

The Town Centre Consumer: Exploring the Holistic Town Centre Journey

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Abstract

To date, current customer experience literature focuses on interaction encounters in a store environment, with limited attention on the wider retail environment. Unlike a retail store, a town centre includes a composite of retail environments, with which a customer interacts during the town centre visit. This paper explores customers' cognitive and evaluative experiences that emerge from customer's engagement during the town centre journey. Three complementary methodological approaches - focus groups, online diaries and critical incidents - were adopted to capture the customer's holistic journey in a town centre. A total of 180 respondents participated in a consumer 'tracking study' with 445 diary entries and a total of 1869 shopping trips recorded. By exploring customers' journeys in town centres, a more complete understanding is achieved for the holistic journey 'process' in the complex retail environment of a town centre. Empirical findings illustrate that the customers' town centre journeys adopt to a large extent a sequential process, illustrating the inherent decision making involved prior to, during and after completing the journey. Furthermore, the findings identify the factors that affect each stage of the process ranging from the initial planning through to the operationalization of the act.

Key words: *Customer Experience, Retail Environment, Town Centre Journey.*

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Introduction

Customer Experience as a concept emerged in the mid-1980s, along with the mainstream literature in consumer behaviour that considered customers as rational decision makers (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). However, much of the existing literature in customer experience has focused on interactions between a customer and a service (cf. Baker *et al.*, 1992), with much focus on retail stores. Store-level studies have examined the effect of a single environmental element on customer emotion, such as music (Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990), colour (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992) and scent (Spangenberg, Crowley, and Henderson, 1996), without addressing the much needed in-depth understanding of the combination of these encounters (cf. Stern, Zinkhan, and Jaju, 2001). Despite the economic importance of downtown and high streets, no research has investigated customer experience in a town centre. A town centre not only includes stores but also represents a conglomeration of other services, with which customers are likely to engage throughout their visit. It is our contention that the combination of multiple service environments contributes to the town centre customer experience.

While customer experience is conceptualised in the town centre environment (Hart, Stachow and Cadogan, 2013) little research has empirically investigated customer journeys in town centres, resulting in limited understanding of customers' town centre behaviour. Understanding how multiple retail environments collectively affects customers' decision-making regarding, why and where to shop is important to town centre attractiveness and patronage.

Verhoef *et al.*, (2009) suggest that Customer Experience comprises two elements; those under the control of the retailer, and those outside the control of the retailer – which together encapsulate a broad understanding of the multiple factors that impact customers experience. To capture a holistic understanding of customer experience, we propose that the next phase of research should explore the town centre journey. The importance to retailers and town centre managers of addressing customer's town centre journeys cannot be understated. To survive and prosper, town centres need to understand and interpret their customers' changing behaviour and perceptions of their high street, in order to compete for their loyalty. Moreover, conceptualising the customer's holistic town centre journey will enable informed strategies to meet or exceed people's emotional needs and expectations, resulting in extended dwell time and repeat patronage in the town centre. This paper will draw on qualitative study to (i) conceptualise customers' journeys in town centres, and (ii) capture the factors influencing the holistic journey to, within and from a town centre.

The remainder of this article includes; first, a literature review sets the context for the customer experience in town centres. Then, the methodology underpinning the research is presented, followed by the analysis and findings. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings.

Literature Review

Town centres are central to retail marketing as they provide a customer experience that goes beyond a shopping interaction to include the wider cultural and entertainment experience (Guy, 1994). Such experiences serve an integral part of the consumer decision-making process, driving patronage and shopping centre equity (El Hedhli and Chebat, 2009).

Customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organisation, which provoke a reaction (LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Shaw and Ivens, 2005). The experience is not only personal but implies the customer's involvement at different levels e.g. emotional, sensorial and physical (LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Schmitt, 1999). Furthermore, the evaluation of customer experience depends on the comparison between a customer's expectations and their interaction with the brand offering during different contact or touch points (LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Shaw and Ivens, 2005). This suggests, that a customer experience is a two-way process in which consumers "co-create" their unique experiences (Gentile, Spiller and Noci, 2007:396) due to their inherent active involvement.

