Towards Rebuilding the Highstreet: Learning from Customers’ Town Centre Shopping Journeys

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Abstract
Patronage in town centres has been fluctuating over the past few years, indicating that consumers are buying elsewhere in pursuit of better and more fulfilling shopping experiences. This is concerning as patronage is considered an indicator of high streets vitality and viability. To help understand the changing patterns of patronage, especially related to the growth in online retail spending, this study sheds light on key touchpoints that influence the town centre shopping experience. Using the customer journey framework and drawing insights from datasets of two central UK regions, we provide new contribution to town centre research by capturing significant and specific physical and digital touchpoints in the town centre shopping journey, thus developing our understanding of the determinants of the town centre shopping experience. Consequently, this work provides recommendations for town centre management to help improve town centre patronage by developing customers’ experience with shopping-specific touchpoints.

Keywords: Shopping Experience, Customer Experience, Customer Journey, Patronage, Town Centre

1. Introduction
The viability of town centres as a retail destination has long been debated as new formats and channels offered alternative shopping experiences such as out-of-town shopping centres and online retailing (Portas, 2011; Wrigley et al., 2015). More recent research (Centre for Retail Research, 2019) suggests the rate of store closures in town centres is increasing partly due to convenient shopping experiences (such as flexible shopping hours, reduced transactional costs and price comparison) offered by online shopping and shopping malls. Town centres were a central location for shoppers and retailers to exchange products/services as over 80% of
journeys into town centres are shopping related (Stocchi et al., 2016). Yet, unfulfilled shopping trips to town centres involving monetary and temporal losses, created negative perceptions of the shopping experience, leading to a significant decline in patronage (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019). With a store closure rate of 60 stores per day through the COVID-19 pandemic (PwC, 2020), UK town centres face the prospect of turning into ‘ghost towns’, with resultant economic impact unless a significant improvement occurs in the shopping experiences they provide (Holder, 2019; Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019).

These prevailing conditions suggest urgent attention is needed if high streets are to be preserved. For town centres to survive, managing the town centre touchpoints is a priority with the aims being to design and audit positive customer experience (De Keyser et al., 2020; Herhausen et al., 2019). Touchpoints are key moments in the customer journey in which the customer interacts with the retail setting and shape their direct/indirect shopping behaviour (Verhoef et al., 2009). They are defined as the “episodes of direct or indirect contact with a brand or a firm” (Baxendale et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2015) at different stages of the shopping journey including: search, purchase, and post-purchase (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). During the town centre journey, customers are in contact with tangible (e.g. assortment of stores, parking) and intangible cues (e.g. atmosphere, events), acting as functional and experiential touchpoints, shaping the holistic town centre shopping experience (Stocchi et al., 2016). Likewise, they engage with non-retail touchpoints (such as traffic queues) that influence their shopping experience and patronage into town centres (AbedRabbo et al., 2020). Touchpoints operate in different ways in town centre journeys compared with an individual retail store (Hart et al., 2013); examining these may uncover the role played by specific touchpoints in town centre patronage.
Customers’ shopping journeys are continuously changing as there is increasing dependence on digital channels to inform decisions from beginning to end of the customer journey (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Dennis et al., 2016). Beyond the physical cues of the retail setting, digital touchpoints (such as websites, social media, email, and mobile shopping apps) are also shaping the landscape of retail journeys (Hallikainen et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2020). They empower customers with information that creates feelings and sentiments towards their interactions with retailers’ physical touchpoints throughout journey (de Bellis and Johar, 2020; Demko-Rihter and Ter Halle, 2015; Rigby, 2011). With the addition of digital channels, the myriad of touchpoints available to the consumer creates challenges for retailers to monitor the complex consumer journeys in pursuit of their goal fulfilment (Grewal et al., 2016; Mencarelli et al., 2021). Herhausen et al. (2019) identified how specific touchpoints (offline and online) reveal customer segments with different loyalty intentions towards retailers. This study responds to the research call to explore customer journeys in different retail settings to better understand the shaping of patronage intentions in multichannel settings (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020; Roggeveen et al., 2020). Particularly in town centres, customer journeys are more complicated as consumers interact with different retail and service providers, as well as public and private organisations (Hart et al., 2013). In turn, the myriad of touchpoints available for consumers in town centres increases the complexity of measuring customer experience in these retail agglomerations.

The increased use of retail digital channels (web, social networks, mobile applications) may have resulted in changing customers’ perception towards the town centre shopping journey. Indeed, Hart et al. (2013) note the image of a town centre has changed from a ‘pure shopping’ destination to include leisure and entertainment, indicating that customers are shopping elsewhere. Similarly, government reports indicate the potential effect of online shopping on consumers’ preferences towards the spatial convenience and information sharing
available in the current format of town centres (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019; Wrigley et al., 2015). This topic warrants further research attention because existing town centre studies (Hart et al., 2013; Hart et al., 2007; Stocchi et al., 2016) omit the expanding role of digital in town centre shopping journeys. Retailers should be particularly aware of customers’ migration across online/offline channels as the interaction with multiple touchpoints can influence the seamless customer experience positively (Valentini et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2015).

Further, research into town centre customer experience also neglects the moderating role of customer goals, which dilutes customer’s recall ability of critical touchpoints that have played a role in their reported experience (Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016). The purpose of the journey (such as shopping) moderates customer experience with the retail setting as shopping goals dictate customers’ interaction with the myriad of available touchpoints (AbedRabbo et al., 2021; Homburg et al., 2015; Puccinelli et al., 2009). The contributions of touchpoints to the customer experience vary according to customers’ interaction with them, and their ability to fulfil their goals (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2020). Thus, for a deeper understanding of town centre patronage, research should focus on specific journeys to control the effect of consumer and situational factors (De Keyser et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2009).

