local population (Birtwistle and Tsim 2005), providing a better service and product range tailored to shoppers needs, and offering incremental services that fulfil neighbourhood needs better than supermarkets. They achieve this by reducing consumers' risks of shopping with them, especially by competing on 'psychosocial' factors and time, rather than financial and physical factors where supermarkets tend to dominate (Mitchell and Harris 2005). They are able to do this by meeting top-up shopping and home meal replacement needs (Anonymous 1999) and adopting a non-standard approach to merchandising and on-going testing of ideas (Smith and Sparks 2000a; Welsh *et al.* 2003) that allows them over time to be more responsive to shoppers needs (e.g. by selling in smaller quantities) (Kyle and Blair 2007). A second way in which small stores compete successfully is through the positioning of a specific format offering. Specialist and forecourt neighbourhood stores, for example, appeal to customers who are 'time pressured' and willing and able to pay a premium in a way that is less stressful than supermarkets by offering ease of access, and an appropriate layout and range of products (Anonymous 2006b; Aylott and Mitchell 1998; Diep and Sweeney 2008), in areas having high affluent urban population (Fernie and Woolven 1995), developing an on-line presence that helps them to compete for customers on value by offering the right merchandise, reducing risks through secure payment systems, controlling costs, improving information flow, developing and offering new products, improving availability, and enhancing the overall experience of the customer (Bevan and Murphy 2001; Lewis and Cockerill 2002). A third way small stores create value is by targeting their offering on specific consumer groups. Small retailers are in a position to develop knowledge of particular groups, some of which have a stronger affinity with them than others shoppers (Child *et al.* 2002) by specialising and developing a congruence between the image of the store and the customers they are appealing to (O'Cass and Grace 2008). They do this by developing a bettering understanding of the benefits they seek better than supermarkets (Ahmad 2003); making practical changes to in-store facilities and developing home delivery (Meneely *et al.* 2008); stocking products that are perceived as more 'authentic' fresh foods (e.g. meat, fish and bakery goods) and satisfying demand for local and locally sourced food (Ilbery and Maye 2006; Morris and Buller 2003); spending more time with the customer (Groves 2001); and advising them on the quality and meaning of the product (Hilton 1998) or helping them to improve their diet (Pettinger *et al.* 2008).

Economic role of small stores

By comparison with the evidence on the social role of small stores, evidence from the UK of their economic role and impact on communities is sparse and equivocal, with a recent assessment of under-served markets by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (subsequently succeeded by the Department for Communities and Local Government) finding that stakeholders hold widely divergent views on their impact (Dunford 2006). Nonetheless, our review does serve to isolate several core issues. First, independent retail operators believe that the owners and their staff have a high level of retailing and selling skills, and as a consequence they *require less training* than is the case with larger retail firms (Baron *et al.* 2001; Paddison and Calderwood 2007). Second, there are indications that small retail businesses *promote entrepreneurial* (Smith *et al.* 1997) *and risk taking activity*, which has a positive consequence in terms of local employment and income generation (Basu 1998; O'Dwyer and Ryan 2002), particularly through the creation of part-time jobs (Smith and Sparks 2000a), and a greater proclivity for convenience stores, particularly Cooperatives, to provide 'NVQ3' level training under the 'Advanced Apprenticeship (AA)' programme (Ryan *et al.* 2007). Third, it has been argued that there is a tendency for smaller independent retailers to be more reliant on local produce and local sources of supply, rather than national or regional level wholesale supply chains structured for multiples, which means that they help stimulate the local economy more so than national multiple chains by helping to retain and reinvest income in the area in which they operate (Ilbery and Maye 2006; Paddison and Calderwood 2007; Smith and Sparks 2000a).

