

Factors Influencing Consumer Value and Attractiveness in Physical Shopping Centers: Evidence from the Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

The shift towards digital retail platforms has significantly impacted physical shopping centers, leading to a phenomenon often referred to as the "retail apocalypse." Despite this trend, physical shopping centers continue to offer unique value through customer experiences that digital platforms struggle to replicate. This study investigates the factors affecting customer value and attractiveness in physical shopping centers in the Western Cape, South Africa. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological research design by conducting in-depth interviews with nine participants before the point of saturation was reached, this study explores how factors such as aesthetics, design, tenant mix, customer service, and safety and security contribute to the attractiveness of these centers. The findings reveal that shopping centers offer unparalleled value through immersive experiences, highlighting the importance of value pricing, immediate delivery, social interaction, and relaxation in fostering customer loyalty and engagement. In addition, the study identified key factors that participants found to be unattractive physical shopping centers, including large crowds, rude employees, unhygienic bathroom facilities, and parking fees. These findings offer valuable insights for shopping center managers and marketers in enhancing customer experiences and addressing deterrents to foster greater customer retention.

Keywords: Physical shopping centers, customer value, shopping experience, qualitative research.

JEL classification: M31, L81, D12.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the global retail landscape has experienced a considerable shift in both operations and functionality. Retailers have notably expanded their range of products and delivery methods, increasingly leveraging technology, particularly through digital platforms (Cantrell et al., 2020). At the heart of these industry-wide transformations lies the rapid advancement of technology (Rossolov et al., 2021). In recent years, both scholars and industry professionals have voiced growing concerns about the possible decline of traditional shopping centers—a trend commonly referred to as the "retail apocalypse" (Lee et al., 2022). While online retail has flourished, traditional shopping centers have seen the opposite trend (Lee et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, despite the significant changes within the retail environment, physical shopping centers remain crucial in consumer engagement and commerce (Križan et al., 2014). Even though e-commerce has expanded rapidly in specific regions, Makhita et al. (2019) contend that physical shopping centers still play a vital role in influencing consumer behaviors. Therefore, for both retailers and urban planners, understanding the value and appeal that shopping malls hold for consumers is crucial. These insights are essential for developing shopping centers that drive economic growth and enhance customer satisfaction (Teller et al., 2008).

Consumers' preferences to shop in physical shopping centers are mainly driven by the distinct advantages offered through in-person shopping. These benefits relate directly to social and experiential benefits such as social contact, examining products through touch, and the atmosphere within a shopping center (Ntlhe, 2023). Furthermore, elements such as availability of products, convenience of acquiring products, and the wide selection of retail options available within physical shopping centers plays an important role in the sustainability of physical shopping centers in the retail landscape (Ikadeh and Cloete, 2020). Additionally, the design and layout of a shopping center, quality of customer service, and other features and facilities provided to consumers at the shopping center largely shape their shopping experience, thereby cultivating customer loyalty in a retail environment that constantly competes with online retailers. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that influence customer value, as well as the appeal of physical shopping centers in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The Western Cape boasts a diverse population and offers a vibrant retail sector. As such, this province provides the ideal physical retail spaces to examine consumer behavior. The findings of the research will assist physical shopping centers to identify strategies to enhance consumers' shopping experiences to increase foot traffic and build customer loyalty, to stay competitive in the retail realm.

1. Literature review

1.1 The retail apocalypse phenomenon

The retail apocalypse phenomenon has gained increased attention over the past years, particularly about the extensive closure of brick-and-mortar stores across the United States and Europe. The extensive closure of physical retail spaces implies a large scale transformation which will directly impact local communities (Helm et al., 2020). This trend is largely attributed to the rise of e-commerce and changes in consumer behavior. This phenomenon has sparked significant discussion among scholars, who have explored its broader implications for the retail sector and the potential impact on shopping centers (Hagberg et al., 2016). However, research indicates that the retail apocalypse isn't solely a result of the growth of online shopping. Other contributing factors include the over-saturation of retail spaces, shifting consumer preferences, and various economic fluctuations (Helm et al., 2020).

