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**Process, Content and Context Considerations
Influencing the Marketing of Urban Areas as
Shopping Destinations**

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Biography

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a series of semi-structured interviews held in two English cities with stakeholders who hold potential responsibility for the marketing of the city as a shopping destination. The findings of the research are structured in terms of the process by which place marketing activity is developed (relating to the remits of individual actors, the extent and nature of their interaction and the process of planning place marketing activity), the content of place marketing activity (relating to the extent to which marketing activity is consumer-focused, the nature of the elements of the urban place product and their interaction, and the specific marketing activities undertaken), and context factors influencing place marketing activity in the specific locations (following de Wit and Meyer's (1998) framework. Analysis of the data from the interviews reveal numerous actors with potential responsibility for the marketing of the urban areas, who engage in frequent formal and informal interaction in order to achieve their specific remits. Regarding content of place marketing activity, the marketing of the town as a shopping destination is largely the remit of the town centre manager, although the importance of retailing is articulated by other actors. Various important contextual factors specific to retailing which impact on place marketing activity are identified. These include the level of shop rentals, supply of retail premises, car parking availability and tariffs, and the presence of off-centre retail facilities.

Key words: Place Marketing, Place Product, Partnership Agencies and Town Centre Management.

1. Research Context

A number of factors have stimulated the marketing of urban areas in the UK since the 1970s, including the need to attract new employment opportunities in areas with declining traditional economic bases and intensified regional and national competition. A key issue for urban places attempting to reinvent and market themselves is the nature of the economic base that will act as the foundation of present and future competitiveness.

While any industrial sector can act as the economic base of a region, traditionally primary activities and manufacturing have been the foundations of many regional economies. However, structural changes in the global economy have increasingly rendered such traditional activities obsolete in terms of providing a competitive economic base in many areas. Consequently, the service sector is recognised as vitally important as an economic base for contemporary urban places, primarily through its communicational and informational infrastructural role (Riddle, 1986). Cities are increasingly in competition as locations for such higher-order service industries (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990a).

It has been argued that those agencies responsible for place marketing have until quite recently neglected the full potential of the service sector and consumer services such as retailing in particular in attempts to bolster the growth prospects of their areas (Williams, 1996). Indeed, in contrast to 'producer services', consumer services such as retailing are often still regarded as 'parasitic' activities surviving off other sectors and contributing little, if anything, to the growth of local economies (Williams, 1996:54). This perspective is evident in the academic literature where retailing is generally regarded as a secondary factor in the development of place marketing activity and in resulting conceptualizations of the urban area as a 'product' to be marketed (e.g. Jansen-Verbeke, 1986).

However, applied research studies (Association of Town Centre Management, 1994; English Historic Towns Forum, 1992) attest to the importance of retailing to urban

economies. Thus, the research described in this paper seeks to investigate the extent to which towns and cities in the UK are actively promoting themselves as shopping destinations, and who is involved in this process. This paper reports on exploratory research in two cities in the UK comprising a series of semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders who hold potential responsibility for the marketing of each location, with specific reference to its retail provision, and identifies key themes and issues for further investigation

2. Methodology

The research reported in this paper takes an interpretive approach, focusing on understanding rather than explanation (Little, 1991). Little distinguishes between the two terms, stating that 'Explanation involves identifying general causes of an event, whereas understanding involves discovering the meaning of an event in a particular social context' (1991, p.68). The subject matter of this research, namely the nature of the urban place product and the process by which it is developed, is socially constructed by those responsible for creating and marketing it, and also by those who consume it (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990a). Thus, the research is primarily concerned with achieving an *understanding* of the neglected dimension of the role of retailing in the development of the urban place product and the planning and implementation of urban place marketing activity by place marketing actors. Understanding the dynamics of this is of particular relevance, as the actors involved in urban place marketing are drawn from both the public and private sectors. Thus, the issue is approached from very different perspectives, cultures and traditions by the actors involved, meaning that the actors' perception of reality will be 'bounded' in terms of what constitutes meaning (Hughes, 1990).