In order to better understand the economics of small retailers, it is important to draw attention to the evidence that points towards their ability to compete with other retailers. Two specific features stand out: their strategic orientation and the organization of their activities. In terms of strategy, a major weakness of independent retailers is their tendency not to develop strategies to guide their growth, a failure to develop a market 'positioning' locally, and their overall lack of market orientation in relation to other retailers and the consumer. In fact, it has been suggested that Government intervention to support such activity would serve to increase their local economic impact (Megicks 2007; Megicks and Warnaby 2008) by promoting specialisation and differentiation – their major selling points to consumers. However, regarding the organization of their activities, small chains and independent stores do not have either the economies of scope or the economies of scale that are characteristic of multiples. As a result, it has been argued that supermarket operators that benefit from such vertical supply linkages and buying power can lead to exploitation of the consumer in terms of price (Delgado and Waterson 2003), giving them a powerful trading advantage within local markets (Burt 2003; Clarke 2000). Research suggests that such economies have been central to major multiples ability to develop an organizational brand presence (Burt 2000), develop new products (Francis 2006), and gain from supply chain efficiencies as the main ways of increasing value to the customer and reinforcing their dominance (Fernie 1999; Potter *et al.* 2007). It has also led to conjecture as to whether supermarket private/own label branded products lead to lower prices for the customer, because of the countervailing power they provide in relation to the manufacturers of branded products with which they compete (Gabrielsen and Sørgard 2007; Omar 1996). As a number of studies have observed, these economies make the power relationship between large supermarkets and consumers highly asymmetric, since compared to the retailer, the customer is small in terms of purchasing power and relevance to the retailer, relatively immobile in terms of being unable or unwilling to travel long distances to purchase food, and uninformed in that they do not tend to know which products are available where, and at what price and quality (Clarke 2000; Gaysford *et al.* 1997; Lennard *et al.* 2001; London Economics 1997). Allied to this, it has been suggested that multiples buying and selling power has been redefined and reinforced through the practice of category management, which has enabled each retailer to develop bespoke approaches (Free 2008). Multiples also gain from their ability to develop sophisticated location assessment procedures, which most operators of small stores lack (Clarkson *et al.* 1996), allowing them to make investment decisions faster and with greater certainty. Such competencies in the major supermarket chains enable them to develop rapidly and have fuelled a debate about their ability to use 'sunk costs' investments – irrecoverable costs through overpayment for premium development sites – to construct barriers to entry for other smaller retailers (Guy 1997).

In contrast with the economics of supermarkets, it is perhaps not surprising that research suggests that independent retail businesses on their own have little power and tend to perform better when working in 'clubs' or networks, or when they are members of buying groups within which they can act as 'merchants' to develop new products, services, and improve efficiency (Megicks 2001; Parker *et al.* 2003). Given the fundamental problems associated with consistent delivery of groceries ordered online from multiples, a number of commentators have suggested that neighbourhoods might collaborate with them to act as dispatch centres (Parker and Gulliford 1996; Watson *et al.* 2002).

These economic features highlight a key issue in the relationship between small retailers and large retailers concerning the assumption of regulators in the UK that they respectively serve 'top-up' and 'one-stop' or main shopping needs. Detailed evidence from two major studies funded by ESRC (Clarke *et al.* 2006; Clarke *et al.* 2007; Jackson *et al.* 2006), however, calls into question this 'two market' assumption on the grounds that both rich qualitative research and extensive quantitative survey-based work with shoppers has shown that the majority of shoppers actually use small and large stores flexibly and inter-changeably for both top-up shopping *and* major one-stop shopping needs (The Grocer 2004). This evidence is significant as it questions the regulatory division of the market and, without this distinction, the national market share of multiples would be seen by regulators as excessive and takeovers of small store chains and organic outlet development might be critically assessed. This definitional issue links directly to the social needs of consumers, who as shown above, hold the presence of a small local store to be an essential part of the assortment of stores they need in their neighbourhoods to have what they regard as an optimal store assortment.

