

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN SHOPPING MALLS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract:

This study explores consumer behavior in a Central-Eastern European shopping mall through qualitative research involving focus groups with young visitors (ages 16–30). Findings reveal that malls serve not only as retail spaces but also as social and leisure hubs. Consumers value convenience, store variety, atmosphere, engaging events, and digital interactions. Key themes include the combination of utilitarian and hedonic shopping motivations, the significance of experiential offerings, the community-building impact of mall events, and social media influence. Practical implications suggest mall managers should focus on enhancing experiential elements, integrating digital engagement, and promoting sustainability. The study concludes with managerial recommendations, research limitations, and suggestions for future studies.

Keywords: Shopping malls; Central and Eastern Europe; Youth consumers; Focus groups; Mall management

1. Introduction

Youth consumers (ages 16–30), which include older Generation Z and younger Millennials, represent a crucial segment for retail, continuing to frequent physical shopping malls despite the rise of e-commerce options (Kunc, et al., 2024). With significant economic and cultural influence, understanding their behaviors in malls is essential (Taylor & Cosenza, 2002). Given the pressure malls encounter from online retail, insights into young consumer preferences and motivations are both timely and valuable. This demographic is noted for being economically significant and motivated by both utilitarian and hedonic shopping experiences (Taylor & Cosenza, 2002).

Socio-economic, cultural, and technological factors significantly influence youth shopping behaviors. This economically diverse age group includes students, early-career individuals, and young professionals, each with distinct spending patterns (Ryu & Fortenberry, 2017). Culturally, malls frequently serve as social and entertainment hubs where interactions and atmosphere play pivotal roles (Taylor & Cosenza, 2002; Wakefield & Baker, 1998).

Technologically, as digital natives, young consumers seamlessly integrate online and offline shopping experiences, utilizing technology for convenience, product research, and peer opinions, while also maintaining interest in physical stores (Kunc, et al., 2024; Priporas, et al., 2017). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube significantly shape their shopping preferences and decisions regarding mall visits (Duffett, 2017). The boundary between digital and physical retail continues to blur, highlighting the necessity for omnichannel integration.

Academically, research on youth consumer behavior has predominantly addressed online contexts, leaving gaps in understanding physical retail interactions. Earlier studies (Taylor & Cosenza, 2002; Wakefield & Baker, 1998) emphasized social and experiential factors, while contemporary considerations now include digital integration and sustainability (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018). From a managerial perspective, insights from youth shopping behaviors are vital for guiding mall transformations toward experience-oriented retail environments (Grewal, et al., 2017). Implementing interactive technologies and sustainability practices is increasingly critical to attract and retain young customers (Priporas, et al., 2017; Johnstone & Lindh, 2018).

1. Therefore, this study addresses five research questions to explore youth mall behavior:

2. Mall vs. Online preferences: How do young consumers evaluate mall shopping compared to online shopping?

3. Mall experience evaluation: How do young consumers perceive mall ambiance, layout, accessibility, and facilities?

4. Appeal of events and activities: Which events and "retailtainment" offerings attract young shoppers, and what enhancements do they suggest?

5. Role of social media: How does social media impact youth mall visitation behaviors and decisions?

6. Sustainability attitudes: How do youth attitudes towards sustainability affect their engagement with malls?

Investigating these dimensions aims to offer rigorous academic insights and practical guidance for increasing mall attractiveness for the next generation.

2. Literature Review

Shopping malls have become prominent destinations for shopping and leisure in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), particularly following the region's economic transition after 1990. Recent literature since 2015 explores consumer motivations, mall attributes, social and experiential roles, demographic variations, and digital influences on mall behaviors.

Motivations for Mall Visits: Utilitarian vs. Hedonic

Consumers visit malls driven by utilitarian (practical) and hedonic (experiential) motivations. Nasim and Shamshir (2018) emphasize that malls serve both shopping and entertainment purposes. Initially, consumers in emerging CEE markets like Albania frequented malls primarily for leisure and curiosity, transitioning later to

routine shopping. Yilmaz and Koçoğlu (2018) found demographic variations: women, in particular, derive greater hedonic satisfaction from mall visits compared to men, underscoring the varied motivational balances influenced by gender and culture.

