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### Do connected town-centre shopping journeys improve town-centre patronage?

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## Do Connected Town Centre Shopping Journeys Improve Town Centre Patronage?

### Abstract

**Purpose** – This study explores the role played by digital channel integration in the town centre shopping experience. It also explores how customers perceive the role of digital in the town centres shopping journeys, improves shopping experiences, and encourages positive future patronage behaviour. Ultimately, the aim is to identify the likely implications of a connected shopping experience on patronage intentions.

**Design/methodology/approach**– A qualitative research design using focus groups to explore customers' perceptions of connected town centre shopping experiences was deployed. Then, data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify overarching themes.

**Findings** – Digital integration has the potential to serve discreetly different functions in the town centre context: *create interconnected information channels, facilitate improved connected shopping experiences, generate positive perceptions of a town*, which subsequently shape future patronage intentions. The study also revealed expectations of digital integration are yet to be fully realised in the town centre context and there are tensions between physical and digital domains to be overcome if digital integration is to positively influence patronage intentions.

**Research Limitations** – The nature of exploratory research tends to pose questions and open out a problem rather than provide definitive answers. This study has sought to highlight key issues and also provide points of departure for future studies. The significance and generalisability of the results are limited by the size and nature of the sample.

**Originality/value** – This study provides theoretical contribution to the town centre literature by expanding our understanding of consumers perceptions of the role of digital integration in shopping journey experiences and unlocks insights into its potential impact on future patronage intentions. Practical considerations for integrating digital in the town centre to create more connected shopping experiences.

**Keywords** Shopping Experience, Connected Experience, Digital Integration, Town Centre, Patronage

**Paper type:** Research paper

## Introduction

Historically, town centres are important shopping destinations in the UK, but High Streets are being recalibrated through the adoption and integration of digital channels by businesses, service providers and other stakeholders. Despite this widespread adoption of digital technologies, town centre managers make limited investments in improving their town's digital presence and communication channels (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019). Perhaps this is explained by consumer demand for digital channels and the impact on shopping experiences being poorly understood at the level of the town-centre. While researchers have widely studied how complex High Street environments stimulate consumer engagement and enhance their experiences when visiting towns for various shopping journey purposes (Stocchi *et al.*, 2016), to the authors' knowledge, none has empirically tested how digital channels might influence consumer shopping experiences in this context. This scarcity of research into the integration of digital technologies is surprising given that most town centre journeys are shopping related (Hart *et al.*, 2013). Especially, when considering growing evidence that integrating physical and digital channels can better satisfy consumer demands by providing contextual information at decisive moments of truth in the customer's shopping journey (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Alongside this, high street performance in 2018 showed significant drop in customers' footfall in UK town centres by 8.1% leading to an increase in the vacancy rates by 11.1% from the previous years (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019). Given these concerns, research exploring integration of digital channels on the town centre landscape becomes critical to arrest decline and avoid places becoming 'ghost towns' (Holder, 2019; Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019). Arguably, digital integration is becoming even more important for town centres following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which, has demonstrated the volatility of brick and mortar stores sales as customers come to rely heavily on online shopping. Reports suggest consumer e-commerce grew by over 40% since March 2020 and multi-channel retailers saw an increase closer to 70%, suggesting changing consumer behaviour when choosing where to shop (Rigby, 2020). With growing concerns that customers' patronage may not return to pre-pandemic levels, understanding the impact of digital integration in town centres becomes more urgent to maintain the viability of towns as retail destinations.

The following issues are recognised as central to understanding digital integration and provide a point of departure for this exploratory study:

- i. To what extent do digital channels (in a town centre) offer synergies with the physical place, and does this enhance or limit customers' ability to migrate across channels to achieve different shopping goals (Herhausen *et al.*, 2015; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015)?

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- 4 ii. Does the existing level of integration of digital channels (in a town centre) hinder shopping
- 5 journeys, and impact negatively on consumer experiences if they are unable to easily achieve
- 6 their shopping goals conveniently (Wrigley *et al.*, 2015)?
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- 10 iii. To what extent does digital channel integration deliver benefits such as reduce spatial and
- 11 temporal constraints and reduce transactional costs of shopping in the physical place (Demko-
- 12 Rither and Ter Halle, 2015)?
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- 15 iv. How can digital integration impact (on a town centre) on patronage behaviour (Betzing *et al.*,
- 16 2018; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015; El Azhari and Bennet, 2015)?
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19 Therefore, this paper is a first step in understanding how customers perceive digital integration in town  
20 centres. It considers the scope for this integration in developing a connected town centre shopping  
21 experience and the likely implications of shopping experience on patronage intentions. The paper is  
22 structured as follows: first, it explores theoretical background on connected shopping experience in the  
23 literature. Then, the methodology and analysis of the results are highlighted. Finally, a discussion is  
24 provided alongside theoretical contributions, managerial implications and future research direction.  
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### 30 **Theoretical background**