Consequently, the research comprises a series of semi-structured interviews with actors involved in the urban place marketing process (with particular reference to retailing) in two English cities. A collective case study approach (Stake, 1998) was taken. Following Stake (1998), cases were selected to represent some population of cases and to ensure

the phenomenon of interest observable in the cases represents the phenomenon generally. Within the constraints facing the researcher, Stake argues that case selection should aim for balance and variety, but more crucially, the selection of cases should provide the researcher with *opportunity to learn*, given that the small sample sizes that characterise qualitative research would not provide a statistical basis for generalisation relating to the whole population.

The two cities reported in this paper have been active in place promotion from an economic development/inward investment perspective, and both cities have a very strong retail provision – both are ranked in the top ten retail destinations in the Management Horizons Europe UK Shopping Index 1998-9. Both cities are typical examples of those urban places formerly reliant on manufacturing industry which have sought to reinvent, and more importantly in place marketing terms, *re-image* themselves as cities of consumption through the attraction of service industries and cultural facilities etc. (this is a key theme in the place marketing literature - see for example, Brownill, 1994; Bramwell and Rawding, 1996; Holcomb, 1993; Hubbard, 1996; Neill, 1993; Short *et al.*, 1992; Watson, 1991, Wilkinson, 1992).

Stake (1998) contends that the primary criterion for the choice of within-case sample is again *opportunity to learn*. Thus, within each town a variety of stakeholders with potential responsibility for the marketing of the totality of the place as a shopping destination were interviewed. Respondents included:

1. economic development managers employed by the respective city councils (the role of the public sector in urban place marketing and related economic regeneration is a common theme in the literature – see for example, Ashworth and Voogd, 1988, 1990a, 1990b; Bovaird, 1994; Peck, 1995; Wilkinson, 1992; and Millington (1995) who explicitly considers the place marketing activities of local authorities in the UK);
2. senior managers/chief executives of public-private sector partnership agencies with a specific urban regeneration/place marketing remit (the role of partnership agencies in place promotion is well documented in the literature – see, for example, Parkinson, 1996; Peck and Tickell, 1994);

3. senior managers/chief executives of tourism promotion agencies (the links between tourism and retailing have been emphasised – see, for example, Jansen-Verbeke, 1990, 1991, 1994; Ashworth and Voogd 1990b; Page, 1995);
4. managers of shopping centres within the city (the role of marketing for managed shopping centres has been discussed by Howard, 1995, 1997; and Kirkup and Rafiq, 1998);
5. town centre managers (the remit of many town centre managers often includes specific responsibility for the marketing of the shopping provision of urban places (ATCM, 1997) and ‘promotional skills’ are identified as one of the most important competencies of town centre managers (Oxford Brookes University/ATCM, 1995).

Interviews with the above respondents took place in the autumn of 1999 and the spring of 2000. The interviews (which normally lasted 40-60 minutes), sought to explore:

1. the respondent’s perceptions of the content of urban place marketing activity;
2. the process by which this activity was planned and implemented (with emphasis on the extent of interaction between the various agencies responsible for the marketing of the retail provision of the urban place);
3. any specific contextual issues influencing place marketing activity within the town or city in question.

An interview schedule is given in Appendix 1. All interviews were tape-recorded and the data were transcribed. The data were analysed using the template analysis technique (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; King, 1998). The essence of this approach is that ‘the researcher produces a list of codes (a ‘template’) representing themes identified in their textual data. Some of these will usually be defined *a priori*, but they will be modified and added to as the researcher reads and interprets the texts’ (King, 1998, p. 118). Thus, the *template* organizing style ‘involves coding a large volume of text so that segments about an identified topic (the codes) can be assembled in one place to complete the interpretive process’ (Crabtree and Miler, 1999, p. 166).

