The exploratory nature of this research indicated that a qualitative research technique would be most informative at this stage of furthering knowledge on the customers’ town centre customer experience Three methodological approaches - focus groups, diaries and critical incidents - were adopted to capture customers’ understanding of town centers. The triangulation and complementary approach of these methods provided more flexibility to ensure a much needed in depth understanding of what constitutes a town centre experience. Therefore, a combination of qualitative methods is employed in this research to gain a greater understanding of individuals and to generate ‘new ways of understanding the complexities and contexts of social experience’ (Mason, 2006:10)

Focus groups were conducted as an exploratory qualitative approach in order to gain specific information about customer experiences of town centers and to highlight significant incidents customers may have experienced. Focus groups allow for group interaction among participants, thus peer pressure can support honest disclosure and spontaneous, unfiltered input from participants. This is because when participants hear about the experiences of other members of groups they are motivated to expand and refine their own ideas and perceptions of the topic; as a result, meanings and emotions surface that may not have been articulated elsewhere.

Diaries were of particular interest to this study as they reflect on personal experiences, behaviours and events. The diaries were solicited (i.e. constructed) for a specific research purpose and completed by participants in the full knowledge that they would be analysed by researchers for that purpose. The form in which the diaries were completed followed a structured format in which diarists recorded full and detailed commentaries in their own words by answering specific questions regarding their town centre experience. Entries were written in the diarists own words during a 4 week period in which each week the diarists were asked to record the events that unfolded during the week by answering specific questions, thus giving the diarists the flexibility to record in their own words what they consider to be relevant and important to their lives. Diaries can also capture the immediacy and spontaneity of a particular experience, thereby facilitating the accuracy of future recall and minimising retrospection bias. In addition, diaries can provide access to the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life, including events that may be easily forgotten or overlooked, and sensitive issues that may not have otherwise been surfaced through face-to-face research methods.

Critical incidents (CI), on the other hand, were conducted to identify the underlying factors that led to the shopping experience. The CI method was chosen to compliment other qualitative approaches adopted for this study as it focuses more on discovery over confirmation. Furthermore, this method was particularly suitable for this research as it enables the generation of rich data in uncovering the underlying cognitive processes which formulate customers’ overall perceptions of town centres based on their interaction with town centres. Diaries take into account the stories which people have experienced, giving the flexibility and opportunity for respondents to probe further into the stories to classify each story within the scheme by encouraging respondents to provide as much detail as possible for each diary entry.

**Research Context**

This research was conducted in the UK. The UK is reported to be a suitable context to explore as it has complex environments with multifaceted functions that comprise both retail and non-retail purposes. English market towns have remained popular locations to live and work, and due to cultural association with the term ‘market towns’ they remain popular locations to visit.English market towns and their centers have been the focus of much planning policy and government initiatives to help maintain the physical fabric, economic vitality and a good quality of life for people, both in the town and the surrounding rural areas, which embody the heritage of the community.

The diverse experiences to be had in town centers distinguishes them from other service sectors as they encourage customers to activate their evaluative cognitive processes in order to provide a complete representation of their understanding of town centers, thus providing a complete representative understanding of the town center customer experience.

**Research Ethics**

Informed consent was obtained from all respondents detailing the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. The consent detailed the purpose of the study, the steps involved in participation, potential risks and benefits, as well as a statement of confidentiality and anonymity. Respondents were also orally debriefed after the studies, ensuring that complete confidentiality and anonymity is preserved.

**Data collection**

Before the multi-method approach to data collection commenced, a pilot study was carried out on respondents at the School of Business Economics at Loughborough University to test the first version of the script and schedule. Respondents that participated in the pilot study were requested to think aloud as they were filling out the diary questionnaire and think out loud in the discussions that emerged in the focus groups.

**Focus Groups**

Data collection was outsourced to an independent research company that specializes in data collection. Participants were recruited on a convenience basis through workplaces or social groups and were requested to invite two or three other people, the only requirement for participation being some level of awareness of the town centre under discussion. Clear verbal and written instructions were given to the independent research company to ensure a complete understanding of the constructs under investigation. A detailed discussion guide was provided with a series of questions to explore in focus group. The respondents in each focus group were initially primed by discussing how they felt about their local town centers. Questions were probed by asking ‘how’, ‘where’ and ‘what’ town center experiences were encountered. Respondents were then encouraged to comment on other town centers they use. The interviewer then explored the feelings and thoughts the shopper had during their town center experience. In total, four focus groups were conducted in different locations across the UK with 8 regular shoppers participating in each focus group. These locations were Huddersfield, Loughborough, Watford and Swindon. All respondents were given a £40 incentive for their participation. Each focus group lasted on average for about 1.5 hours. The discussions were recorded and transcribed into an electronic format. Notes were also taken throughout the focus group discussions to cross validate key themes discussed as well as to ensure that the correct meanings of discussions were conveyed during the analysis stage. A range of occupations were represented including young unemployed people, students, people with occupations and retired individuals. All respondents were internet users with 50% being smart phone users.

**Diaries and critical incidents**

The questionnaire for the online diaries was designed to first capture every instance the respondent experienced when they went shopping and, secondly, to capture their reflections at the end of each week on a critical incident (i.e. one particularly satisfying or memorable occasion that was positive for them when shopping over the last week, and one occasion which was particularly dissatisfying) (see Appendix B and C for the instructions given to respondents to fill out). By adopting open-ended structured questions to help identify categories of critical incidents that led to the informed outcomes, all respondents were encouraged to accommodate as much information as possible. A total of 180 respondents participated in the diary study with 445 diary entries and a total of 1869 shopping trips recorded. Respondents were free to recount their positive and negative shopping experiences alongside the reasons for those experiences encountered and the consequences this had on their future town center visits. Respondents were encouraged to provide as much detail as possible. This resulted in a rich description of the antecedents of negative affect of town centers and behavioral outcomes, in a variety of retail settings.