Many shopping centers have found it challenging to meet the evolving demands of consumers, who increasingly value convenience and unique, experiential offerings over traditional in-store shopping experiences (González and Waley, 2013). In response to these challenges, El-Adly (2019) highlights how the retail apocalypse has compelled retailers to innovate and reassess their value propositions. This has led to the transformation of shopping centers into experiential destinations that offer far more than just retail transactions. In South Africa specifically, retailers in physical shopping centers are increasingly incorporating leisure and entertainment features in their in-store offerings, to increase the number of consumers visiting their stores. This is done despite the fact that retailers in physical shopping centers are facing global challenges unique to the retail industry (Mason et al., 2019).

1.2 Physical shopping centers and customer value

Physical shopping centers are providing a unique experience to consumers that surpasses simple transactions, which hold a significant appeal to consumers (Dennis et al., 2010). Utilitarian value is considered a key aspect of enhancing in-store shopping experiences as it includes practical benefits such as convenience in acquiring products, as well as the opportunity to physically touch and feel products before committing to making a purchase. This plays a particularly significant role in the case where a consumer prefers to assess product quality as

part of the purchasing process (Babin et al., 1994). This is confirmed by research conducted by Zhang et al (2022) who found that more retailers are placing emphasis on providing their customers with multisensory experiences in their physical stores to increase and enhance customer value. Furthermore, consumers often view physical shopping centers as the ideal place to find competitive prices and special promotions for products. As such, the economic value offered by shopping centers increase consumers' overall satisfaction with their shopping experience (Lloyd et al., 2014). The convenience of acquiring products that consumers need immediately is viewed as an additional advantage of physical shopping centers. Consumers' desire for immediate gratification is instantly satisfied with obtaining their purchases instantly, compared to having to wait for delivery as is the case with online shopping (Jones et al., 2006). Another unique benefit of the social value of physical shopping centers is the fact that it serves as collective spaces for individuals to meet, socialize with friends, and engage in a variety of amenities offered by the centers (El-Adly and Eid, 2017). As such, the social value derived from shopping in these centers provides a relaxing ambience with a sense of escaping reality, ultimately making consumers' shopping experience more enjoyable (Bäckström and Johansson, 2017).

1.3 Attractiveness of physical shopping centers

The appeal of physical shopping centers is essential in enhancing customer experiences and attracting visitors (Ortegón-Cortázar and Royo-Vela, 2017). The aesthetic qualities of these spaces are particularly influential, as visually pleasing environments create positive first impressions, making the shopping experience more enjoyable and encouraging shoppers to spend more time (Jang et al., 2018). Equally significant is the thoughtful design and layout of shopping centers, which greatly affect how easily customers can navigate the space, contributing to a more convenient and satisfying shopping experience. Well-planned layouts are often linked to higher customer satisfaction (Krasonikolakis et al., 2018).

Another critical factor is the tenant mix, as a diverse selection of stores and services caters to a broad range of consumer needs, offering everything from everyday essentials to luxury goods under one roof (Zhang et al., 2020). Additionally, another factor that significantly impacts consumers' shopping experience is the ability to offer high-quality customer service. Here, the aim is to ensure that consumers' needs and wants are satisfied efficiently, in order to indirectly enhance the overall attraction of physical shopping centers (Tomašević et al., 2020). Lastly, the safety and security of consumers at physical shopping centers is crucial. Consumers are more likely to return to these centers if they feel safe while they browse and experience a sense of effective security measures to ensure their safety and overall well-being (Badiora and Odufuwa, 2019).

1.4 Physical shopping centers in the South African landscape

Physical shopping centers remain a critical cornerstone to the retail landscape in South Africa (Van Niekerk and Cloete, 2020). Many South African consumers continue to profoundly value the tangible encounters in combination with the social value offered by physical shopping centers, despite the global shift of consumers to shop online (Mason et al., 2019). As such, physical shopping centers are designed to seamlessly integrate and address a comprehensive range of consumer retail needs to create a multifunctional environment to a diverse consumer market (Van Niekerk and Cloete, 2020).

