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## CONSUMER BEHAVIOR CHANGES IN SMALL CITIES WITH MALL GROWTH

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### ABSTRACT

The research project aims to investigate the changing shopping behavior of local communities in small cities in response to the increasing presence of shopping malls. The study seeks to understand the complex dynamics driving consumer choices and behaviors in this evolving urban landscape by examining the fundamental components of mall essentials, convenience, and the unique essence of shopping malls. It also aims to explore the roles, challenges, and future suggestions related to the changing shopping behavior of local communities in small cities towards growing shopping malls. The significance of the study lies in shedding light on the social and economic implications of shifting purchasing behaviors within small metropolitan areas due to the expansion of shopping malls. The research also emphasizes the importance of comprehending the unique preferences and motives of various consumer segments in smaller cities and aims to provide insights that can improve the overall shopping experience and meet the changing expectations of local shoppers. Additionally, the study seeks to unravel the complexity of this transformation and lay the groundwork for proactive measures that promote harmonious cohabitation between traditional local businesses and the rising shopping mall culture in small towns. |

### ARTICLE INFO

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the growth of shopping malls in small cities such as Semenyih has significantly transformed the retail landscape. Originally known for their role in large metropolitan areas, malls are increasingly becoming central to commerce, entertainment, and community life in smaller towns. This transition is marked by a shift from traditional street markets and standalone shops to modern, centralized, and multifunctional retail spaces. Malls today are not just commercial hubs, they also serve as cultural and social spaces that fulfill both practical and emotional consumer needs (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Wakefield & Baker, 1998).

As the retail environment evolves, so too does consumer behavior. Malls are designed to provide a "better shopping experience" by integrating ambiance, convenience, and entertainment, surpassing the limited offerings of traditional retail outlets (Belk & Bryce, 1993; El Sayed et al., 2004). However, the effectiveness of these features varies across demographic groups, as consumer preferences are influenced by age, gender, cultural values, and lifestyle (Barak, 1998; Myers & Lumbers, 2008). For instance, younger shoppers often seek leisure and excitement, while older customers prioritize ease and familiarity (Myers & Lumbers, 2006).

Despite the widespread establishment of malls in small cities, there is limited research on how they are reshaping the shopping behavior of local communities and what consequences this transformation holds for traditional retail formats. This study addresses the central question: How are shopping malls influencing traditional consumer behavior in small cities?

This research seeks to:

1. Examine the attributes of shopping malls, such as convenience, variety, and ambiance, that influence consumer decisions in small cities.
2. Understand how different consumer segments (e.g., youth, elderly, families) are adapting their preferences and motivations in response to the mall experience.
3. Explore the implications of changing shopping behavior for traditional local businesses in towns like Semenyih.

This study is significant in that it sheds light on the economic and social impacts of mall expansion in small urban areas. Understanding how shopping malls affect local purchasing patterns helps stakeholders, retailers, policymakers, and urban planners—make informed decisions. Furthermore, the research contributes to discussions on how traditional and modern retail systems can co-exist, ensuring that local businesses are not sidelined in the face of rapid commercial development. By focusing on Semenyih as a case study, this research provides grounded insights into a broader phenomenon affecting many small towns globally.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Convenience

Convenience is a pivotal factor driving consumer behavior in malls, especially in small cities where shopping habits are evolving. Malls provide a compact location for consumers to satisfy multiple shopping needs, significantly enhancing the experience compared to traditional shopping avenues. Studies indicate that convenience brings together various functionalities—including retail, dining, and entertainment—that are particularly attractive to families and busy individuals. For instance, according to Singh et al., malls in tier II and III cities significantly influence consumer behavior due to the abundance of retail offerings, serving as a one-stop solution for many shopping needs (Singh et al., 2023). Moreover, Khare highlights that small-town consumers in India perceive mall shopping as a blend of utilitarian and hedonic values, with convenience playing a central role in their shopping decisions (Khare, 2011).

