Enlivenment and the Gruffalo; the unfolding story of events in destination shopping centres

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Enlivenment and The Gruffalo: the unfolding story of events in Destination Shopping Centres

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Introduction

They are known in the trade as Top Tier or Super Regional Shopping Centres, so defined by their scale; in the UK we recognise them as preeminent centres such as Trafford Centre (Manchester), Westfield Stratford City (London), Meadowhall (Sheffield), and globally Mall of America (Minnesota, USA) or Mall of the Emirates (Dubai, UAE). Positioned as destinations in their own right, these venues symbolize the future direction of shopping centres; transcending shopping and confirming Howard's (2007) view that they can no longer rely on shopping alone. Therein, it would be spurious to singularly refer to them as shopping centres (Chaney, 1990), shopping malls (Bloch, Ridgway and Dawson, 1994), or even Mega Malls (Timothy, 2005). More expansively they are referred to, in this paper, as Destination Shopping Centres (DSCs), which is a term used by Robinson (2013), Morgan *et al.*, (2011), and also Landy (2016). DSCs embody Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy; investing in the staging of many and varied events as a prominent feature of their commercial offering. This study provides a constructive lens through which to examine 'Event Futures' from the perspective of DSCs as a very contemporary setting, with their progressive application of events providing consumers with an everyday wow factor (Michelli, 2007; Yeoman, 2013).

A cursory glance at the website of a DSC indicates the pervasive role that events play as they compete for more and more visitors who stay longer and longer (Roberts, 2014; Deep, 2016). Their investment is wide-ranging, from larger scale and carefully choreographed experiences such as The Gruffalo Experience (examined in this paper) to more fleeting and (apparently) impromptu enlivenment on the malls; perhaps a stilt walker or piano recital. These, and many other events in between, are bound together by key traits: design of experience (Berridge, 2012), purposefulness (Crowther, 2014), transience, uniqueness, and congregation (Getz, 2007). Commercial experience literature characterises these as rich and compelling experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), memory creators (Lilja *et al.*, 2010), and engineered to influence future behaviour (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994). Events are ubiquitous inside DSCs with many of these also being staged by, and within the physical realm of, their tenants (Ibrahim and Wee 2002; Sit *et al.,* 2003). However, the focus of this paper is, what we term, DSC-centric events (not tenant-centric) i.e. those staged in the public spaces and malls, orchestrated by, or though the acquiescence of, centre management.

Increasingly scholars chart the 'arrival' of events as a notable strategic force (see Getz, 2012; Richards, 2013), yet only a few have commentated specifically upon their growing, and more sophisticated, appropriation within shopping centres. Ennis (2016), for example, characterises an increasingly indivisible relationship between events and shopping centres, with Backstrom and Johansson (2006) referring to their preoccupation with experience creation and management. Other writers have likened DSCs to artificial mini-cities (Amorim, 2000; Barker, 1998; Hornyak, 2013) preoccupied with staging spectacular and unique retail experiences (Getz, 2007; Howard, 2007). At the extreme, this is emphatically evidenced by DSCs such as West Edmonton Mall in Canada, whose tagline is "the greatest indoor show in the world" (Thomassen *et al.,* 2006), hosting daily sea lion shows amidst a giant indoor water park. Additionally, Grandview Shopping Centre (Guangzhou, China) showcases the 'world's saddest polar bear' in their ocean theme park (Phillips, 2016) whilst Intu Braehead hosts a real snow ski slope in conjunction with their DSC's retail offer near Glasgow (Snow Factor, 2018).

This study emerged from an opportunity to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research into The Gruffalo Experience - a three week pop-up experiential children's event hosted in 2015 and 2016 by three DSCs across the UK (Meadowhall in Sheffield, Centre: MK in Milton Keynes, and Bluewater in Kent). Privileged access to this event enabled an extensive survey of 8000 attendees (1305 completed questionnaires), and in-depth interviews with the event's producer, project manager, and executives from two of the DSCs hosting the event. These exploratory findings revealed emergent themes which led to a further seven interviews focussing more generally on such events in DSCs; interviewees were selected on the basis of their close involvement and insight into the role of events in DSCs, including four DSC event managers and three related event agencies. The four research questions which the study sought to address are:

1. How do the changes in DSCs underpin a growing future role for events?
2. What do DSCs perceive as the role, and return on investment, of events?
3. What are the opportunities and challenges for DSCs in their harnessing of the strategic value of events?
4. How can we conceptualise this progressive, and future, role of events in DSCs?

The remainder of the paper is ordered as follows. First, we review and relate extant literature pertaining to: the changing context of shopping centres, commercial experiences, and event strategy. Second, we describe the research method before, thirdly, presenting and discussing the findings, leading on to the associated analysis of a derived conceptual framework. Finally, we conclude outlining the contribution of this research, its theoretical and managerial implications, and the study's limitations.