Although the integration of technological features to enhance consumer engagement and satisfaction (such as mobile payment systems and digital marketing tools) are increasingly adopted by South African shopping centers, the industry continues to face significant

challenges (i.e. economic volatility and rising operational costs) prompting retailers to redesign current business models to ensure competitiveness (Masebe et al., 2020).

Despite these hurdles, South African shopping centers are evolving to meet changing consumer expectations, ensuring they remain a vital part of the retail sector (Mason et al., 2019).

2. Research methodology

To realize the objectives of the study, qualitative research was conducted and guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which is deemed suitable for exploring complex human experiences and perceptions in consumer behavior research (Creswell, 2013). An inductive phenomenological approach was adopted to deepen the understanding of customers' lived experiences regarding shopping centers. The methodology considers the personal and emotional characteristics of shopping experiences and is supportive of rich insights into the factors creating customer value and attractiveness (Hirsch, 2015).

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used for this study. Only those participants older than 18 years, who visited a physical shopping center in the Western Cape province of South Africa in the last six months were approached for participation in the study. The Western Cape province formed the context of this study because of its balanced demographic profile and because it is one of the major retail centers in South Africa (Bell, 2020). Participants were recruited by posting an invitation to the study on Facebook pages of large regional shopping centers, ensuring the participants from different demographic profiles were included (Babin and Zikmund, 2016).

In-depth interviews were conducted with nine participants who were selected to ensure that more insight into their shopping experiences and value perception of physical shopping centers was attained. It allowed the researchers to gain a deeper and holistic understanding of the participants' perspectives. The interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams and Zoom to make it easy and accessible for the participants (Mishra and Alok, 2015).

Thematic analysis was conducted, which is a systematic approach for qualitative research with respect to coding and theme identification. Major themes and categories about perceptions of value among customers and the attractiveness of physical shopping centers were discovered, allowing researchers to gain new insights into how customer satisfaction and loyalty can be enhanced in such establishments. To further guarantee trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation were applied. This included inviting participants to scan transcriptions of the study to check for accuracy and utilize multiple sources of data to corroborate findings (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Ethical guidelines were adhered to when conducting the study by obtaining informed consent from each participant prior to conducting the interviews, allowing participants to be fully informed about the purposes and procedure of the study. The participants were informed that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and that their anonymity and confidentiality of the information provided is ensured. In addition, the study was approved by the appropriate institutional ethics committee of the university and hence adheres to the universally accepted ethical principles for research involving human subjects.

3. Results and discussion

Through a comprehensive analysis of participant interviews, three major themes emerged as central to understanding these factors: Value Derived from Physical Shopping Centers, Attractiveness of Physical Shopping Centers, and Unattractiveness of Physical Shopping Centers. Results indicate how these themes comprise several factors that contribute to the value derived by participants when shopping at a physical shopping center, as well as factors that

make physical shopping centers attractive or unattractive to participants. Subsequently, these themes are examined in greater depth and offer insights into how they impact perceived value and attractiveness within physical shopping environments.

3.1 Theme 1: Value derived from physical shopping centers

The study identified several key factors that participants find of significant value when shopping at physical shopping centers. These factors are discussed in more detail subsequently.

Utilitarian Value

The results of the study show that many participants enjoy touching and feeling products when visiting a physical shopping center. Some of the participants like the variety of stores and products that are offered at a physical shopping center. A few of the participants expressed that they enjoyed window shopping when at a shopping center. While a handful of participants indicated that they derived value from being able to fit clothing items when they frequented a physical shopping center. A small number of participants mentioned that they were able to see the latest trends when they were at a shopping center.

Participant 2 noted: *"Especially with clothes, I prefer going to the store and seeing it because I feel like I would get my money's worth if I see it and try it on at the store"*. Participant 8 said: *"I value seeing the quality and, you know, touching the product"*.