## **2.2 Mall Essentials: Variety of Shops, Facilities, Safety, Atmosphere, Family-friendliness**

The essence of a successful mall incorporates several key attributes such as a variety of shops, modern facilities, safety, an inviting atmosphere, and family-friendliness. Mendes-Rodrigues et al. argue that a diverse range of shops and services ensures that malls cater to various consumer preferences, making them more appealing (Parente et al., 2012). Safety features such as surveillance and well-lit environments are critical for drawing families and older consumers, aligning with Ratnayake's findings, which stress the importance of safety in attracting customers in contrasting shopping environments (Ratnayake, 2015). Furthermore, the study on Davaoeno's preferences during the pandemic reveals that family-friendly amenities paired with a vibrant atmosphere significantly contribute to increased patronage, allowing malls to thrive as community hubs in smaller cities (Montizo et al., 2023). The ambiance and design of the mall interface significantly influence shopping experiences, impacting consumer loyalty and satisfaction (Sadachar & Fiore, 2018).

## **2.3 Unique Mall Essence: Branding, Experience, Entertainment Integration**

The unique identity of a mall arises from its branding and the overall experience it offers to consumers. Integrating entertainment options into the shopping experience elevates consumer engagement, as emphasized by Bawa et al., who suggest that young consumers are particularly drawn to the immersive experiences provided by malls (Bawa et al., 2019). The study further indicates that branding strategies that resonate with local cultural aspects can enhance consumer attachment to malls, leading them to prefer such venues over traditional retail formats (Kushwaha et al., 2017). This integration of shopping and entertainment provides an experiential value that encourages consumer loyalty and repeated visits, particularly in suburban contexts where traditional shopping options may be limited.

## **2.4 Consumer Segmentation: Youth vs. Elderly Preferences, Cultural Differences, Income Groups**

Consumer behavior in newly developed malls is significantly influenced by demographic factors such as age, income, and cultural background. Research indicates that younger consumers are more inclined towards the social and entertainment aspects of mall shopping, seeking vibrant atmospheres to socialize and engage in leisure activities. In contrast, older consumers often prioritize convenience and safety, preferring environments that accommodate their shopping needs without much hassle (Suvadarshini & Mishra, 2021). Khare illustrates how income levels directly affect shopping decision-making styles across distinct demographic segments, with low-income groups leaning towards affordability while higher-income groups seek premium brand experiences (Suvadarshini & Mishra, 2021; Mogil et al., 2021). Moreover, cultural differences can shape shopping preferences, where local customs and practices influence the types of stores and offerings that attract various consumer segments (Vaidya, 2019).

In summary, the growth of malls in small cities induces significant shifts in consumer behavior, marked by evolving preferences for convenience, diverse offerings, safety, and experience-driven shopping. As small cities actively embrace such retail developments, understanding these changing dynamics will be crucial for stakeholders looking to harness the full potential of emerging retail landscapes.

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the research approach, design, sampling strategy, participant selection, and data analysis method employed in the study. The methodology is structured to ensure the research objectives are met by accurately capturing the experiences and perceptions of the local community in Semenyih regarding the influence of shopping malls on their shopping behavior.

### **3.1 Research Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore changes in shopping behavior among residents of Semenyih, a small but rapidly urbanizing town. Qualitative methods are well-suited for uncovering deep insights into human behavior, attitudes, and motivations, particularly in complex social contexts (Patton, 2002). The primary aim is to understand how the growing presence of shopping malls affects traditional shopping practices and community dynamics, especially among different consumer groups.

### 3.2 Research Design

The study employs a semi-structured interview design, allowing for flexibility in how questions are posed and enabling participants to express their thoughts freely. This design supports an in-depth examination of shopping behaviors and perceptions without imposing rigid preconceptions (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Edwards & Holland, 2013). Semi-structured interviews encourage richer, more nuanced responses and are particularly effective when investigating emerging social changes, such as the transformation of shopping habits in small cities.