To understand the decline in patronage intentions in the high street, re-examining the town centre shopping journey is necessary to reveal insights into the effect of physical and digital cues that influence consumers’ experiences with town centres (AbedRabbo et al., 2021; Stocchi et al., 2016). Building on scholarly recommendations for researching retail experiences (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020; Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), this research adopts a multichannel perspective to develop an understanding of the role of digital touchpoints (including town-based webpages and mobile applications) in shaping the town centre experience and responds to the patronage issue in town centres (Stocchi et al., 2016). Using the
customer journey framework of Hossain et al. (2020) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016), we focus on the shopping journey due to the frequency of the trip (Stocchi et al., 2016). Further, we identify key interactions at the three stages of the customer journey: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. To address the research objectives, we adapt the notion that the town centre customer experience is composed of functional and experiential touchpoints in the town centre (Stocchi et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2013). Moreover, we extend this notion to include digital channel touchpoints (including email, websites, social media pages, and mobile applications) that play a critical role in the modern shopping journey (Hallikainen et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2020). Using data from two central regions in the UK, we develop an illustrative framework to present physical and digital touchpoints that shape the town centre shopping journey and explain how customers assess their shopping experience and patronage intentions. Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are:

1. To highlight the physical and digital touchpoints and when they are accessed during customers’ shopping journeys.

2. To explore the effect of interaction with these touchpoints on the perceived shopping experience in terms of town centre patronage intentions.

3. To provide managerial recommendations towards improving the town centre shopping experience.

The paper explores the theoretical foundations that contribute to the shopping experience across the customer journey in a town centre context. Next, the qualitative methodology and thematic analysis are highlighted. Finally, a discussion of the results presents an illustrative framework of the customer journey that shapes managerial implications and future research directions.
2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Customer Experience Journeys and Touchpoints

Retailers’ offerings play a critical role in motivating customers to visit their stores (Stocchi et al., 2016). Yet, this notion has changed with more emphasis placed on experiences that stimulate customers’ senses across their shopping journey beyond goal fulfilment (Van Rompay et al., 2012). Customers shop for different reasons beyond products/services including entertainment, recreation, or social interaction (Foster and McLelland, 2015). Thus, their experience hinges on their sensory responses to interactions developed with tangible cues of the physical store (e.g. merchandise, price, and layout) and sensory cues that relate to the stores’ environment (e.g. ambience and atmosphere) (Jain and Bagdare, 2011; Hart et al., 2013). Interactions with these cues highlight the critical moments of the journey (Meyer and Schwager, 2007), which stimulate feelings and sentiments that guide consumers’ patronage intentions in a retail setting across the customer journey (Baxendale et al., 2015; Edelman and Singer, 2015). Hence, customer experience is process-oriented and encompasses customer perceptions of the totality of interactions with the retail environment across their pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages of the shopping journey (Homburg et al., 2015; Hossain et al., 2020).

Customer experience is defined as a holistic construct that encompasses cognitive, affective, and sensorial responses generated from interactions with an array of brand-owned, customer-owned, partner-owned and external ‘touchpoints’ (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) during a customer journey. Synthesizing the customer experience literature, De Keyser et al. (2020) identified touchpoints as first of three overarching building blocks forming the customer experience. Touchpoints operate as extrinsic and intrinsic cues that stimulate habitual
purchasing behaviour, feeling and sentiments that trigger internal response towards the retail environment (Barann et al., 2020). Once an interaction occurs between the customer and any touchpoint, perceptions of the holistic experience are formed, influencing patronage throughout the stages of the customer journey (Edelman and Singer, 2015). Retail journeys typically compose of direct/indirect interactions with retail touchpoints, some of which are beyond the control of retailers (Mencarelli et al., 2021; Meyer and Schwager, 2007). This creates measurement complexity that clouds the critical ‘moments of truth’ that have the most effect on consumers’ perceptions of the holistic experience and their patronage behaviour (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020; Homburg et al., 2015). Consequently, scholars call for a model to show the effect of multiple touchpoints interaction from the need recognition stage to the evaluation of purchase (Baxendale et al., 2015; Grewal et al., 2016; Herhausen et al., 2019).

The purpose of analysing customer journeys is to pinpoint all possible routes to goal fulfilment (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Indeed, customers no longer take a linear path in their buying process thanks to the digitalisation taking place in the retail sector (Singh and Jang, 2020). The advancements of technologies helped customers to migrate from one channel to another, creating complex journeys that yield different perceptions of the retail experience (Grewal et al., 2016; Herhausen et al., 2015). Through this migration, customers are exposed to multiple offline/online touchpoints that influence the route to purchase (Verhoef et al., 2015). Specific touchpoints contribute differently to the valence of customer experience (positive/negative), which affects customers’ brand choice (Baxendale et al., 2015). Thus, customer journey models can highlight when and how these touchpoints influence consumers’ behaviour in the retail environment (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020; Hossain et al., 2020).
2.2 Town Centre Customer Experience