Recent studies support this assertion, indicating that physical interaction with products positively influences the confidence of customers in their purchase decisions (Heller et al., 2019). However, other studies argue that the uniqueness in value proposition posed by the ability to touch and feel products in physical shopping centers is decreasing with the advent of new technology and innovations in artificial intelligence on online shopping platforms (Hilken et al., 2017).

Economic Value

The results of the study indicate that most of the participants expressed that they feel they have spent their money well after visiting a physical shopping center. Some of the participants indicated that there were more specials at a shopping center as opposed to online stores. A few participants felt that physical shopping centers offer cheaper prices than online stores.

Participant 5 noted that: *"Prices online are most definitely hyper inflated. I don't know the reason behind that. There is also a delivery fee on top of the hyper inflated prices"*. Participant 7 said: *"I get more value for money if I shop at a physical shopping center"*.

This finding corresponds to a study conducted by Oghazi et al. (2018) wherein the findings showed that price perception and the likelihood of being able to compare prices in different stores are strong drivers of customer preference regarding physical shopping centers. However, since online retailers are now more engaged in competitive pricing strategies and online discounts, this economic advantage of the physical retail environment may be short-lived, as found by Hagberg et al. (2016) in their study.

Immediate Delivery

The findings of the study indicate that most participants appreciate that they are able to buy for and receive their products instantly and that there is no waiting period. Some of the participants expressed that they received efficient customer service when visiting a physical shopping center, allowing them to shop and take delivery of their purchases much faster than when opting to shop online.

Participant 1 said: *“When I go to a shopping center, I get to take what I see and pay for it, after which I leave with it in my hands”*. Participant 7 echoed this sentiment by stating: *“One annoying thing about shopping online is having to wait”*.

This finding is supported by Akram et al. (2018) who emphasize that the immediate gratification associated with shopping in physical shopping centers leads to customer satisfaction. However, with the advent of same-day delivery options, the gap may finally start to close, at least for the advantage that physical stores seem to hold over online shopping platforms (Hübner et al., 2016).

Social Value

The findings of the study show that participants who visit a physical shopping center derive much value in their ability to converse and interact with fellow customers and staff.

Participant 4 said: *“For me, it’s more about the personal interactions with not only staff, but also other customers”*. Participant 8 said: *“Sometimes you go shopping to meet other customers, and you just talk about this or that”*.

This finding is further supported by El Hedhli et al. (2016) who identified social interaction as a primary motive for shopping in physical stores. However, with the integration of more social features in online shopping platforms, such as customer reviews and live chats, the social value of online shopping is also becoming more significant and may challenge the dominance of physical stores in this regard (Pizzi et al., 2021).

Relaxation

The results of the study show that most participants find frequenting physical shopping centers a relaxing and therapeutic experience. Some participants shop at a physical shopping center to escape the routine of everyday life.

Participant 1 said: *“I find it therapeutic”*. Participant 2 added: *“If I need to relax, I would go to the mall to do that”*. Participant 5 said: *“It’s more like some sort of dopamine when I shop”*.

This finding aligns with the results of a study conducted by Cao et al. (2018) who found that the retail environment can have significant impact on customers moods and levels of stress, often having a calming or rejuvenating effect. Other studies, however, argue that stress created through crowds, challenges with parking, and long queues related to the physical retail environment, can offset this perceived relaxation effect, suggesting a more nuanced view of the shopping experience (Baker & Wakefield, 2012).

3.2 Theme 2: Attractiveness of physical shopping centers

The attractiveness of shopping centers was found to be influenced by several factors, including aesthetic appeal, design and layout, tenant mix, customer service, and safety and security.

Aesthetic Appeal

The results of the study show that many participants are attracted to the aesthetics of physical shopping centers. Most participants are attracted to the decorations and displays at a shopping center. Some of the participants are attracted to the entertainment offered at shopping centers. A few of the participants are attracted to festive decorations when visiting a physical shopping center. A small number of participants are attracted to the tidiness of a shopping center.

