

From 'heydays' to 'maydays': Place revitalisation through entrepreneurial activity

Recent times have seen growing debates about the vibrancy of local towns across the UK, with increasingly visible levels of empty shops, deprivation and inactivity. Consequently, places are being viewed and experienced in different ways, as changing consumer behaviours (brought about by increasing digital activity and changing attitudes following the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic) lead to changing perceptions of place. This is true for many towns across the UK and beyond, but particularly prominent for places that have strong associations with tourism and hospitality, as previously thriving coastal towns face challenges of providing locals and visitors with experiences that align with modern expectations, especially given the out-dated perception of some places, inconsistent weather conditions, and competition from European destinations through cheap flights and the ease of travel. Despite these challenges, these coastal towns remain communities where locals and visitors retain a pride of place and a certain quality of life that ensures a certain level of attachment to these places. While the heydays may be in the past, and some places sending out 'mayday' distress signals, other places are finding new ways to build resilience and develop new perceptions of place for modern times. This can be seen through increasing entrepreneurial activity and the development of new opportunities through local small businesses, which initiate new ideas, often led by locals who understand the needs of the community.

This research presents the case study of Aberystwyth, a seaside town in west Wales, known for its Victorian and Georgian-styled promenade, which has long been seen as a destination for visitors from Wales and the Midlands, but has experienced difficult times in recent years with numerous empty units along the high street, empty buildings along the promenade, and a lack of investment. Despite this, changes to regulations have allowed for businesses to set up along the promenade in recent years, enabling new businesses to bring vibrancy to the town, ensuring that new offerings are available for locals and visitors throughout the year. This research looks at how these entrepreneurial businesses are helping to change perceptions of Aberystwyth through a netnography study of Instagram posts relating to Aberystwyth from 2015-2025. This methodology allows for people's perceptions of Aberystwyth to be analysed in the ways that the public share their images of Aberystwyth and how they express their vision of the place. Theoretically, this research draws on entrepreneurship and place theories to outline how entrepreneurial activity can create more positive place representations. This is linked to three key segments of population that are prominent in Aberystwyth, namely the student population, underlining changing perceptions from nightlife towards well-being; the tourist population, with new attractions and experiences that maintain their interest and keep them coming back; and the local population, who have a pride of place and are keen to engage in the community by supporting local businesses. Findings from this research provide insights to other similar places to show how entrepreneurial activity can support changing perceptions of place.