Literature Review

The changing face of shopping centres

The above examples from West Edmonton and Grandview offer an, albeit fanciful, insight into the considerable evolution of shopping centres (Thomassen *et al.*, 2006) and their transition beyond simply offering consumers a place to shop (Jones, 1999). The predominant concept of leisure shopping (Howard, 2007) fuses retail with entertainment, leisure and events 'under one roof', responding to consumer demand in the context of shopping time as family and leisure time, and vice-versa (Dennis, *et al.,* 2002; El-Adly, 2007; Howard, 2007; Borges, *et al.,* 2010). This underpins a seamless integration of many and varied entertainment-led features. These include permanent 'anchor' attractors such as cinemas, climbing walls, or ski slopes, and temporary attractors in the form of events (Howard, 2007; Jones *et al*., 2006), supplementing the ever increasing food and beverage offers (Greco, 2017) and social and community offerings (El-Adly, 2007). These new experiences need to, not only, bring new customer footfall to the centres, but also animate and enhance the visitor experience (Fantoni, *et al*., 2014) and encourage customers to 'linger for longer' (Europe Real Estate, 2013), which is where literature is less prevalent.

Underlying the development and design of DSCs are decisive macro factors: intense competition, online shopping, and shifting expectations of the postmodern consumer (Kirkup and Rafiq, 1999; Backstrom and Johansson, 2006; Howard, 2007; Benady, 2014; Conick, 2017). Given this context, it is no longer enough for shopping centres to more straightforwardly provide, and finesse, functional utilitarian facilities for shoppers (Arnold *et al.*, 2005). This notion is particularly true for millennials who have proclivity for experiences over products (Yeoman, 2013; Blake, 2016; Saiidi, 2016) with hedonic motivations increasingly characterising DSC visitation (Turley and Chebat, 2002; Sit *et al.,* 2003; Arnold and Reynolds, 2003; Lombart, 2004). The postmodern consumer is searching for cultural identity in the act of frequenting shopping centres (Yeoman, 2013), preferring DSCs where they believe they will find similar communities and a sense of self-worth - so-called 'being spaces' (Trendswatch, 2002). The payback for such fulfilment being increased expenditure of time and potentially money in the centre (Jones, 1999; Wakefield and Baker, 1998; Borges, e*t al.,* 2010).

Shopping centres have morphed into destinations in their own right (Dennis, *et al.,* 2002), both geographically, as they are demarcated by their own defined landscape, but also metaphorically through their uniqueness and experientiality. Lines have become blurred, with DSCs increasingly becoming containers for services and experiences which are traditionally offered by other providers and settings: city centres, entertainment venues, community parks, leisure services, and even visitor attractions (Sit *et al.,* 2003; Maclaran and Brown, 2005; Fantoni, *et al.*, 2014). Such proliferation has led to them being characterised as 'non-places ... of circulation, consumption and communication' (Auge, 1995, p.8) or the apex of post-modernity encompassing a hybrid of services and experiences (Jones, 1999). They are an illustration of what Auge (1998) refers to as super-modernity, hyper-real spaces where nothing is as it seems and time and space are artificially constructed to enhance liminality and encourage dwell time – with events integral to that stratagem. This commodification of leisure time, and indeed space, is a particular trait of post-modernity (Borchard, 1998) or as Bauman (2013) discusses, liquid modernity. DSCs have had to adapt to survive – and their response is indicative of Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy, and a characteristically post-modern approach to consumerism and society (Borchard, 1998; Blake, 2016). Centres have, in many respects, become utopian settings, combining consumers' and marketers' desires in equal measure (Maclaran and Brown, 2017).

Henceforth DSCs purposefully facilitate vibrancy, and playfulness, creating memorable customer experiences in order to elicit hedonic values of fun and escapism (Barbieri, 2005; Backstrom and Johansson, 2006). They are 'fantasy palaces' (Woodruffe-Burton *et al.,* 2001), with consumers inclined to drive past 'weaker' centres to arrive at the 'destination' centre, in order to maximise their experience (Wakefield and Baker, 1998). The emerging consensus, although coverage is less widespread in the literature, is of DSCs as visitor attractions (Getz, 2007), and therein the notion of retail tourism emerges. This reflects the competitive situation of DSCs (Sit *et al.,* 2003) and their evolution as destinations, where design and facilitation of experience is foremost (Morgan *et al.*, 2011; Underhill, 2000).

Commercial experiences in DSCs

The advancement in consumer experience, although not so widely discussed in context specific literature, is heralded in the wider literature with the 'experience movement', which dates back to Alderson (1957), but has gained traction over the past 35 years (see Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Carbone and Haeckel, 1994; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The clamour for experiences from both supplier and consumer sides, is commentated upon in varied literature: commercial experience (Poulsson and Kale, 2004; Lilja *et al.*, 2010), experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999; Smilansky, 2009), retail experience design (Underhill, 2000; Turley and Chebat, 2002; Davis and Hodges, 2012); and event design (Nelson, 2009; Berridge, 2012). The overlapping arguments across this combined body of knowledge underlie the widespread increase in the staging of commercial experiences, with Pine and Gilmore (1999, p.25) encapsulating this by emphasising the *'diminishing world of goods and services'* and the imperative to *'stage rich compelling experiences'*. Therefore, DSCs have an understandable appetite for the experiential, and also the participative and relational features of events (Crowther, 2011).