Both King (1998) and Crabtree and Miller (1999) regard this approach as occupying a middle ground between content analysis (Weber, 1985) where codes are predetermined and analysis of their distribution is via statistical methods; and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) where there is no *a priori* definition of codes. Advantages of template analysis include the fact that ‘it does not come with a heavy baggage of prescriptions and procedures’ (King, 1998, p.132), and its consequent flexibility enables it to be modified to suit the needs of any study in a particular area. Given the exploratory nature of this research, it was felt that this flexibility of approach would be advantageous.

A code manual or coding scheme which serves as the template for organizing the data can be developed in a number of ways ranging from a reliance on predetermined codes, generally based on understandings from prior research or theoretical considerations, to the development of codes only after some initial exploration of the data has taken place (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). However, a common intermediate approach is to develop at least a few predefined codes, which are refined and modified during the analysis process (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; King, 1998). This intermediate approach was used for this research.

King (1994) identifies the interview topic guide as a good starting point for the development of the template, given that it normally draws on some or all of the following: the academic literature, the researcher’s own personal experience, anecdotal and informal evidence and exploratory research. This research drew on de Wit and Mayer’s (1998) ‘process, content and context’ framework for the development of the template, thus building on the interview schedule. The dimensions of process, content and context comprised the highest-order codes and various sub-themes were identified for each of these dimensions, which comprised various levels of lower-order codes (King, 1998).

3. Initial Analysis

The account of the initial analysis of the data from the two cities has been structured around the main themes identified, drawing illustrative examples from each transcript. King (1998) indicates that this approach to data presentation is the one which most readily produces a clear and distinct thematic discussion. The broad categories of process, content and context provided a logical framework, and consequently have been used to structure this account.

3.1 Process

Key issues arising within this theme centre around the remits of the individual place-marketing actors, the extent and nature of their interaction, and the process of planning place marketing activity.

The remits of the individual actors were defined in a number of different ways, with the two main criteria being spatial and sectoral. Spatial remits were particularly prevalent among local authority actors, who obviously operate within a designated jurisdictional area. However, a pragmatic approach was adopted when dealing with potential customers of the urban place whose definition of the boundaries of the place ‘product’ often varied from the definition of those responsible for creating and shaping the product (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990a). Thus, there was recognition by individual actors that their activities were often spatially ‘nested’ within a variety of local government jurisdictional areas with collaborative working between urban areas within a region for the common good:

‘So we had [the] Business Park at that time, which we were marketing with the Development Corporation and we were targeting the telebusiness sector. Two big companies came along, British Airways came along and the AA Insurance Services, both wanted call centres. So that’s taken off, and paradoxically a lot of the benefits have gone down to [a nearby town], they’ve had a lot of call centres in. But that goes back to my earlier comment about how we’re all working together because jobs [there]

benefit people [here] and vice versa, it's a very tight knit area'. (City Council Economic Development Department)

'And if we get industrial requirements that we can't accommodate, we'll say, 'Talk to the County [Council]'. So, it doesn't present any problems in terms of dealing with the client base, because we'll just extend the boundaries and I'm not parochial about that. I've been with the County Council to do presentations to companies in Cambridge, knowing that the only site that they can go on is... outside the City, but they wanted to talk about the City, so it is my job to talk to companies about the City'. (City Council Economic Development Department)

Actors also defined their remits in terms of particular target groups to whom their elements of the overall place product was specifically marketed. However, there was a recognition that the boundaries between different target groups were often very blurred as the city is multi-functional and can be multi-sold simultaneously to different groups of customers for different purposes (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990a). One respondent responsible for tourism promotion articulated her mission statement as follows:

'...along the lines of, 'To promote [the city] as an exciting, lively, vibrant place for people to come and visit' i.e. tourism is, sort of, top of the agenda. But also for people to come and work in, to live in, to invest in, to study in. It has a knock-on effect elsewhere, you don't tend to promote just in one sector, it's not just tourism and travel that I am doing'. (Tourism Promotion Agency)

Respondents sometimes defined their remits by what it *didn't* include:

