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Pop-Up Retail in Luxury Brand Strategy

Ephemeral retail has become a strategic instrument in luxury brand management. The Ephemeral Brand Environment (EBE) Framework maps four brand-side functions of pop-up retail: brand narration, community activation, market intelligence, and format experimentation, positioning the pop-up as a complementary channel in an omnichannel luxury strategy.

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Luxury brands spend decades building stores designed to last forever, and then open pop-up stores that disappear in a weekend. This is not a contradiction; it is strategy. The contemporary luxury retail landscape runs on a productive tension between permanence as aspiration and ephemerality as tool, and understanding that tension is the purpose of this article.

Since the early 2000s, temporary retail formats have attracted growing scholarly attention (Picot-Coupey, 2014; Surchi, 2011). Within luxury studies, however, the strategic logic of ephemeral formats remains underexplored. Most research documents what pop-ups do for consumers, such as generating brand experience, word of mouth, and emotional responses (Henkel & Toporowski, 2021; Klein et al., 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2021), without asking what they do for the brand. That question is the starting point of this article.

Pop-up retail, when deployed intentionally and coherently, serves four distinct strategic functions that permanent retail cannot replicate: brand narration, community activation, market intelligence, and format experimentation. Together, these constitute the Ephemeral Brand Environment (EBE) Framework: a brand-side analytical lens for understanding why luxury brands activate ephemeral formats, and how those activations should be designed. Throughout, the pop-up is understood not as an isolated format but as one channel among several: a tool that complements permanent stores and digital touchpoints within an integrated omnichannel strategy.

The Luxury Paradox

The Logic of Permanence in Luxury Retail

Luxury brand management has long been built around permanence, scarcity, and selective distribution (Bitner, 1992; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). The flagship store is the clearest expression of this logic: it is not just a shop, but a territorial claim – a spatial statement of brand identity, anchored in architecture, location, and savoir-faire. Permanence signals stability; stability signals heritage; heritage signals value.

Major luxury retailers have invested in stores that function as cultural landmarks (on the Champs-Élysées, Bond Street, Fifth Avenue) because the physical brand environment is a communication medium in itself (Boustani & Zielinski, 2023; Turley & Milliman, 2000; Wiedmann et al., 2007). Consumers do not simply shop in these spaces; they visit them. The store is part of the product. Yet this logic has structural limitations. Digital commerce, generational shifts in brand allegiance, and the growing demand for participation over passive purchasing



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have created pressures that the flagship model, designed for longevity, is poorly equipped to absorb (Boustani & Leonini, 2022). Urgency, novelty, and temporal scarcity are not the flagship's strong suits. They are, however, precisely what the pop-up does best. This contrast should not be read as opposition. The pop-up store does not compete with stationary retail but operates as a complementary extension of it. While the flagship serves as a space to communicate the brand story and engage the existing community, the pop-up offers an opportunity to reinterpret that story and history in new contexts and to connect with new target groups. Within an omnichannel architecture, permanent stores, digital channels, and temporary activations play distinct and mutually reinforcing roles.

The Rise of Ephemeral Retail

Since approximately 2010, ephemeral retail formats (pop-up stores, temporary brand installations, travelling boutiques, time-limited concept spaces) have spread across the luxury sector, with significant acceleration after 2018 (Picot-Coupey, 2014; Surchi, 2011). Several forces converge to explain this phenomenon: the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), the role of social media in amplifying retail in real time, the post-pandemic resurgence in the demand for in-person interaction, and the luxury sector's growing engagement with younger consumers who express brand loyalty through participation rather than ownership.

Initially, the pop-up store was distinguished from other retail formats by its intentionality, temporality, and experiential design, a tripartite structure that underpins the EBE Framework proposed here (Boustani, 2021a). Pop-up adoption varies by sector, brand positioning, and strategic context, and consumer responses to pop-up communications range from short-term applications to permanent retail stimuli (Boustani, 2021c).

Table 1: The Ephemeral Brand Environment (EBE) Framework

EBE Dimension	Strategic Function	Consumer Outcome	Luxury Case
Brand Narration	Immersive storytelling beyond permanent retail	Brand mythology, emotional resonance	Hermès Wanderland
Community Activation	Cultivating brand tribes through shared experience	Belonging, social visibility, brand advocacy	Chanel Coco Beach
Market Intelligence	Real-time testing of product, concept, and geography	Consumer data, cultural fit, purchase signals	Dior pop-ups in emerging markets
Format Experimentation	Piloting new retail architectures and service models	Brand modernity, design leadership perception	Louis Vuitton nomadic formats

Source: Author’s illustration.

