


Please cite the Published Version

Warnaby, Gary  and Shi, Charlotte (2019) Changing Customer Behaviour; Changing Retailer Response? The Potential for Pop-up Retailing. Journal of Customer Behaviour, 18 (1). ISSN 1475-3928

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1362/147539219X15633616548489>

Publisher: Westburn Publishers

Version: Accepted Version

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Changing Customer Behaviour; Changing Retailer Response? The Potential for Pop-up Retailing

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Abstract

Many retailers are facing challenges in accommodating their strategies and *modus operandi* to changing customer needs and behaviour, and in this paper, we posit the ‘pop-up’ concept as a possible means by which retailers can help acquire the requisite flexibility and agility to respond effectively to these challenges. In recent years, the ‘pop-up’ epithet has become ever more commonplace, and we discuss its potential to achieve retailers’ strategic objectives by virtue of its temporal, spatial and material flexibility.

Keywords POP-UP RETAILING, BUSINESS OBJECTIVES, TEMPORALITY, MATERIALITY

Introduction and context

The recent travails of many traditional ‘bricks and mortar’ retailers - manifest in staff redundancies, store closures, and in some cases, overall business failure - is indicative of the challenges they face in adapting to changing customer needs and behaviour, most notably shoppers’ increasing predilection for buying online. Matthew Hopkinson of the Local Data Company is quoted as stating, “Online has been a catalyst that has reinforced the fact that we have too many shops in the UK...Around 10% of the UK retail stock is surplus to requirements” (Wood, 2017: 30). Indeed, the failure of major retailers such as BHS, Toys’R’Us, and most recently House of Fraser, has generated extensive media comment in the UK, with Butler (2018: 60), for example, suggesting that there is “a structural shift in the way consumers spend their money. This is threatening famous retailers and forcing a rethink about how high streets will look in years to come, and what might be done with retail parks, and malls when retailers shut up shop”.

However, this is not just a UK phenomenon, and retailers everywhere will, perforce, have to adapt their strategies and *modus operandi* to accommodate the shifting industry structural dynamics that arise from changing customer shopping habits. It has been argued, for example, that retailers will have to more effectively integrate in-store and online activities, creating novel, interactive hybrid retail concepts (see Gordon, 2004; Kim et al., 2010; Niehm et al., 2007); in press commentary, this has been articulated in terms of the need for retailers to “reinvent themselves” (Narwan, 2018).

In this paper, we posit pop-up retailing as one means by which retailers can achieve the imperatives of flexibility and agility, as part of such processes of ‘reinvention’. We begin by outlining the nature of the ‘pop-up’ concept, distinguishing it from earlier forms of (often long-established) temporary retailing, such as periodic markets, before going on to describe some of the different ways in which pop-up activities can be classified. This serves to highlight pop-up’s essential plasticity and flexibility, which we discuss in terms of *temporal*, *spatial* and *material* flexibility, before concluding with a discussion of the potential implications for the retail industry.

The concept of ‘pop-up’

Pop-up retailing is an ephemeral, retail-oriented setting that can facilitate direct, experientially oriented customer-brand interaction for a limited period (Warnaby and Shi, 2018). In recent years ‘pop-up’ has become commonplace across a range of commercial, non-commercial and cultural contexts, with the ‘pop-up’ epithet almost becoming a synonym for virtually any kind of temporary event (see Beekmans and de Boer, 2014; Bishop and Williams, 2012). Whilst ‘pop-up’ retailing is seen by some as a relatively new phenomenon (see Doyle and Moore, 2004, Pomodoro, 2013; Surchi, 2011), there is a tradition of *temporary* retailing arguably going back centuries to periodic markets and fairs, and more recently, temporary shops that capitalize on product categories characterized by extreme seasonality (e.g. Halloween and Christmas goods). More broadly, the origin of the ‘pop-up’ concept has also been linked to the ‘happenings’ of the 1950s and 1960s, where artworks of various types became an intervention existing in real time (with a permanent record of its existence only available via film or other media), and more recently, to ‘street culture’ of the 1980s and the ‘urban counterculture’ of the 1990s (Klépierre with Qualiquanti, 2016). However, it could be argued that the recent development of ‘pop-up’ *retailing* is distinguished by the fact that the motives impelling its use are as much about promotion (in terms of building and communicating brand values etc.), than they are about maximizing revenue and profits of the companies concerned.