'...my job, this team's job, the people we want to market it to aren't the people who might come and do their shopping rather than go [elsewhere] to do their shopping. In the narrowest terms they are not really my concern, [the City Centre Manager] can sort them out'. (City Council Economic Development Department)

Indeed, town centre managers may have a specific remit for marketing the retail provision of the urban place:

'...the two primary strategic objectives for city centre management are about encouraging and facilitating the regeneration of [the city] because it seems to me, to us, city centre management seems to hang under regeneration, and promoting and marketing the city centre as a major

regional shopping and leisure destination. And those are the two primary areas. And within that we have got various projects that are detailed, standard TCM business plan stuff'. (City Centre Management)

Another key theme relating to the process of urban place marketing, following on from the potential ambiguity regarding spatial and sectoral remits of the individual actors, was the extent of interaction and collaboration between actors in the two cities. Many of the respondents, while indicating their *specific* remits, emphasised that the urban place should be regarded as a holistic entity and that they all had a role in marketing the totality of the urban place product and as a result, all saw the benefit of a collaborative approach (of varying degrees of formality) incorporating all relevant place marketing actors, often through the work of steering groups for the individual agencies:

'...we've always had a private sector working party. So it's not the City Council saying, 'Let's do this, let's do that.' Anything we want to do we take to that group...Quite a cross section of people who say, 'Oh, hold on, what is it we are about?', and keep bringing us back to the core aims, which is quite useful because sometimes you can get too local authority focused.' (City Council Economic Development Department)

However, potential problems with a collaborative approach were identified in terms of producing a very generic message which, while uniting all place marketing actors, may not be particularly effective from the consumer's perspective:

'I think part of the problem is that you do have to have a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve and many of these [local place marketing] organisations have a specific focus and probably know their market very well, and if they try to bring it all together you'd lose focus and you'd produce a lot of kind of generic marketing literature, which wouldn't necessarily be what the retailer or potential retail investor wants to hear as opposed to the conference organiser. I think you are talking about very different client markets, they tend to have their own particular steering groups or sounding bodies who are made up of people from that particular profession. If you sort of merged it all together there might be economies of scale but..., I don't know, there's two ways of looking at it really. I would perhaps go for more the specific focus on particular client groups rather than lumping it all together'. (Urban Regeneration Agency)

The establishment of steering groups comprising individuals drawn from a range of public and private sector organisations and agencies appeared to be the key mechanism for the facilitation of a more collaborative partnership-type approach. Often the

respondents interviewed sat on each other's steering groups, and cross-membership of steering groups appeared to be a common occurrence:

'...at the end of the day, over all of these organisations, you are going to attract the people who are the, I hate using this term, movers and shakers, but, you know, they are the people who will end up being involved in these different companies and I don't think it is a bad thing that there are one or two people who are linking over into different areas'. (Tourism Promotion Agency)

However, informal contact between those responsible for marketing the various aspects of the urban place product was seen as equally important in achieving results:

'It is regarded as partnership and there are very close working relationships, I mean, I meet regularly with all those people who you mentioned at the start [e.g. Economic Development, City Centre Management etc.]...we have regular meetings, there's a lot of sharing of ideas and again looking out for each other as well in terms of that. It's very positive, I couldn't stress that enough, it's a happy relationship'. (Tourism Promotion Agency)

The importance of networks is a key theme from the earliest urban place marketing literature (e.g. Molotch, 1976) onwards, and this is reiterated in the cities studied as part of this research. Sometimes these networks are more formalised, as in 'Ambassadors' schemes, which are operated in both cities. The rationale behind such schemes is articulated as involving:

'...educating people, senior people within the city from the public, private and voluntary sectors to become more aware of what's around so that when they're outside [the city] they can fly the flag and if they do come across companies that are looking to re-locate, you know, there is a network that we can tap into. So what we found in the past is that if a company is coming to the city, then they'll be a little bit dubious about what they are told by the local authority but if they are told by some of their counterparts who can say..., you know, like when [a major bank] came to the city, we were able to take them, through the Ambassadors' network, we were able to take them to a number of other companies who could say, 'Well, yeah, actually it's really good here and we haven't had problems finding staff', and give a sort of testimonial, rather than just hear it from the local authority. It's quite a useful network and we've put a lot of effort into the Ambassadors initiative'. (Urban Regeneration Agency)