### 3.3 Sampling Strategy

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was used to identify participants who possess deep local knowledge and are actively involved in the Semenyih community. This approach ensures that the study captures a variety of viewpoints while also benefiting from community referrals to reach relevant individuals. Snowball sampling is especially effective in studies involving specific, localized populations and allows researchers to build a robust participant pool in a cost-effective and timely manner (Patton, 2002; Minichiello et al., 1995).

The sampling continued until data saturation was achieved—i.e., no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

### 3.4 Research Participants

The study included three key participants, all of whom are respected community leaders with extensive knowledge of the local retail environment and cultural dynamics:

1. Encik Rashidi Bin Anuar (48 years old) – Village Chief of Kesuma, selected for his close monitoring of local developments and community retail trends.
2. Encik Johari bin Tinnin (49 years old) – Head of Batu 3 Jalan Bangi, with a decade of experience and prior state assembly work, offering valuable insights into policy and infrastructure shifts.
3. Encik Abdul Haroon (64 years old) – Chief of Kampung Sungai Machang and a retired Immigration Officer, bringing both administrative and grassroots perspectives.

These individuals were interviewed at the Penghulu Mukim Semenyih Complex, representing diverse yet informed views from within the Semenyih region, which comprises eleven villages.

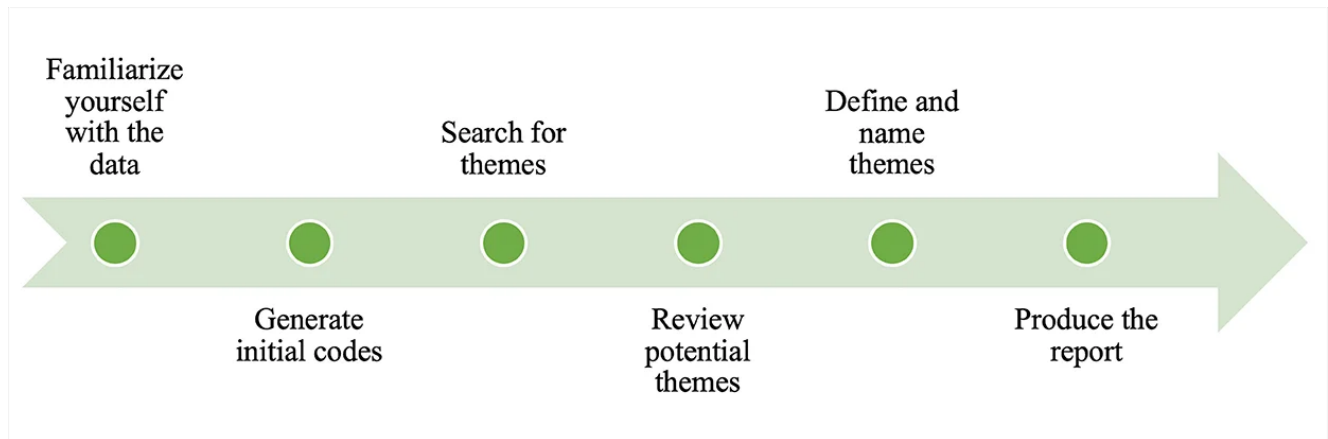
### 3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible yet rigorous approach for identifying patterns and meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process included:

1. Initial coding of interview transcripts
2. Categorizing codes into emerging themes
3. Refining and interpreting themes to align with the research objectives

Thematic analysis allows researchers to uncover both explicit and implicit messages within participant responses, offering a structured way to interpret complex social phenomena. It also enhances the **validity and reliability** of findings by ensuring a systematic and transparent approach to data interpretation.

The results of this analysis serve to reveal how malls are altering local consumer behavior and what these changes imply for the broader community and its traditional businesses.