The conceptualisation of customer experience in the context of town centres is more complex than for brands due to the composite of 'cues' with which consumers interact simultaneously, and which essentially guide their journeys in a retail environment (e.g. see Berry, Carbone and Haeckel, 2002). The cues take the form of customers' direct contact with a retail environment, but also a combination of diverse interactive encounters due to the structure of town centre environments. The combination of encounters captures the vivid, novel and memorable experiences customers engage in, which activate customers' feelings, emotions, interaction and evaluation. This could include stores, hospitality, entertainment and markets, indicating that customer experience in a retail environment is multi-faceted (Voss, Roth and Chase, 2008). Reinforcing this, Meyer and Schwager (2007, pp.118-19) define customer experience in a service setting as a combination of internal and subjective responses customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a service. Direct contact generally occurs at the point of purchase and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters or intangible encounters that represent a company's products, services or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticism.

Compared with the traditional understanding of service experience, customer experience in a retail context comprises the entirety of the shopping process (Haytko and Baker, 2004) which encompasses a total experience, including the search, purchase, consumption, and after-sales service of the consumer decision making process (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009:32). Thus, customer contact not only includes the interactions with the retail offer but also interactions across multiple channels which involve broader social and community elements. As such, the customer experience begins with the 'journey' to the store and continues through to the completion of the shopping experience (Gilmore and Pine, 2002; Haytko and Baker, 2004). Throughout this journey, the customer will be in contact with both direct (tangible) experiences, such as merchandise offerings and indirect (intangible) interactions, such as the services and atmosphere, which add value to an enjoyable experience. The town centre journey could therefore be a combination of diverse interactive encounters of both direct and indirect interactions.

Therefore, a town centre experience will be influenced by a customer's journey which is not solely created by those elements which the retailer can control (e.g. service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment) but also by elements that are outside of the retailer's control e.g. influence of others, purpose of shopping (Verhoef *et al.* 2009:32). Equally, in a town centre, there will be multifaceted external elements due to the combination of multiple retail environments. It is likely that the collective individual encounters occurring during a town centre visit develop a meaning and value, which helps consumers create preferences for particular town centre experiences. For example, Pullman and Gross (2004) argued that a customer experience is an act that engages the customer in an experience which progresses over time and includes anticipation and emotional involvement (Pullman and Gross, 2004:553). Similarly Roederer (2012) suggests that such anticipation and emotional involvement can be combined into four dimensions to understand the meaning of the customer's experience; namely praxeological, hedonic, thymic and rhetoric. These four dimensions capture the actions taken during the experience, pleasure-displeasure associated with the experience, the meaning of the experience encountered and the holistic significance customers assign to their individualistic retail service experience.

By understanding the meaning of consumers consumption experience, the quest for a town centre journey is supported by consumption choices and service encounters that add authenticity and originality to the experience. For example, Castéran and Roederer (2013) argued that consumers will undertake consumption experiences that underpin their decision making process and add meaning to consumers in the form of entertainment, emotional engagement and (or) creatively challenging experiences.

Much attention has been given to experiential encounters in a retail context (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Babin *et al.* 1994; Schmitt, 1999). Yet, focusing on the experiential engagement only provides half the story. Town centres not only facilitate experiential connections through indirect encounters (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Caru` and Cova, 2003; LaSalle and Britton, 2003) but also direct encounters such as purchasing products in stores, combine into the town centre journey. Thus, this paper extends the current literature by examining the holistic process of a town centre journey from a consumer's perspective - that is, including the direct/physical interactions, which the consumer encounters to complete the journey.

Regardless of how routine or commonplace the experience, consumers want or expect a direct and (or) indirect experience to complete a shopping journey (Garg, Rahman and Kumar, 2010; Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Berry and Carbone, 2007; Voss and Zomerdijk, 2007). This paper responds to the much-needed call to understand the combination of multiple interactive encounters experienced by customers during a town centre visit. The next section will explain how we used a multi method approach to provide an in-depth understanding of customer journeys, and will detail the qualitative methodology undertaken to explore the holistic town centre journey.