In a town centre context, touchpoints reflect the wide-ranging contacts between customers and the town centre, whether human (e.g. frontline employee, other shoppers), physical (e.g. variety of shops, layout of streets) or digital (e.g. town website, mobile app) in nature (De Keyser et al., 2020). However, our understanding of these touchpoints and how they influence the town centre customer experience is limited. Customer journey models are scarce in the town centre despite its importance as a shopping destination to local users (Stocchi et al., 2016). Knowledge of the town centre touchpoints dates to Hart et al. (2007) which identified the contribution of tangible and intangible image dimensions including Accessibility, Atmosphere, Environment, and Service elements, to consumers’ shopping enjoyment in regional centres. This earlier conceptualisation viewed the town or city centre as a holistic image construct comprising dimensions that can be controlled and managed to create an attractive shopping destination. However, town centres contain public spaces, street layouts, parking, and accessibility to and within the centre, many of which are beyond the scope of retailers or town centre management control. These early findings emerged before the 2008 economic crisis, which changed the town centre mix and customers’ shopping habits to more convenience-oriented (Housing, Communities and Local Committees, 2019; Wrigley et al., 2015).

Stocchi et al. (2016) advanced the town centre experience construct with an empirical study on multifaceted journeys in the town centre. The authors analysed 13 dimensions of the town centre customer journey and categorised these as functional and experiential touchpoints that contribute to the development of the holistic town centre experience. Functional touchpoints refer to the extrinsic cues of the town centre (such as stores, products, parking) that contribute to the functional value of the town centre. Meanwhile, experiential touchpoints refer to the intrinsic cues (such as atmosphere, customer service, special events) that trigger
emotional stimulation including happiness and pleasure. Stocchi et al. (2016) posit that the perceived experiences from interaction with these touchpoints combine to form the holistic customer experience that affect customers’ likelihood of revisiting the town centre in the future.

Despite their fundamental work towards understanding the town centre customer experience, Stocchi et al. (2016) analysed multifaceted journeys into town centres. This approach does not identify the touchpoints that influence specific patronage behaviour since multifaceted journeys may dilute consumers’ recall of critical touchpoints that affected goal fulfilment in specific journeys (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016). Different shopping goals moderate the valence of interactions with the retail touchpoints (Baxendale et al., 2015), creating positive/negative sentiments for the consumer that change their future intentions throughout the customer journey (Puccinelli et al., 2009). This subjective response to the customer journey adds to the complexity of mapping the critical touchpoints that influence the customer experience construct. Accordingly, specific research on town centre journeys is needed to understand consumers’ changing perceptions and patronage of the high street. In this study, we examine the shopping journey as it is the most frequent journey into the town centre (Wrigley et al., 2015).

2.3 Multichannel Shopping Journeys

Previous town centre studies focused on customers’ perceptions of physical, tangible touchpoints, with limited insights into the significance of digital touchpoints to customer experience (Betzing et al., 2018; Roggeveen et al., 2020). Customers’ preferences of the shopping experience have shifted with the emergence of digital retailing as they grew more reliant on the internet to make shopping decisions (Alexander and Kent, 2020; Hossain et al., 2019). The introduction of digital channels (internet-enabled devices such as mobile phones) offered alternatives for consumers to adopt different ways of shopping such as searching online
and buying in-store (Hossain et al., 2020). Customers now interact with software alternatives to traditional retailing to fulfil their needs. Wagner et al. (2020) defined these as digital channel touchpoints, and include websites, email, search engines, social networks, photo and video content communities, discussion forums, and blogs (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Wagner et al., 2020). In turn, interactions with digital channel touchpoints are becoming pivotal in the decision-making journey due to their perceived effect on consumers’ holistic experience across the customer journey (Hallikainen et al., 2019).

It is evident that consumers reliance on information available online (including social networks and mobile applications) influences their shopping output and basket-size (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020). Access to information online is reducing the spatial distance between the customer and the physical stores by indicating availability of products and services to meet their needs (AbedRabbo et al., 2021; De Hann et al., 2018). Further, these digital channel touchpoints facilitate different shopping journeys into the physical environment (such as webrooming, showrooning, click & collect), leading to enhanced experiences beyond the traditional shopping experience and goal fulfilment at the physical place (Palmatier et al., 2019; Savastano et al., 2019). Mobile devices increased customers’ access to internet, allowing them to interact with the digital channel touchpoints across the customer journey. Consequently, customers are continuously migrating between physical and digital channel touchpoints to achieve their goals (Herhausen et al., 2015; Wagner et al, 2020). This behaviour stimulates immediate perceptions of the retail touchpoints that affect the outward shopping behaviour (Barann et al., 2020; Demko-Rihter and Ter Halle, 2015; Savastano et al., 2019). Accordingly, digital channel touchpoints are critical in the customer journey and demand more attention since customers perceive their experience across multiple channels (Hallikainen et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2015).
The changing shopping behaviour of town centre consumers raises the need to examine the town centre experience from a multichannel perspective (Palmatier et al., 2019). AbedRabbo et al. (2021) provided an exploratory understanding of how digital channel touchpoints (including mobile application, social networks, and website) and availability of digital technologies (such as Wi-Fi) may contribute to a connected shopping journey in the town centre context. However, these authors call for further empirical evidence to advance our understanding of the how physical/digital channel touchpoints are used interchangeably during the shopping journey. Building on limitations in existing research, this study adopts a multichannel perspective to capture significant and specific physical and digital channel touchpoints that influence the town centre shopping experience, as well as exploring the perceived effect of this construct on patronage intentions.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research design using an online diary was used to capture respondents’ interactions with the town centre during their most recent shopping visit. This approach allows respondents to reflect on their experiences and behaviour using their own words at each stage of the journey (Milligan et al., 2005). At the beginning of the diary, respondents were asked to give details about their shopping visit and describe their perceptions of the shopping experience. Then, after the customer journey framework of Lemon and Verhoef (2016), the diary was sectioned into three phases of the shopping journey: Pre-visit, During-visit, and Post-visit. Within each stage, a set of open-ended questions were presented respectively to the respondents to allow them the space to express their feelings with as much detail as they desire. Finally, customers were asked to highlight their intentions towards patronising the town centre in the future based on their shopping experience. The sequence of the diary and the main questions asked are illustrated in Figure 1.
The diary was pre-tested with academics to ensure that the wording of the questions and the diary flow were appropriate (Kvale, 2007). Then, a pilot study with 24 respondents from different demographic profiles verified that the questions reflected the objectives of the study (Hill, 1998). The diary was administrated via multiple offline and online communication channels (including town centres’ website and social media pages) to allow an equal chance of participation. Data were collected across six town centres in two central regions of the UK: Leicestershire and Warwickshire. These regions provided a clear contrast within the six town centres studied, representing a wide range of demographic profiles that fit the overall UK population, and represent the ‘average’ retail offer of a UK town centre. The data collection process commenced in 2018 and lasted for 10 weeks and controlled for the effect of the festive shopping period and sale season on customer experience creation (Verhoef et al., 2009).