Mall Attributes Influencing Consumer Behavior

The mall's tenant mix, service amenities, and ambiance significantly affect consumer preferences. Szymańska and Płaziak (2018) highlight that malls offering diverse stores, especially fashion outlets and anchor tenants, attract significant patronage. Functional amenities (parking, ATMs) and a comfortable ambiance enhance convenience and comfort, significantly boosting consumer satisfaction (Černíkováítě, 2021). Promotional activities, including seasonal sales and entertainment events, further increase consumer engagement and the mall's attractiveness (ShopFully and Offerista Group, 2024).

Social and Experiential Aspects of Mall Usage

Beyond shopping, malls in CEE countries function as social hubs or "third places" for leisure activities and social interactions. Research from the Czech Republic by Kunc et al. (2024) demonstrates the transformation of malls into entertainment spaces, with facilities like cinemas, bowling alleys, and eateries attracting diverse visitor segments. Malls provide young people and families venues for gathering and social engagement, significantly influencing consumer loyalty and visitation frequency (Križan, et al., 2018).

Generational and Demographic Differences

Mall behavior varies notably by demographics. Younger consumers integrate malls seamlessly into their lifestyles, viewing them as social spaces. In contrast, older demographics initially demonstrate more reserved behaviors but may become more receptive with familiarity (Križan, et al., 2018). Gender also plays a critical role; female shoppers typically prioritize hedonic shopping experiences and leisure amenities, whereas male consumers display more utilitarian, task-oriented mall visits (Yilmaz & Koçoğlu, 2018). Recognizing these demographic distinctions allows malls to tailor targeted amenities and marketing strategies.

Influence of Digital Touchpoints and Online–Offline Integration

The growing prominence of digital touchpoints profoundly shapes consumer mall behaviors in CEE. Consumers routinely integrate online research with offline purchasing (ROPO), demanding seamless omnichannel retail experiences (Pantano, et al., 2020). Popa et al. (2019) highlight a generational divide, with younger shoppers readily embracing digital technologies such as mobile apps and click-and-collect services. Zielke et al. (2023) reveal regional variations; for instance, Polish consumers exhibited quicker adoption of digital channels than their German counterparts post-pandemic, influenced by historical retail contexts. Thus, successful malls increasingly merge digital and physical experiences, adapting to consumer expectations for seamless omnichannel interaction.

Recent literature highlights that CEE shopping malls are multifaceted consumer ecosystems catering to both practical and experiential needs. The success of malls hinges on offering diverse retail and leisure options, understanding demographic-specific motivations, and embracing integrated digital solutions. This approach not only maintains the relevance of malls amidst retail evolution but also enhances their role as central communal and leisure destinations.

3. Methodology

Study Design

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design, employing focus groups complemented by in-depth interviews. Qualitative methods effectively capture the motivations, perceptions, and social dynamics of consumer behavior that quantitative methods often overlook (Creswell, 2013; Malhotra, 2010). Focus groups were specifically selected to facilitate interactive discussions, allowing participants to express their shopping experiences in their own words and build upon each other's insights (Morgan, 1996). This approach is well-established within consumer research as valuable for exploring consumer behaviors and experiences (Baker & Haytko, 2000).