Initially, this more contemporary use of pop-up activities was particularly evident in the fashion industry (Beekmans and de Boer, 2014; Niehm et al., 2006; Picot-Coupey, 2014), but from the late 2000s its use has become much more commonplace (Warnaby and Shi, 2018). Harris notes that pop-up “is now a fashionable choice for creative start-ups and a popular marketing tactic for global brands” (2015: 592). Moreover, pop-up is arguably becoming more mainstream: according to CEBR, “[t]he pop-up model is expanding, with established businesses, both traditional and online, launching a range of pop-ups to complement their other business activities” (2015: 4). CEBR goes on to state that “[w]ith established retailers moving into the pop-up market and successful pop-up retailers making a quick transition from pop-up to other well-established formats, the lines between pop-up and traditional retailing are fading fast”

(2015: 4). An important reason for this is pop-up's inherent plasticity and flexibility (Chappell, 2013; Gonzalez, 2014) - chiming with the need, mentioned above, for retailers to 're-invent' themselves.

This plasticity is evident in the various means by which contemporary pop-up stores can be classified. For example, referring to *location*, Beekmans and de Boer (2014) make a basic distinction between two main types of pop-up store. The first are *nomadic* pop-up stores that travel from location to location (e.g., using converted shipping containers, or other vehicles, adapted in such a way as to communicate a very strong and visible brand concept). The second type are *static* pop-ups, which colonize an existing space, notably vacant retail premises (of which, as noted above, there seems to be an ever increasing supply).

Others classify pop-up activities according to *function*, acknowledging the variety of different objectives they could potentially serve to achieve (in contrast to the very sales-oriented motives behind earlier forms of temporary retailing outlined above). Thus, Pomodoro identifies different types of stores including:

- *The concept brand store* – i.e. where the main purpose is to increase brand awareness and develop brand identity;
- *The community store* – i.e. where the main purpose is to enhance customer-brand relationships and build brand communities, often through experiential marketing techniques; and,
- *The test-store*, the main purpose of which, as the name implies, is to ascertain potential demand for a new brand concept/product range etc.

Warnaby et al. (2015) stress that these different pop-up categories are not mutually exclusive, and a particular pop-up activity may incorporate various elements according to the specific objectives set. This inherent flexibility is critical. For more established retailers, the need to refresh product/service offerings in order to stay relevant will be paramount; and for small, start-up entrepreneurs (what Warnaby and Shi, 2018, term 'emergent' retailers), using pop-up could facilitate the testing of new ideas; increasing brand awareness, and gaining customer feedback to inform and develop new concepts. In their discussion of different pop-up retailing stereotypes, and

the kinds of objectives to which they can contribute, Warnaby et al. (2015) identify four categories of objectives for pop-up activity:

- *Communicational* - i.e. increasing brand awareness enhancing brand identity and influencing brand values perception;
- *Experiential* - i.e. facilitating consumer-brand engagement;
- *Transactional* - i.e. maximizing potential sales, especially in markets characterized by an intrinsic periodicity; and
- *Testing* - i.e. testing business concepts, gaining market intelligence etc.

We continue by discussing the various ways in which pop-up's plasticity and flexibility is manifest – namely, *temporal*, *spatial* and *material* – before concluding by analyzing the implications for retailers if they are to ensure a continued relevance to changing customer needs.

Temporal flexibility

Temporality is one of the defining characteristics of pop-up retailing (Kim et al., 2010; Pomodoro, 2013; Surchi, 2011), and its increased use has led to the development of a variety of ephemeral retail spaces. In addition, property owners are increasingly amenable to the prospect of letting retail premises on a more short-term basis (CEBR, 2015). Pop-up's essential ephemerality can, thus, provide various advantages, and contribute to a number of the objectives mentioned above. For example, pop-up can be used as a low(er)-risk test-bed by both established and emergent retailers. For pure-play online retailers, using pop-up can provide a tangible presence to engage customers and enhance brand loyalty. Additionally, pop-up allows retailers to better capitalize on time-specific events (e.g. cultural/sporting occasions, fashion weeks, Christmas, Halloween etc.) in circumstances where a more permanent resource commitment may not be justified. Furthermore, increasingly ambitious, experientially oriented environments can also be created in a temporary setting, which it might not be possible to sustain in a long-term tenancy (Ratcliffe, 2015), and indeed, pop-up activities have been explicitly conceptualized in terms of events (see Pomodoro, 2013).