#### 31 *Disrupted dynamics of the shopping experience*

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36 Researchers have discussed how the advancement of digital retailing disrupted the dynamics of  
37 shopping experiences (Dennis *et al.*, 2016; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015). For instance, customers' expectations  
38 and behaviours towards the physical store have altered due to increased accessibility to a plethora of  
39 online information across multiple channels beyond those of the retailer (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016;  
40 Cao and Li, 2015; Pauwels and Neslin, 2015). These actions facilitated new shopping behaviours such  
41 as webrooming and showrooming to make better shopping decisions (Pantano and Priporas, 2016;  
42 Verhoef *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, customers' expectations from the shopping experience extended  
43 beyond a single channel and retailer, making it more dynamic and difficult to manage (Verhoef *et al.*,  
44 2015). The possibilities afforded by digital technologies have influenced both retailer and consumers.  
45 Since 2005, many large retailers' have made investments in digital channels aimed at developing  
46 superior customer experiences and levels of service online (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Doherty *et al.*,  
47 2015). This is stimulated by customers' demand for a multisensorial and interactive experience that  
48 entertains, stimulates and emotionally affects them (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). As such, Terblanche (2018)  
49 argues a memorable shopping experience is associated with a distinct competitive advantage that  
50 influences existing and future customers' patronage intentions.  
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3 A body of research from the customer perspective has examined customer experiences with  
4 retailers following digital integration (Pantano and Priporas, 2016; Herhausen *et al.*, 2015; Cao and Li,  
5 2015). But this needs extending to explore at a macro level (such as town centres) and to increase  
6 understanding of the effect of digital integration on the shopping experience and patronage behaviour  
7 (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019; Stocchi *et al.*, 2016; Wrigley *et al.*,  
8 2015). This is equally important because shopping experience is personal and informed by interaction  
9 between the customer and stimuli (from the retail environment) across each stage of the decision-  
10 making process (Jain *et al.*, 2017; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Customers evaluate the totality of their  
11 interactions with the physical retail touchpoints to create a perception of the shopping experience that  
12 guides their patronage intentions (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). These perceptions are moderated by a  
13 customer's ability to achieve their goals from interacting with a specific channel/retailer (Verhoef *et al.*,  
14 2009). With the image of town centre changing beyond a pure retail destination (Hart *et al.*, 2013),  
15 understanding customers' perceptions of digital integration on their *connected* town centre shopping  
16 experience could unlock insights into patronage issues for better place management.  
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### 25 26 *Connected shopping experiences*

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28 With the advancement of digital retailing, customers' expectations from retail settings extended beyond  
29 physical interactions with the retail place (Dennis *et al.*, 2016; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015). Digital retailing  
30 started empowering customers with information to use during the decision-making journey, which  
31 altered their expectations and behaviours (Cao and Li, 2015). Nowadays, depending on their shopping  
32 goals, many customers prefer to shop across different physical and digital channels to create a connected  
33 shopping experience, which increases the perceived value of their shopping decisions (Betzing *et al.*,  
34 2018; Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2013). Studies found that integrating digital channels and technologies in  
35 retailing influence purchase intentions positively (Watson *et al.*, 2018; Pantano and Priporas, 2016).  
36 Digital retailing increases the quality of shopping experience by enabling personalised retail services  
37 that facilitate the interaction process (Hoffman and Novak, 2015). Further, it allows constant availability  
38 and interactivity between the customer and retailer to conduct the transaction at the customer's  
39 convenience beyond the physical store, which reduces transactional costs of shopping (such as time and  
40 effort), thus enhancing the shopping experience (Frasquet and Miquel, 2017; Demko-Rihter and Ter  
41 Halle, 2015).  
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50 A connected shopping experience has also been found to have a positive effect on customers'  
51 search, purchase and willingness to pay intentions (Herhausen *et al.*, 2015; Pantano and Priporas, 2016).  
52 These researchers argue by digitally linking the physical store, customers' experienced higher positive  
53 perceptions of service quality and reduced levels of perceived risk in their decision-making, which led  
54 to an improvement in perceived experience overall. The effect of digital channels integration on the  
55 physical store extends to other attributes including customers' order size and purchase frequency (Cao  
56 and Li, 2015; Pauwels and Neslin, 2015). In the high street context, scholars found a positive effect of  
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3 integrating several digital technologies on customers' shopping experience and patronage intentions  
4 (Betzing *et al.*, 2018; El Azhari and Bennet, 2015; Demko-Rihter and Ter Halle, 2015). For instance,  
5 the introduction of digital channels and technologies reduced spatial and temporal constraints, allowing  
6 customers to plan their shopping journey and increase the convenience of the shopping visit (Demko-  
7 Rihter and Ter Halle, 2015). Consequently, customers were able to develop better shopping experiences  
8 that induce positive patronage behaviour towards the high street (Betzing *et al.*, 2018; El Azhari and  
9 Bennet, 2015).  
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### 16 *Digital Integration and Patronage intentions*

