Adopting new activity-based classifications of town and city centres are key to combatting decline

Summary

- Analysis of nine years' of UK hourly footfall counts identifies new classes of town and city centres based on their activity signature (comparison shopping, holiday, multifunctional and speciality)
- Dynamic indicators of town and city centre performance can radically alter the way we manage and develop them

The problem

Recent Economic and Social Research Council funded research has concluded that the changing nature of retailing, coupled with rapid technological and social developments are posing great challenges to the attractiveness and marketing of high streets and town centres (1,2).

Despite the widespread concern regarding the 'vitality and viability' (3) of many centres, there is no standard interpretation of the concept as a key performance indicator (4). In fact, the only widely recognised measure of town centre success (or failure) is the amount of multiple retailer occupied floorspace present in the centre. However, between 2007 and 2014, 315 medium or large retail companies disappeared from the UK high street, with the loss of 26,075 shops (5). Therefore, multiple retailer occupied floorspace should no longer remain the only proxy for town centre performance. We need a new approach to understanding our town and city centres.

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Why we need new activity-based classifications

It is not just multiple retailers who activate town centres. As chain stores vacate units, these can be used by other occupiers, such as independent retailers (6). Alternatively, the space can be repurposed for employment or housing, or transformed, even temporarily, by 'pop-up' use (7). As commentators, such as veteran retailer Bill Grimsey, have stated, town centres should be more than just retail (8) – therefore contemporary classifications must reflect the more multifunctional nature of how today's centres are used (9).

The method

As part of the InnovateUK 'Bringing Big Data to Small Users' project, researchers from the School of Computing and Mathematics at Cardiff University and the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University have used Springboard footfall data to develop a new classification of UK town and city centres (10). Drawing from a vast amount of raw hourly data gathered from counters located within 99 UK centres that have been operational for a period of between two and nine years, the team used K Means clustering techniques to firstly, produce four convincing signature templates and secondly, classify each of the 99 retail centres as one of the four signature types. During this process, Silhouette Analysis was also used to help assess the distinctness and quality of the clusters (11).

Comparison, holiday, speciality and multifunctional centres

The analysis demonstrates four reliable and distinct footfall signatures exist, that have been labelled comparison, holiday, speciality and multifunctional (Figure 1). Some centres have a clearer "offer" than others, in terms of how closely their footfall profiles match one of the four template signatures: all centres can be classified by their closest match, but some matches are better than others. Comparison shopping centres tend to be located in the larger town and city centres and their monthly signatures can be identified by a footfall peak in December, coinciding with the Christmas preparation period. Holiday towns are busier in the summer months and footfall drops right down in the winter. Speciality centres seem to be somewhat of a "hybrid" type between comparison and holiday, insofar as they have peaks in the summer and in December, although these peaks are not as pronounced as they are in pure

Figure 1 - Signature types

Comparison

Holiday

Speciality

Multifunctional /convenience

comparison and holiday centres. Finally, multifunctional centres tend to have more of a flat profile throughout all the months of the year. Multifunctional centres can be city centres, in which case they are anchoring a regional economy or small and just serving a local community/ convenience catchment.
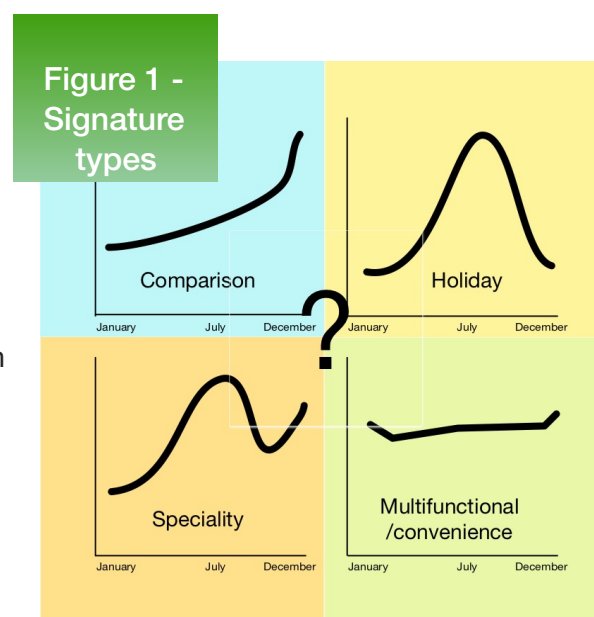
**Download the full analysis at
http://www.placemanagement.org/bdsu-publications/technical-report-1/**

Place management recommendations

Understanding towns by examining their signature type enables more sensible plans for action (10) to be developed for those managing different classes of towns (Figure 2).

Comparison	Holiday
Wide range of retail choice Strong retail anchor Serve large catchment area Accessible by a choice of transport.modes Management and marketing strategies focussed on competing against other comparison centres	Offer experiences to tourists and day trippers Anchor is often natural (seaside, countryside) Dependant upon visitors Can poorly serve local catchment Management and marketing strategies focussed on attracting visitors
Speciality	**Multifunctional**
Offer something unique and special Anchor not retail (e.g. heritage) Attract visitors but also serve a local catchment Have a longer dwell time Management and marketing strategies focussed on protecting and promoting identity and positioining	Offer convenient mix of retail, services, events etc. Ordinary/everyday anchors (work, transport, groceries) Are visited frequently Management and marketing strategies focussed improving access, reliability, connectivity and widening diversity of linked trips

Policy implications

To assist the management of change in individual town and city centres, as well as develop national policy to combat widespread decline in traditional retail centres, activity-based classifications of town and city centres need adopting at both national and local levels.

Dominant town and city centre performance measures, classifications and hierarchies are based upon an out-dated view of the world. The preferencing of development that involves multiple retailers has made local authorities risk adverse towards other types of regeneration activities. Property developers and landlords are unsure where to invest or who to let to, as many comparison retailers continue to concentrate their store portfolios in the top 100 centres. Local place managers are still encouraged to invest in marketing and management techniques that are designed to compete with other centres they are not actually competing with. A lack of activity-based classifications is hampering a more place-based approach to decision making and wasting money, effort and time.

1. Using the new comparison, holiday, speciality and multifunctional classes in the language of national policy and guidelines will speed up the adoption of activity-based performance measures and classifications across the planning profession, urban regeneration sector and local government

2. Encouraging locations to measure footfall and establish their signature will lead to more realistic and effective place management and marketing strategies.

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