As Whelan and Wohlfeil (2006, p.315) accentuate in their definition of marketing events, the ambition is to 'harness the potential for emotional bonds...' and provide experiences '*....which customers perceive as adding to their enjoyment and experienced quality of life*'. This language is akin to the established definition of a commercial experience: '*an engaging act of co-creation between a provider and a consumer wherein the consumer perceives value in the encounter and in the subsequent memory of that encounter*' (Poulsson and Kale, 2004, p.270). This emphasis on co-creation, with embedded notions of participation and involvement, is significant and underlies Lugosi's (2008) conception of communitesque, or metahospitality. Although not principally intended for this purpose, this is a useful lens through which to interpret events within a shopping centre as it places the emphasis upon shared experiential spaces within which visitors become participants in a contextually defined social entity. Aligned with Turner's (1969) conception of communitas, they are not dispassionate spectators; moreover, the hospitableness is intrinsically emotional and leads to temporary and carnavalesque spaces (Sheringham and Daruwalla, 2007). Such experiences represent a designed disruption of conventional space and time or liminality, where 'shoppers' become fleetingly detached from the everyday and into a temporary state of unity and sociality (Turner, 1969). Thus, malls are disrupted with mundane spaces fleetingly transformed into hospitable, or existential, spaces, palpably inducing positive emotions which underlie future preferences, purchases, and advocacy behaviour (Carbone and Hackel, 1994; Underhill, 2000; Barbieri, 2005; Lilja *et al.*, 2010).

DSC event strategy

This rise of events, and the associated requirement for a more strategic approach, is increasingly charted in many and varied contexts: city and destination level (see O'Toole, 2011), commercial and third sector organisations (Crowther, 2011; Gerritsen and Van Olderen, 2014), sports events (Taks, Chalip, & Green, 2015), business events (Foley *et al.,* 2013). The shopping centre context is similarly escalating in both investment and sophistication, yet there is a dearth of literature to directly inform our understanding of their events and event strategies. Varied literature, from related contexts, can be applied to inform our understanding of the anticipated return on investment: events as attractors to drive visitation / footfall (Morgan *et al.*, 2011), enrichment and elongation of visits so as to maximise dwell time and associated revenues (Gerritsen and Van Olderen, 2013), communication of brand values, creating emotional attachment, and differentiation (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994; Dennis, *et al.,* 2002), profiling, PR, and advocacy (Allen, *et al.,* 2005). Besides these outcomes, events are often an appealing and expedient strategy because they require comparatively less long-term financial and operational commitment (Getz, 2007) and can also be much more easily adapted as they are flexible and fluid (Berridge, 2007).

Ostensibly there are two tiers to event strategy in DSCs, although this lacks examination in the literature: the single event level with its specific context related to stakeholders, outcomes, audience, and design (Crowther, 2014) and also the aggregate, or event portfolio level with the full population of events (Andersson *et al.*, 2013). DSCs are creating events on behalf of a primary stakeholder grouping of tenants, and arguably have a more tightly defined context than town or city destinations where event strategy is characteristically driven by varied competing interests (Ziakas, 2013) henceforth the portfolio is more diverse.

While DSCs are challenged to cultivate a balanced programme of events to directly please, or appease, their tenant groupings, ultimately these events must also fit, and perpetuate, the DSC's overall brand within their competitive situation (Morgan *et al.*, 2011; Jago *et al.,* 2003). Research emphasises the branding and image benefits of expedient event creation both at a single event level and, more significantly, in the aggregated form as the totality of an organisation's events (see

Morgan *et al.*, 2011; Schmitt, 1999). In a similar way to which Heeley (2011) places an imperitive upon cities to recognise, create, and transmit their differentiation, shopping centres are similarly challenged and their events form an integral aspect of that communication. With captive audiences, events, within shopping centres, inescapably combine to tell a persuasive story about the destination (Ziakis, 2013) meaning DSCs step into the domain of experience / event designers or as organisers of value creation (Normann, 2001).

Such proficient design is multifaceted and takes shopping centres beyond their core function, challenging them to realise the potential of events as a source of competitive advantage (Davis and Hodges, 2012). Such advantage is sustainable when it cannot be replicated easily by competitors, which is a significant challenge given the important feature of artificiality of many DSCs (Kirkup and Rafiq, 1999). Depicting this, Richards and Palmer (2011) cite 'copycat' events as a prevailing trait in city event portfolios, and similarly Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) refer to substitutability as a risk to reputational status and competitive identity. Adept event design, both at the portfolio, and singular, event level is therefore imperative for DSCs to succeed.

Methods

The opportunity for this study emerged from a first tranche of empirical data relating specifically to The Gruffalo Experience (GE), which was a large event delivered in three UK DSCs in 2015. An extensive survey was conducted with attendees in addition to interviews with key stakeholders (1-4 below). This initial phase of research revealed a prominent but intricate role for events in DSCs and presented an opportunity to further and more widely investigate this through a second phase of empirical research.

Visitor survey

A cross sectional questionnaire survey was undertaken to assess visitor perceptions of the GE at the Meadowhall DSC in Sheffield, through an analysis of their ratings on a range of items relating to their experience of the event and also their intention to recommend GE, share their experiences on social media, and to revisit GE. A convenience sample of 1305 was obtained (number of adults in each party: 1: 334; 2: 803; 3: 98: >3: 70; children in each party: 1: 626; 2: 498; 3: 118; >3: 63; ages of children: 1-3: 745; 4-7: 389; >7: 38).