Policy and planning implications

The spurt in out of town retail development (Schiller 1987), and their negative impact on traditional local stores (BDP and OXIRM 1992) was already well documented by the time Planning Policy Guidance Note 6 was issued in 1996 (DoE 1996), and was in keeping with the European trend towards tighter controls over out of town developments (Guy 1998b). The intention of PPG6 was to promote sustainable development, enhance consumer choice by making provision for a range of shopping choices, supporting innovation, improving accessibility to promote socially inclusive retail development, and encouraging regeneration and sustainable development. Authorities were required to develop a hierarchy of centres and assess their main retail needs, and to actively manage retail developments and centres with a view to minimising retail impact. Importantly, the guidance note emphasised that it was not the role of the planning system to restrict retail competition. PPG6 therefore gave greater emphasis to regeneration of town and city centres, preventing the excessive spread of out-of-town retail development by encouraging developers to invest in town centres, assessing impact of off-centre development on the vitality and viability of existing centres where such central development was not possible; and encouraging local authorities to positively plan and promote integrated development planning that minimised car usage. Subsequent assessments of PPG6 have highlighted its inadequacies and inconsistencies and underlined the significant and cumulative impact of out of town retail developments and large food stores on the viability and vitality of town centres (Carley *et al.* 2001; DETR 1998), and by implication, on small stores.

The form of PPG6 was influenced by the involvement of the major retailers up to its publication (Pal *et al.* 2001) and has provided the backcloth for retail development over the last twelve years. Over the period since 1996, a series of inter-related planning studies in Cardiff have examined the effects of planning guidance on large store development and concluded that instead of achieving its intended aims, the result has been that PPG6 has tended to channel retailers into creating more flexible formats for expansion, often into small stores, largely because of the poor understanding planners have of retailers development strategies and how these impact the retail system overall (Guy and Bennison 2007). While detailed studies of trading impact of store development programmes by the major multiples suggest clear cause and effect links to small store closures, more studies of this type are needed in order to corroborate and extend such insights (Guy 1996). Nevertheless, the Cardiff studies have served to illustrate the complexities of retail change at the local level and demonstrated the crucial role of the local authority in engaging with stakeholders such as government, traders' associations, residents' groups and the voluntary sector to ensure that diverse needs are met in revitalisation programmes (Guy and Duckett 2003). The studies inform policy by reflecting the different roles and functions of small stores in local communities (Smith and Sparks 2000b).

In the early days of PPG6, it was predicted that the effects would simply be to circumvent barriers to growth (Langston *et al.* 1998), and indeed a key observation since is that the tightening of the planning system has had a direct impact on retailers' locational strategies as they seek to find ways around the restricted development system (Guy 2006). The way in which they have used more flexible store formats (Guy and Bennison 2007; Guy 1998a) has created problems because their effects are not fully understood by planners, who have tended to over protect and prop up inefficient retailers in outmoded locations (Sparks 2005). By contrast, some commentators have suggested that these effects of planning changes have been over-exaggerated and that the changes to the planning system in the UK have simply injected competition issues into the consent development processes (Wrigley 1998; Wrigley 2001). With the benefit of hindsight, the long term effects of PPG6 have been to force retailers to work within the new regulatory constraints – exposing and exploiting laws in the legislation in the process – with the end result that its main intention to shape retail provision has been circumvented by multiple retailers moving into fragmented markets such as c-stores, thereby eroding the market for independent outlets (Wood *et al.* 2006). Another impact that can be seen is that the scale of out of town developments, and of newer formats, has been downgraded and is relatively more downmarket (Fernie 1998). Arguably, the efforts of major UK retailers to expand, and planning policy aim of protecting the viability of town centres has created a tension, which has been ignored by retailers and policy makers alike (Guy 2002). What we do not know, however, is whether these changes would have occurred in any event simply as a result of the falling number of opportunities through cumulative incremental expansion of superstores, making rent and capital values in smaller and more centrally located developments appear attractive capital investments. As a result, it has been suggested that a by-product of PPG6 has actually been to detract from investment in the more disadvantaged middle order shopping centres where investment is most needed (Jackson and Watkins 2007).