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19 Research suggests a lack of a connected shopping experience in town centres may have negative  
20 implications on patronage. For physical places to survive, Rigby (2011) emphasises the need to have  
21 “an integrated sales experience that melds the advantages of physical stores with the information-rich  
22 experience of online shopping” (p.4). This statement is supported by recent work demonstrating the  
23 advantages of channel synergies across the decision-making process (Anderl *et al.*, 2016; Fornari *et al.*,  
24 2016). As we move towards an omnichannel strategy, scholars emphasise the need to take a customer-  
25 centric approach to online-offline channel integration to satisfy different customer goals (Palmatier *et*  
26 *al.*, 2020). Indeed, the limited digital integration in town centres creates spatial and temporal constraints  
27 where customers remain unable to interact with the town centre without physically being there, thus  
28 limiting their goal fulfilment process (Demko-Riher and Ter Halle, 2015). Accordingly, customers may  
29 face challenges in fulfilling their shopping goals, incurring significant monetary and temporal costs. (El  
30 Azhari and Bennet, 2015; Wrigley *et al.*, 2015).  
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39 The relationship between the town centre customer experience and the likelihood of revisiting  
40 the town centres are noted in the literature (Stocchi *et al.*, 2016; Hart *et al.*, 2013). However, these  
41 studies focused on customers' physical interactions with the town centre, with limited consideration of  
42 the effect of digital on the town centre customer experience. Reports and academic research raised the  
43 call for researching the effect of digital on the Town Centre Customer Experience (Wrigley *et al.*, 2015).  
44 At a business level, Pantano and Timmermans (2014) argue “the emerging idea of smart retailing would  
45 reflect a particular idea of retailing, where firms and consumers use technology to reinvent and  
46 reinforce their role in the new service economy, by improving the quality of shopping experiences”  
47 (p.102). Thus, town centres are encouraged to rethink their digital retail offer to maintain their  
48 economic and sociological contributions  
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55 Additionally, limited focus on the role of digital channel integration in previous studies  
56 highlights the importance of further exploration of the connected shopping experience and its likely  
57 impact on town centre patronage. Creating a seamlessly connected experience across the retail channels  
58 can help retailers to maintain their customers and improve performance (Jocovski *et al.*, 2019). Kim  
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(2002) argued, retailers should explore how customers are shopping in the digital domain to create similar experiences in the physical place. But also, to understand the scope to transcend the limitations of either physical or digital channels by connecting them together to deliver much more informed shopping journeys. As such, this exploratory study seeks to attain insights into the forms of digital integration that can be leveraged in the town centre to create a connected shopping experience. This study addresses the following specific research questions:

*RQ1: How do customers perceive digital integration can be implemented in the town centre shopping journey to enhance the shopping experience?*

*RQ2: What is the likely effect of a connected shopping experience on town centre patronage intentions?*

### **Methodology: Exploring the connected shopping experience in a town centre**

This study applied an exploratory qualitative approach to probe the connected shopping experience in a town centre context. This approach develops insights into participants perceptions of constructs and variables of interest (Hair *et al.*, 2017) and allowed us to delve into their connected shopping experiences.

Three focus groups were administered in an East Midlands town centre, which represents an average market-town in the UK with a population over 60,000 (Taylerson, 2017). Additionally, the town has a university with 3869 employees and 17,077 students from different regions across the UK (Loughborough University, 2019), which adds to the richness of the attained data due to participants' diversified shopping experiences across the country. A purposeful sampling technique was used to recruit participants from different demographic profiles in a timely manner. Participants were recruited following a research call through emails and social media platforms.

Each focus group involved 8-12 participants with a total of 29 participants taking part in the study. Participants ages ranged from 18-60 years old, with an average of 34.7 years and a representative spread of socio-economic profiles (AB, C1, C2 and DE). There were more females (18) than males (11) in this study, which is consistent with the demographic split of this town and previous town centre research (Stocchi *et al.*, 2016). As noted earlier, a few participants have lived and have shopped in various towns across the region. The diverse shopping experiences of those participants enabled the researcher to elicit insights about the connected town centre shopping experience across several towns.

