

NEIL WRIGLEY

Professor of Geography,
University of Southampton

MICHELLE LOWE

Professor of Strategy
and Innovation, University
of Southampton

OPINION: TOWN CENTRES

RETAIL
THERAPY*Professors Neil Wrigley and Michelle Lowe consider whether the high street will ever bounce back, and if 'local heroes' and corporate retailers joining forces is the answer*

The collapse in consumer confidence in late 2008 tore through Britain's town centres, and the economic crisis triggered responses to longer-term forces of change in high-street retailing that were masked during the boom years earlier in the 2000s. Three structural forces were particularly important: first, the growth of online shopping; second, competition from out-of-town retail development, filtered through the regulatory backlash of the 'town centres first' policies; and, third, the rise of 'convenience culture' as consumers reassessed the money and time savings attributed to 'one-stop' shops.

These forces were far from uniformly negative for high-street retailing. But combined with the grim realities of no-growth 'austerity Britain', they prompted growing anxiety about

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the economic health of town centres. Faced with claims that high-street footfall had fallen dramatically and town centre vacancy rates had doubled, the government responded. In May 2011, it commissioned an independent review of Britain's town centres by TV's 'queen of shops', Mary Portas. Portas expressed passionate views about the need to consider high streets not simply in commercial terms but as 'dynamic, exciting and social places that give a sense of belonging and trust to a community'. Her review, published in December 2011, contained a series of recommendations, including what became known as 'Portas Pilots' to test options for boosting high-street vitality. In March 2012, the government accepted virtually all the



Can the 'Portas Pilots' boost high-street vitality?

recommendations. It claimed to go further, too, offering 'a raft of new incentives, funding schemes and bureaucracy-busting measures, in a bid to rejuvenate the country's rundown high streets'. By July, 27 Portas Pilots were in place with a brief to assess what ideas worked most successfully.

How can social science contribute to this debate about high-street futures? In a major ESRC research project supported by Tesco, we are looking at four areas. The first is providing insight into the marked variation in performance of town centres in response to the crisis: Why have some thrived while others have terminally declined? This question has been neglected by commercial data providers. There is consensus on the strong North-South divide in performance, but other simple differences (such as between large and small centres) have been inconsistently interpreted. More subtle drivers (such as local institutional structures supportive of the high street or the effects of high levels of long-term vacancy) have been largely ignored. Yet some performance drivers are simply assumed by conventional wisdom, such as the protective effects of 'diversity' - town centres dominated by a wide range of small, independent retailers. Academic research indicates that 'diversity' may need to be complemented with corporate retail presence to offer the greatest protection.

The second contribution of social science is providing insight into how performance differences are affected by scale: Do the factors that offer protection at a regional level remain the same at the scale of a single city, or do new drivers come into play? A related question

concerns the performance of secondary retail centres - the local centres, shopping parades and peripheral streets often missed by commercial surveys. The third contribution is providing a conceptual framework for understanding both complex variations in performance and longer-term, evolving configurations of high streets. What value can be added to understanding the evolutionary trajectories of town centres and their responses to the crisis by concepts of the 'resilience' of regional economic systems?

HOW RESILIENT IS THE HIGH STREET?

The 'engineering' interpretation of resilience suggests that high streets can 'bounce back' and resume their pre-crisis trajectories. The 'ecological' interpretation suggests that the fragile ecologies of many high streets may be stretched beyond a tipping point, from which they are unable to bounce back and must move to new configurations. Our 'adaptive resilience' interpretation focuses on forms of anticipatory and reactive reorganisation to cope with changing competitive dynamics following a crisis.

The final contribution is evidence- and theory-based insight to inform policy. For example, an 'adaptive resilience' perspective implies accepting that high streets have always been dynamic, rarely evolve smoothly and are constantly reshaped by crises, so the morphing of the ubiquitous corn merchants of 19th-century high streets into today's mobile phone shops should not be over-interpreted. This implies that the policies likely to be most effective must work with the grain of the evolutionary trajectories becoming clear before the crisis. As Britain's high streets gradually emerge from crisis, it is unlikely that there will be bounce-back to earlier forms. More likely is a renewal of pre-crisis trends.

Accepting that allows us to map out 'adaptively resilient' high streets of the future. Their core is likely to involve 'complementarity' (with online retail, emerging forms of consumer culture and shifts towards leisure services provision); raised levels of quality and consumer service; and symbiotic relationships between small, independent shops - particularly 'local heroes' - and corporate retailers. ■

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