A further implication of the shift in planning emphasis since 1996 has been the tendency for planners attention to be diverted away from town centres which arguably offer more resilient, viable, and secure shopping environments (Crosby *et al.* 2005; Dawson 1995; Ravenscroft *et al.* 2000; Thomas and Bromley 1996; Warnaby *et al.* 2005b), largely because planners perceive off-centre supermarkets to be more popular with consumers (Richardson and Powe 2004). Higher levels of car ownership are now enabling customers to travel longer distances to centres with more attractive retail mixes (Hart *et al.* 2007), with national surveys suggesting that maintaining the presence of independent retailers is essential to the long term vitality and viability of urban shopping locations (Warnaby *et al.* 2005a; Warnaby *et al.* 2004). The result has been a shift in the balance of retail provision away from traditional centres to suburban retail parks without the full impact of this change being understood (Findlay and Sparks 2008; Thomas *et al.* 2006; Thomas *et al.* 2004), as well as a lack of attention to the impact of these developments on small neighbourhood centres (Banham 2006; Emery 2006; Walker 2003). For example, it has been observed from the analysis of the National On-line Manpower Information Service (NOMIS) data that the pull of labour to larger shopping centres and supermarkets has focused on part-time employment as a central feature of supermarkets lower cost base (Omar and Shittu 2005) and has been at the expense of small stores – leading to a net decrease in overall employment – therefore the role of small stores in regeneration schemes is likely to be underplayed (Dixon 2005).

More recently, many of the retail planning issues were brought to a head by the Competition Commission investigations in their reports of 2000, 2007 (provisional findings) and 2008 (Competition Commission 2000; 2007; 2008), which became increasingly concerned with the perceived growth of supermarket power in the supply chain, and in terms of their effect on local choice. While choice *per se* is strictly speaking not a competition issue, it is within the Commission's remit to examine such issues when the outcomes of competition are regarded as having excessive effects. The main conclusion of their 2008 Report was that action is needed in some localities where supermarket power is excessive and, to this effect, they introduced a 'competition test' to ensure that in areas where grocery stores face limited competition, new proposals would be favoured that extended choice by introducing retailers not already present in a locality. Given the important social role that small stores play in consumers' perceptions of the adequacy of shopping provision locally, the impact of this competition test on new proposals and the diversity so essential to local retail assortments will need to be monitored and assessed.

Discussion, conclusions and future research

In summary, the evidence on the social role played by small stores demonstrates that they are a fundamental building block of retail provision, vital to the health of society as they provide for the needs of a variety of consumers. Small convenience stores act as a 'social hub' for individual communities, fostering interactions, relationships and familiarity with customers; and creating emotional connections within a community. Rather than simply performing a utilitarian function, they foster consumers' security, reduce isolation and support independence. Small stores serve a particularly valuable role in meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups by acting as a flexible 'pantry/larder' for geographically isolated communities, rural areas, and elderly and disabled consumers. The evidence from this review suggests that small stores significantly complement other formats and larger stores within local shopping assortments, which is necessary for consumers to feel as though they have full and varied choice. The representation of these different formats has started to influence Competition Commission thinking with the introduction of the 'competition test' to the planning system. However, it is likely that the test will focus on larger retail units and brands, thereby underplaying the social significance of smaller and independent outlets. The social significance attached to small neighbourhood stores by consumers should be taken into account in any Sequential or Competition tests, which should be modified to incorporate in their assessment the detrimental impact of any new retail supermarket development, in order the balance of retail provision at the local level is not affected. Future research therefore needs to examine in greater detail how small stores are used within consumers' shopping routines and how their presence or absence fosters or restricts choice respectively, and the knock-on effects on domestic life and diet. Our findings suggest the need for policy intervention to ensure access to a small neighbourhood store (irrespective of independent or multiple chain ownership) within a 5 minutes' walk, a feature that is valued significantly by consumers in terms of choice and variety.

