Influence of Online Shopping on Consumer Shopping Patterns in the UK

1. Introduction

The UK's retail sector is experiencing a period of uncertainty due to increasing alterations in consumer shopping habits and as a result, UK high streets and town centres are facing their biggest crisis known to them. In the first six months of 2019, the UK's high street's lost almost 10% of its chain stores, in addition an average of 16 stores are closing daily, almost doubling the number of stores that have opened (Hooker et al., 2019). The biggest casualties of these consist of restaurants, fashion retailers and estate agents (Nie et al, 2019). In addition, the average business on UK high streets and town centres are witnessing a 20% decrease in overall sales (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019). These dismal figures in retail have not only acted as a reminder that in many locations, shopping on the high street is not just altering, but instead dying. Known as 'Britain's most depressing high street' (Hockday, 2019), Burslem in Stoke-on-Trent has faced the brunt of alterations in consumer shopping patterns and has become the town with the highest shop vacancy rate in the UK. In 2018 alone, Burslem witnessed over twenty store closures with only eight opening, and these figures have transformed a once thriving industrial town into an 'abandoned town' (Hocday, 2019). Since UK high streets and town centres such as Burslem have been exposed and challenged by additional forms of purchasing products, store closures in UK high streets and town centres have provided enough evidence that shops can no longer be the single appeal for consumers, and instead high streets must adopt innovative methods to not only survive,but thrive. This economic development strategy will discuss a proposal to regenerate Burslem's public space, setting out a constructed rationale, implementation and evaluation of how Burslem can re-emerge as a diverse and inclusive space that mirrors its lively history.

2. Strategy Rationale

The downturn of UK high streets and town centres began in 2009 following the national recession, although, following this period, retailers remained certain that economic success would return to high streets. However, figures from the Centre for Retail Research such as the UK having fifty thousand fewer stores on its high streets compared to a decade ago (Erkan and Evans, 2018) have proved that this has not been the case. According to Amblee and Bui (2011), the key reason that many UK high streets and town centres have failed to recover is due to the influence of online shopping. In 2018, 87% of retail purchases in the UK were made online (Alaimo, 2018), an increase 9% from the previous year, indicating that this this statistic is on an upward trajectory.

Research from academics such as Neil Wrigley et al., (2015) have displayed that there is a lack of evidence to state that consumers do not want to shop at local high streets and town centres. Instead, consumers desire town centres and high streets that are composed of a variety of stores ranging from local traditional stores that offer a sense of community, alongside large retailers. This economic development strategy approves these principles and suggest that a healthy and well-maintained high street is one that consumers have an emotional attachment to.

If consumers perceive UK high streets and town centres as privatised spaces that are governed and maintained by large corporate developers, an argument could be made to suggest that consumers are not concerned about a reduction high street sales.

This economic development strategy deems that for high streets to thrive in the current climate, consumers will have to form a relationship and emotional attachment to them. We believe this can be achieved by regenerating its public space, re-emerging it as a space of inclusivity and diversity. Nearly a third of all stores in Burslem are abandoned, therefore it needs re-emergence.

Figures 1 and 2: Abandoned stores in Burslem town centre (Paterson, 2018)

Burslem needs to be a space that offers more than shopping, and although retail is crucial for the economic development of town centres and high streets, they must evolve into spaces where a community is able to come together. Re-generating public spaces require various approaches, however strong community feel, and inclusivity are crucial components for a thriving town centre and high street (Peel and Lloyd, 2008).

3. Proposed Strategies and Objectives

In order to set objectives that will ensure Burslem re-emerges as the thriving centre it was previously recognised as; the first task is to determine how the town centre is viewed from a consumer perspective. According to Merritt (2014), the town centre of Burslem suffers from severe visual deprivation. The town's grey and abandoned industrial infrastructure overpowers any surrounding green space and fails to offer a sense of identity and community feel (Stobart, 2004). Other public responses have deemed Burselm to be a place that does not offer anything other than shopping (Ault, 2018). Burslem is in need of a rebuild that will ensure it is recognised as a destination, rather than a location that has been drained of its identity. Thus. this report has set out two objectives to ensure Burslem re-emerges as a thriving town centre that remains attached to its historical narrative.

Historically, high streets and town centres were relatively one dimensional, with shops being the primary motive behind the reason for people visiting them (Carmona, 2015). However, the introduction of online shopping has enabled customers to purchase products without leaving their home, and erased any logistical issues people would likely encounter whilst visiting the high street or a town centre for the sole purpose of shopping, such as parking and inclement weather. Although retail is an essential component for a high street or town centre to be successful, visiting them must become an experience (Hart et al., 2014). Below are the three strategies this report is proposing for the re-emergence and re-vitalisation of Burslem's public space, and examples of where these strategies have been adopted and have been successful in public spaces in other UK locations.