Following a normality test of the variable ratings, base 10 logarithmic transformations were used to normalise all variables which violated the assumption of normality. Independent samples t-tests and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to identify differences in the visitor experience variables on the basis of visitor behaviour and demographics. A Games-Howell procedure was used for the post-hoc multiple comparison tests because it controls for type I error rate while maintaining both statistical power and accuracy when sample sizes are unequal (Field, 2009). Ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression analyses were then used to assess the predictive capability of the experience items on visitors' intention to recommend GE, to share their experiences on social media, and to revisit GE.

Interviews

Four initial interviews were undertaken with the GE producer and manager, and also with marketing/event executives at two of the DSCs. The second phase of research involving a wider stakeholder group (5-11 below), used purposive sampling based upon the interviewees' ability to provide specific insight relating to the topic (Flick, 2002); specifically, the inclusion criteria was their professional experience of the strategic use of events by DSCs. A protocol was developed to guide the semi-structured interviews, with question areas emerging from both the survey responses and from the broad themes which developed from the first phase of the interviews. Transcripts from the second phase of interviews were analysed using a systematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, units of information e.g. phrases and sentences relating to each research question were identified and then categorised into nine descriptive themes from which four analytical themes emerged. The themes were then independently verified using an inter-sorter reliability test, which produced 90% agreement, exceeding the recommended acceptable level (Johnson and Heal, 1987). These analytical themes comprise four integral components which are evidenced through the structuring of the results section: experience, outcomes, integration, and stakeholders.

1. Director, Unit 10 Eventive (Producer and Designers of GE)
2. Director, Hopper Events Ltd (Event Management for GE)
3. Events and Marketing Manager, Meadowhall (Hosted GE)
4. Head of Marketing, Centre:MK (Hosted GE)
5. Events Manager, Trafford Centre
6. Assistant Marketing Manager, Metrocentre, Gateshead
7. Ex-Marketing Manager, Centre:MK
8. Marketing Manager, Ridings Centre, Wakefield
9. Senior Account Executive, Because Experiential Marketing Agency
10. Account Executive, Born + Raised Creative Marketing Agency
11. Director, Pod Event Staffing

Results

Survey findings

The results were wide ranging in informing a detailed understanding of the visitor experience and implications for future behaviour. Specifically, and within the prescribed focus of this paper, there were five significant survey findings, which extend our understanding of events in DSCs and cohere with, and underpin, the views of stakeholders as expressed through the qualitative findings. This accord endorsed and strengthened the analytical themes developed and discussed more fully in the qualitative findings below.

1. Overall, the results highlight the importance of integrating event attendance with shopping. Also, they show the relative importance of specific dynamics and aspects of the designed event experience, and it is clear that it is not just the GE *per se* which was influential in enhancing the DSC visitor experience. Generally, there were high mean visitor ratings on all items relating to the GE (Table 1), but interestingly the findings also highlight three primary items of importance: children's' excitement, event authenticity and customer service experience. Further demonstrating this hierarchy of influential items were the key aspects underlying intention to revisit (Table 2): children's enjoyment and also the importance of a captured personalised experience in the form of a photo with the Gruffalo.

2. Importantly, given the underlying outcomes desired by DSCs, the regression analysis (Table 2) also identified that meeting visitor expectations was the most influential item for revisitation

and recommendation; this also reflects the high ratings for, and the importance of, providing an authentic and exciting experience for visitors (Table 1). Moreover, it demonstrates the importance of creating emotional bonds (Whelan and Wohlfeil, 2006) because they underpin future behaviour and advocacy (Carbone and Hackel 1994; Underhill, 2000; Barbieri, 2005; Lilja et al., 2010).

3. Linked to this latter point, and significantly, ratings were notably higher on all aspects of the event experience where visitors had had their photo taken with the Gruffalo (Table 1). Importantly, this also includes the integral outcomes sought by the DSC: visitor intention to recommend, to share their experience on social media and to return to the GE. This is an important finding, which suggests that securing a tangible legacy / memento enhanced the experience not only directly, but also indirectly in terms of positively influencing reaction to other aspects of the event experience.

4. Distance travelled to Meadowhall was significant for the large majority of items; those who travelled over five miles to reach Meadowhall rated items significantly higher than those who travelled less far. This is an interesting finding, suggesting that the increased effort to visit in some way influences the experience; this also resonates with previous research (Wakefield and Baker, 1998), which indicates that consumers drive past ‘weaker’ centres to arrive at the 'destination' centre, in order to maximise their experience.

5. It is also notable that intention to share their experience on social media was notably higher for those who had previously visited Meadowhall compared with first time visitor ratings (see Table 1), which suggests, albeit indirectly, that The Gruffalo Experience was an important influence on DSC visitation, revisitation and advocacy.

About Table 1 here

About Table 2 here

<u>Interview findings</u>

Thematic analysis of the eleven interview transcripts revealed four predominant themes: experience, outcomes, stakeholders, and integration.