Evidence on the economic impact of small stores is sparse but emphasises they are an important driver of local economies. This omission represents a major gap in understanding and we recommend research to examine their economic role is treated as a priority. Our research suggests particular emphasis should be placed on research to clarify their role in promoting local entrepreneurship, generating employment, and developing employee skills. The role of small shops in promoting sustainable models of local production, supply and consumption needs to be investigated fully. This is particularly important as it allows for a high volume of business turnover to be returned and invested back into local economies. Small shops are generally reliant on a complex local network of interdependent actors in the supply chain, and these networks constitute a valuable resource for generating business activity in the local economy. The evidence also indicates that clusters of small shops attract footfall, increasing consumer spending, as well as meeting the needs of a section of 'ethical' consumers who recognise the social and economic value of local stores, and who wish to patronize and remain loyal to local produce and local retail.

The review suggests small stores compete on unequal terms with major multiples, because they lack brand strength and supply chain power, and hence would benefit from initiatives to help them differentiate their offer. For example, since it is clear small stores cannot compete with multiples on price or product range, Government initiatives to generate awareness of the practices associated with effective market positioning and market-orientation to develop a more focussed offer would be likely to benefit small stores. A deeper understanding and appreciation of market-led strategies would foster business management skills to address shortcomings in this area. Small retail business owners/managers would value insights about the potential strategic options to help them compete, as long term strategic direction and objectives are often overlooked in day to day operational difficulties and time constraints. Business advice is clearly needed, alongside financial support, at the local Government level, as well as from market/trade associations, to make these owners more aware of their business position. Policy makers also need to recognise and address the value of training independent retailers, to help them understand and adopt new skills and new ways of doing business, keeping in mind their particular needs. The evidence emphasises the value and importance of training for developing new skills in this sector, which policy makers need to address. Allied to this, we highlight the importance of research to gauge the role and impact of such practices on alternative business models for small stores.

This paper draws attention to the fact that behavioural research demonstrates clearly that consumers are using small and large outlets interchangeably for 'top-up' and 'one-stop' shopping, suggesting that the current market regulatory definitions are false. The Competition Commission treats grocery market as three separate markets in a way that is out of line with current consumer shopping behaviour. Increased mobility and the wide choice available has led consumers to base their shopping choices on convenience, price, as well as product range.

Research shows that where consumers shop and how they shop depends heavily on their household and situational context at a given point in time and that the grocery market is, in effect, one. Research is needed to model the effects of changing this definition. For instance, how would such a change impact regulators' approach to market concentration, and to what extent would this suggest a need for enforced store sales between operators? A move to treat the market as 'one' national market implies the regulator would have to shift from its definition of shoppers' habits as being 'one-stop' (the one big weekly shopping trip) and 'top-up' (mainly convenience shopping), to something which is not so distinct - a variety of shopping routines in an assortment of stores in an overlap of catchment areas. In what ways would the independent store sector benefit from such a shift in policy assumption? If store sizes are no longer helpful in categorising the market, the current view of larger stores/supermarkets being a competitive threat to small stores, but not vice-versa, would need to be reconsidered. Would it be reasonable to categorise Marks and Spencers and Aldi along with an independent neighbourhood convenience store, and to believe that small stores exert any significant competitive pressures on larger ones? The findings warrant a major programme of economic modelling work along these lines.

The review underlines the effect of current planning policy and suggests that the formalisation of guidance in the form of Planning Policy Guidance Note 6 in 1996 had the long-term effect of stimulating retailers to develop more flexible store formats across a variety of location types, the impacts of which have not yet been fully evaluated. In order to inform planners, further research into the impact of these different store types on existing provision and shopping behaviours is required, particularly research that examines the efficacy of the planning system in shaping provision at the local level. The review also highlights the need for debate about the nature of policy interventions that are possible where local shopping needs are not met because of local market failure. For example, in so-called 'food deserts', how could planning policy and/or social policy be used to ensure the essential shopping needs of consumers are met when market failure occurs? Evidence suggests that in areas of low retail provision, disadvantaged and socially excluded consumers are more dependent on local convenience stores. However, the notions of 'disadvantage' and 'social exclusion' are not homogenous, challenging the suggestion that convenience store shopping is expensive for these cohorts. The evidence, though insufficient on the relative store price dispersion across areas or within deprived postcode sectors, does indicate that independent stores find themselves in a position unable to offer competitive prices because of market distortions, and because they compete on unequal terms with multiples.