The extent of the influence of individual actors can be influenced by a number of things, not least the extent of financial resource at their disposal. Here the private sector has an inherent advantage:

‘I would suggest that on the city centre activities to promote [the city, the City Council] are very interested in what we need to do. We have a much bigger budget and a lot of our activities are, if you like, reciprocal, so we get involved there. I wouldn’t say it’s a, ‘We will do, so you will follow’ relationship. Don’t get that impression at all, but we have a very, very strong say and other people will probably link into us more than we link into them, and that’s just the way it works’. (Shopping Centre Manager)

However, there are numerous potential problems that might arise from this ‘partnership’ approach (indeed, there exists a substantial critique of the partnership *modus operandi* in terms of place marketing/economic development activity, e.g. Bassett, 1996; Dicken and Tickell, 1992; Peck, 1995; Peck and Tickell, 1994):

‘So there is a danger that everyone goes off and does their own thing, although I don’t think it’s quite that bad, I think there is reasonably good...informal liaison. But there is a danger that it could be all uncoordinated and fragmented’. (Urban Regeneration Agency)

In the cities in question, respondents identified a variety of underlying tensions between the various actors, arising from their different remits, and when comparing public and private sector actors, different traditions manifested for example in different objectives, strategies, working methods, systems of accountability etc. (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990a). A flavour of some of these tensions is given below:

‘[The city] has one of the highest car parking tariffs in the country, there are 10,000 car parking spaces in the city. By any measure, that is under-car parked... To facilitate the car borne shopper, we have a few car parking spaces, but...the City [Council] own all the car parks, that’s their strategy, that’s what they stick with. So, it’s no good banging on the door because you’ll get blood on your knuckles, it won’t change a lot’. (Shopping Centre Manager)

In terms of the process by which the marketing activities of the various actors was planned, an annual planning cycle was the norm, with draft plans discussed and approved by steering groups prior to implementation. A key theme emerging from the data was the financial imperative, which influenced not only the activities undertaken

(numerous respondents mentioned a reliance on public relations activity because of the cost implications of undertaking advertising), but also the mode of planning:

‘Most of the marketing I’ve done here has had to have been sponsored either financially or in kind, and that’s a very different situation to actually planning a marketing campaign within a funded marketing budget...so that really dictates very much what you can do, is it the sorts of things that people will support?...it’s the not the same as having a multi-million pound marketing campaign’. (Urban Regeneration Agency)

In addition, most respondents did not engage professional marketing agencies because of the cost implications:

‘No, we don’t use commercial agencies at all. Budget. I mean, you would laugh, I have, my whole budget for the whole year is £10,000. Right, that’s what I have for projects. ...that’s to cover the entire business plan activities...You try getting..., I mean, you wouldn’t even get a cup of coffee with a private agency for that would you?’ (City Centre Management)

3.2 Content

Key issues arising around this theme included the existence of a consumer-focused approach among the individual actors, the nature of the elements of the urban place product (and their interaction) and the specific marketing activities undertaken (to market the general urban place product and, more specifically its retail provision, depending upon the remit of the individual actors).

As stated previously, the majority of respondents articulated their remits in terms of the target audiences to which their marketing activities were directed. Indeed, many respondents favourably compared their current, more targeted marketing activities to more indiscriminate activities carried out by their agencies in the past. While this change of approach is partly budget-driven, there is evidence of a change in attitude to the role of marketing:

‘We were faced with, 10 years ago, the common issue of other Northern cities of being seen in the South East where the decision-makers perceive [the city]... as being somewhere remote, an area of declining industries and so on. So, in the 1990s, especially in the early 1990s, we spent a lot of

time trying to overcome those perceptions, which is where we engaged in a lot of work with [a London-based public relations consultancy], trying to get good stories in the national press about the area. We are now starting to pull back from that whilst we develop an economic development strategy of trying to become far more focused. Rather than doing a great deal of generic marketing, we've been targeting it at specific sectors'. (City Council Economic Development Department)