Methodology

The UK is reported to be a suitable context to explore, as it has complex urban environments with multifaceted functions that comprise both retail and non-retail purposes (Hart, Stachow and Cadogan, 2013), and thus formed the context for this study.

The diverse experiences generated in town centres distinguishes them from other service encounters, as they encourage customers to activate their cognitive processes, providing a representation of the customer's total shopping journey (Dichter, 1985). Thus, exploring the challenges customers face during the journey which influence their overall experience and level of interaction across the multiple encounters in town centre, is important to this study.

Three methodological approaches, focus groups, diaries and critical incidents, were adopted to capture the customer's holistic journey in a town centre. The triangulation and complementary approach of these methods provided flexibility to ensure a much-needed in-depth understanding to explore town centre journeys (Creswell and Tashakkori, 2007).

Focus groups were conducted as an initial qualitative approach to gain specific information about customer experiences of town centres and informed the following stages of the exploratory study. Thus, highlighting key interactions' customers experienced from the initial point of the town centre journey right through to the end of their journey. By adopting focus group methodology respondents are able to hear experiences of other members and are motivated to expand and refine their own ideas and perceptions of their journey in a town centre (Bloor *et al.*, 2001; Morgan, 1998).

Diaries enabled reflection on personal experiences, behaviours and events (Milligan, Bingley and Gattrell, 2005). The diaries were constructed for a specific research purpose and completed by participants for the duration of 4 weeks in the form of a 'tracking study'. Diaries followed a structured format in which diarists recorded detailed commentaries in their own words by answering specific questions regarding their town centre experience. This helped capture the immediacy and spontaneity of a particular experience, thereby facilitating the accuracy of future recall and minimising retrospection bias (Alaszewski, 2006; Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003).

Critical incidents (CI), however, were conducted to identify the underlying factors influencing customers' journeys and the experiences they encountered (Flanagan, 1954). Given that the holistic journey in a town centre experience is relatively under explored, the CI method was chosen to complement other qualitative approaches. The CI method enables generation of rich data in uncovering the underlying cognitive processes, which formulate customers' journey decision process, thus helping determine the town centre experience (Deshpande, 1983).

Data Collection

Data collection was outsourced to an independent research company that specializes in qualitative data collection. Respondents in each focus group were initially asked to complete a paper exercise to capture their rationale for, and journey process for their last town centre visit. The interview schedule then opened by discussing how respondents felt about their local town centres, and probing 'how', 'where' and 'what' town centre experiences were encountered. Respondents were encouraged to comment on other town centres they use. The moderator explored the consumers' feelings and thoughts during their town centre experience together with the actual journey undertaken. By doing so, the respondents naturally evaluated what stimulated their need to visit a town centre, and the interactions they encountered right through to the end of their shopping journey. In total, six focus groups were conducted in different UK locations, with eight regular shoppers participating in each

focus group. These locations were Huddersfield, Loughborough, Watford, Swindon, Bury St Edmunds and Sandbach. All respondents were given a £5 incentive for their time and participation. Each focus group lasted on average for about 90 minutes. The discussions were recorded and transcribed into an electronic format.

The questionnaire for the online diaries was designed to capture every shopping activity during the 4-week period, whether in-town, convenience or online, with whom, the time and money spent. A second questionnaire was designed to capture their reflections at the end of each week using a critical incident technique. This probed for memorable, critical incidents, both positive and negative, occurring in town centre locations, during the previous week. A total of 180 respondents participated in the diary study with 445 diary entries and a total of 1869 shopping trips recorded. Respondents were encouraged to provide as much detail as possible. This resulted in a rich description of customers' journeys in a town centre.