Each session lasted 75 minutes and was moderated and recorded by the research team. Focus groups were semi-structured, and participants were guided through the interview schedule. Open-ended questions allowed participants to freely express their shopping experiences using their own words and engage in an interactive discussion. Thematic analysis based on Braun and Clark (2006) was applied to extract latent meanings behind participants' words. With limited understanding of the connected town



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3 centre shopping experience in the literature, we adopt this technique to extract meanings that will elicit  
4 new understanding of what is the connected town centre shopping experience, its likely antecedents and  
5 its potential impact on patronage.  
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8 Several measures were taken to increase the reliability of the data: 1) participants were required  
9 to have completed a shopping visit to a town centre within the past month as customers may not recall  
10 the entirety of an experience after an extended period (Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016; Puccinelli *et al.*,  
11 2009), 2) During the discussions, and to reduce confounding effects on the shopping experience (such  
12 as shopping goals), participants were asked to reflect on their patronage behaviour towards the town  
13 centre based on their most recent shopping experience (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). 3) the structure and  
14 wording of the focus group interview schedule questions were adapted from pertinent literature  
15 (Terblanche, 2018; Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016; Stocchi *et al.*, 2016) and were reviewed with  
16 established retail academics. 4) to increase the rigor of the data analysis, the emerging themes and their  
17 interpretations were developed in an iterative process of listening to the tapes to capture words, change  
18 of tones and subtle nuances. 5) the themes were reviewed with other researchers in retailing and  
19 marketing. The findings of the focus groups are presented with supporting illustrative quotes.  
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## 28 **Results**

### 29 *1) How do customers perceive digital integration can be implemented in the town centre* 30 *shopping journey to enhance the shopping experience?* 31 32 33

34 Focus group findings suggest customers mainly perceive their shopping experience in terms of  
35 interactions with physical touchpoints of the town centre including; assortment of shops, range and  
36 availability of products, transport, accessibility and layout of the town centre, as well as social  
37 interaction with other customers, shopkeepers, and leisure facilities such as cafes. Participants reported  
38 different feelings and sentiments towards an interaction with one or all these touchpoints across their  
39 shopping visit:  
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45 My shopping experience would be judged by what the town can offer to me such as good range of  
46 brands and products, cheap parking and clean routes...It will either be a happy experience or a bad  
47 experience [Female, 31-40, C1].  
48

49 Sometimes I have positive experience and sometimes not. It all depends on each visit. For example, if I  
50 go into town and I am able to find a convenient parking, it will be a pleasant one. Unfortunately, most  
51 of the times you don't find good products and end up wasting your time walking down empty stores  
52 and wasting your money on parking [Female, 31-40, AB].  
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56 Having established common understanding of the town centre shopping experience across the  
57 focus groups, participants were then asked whether they were aware and/or have interacted with any  
58 town centre's digital touchpoints during their town centre shopping visits. None of the participants  
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3 reported a previous interaction with any digital touchpoint of the town centre and had little or no  
4 awareness of its existence. Moreover, some participants mentioned their lack of interest in searching  
5 for digital touchpoints as they were familiar with the town centre, and believed digital information  
6 would not add value to their knowledge:  
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10 I never heard of any online for the town centre. What can it offer to me? I know the town centre inside  
11 out, so it doesn't come to me [Male, 18-25, DE].

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13 Do they exist? I have never heard of any online website for [town] in my life. Won't use it anyway  
14 because I know the town thoroughly [Female, 27, C1].

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16 I wouldn't think of using them because I know everything in the town so I would just go and get what I  
17 want easily [Female, 40, AB].  
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21 Methodologically, this outcome enriched discussion of participants' perceptions of digital integration  
22 in the town centre and they freely expressed their views (with minimal bias from their peers as they had  
23 equal knowledge of the research topic).  
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26 It is hard to imagine how it can be used in my shopping visit. Maybe just like a shopping mall? For  
27 example, when I go to a shopping mall, I can check what stores they have, any offers, parking costs, and  
28 any events they are running [Female, 18-25, C1].  
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31 You know those displays in shopping centres? I've recently been to Westfield and all you need to do is  
32 touch it, search for information on the shops you want. It also has a map that's quite useful. I think we  
33 can have such thing in town centres, especially in here where we seem to have more than one centre  
34 [Female, 31-40, C1].  
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38 As the majority of the participants were not aware of the study town's digital channels, they  
39 discussed the potential value and role of digital channels through things they were familiar with e.g.,  
40 websites, social media and mobile application, in order to assess how they might gather vital shopping  
41 information about a town centre. These digital channels were seen as useful in informing their shopping  
42 visits to different retail locations and provided detailed information such as variety of stores, opening  
43 hours, promotional events and more. Many acknowledged the value of digital information insights in  
44 planning and informing shopping journeys and facilitating successful achievement of shopping goals.  
45 They also recognised the limitations placed on physical shopping journeys when such information is  
46 missing:  
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52 When I shop online, I can find every store I want, every product with the right price within few clicks.  
53 Maybe if such a website exists for a town centre, then it can help me learn more about the stores in the  
54 town and if any offers exist. At least I wouldn't waste my time going there for luck [Female, 26-30,  
55 C1].  
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59 The issue is town shopping is inconvenient. You don't find what you want, and if you do, you find it at  
60 a higher price. Parking is a problem that needs attention. I don't know how digital can be a solution but

