

Online or Offline Services for Urban Neighbourhoods?

Conceptualisation of Research Problems

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ABSTRACT

Services originally developed as natural concentrations of human activity, reflecting the Christallerian hierarchy of central places. Today, those natural mechanisms are challenged by strong competition from online facilities. More and more services are offered by the internet and this affects the traditional ‘bricks-and-mortar’ urban development. In this article, the main research problems of the inter-relatedness of real and virtual environments are defined in the context of urban neighbourhood service centres. The process of conversion from offline services into online ones is treated as a canvas for building a comprehensive research model for studying the development of the contemporary urban services sector in the local scale. Particular research questions and hypotheses are formulated and followed by a set of methods for further empirical research.

KEYWORDS

Conceptualisation, Local Service Centre, Neighbourhood Service Centre, Offline Services, Online Services, Urban Neighbourhood

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Scope of the Paper

Services are one of the core functions of urban areas. They determine the unique specialisation of a city, they define its position in the hierarchical urban network, they induce its competitiveness and finally contribute to the citizens’ quality of life. In this paper we present the state-of-the-art for the urban service sector in the context of the recent ICT developments and ask questions about the relationships between online and offline channels in providing everyday services.

Services in urban areas had originally developed as natural concentrations of human activity, reflecting the ‘least effort’ principle: on one hand service clusters were supposed to satisfy various needs of citizens in one place and on the other hand they guaranteed the economic efficiency for service providers. But today those natural mechanisms are challenged (disturbed?) by the rapid

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development of online services. More and more facilities are offered by the Internet and this affects the traditional 'bricks-and-mortar' patterns of urban development.

To be properly studied, this vibrant research subject requires a systematic and comprehensive approach. In this paper we try to define the main problems of the inter-relatedness of real and virtual environments in the local (neighbourhood) service centres. We highlight the process of conversion of offline services towards online ones, we point on the changing needs and expectations of customers and present the reasoning for building a combined 'online+offline' research model. The main benchmark in this work will be Europe (and where examples of particular data are required – Poland as a representative country of stable economic and technological development in the recent decades). We believe however that the problems raised are somehow universal and may be observed in other parts of the world as well.

1.2. Objectives and Approaches

This paper is a theoretical, cross-sectional desk-research study, based on a critical literature review. The state-of-the-art in the field of urban services sector is drawn upon the online-offline dichotomy. Within this framework some of the observed phenomena turn out to be contradictory (e.g. spatial concentration as an effect of reducing travel costs versus remote access to services), some support each other (e.g. development of online services as an emanation of the 'least effort' principle) and some are doubtful or simply unrecognised (e.g. spatial behaviours in relation to online services provision). The confrontation of those trends enables extracting particular research problems that have not been addressed by the literature yet and opens new perspectives to urban studies. A research model addressing the interrelatedness of 'real' and 'virtual' factors in the development of local service centres in urban areas is needed to fill this important gap in our knowledge.

The structure of the paper is multifocal. Firstly, we try to address the most important aspects of the service sector development in order to produce a wide, comprehensive picture of the subject. Three main strands of the current knowledge are discussed here:

1. The role of services in urban development (including concentration and agglomeration mechanisms, time-space compression, suburbanisation, urban shrinkage, availability of services);
2. Local (neighbourhood) service centres as the clusters for satisfying essential (everyday) needs of citizens;
3. Online and offline channels in the service sector (including patterns of using online services and virtual territoriality).

We then turn to the conceptualisation procedure that aims at defining the research problems of local service centres and their relations, it also seeks to clarify the abstract terms necessary for description of those problems (see Górny, 2008; Dobrodziej, 2016). Eventually it enables distinguishing particular research components (to be studied in empirical research) and some wider developmental contexts (forming the background for the studied issues). The paper ends up with several research questions and a hypothesis for further studies.

2. SERVICE SECTOR IN URBAN AREAS: WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DON'T

2.1. Servicisation and Its Impact on Urban Development

The term 'service' can be defined as a process of providing particular material or non-material goods to the customers (see Kachniarz, 2012). The range and diversity of services offered in a given territory changes over time and the dynamics of this process depend on several factors:

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