Ephemerality itself, the time-limited character of the format, drives visit intention through anticipated scarcity and amplifies in-store purchase behavior by product type and consumer profile (Henkel & Toporowski, 2021; Henkel et al., 2022). The degree of transactional intent varies along a continuum: ephemeral activations range from pure brand installations without any checkout opportunity to sales-driven temporary spaces, and each position on that continuum implies different design choices and success measures.

A Gap in the Literature

Despite this growth in practice and in research, the theoretical literature on pop-up retail remains skewed toward the consumer side of the encounter. For example, Klein et al. (2016) document word-of-mouth effects and emotional brand responses, but their analysis stays anchored in the consumer experience. Rosenbaum et al. (2021) surveyed retailing organizations globally and found that over 80% rated their pop-up as successful, yet their framework focuses on consumer outcomes and brand awareness rather than the strategic logic that should govern activation design. Henkel and Toporowski (2023) show that temporal scarcity enhances the brand experience and increases word of mouth, particularly among consumers with a high need for uniqueness. These are important findings that nonetheless focus on the consumer side of the equation.

Strategic accounts that ask what ephemeral formats achieve for the brand and how they should be designed to accomplish it remain rare. This article addresses that gap directly. The EBE Framework shifts the analytical lens from the consumer experience in a pop-up to the brand’s gains from deploying one: a deliberate move from a consumer perspective to a brand perspective, in which elements of the business perspective

(such as investment logic, learning capacity, and measurable return) become explicit decision criteria.

The Ephemeral Brand Environment Framework

Overview

According to the EBE Framework, luxury pop-up activations serve one or more of four distinct strategic functions. Each function corresponds to a specific managerial objective, a characteristic design logic, and a set of consumer outcomes that signal whether the activation has been successful. All four dimensions share an underlying organizational logic: the ephemeral format is a vehicle for experimentation, learning, and socializing. Each activation is an experiment the brand runs on itself, a learning

Management Summary

In luxury retail, ephemeral formats have evolved from a tactical novelty to a strategic instrument, capable of performing functions that permanent flagship stores cannot deliver on their own. The Ephemeral Brand Environment (EBE) Framework maps four brand-side functions of pop-up retail: brand narration, community activation, market intelligence, and format experimentation. It reframes the pop-up as a complementary channel within an omnichannel strategy, shifting the focus from what a pop-up does for the consumer to what it does for the brand.

cycle that generates knowledge for future decisions, and a social occasion that introduces consumers and internal teams to new ways of encountering the brand. Table 1 lays out the framework.

Brand Narration

Permanent retail is conservative by design. The architecture, product display, and service ritual communicate brand identity, and changing these elements is expensive and carries reputational risk.

Pop-ups operate under no such constraints. They can be built as a fully immersive, narrative environment organized around a specific moment in the brand's history, such as a heritage anniversary, a new creative direction, a cultural collaboration, or a deliberate provocation (Boustani, 2019, 2025). And because the format is temporary, consumers enter it with heightened attentiveness: anticipated scarcity intensifies the desire to visit and deepens in-store engagement (Henkel & Toporowski, 2021), making the temporary brandscape perceptually richer than its permanent equivalent.

Hermès Wanderland is the reference case for this concept. Activated across multiple international cities, the installation created a narrative universe constructed from Hermès archival motifs, a theatrical environment that rewarded close examination and extended time. Visitors did not encounter the brand as a retail proposition; they experienced it as a world with its own internal logic and aesthetic density. In Sherry's (1998) terms, this is the brandscape: a space in which brand mythology and consumer subjectivity are jointly produced through spatial encounters. That kind of depth is structurally unavailable to permanent stores. Ephemerality is what makes it possible, and the narrative staged by the installation feeds back into the brand's other channels, extending the story told by flagships, digital media, and campaigns rather than substituting for them.

Community Activation

Luxury brand communities are social formations organized around shared aesthetic values, consumption practices, and symbolic identification (Cova & Pace, 2006; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Pop-up formats can serve as community activation events: bounded gatherings where members of a brand's extended tribe recognize and reaffirm their shared membership (Klein et al., 2016). Rosenbaum et al. (2021) found that building connections with current and potential customers was the most frequently cited reason why organizations activate pop-up formats, a finding that maps directly onto this dimension. Community activation is, in this sense, the socializing function of the EBE made

explicit: the format brings together the brand's tribe in a physical space and converts shared presence into durable social bonds.