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3 maybe a website or a mobile application like Harrods app can help to gather all information of the town  
4 in one place [Male, 31-40, AB].  
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7 Despite being driven by physical shopping experiences the consensus amongst participants was;  
8 physical town centre shopping can be a relatively poor experience. Memories of previous unsuccessful  
9 shopping trips remind customers of inconveniences and significant costs associated with unsuccessful  
10 shopping trips. Some participants revealed over-reliance on their familiarity and knowledge of the town  
11 centre retail offer.  
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15 Last time I went looking for a suit in the town centre for a job interview the next day. I always went to  
16 this store next to McDonalds because they are of good quality. When I got to town, the store had a sign  
17 that they are closed permanently. I was disappointed because I could have gone somewhere else like  
18 [regional city] and bought one [Male, 41-50, AB].  
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21  
22 Although participants had limited experience of town centre digital integration, they used their  
23 wider shopping experiences; online and in shopping malls to suggest how the town centre might  
24 improve information flows through digital channels. These findings offered insights how the  
25 participants might value (or not) the town's digital channels and touchpoints had they used these  
26 channels. Participants acknowledged the potential value of pre-shopping journey information believing  
27 that digital channels can provide relevant and timely information to plan their shopping journey more  
28 effectively and reduce the associated transactional costs. Digital channels are perceived to fulfil a  
29 complementary role to the physical shopping journey. There was agreement amongst the three groups  
30 of the positive effect of digital integration on their town centre shopping experience:  
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36 Knowing what I can get without going there will save me a lot of time and effort [Male, 18-25, C1].

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38 I think it would be helpful for many of us to know more about independent retailers that operate in the  
39 town [Female, 26-30, C1].  
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42 I will feel a lot better about shopping in [town] if I can get a similar experience to that online [Female,  
43 18-25, C1].  
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46 Importantly, participants repeatedly cited the need for freely accessible Wi-Fi, to help overcome  
47 connectivity issues, when shopping. They also suggested when mobile phone signal coverage is "*poor*",  
48 "*weak*" and "*limited*" in certain areas of a town, this hinders their ability to make better shopping  
49 decisions:  
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52 The reason I shop online is that I can get a bargain by comparing the prices. When I am in town,  
53 sometimes I struggle to do so because I don't get good signal on my phone, so I end up nipping into a  
54 café to use their Wi-Fi and check the prices [Female, 31-40, AB].  
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57 I use the internet to get advice from my family and friends when shopping. If I can't get online, I won't  
58 be able to make a good decision, so I end up leaving [Female, 18-25, DE].  
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3 I remember once I was buying clothes for my sister in-law and I was sending my husband photos of it. I  
4 ran out of internet signal and the store had no Wi-Fi to connect to. I would have avoided this poor  
5 experience if I was shopping in a mall because they have free internet there [Female, 31-40, C1].  
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8 Consequently, Wi-Fi connectivity is perceived to be an expected tool of digital integration to bridge the  
9 gap between the physical and digital domains. It not only connects customers to other channels and  
10 information, Importantly, it connects them with their social circle to seek reassurance in their choices.  
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16 2) *What is the likely effect of a connected shopping experience on town centre patronage*  
17 *intentions?*  
18