Participants and Data Collection

Participants included young consumers aged 16–30 who frequently visit shopping malls. Five focus groups, each containing 6–8 participants, ensured an optimal size for dynamic interaction and inclusive participation (Krueger & Casey, 2015). To promote openness, groups were formed with age-related homogeneity to ensure comfort and rapport (Morgan, 1997). Sessions, lasting 60–90 minutes each, took place in a neutral location near a shopping mall to maintain objectivity. Discussions were moderated with a semi-structured guide addressing motivations, peer influences, and attitudes toward mall environments. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and accompanied by field notes on group dynamics and non-verbal cues.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive, non-probability sampling approach was used to recruit relevant and information-rich participants (Patton, 2002). Eligibility required participants to be frequent mall visitors aged 16–30. Recruitment involved mall intercepts, flyers, and social media outreach, specifically targeting youths from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, achieving depth rather than statistical representativeness (Malhotra, 2010). A total of 30 participants (15 males, 15 females) provided sufficient data for thematic saturation, identified when repeated patterns emerged without new significant insights after multiple groups (Guest, et al., 2017; Boddy, 2005). By the fourth session, core themes stabilized, confirmed by one additional session, ensuring robust comparative analysis and confidence in thematic generalizability (Guest, et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis guided data interpretation, following established qualitative research standards (Spiggle, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive coding process was adopted to preserve participants' perspectives, facilitated by NVivo software. Analysts conducted iterative cycles of data familiarization, coding, theme identification, and refinement, employing constant comparative analysis to ensure accurate theme representation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Thomas, 2006). Themes underwent rigorous verification against original transcripts to confirm coherence and distinctiveness, with analyst triangulation utilized to minimize interpretative bias (Patton, 2002; Miles, et al., 2014). Representative quotations grounded findings directly in participants' narratives.

Research Ethics

Ethical approval was secured prior to the commencement of the study, ensuring adherence to standards for human participant research, particularly concerning minors. Informed consent, including parental consent for minors, clearly

communicated the voluntary nature of participation and the protections of confidentiality. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant identifiers and carefully redacting potentially identifiable details. Group confidentiality agreements were emphasized to manage shared disclosures effectively (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

Discussions were designed to minimize discomfort, focusing on everyday consumer experiences while avoiding sensitive topics. Participants had the opportunity for debriefing and the option to withdraw their data after the discussion, reinforcing their autonomy (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The secure storage of data on password-protected devices and anonymous reporting ensured participant privacy and ethical compliance throughout the research.

4. Results

This section offers qualitative insights from visitors to The Mall, organized around five primary themes: (1) Reasons for Visiting, (2) Consumer Behavior and Store Preferences, (3) Events and Activities, (4) Interaction with Online and Social Media, and (5) Suggestions for Improvement. Key patterns are contextualized within existing literature and supported by illustrative participant quotations.

Reasons for Visiting the Mall

Participants described visiting the mall for various reasons, ranging from practical shopping tasks to leisure and enjoyment. Convenience and the appeal of a “one-stop shopping” experience emerged consistently, as visitors valued having multiple stores and services available under one roof. One participant remarked, “I come here because it’s convenient to find everything I need in one place—groceries, clothes, pharmacy—you name it” (Participant 4, female, 29). This supports established notions that functional benefits such as accessibility and store variety strongly motivate mall visitation.

However, shopping was often combined with leisure and social activities. Many visitors explicitly noted that they visit the mall not only to purchase products but also to socialize and unwind. For instance, a young adult explained, “Sometimes I don’t plan to buy anything serious; the mall is just a nice place to hang out with friends or grab a coffee” (FG1, male, 21). This indicates a blend of utilitarian and hedonic motivations, confirming prior findings that malls increasingly fulfill social and recreational roles alongside traditional shopping functions.

Socializing was indeed a major aspect of mall visits, with the mall perceived as a default meeting place for various age groups. Participants commonly described visiting simply to meet friends, stroll, or enjoy leisure activities like dining or cinema-going, consistent with literature depicting malls as “third places”—comfortable, neutral venues ideal for casual interactions (Bloch, et al., 1994; Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). Such visits often involved minimal purchases but substantial social engagement.

The mall’s atmosphere and entertainment offerings significantly enhanced its appeal for visitors. Participants repeatedly cited attractions such as cinemas, food courts, gaming areas, and the overall ambiance—pleasant décor, music, and climate control—as reasons they preferred spending time at the mall over other venues. Thus, the mall emerges as a multifunctional leisure destination where entertainment complements retail, resonating with contemporary research underscoring that modern malls must blend commercial and experiential components (Bloch, et al., 1994; Terblanché, 1999).