Data Analysis

As qualitative information is intricate and diverse, the data were analysed following Spiggle's (1994) recommended qualitative analytical techniques. That is, data were first categorized into "critical incidents", "direct experience", "indirect experiences" and "journey". A detailed coding approach was then conducted through a content analysis method, which drew from the traditional analytical techniques (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991; Kassirjian, 1997). Direct and indirect experiences in town centres were identified from transcripts along with the typical interaction customers encountered in a single town centre visit. By carefully reading and rereading the content of the interviews, the researcher assessed what typically constituted a town centre journey. This was carried out using the partial open coded method (Straus, 1989), and was completed alongside Krippendorff's (2004) content analysis by reading in-between the lines of the transcripts being assessed; although categories are based on but not limited to the 'critical incidents', 'direct experiences', 'indirect experiences' and 'customer journey'. Abstraction was then used to gain a deeper understanding, allowing for themes to be modified and additional themes to be identified.

Three other experienced researchers were involved in coding and analysing the data, which increased the reliability and validity of the emerged themes. A coding template was prepared for the additional researchers that helped code the large volume of data. Coders were informed that non-fitting responses should be considered to be of equal interest to ensure critical incidents, direct and indirect experiences and customer town centre journey are captured.

All transcripts were compared within, and between each transcript. This is consistent with the 'part to whole strategy' (Haytko, 2004), where initial focus was directed towards individual interviews, and then similarities and differences across interviews compared. Texts that could not be categorized within the initial coding categories were given a new code. The coding structure was cross-validated by an independent reviewer to further validate the emergent themes.

Results

Findings illustrate that customers engage in a cognitive process before embarking on their town centre journey. Once an initial need is recognised, the customer then undertakes a progression of diverse encounters of both direct and indirect interactions occurring in a town centre journey. Figure 1.0 illustrates the sequential process of the consumer's town centre journey and each stage will be discussed in turn.