Chanel Coco Beach brings the concept to life. Staged in coastal resort destinations during summer months, these installations translate Chanel's visual codes (the interlocking C, the camellia, the navy-and-white palette) into immersive leisure environments. The events are not designed to sell products, but rather to showcase a shared lifestyle. The time-limited character of the activations gives attendance its social value: being there, in and of itself, is a form of distinction, and the documentation of that presence on social media extends the community activation far beyond the physical venue. Henkel and Toporowski (2023) demonstrate empirically that consumers with a high need for

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uniqueness convert ephemeral brand experiences into elevated word of mouth advertising, which is precisely the amplification mechanism at work. In terms of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the pop-up makes brand membership publicly visible and collectively enacted.

Market Intelligence

Luxury brands operate across diverse geographies, cultural contexts, and consumer segments. Understanding how a brand proposition may be received in a specific market, without the long-term commitment and reputational exposure of a permanent store, is a persistent managerial challenge (Boustani, 2021c). The pop-up resolves this issue. Rosenbaum et al. (2021) confirm that introducing a product or brand and testing its reception are among the primary reasons why organizations activate ephemeral formats. The format is, in this reading, a structured market experiment.

Dior's deployment of pop-up formats in emerging luxury markets across Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America illustrates this clearly. Before committing to a flagship investment, the brand can gather precise intelligence about which product categories attract traffic, how the visual vocabulary is perceived in a given cultural context, and how service interactions are received. The pop-up becomes a learning environment where the primary output is knowledge, not revenue, in the tradition of market-oriented sensing (Day, 1994; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). In this mode, a successful pop-up is one that generates actionable data for the brand's next

Main Propositions

- 1 Pop-ups are a strategic instrument, not merely a tactical novelty in luxury retail.
- 2 The EBE Framework defines four functions: narration, community, intelligence, experimentation.
- 3 Pop-ups complement flagship and digital channels within an integrated omnichannel strategy.
- 4 Each activation should serve a defined primary function, with success criteria set in advance.
- 5 Capturing data across all four dimensions turns each activation into a measurable brand asset.

decisions, whether or not it generates strong sales. This includes decisions about the channel mix itself, since intelligence gathered in temporary formats informs where and how permanent and digital channels should subsequently be deployed.

Format Experimentation

Luxury brands are among the least well positioned to lead retail format disruption from within their permanent stores. Heritage and continuity are core brand assets; experimenting with the flagship store could jeopardize both. Pop-up stores provide a low-risk alternative, offering a contained space in which new retail architectures and service models can be tested without reputational exposure (Boustani, 2021b; Boustani & Zielinski, 2023). In a mixed-methods study of pop-up store design, Ye et al. (2023) confirm that design roles in temporary retail are purposefully varied to serve distinct experiential and transactional objectives: evidence that format innovation in pop-ups is deliberate, not incidental.

Format experimentation also extends to the design economics of the space itself. A recurring managerial decision is whether to conceive an activation as a one-off installation or as a modular, reusable concept that can travel across locations and be reconfigured for successive deployments. Modular design converts each activation into a cumulative learning cycle: it lowers the marginal cost of experimentation, accelerates iteration between formats, and embeds sustainability considerations into the economics of ephemeral retail. Through the lens of the EBE Framework, experimentation is inseparable from learning (each deployment teaches the organization something about its formats, service models,

and audiences) and from socializing, as reusable concepts travel between markets and expose new communities to the brand.

Louis Vuitton has been notably systematic in this regard, with gaming-themed installations targeting younger luxury consumers, artist collaboration spaces repositioning the brand within contemporary art discourse, and nomadic boutiques that challenge the fixed-location assumptions of luxury retail geography. Each format generates consumer response data that permanent retail investment cannot safely produce. According to the retail innovation literature (Reynolds et al., 2007), pop-ups do not simply allow experimentation; they institutionalize a learning capacity that permanent stores, by their very nature, suppress.