Experience

There was a strong accord among all respondents that centres are more ‘... *than just a shopping centre*’; they are more of a ’*destination, or a place to visit*’, offering an experience. Acknowledgment of the notion of ‘destination’ was resounding, endorsed by the Meadowhall event manager who revealed that they had, in fact, dropped ‘shopping centre’ from their name in external facing communications. Things have “*changed massively in the last few years due to online*” according to the executive of the production company and there is a ‘*need to give customers another reason to visit*’, the view being that ‘the reason’ has to go beyond shopping and the mundane, as there is too much copycat. ‘*There’s a lot of generic in Shopping Centres, I mean every where's got a Top Shop.*

It's quite hard to distinguish between places and so it all comes down to this reason to visit'. Therefore, centres cannot just '*be full of shops*', they '*have to give customers reasons to come here*'. Hence the Trafford Centre has '*... got a Namco's entertainment centre, a climbing wall, LEGOLAND, Sealife Centre – all those things under one roof, we're a destination*'. This emphasis on experience, providing differentiation and enticing 'reasons to visit' was ubiquitous in the transcripts. In fact the whole raison d'etre (of the GE, for example), in the words of the executive of the production company, was '*to provide high quality branded content to shopping centres to give them the marketing edge'*, but also to give '*people a reason to visit'*. Centres echoed this view: '*it's a win-win situation...bringing in external events that are branded and look good'.*

The view was of shoppers having higher expectations, with the ex-Marketing Manager for Centre:MK suggesting that modern consumers '*are demanding physical destinations, including shopping centres, becoming experiences.*' This experience mission is engrained in the ethos of all the centres; for example, the strapline for British Land (Shopping Centre Owner) is tellingly '*places people prefer', and Intu's is* '*being enjoyed, being creative, being different'.* Such mantras underlie the *'personality of our events'* with respondents repeatedly inferring the notion of 'positively interrupting' the customer journey and therein the integrated role of events; '*animating'* the experience, and providing '*shoppers with a positive experience which they then associate with the centre'.* This purposeful staging and design of events was widely evident in the rhetoric with the Head of Marketing at Centre:MK and also Ridings Centre, Wakefield, offering a shared view that '*customers are not just looking for things to purchase; they're looking for experiences to enjoy and then share via social media'*.

Outcomes

A recurring theme was the integral relationship between event investment and both short term tactical and also longer term and brand building outcomes. Often the sentiment, of respondents, pivoted around the notion of 'enlivenment', a term specifically coined by Meadowhall's Event Manager, with the appeal and vibrancy of events sparking a virtuous cycle of visitation; 'attracted to visit', 'engaged and happy', 'longer dwell time', 'propensity to spend money', and then, of course, 'advocacy' and 'return visits'. Their brand strategy, and the deliberate pursuit of brand differentiation, was foremost in their minds and therefore a desire to be '*known as a place that does events... so customers choose you'*. Indeed, a key brand pillar of Intu is '*events with a difference*'; hence events like The Gruffalo Experience are very much positioned instrumentally '*as part of the marketing function'.*

The recurring belief was that events are '*a really good way to bring new people to the Centre that might not have been before because, often, the event is exclusive to that site so it could bring new people in'*. Equally it '*gives them a reason to stay, to explore the centre...*', it's about the customer journey, and simply it makes *'their experience a lot better. That's basically the kind of gist of why we do what we do, to make them feel happier when they're here'*. Overwhelmingly, there was a narrative around '*shopping centres becoming the new destination of choice.... with event content, rather than, you know, let's go to the rail museum or whatever … so as a parent it's a case of – do you want to go to one shopping centre where there's no event on, or do you want to go to Meadowhall where there's a Gruffalo event on, (and) you can do some shopping'*.

Stakeholders

The varied competing interests shaping event decisions within DSCs was manifest in the transcripts, with events, in the words of one of the agency respondents, often '*twisted and bent to try and make* *it work'*. Often, as an illustration, larger events such as The Gruffalo Experience, or In the Night Garden (Trafford Centre), are *'located in purpose-built structures in the overflow car parks'*. Sometimes this is due to physical limitations of space in malls but often due to the objection of tenants, who may have *'got this amazing space outside (X store), which is an event space, but it's like, whatever's put in there has to be sympathetic to (X store) as temporary event structures can impact sight-lines to stores*'. Such issues are significant as it frustrates the potential of such events to impact dwell time and spend; for example *'driving that footfall from that overflow car park – after that show - to come and have something to eat here, or nip into Selfridges, come and see what we've got to offer'* is more of a challenge than if the attendee is already physically there.

Centre events teams displayed awareness of the need to be adept at '*looking for commercial opportunities to try and join the dots, as if they have this great brand on their site; it's about how you can spread that more and bring benefits back to the retailers'*. In the case of the Gruffalo, the symbiotic relationship with retailers was obvious, but given the evident challenge of engaging tenants, it showed itself to not be so easily achievable in practice. The challenge of proactively involving tenants was palpable: *'some are quite willing and want to participate and others just don't want to know'* or '*that's the funny thing with retailers - some of them, you might never see in a year and others want regular meetings'*. The opportunity for tenants to co-produce events, and therein realise the potential, was clear: '*when it's the student events or Ladies Night for example, the retailers are involved. For a student event, we have probably over 180 retailers that will be actively involved in that by offering discounts or experiences in their stores'*. Metrocentre agreed, suggesting that they find it easier to *'work with restaurants rather than the stores to increase customer dwell time'*.