However, there remains a strong public sector ethos, which, as one respondent (with a background of marketing in private sector companies) states, can cause problems in that local authority marketers inevitably lag behind in contemporary marketing practice:

'Already, marketing in the commercial sector has moved on again to a level of sophistication. The gap is widening really and I think that's a problem because we've got this slow, lumbering beast which is very slow to change and which is in a political process which we have to sort of deal with, not on a daily basis, but it affects what we do a lot'. (Urban Regeneration Agency)

Indeed, respondents seemed acutely aware of the gaps in their knowledge of marketing theory:

'I'm not a marketeer, I have no marketing qualifications whatsoever and yet here I am charged with this massive responsibility. It's quite interesting because it wasn't even a requirement of the job'. (City Centre Management)

'I think a lot of town centre managers find themselves in this sort of situation where they are charged with the responsibility of marketing the retail offer, they are not actually from a marketing background, or if they are, they don't do just marketing and they don't do any of the other things that, you know, multi-skilled town centre managers do, so somewhere along the line, as well as being an environmental and a regeneration expert and a funding expert and a partnership management expert and all the rest of it, you are also a marketeer'. (City Centre Management).

Given the variety of remits of the individual actors, the various individual elements of the place product were mentioned extensively. What is perhaps more important, from the place marketing perspective, is the interaction of those various elements, particularly in terms of the perceptions of the various actors regarding the extent and nature of this interaction (mirroring to some extent the organizational structures and processes within each city). Here, retailing was seen as a contributory factor in the marketing activities

of many of the actors. The link between retailing and tourism (both leisure and business tourism such as conferences etc.) was made numerous times:

‘...certainly in terms of our publicity, our literature and our angles with the press and so on, that’s [retailing] one of the things that will come up time and time again. On my web site there will be a page devoted to the whole shopping side of things. Again, most cities will make some hype there of what they’ve got to offer on that side’. (Tourism Promotion Agency)

‘On conferences you’re marketing the availability of conferences facilities and so on but there is an overarching quality of life issue. A lot of places say this obviously but we’re in an area with cultural facilities, heritage, shopping facilities. So, that’s being marketed...those are all being marketed as well. In terms of shopping we’re really angling the tourism marketing towards shopping, marketing [the city] as a shopping destination’. (City Council Economic Development Department)

The link between retailing and economic development was also made explicit by some respondents, for example:

‘I wouldn’t go big on it [retailing] with the key decision making types who are invariably men, in my experience aren’t particularly interested in the retail offer...But it [retailing] is important for companies looking to move staff... very important; housing, education and shops are all the questions that people ask. Especially if they are going to be city centre based’. (City Council Economic Development Department)

However, retailing is, to some extent seen as a supporting factor:

‘I think inward investment is certainly number one priority, tourism and hospitality is probably number two and the retail, I think there’s almost a feeling that retail can take care of itself really. As long as we work hard in terms of city centre management and starting to make sure that the place looks nice and has the right feel to it, then that investment will flow’. (Urban Regeneration Agency)

The fact that the promotion of the retail provision of urban places is often left to town centre managers is articulated in the following statement, which regards the remit of TCM as everything other agencies are not charged to do:

‘So, I think what city centre management tends to get left with, if you like, are the bits that nobody else does, where what we do, is, either identify that there’s a requirement or it’s there to sort of fill a gap’. (City Centre Management)

The pivotal role of town centre management is articulated as follows:

‘The city centre manager is a focal player but I do think the retailers can play more of an active part and again, I don’t say that critically, it’s difficult’. (Shopping Centre Manager)