285 respondents participated in this study, contributing to 285 shopping diaries. Data were processed and cleaned to maximise its reliability. Entries referring to trips beyond one month were eliminated to control for the effect of memory (Puccinelli et al., 2009). Likewise, entries with over 50% missing values were eliminated due to concerns regarding participants’
and data credibility (Gupa and Lincoln, 1994). Consequently, a total of 193 trips were retained. Using NVivo 12 software package, thematic analysis was used to extract latent meanings from respondents’ words (Braun and Clark, 2006). The names for the themes were consistent with established themes in town centre literature (Hart et al., 2013; Hart et al., 2007; Stocchi et al., 2016) to maintain transferability of the qualitative findings. The final report of themes and codes was reviewed by independent Marketing and Retailing academics to ensure consistency in the meanings of the overarching themes and their representation of the codes. The following section presents the results of this study.

4. Results and Discussion

Respondents’ diaries revealed detailed insights into the influences which shape their patronage behaviour. Approximately, 72% of trips reported in this study were completed within 2-3 days of taking part in this research. The average shopping journey duration was 1-2 hours with an average spend of £20-50. Consistent with town centre studies (Hart et al., 2007; Stocchi et al., 2016), more females (114, 57%) participated in this research in contrast to men (79, 43%). The age group 31-40 years old recorded the most trips (46%) whilst 61+ years recorded the lowest trips (8%). The participant sample is consistent with previous town centre studies, indicating its suitability for the analysis. Table 1 illustrates the touchpoints reported by respondents for each stage of the customer journey and the frequency of interactions. The analysis section is divided into physical and digital shopping touchpoints as follows:

4.1 Town Centre Physical Touchpoints

In summary, nine physical touchpoints were identified, compared with Stocchi et al. (2016) thirteen functional and experiential touchpoints. Each touchpoint is outlined as follows.

Pantano and Dennis (2019) highlight the increasing role of building appearance in enhancing the attractiveness of shopping malls, thus better shopping experiences for tourists.
Consistently, the Layout of the town centre featured strongly in nearly 150 respondents’ diaries. Respondents reported their concerns about the structure of the town centre, its visual appearance, and the physical location of the shops. The physical environment of the town centre influenced customers’ patronage intentions, making it a salient interaction in customers’ shopping experience.

Respondents elaborated on how the atmospheric aspects of the town centre affected their shopping experience. Their impressions of town centres’ Atmosphere were captured in terms such as “Vibrant”, “Dull” and “Dead”. Atmospheric cues such as crowdedness, friendliness, and ambience influence how customers perceive their shopping experience (Kerin et al., 1992). As such, interactions with the atmospheric elements generated sensory feelings and impressions that contributed to respondents’ shopping experience and patronage intentions.

The significance of Accessibility to customers’ choice of the shopping location is noted in different retail contexts (Stocchi et al., 2016; Tandon et al., 2016) as UK consumers’ value the convenience of shopping elsewhere such as online and out-of-town shopping malls (Wrigley et al., 2015). Customers’ ability to access the town centre was significant throughout their shopping journey. For instance, at the Pre-visit stage, respondents in one location commented on their journey access into the town centre in terms of traffic queues, public transport timetable and bus stops, and parking availability. In expressing their feelings and emotions towards these interactions, respondents had already developed clear perceptions of their shopping experience before reaching the town centre. Thus influencing their holistic experience and the consequent involvement with the touchpoints in the latter stages of the journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Meanwhile, in the During-visit stage, respondents reported positive/negative perceptions of the shopping experience based on their mobility within the town centre. For example, narrow pedestrian footpaths in busy streets with cars,
impeded consumers when manoeuvring with their shopping bags through the town. Additionally, some respondents referred to the effect of parking on their patronage intentions. Similar to the Pre-visit stage, the Post-visit stage included respondents’ feelings towards the accessibility touchpoint components, mainly traffic and public transport. Individuals stated their shopping experience was negatively influenced by such interactions.