19 Having identified the different forms of digital integration, participants reflected on the likely effect of  
20 a connected shopping experience on their patronage intentions. First, they agreed that different shopping  
21 experiences influence revisit, spend or dwell intentions differently. Product assortment, choice and  
22 selection were primary considerations, followed by external factors for example, weather conditions,  
23 parking, local events:  
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28 Last time I shopped in [town] was terrible. Barely any good stores let alone the weather. I don't like to  
29 go there unless I really have to [Female, 18-25, C1].  
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32 When I went there last time it was nice. I managed to get a good parking spot for cheap. I got  
33 everything I wanted in one go rather than going in and out to move the car. The market was in town so  
34 I stayed for a little longer and ended up buying more things from the market [Male, 31-40, C2].  
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37 I don't enjoy visiting [town] for shopping because you cannot get anything. Market days are good  
38 because they create a vibrant atmosphere in the town so you would enjoy spending time and money  
39 there. Otherwise, it is waste of time [Female, 41-50, AB].  
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42 When asked about the effect of a connected shopping experience on their future patronage, most  
43 participants reported positive intentions towards shopping in the town centre *if* a digital integration  
44 existed. This suggests the utility of the shopping visit could be improved by accessing information about  
45 town centre shopping prior to and during their shopping visit. They also agreed efficacy of the shopping  
46 journey could be increased by knowing what stores, products, prices, are available in the town centre  
47 when planning to visit and thus reinforce their image of a town as a shopping destination.  
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51 Many participants had more nuanced views of how digital channel integration might positively  
52 influence patronage behaviour by facilitating their connection to the town centre without being  
53 physically present.  
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57 My issue in this town is that I can't get what I want, for the price that I want. But maybe if I know what  
58 is available in the town centre through a website, then I guess I will be tempted to give it a try. It will  
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3 be similar to shopping for clothes from a brand. You go on the website and if the collection is tempting,  
4 you may visit the store and probably buy something there [Female, 26-30, C1].  
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6 I think it will be more convenient for myself. If an app can tell me the retail offer in the town centres  
7 such as brands, promotions, opening hours, etc., then I will be more confident in visiting the town  
8 centre. I will get what I want in timely manner [Male, 26-30, DE].  
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11 My main issue with the shopping in the town is not knowing what I can get there. Last time I spent 2  
12 hours looking for a gift because I had no idea what stores exist. I guess if I can view what's available  
13 there at any time, then I will feel much better because my shopping will be more convenient [Female,  
14 18-25, C1].  
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18 A few participants had negative perceptions on the potential effect of a connected shopping experience  
19 on their patronage intentions. They perceived that the town has a "poor" and "insufficient" retail offer,  
20 and 'Dead and Empty' atmosphere which was a structural problem that could not be solved by digital  
21 integration.  
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25 I don't think it will impact my decision to go there at all. The problem is the town is dead and empty.  
26 Having Wi-Fi or a website will not solve the problem. In fact, it might be off putting for people because  
27 they will know how poor the town is before going there [Male, 26-30, C2].  
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30 Although I don't see it happening anytime soon, but let's say it exists, I think I will be more willing to  
31 try and shop there again. [Female, 26-30, C1].  
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34 I know the town inside-out and the disappointment is there. I don't see the value of shopping in the town  
35 anymore. [Female, 31-40, AB].  
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38 The town has poor variety of shops that are often overpriced, inadequate parking options and unpleasant  
39 appearance. For digital to be helpful, town centre should be improved first. We can't pay expensive  
40 parking and waste time just to enjoy Wi-Fi. In fact, digital information will only push me further because  
41 it will show me how poor my town centre is [Male, 31-40, AB].  
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44 The results revealed shortcomings of the physical offer of the town which, in turn limited the scope of  
45 digital channels to deliver improvements to influence patronage intentions. Providing digital  
46 information in a timely way to create opportunities for individuals to plan their shopping better was  
47 perceived as a strong positive. Moreover, there is potential for a halo effect of shoppers' perceiving the  
48 town to be more convenient and the shopping experience in the town more memorable. Results also  
49 supported the idea that positive shopping journeys outcomes are more likely to yield positive future  
50 patronage intentions than negative experiences. But some participants were cynical about when digital  
51 integration might happen in a meaningful way in the town. Interestingly, the physical touchpoints of  
52 the town centre, key drivers of shopping journeys, (including assortment of shops, range and availability  
53 of products) were cited as a structural barrier which no amount of digital channel integration could  
54 overcome.  
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3) *Emerging Findings: The moderating role of shopping goals on the perceived connected shopping experience and patronage intentions.*

Study participants had different viewpoints on the effect of digital channels on the *connected* town centre shopping experience. These differences were attributed to customers' purpose of shopping in the town centre. This finding is consistent with Palmatier *et al.*, (2020) arguments on the role of goals in customers' interactions with multiple channels. These researchers found, customers interested in browsing or spending recreational time shopping, perceive a positive effect of developing integrated digital channels and technologies on town centre shopping experience. Study participants argue contextual information allows them to shop online and offline at the same time whilst being in the town centre, can help them make better shopping decisions by comparing prices, and enable physical examination of products, and or seeking alternatives.

Shopping online is nice because you can browse several stores in few clicks. I think if I go to the town just to browse, then I'll benefit from a website to view information available about several stores in town when I am there. Internet accessibility will definitely help me when I want to read more about a product [Female, 18-25, C1].