Participant 5 said: *“The aesthetics of a mall in general makes me want to go there”*.

A study conducted by Pantano and Gandini (2017) emphasized that a pleasant and visually appealing store environment significantly enhances customer satisfaction. In addition, Turley and Milliman (2000) identified store aesthetics as a key element of the retail atmosphere that influences customer behavior.

Design and Layout

The findings of the study indicate that a majority of the participants find the cleanliness of a shopping center an attractive quality. Some of the participants expressed that the addition of drinking stations/fountains would add an attractive element to shopping centers. Some of the participants mentioned that the layout of a shopping center enhances the attractiveness of a shopping center. A few participants expressed that an addition of more seating would improve the attractiveness of a shopping center. A small number of participants mentioned that a convenient location is an attractive quality.

Participant 3 highlighted: *“Please give me a clean and tidy shopping center”*. Participant 4 said *“Having a good layout in a shopping center is important”*.

This finding supports the work by Bonfanti and Yfantidou (2021) who claimed that it is the physical design of a retail environment that is important for providing a unique experience for customers and contributes to heightened levels of customer satisfaction. On the other hand, poor store layout and design will result in customer frustration, therefore leading to lower overall customer satisfaction (Faria et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022).

Tenant Mix

The results of the study show that most of the participants expressed the view that coffee shops or the addition of coffee shops can make a shopping center more attractive. Some of the participants viewed a shopping center as a one-stop shop due to it comprising a variety of different stores. A few of the participants mentioned that bookshops are an attractive factor and expressed that small stores that have online stores make things easier and more convenient.

Participant 2 said: *“A coffee shop or something like that will make me want to stay a bit longer”*. Participant 3 said: *“I enjoy having that one-stop shop for all types of things that I need”*.

This finding aligns with the study conducted by Sit et al. (2018) that found the mix of tenants to be a critical determinant of shopping center attractiveness and customer loyalty. Furthermore, findings by El-Adly (2019) suggest that tenant mix must be carefully curated since inappropriate mixes could decrease customer footfall and reduce customer satisfaction.

Customer Service

The results of the study show that most of the participants consider quality service delivery from the staff an attractive factor at a shopping center. A few of the participants consider the appearance of the staff when at a shopping center as equally important, emphasizing that the cleanliness and neatness of their uniforms contribute to the overall service received.

Participant 3 noted: *“I like the service delivery at a physical shopping center”*. Participant 9 said: *“The staff need to be dressed nicely”*.

This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Seo and Lee (2019) which found service quality to be the most influential factor in customer satisfaction within retail settings. The role that customer service has conventionally played in stores, however, may be changing with the new automated and self-service technologies, thus creating a challenge but equally an opportunity for retailers (Orel and Kara, 2014).

Safety and Security

The findings indicate that most of the participants expressed that security is an important aspect that makes a shopping center attractive. Some of the participants indicated that secure parking enhances the attractiveness of a shopping center.

Participant 3 emphasized: *“Those are the shopping centers that I really love – those that take our safety into consideration”*. Participant 8 said: *“If there are more security guards around, I definitely feel safer”*.

The findings of recent studies conducted by Ceccato and Tcacencu (2018) and Ylilehto et al. (2021) support this finding, emphasizing the importance of safety and security in the formation of customer perception about retail environments. However, some studies suggest that highly visible security measures may occasionally have the reverse effect on customers, making them uneasy and thus detracting from the shopping experience as a whole (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Valdez-Juárez, 2021).

3.3 Theme 3: Unattractiveness of physical shopping centers

The findings of the study show that a large majority of the participants dislike large crowds that can be found at a shopping center. A portion of the participants indicated that they dislike the layout of a shopping center, dislike rude employees and dislike long queues. Some of the participants mentioned that they dislike unhygienic bathrooms and the parking fees of a physical shopping center. A few of the participants expressed that they dislike festive decorations, the lack of store variety and limited automated teller machines (ATMs) at a physical shopping center.