Strategy 1: Offer vacant stores as hub's for local and regional business

Background: Abandoned stores offer opportunity for space to be used to bring a community together. Creating more vibrant community hubs have the potential to provide social and economic benefits to a high street or a town centre and in Burselm's case, this proposal would give an opportunity for this historical town centre to re-emerge as a space that celebrates and

supports its community. In Wolverhampton, a fashion design agency has benefited from occupying un-used stores to increase their economic growth.

Example: WeCreate, have supported graduating fashion students and young entrepreneurs by renting out empty stores for them to establish workshops for their new and upcoming businesses. Grants from local authorities enabled these fashion agencies to renovate the stores, and other stores have been used to showcase artwork and other products produced. In four months, over ten thousand visitors were attracted to these stores, ranging from local to regional professional artists (Jefferies, 2012). With the shared aim of transforming high streets into community spaces rather than districts of privately owned corporations, Burslem can take inspiration from these projects and alter its barren and deserted stores into spaces of innovation and opportunity.

Outcome: Twenty-two national organisations and over ten volunteers generated £26,000 of revenue for their business, attracting over two thousand customers that purchased products from local designers (Jefferies, 2012).

Strategy 2: Re-design Burslem's public space

Background: In addition to occupying abandoned stores; high streets and town centres can become a destination by reserving spaces for the use of pedestrian's only, also known as pedestrianisation. This method of altering a space's occupation for pedestrian needs allows individuals and groups to change the ways in which they use these spaces.

Example: New Road, Brighton is a high street that was pedestrianised in 2005, and the initial result the city council saw was that the new space being shared between local residents and external partners.

Figures 3 and 4: New Road, Brighton prior to and following the pedestrianisation investment (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012)

Outcome: Its re-design created opportunities for people to interact and invited them to move more freely due to the removal of kerbs and crossings, and although vehicles were still able to commute through the street, pedestrians were given priority (Melia and Shergold, 2016). Following the investment, public life-space related assessments revealed that traffic congestion was reduced by 93%, while pedestrian numbers increased by 63% (Melia and Shergold, 2018).

Strategy 3: Increase the amount of green space in Burslem

Background: Public spaces are generally thought of spaces that promote elements of freedom, vibrancy and accessibility to all. Therefore, green spaces such as trees and gardens can reinforce these attributes that are typically attached to public spaces (a high street in this instance). Additionally, altering the visual landscape of Busrlem in a way that recognises and celebrates its past industries may increase its sense of locality, whilst offering several economic, social and environmental benefits.

Example: In Walthamstow, re-developed public space such as paths and gardens have been re-designed in order to improve visitors' quality of walking whilst offering more accessible and

visually appealing links between the area's transport centre and its primary shopping area. Its structural redesign was a result of the local authority's new emphasis towards attracting people to its town centre whilst simultaneously promoting sustainability and harmony between people and nature (Lee and Maheswaran, 2011).

Outcome: Surveys and reviews produced by Walthamstow's local authority revealed that making public space more aesthetically pleasing and improving their walking environment has increased visitor shopping, and from and economic standpoint, pleasant walkways and infrastructure have provided workers with a greater motive to live and visit more frequently (Zhou and Rana, 2012).

Figure 5: Re-designed attractive walkway linking Walthamstow's transport centre and shopping space (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012)

Given the success of these three strategies that have been undertaken in Wolverhampton, Brighton and Walthamstow, stakeholders who desire to make Burslem a destination rather than a high street that only offers shopping, can take inspiration. Gathering requirements from project stakeholders prior to the commencement of these implementations would significantly reduce a variety of issues. Firstly, a user story should be used to capture an expectation of how the strategies will be implemented (Barbosa et al., 2007). This should set a narrative and a motive behind why these implementations are required, and how they would benefit Burslem town centre. Secondly, major elite's such as Burslem's local planning authority and additional stakeholders responsible for high street management on a local degree would be a key a group for planning decision-making and gathering resources. In addition, stakeholders within the fashion industry would heavily benefit from these projects by allowing them to adapt and operate their business that differs from traditional methods. Furthermore, local business and partnerships can contribute together to enhance Burslem's local economic development and improve the quality of life for its communities.

4. Proposed Strategy Implementation

For the strategies to support Burselm's re-emergence by improving its public space, calculated decision making is required between organisations that determine the extent these new implementations will bring economic, social and environmental values to Burslem.