The centres were very aware of the need to be very responsible, and transparent, '*with what money we spend – making sure that we do have an impact for the retailers – ultimately, it's their budget'*. Proactive communication and evaluation was therefore a notable theme relating to tenants with Meadowhall explaining: *'after every event we'll do a campaign evaluation...set out what the key objectives and challenges were, what we are trying to achieve, and then it will give them the key results'.* There was much evidence of tenant influence in shaping the event plans of DSCs, with the Trafford Centre revealing significant changes to '*Christmas Lights Switch On…because the large footfall generated does not transfer to sales which 'are declining*', and therefore '*we need to be questioning whether we're bringing the right (more affluent) audience in*'. The need for consistent and upfront dialogue was clear, to avoid a disconnect: '*if they feel that there's a period that they're not thriving in, then we need to use our budget smarter – as the budgets don't change, they're pretty much the same year in year out – we need to be smarter to try and get the key footfall*'.

Integration

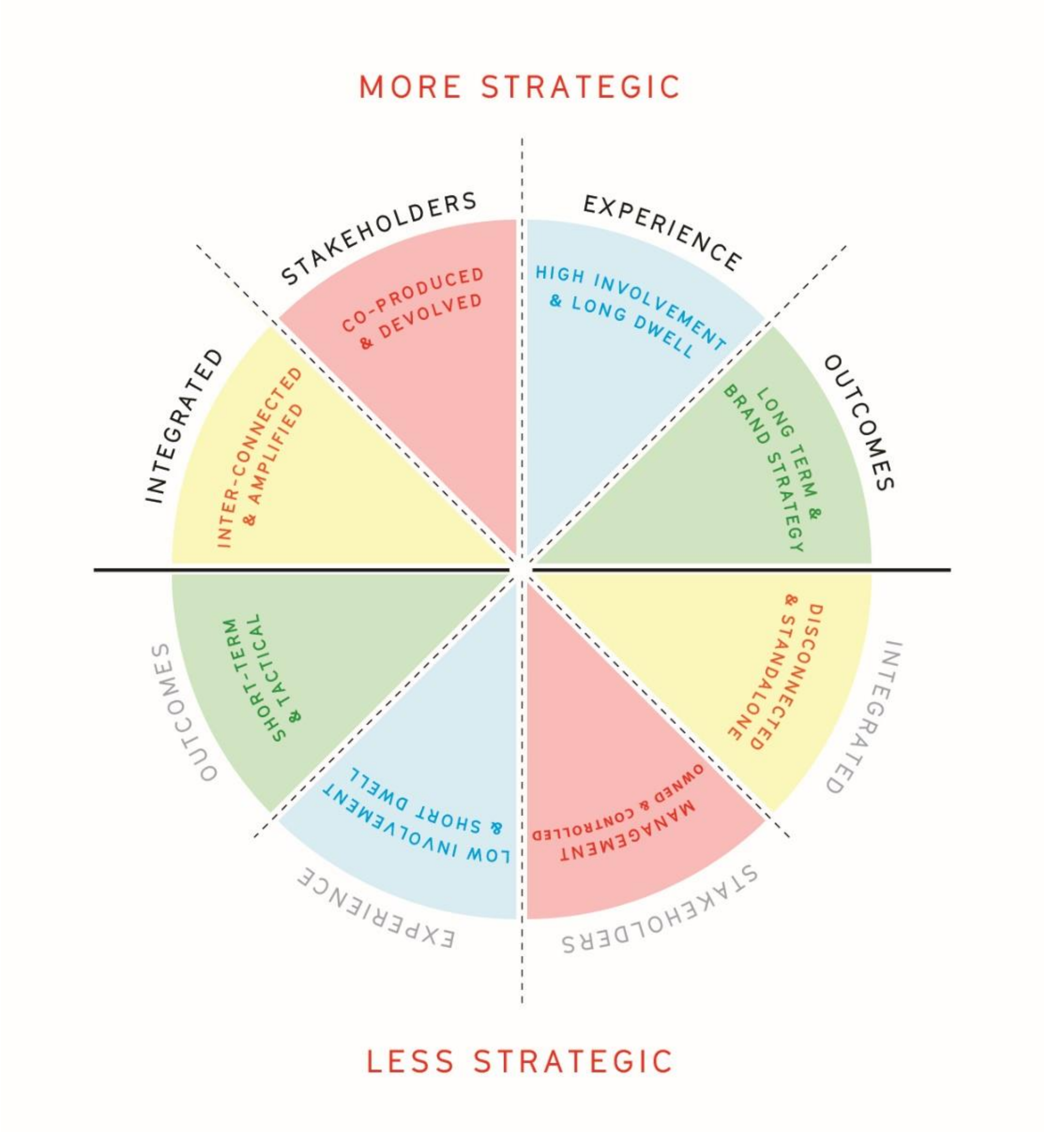
In response to diverse stakeholder interests, transcripts revealed a multi layered, portfolio based, approach to events with respondents referring to varied event types; popular terms used were 'commercial', 'brand building', 'attractor', 'disruptor', 'third party', 'enhancer', and 'community'. This variety reflects competing priorities and interests such as: 'brand building', 'short term footfall', 'community engagement', 'tenant involvement', 'media generating', 'integrate with marketing campaigns', 'CSR focus'. Hence interviewees referred to tough decisions, trade-offs, and competing aspirations limited by their resources: monies, time and also event spaces. Any given event cannot satisfy all agendas and hence respondents referred to their calendar (portfolio) of events as the solution to optimising resource, balancing competing interests and interconnecting tenants into individual events and the event strategy as a whole.

