

The pandemic may have exacerbated the decline of the high street, but it was in no way the cause. The current value proposition of the high street is no longer competitive. Online retailers can offer greater choice, cheaper prices and in some cases quicker delivery times. The problems facing the high street represent the systemic issues within competitive capitalism. However, this means that the rejuvenation of the high street could act as a turning point in how businesses function within society. This essay will be split into three sections. The first will focus on the problems facing the high street. The second will focus on the solutions and the third will give opinions about the responsibility of implementing given solutions.

High street footfall is alarmingly low. The British Retail Consortium reported a 77.8% year on year decline as of last May (Weinbren and Grocer, 2021). Lockdown restrictions sped up the decline of high street tenfold. Currently the situation for high streets in the UK is bleak. The immediate problems are low foot fall due to the pandemic and high business rates being a roadblock to recovery. The long-term problems are greater still. Society's paradigm of shopping, socialising and consumption of media has transitioned from in person experience to an online one, and it is easy to see why. Having a smart phone is now a necessity to function effectively in society. With the improvement of technology over the last decade shopping online has never been more convenient. Cheaper prices, wider product offerings, same or next day delivery as well as algorithms predicting consumers wants and needs before they've had them (OECD, 2015) means the high street can no longer compete the way it currently operates. The other problem facing the high street is an internal one. The experience of visiting the high street is unenjoyable and has been since the recession following the 2008 financial crisis. As society grew and new generations of shoppers (Millennials and Gen Z) emerged with their own unique needs and wants the high street remained stagnant. High street stores still operate under a completely competitive model which worked in more affluent times but is failing today. However, the problems facing the high street are not insurmountable. Continuing, solutions of the problems faced will be given.

Radical change is needed to save the high street. The current model of competitive capitalism leaves high street businesses unable to collaborate effectively on projects which yield less tangible shared benefits over a longer time. This is part of a much wider issue within capitalism and its Friedman doctrine. Too much emphasis is put on profit and growth, while failing to recognise that businesses should serve their communities, not just their shareholders. The first

solution offered is a design one. The high street should be transformed into a space new generations want to go. Greener spaces with a greater emphasis on inclusive design should be paramount. When redesigning the space designers should look at where individuals go to enjoy themselves currently, taking consumerism out the picture. The idea is to make the high street a space individuals want to occupy regardless of their shopping needs. Tourists should also be a key focus as they have a unique perspective, viewing cities through fresh eyes. What individual retailers offer should also be changed. High street stores must adopt a more experience-based shopping model to compete with online retailers. For example, 'Run 4 it' a UK athletics goods company offer free running consultations to individuals, analysing a consumer's running style and offering footwear suggestions and test which are suited to their customers individual needs. This highlights the weakness in the online shopping experience, which is that is impersonal. High street retailers need to exploit this weakness to stay competitive.

The responsibility of implementing these solutions fall primarily on the retailers which occupy the high streets as well as local council and government. Collectives should be set up between the retailers who share the high street spaces. Each member of the collective would contribute a small percentage of profits into a fund which would be used to fund the transformation of the high street previously mentioned. Business rates should be reduced for businesses who contribute to these rejuvenation projects as an incentive. Before transforming individual high streets, conversations within the local communities must be had. The process of making a space more inclusive should begin with the individuals and communities currently excluded, being listened to. Inclusion is an ongoing process and there is no one size fits all approach to designing inclusive spaces. Nor one group or individual which knows what's best for others. Vacant sites within the high street should be transformed into affordable housing and community hubs. The high street should be a lived-in thriving space and no longer the ghost towns they currently are.

To conclude, the high street currently is longer fit for purpose. The pandemic may have accelerated its downfall, but it can't be blamed for it. Nor can the individuals who choose to shop elsewhere. An opportunity for change is presented within the high street's situation. One which could change the course of business itself. Future high streets could be more attractive, more inclusive and more cooperative. Serving the communities, they reside within. Businesses no longer seeing competitors, but collaborators with common goals.

References

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