Strategy 1: Offer vacant stores as hub's for local and regional business

Costs for offering units may vary depending on size and location. Costs will include rent, service charges, utilities and insurance. However, due to its proven success in another UK locations, various landlords may offer units with no rent charge. The primary outcome that will be most beneficial for how this strategy will be implemented will be for the Burslem local authority to partner with the local store owners to enter short- or long-term leases of vacant spaces at a discounted rate. In addition, a free or discounted store licence would act as a tool for more local business with a desire to use a vacant store to get started without waiting for several approvals that most business registrations require.

Strategy 2: Re-design Burselm's public space

Pedestrianisation is unable to proceed without planning and undertaking numerous technical measures prior to its commencement. Planners and landscapers are required to design a pedestrianised system that prioritises people and make them reclaim Burselm's streets from motorised vehicles. From a planning perspective, the first aim will be to understand Busrelm's local context and discover how residents and visitors use its public space. Verifying how communities use Burslem's public space will determine how successful this particular project will be, as they have the greater understanding of life and day-to-day awareness of the area (Paterson, 2018). This strategy and vision should benefit local residents, businesses and government. Various strategic judgments and impact evaluations are required along with an imagination; this will be crucial for the success of this strategy.

Strategy 3: Increase the amount of green space in Burslem

Increasing green space solutions must be considered case by case, as some public spaces in high streets and town centres in the UK offer varying traits. For example, some public spaces are home to large monuments that are rich in heritage, while others offer opportunities for pedestrians to watch and host vibrant events and attractions. Managing and maintaining these green spaces in Burslem will require authorities to clean these spaces regularly in order for the appeal to remain and from a planning standpoint; social, environmental and economic factors must be considered during the construction of green space. The success of the green space will be determined on how well it has been visually designed and its compatibility into all elements that influence how successful a town centre or high street is. The diversity of land use should furthermore be considered; therefore, it will benefit pedestrians of all ages, occupancies health conditions and more.

5. Strategy Evaluation

To determine if these implementations would succeed in re-generating Burslem, measures and metric's will be required to evaluate if the objective's visions have been achieved. In addition, necessary process will be required to monitor how the objectives will continue to benefit Burslem. Monitoring the success of the implemented objectives will furthermore uncover if these strategies have demonstrated if they have degrees of limitations, and if other implementations are required to re-generate Burslem.

Street Audit: A street audit can determine how public spaces are currently used by visitors at different periods of the day, giving the ability for developers to increase the rationality of decision making (Griew et al., 2012). This method used to determine unique characteristics of a public space involves groups such as stakeholders including local residents, business owners and local authorities, collaboratingto obtain the correct local recipe required for a space to be productive and profitable (Mooney et al., 2014). The primary benefits of a street audit are that there can be various approaches. For example, a conventional street audit collects data from quantitative audit functions such as spatial mapping and street imagery that displays the built environment of a public space. Alternative approaches to street audits can additionally be adopted. For example, community street audits undertake a more hands-on approach by walking around public spaces to gain first person knowledge on the functionality of said area (Rundle et al., 2011). This can be accrued by developers and community members to determine what vision and objectives are required to be prioritised, whilst simultaneously building relationships between various actors. A street audit has the ability to determine the success of

all three strategies proposed to regenerate Burslem, as input will be required from local residents to identify the key underlying issues that present, and a street audit enables a range of actors that understand how the public space in Burslem is used and what implementation will benefit these spaces most.

6. Conclusion

Due to altering shopping habits from UK consumers, public spaces in high street's and town centres that are deteriorating must be re-generated to offer more than a shopping experience, and as a result of a 20% overall decrease in sales (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019), Burslem must adopt this initiative if it is to thrive once more. 'Strategy 1' gives an opportunity for vacant stores in Burslem to be occupied by local businesses at a low to zero cost rate. An opportunity to increase a community feel towards Burslem whilst producing income for local business. In addition, appealing business opportunities can attract larger corporations, which in turn will invite employees to work. WeCreate in Wolverhampton attracted two thousand customers by occupying vacant stores, therefore given the success of this implementation, there would be no reason to suggest that vacant stores in Burslem cannot achieve economic development. 'Strategy 2' offers a re-design in Burslem's public space, in a way that it prioritises pedestrians, and increases the opportunity for individuals to interact and flow at a freer rate. Inevitably, the New Road, Brighton case study has revealed pedestrian numbers have increased by a staggering 63% since its pedestrianisation, therefore this method of attracting people so these public spaces are achieved with a high success rate. 'Strategy 3' offers a more environmental approach to attracting visitors to Burselm. Investment in green space that has been proved in areas such as Walthamstow to invite workers, business and other groups to love, visit and work in areas that are visually appealing. Furthermore, green space van be structurally re-designed to provide more accessible links between various public spaces in high streets and town centres.