'*Attractor Events',* for example, were referred to as '*marquee events where they can bring a brand in and that brand is exclusive to the Centre .... the Gruffalo is coming here, Wallace and Gromit are coming here, so there's a reason to visit'*. Often, in these instances, there can be a short term disconnect between the event and tenant footfall and revenues; hence tenant engagement and proficient event design is pivotal to leverage maximum short term impact. Often more attractive events in appeasing, engaging, and or involving tenants are so called 'disruptor events', such as a seasonal fashion shows or a treasure hunt, akin to the 'kids club' concept discussed by Metrocentre. These interrupt the customer's journey, animating the experience and therein positively affect customer mood, dwell time and henceforth propensity to shop: 'w*hen people are happier, they spend more'.* Such events conjure a *perception that* the centre is somewhere '*where there is always something happening*' and thus a '*place to spend time'*. Centre managers frequently referred to the need to integrate different strategies to balance the requisite short-term footfall, dwell time and sales outcomes, required by tenants, with the longer-term and more subtle imperative to articulate a coherent brand personality that will create engaging experiences. A notable area of contention was an appetite from the DSC to move away from more hackneyed events and exert a coherent and persuasive brand personality through more immersive experiences: '*all events should support brand positioning'*. However, this level of sophistication is typically more resource intensive and also can be akin to longer term and softer outcomes, often contentious with tenants driven by short term targets.

Discussion and Conclusion

This early research study into events within DSCs has revealed a prolific and advantageous, but also nascent and intricate, relationship which requires further examination. The survey findings from the GE indicate a significant relationship, in various forms, between the event and the feelings and behaviours of the attendees. These results support the overarching views revealed in the existing literature and through the interviews which, and in response to RQ1, emphasise how the 'changing face of shopping centres' underpins a growing, and multifaceted, role for events. In seeking to give people a persuasive reason to not only (re)visit the centres, but also induce dwell time, purchase behaviour, and advocacy, the strategic use of events, alongside permanent 'anchor' leisure attractions spearheads a sophisticated DSC experience strategy. RQ2 and RQ3 are responded to through the literature and results sections and these findings are captured in the conceptual framework (Figure 1) which reveals the key considerations underlying the event stratagem of DSCs.

Figure 1: A Framework for DSC Event Strategy



The framework contains the four themes that preoccupied the responses of interviewees and which are thus integral to their approaches and decision making relating to the DSC events. Within each there was an evident tension between the short and longer term, and also between individual events and the holistic event portfolio. The separation displayed by the emboldened horizontal line is aligned with a key theme of the qualitative research which revealed a range of dichotomies in the design of events and decisions of event creators as to whether emphasis is placed upon, for example: short-term sales / long-term brand building; no tenant involvement / co-production with tenants; low experiential emphasis / high experiential emphasis; standalone / integrated with wider campaign. This is, of course, to some degree artificial in that all of these are scalable and it is more of an issue of balance and degree, than either / or. Yet it was strongly evident that DSCs comprise events with considerable dissimilarity and if each of these events was to be plotted on Figure 1, the picture would be eclectic. The findings were clear that such dissimilarity is necessary, inevitable and therefore desirable, given the competing objectives and stakeholders. Therefore, the challenge is not to choose one or another but to craft an appropriate balance, in any given event and also across the population of events.

Responding, particularly, to RQ4 there was a strong finding relating to the future oriented role of events. Efficaciously designed events provoke future visitation and increased customer dwell-time by ‘animating the mall’, ‘entertaining visitors’, or ensuring there is ‘always something happening’; embodying the distinctive personality, and engendering the intrinsically emotional hospitableness inferred by Turner (1969). The challenge for DSC event teams is to craft events, throughout the malls and public spaces, and across the year, to inject reverberating hedonic dimensions of playfulness, enjoyment, and sociality (Davis and Hodges, 2012). Henceforth there is an ‘eventalisation’ challenge, as expressed by Smith (2016), at the heart of event and event strategy decisions, which will determine the extent to which events are a source of differentiation and competitive advantage. Crucially, the potentiality, to achieve this, is improved when the event has a unity of intent among the DSCs' own internal stakeholders and also their many and varied tenants (Andersson, *et al.,* 2013).