Implications

Managerial Implications

The EBE Framework offers luxury retail managers a practical diagnostic tool for activation design. Rather than designing a pop-up based on aesthetic ambition or competitive pressure, managers can use the four dimensions to create a clear brief: which strategic function does this activation primarily serve? What spatial and experiential choices follow from that function? What quantitative or qualitative outcomes will determine its success? And how does the activation connect to the brand's other channels? Which flagship, digital, and communication touchpoints does it feed, and which feed it? The framework also identifies a common failure mode: the undifferentiated pop-up, designed without a primary function, generating energy but no return (Boustani & Leonini, 2022). Rosenbaum et al. (2021) note that, while over 80% of pop-up activations are considered successful by those who run them, success criteria are rarely articulated in advance. That ambiguity is what the EBE Framework resolves.

The four dimensions are not mutually exclusive. A well-designed activation may serve multiple functions simultaneously: narrating the brand, activating a community, and gathering market intelligence, all within a single format. The framework does not prohibit this; it argues that multi-dimensional activations require deliberate design choices for each function rather than incidental accumulation. Strategic clarity precedes spatial coherence.

Quantifying the Success of Temporary Formats

The shift that the EBE Framework performs, from a consumer perspective to a brand perspective, also requires that elements of the business perspective be made explicit. Methods of measuring the four elements of the EBE Framework and

capturing data across them should be considered central to quantifying the success of pop-ups and temporary formats. In the market intelligence dimension, consumer data is already an explicit output, but data collection is equally possible, and equally relevant, for brand innovation, community activation, and format experimentation. It constitutes a core element of modern brand management. Brand narration can be assessed through indicators of emotional resonance, dwell time, and earned media; community activation can be evaluated through metrics of participation, advocacy, and social visibility; format experimentation can be gauged by comparing design variants, service models, and the performance of reusable concepts across deployments. Systematically capturing and gathering data across all four dimensions turns each ephemeral activation into a measurable business asset. Success criteria are defined in advance for each dimension and evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Theoretical Implications

The EBE Framework reorients a body of literature that has consistently examined pop-up retail from the consumer's perspective. It classifies ephemeral formats not by their physical attributes (size, duration, location) but by the strategic logic they serve. This addresses a gap identified in the literature (Henkel & Toporowski, 2023; Klein et al., 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2021): retail research on ephemerality has rigorously

documented consumer-side outcomes but has not provided a brand-side framework for translating these findings into an activation strategy. Future empirical work (fieldwork, managerial interviews, in-situ observation across activation contexts) can begin to test how the four dimensions operate under different brand, market, and format conditions. Quantitative designs could assess each dimension's contribution to brand equity and retail performance outcomes. The relationship between ephemeral and permanent formats as components of an integrated omnichannel luxury retail strategy remains particularly underexplored (Boustani, 2025).

Conclusion

Pop-up retail is no longer a novel tactic. It has become a strategic instrument for luxury brands – one that performs functions that permanent stores are structurally unable to deliver alone. The EBE Framework maps four of those functions: brand narration, community activation, market intelligence, and format experimentation. Each function corresponds to

Lessons Learned

- 1 Before designing a pop-up, define which of the four EBE functions it primarily serves. Strategic clarity precedes spatial coherence and prevents undifferentiated activation that yields no return.
- 2 Treat the pop-up as one channel among several, designing it to feed, and be fed by, physical and digital touchpoints, rather than operating it as an isolated format.
- 3 Set success criteria in advance for each dimension and capture both qualitative and quantitative data, turning every activation into a measurable business asset.
- 4 Favor modular, reusable concepts to lower the cost of experimentation, speed iteration between formats, and embed sustainability into ephemeral retail.



a distinct managerial objective, a characteristic design logic, and a set of outcomes that justify the investment.

Ultimately, the framework shifts the focus of the question. The existing literature asks, “What does a pop-up do for the consumer?” The EBE Framework asks, “What does a pop-up do for the brand?” These are different questions, and they produce different answers. The studies by Henkel and colleagues (2021,

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2022, 2023) accurately document consumer-side effects: amplified visit intention, differentiated purchase behavior, increased word of mouth among consumers with a high need for uniqueness. The EBE Framework situates those effects within a brand-side logic so that practitioners know not only that pop-ups work but also why to activate them, how to design them to achieve specific outcomes, and how to capture the data that proves their effectiveness.

In the world of luxury, the tension between permanence and ephemerality is not a problem to be resolved; it is a strategic resource to be managed. The flagship says: “You will always find us here.” The pop-up says: “Be here now, before it is gone.” Both statements are true, and both serve as complementary channels within a single omnichannel strategy. Seen through this lens, the EBE Framework is an attempt to provide the analytical language that this management practice deserves. ■

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