Further research for social policy and development of interventions to meet the needs of these disadvantaged consumers is needed. In addition, we also emphasise a collaborative and participative approach between retail operators and planners to facilitate basic consumer needs being met for such groups.

Finally, we are cognisant that our review only distilled evidence on the economic and social impact of small stores in the context of the UK. Hence, we call for an urgent investigation to assess evidence at the international level. To what extent are international differences in the health and vitality of the small store sector attributable to variations in competition policy and planning controls at the national and local levels? A major review of this type would serve to answer questions of this type and stimulate policy thinking internationally.

Notes

1. PQR statements are definitional statements, a 'root definition' that expresses purposeful activity as a transformational process. In short, a PQR statement when cast in the form "do P by Q in order to achieve R" answers the three basic questions which help break down and simplify complex situations or problems: What to do (P), How to do it (Q), and Why do it (R)? The aim of this exercise is to ensure that there is clarity of thought about the activity that was to be undertaken.

2. The acronym CIMO stands for Context, Intervention, Mechanism, and Outcome. This logic has been explained by Denyer et al. (2008) who argue that the fragmented and limited relevance of research in the field of organization and management studies can be overcome by a 'design science' approach. Although the aim of research in this project was not to develop a design proposition for the issues/problems sought to be solved in the project, the CIMO logic was useful for a more structured and careful consideration of the nature and characteristics of small stores while analysing the literature.

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Appendix I: List of keywords used for database search

Theme	Key words
Theme 1 and 2 **Social & Economic role of small stores**	Small store/s, Independent store/s, Convenience store/s, Family owned store/s, Local store/s, Retail store/s, Small shop/s, Independent shop/s, convenience shop/s, retail shop/s, family shop/s, local shop/s

Appendix II: PQR Statements

Social role of small stores

To understand the social role of small stores by systematically researching literature in order to enable ACS to gain a holistic view for effectively formulating its' strategies.

Economic role of small stores

To understand the economic role of small stores by systematically researching literature in order to enable ACS to gain a holistic view for effectively formulating its' strategies.

Appendix III: List of keywords-Economic theme

Context	Intervention	Mechanism	Outcome
Owners Other small stores, post office Supermarkets	Economic role of small stores	Entrepreneurship Competition Business networking Innovation in business processes Revenue and profit generation	economic benefits-revenues, Income and salaries, local sustainability, viability, vitality, community based business spending power
Employees		Employment-Jobs for local population, Skills creation and development-training Flexible working hours-attract women and youth	
Customers		Customer service, attraction, and retention, Innovative marketing, pricing, convenience, product and service innovation, clustering to increase footfall/revenues	
Suppliers/Distributors		Supply chain efficiencies and interdependencies, Procurement processes, pricing, competition and competitive sustainability(low economies of scale)	
Government Local Authorities		Investment, VAT, Taxes, Duties etc.	