As town centres become more of a social place (Stocchi et al., 2016), Social Interactions are becoming critical to customers’ judgement of the shopping experience. Respondents referred to the positive/negative effect of social interactions on their shopping experience and sense of belonging in the town centre. Social relationships with other shoppers, residents and retail staff in the town increase customers’ attachment to the place (Hart et al., 2013), creating social responsibility towards the town centre and its users. This was noted in respondents’ comments that labelled their visits to the town centre to “support independent retailers”. Notably, an emerging theme from this study refers to customers’ sense of Public Insecurity in town centres. Serious concerns regarding street beggars, donations collectors and negative behaviour of other shoppers were reported by respondents, raising potential issues influencing the decline in town centre patronage. Respondents shared concerns on the increasing number of street beggars by expressing their level of “discomfort” and “anxiety” when approached by these people. For some respondents, the interaction with this group of town centre users created a sense of being “hassled” and “pestered” for money, which negatively influenced their shopping experience. The increasing number of vacant units exacerbated this feeling by generating a sense of loneliness and discomfort during the shopping visit:

“Empty alleyways and ghosted stores create a dodgy feeling when you walk through the town especially when it’s getting darker.” [ID:65, Female, 26-30 years]
Earlier studies included the effect of safety on the shopping experience when referring to the friendliness of the town and direct/indirect interactions with staff (Hart et al., 2007). Yet, little attention is given to the implications of interaction with other users of the town centre such as street beggars and donation collectors. With the change in customers’ perceptions of town centres becoming a leisure location (Hart et al., 2013), customers’ focus on experiential aspects is increasing as they are more involved in hedonic goals than utilitarian goals (Puccinelli et al., 2009). Negative insecurity aspects of the shopping journey are a risk for customers when more secure alternatives such as online shopping and shopping malls are available.

The Assortment of shops and products remains pivotal to the shopping experience (Tandon et al., 2016; Terblanche, 2018). Despite greater emphasis given to experiential touchpoints such as Atmosphere and Social Interactions, shops, product variety and availability remain a salient aspect of town centre shopping. Respondents reported mixed feelings towards the variety and the quality of the stores such as “cheap”, “basic” and “everyday”, and how interactions with these touchpoint components contributed to their town centre shopping experience. Whilst customers increasingly rely on online shopping to get everything they want (Wrigley et al., 2015), respondents viewed their physical shopping experience as “pleasant”, “enjoyable” or “limited” depending on their perception of product availability. Feelings triggered by this touchpoint had a strong influence on customers’ future patronage intention.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Touchpoint</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% of Sample</th>
<th>Example Respondent Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Touchpoints</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
<td>Refers to the layout of town centre in terms of its appeal and physical location of the town centre.</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>77.20%</td>
<td>“I do not like the way the town now seems to have 2 centres – around the marketplace and the Rushes. I tend to do one or the other.” [ID:40, Female, 31-40 years]</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“Coalville seems rundown and dated as well. It is a horrible place, needs regeneration.” [ID:77, Female, 31-40 years]</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Went on Friday and it was not too busy/crowded. I’m not particularly a fan of crowds so I enjoyed this shopping visit” [ID:22, Male, 26-30 years]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atmosphere</td>
<td>Refers to the sensory cues of the town centre including level of crowding, friendliness of the town centre and the vibe of the place.</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>65.29%</td>
<td>“The atmosphere of Coalville is horrible. The town is full of closed and empty shops so not so many people come here” [ID:114, Female, 18-25 years]</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“Atmosphere in Leamington is nice, there is good variety of stores there and consumers are friendly.” [ID:69, Female, 41-50 years]</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“It is really a shame that we try to go into the town but you can’t find proper public transportations. How am I supposed to carry the bags in the rain until the bus shows up?” [ID:168, Female, 31-40 years]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>Denotes the ease of access into the town centre by various methods of transport.</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>47.15%</td>
<td>“It was such a waste of time. I had a lunch break and I wanted to nip quickly into the town to get my stuff. They really should find a solution to the traffic into the town otherwise they shouldn’t complain about us not going there anymore” [ID:9, Male, 41-50 years]</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>“Shopping in the town is fun because you always bump into someone you know. I even once met the MP in the street and market stall holders know you” [ID:19, Male, 41-50 years]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interactions</td>
<td>Customers perception towards interaction with other users of the town centre.</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>44.60%</td>
<td>“I went to check the town for some products. I did not get what I wanted but I bumped into an old friend who I haven’t seen in a while. We ended up going for a coffee so my experience was great” [ID:2, Female, 31-40 years]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Insecurity</td>
<td>Refers to the customers sense of safety in the town centre including their feelings towards street beggars and crime rate.</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>40.90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assortment</td>
<td>Denotes customers’ perception towards the availability of a variety of stores/products in the town centre.</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>40.41%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>Customers’ perception towards the experience created by special events, entertainment facilities and food services in the town centre.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>26.43%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly Market</td>
<td>Denotes the occasional offer provided by street markets and the atmosphere it creates.</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14.00%</td>
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</table>

“*The town is filled with yobs or people in large groups that are clearly out to cause trouble. They are creating discomfort in the town centre by going into the shops and causing problems out of boredom. They are creating a negative atmosphere, I’m only 18 and I hate shopping there*” [ID:94, Female, 18-25 years]

“Too many beggars in the town asking for money. I keep telling them sorry but it’s not comfortable when you are carrying shopping bags”. [ID:115, Female, 31-40 years]

“I find shopping in Coalville not a great experience as the charity shops, vape shops, cheap shops far outweigh the better up market shops. So many shops closed down for one reason or another”. [ID:130, Male, 31-40 years]

“There is no point of going there anymore. It is all about frustration and waste of money and time. I don’t think I will shop there for clothes anymore.” [ID:158, Female, 18-25 years]