Thus, by capitalizing on pop-up's inherent temporal flexibility, retailers can more effectively 'synchronise' their activities with (changing) rhythms of consumers' behaviours (Kärrholm, 2008, 2012). However, the duration of a specific pop-up activity can be an issue for customers: Taube and Warnaby (2017) indicate that there is a perceived maximum duration for a pop-up shop, and that if a pop-up shop lasts too long it could potentially be counter-productive. That said, Boxpark - the self-styled 'world's first pop-up mall' (see <https://www.boxpark.co.uk/>) - apparently seems to be a permanent addition to the Shoreditch area of East London. However, whilst the structure (made of converted shipping containers) may be apparently permanent, there is a continual 'churn' of tenants, consistent with this notion of temporal flexibility. However, Boxpark does indicate the potential for perceptions of temporality to vary as far as pop-up is concerned, according to context and the spatial scale involved.

Spatial flexibility

Pop-up's spatial flexibility is reflected in the broad range of locational choices available (Beekmans and de Boer, 2014; de Lassus and Anido Freire, 2014), manifest in the *nomadic* and *static* pop-ups (Beekmans and de Boer, 2014) mentioned above. Static pop-ups are determined - and constrained - by the availability of suitable physical space. This may require some locational flexibility on the part of retailers at the micro-scale (see Warnaby and Shi, 2018). Nomadic pop-ups have more freedom to determine the specific spatial nature of the retail 'territory', within the constraints of the structure chosen to house the pop-up; such as a converted shipping container, which has obvious spatial constraints in relation to design etc. (see Martin, 2016). In addition, spatial flexibility can be further developed by combining elements of both static and nomadic approaches through pop-up *tours*, whereby a pop-up concept sequentially occupies a series of empty retail premises in different locations (outlined in more detail, with reference to a particular exemplar, by Warnaby et al., 2015).

Indeed, in spatial terms, it is perhaps helpful to take a 'territorological' (Brighenti, 2010) perspective, to consider the spatial flexibility of pop-up. Brighenti (2014) suggests that 'territory' has been traditionally imagined in terms of fixity and enclosure, and as a distinct, bounded space affected by a certain control or regular set of behaviours (see also Kärrholm, 2007, 2012, for a review). Following this logic,

any retail store could be considered as constituting a brand-oriented ‘territory’. However, in the pop-up context, notions of territory can be regarded more flexibly; here, territory is “not an absolute concept. It is always relative to a sphere of application or a structural domain of practice” (Brighenti, 2010: 61). Kärholm (2007, 2008) notes that territories arise through (possibly contested) processes of producing, maintaining and assigning spaces with meaning, and here the choice of specific pop-up format can depend on the firm’s resources and strategic objectives. Thus, for a strategic objective of increasing brand awareness and regional coverage, a nomadic format such as a pop-up tour would seem more appropriate. However, if the primary goal is to capture high footfall within a certain area, occupying an empty unit in a prime location would perhaps be a more effective strategy (Gensler et al., 2013). Alternatively, retailers may adopt what Surchi (2011) terms a ‘guerilla’ approach, locating in secondary retail areas.

Material flexibility

The concept of territory, as discussed by Brighenti and Kärholm above, is also relevant to the in-store environment, or the material ‘territory’ of the pop-up shop itself. Contrary to more ‘fixed’ stereotypical perspectives, which define territory in bounded, spatial terms, Brighenti argues that territory is “better conceived as an act or practice rather than an object or physical space” (2010: 53). This suggests that the main characteristics of territories can be considered from more dynamic, relational, and processual perspectives; in this context, consistent with the conceptualisation of pop-up activities as events (Pomodoro, 2013). Arguably, retailing more generally is moving towards entertainment, with a combination of sensory experiences, and pop-up retailing can perhaps provide more effective opportunities to organize in-store events and live demonstrations, thereby creating a more interactive and participatory environment for customers (Lee, 2013; Niehm et al. 2007; Surchi, 2011), linked to Brighenti’s notion of territory as a “domain of practice”. This is manifest in the materiality of the pop-up store: for example, with the creative use of versatile fixtures and fittings (de Lassus and Anido Freire, 2014) to facilitate a more effective transition between different functions.

As customers become more technology-savvy, the use of various types of consumer-facing technology has become increasingly important for retailers (see Bonetti et al., 2017), which in turn will contribute to achieving the experientially-

oriented objectives mentioned by Warnaby et al. (2015) in the specific context of pop-up retailing. Consequently, technology utilization becomes an integral part of the pop-up experience, and the adoption various in-store technologies strengthens the ties and connections between the physical and digital territory (Dennis et al., 2014; Pantano and Viassone, 2015). This is consistent with the principles of multi- and omni-channel retail in the sense that the customer experience is created through connectivity and interactions via multi-sensory engagement within the store, and/or relational platforms such as social media and digital displays. Linking back to spatial flexibility mentioned above, the use of social media and other retail technologies to facilitate the dissemination of information about pop-up activities, and also their operationalization (see Warnaby and Shi, 2018) expands the ‘territory’ of the pop-up store – as (to use Brighenti’s term), a “domain of practice” - beyond its physical boundaries. This capitalizes upon the online presence that is increasingly part of retail competitiveness into the future.