Consumer Behavior and Store Preferences

Participants reported diverse patterns of mall usage, typically visiting a few times per month, with some visiting more frequently due to proximity or routine. Most visits lasted between one to two hours, although longer stays occurred during weekends or family outings, aligning closely with quantitative data from other mall contexts (Çavka, 2023). Regular visitors often described established routines or habitual store visits. One participant shared a typical route: "First, I hit the hypermarket, then the tech store for gadgets, and if I have time, maybe a clothing store" (FG2, male, 28). Such routines reflect habitual behaviors and store loyalty, facilitated by the mall's comprehensive tenant mix.

Store preferences notably varied across demographics. Younger visitors predominantly favored international fashion retailers like H&M and Zara, citing them as regular destinations for browsing the latest styles. Older or family-oriented visitors showed a greater preference for specialty or local stores, seeking quality and uniqueness rather than merely trends. Cross-shopping was common due to complementary mall facilities, such as cinemas and food courts, which drove visitors to explore additional stores beyond their initial purpose.

Participants identified several factors influencing their store choices, notably product variety, promotional activities, store atmosphere, and customer service quality. Sales promotions emerged prominently as motivators for visiting specific stores, as one shopper emphasized, "The Mall often has season-end sales that draw me in" (Participant 6, female, 25). Attractive store environments also increased browsing duration, aligning with literature suggesting that appealing retail atmospheres contribute significantly to customer engagement (Calvo-Porrà & Lévy-Mangin, 2018).

Furthermore, shoppers described a balanced mix of planned and impulsive shopping behaviors. While some visits started with defined shopping objectives, in-store displays or promotions often led to spontaneous additional purchases. These unplanned buys were generally framed positively, emphasizing the enjoyable aspect of mall shopping rather than reflecting negatively on impulse buying.

Events and Activities in the Mall

Participants strongly emphasized the positive impact of events and activities organized at the mall. Seasonal festivities, cultural fairs, concerts, and family-oriented activities significantly enhanced the overall visitor experience. One participant recalled fondly, "Last December, the Christmas village with beautiful decorations made the mall feel magical" (FG1, female, 28). Events were commonly cited as primary reasons for visits, increasing overall attendance and dwell time, corroborating studies indicating that in-mall events significantly elevate visitor satisfaction (Sit, et al., 2003; El-Adly, 2007).

Importantly, events also served as catalysts for community building and social interaction. Visitors described attending events not merely for entertainment but also to meet friends or engage with community members, thereby reinforcing interpersonal bonds. Even those less actively participating in events appreciated the vibrant atmosphere created by these gatherings, underscoring the mall's social dimension and perceived quality (Gilboa, et al., 2016; Wu & Lo, 2018).

Preferred event types included seasonal and holiday-themed activities, cultural exhibitions, and interactive experiences such as gaming tournaments or virtual reality demonstrations. These events proved particularly effective in attracting younger visitors. Although some noted occasional downsides like crowding, the

overall sentiment toward the events was highly positive, reinforcing the mall's position as a leisure and community destination.

Interaction with Online Media and Social Media

Participants regularly engaged with the mall through online channels, particularly social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Most utilized these platforms to stay informed about promotions, events, and new store openings, effectively treating social media as an extension of their mall experience (Verhoef, et al., 2015). These digital interactions significantly influenced visitation decisions; promotional posts often directly resulted in visits.

However, participants also noted occasional negative reactions to excessive promotional content; however, this did not significantly reduce overall engagement. Online interaction typically supplemented rather than replaced physical mall visits, consistent with research highlighting digital channels as complementary drivers of physical retail traffic.

Additionally, visitors actively contributed their own mall-related content online by posting reviews and sharing experiences, which generated positive word-of-mouth. The responsiveness of mall staff via social media further enhanced customer satisfaction, reflecting effective two-way digital communication strategies.

Participants expressed interest in expanding digital initiatives, particularly suggesting a dedicated mall app that includes real-time promotions, interactive navigation, and loyalty programs. These ideas reflect broader consumer expectations for integrated digital experiences in physical retail contexts.

Suggestions and Future Initiatives

Participants provided numerous suggestions to enhance the mall experience, reflecting both practical concerns and strategic considerations. Many emphasized increasing comfort through more seating, improved ventilation, and expanded restroom facilities, particularly during busy periods.