Planning Prior to Town Centre Journey

Operationalization of the Town Centre Journey

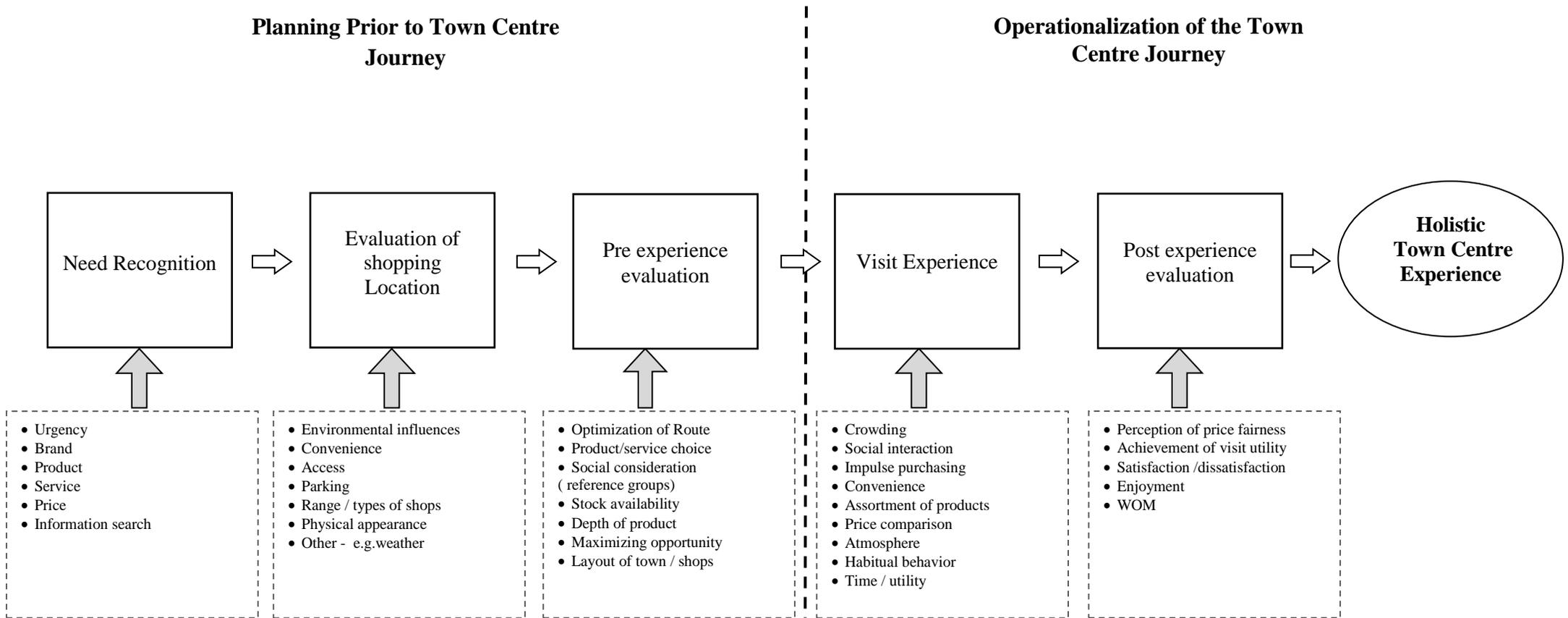


Figure 1.0: The sequential decision process of consumer's town centre journey with factors influencing each stage.

Need Recognition

The findings of the data show that respondents' needs were frequently prompted by a need to purchase a product, for example, "I wanted to buy a book", a service such as a "I needed to go to the bank", or to fulfil a social state, for example, "friends who insisted I go shopping with them". Overcoming the state of need motivates the consumer to seek a balance between their current and desired state. For example, having to buy a birthday present is sufficient encouragement to prompt a shopping trip. Therefore, some customers start the town centre journey by identifying an urgent physical need, while others identify a need for social reasons. For example:

'To purchase a new printer for use at home'

'The purpose was to get Christmas presents....'

'I haven't met my friend in a while ... I wanted to catch up with them in town'

Consequently, the customer is prompted to seek relevant information associated with fulfilling their immediate need. The respondent diaries indicated that the key information accessed was product related, checking prices and stock availability - online. The diaries indicated additional hedonic motivation was realised by wider attractions of town centre shopping, for example, an expectation of pleasure in seeking bargains during the town centre visit.

'I needed to get Christmas gifts, I don't exactly know what to get but I want to see what bargains I can grab'

Evidence shows that social needs in the form of sensory motives equally prompted a town centre journey. Respondents sought relevant information to satisfy emotional needs in a town centre through peripheral attributes such as the social history, heritage and culture of the architecture. For example:

'It was a lovely sunny day and me and my partner wanted to explore the some of the heritage landmarks in town'

Evaluation of Shopping Location

The findings show that once the need is identified, individuals start to evaluate external factors of a location that are likely to help fulfil this. In the second stage, customers draw from information regarding the location and employ their prior knowledge base to assess the attraction of a town centre versus alternative locations, primarily due to the range of stores.

'The range of shops in shopping centre is attractive to me'

'All the necessary shops are within walking distance, I can browse for gifts at the same time in other shops nearby...'

'I choose this town centre because of the high density of popular high street stores... good quality products, and staff are always happy to help when needed... I enjoy it here because of the heritage buildings surrounding the town centre.'

Although each individual adopts different patterns of information seeking depending on the nature of the visit, all individuals will consider both macro and micro level by scanning the town centre structure and surrounding environment, such as access or parking to help them plan their shopping journey. Familiar customers will activate their prerequisite knowledge base on the location of stores, which will later determine the customer's physical route through the town.

Among the criteria included in the environmental influences, customers see the convenience of a town centre as essential, alongside constraints such as traffic or potential road works, how close

the stores are from the bus stops/car parks. Essentially, environmental factors are influenced by customers' levels of familiarity with the town centre.

'This town centre is the closest to where I live, I know where to park and where all the shops are'.

'I needed to get my food shopping.... It's easy to get to [the town centre] on the bus; all shops are within easy walking distance; there is a reasonable choice of stores to visit'.

The evaluation of shopping location is affected by an individual's prior knowledge base, such as, "will I get a parking space?" or "will the bus drop me near the shopping area?" which are all external environmental influences.