Appendix IV: List of keywords-Social theme

Context	Intervention	Mechanism	Outcome (Intended)
Location	Social Role	Easily Accessible	Convenience, good experience, social cohesion, social interaction, social networking, perception of quality and service, useful, social inclusion, promoting diversity, quick shopping-less time consuming, Sustainability, viability, vitality
Geographic Spread, rural, urban			
Timing/Working Hours		Longer working hours/ extended timings/7 days work	
Elderly, Less mobile, Ethnic groups, affluence (Socio Economic characteristics of above groups) Disadvantaged, discrimination, Post office, Environment		Proximity, Product Range-meeting diverse needs, Fresh Produce, Counter service, Bespoke services, Social hub, Community Activities, Familiar and Friendly atmosphere, Social Interaction, Affordability, Time-scarce/affluent, Environmentally friendly	

Appendix V: Selected database descriptions

S. No. 1	
Database	Business Source Premier (BSP)
Type	E-Journals Collection
Areas Covered	Business Source Premier offers information in nearly every area of business including management, economics, finance, accounting, and international business. It provides full text for over 8,300 sources, over 1,100 of which are peer-reviewed business publications. Other sources include market research reports, country economic reports, and detailed company profiles for the world's 10,000 largest companies
Coverage	1922 to present; coverage varies by title.
Publisher and URL	EBSCO, http://www.epnet.com/
Specific Comments and Limitations	ISBN and phrase truncation are not supported

S. No. 2	
Database	Web of Science
Type	Indexing Databases
Areas Covered	Collectively indexes over 8,500 high qualities, peer-reviewed journals, providing complete bibliographic data, full-length author abstracts, and cited references to influential research. Part of Web of Knowledge
Coverage	Science 1945-current. Social Sciences 1956-. Arts & Humanities 1975- . Updated weekly
Publisher and URL	Thomson Scientific, http://www.isinet.com/
Specific Comments and Limitations	Author searches are done using the last name only. Year searches may be done as the second part of a Boolean AND search only. Subject searches are done in All Fields. ISSN and ISBN searching is not supported.

S. No. 3	
Database	Science Direct (ELSEVIER)
Type	Indexing Databases
Areas Covered	Science Direct is the full-text journals service from Elsevier. It contains over 1,700 full-text journals, mainly in the sciences, but also includes other disciplines such as management, social sciences, arts & humanities
Coverage	Lancaster users do not have full-text access to every journal available in Science Direct
Publisher and URL	http://www.elsevier.com
Specific Comments and Limitations	Author searches are done on the last name only. ISBN searches are not supported. Subject searches are supported, but subjects are not presented within the records.

S. No. 4	
Database	Swetswise
Type	E-Journal Collections
Areas Covered	SwetsWise offers a single point of access to a large and growing range of full text publications as well as table of contents and abstracts
Coverage	Not Specified, coverage varies
Publisher and URL	Swets Information Services, http://www.swets.com/
Specific Comments and Limitations	Up to 30 authors will be displayed in the records. Subjects are searchable, but will not display in records. Truncation is not supported. Refining searches is not supported. Boolean OR and NOT searches are not supported. Year searches are not supported

Appendix VI: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria applied for studies

No.	Criteria	Reason for exclusion
1.	Pre 1996 studies	A cut-off date of 1996 was chosen, as the planning policy guidance(ppg6) notes was published in 1996, (and subsequently revised and replaced in 2005 by the planning policy statement(pps6) note 6), on town planning.
2.	Quality Criteria	Review only academic, scholarly, or peer reviewed articles in order to have the best possible evidence
3.	Only UK empirical evidence	The research was limited to studies which had empirical evidence gathered in the UK
4.	Studies pertaining to a specific retailer or company	The research was aimed at only the generic retail sector

Appendix VII: Excel form for data extraction and analysis

Sr.No.	Study(Author, Year,Title, Journal, Volume, Issue, Pages)	Abstract	Year	Journal	Funding	Theoretical Underpinning/Framework used	Methods	Nature of Evidence	Location of Empirical Evidence	Evidence Details	Key Findings	Own Interpretations relating to themes

Appendix VIII: Word form for data extraction and analysis

Sr. No.:		
Study(Author, Year, Title, Journal, Volume, Issue, Pages)		
Abstract		
Funding	**Theoretical Underpinning/Framework used**	**Methods**
Nature of Evidence	**Location of Empirical Evidence**	**Evidence Details**
Key Findings		
Own Interpretations relating to themes		