## 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the key findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with three local leaders in Semenyih. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and insights related to how the presence of shopping malls is reshaping consumer behavior in small-town settings. Three core themes emerged from the data: (1) the evolving role of shopping malls in the community, (2) challenges faced by traditional businesses, and (3) future suggestions for balancing modern and traditional retail culture.

### 4.1 The Role of Shopping Malls in the Community

Participants consistently described shopping malls as more than just retail spaces—they have become central social and lifestyle hubs in Semenyih. Malls offer a one-stop destination where shopping, dining, and leisure activities converge.

*"Nowadays, people go to the mall not only to shop but also to spend time with their families, eat, and even attend events. It's a whole experience."* – **Encik Rashidi Bin Anuar**

This multifunctional role of malls has increased their appeal, particularly among younger and middle-income residents. The participants also noted that malls offer a sense of modernity and convenience previously unavailable in smaller towns.

*"Many youth prefer the mall because it's air-conditioned, clean, and everything is available in one place. It's different from traditional shops."* – **Encik Johari bin Tinnin**

### 4.2 Challenges Faced by Traditional Businesses

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A recurring concern raised by all three participants was the **decline of traditional local businesses** as a direct result of the malls' growing influence. Smaller shops struggle to compete with the variety, promotional pricing, and infrastructure of shopping malls.

*"Some shops in the village have lost customers because people now choose to go to the mall. It's harder for small businesses to survive."* – **Encik Abdul Haroon**

In addition to economic pressure, there is also a cultural impact, as community interactions that once occurred in local markets are now shifting to more commercialized mall spaces. This transformation risks weakening the traditional fabric of community-based retail.

#### 4.3 Suggestions for Future Adaptation and Coexistence

Participants proposed several strategies to promote a balanced retail ecosystem that supports both malls and local businesses. One idea was to create **partnerships between malls and local vendors**, allowing small businesses to have a presence within the mall environment through kiosks or local product corners.

*"Maybe malls can allocate some space for small traders to showcase their products. That way, the tradition can continue in a modern setting."* – **Encik Rashidi Bin Anuar**

Others emphasized the role of **government and municipal support**, suggesting initiatives such as tax reliefs, training programs, or joint marketing efforts to help traditional retailers modernize and adapt.

*"Local authorities need to step in to help these small shops upgrade. They must be supported to survive in this new environment."* – **Encik Johari bin Tinnin**

### DISCUSSION

The findings highlight a clear **behavioral shift** in shopping patterns among Semenyih residents, driven largely by the accessibility, comfort, and integrated experiences offered by shopping malls. While malls enhance consumer satisfaction and meet modern lifestyle needs, they also disrupt the traditional retail landscape, posing survival threats to longstanding local businesses.

This mirrors Rajagopal's (2010) findings on the coexistence and conflict between malls and street markets and reinforces the need for **proactive urban planning and inclusive economic strategies**. Without deliberate efforts to support local retailers, the growing mall culture risks eroding small-town commerce and identity.

### 5.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined how the growth of shopping malls in small towns—specifically in Semenyih—has influenced local consumer behavior and impacted traditional businesses. Through semi-structured interviews with key community leaders, the research revealed that shopping malls have become central to modern life in small cities, offering a wide range of services that go beyond basic retail. Malls have successfully attracted various consumer segments by emphasizing convenience, entertainment, and variety.

However, this transformation has created significant challenges for traditional local businesses, which struggle to compete with the infrastructure, offerings, and appeal of modern shopping centers. As consumer preferences shift—particularly among younger generations, longstanding community-based retail practices are under threat.

Despite these challenges, participants in this study offered constructive suggestions for harmonious coexistence between traditional and modern retail formats. These include collaboration between malls and small vendors, government support for local businesses, and community-focused planning that preserves cultural identity while embracing modernization.

In conclusion, the expansion of malls in small towns like Semenyih represents not just a commercial shift but a broader cultural and economic transformation. Addressing this shift requires inclusive, adaptive strategies that balance progress with preservation. |

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