'Depending on my reason for going to the town centre I would park in the relevant car park nearest to the store I needed'

'I try to plan my journey by avoiding central routes because of traffic and for convenience purposes'.

Therefore, evaluating the shopping location is attributed to the attractiveness and accessibility of a town centre that is influenced by assortment and the atmosphere, which arouse consumers' sensory and emotional factors.

Pre Experience Evaluation

Following evaluation of the shopping location factors, customers progress to evaluate information regarding the physical elements of their proposed visit. Pre-experience evaluation works from consumers' existing knowledge base from media and previous town centre encounters to facilitate the most convenient town centre journey. Key factors influencing this stage were depth of product assortment, stock availability and layout of the town centre to optimise the journey. Consumers use store locations to plan their navigation around the town centre to avoid any potential disruptions of their journey such as crowding. For example:

'I already planned my journey [to] walk to the furthest [store] first so I could carry my shopping back on the shortest route and avoid the crowding'.

'A natural order in walking as I knew what I wanted to get and made sure the largest item was bought last'.

'I only had a small item to get from Argos then Iceland was the next nearest then Boots because it was nearest to the car park and the items I was buying were bulky'.

The use of 'click and collect' is used increasingly to ensure stock availability by ordering items online. 50% of respondents collected pre-ordered items during their town centre visits, and this was planned into their routes:

'I used the internet to reserve an item I wanted to get. I did this to make sure they had it in stock'.

As pre-experience evaluation is typically undertaken before entering a town centre, this stimulates elements of uncertainty. Consequently, customers strive to maximise the quality of the town centre experience by including social and emotional aspects of the journey, for example, planning a visit that involves bargain hunting, or social engagement with other people to deliver a positive experience (i.e. meeting up with friends over a coffee). The interaction with additional services helps reduce uncertainty, maximise the shopping opportunity while helping to navigate around the town centre.

'I planned my route before going into the town so I knew what I wanted to get –I knew what to expect... I knew what I was going to shop to buy gifts as its festive time of year'.

'...So I could put the heavy things in the car first and then continue shopping... '.

However, the determination of the “optimised route” is subjective, situational and difficult. Ultimately, the physical encounters of the town centre journey commence when customers engage with stores and service offerings.

Visit Experience

Arriving in the town centre, customers engage in direct contact with the purchase and consumption of the town centre offering whether it is a product or service. Indirect contact involves the unplanned encounters that occur on the journey and takes the form of crowding, impulse behaviour triggered by atmosphere or physical appearance of shops. Indirect contact heightens the customer’s journey, which influences the outcome of the experience. Therefore, direct and indirect contact creates a sensation and knowledge acquisition that comprises: the physical setting, price perceptions, range of stores, product design or quality of service, entertainment and atmosphere which contribute to the actual visit of a town centre.

The findings show that when consumers are in town centres they may interact across multiple retail environments such as stores, in-town malls, street markets. As a result, cues from these interactions trigger secondary needs identified through situational factors, signage or social groups, which in turn stimulate impulse purchasing. Hence, this further activity extends and expands the utility of the shopping trip to achieve a fruitful journey. For example:

'I wanted to make sure I bought some stamps, having bought stamps from Superdrug before I headed there first, then Argos, Primark as I walked past the store, TK Maxx just for a look around then back up to Sainsburys to get some shopping and make my way to the bus station'.

'Like the town, wanted to visit the Market as it's bigger than most, also wanted to go to the Target Archery Centre, so made a trip of it'.

'We bought several items that we had reserved and also a couple of extra gifts which we saw whilst shopping'.

The data revealed, that over 60% of respondents reported taking habitual routes, which limits the utility of a town centre journey, missing secondary locations. However, the findings also show that the utility can be maximised when retailers promote offers or special events in central locations. Special events stimulate consumer’s interest and in turn trigger diversions from habitual routes.

'I don't think the town centre is very well signposted, so you don't know what shops are available'.

'Because that followed a loop of the town saving time'.

'I walked a different route with my girlfriend.... as there was an event on.. we also explored other shops which we didn't plan'.