Participants believe digital integration could influence their behaviour and deter them from shopping in the town centre if the product/service was not available in the town. Product categories also influence common perception of digital integration.

It would only put me off. If you want to buy specific item and you can't find that it exists in town, then you won't go there at the first place. I feel this would only expose the bad selection of stores and services in these rundown places. Online is the way forward [Male, 31-40, AB].

It could go both ways. For clothing stores, they will be empty as people will realise there is no range of products there so it's a waste of time. At least people now go there hoping something interesting could pop-up. If you want something else like groceries or vape, then it would be excellent as we have an excess of these stores there [Female, 31-40, AB].

### **Discussion and implications: Digital Integration in Town Centres- where are we now?**

Town centres face difficulties ahead. The trading environment is increasingly uncertain due to the COVID-19 pandemic and shopping online is expanding rapidly since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020; e.g. from 20% to 32% of total retail sales (ONS, 2020). Furthermore, shoppers have developed greater anxieties about the risks associated with shopping in physical environments (Federman, 2020). Arguably, there has never been a more important time for successful digital integration, which can provide information to shoppers, enable purchasing and in doing so contribute to town centre recovery. From the issues raised at the beginning of the paper, this study has found a distinct lack of integration between physical and digital channels and negative perceptions of how this

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3 missing facility in a town centre can limit customers' ability to switch between channels, which hinders  
4 the achievement of shopping goals. This finding supports Herhausen *et al.* (2015) and Verhoef *et al.*  
5 (2015) in terms of the limiting effects when synergistic digital integration is absent. Lack of integration  
6 of digital channels has also impacted negatively on shopping experiences, even more than anticipated,  
7 as shoppers were found to be over reliant on their memories of physical shopping experiences and had  
8 little regard for the town's digital information. This study referred to the work by Demko-Rither and  
9 Ter Halle (2015) but found the intangible benefits were limited to experiences associated with use of  
10 free town Wi-Fi rather than reducing spatial and temporal constraints and reduction of the transactional  
11 costs of physical shopping. Evidence of positive influence on patronage intentions as suggested by  
12 Betzing *et al.* (2018), Verhoef *et al.* (2015), and El Azhari and Bennet (2015) was not found but the  
13 study participants recognised the potential to achieve such gains in the town context based on their  
14 experiences of shopping in other locations.

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23 How has this study advanced understanding of connected town centre shopping experiences  
24 and how can towns enhance shopper journeys through digital integration and in doing so ensure long-  
25 term survival?

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28 1) *Bridge the gap between digital and physical channels*

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There appears an assumption that because adoption of digital technologies is so widespread it  
should integrate seamlessly into shopper journeys just by *being there*. In our study, town centre  
customers still view their shopping experience in terms of interactions with the physical touchpoints  
rather than digital ones, hence town centre digital channels were perceived as low priority and low  
value. Powerful memories of previous physical shopping trips dominated consumer perceptions and  
when interlaced with familiarity of a place, it further downgraded the perceived usefulness of digital  
channels. Town centre management need help to address the balance by using digital to change  
perceptions of physical touchpoints:

- i. Shoppers encounter drivers and barriers at every stage of their shopping journeys from  
planning to post-visit (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Identifying which information they  
need and when in their journey will enable towns to become a valued source of  
information. By showcasing the physical touchpoints (including assortment, parking  
spaces and entertainment events) via a town's website, mobile applications or using  
social media at different stages of their journeys, it will enable customers to discover  
new parts of the town and shift from habitual journey behaviours (Hart *et al.* 2014). In  
so doing, shoppers will also remain connected to their own digital domain within the  
current retailing environment (Verhoef *et al.*, 2015). Here the real value to the shoppers  
is relevance, and encouraging social interaction with their friends, and influencers at  
every stage of their shopping journey.

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3 ii. Creating awareness of digital channels and touchpoints and demonstrating the value to  
4 the shopper. Town centre apps already provide product ranges, store availability, and  
5 trails but are clearly not easily discoverable to all shoppers who may need educating to  
6 their value. Marketing tools could be used to inform and change perceptions about both  
7 the retail and digital touchpoints for the town. For example, using promotional offers,  
8 town centre management can encourage users to download parking and public transport  
9 apps to link access to the town. Regular virtual 'events' advertised via town centre apps  
10 e.g. linking local independent retailers, producers, online and offline, will educate local  
11 customers to the hidden, diversified assortment available in that town, while supporting  
12 local businesses online. Sector based e.g. virtual food events could similarly link large  
13 supermarkets with local producers, providing online blogs and competitions. Likewise,  
14 With the emerging risk of COVID-19 spread, a town centre app may highlight the  
15 hotspots and busy areas of the town, which would help people be reassured of when to  
16 visit the town safely and conveniently.  
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## 27 2) *Harness the potential of digital integration*

