

Will Coronavirus finally kill Britain's high street?

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The future of the high street has looked gloomy for a long time, far before the Coronavirus pandemic. The onset of the virus has only made it more difficult for retailers to 'bounce back'.

With online shopping being quicker, easier and more practical than ever before, high street shops have long been fighting to keep their place in the market, and COVID-19 has only made the internet an even more preferable method for the consumer.

A number of online retailers have had to cater to the increased demand during lockdown, with Amazon hiring [10,000 extra staff](#) to cope. In fact, CEO Jeff Bezos has grown his vast fortune by a further [\\$24bn so far](#) during the coronavirus pandemic.

Although shops are now allowed to open with limited numbers of staff and customers allowed in the shops at one given time, this has not made the average member of the public rush back. So, what is the new "norm" for the high street shop?

The struggles of Debenhams have been widely publicised, having to cut 2,500 jobs and close down its big stores across the UK. John Lewis has recently announced plans to close down a number of its largest stores, including in Watford's Intu Centre and at Birmingham's Grand Central.

This was in some ways a shock, but in other ways completely understandable. Both Debenhams and John Lewis are massively popular stores and can even be regarded as 'giants of the high street'. However, in recent years, both have struggled to compete with online and other retailers.

Unfortunately, department stores that offer everything from men's socks to perfume, simply aren't fashionable anymore, with many preferring to spend their money in more specialist stores, as opposed to massive shops that may not be able to offer the same level of expertise with their products.

A popular way independent stores have tried to tackle this issue is through promoting their brands online, through websites such as Etsy and Not On The High Street, giving smaller, up-and-coming brands a chance to sell their products online far more cheaply due to the absence of rents and rates and consumer ease.

Similarly, fast fashion brands such as Pretty Little Thing and Misguided are adding to the high street competition. How will the likes of New Look, River Island and Topshop compete in the future, when they have additional costs from having high street stores. Their online competitors, like Boohoo, Nasty Gal and ASOS simply do not have these kind of concerns.

Having said all this, I personally have actively indulged in high street shopping since it has reopened, but I'm unsure if this is because there is not much else going on right now or if I have genuinely missed being out and about. Although there are benefits to online shopping, I never feel the quality is as good and feel I am not the only one constantly sending things back.

Whereas this used to be a benefit when it came to high street shopping, I am now experiencing similar issues since shoppers are no longer allowed to try clothes on or use dressing rooms in store. I have found it frustrating to not be able to try things on, but at least you can view the item in person before buying it. This lack of being able to try before you buy will only continue to have a knock on effect for our high street shops.

Personally, Victoria's Secrets was a huge loss and shock to me to see go into administration earlier this year. This is a global company, which is very popular, and benefits from many models and celebrities being associated with the brand. I will be sad to see it leave the high street and I hope it manages to sustain its business online.

However, having researched into Victoria's Secrets closure, it is not just the pandemic to blame. The brand is far weaker than it was a few years ago, and it had lost numerous consumer sales due to consumer change in 2019. Even their annual fashion show has been scrapped due to poor television ratings.

It seems high street shops are trying their best to survive by adding additional safety measures to try and entice customers in. For example, there are hand sanitizer stations in every doorway, a new norm I have sort of got used to and quite prefer. In the future, this could be the new cleaner high street shopping experience, where sanitising stations may not ever fade away, possibly not having over crowded stores and asking people to wait their turn, could be an attractive new shopping experience. I have certainly preferred shopping on the high street without the hustle and bustle. The stores look cleaner overall and people seem a lot calmer roaming around.

However, face masks becoming compulsory on the high street could seriously deter consumers, causing an even greater fall in the number of consumers choosing physical shops over online shopping. Although a safe and necessary precaution, it is definitely not a comfortable accessory. Having spoken to a number of middle-aged people around me, it is clear they would rather not venture out to the high street and move to the online world, with masks being a significant factor in this decision.

Even more so, the older generation, those more likely to support their local shops and high street stores rather than moving to online, definitely appear more worried about heading to shops and supermarkets due to the pandemic. Although I understand we have to wear masks to keep these stores open for the economy, and to keep each other safe, I can see the detrimental impact it could have on consumers not wanting to shop on the high street or in shopping centres.

Its clear high street stores need to differentiate themselves from one another, in an attempt to excite consumers once again. Nowadays, every high street virtually looks the same, pushing consumers to online not only for convenience, but also to find something totally different from what's already in shops.

We may see the high streets prospering once again in the future, it would be a shame to see them disappear altogether. But in order to do this, a lot of change needs to be done for people to see the high street as they once used to.