Appendix IX: Overall summary of search results

Science Direct

Search conducted on 24/07/2008

Search mode: Advanced

Fields: Title, Abstract and Key word fields

Publication years: 1996-2008

Key words	No. of Citations
193 articles found for: pub-date > 1995 and TITLE-ABSTR-KEY("Small shop" OR "Independent shop" OR "convenience Shop" OR "retail shop" OR "family shop" OR "local shop")	193
45 articles found for: pub-date > 1995 and TITLE-ABSTR-KEY("small retail*" OR "independent retail*" OR "convenience retail*" OR "family* retail*" OR "local retail*")	45
93 articles found for: pub-date > 1995 and TITLE-ABSTR-KEY({Small store} OR {Independent store} OR {convenience Store} OR {retail store} OR {family store} OR {local store})	93
Total no. of citations	**331**
Relevant citations retrieved	**38**
Success rate: Relevant citations as % of total	**11.48%**

Swetswise

Search conducted on 22/07/2008

Limiters- published years: 1996 - 2008

Expanders: all subscriptions, categories: all

Language: EN

Key words	Fields	No. of Citations
Search results for "small shop?" or "independent shop?" or "convenience shop?" or "retail shop?" or "family shop?" or "local shop?"	Advanced search, within article abstract	61
search results for "small retail*" or "independent retail*" or "convenience retail*" OR "local retail*"	Advanced search, within all fields	78
Search results for "convenience store?"	Basic search, within article abstract	51
Search results for "family store?"	Basic search, within article abstract	4
search results for "independent store"	Basic search, within article abstract	12
Search results for "local store?"	Basic search, within article abstract	26
Search results for "retail store?"	Basic search, within article abstract	100
Search results for "small store?"	Basic search, within article abstract	12
Total no. of citations		**344**
Relevant citations retrieved		**23**
Success rate: Relevant citations as % of total		**6.69%**

Web of Science

Time span=1996-2008. , Databases=SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, A&HCI.

Refined by: Countries/Territories= (NORTH IRELAND OR ENGLAND OR SCOTLAND OR WALES)

Search mode/screen: Search, Fields: 'Topic' (Title, Abstract, and Author Keywords)

Key words	Date	Total No. of Citations	Limited by Geography	Citations retrieved	Relevant
Results Topic=("Small store" OR "Independent store" OR "convenience Store" OR "retail store" OR "family store" OR "local store")	22/07/2008	213	14	13	7
Results Topic=("Small shop*" OR "Independent shop*" OR "convenience Shop*" OR "retail shop*" OR "family shop*" OR "local shop*")	23/07/2008	187	28	24	6
Results Topic=("Small retail*" OR "Independent* retail*" OR "convenien* retail*" OR "family* retail*" OR "local retail*")	24/07/2008	142	22	22	7
Total no. of citations		**542**	**64**	**59**	**20**
Duplicates	**1**				
Final	**19**				
Success rate: Final as % of total	**3.50%**				

Business Source Premier

Limiters -	Scholarly (Peer Reviewed)
Geographical terms-	"GREAT Britain"
Journals-	Published Date from: 1996-2008
Expanders -	Apply related words; also search within the full text of the articles
Search modes -	Boolean/Phrase
Interface –	EBSCO host
Search Screen -	Advanced Search

Key words	Date	Total No. of Citations
"Small store*" OR "Independent* store*" OR "convenien* store*" OR "retail* store*" OR "family* store*" OR "local store*"	09/07/2008	63
"Small shop*" OR "Independent shop*" OR "convenien* Shop*" OR "retail* shop*" OR "family* shop*" OR "local shop*"	23/07/2008	119
"Small retail*" OR "Independent* retail*" OR "convenien* retail*" OR "family* retail*" OR "local retail*"	24/07/2008	23
Total no. of citations		**205**
Relevant		**130**
Duplicates		**9**
Final		**121**
Success rate: Final as % of total		**59.02%**