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29 Understanding more about how shoppers plan their journeys, the touchpoints which inform their  
30 decision-making and bridging the gap between digital and physical channels, could help towns to  
31 become an integral part of the shoppers' digital domain. Depending on the purpose of their shopping  
32 trip, at a basic level shoppers' need access to dynamic information about the physical touchpoints  
33 (Assortment, Layout, Accessibility and Leisure), and digital touchpoints (mobile application, Web sites,  
34 Social media channels, e-commerce platforms of the businesses in the town). These need to be in place  
35 for customers to attain convenience in the shopping journey. Further, for customers seeking hedonic  
36 shopping visits, digital has the potential to add exciting, discoverable experiences through gamification,  
37 VR and AR and other innovations, which can allow experiences such as virtual shopping visits in the  
38 pre and post visit stages of the town centre journey.  
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## 48 3) *Create a pull effect using digital channels to drive patronage*

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50 Using digital touchpoints enables towns the opportunity to uncover experiential value to the  
51 shopping experience (El Azhari and Bennet, 2015). Shopping experience is positively affected as a  
52 result of the multiple channel shopping behaviour facilitated by digital integration (Pauwels and Neslin,  
53 2015; Herhausen *et al.*, 2015). This in turn can influence customers' patronage intentions towards the  
54 retail environment (Terblanche, 2018). Consistently, the study's findings suggest different perceptions  
55 of the shopping experience yield different patronage behaviours in the town centre. Participants  
56 indicated that negatively perceived shopping experiences in local town centres influenced negative  
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3 patronage intentions beyond revisiting. This study highlights the effect of town centre shopping  
4 experience on other patronage intentions including spend and dwell thereby extending our  
5 understanding of the relationship between shopping experience and patronage behaviour in town  
6 centres.  
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10 In summary, this study has revealed there is potential for digital integration to enable customers  
11 to be more successful in their shopping journeys in retail environments. Creating synergy between  
12 physical and digital channels could help shape customers intentions to revisit, spend, and dwell in the  
13 town centre.  
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### 19 **Conclusions, Limitations, and future research**

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21 Drawing from consumer insights, this study enriches the town centre literature and breaks new ground  
22 by 1) understanding the role of digital channel integration in the (town centre) shopping experience, 2)  
23 highlighting the effect of digital integration on the perceived shopping experience and patronage  
24 intentions; 3) considering the importance of channel integration on future patronage intentions. As such  
25 this study extends the town centre literature by answering the calls for research on this topic (Stocchi *et*  
26 *al.*, 2016; Wrigley *et al.*, 2015).  
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32 This study has also provided managerial implications towards integrating digital channels and  
33 technologies to improve the perceived value of shopping in town centres. In the emerging economic  
34 environment, creating digital channels can be a cost effective first step to overcome customers' concerns  
35 regarding the transactional costs of shopping locally. With the change in consumer expectations of a  
36 connected shopping journey (Palmatier *et al.*, 2020; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015), integrating digital channels  
37 will inform town centre users' expectations and perceptions of their shopping journey. This in turn  
38 yields positive experience and patronage behaviour. Likewise, given the likely consequences of  
39 COVID-19 pandemic on consumer sense of safety and social interactions, bridging the gap between the  
40 physical and digital town can reduce the spatial constraints, which in turn will allow the customer to  
41 assess the layout and atmospheric cues of the town (such as traffic, queues and hot spots) before visiting  
42 there.  
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50 Despite the richness of the data and insights collected during this study, there are limitations to  
51 the findings. Whilst small sample sizes are suitable for exploratory research (Churchill, 1999), the  
52 results of this research cannot be generalised. Customers across other regions in the UK may have  
53 different perceptions of a connected shopping experience due to situational factors such as location,  
54 retail offer and available digital offer. Therefore, future work could build on this work across other  
55 regions to extend our knowledge of this construct in the town centre context. A subsequent study may  
56 include quantitative data across different regions and/or countries to validate and generalise the findings  
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proposed in this research. It would be interesting to empirically test the relationships between the digital touchpoints and the shopping experience construct to attain detailed insights into the role of digital interactions in changing customers' perceptions of the physical touchpoints and patronage intentions. The outlined effect of shopping goals and product categories on the perceived connected shopping experience and patronage intentions would offer an interesting perspective and researchers are encouraged to use multigroup analysis to capture the effect of digital integration on the perceived shopping experience across different shopping goals.

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