Implications for the Future?

As noted above, the ‘pop-up’ epithet has become virtually synonymous with temporary events, and an important reason for this is, arguably, pop-up’s inherent plasticity and flexibility – discussed here in *temporal*, *spatial* and *material* terms. We argue that incorporating pop-up into their activities potentially allows retailers to become more agile (both strategically and operationally), enabling them to more effectively navigate the implications of rapidly shifting consumer behaviour and preferences, against a backdrop of technological, political and economic upheaval and the overarching, interconnected forces that will drive and shape the retail industry in years to come. Indeed, evidence suggests that the pop-up concept is becoming an integral part of the retail *modus operandi*, increasingly integrated as part of a multi-channel retail capability as the digital and physical retail worlds converge.

In this scenario, the pop-up concept will continue to evolve as a wider range of companies embrace its flexibility in order to achieve the range of business objectives outlined above. Pop-up can satisfy both the firm’s need to synthesize and communicate its brand essence in an authentic and memorable way, as well as the customer’s increasing need for interaction and socialization (Russo Spena et al., 2012). The pop-

up concept has, for example, through the related concept of ‘Shop-sharing’, encouraged greater collaboration among retailers, helping emergent retail brands to boost brand awareness, as well as providing a more efficient use of space for established retail brands, especially in situations where they have an excess of selling space as a consequence of changing retail consumption patterns.

From a more operationally oriented perspective, pop-up retail can utilise a range of technologies at point-of-sale, offering a highly experiential in-store environment, incorporating engagement, interactivity, and rich sensory experiences to encourage customers to have a unique and personalised experience with the brand (Kim et al., 2010; Niehm, 2007). In an increasingly competitive market, brands will need to keep on creating a ‘surprise element’ to attract customers’ attention (Pomodoro, 2013). The novelty of the pop-up attracts customers to the brand experience, and can also act as a powerful motivator for immediate consumption. Resonant with this imperative, some pure-play online retailers have opened temporary ‘ecommerce-showrooms’, offering customers a physical space to try products and then place an order online (Marchant, 2016). This operational model can be potentially adopted by a wider range of retailers as it removes the complexity and cost of handling store inventory that is involved in traditional retail formats, thereby improving efficiency, as well as giving online retailers opportunities to interact in a more overtly experiential manner with customers in a physical space.

For emergent brands, the flexibility of pop-up allows the possibility to explore different growth avenues without having to commit to a long-term store lease and other ongoing commitments (Thompson, 2012). Connected with one of its key objectives, pop-up is now used as a method of testing potential new concepts, including new products, store designs and technology tools (Catalano and Zorzetto, 2010 cited in Warnaby et al., 2015), and new markets (Picot-Coupey, 2014). Given the fact that, compared to opening up a brick-and-mortar retail store, launching a pop-up can be approximately 80% cheaper (StoreFront, 2016), retailers could minimise their financial outlay and still gain access to premium locations, and retain the ability for experimentation in response to changing customer habits and future demand.

However, the inherent flexibility of the pop-up *modus operandi* has less welcome implications too. Pop-up can assume total flexibility on behalf of the people who work in such activities, analogous to the notion of the ‘gig economy’ (Warnaby and Shi, 2018). Indeed, Harris notes that there is a danger that the widespread application of the pop-up concept could increase the precarity of retail work practices, in that it normalizes “not just pop-up places but also pop-up people” (2015: 596); and in this sense, pop-up could be regarded as potentially exploitative? Furthermore, there exists an increasing critique of the pop-up concept in relation to some of its wider social and spatial (in terms of how vacant urban space is used into the future) implications, in both the academic literature (see for example, Ferreri, 2015, 2016; Harris, 2015) and the popular press (see for example, Hatherley, 2013).

Thus, rather than a potential panacea for some of the current problems faced by the retail industry in responding to changing customer needs and behaviours, viewed another way, pop-up could be regarded in terms of a short-term, interim ‘coping mechanism’, rather than face up to more fundamental problems. Perhaps the reality of the situation lies somewhere between these two extremes? Given the relative paucity of the academic literature on the pop-up concept to date (although more recently it is generating greater interest among researchers), there is scope for a much more extensive and detailed analysis of its possible contribution to - and implications for - the future of retailing.

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