This emphasises the fact that responsibility for the promotion of the retail provision of urban places, like other elements of the urban place product, is spread across a variety of actors. Indeed, van den Berg and Braun (1999) argue that there are three levels of urban place marketing: the individual urban goods or services; the clusters of related services; and the level of the city or urban agglomeration as a whole. The role of TCM could be said to exist at the intermediate level, with all the implications inherent in this of trying to coordinate the activities of a variety of individual actors:

‘We, I, as the town centre manager should be collectively getting them [retailers] together, getting them to agree to something, and then saying, ‘Yeah, we think this would be good, now let’s put our hands in our pockets’. It doesn’t necessarily work like that...they say, ‘Yeah, that’s a good idea, OK, then now you go and fund it’. (City Centre Management)

Indeed, the availability of funding often influences the range of marketing activities undertaken by urban places. As has been stated, much activity is focused on public relations because of cost considerations:

‘Over the years the advertising element has declined, it’s just so expensive, without substantial budgets you’re very much wasting your money I feel. We’ve put a lot more effort now into public relations.’ (City Council Economic Development Department)

‘...it’s primarily print materials, virtually nothing in the way of advertising, no budgets for that, and it’s done...What we try to do increasingly is target particular companies through the network of contacts that we’ve got’. (Urban Regeneration Agency)

With regard to specific activities for marketing the retail provision of the two cities, the various public and private sector actors focused on the usual activities of printed

material such as shopper's guides, Christmas promotions and additional themed events at other times of the year. The main focus of promotional activities occurred during the Christmas trading period, but as one respondent said:

'I sit here and say, 'Why do we need to market shopping at Christmas?' I actually think it's a very old fashioned way of retailers going about...., you know, I think we're a major regional city and unless the Government or world finance has decreed that nobody is going to go and spend up to the hilt and on credit at Christmas time, you know, we are bound to pick up that market share'. (City Centre Management)

3.3 Context

A number of issues were identified as being of relevance in providing a context for the actions of place marketing stakeholders, in isolation or combination. This theme incorporated the identification of competitors, which was obviously dependent on the remit of individual stakeholders in terms of their spatial and sectoral nature. With particular reference to retailing a number of issues were identified as providing a context, which has to a greater or lesser extent influenced the actions of the various urban stakeholders interviewed. These included the fact that the retail 'product' of the urban place is influenced by a large range of factors outside the control of those responsible for its marketing (a factor emphasized in the place marketing literature (e.g. Ashworth and Voogd, 1990b), which has significant implications for the development of the place product (Paddison, 1993; van den Berg *et al.*, 1990). Such factors included, for example, the level of shop rents, which may preclude the smaller independent retailers on whom the diversity of the retail provision is based from locating in the city:

'...we're trying to get towards this more relaxed café society but the fact is that the relaxed café society with individual shops can't survive in a city centre where rent and rates are very, very, high and you have to have a high turnover. So you have to have 108 pints of lager in half an hour to actually make your money back. You can't have someone sitting there with a cappuccino looking all fit having a conversation about the Guardian, because you just don't make any money. So, we're saying we want to be more European, more laid back, but in terms of how people spend and how much it costs to exist in our city centre, it's very difficult to encourage that type of business to come into the city centre, which would vary the provision a little bit more'. (Urban Regeneration Agency)

In addition, shortages in the supply of retail premises within the city centre may negate any positive outcomes from marketing activities aimed at retail inward investors. This can lead to something of a ‘catch-22’ situation, as described by one respondent:

‘So they [property agents and developers] were a little bit lukewarm about the idea of having targeted marketing and tended to say that if we get all this interest, well, we’ve got nothing to show people. Which we thought is a bit chicken and egg really. Unless you can demonstrate the demand, then the supply won’t be forthcoming’. (Urban Development Agency)

Issues relating to the perennial problems (to retailers) of car parking availability and tariffs within the city centre were also mentioned. Another factor, which was deemed to be of great importance by respondents was the provision of off-centre retail facilities and the effect on the town centre. Here the two cities contrasted: one city’s explicit policy of discouraging off-centre retailing was cited as a reason for the strength of the city’s retail provision by many respondents; whereas the development of major off-centre provision on the outskirts of the other city obviously impacted on the retail geography of this area and had major implications for the promotion of the retail offer of the city centre, although the strength of the retail provision has ameliorated the effects of this (evidenced by the level of shop rentals, as mentioned above).