Visitors suggested introducing more international brands and pop-up retail spaces to keep the experience fresh and novel. Recommendations for dining options included healthier food choices and utilizing adjacent outdoor spaces for dining, aligning with contemporary global retail trends toward dynamic tenant mixes.

Events were particularly emphasized, with recommendations to increase the frequency and diversity of cultural events, educational workshops, live performances, and family-oriented programs. Participants also encouraged greater community engagement initiatives, such as charity events, viewing the mall as a potential catalyst for local social contributions.

Technological integration emerged as another key suggestion, with visitors advocating for advanced digital tools such as interactive mall apps, augmented reality features, and enhanced online interactivity through social media campaigns. Participants expressed enthusiasm for digital innovations that could streamline and enhance their mall experiences.

Finally, suggestions also emphasized sustainability and accessibility, proposing eco-friendly measures like recycling programs, solar power installations, and electric vehicle charging stations. Enhanced accessibility features, such as automated doors and improved public transportation, were also mentioned, indicating a broader vision of the mall's integration into the local urban fabric.

In summary, qualitative findings reveal that The Mall plays a multifaceted role in visitors' lives, satisfying utilitarian needs while significantly fulfilling social, recreational, and community functions. Visitor behavior and preferences reflect a

dynamic interaction between shopping, socializing, and entertainment, supported by a favorable tenant mix and active event programming. Interaction through digital channels further strengthens engagement, demonstrating effective integration of online and offline experiences.

Participants' constructive suggestions highlight pathways for enhancing visitor satisfaction, including experiential retail improvements, technological innovations, sustainability, and community involvement. These insights underscore the mall's importance as both a commercial and social hub, informing strategic opportunities for ongoing development and strengthening its role within the local community.

5. Discussion

This qualitative study enhances understanding of consumer experiences at The Mall in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, illustrating how Central and Eastern European youth perceive and engage with retail environments. The analysis revealed five central themes: shopping behavior and preferences, mall atmosphere, events and entertainment, digital engagement, and suggestions for improvement, collectively highlighting the mall's multifaceted role as both a commercial and social space.

Shopping behavior analysis indicated that consumers value the mall's extensive variety of stores, brands, and promotional activities, emphasizing convenience and diversity. Young visitors frequented the mall not only for purchasing goods but also for social interactions, reflecting a combination of hedonic and utilitarian motivations consistent with literature on mall patronage (Bloch, et al., 1994; Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). Age differences emerged distinctly: the younger group (16–24) showed enthusiasm for spontaneous browsing and trendy brands, whereas older youth (25–30) prioritized quality and convenience. Gender-specific preferences were also evident, with females leaning towards fashion and beauty and males favoring electronics and sports goods, reinforcing prior studies on demographic nuances (Yilmaz & Koçoğlu, 2018). These insights underscore the necessity for personalized marketing and targeted promotions, aligning with contemporary strategies that utilize data analytics for consumer segmentation.

The importance of mall atmosphere surfaced prominently, with participants appreciating the mall's modern decor, dynamic environment, and comfort-enhancing features like seating and food courts. Nevertheless, respondents highlighted areas for improvement, including expanded relaxation spaces, cleanliness maintenance, and optimized crowd management. Females particularly emphasized aesthetics, while males focused on practical aspects like navigation and parking, reflecting established gender differences in mall expectations (Calvo-Porrall & Lévy-Mangin, 2018). Improving spatial and atmospheric elements could significantly enhance visitor satisfaction and encourage longer visits, echoing global trends toward experiential retail environments.

Events and entertainment significantly shaped perceptions, positioning the mall as an engaging social venue. Participants appreciated events like seasonal festivals and cinema offerings but desired greater diversity, including concerts, fashion shows, gaming competitions, and cultural activities. Notably, younger consumers preferred interactive and trendy events, while older youth suggested more family-oriented and educational workshops, underscoring diverse event preferences among demographic groups. Incorporating a wider range of activities aligns with experiential retail literature, suggesting that malls offering varied entertainment foster stronger consumer loyalty (El-Adly, 2007; Gilboa, et al., 2016).