Participant 1 said: *“I find it so overwhelming when I walk into a shopping center and I find it busy”*.

According to recent studies, a thoughtful layout and design can increase customer satisfaction, while poor design may increase frustration and dissatisfaction (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021). Other studies, however, have suggested that sometimes innovative layouts that break with convention might improve the shopping experience through the creation of discovery and novelty effects (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

Furthermore, a study conducted by Parikh (2018) emphasized the importance of cleanliness, among other critical factors, that determine customer satisfaction in physical retail environments. In contrast, a few studies have indicated that although hygiene is of utmost importance, it does not contribute to customer loyalty as much as product quality and customer service (El-Adly, 2019).

In terms of the variety of store offerings, Teller and Elms (2012) established that in-store offerings are one of the major determinants of a shopping center's attractiveness. However, other studies posit that excessive provision of choice may lead to choice overload, whereby customers would experience feelings of being overwhelmed and consequently dissatisfied with the shopping experience (Guy, 1998).

Conclusion

This study presents the key drivers of customer value and attractiveness of physical shopping centers in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Despite e-retailing platforms, physical shopping centers still sustain conspicuous advantages, particularly in the areas of sensory engagement, immediate acquisition of products, and social interaction. In this regard, the study revealed that customers were attracted to the in-store shopping experience by the tactile experience, obtaining products instantly, and social aspects associated with in-person shopping. Furthermore, the success of a shopping center in terms of attracting and retaining customers is significantly influenced by the attractiveness of the center, careful layout and

design, and the choice of tenant mix. Crowds, poor layout and design, and hygiene problems all have a negative impact on the shopping experience.

The enhancement of sensory experiences for customers through interactive displays and experience marketing should be the focal areas of investment for shopping centers to tackle these areas of concern and to sustain competitiveness. It can also enhance the shopping experience by availing technologies like augmented reality fitting rooms and through improved layout and design that promote a customer-friendly shopping experience. Moreover, high standards of hygiene, a diversified tenant mix, entertainment, dining options, and visible yet unobtrusive security measures are also some of the major factors that need to be considered. Provided that shopping centers remain agile and adapt to shifts in customer preferences; they will very much be able to thrive even in this tumultuous digital age.

In essence, several key factors emerge from this study. Convenience is considered a significant component for customers, specifically accessibility, parking availability and an intuitive layout. Shopping centers could also consider extending their operational hours to cater to varied customer schedules. Customer engagement is driven by the choice of tenant mix and availability of a wide variety of products under one roof. Shopping centers could consider the inclusion of a balanced mix of popular brands, niche stores, and pop-up stores to maintain novelty. Aesthetic appeal and the availability of interactive spaces improve the customers' perceptions of the shopping center and increase enjoyment. Shopping centers are perceived as social hubs, and therefore, the availability of dining and entertainment facilities is crucial to improve customer satisfaction. Customers are increasingly aware of safety and hygiene levels, and therefore these aspects should be prioritized by shopping centers to create a more conducive shopping environment. Shopping center managers should consider the findings of this study to remain competitive in the market and to ensure long-term sustainability. Current strategic initiatives should be revised, amended and implemented to align with changing customer preferences.

Several limitations emerged from conducting this study. Firstly, the study only included nine participants, which affects generalizability of the findings to a wider population. Secondly, the study relied only on conducting in-depth interviews for collecting data. This limited the possibility of gaining multiple perspectives, which could have been achieved if observational studies or focus groups were used to collect data. Thirdly, the study was conducted in only one province of South Africa, the Western Cape. Other regions in the country may produce different results in terms of factors affecting consumer behavior.

It is recommended that future studies employ a larger sample size to ensure broader generalizability. In addition, a mixed-methods research approach could be considered to enhance the robustness of the study. This could include surveys with a larger sample size, or the use of focus groups to provide additional insights into factors influencing customer perceptions. Future studies could possibly consider conducting a comparative study between different provinces in South Africa or perhaps include different countries. This would allow for a more profound understanding of customer behavior and shopping center attractiveness.

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