Importantly, the data illustrated the significance of creating relationships *between* customers as opposed to *with* customers, as customers can affect one another either directly or indirectly. For example, crowding or standing too close to others can create anxiety and eye contact between strangers, which can be negatively perceived. Similarly, other customers can be disruptive (e.g., talking loudly in a town centre), and undermine the experience for other customers during their town centre journey:

'The crowds were too big and we had a wasted journey'.

'The people around me were noisy, bad characters - both of them ignorant and arrogant - upset my concentration and unnerved me - they could quite easily have grabbed one another by the throat...'

Post Experience Evaluation

The findings illustrate that once the consumer has interacted with the town centre, customers reflect on their experience to determine overall satisfaction of the journey. More specifically, the that satisfaction is orchestrated around the approval of the town centre's physical and emotional offering encountered in fulfilling the need.

'Most memorable experience about high street shopping for myself is it's more immersive and tactile'.

The high level of involvement customers have in a town centre suggests that certain critical incidents create a strong emotional reaction during the journey. Emotions act as a source of information, which is used to evaluate the town centre and leads to the formation of an attitude. With positive attitude, customers' journeys in a town centre are evaluated favourably and are likely to prolong future town centre journeys.

'The experience was memorable because there was ...good salesmanship, good communication, care taken to meet my needs, good attitude'.

'Seeing friends, shopping for sale bargains created a memorable experience for me'.

With an unfavourable attitude and limited parking time consumers will shorten their journey by eliminating exploration of the town centre. Town centre journeys are often made by consumers who are highly involved to induce a sense of belonging. Based on other town centre experiences, consumers have specific expectations about the town's attributes depending on the outcome of the journey experience and how recent it was. However, the psychological benefit of a town centre journey has most bearing on satisfaction or dissatisfaction rather than purchasing outcomes. The psychological benefit, however, is less controlled by the town centre offer, depending considerably on local market conditions and individual shopping behaviours.

"I liked my town centre visit today, I felt quite satisfied, I didn't buy anything but I liked the atmosphere – people were helpful".

Overall, the findings provide evidence that the town centre journey includes customer involvement at emotional, sensorial and physical levels. For example, the emotional level of satisfaction is activated through the evaluation of the indirect encounters that stimulate enjoyment through good customer services, reduced level crowdedness and achievement of a bargain. Sensorial involvement is evaluated by the customer through the appearance and attractiveness of the town centre, such as the heritage and cultural buildings that create a positive atmosphere throughout the town centre journey. Physical involvement activates through the direct encounters and the variety of stores that encourage impulse purchase and in turn stimulate customer satisfaction. The actual journey, however, depends on the initial identification of a need through to the interaction the customer has with the stimuli and its correspondent offering.

Conclusion

The customer experience journey encompasses the entire process, from anticipation and search to purchase, consumption and beyond. Comparing with retail experience journeys (Verhoef et al. 2009), the town centre journey begins prior to the search phase, including the need arousal in the

decision to initiate the journey. The following two stages involve planning, first by evaluating the location and then the layout and route. Importantly, this careful route planning then directs customers' physical journeys to and through the town centre. The manner in which the consumer evaluates the information hinges on the nature and the intensity of the primary need (functional or social needs), the information available, as well as on personal factors. In general, consumer information behaviour is rooted in and shaped by primary needs.

The town centre journey is a continuous process evaluating factors such as access, social consideration and the range of shops that influence the holistic journey to, within and from the town centre. Although a town centre journey is not universal (unlike psychological needs) or directly associated with life goals. Consumers may plan but cannot pre-determine the duration of a journey to fulfil their satisfaction. However, a town centre journey is prompted and energized by a customer's need that varies in intensity. The strength of satisfaction in a town centre, and its particular nature in combination with factors that influence the holistic journey, all heighten utility, resulting in extended dwell time, satisfaction and repeat patronage. Thus, the overall experience in a town centre is determined by the customer's town centre journey. Further study of town centre journeys could significantly advance our understanding of *why* and *how* consumers behave in a town centre and lead to shaping those journeys to result in enhanced experiences.

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