4. Conclusion

This initial account of the data from respondents in two of the urban places chosen for the research confirms many of the general themes in the place marketing literature relating to the organisation of marketing activity and the relative importance of the various elements which contribute to the overall urban place product, with particular reference to the role of retailing.

Reflecting the literature on the organization of place marketing activities, the organizational structure for the specific marketing of the retail provision of each city is fragmented across a range of agencies from both the public and private sectors, with the attendant problems that this may cause in terms of, for example, the underlying tensions

within many partnership agencies (Peck, 1995; Peck and Tickell, 1994), which may lead to a fragile consensus between participants (Bassett, 1996) and policies which move little beyond the lowest common denominator in order to maintain this fragile consensus (Peck and Tickell, 1994). In addition, the proliferation of agencies who may have different remits and operate at different spatial scales may lead to fragmentation and duplication of resources (Peck and Tickell, 1994; Wilkinson, 1992) and competition between agencies (Dicken and Tickell, 1992). While there is obvious scope for duplication and fragmentation of activities, the specific mechanics of the workings of the collaborative approach between the agencies responsible for the marketing of the retail provision in both cities (manifested by more formalised mechanisms such as cross-membership of steering groups etc. and perhaps equally importantly, more informal networks and contact) mean that some of the potential problems are alleviated to some extent.

Regarding the relative importance accorded to retailing, the data presented here appears to support the views of authors such as Ashworth and Voogd (1990a) that there is significant interaction between the various elements of the urban place product, and also that most actors responsible for urban place marketing perceive retailing as a secondary element in the overall place 'product' (see for example Jansen-Verbeke, 1986). Although the importance of retailing is articulated by numerous actors, the promotion of the retail provision of the urban place as a whole is generally left to the town centre manager, for whom it may be a specific element of his or her remit, and who are increasingly incorporating marketing principles within the normal activities (Page and Hardyman, 1996). The research also indicated the importance of issues relating to the particular context of the urban place, which is another theme in the place marketing literature (e.g. Ashworth, 1993; van den Berg *et al.* 1990), and a flavour of these issues has been presented in the paper.

Thus, the exploratory research reported in this paper into a neglected area of place marketing literature, namely the marketing of towns and cities as *shopping* destinations, has shown that many of the specific issues identified have resonance across the wider place marketing literature. Indeed, the issues identified in this paper relating to the

process of marketing towns and cities as shopping destinations, the *content* of such marketing activity, and the specific *context(s)* within which this activity occurs are all areas worthy of further research.

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Appendix 1 Interview Schedule

1. Background information on agency/organisation.

Remit

Main activities

Reporting responsibility

2. Role your agency/organisation plays in the marketing of [your town/city].

Remit regarding marketing of [your town/city]

Interaction with other agencies/organisations

3. How would you define the concept of marketing in the context of [your town/city]?

Customer focus & identification

Segmentation

Orientation

4. What aspects of [your town/city] do you have responsibility for (or are involved in) actively promoting,

Or alternatively what aspects do you feel you should be involved in promoting.

i.e. respondents' understanding of what constitutes the place product:

Inward investment & related incentives

Job creation

Leisure

Tourism

Quality of life

Retail provision

5. (If not identified previously) Assessment of the role and importance of Retailing in the description of the place product and marketing activities undertaken.

6. **Identify the major marketing activities undertaken for [your town/city].**
specific objective(s)
target audience(s)
how effectiveness is evaluated
7. **Describe the process by which marketing activity for [your town/city] is developed** (either generically or by means of a specific initiative as an exemplar).
8. **Identification of any particular contextual issues influencing (positively or negatively) the development and implementation of marketing activity for [your town/city].**