“It is all about luck. If you find what you are looking for then you can go. Personally, I’ve been lucky with finding what I want. You just have to know what you are shopping for before choosing to go or not” [ID:181, Female, 31-40 years]

“The old car show was on in the town centre which was fantastic and probably the reason that we chose to walk through the town centre as opposed to drive directly to the Sports Direct. It was very pleasant” [ID:6, Male, 31-40 years]

“There was an event in the town centre at the time. I decided to go check it out and then decided to do some browsing afterwards” [ID:14, Female, 18-25 years]

“The market is great! I have been going there most Saturdays for over 20 years…The shop keepers and market stall holders know you. Sometimes there is a busker or another event. It is just wonderful.” [ID:53, Female, 41-50 years]

“I look forward for the market days because I can find vintage items and bargains. The market creates a vibrant atmosphere in the town centre.” [ID:79, Male, 31-40 years]

“I hate the market because it is not organised and you can’t walk comfortably in the town” [ID:40, Female, 31-40 years]
Information & Signage

Refers to the availability of information points and signage to facilitate shopping navigation around the town centre.

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“I was trying to find where the event is taking place but there weren’t any signs up around the town” [ID:103, Female, 31-40 years]

“I went to the town because I heard of new stores opening. When I got there, I couldn’t find any information on where they are. It took me a while but figured it out” [ID:122, Female, 26-30 years]

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Digital Channels and Technologies Touchpoints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Touchpoint</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town Centre Website</td>
<td>Customers’ perception towards the town centres’ own website including recentness of information.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Centre Social media</td>
<td>Customers’ perception towards the town centres’ own social media presence including information about events, customer service, feedback and reviews.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Centre Mobile Application</td>
<td>Customers’ perception towards mobile applications in the town centre including information about stores, services, offers and promotions.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wi-Fi</td>
<td>Refers to the internet availability within the town centre.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.66%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

“I went on the website as I needed to check the availability of certain shops and the closing hours. I was also looking for the location of one shop in the town centre [ID:14, Male, 31-40 years]

“I was disappointed because I couldn’t find any information about the store closing hours or what they sell!” [ID:92, Male, 31-40 years]

“I was looking for reviews about the new store that opened in the town so I went on the social media page of the town as it was advertised there.” [ID:96, Female, 31-40 years]

“I wasn’t planning to stay long in the town but then I saw an advertisement about an event taking place in the town so I decided to check it out” [ID:13, Female, 31-40 years]

“I heard about an event coming up from one of the storekeepers. I decided to go on Love Loughborough to check when it is happening so I can plan my next visit” [ID:90, Female, 41-40 years]

“I prefer to shop online because I can get my bargains spot on. When I knew about Love Loughborough apps things have changed slightly because I can get a lot of offers without having to wait for delivery. I think any online is very important factor now to where people prefer to go and shop.” [ID:107, Female, 26-30 years]

“I needed to access the internet as I had issues with my signal. Wi-Fi allowed me to stay connected to the online world so I can get better deals. It was also important because I was shopping for my family, so I had to send them photos of the stuff I was buying.” [ID:107, Female, 26-30 years]

“The internet is very bad in the town around the shops. Having access to internet while shopping may extend my stay in the town centre”. [ID:14, Male, 31-40 years]

\(N = \text{Number of respondents’ interaction with the touchpoint throughout the stages of the shopping journey}\)
Leisure and recreational activities were mentioned in many shopping trips recorded in this study. Interactions with entertainment facilities (cinemas, pubs, and bowling), cafes and restaurants, or special events organised by the town centre, developed reactions and feelings, which influenced respondents’ shopping experience during the visit. The perceived experience from the Leisure touchpoint component complemented the utilitarian purpose of shopping in the town centre, having a strong influence on respondents’ intentions to spend and dwell in the town centre. As online develops into the dominant shopping destination, customers are looking beyond the utilitarian value of shopping (Alexander and Kent, 2020; Van Rompay et al., 2012). Leisure and entertainment enhance the shopping experience by creating hedonic feelings and sentiments for the consumer, turning it into an event that stimulates different perceptions of the shopping visit beyond goal fulfilment (Dennis et al., 2002). Likewise, evidence from shopping mall experience suggests the anchoring effect of leisure on customer patronage choice (Tandon et al., 2016). The variety of entertainment facilities in the town centre complements a hedonic shopping experience, which increases the perceived value of shopping there.

Consistent with Stocchi et al. (2016), more respondents are appreciating the experiential value of Weekly Markets in their town centre shopping experience. Respondents view it as “unique to the town centre”, which creates a distinctive atmosphere that resembles an “old English town centre”. This touchpoint reinforces customers’ sense of belonging to the community as it reminds them of the “British heritage”, which gives them unique experiences beyond modern brick and mortar retailing. Yet, managing this interaction is critical as it can influence other interactions in the town centre, and thus the shopping experience. For instance, respondents had different perceptions towards this touchpoint in terms of its positive/negative effects on other touchpoints including Layout, Atmosphere and Public Insecurity.

Despite its low frequency, the physical Information & Signage is considered important for respondents, particularly older respondents seeking information about the town centre
during the visit (Stocchi et al., 2016). Whilst digital channel touchpoints (such as search engines and social networks) facilitate ease of access to information about the shopping purpose, allowing customers to make more convenient choices (Singh and Jang, 2020; Pantano and Viassone, 2015), some customers still rely on the information on physical signs and notices within the town centre to navigate their route around the town. The UK demographic comprises an ‘ageing population’ (Wrigley et al., 2015), thus addressing their needs is necessary to improve their shopping experiences.