Digital engagement emerged as crucial, with social media heavily influencing mall visitation. Participants actively used platforms like Facebook and Instagram to stay informed about mall activities, significantly impacting their visit decisions. Younger participants frequently interacted with digital content, while older youth primarily used social media for informational purposes, reflecting generational differences in digital engagement (Verhoef, et al., 2015). These findings support strategic omnichannel marketing, promoting the integration of online and offline consumer experiences.

Suggestions for improvement focused notably on sustainability and service quality. Participants urged practical sustainability actions, such as enhanced recycling, reduced plastic use, and energy-efficient practices, reflecting broader generational shifts towards environmental consciousness (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018). Service enhancements, including staff training, improved informational services, extended mall hours, and upgraded amenities, were widely recommended, aligning with global best practices in customer experience optimization.

6. Practical Implications

Building on the discussion above, several actionable recommendations can be made for shopping mall management, particularly in Central and Eastern European contexts:

1. *Segmentation and Personalized Marketing*: The variety in shopping preferences and the need for tailored engagement indicate that marketing strategies must evolve to be more data-driven and segmented. Mall management can introduce personalized marketing campaigns—leveraging mobile app or loyalty program data to offer customized deals, birthday rewards, or event invitations aimed at various age groups and interest categories. This kind of personalization (for instance, showcasing fashion discounts to younger female shoppers or notifying tech enthusiasts about a gadget expo) can help consumers feel acknowledged as unique individuals and increase their responsiveness to promotions.

2. *Optimize Atmosphere and Space*: The significant effect of atmosphere on visitor satisfaction suggests that optimizing spatial elements is crucial. Management should consistently assess and enhance the mall's environment: ensuring a desirable mix of tenants and a store layout that aligns with current trends, improving comfort with sufficient seating, maintaining cleanliness, and potentially incorporating natural features (like indoor plants or design elements inspired by the nearby park). Even minor changes, such as thoughtfully selected music playlists or local art that connects with youth culture, can enhance the sense of place and belonging for younger visitors.

3. *Diversify Events and Experiences*: The enthusiasm for events and entertainment highlights the necessity for ongoing event diversification. By offering a rich calendar of activities—mixing large-scale events (concerts, festivals, major sales) with niche-interest meet-ups (such as book clubs, hobbyist gatherings, or student talent showcases)—the mall can continuously attract diverse segments of the population and keep the experience fresh. There are opportunities to partner with student organizations, local artists, or businesses to co-create events that resonate with the community. Emphasizing interactive and participatory events (like workshops or gaming competitions) can particularly engage younger audiences.

4. *Deepen Digital Engagement (Omnichannel Strategy)*: Given the pivotal role of social media and online engagement in these consumers' lives, digital integration

should be strengthened. This involves maintaining active social media profiles with engaging content and two-way interaction (promptly responding to inquiries and feedback), as well as developing integrated online-to-offline experiences. For example, the mall could enable online followers to vote on upcoming event themes or new store merchandise, which are then implemented in the mall – creating a seamless “phygital” experience where online interactions enhance the in-mall visit. Implementing a dedicated mall app or interactive digital features (maps, indoor navigation, real-time promotions) can also enhance engagement and convenience for tech-savvy shoppers.

5. *Sustainability Initiatives*: The prominence of sustainability in the findings implies that green initiatives should take center stage in the mall’s strategic plan. Mall management could implement visible environmental programs – for instance, installing recycling stations next to trash bins, introducing energy-saving measures (LED lighting, solar panels), and encouraging eco-friendly practices among tenants (reducing plastic use, offering sustainable product lines). Effectively communicating these efforts (through signage in the mall and posts online) will meet young consumers’ expectations and distinguish the mall in an increasingly eco-conscious market. In the long term, pursuing certifications for green building or sustainability could further enhance the mall’s reputation as a responsible community actor.

6. *Service Quality and Amenities*: Continuous improvement in service is crucial for sustaining customer satisfaction. Management should prioritize staff training and development to guarantee that every interaction—from security staff to retail associates—offers polite and helpful assistance. Front-line employees are vital in influencing perceptions of safety and friendliness, which participants indicated as significant. Furthermore, enhancing amenities will cater to the practical needs identified by visitors. This can involve increasing the number of information kiosks or digital directories, offering storage solutions for shoppers, extending free Wi-Fi access, and installing charging stations in seating areas. Maintaining facilities such as restrooms and parking lots—ensuring they are clean, well-lit, and adequately sized for busy periods (along with strategies for managing crowds during major events)—will further improve the overall visitor experience.

