1. Introduction

The concept of leasing temporary retail space has taken the retail world by storm over the last fifteen years (Ibrahim and Chua, 2010). Contributing to over 8 billion dollars to the US economy annually and employing over 23,000 people with a growth rate of 8.4% in the UK (Savills, 2015), marketing practitioners are increasingly developing temporary retail spaces designed to surprise and delight and act as a means to gain competitive advantage (Kim et al., 2010; Wyrley-Birch, 2014). Temporary retail activations have been increasingly adopted by brands as an innovative experiential marketing strategy to engage existing and new customers. Through a series of in-depth interviews with multiple-actors (agency executives, brand managers, and consumers), this study identifies divergences and commonalities in defining the concept of temporary retail activation success. Further, we propose a conceptual framework of key factors that can contribute to the success of experiential-driven initiatives in retail. Four critical success factors (relational touchpoint, strategic alignment, surprise and delight, and serendipity) are discussed. We suggest that temporary retail activations should be considered as retail exchange events aimed at generating relationship-driven outcomes.

2. Background

In an increasingly global retail market, socioeconomic and demographic changes are reshaping consumer behaviour, shopping patterns and retailing models (Grant, 2016). Furthermore, as online and mobile retailers capture more of the market and bricks-and-mortar retailers struggle with declining sales, the store environment has become more important than ever (Durden, 2016; Sparshott, 2016). One strategy employed by retailers to address changes in consumer behaviour and overcome threats from online retail is temporary retail activations. These activations are typically implemented as experiential marketing initiatives to create opportunities for competitive differentiation and consumer engagement (Niehm et al., 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Surchi, 2011), as well as a means of non-price driven points of difference (Grant, 2016).

In the context of retail, temporary activations are recognised as an innovative experiential marketing tool (Kim et al., 2010; Niehm et al., 2007; Pomodoro, 2013; Surchi, 2011) that provides interactive brand experiences (Russo Spena et al., 2012), and results in enhanced consumer engagement, generating value for both retailers and consumers (Gentile et al., 2007; Niehm et al., 2007). Hence, it is important for brands to provide retail experiences as a means of competitive
temporary retail activations as experiential marketing

As retail has moved from a product and services oriented economy to a more experience-based economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), the value of the service concept increasingly lies in the experience provided to the customer (Babin and Attaway, 2000; Baker et al., 2002; Kozinets et al., 2002; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). According to Meyer and Schwager (2007), the customer experience refers to the internal and subjective response customers have regarding any contact with an organisation. As such, it has been proposed that retailers (and service providers more broadly) hold a unique and ideal position to create temporary retail activations, which increases the likelihood of reaching potential consumers (Suruchi, 2011).

2.2. Temporary retail activations as experiential marketing

Within the context of the experience economy, temporary retail activations are one form of brand experience utilised as an innovative experiential marketing strategy. Such initiatives are based on surprise and exclusivity, and intended to engage consumers and reinforce brand loyalty (Niehm et al., 2007; Russo Spena et al., 2012). These activations provide an interactive, multi-sensory platform for brands and consumers to build a relationship (Russo Spena et al., 2012). For retailers aiming to build brand awareness, strategically locating temporary retail activations increases the likelihood of reaching potential consumers (Suruchi, 2011).

3. Methodology

Given the novel, contemporary and contextually-specific nature of temporary retail activations, we applied a grounded theory approach (Daymon and Holloway, 2011) to explore the subjective experiences of multiple actors, including retail brand managers, experiential agencies and consumers. The ontological assumptions of this research combine the interpretivist ideology with social constructivism, whereby a belief in multiple and relative perspectives of reality exist and subjective meanings of experiences are developed through interaction with others (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Originally emerged in sociology, grounded theory has been increasingly applied as a methodology to study emerging themes with significant behavioural implications in the marketing discipline, such as ethical marketing, social marketing and experiential consumption (Goulding, 2005).

Aligned with the precepts of the grounded theory methodology, our research was not guided by hypotheses; rather insights were driven by the data following a rigorous approach that forces researchers to look beyond the superficial and apply every possible interpretation before developing a final theory demonstrated by explication and data-supported evidence (Goulding, 2005). We relied on the Straussian approach to grounded theory, which prescribes that theory is to be derived from data, systematically collected and analysed and interpreted in an on-going way throughout the research (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Gummesson, 2003). A reflexive process informed our study with researchers intimately involved with data collection, analysis and interpretation.
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