4.2 Town Centre Digital Channel Touchpoints

AbedRabbo et al. (2021) highlighted the increasing demand for digital channel touchpoints in the town centre to facilitate search/purchase intentions. Consistent with Wagner et al. (2020) and Hallikainen et al. (2019), some respondents in this study outlined their interactions with a Town Centre owned Website, Social Media pages and Mobile Applications, termed digital channel touchpoints, to seek further knowledge for their shopping trip. In the Pre-visit stage, respondents interacted with these digital channel touchpoints to plan their shopping visit and assess their potential to achieve their goals. They attempted to obtain information about the town centre (including the range of shops, offers and discounts, stores opening hours, parking availability and any special events) online, which influenced their journey into the town centre. This supports the notion that websites, social media and mobile applications are becoming functional digital channel touchpoints for consumers throughout the customer journey (Hallikainen et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2020). They help in overcoming spatial and temporal constraints between the customer and the retailers, enhancing their shopping experience and revisit intentions (De Hann et al., 2018; Demko-Rihter and Ter Halle, 2015). This study found that interactions with the digital channel touchpoints of the town centre (including mobile applications and social media) allowed users to remain connected to their social circle and seek reassurances regarding their shopping decisions. In turn, digital channels
facilitated customers’ shopping experience and patronage into town centres as it reduced the transactional costs of shopping (such as time and money) by planning their visit conveniently:

“I think having access to information about the town before the visit would influence my spend or stay. If I knew about any promotions or events beforehand then I would be more willing to go there again” [ID:166, Male, 18-25 years]

Meanwhile, in the *During* stage, respondents interacted with the digital channel touchpoints to learn more about aspects of the physical touchpoints’ components (such as store reviews, locations and closing hours). Their dwell/spend behaviour towards the town centre was guided by the sentiments and feelings created from the available information online. This supports AbedRabbo et al. (2021), which identified how online information can inform customers of the physical touchpoints of the town centre, allowing them to make better decisions towards their shopping visit.

In the *Post-visit* stage, respondents highlighted how online information (such as available retail stores, opening hours, parking, offers and promotions, and leisure facilities) accessed via digital channel touchpoints will encourage them to patronise the town centre in the future. These findings are consistent with the effect of digital integration on customers’ willingness to search and purchase noted in previous studies (Herhausen et al., 2015; Singh and Jang, 2020). The increasing reliance of customers on online information makes it imperative for town centre managers to monitor the type and nature of customers’ interactions with the digital touchpoints, as this influences search and purchase intentions in the physical location.

Notably, interaction with digital technologies (such as Wi-Fi) also emerged as an important touchpoint, serving two purposes in the *During* visit stage: (i) To help overcome connectivity issues in the town centre, allowing respondents to remain connected to their social
circle and attain convenience in shopping (Betzing et al., 2018; El Azhari and Bennett, 2015). Respondents’ ability to connect to the internet created feelings of “pleasure”, “satisfaction” and “value” as it facilitated the purpose of their shopping journey and influenced their dwelling and spending intentions. (ii) Accessing town centre Wi-Fi generated valuable data regarding consumer behaviour, such as footfall, dwell time in stores or locations in the town centre. As outlined by Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), data can be used to improve the town centre shopping journey by highlighting the different routes taken in the town centre, which will lead to effective planning and structuring of the town centre touchpoints to fit consumers’ needs including the location of retailers, leisure providers, parking, and public transportation.

5. Managerial implications and Limitations

Retail patronage is vital if town centres, and retail businesses are to be sustainable. But the advent of digital channel touchpoints as a mainstream route to market has changed the dynamic between consumer, retailer, and place. At the beginning of a visit to a town, individuals not only rely heavily on digital devices, to provide information on parking availability, transport timetables and booking a ride to their favourite shopping destinations but also rely on the reliability of the physical aspects of their chosen transport which gives access to place. This study presents new insights into how customers perceive these physical/digital touchpoints along the shopping journey and their impact on the town centre shopping experience. Building on the customer journey framework (Hossain et al., 2020; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), our town centre shopping journey framework (Figure 2) highlights specific physical and digital touchpoints accessed at different stages of the shopping visit. This will help in advancing the town centre literature by exploring the potential effect of touchpoints on the patronage issue at the high street. These findings offer implications for managing customer experiences in town centres:
1. **Pre-visit Touchpoints**: Town centre digital touchpoints are important to inform customers in planning their visit or whether to visit at all. Compared to earlier studies (Hart et al., 2014) the respondents had higher expectations of the recency, range and consistency of information provided on town centre-based websites, applications, and social media. This information was considered lacking to support the physical touchpoints of parking, promotions, and assortment, which shape customer patronage decisions. The use of digital communications is more prevalent in town centres yet often disjointed and not connected to the *shopping journey narrative*. Stimulating a visit to town through digital promotional activities such as forthcoming event alerts or retail brand/product launches would help shape *pre*-visit intentions, providing the physical touchpoints then meet expectations *during visit*. Given that physical access was a perceived barrier to visiting towns, town centres need to identify journey access ‘pain points’ to that town, develop and
communicate easier transport or parking options. For example, working with provider appyway.com, two UK local authorities introduced the first Smart City Parking solution in Harrogate to enable a ‘seamless parking experience’ for app users to find and pay for any available parking, in real-time.