By acting on these implications, The Mall and similar shopping centers can enhance their value proposition toward a more customer-centric, experience-oriented model that utilizes personalization, experiential design, community engagement, digital integration, and sustainable practices. These strategies align with global retail trends and can help malls stay competitive against both other physical shopping venues and the growing convenience of e-commerce. Implementing such improvements not only addresses current consumer feedback but also builds resilience for the future, fostering loyalty and positive word-of-mouth among the next generation of shoppers.

7. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into consumer behavior at a CEE shopping mall, it has limitations. First, the research focused primarily on one mall (The Mall in Cluj-Napoca) and a predominantly youth demographic, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Consumer attitudes and behaviors can differ between various malls, cities, or countries in Central and Eastern Europe. For instance, malls in capital cities or other countries might attract a more diverse age range or exhibit different cultural influences. Future research could extend this work

by conducting comparative studies across multiple malls or regions—examining, for example, whether similar themes arise in malls located in other CEE countries or in smaller towns versus large urban centers. Such comparisons would help determine which insights are broadly applicable and which are context-specific.

Second, our sample was intentionally skewed toward young consumers (16–30), with only a few older participants included through individual interviews. Consequently, the study's findings particularly reflect the youth and young adult experience. Older adults and seniors, who constitute a significant segment of mall visitors in many contexts, may exhibit different patterns and preferences (as suggested by the literature on generational differences). Future research should incorporate a more balanced age distribution or focus specifically on older consumers to examine their mall behaviors, needs, and challenges in Central/Eastern Europe. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of mall usage across the lifespan and could inform strategies to make malls inclusive and appealing to all age groups.

Another limitation relates to the qualitative nature of the research. While focus groups and interviews yielded in-depth narratives and allowed us to capture the “why” behind behaviors, the findings are based on subjective self-reports from a relatively small sample. We cannot quantify the prevalence of certain behaviors or preferences in the broader population of mall-goers. Future studies might use a mixed-methods approach, where qualitative insights guide the development of a survey instrument that can be administered to a larger sample of mall consumers. A quantitative follow-up (for example, a survey across multiple malls) could test the prominence of the identified themes or measure relationships (such as the link between social media engagement and visit frequency) with statistical rigor.

Additionally, the study was cross-sectional, capturing consumer perspectives at a single point in time. Shopping mall dynamics are evolving, especially in the post-pandemic retail landscape and amid the ongoing digital transformation. Longitudinal research could examine how consumer behavior in malls changes over time—for instance, tracking whether the growing emphasis on sustainability translates into observable changes in mall operations and customer satisfaction, or how the adoption of new technologies (like a mall app or AR experiences) affects engagement metrics over the years. It would also be interesting to monitor whether the needs and preferences of the current youth cohort remain consistent as they age (suggesting cohort effects) or shift (indicating life-stage effects).

Another potential avenue for future research is to delve deeper into cross-cultural comparisons. Central and Eastern Europe has diverse markets; comparing consumer behavior in CEE malls with that in Western European malls could highlight unique regional traits and universal mall phenomena. Similarly, exploring how local cultural contexts (e.g., post-socialist urban development, community norms) interact with global retail trends would enrich the understanding of malls as hybrid commercial-social spaces.

Lastly, future studies could incorporate observational methods or analytics data to complement self-reported behavior. For example, observing actual foot traffic patterns during events compared to normal days, or analyzing social media engagement metrics for the mall's pages, might provide objective evidence to support or contrast with participants' perceptions. Integrating such data can strengthen conclusions and provide practical metrics for mall management to monitor.

In summary, while our research provides valuable qualitative insights into mall consumer behavior in a Central/Eastern European context, expanding the scope in terms of geography, demographics, and methods will be essential to build on these findings. Addressing these limitations in future research will not only validate and refine the themes identified here but also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of shopping malls in the region.

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