From a managerial perspective, the study has three noteworthy contributions. Firstly, and as indicated directly above, that proactively and positively involving tenants to facilitate (some) events is worthwhile and worth investing in to increase the outcomes of the event. Secondly, and significantly, that by interlinking events with shopping, experiential and emotional bonds are enhanced and re-visitation potential is improved and therefore not only does it deliver short-term outcomes but promises to have long-term payback. Thirdly, that given the vast assortment of events, and also the multifaceted outcomes and stakeholders, a strategic and reflective approach is required to both the creation of singular event, and portfolios. The conceptual framework derived from this study is an example of this process in DSC mapping both the approach and priorities of events.

Whilst this study has answered the four research questions that were established at the outset, it should be considered in light of certain limitations. First, there is limited research on DSCs, events, and event strategy with which to compare the findings. Second, the study provided survey data relating to one specific event, with its own specific context, and the limitation of this is acknowledged, particularly given the absence, in wider research, of a direct empirical comparison. Future research should therefore compare the results of the survey with other events in DSCs, and also internationalise the interview respondents to identify similarities, differences, trends, and counter flows.

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Appendix A: Interview questions used in semi-structured face to face interviews and structured interviews conducted via email.

Name

Current Job Title

Organisation

Other relevant job titles

Q1 In what ways do you think shopping centres are no longer relying on just retail / shopping alone to attract customers?

Q2 How are shopping centres encouraging customers to spend longer in the centre?

Q3 What are the different types of events that happen in shopping centres and how can they be categorised together?

Q4 How are events in shopping centres becoming more central to the overall marketing strategy for the centre?

Q5 How can the success of events in shopping centres be evaluated?

Q6 How are shopping centres leveraging the benefit of events that happen in the malls?

Appendix B: Survey questions (screenshots)

The Gruffalo Experience

Customer Evaluation Survey

Your responses to this questionnaire are anonymous. The data will be analysed and used to help us improve the event experience for future guests and also to inform an academic research study of event experience from a customer's perspective. Many thanks for agreeing to participate.

*Required

1. **How many adults were in your party?** *
Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2. **How many children were in your party?** *
Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3. **What ages were the children?**
Mark only one oval per row.

	0-1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
#1 Child																
#2 Child																
#3 Child																
#4 Child																
#5 Child																
#6 Child																
#7 Child																
#8 Child																
#9 Child																
#10 Child																

4. **Had you been to Meadowhall before?** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes, many times
- Yes, but only once or twice
- No, first time

5. **Did you go to the shops in Meadowhall as part of your visit?** *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

6. **How many miles did you travel to get to Meadowhall?** *
Mark only one oval.

- ( ) Less than 5 miles
- ( ) 5-10 miles
- ( ) 11-20 miles
- ( ) 21-30 miles
- ( ) 31-40 miles
- ( ) 41-50 miles
- ( ) 50+ miles

7. **How did you hear about the Gruffalo Experience?** *
(Tick all that apply)
Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Saw the advertising in Meadowhall
- [ ] On a website
- [ ] Facebook
- [ ] Twitter
- [ ] Posters or flyers
- [ ] Meadowhall email list
- [ ] From a friend or family member
- [ ] Other Media
- [ ] Other:

Page 2

About your event experience

8. **How excited were the children in your party about coming to the Gruffalo Experience?** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not excited at all	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	Very excited!

9. **How important a factor was "meeting the Gruffalo" in your decision to attend?** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not important	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	Very important

10. **How close was the look and feel of the Gruffalo Experience to the Gruffalo environment you're familiar with?** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not at all	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )	Very much so

11. **To what extent did the Gruffalo Experience meet your expectations?** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not at all	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Exceeded them

12. **If 5 or more: how did it exceed expectations?**

13. **If 3 or less, why didn't it meet expectations?**

14. **Did the children in your party enjoy the event as much as you thought they would?** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not at all	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	They enjoyed it far more!

15. **Did you get a photo with the Gruffalo?** *
Mark only one oval.

◯ Yes
◯ No

16. **If not, why not?**
Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Didn't have time
- [ ] Too expensive
- [ ] Couldn't be bothered waiting
- [ ] No real reason

17. **If yes, how important to you was getting a photo with the Gruffalo?**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not important at all	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very important

18. **How would you rate the customer service you received at the Gruffalo Experience?** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
OK	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Outstanding

19. **What did you most enjoy about your visit to the Gruffalo Experience?** *
Tick all that apply
Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Meeting the Gruffalo
- [ ] Having a photo
- [ ] Interacting with the other animals
- [ ] Travelling through the woods
- [ ] Spending time with family & friends
- [ ] The whole experience!
- [ ] Don't know

20. **Which areas need improving in your view?** *
Tick all that apply
Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Ticket system
- [ ] Facilities / venue
- [ ] Set design
- [ ] Quality of Characters
- [ ] Customer Experience
- [ ] Value for money
- [ ] More Gruffalo activities
- [ ] More souvenirs available
- [ ] Nothing it's all good
- [ ] Don't know
- [ ] Other:

21. **How likely are you to visit the Gruffalo Experience again?** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not likely at all	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Very likely

22. **How likely are you to recommend the Gruffalo Experience to friends and family?** *
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not likely at all	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Very likely

23. **How likely are you to share your experience on social media?**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not likely	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Very likely