2. **During-visit touchpoints:** The global pandemic created many challenges; most affecting customer perceptions of atmosphere, layout, and public insecurity. As online retailing offers a convenient alternative to physical shopping, the task is to increase perceptions of the physical value of the town to shopping journeys and improve customer interactions with physical touchpoints. This stage is where touchpoints converge into a physical / digitally connected ‘holistic’ shopping journey. More intuitive town centre mobile applications could be used to guide individual shoppers through their utilitarian journeys such as using the shortest, convenient route to fulfil their shopping goals from available assortment or services. For hedonic journeys, the mobile application could recommend discoverable, forgotten parts of the town, accessing promotions, events, and social media to interact with friends, family, or like-minded people in a physical or digital social environment. Linking entire customer journeys will be dependent on customers’ connectedness to the internet with reliable town centre Wi-Fi.

3. **Post-visit touchpoints:** Digital interactions at the *Pre-visit* and *Post-visit* stages can be pivotal in explaining customers’ patronage levels in town centres. By focusing on the whole shopping journey narrative, creates holistic connected customer experiences. The *post-visit* stage allows shoppers to engage and reflect on the success of their visit, which will shape revisit intentions. The role of town centre websites, mobile applications and social media pages here can help to empower the consumer with information about upcoming events, activities and offers taking
place, thus creating a sense of urgency for them to patronise the town centre. Likewise, harnessing the power of local shopper knowledge can expand habitual journeys to be discoverable. These digital channel touchpoints are providing a platform for consumers to share their concerns about shopping in town centres, allowing decision-makers to remain connected to town centre users and address their emerging needs.

Importantly, this work reinforces the continuing importance of atmospheric cues to customer experience (Roggeveen et al., 2020). New touchpoints such as Public Insecurity create negative feelings and sentiments for customers’ physical shopping journeys. The negative behaviour of other users in the town centre can deter customers and encourage them to cut short their visit to the shops and reduce future patronage. This avoidance approach will be passed to customers through negative word-of-mouth, which will influence other users’ intentions to patronise the town centre. Thus, periodically monitoring customer perceptions of safety will enable towns to address these concerns before patronage is impacted.

It is noteworthy that customers’ concerns towards these touchpoints were reported pre-pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic placed greater emphasis on the layout and customers’ safety within the store to limit virus transmission. In town centres, immediate post-lockdown issues involved queuing outside of the stores and how to ensure customer safety in accessing different stores. Addressing the atmospheric and accessibility cues, and customer safety concerns may act as ‘hygiene factors’ towards improving the patronage issue.

This paper is a first step to exploring the integrated role of the digital domain in the physical town centre journey (Stocchi et al., 2016; Wrigley et al., 2015). Further, this study confirms an association between the digital touchpoints and town centre patronage by influencing customers’ perceptions of the physical touchpoints. Similar to existing town centre
research (Betzing et al., 2018; Stocchi et al., 2016) this paper focuses on one country which may incur some cultural bias yet drawing qualitative data from six locations within two regions provides rich data to develop our understanding of the town centre context.

The paper sheds new light on the effect of shopping experience on different patronage indicators such as spend and dwell. Previous studies explored the relationship between town centre customer experience and revisit intentions (Stocchi et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2013). Yet, as reported by some customers, ‘exciting’ and ‘enjoyable’ shopping journeys incurred a larger amount of money spent and longer shopping duration in that visit. Respondents attributed their spending and dwelling behaviour to the sentiments they perceived from physical touchpoints (such as accessibility, atmosphere, and leisure). Importantly, information available on the digital channel touchpoints (such as social media and mobile application) guided customers spend behaviour by highlighting the various offers and events available in the town centre. Those interactions shaped the town centre shopping journey, highlighting the need for further research into the association between shopping experience and spend/dwell intentions as they could provide additional insights into the patronage issue.

6. Concluding comments and future research

The town centre shopping experience is a specific construct which is viewed through the customer journey framework in this paper. Currently, many customers’ interactions remain physical and occur during the visit to the town centre and yet we highlight a moderation effect of digital touchpoints on customers’ perception of the physical touchpoints, shopping experience and patronage intentions. Future research should focus on digital interactions impact on customers’ shopping experience and could replicate this study in different regions and internationally to extend our insights into town centre patronage. Similarly, the dataset used for this study predates the COVID-19 pandemic, and in so doing provides a foundation
for future studies to access the impact of the pandemic on future shopping behaviour. The importance of each touchpoint and customers’ interactions with these may change over time. Thus, further quantitative work is needed to provide statistical support to the effect of each touchpoint on the shopping experience and patronage intentions, which would allow the development of a precise measure of town centre shopping experience that managers can adopt to improve their town centre shopping experience (Homburg et al., 2015).

References


Trip details

- Demographics
- Shopping visit information (time of the day, purpose, duration of visit, total money spent)
- “Describe your journey into the town centre”
- “Did you have any memorable interactions on the way to the town? If yes, please elaborate”
- “Did you use the internet before going into the town centre shopping visit? if yes, please explain”

During-visit

- “Describe your visit in the town centre”
- “Did you have any memorable interactions during your visit? If yes, please elaborate”
- “Did you use the internet during your shopping visit? if yes, please explain”

Post-visit

- “Describe your return journey from the town centre”
- “Did you have any memorable interactions on your way back? If yes, please elaborate”
- “Did you use the internet after your shopping visit? if yes, please explain”

Future intentions

- Based on your most recent shopping experience, what are your future intentions towards shopping in the town centre”
- “How would you improve the town centre shopping experience”