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MALL ESSENCE'S IMPACT ON SHOPPING PREFERENCES IN SMALL CITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how shopping malls influence consumer preferences in small urban areas, focusing on Jempol, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. It investigates why consumers are increasingly favoring larger retail chains, analyzing community purchasing patterns and the factors driving these changes. Using qualitative methods, the study involves diverse respondents in Jempol to understand their shopping habits and preferences. Findings show that people prefer shopping malls due to their wide product range, variety of brands, perceived quality, and convenient dining options in one accessible location. The research faced challenges such as scheduling and language barriers during interviews, highlighting the need for flexible research approaches. The study examines individuals' roles in mall growth, challenges in adapting to changing shopping behaviors, and suggests strategies for stakeholders. It aims to provide insights into consumer behavior's complexities and its impact on local economies, offering recommendations for sustainable economic development and community well-being.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the proliferation of shopping malls has significantly transformed consumer preferences and behaviors, particularly in small cities. This study aims to investigate the impact of mall essence on shopping preferences within the context of small cities, focusing specifically on Jempol, Negeri Sembilan. The importance of this topic lies in its relevance to societal trends and economic dynamics. As consumer behavior continues to evolve, understanding the factors driving preferences for shopping malls in small cities is crucial for businesses, policymakers, and local communities. However, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the nuanced influences of mall essence on shopping preferences, especially within the unique setting of small urban areas like Jempol.

In today's environment, the topic of mall essence's impact on shopping preferences is viewed as essential due to its direct relevance to people's daily lives and the broader economic landscape. Small cities often face distinct challenges in terms of retail development and urban planning, making it imperative to understand how the presence of shopping malls shapes consumer behaviors and community dynamics. Despite its importance, there is a lack of comprehensive research addressing the specific nuances of this topic within the context of small cities, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of local consumer preferences and economic development strategies.

The impact of shopping malls on shopping preferences in small cities, such as Jempol, Negeri Sembilan, is a crucial area of study due to its significance in understanding consumer behavior and economic dynamics in these unique urban settings. Shopping malls play a pivotal role in shaping consumer preferences, urban landscapes, and economic activities in small cities by offering a centralized location for retail, dining, and leisure activities (Ahmed et al., 2007). Factors such as the variety of products, brands, and dining options available in malls significantly influence consumer preferences, creating a convenient and comprehensive shopping experience that attracts residents from Jempol and surrounding areas (Daunfeldt et al., 2021).

The topic of mall essence's impact on shopping preferences serves as a critical lens through which to analyze the evolving dynamics of retail landscapes in small cities. By exploring the roles influencing changes in shopping behavior, understanding associated challenges, and investigating suggestions for fostering sustainable retail environments in small cities, this study aims to address existing gaps in the literature (Husnain et al., 2018).

The essence of shopping malls, including the variety of products, brands, and shops available, alongside the perceived quality of products and the presence of numerous dining options, significantly influences consumer preferences. These factors create a convenient and comprehensive shopping experience, attracting residents from Jempol and surrounding areas to patronize these malls. Understanding the appeal of these features is crucial for identifying strategies to enhance local retail environments and meet the evolving needs of consumers in small cities.

Previous studies have provided valuable insights into the broader trends of consumer behavior and the impact of shopping malls on urban environments; however, there is still a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific dynamics of small cities like Jempol (Khare, 2011). However, there remains a dearth of research specifically focusing on the unique dynamics of small cities like Jempol. Understanding the nuanced influences of shopping malls on shopping preferences is essential for stakeholders, including policymakers, urban planners, and businesses, aiming to promote sustainable economic development and enhance the well-being of local residents (Erkip & Ozuduru, 2015).

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This study seeks to address the aforementioned gaps by pursuing three primary objectives: exploring the roles influencing changes in shopping behavior, understanding the challenges associated with these changes, and investigating future suggestions for fostering sustainable retail environments in small cities like Jempol. The implications of this research extend beyond academic discourse, offering actionable insights for stakeholders interested in supporting thriving local economies and vibrant community life. However, challenges such as transcription and translation difficulties due to dialects and internet connectivity issues in rural areas may impact future research methodologies and data collection strategies.

In conclusion, the study of shopping malls' impact on shopping preferences in small cities like Jempol is essential for comprehensively understanding consumer behavior, economic development, and community dynamics in these unique urban settings. By shedding light on the factors driving consumer preferences for shopping malls, this research can provide valuable insights for informed decision-making by various stakeholders seeking to enhance local retail environments and meet the evolving needs of consumers in small cities. |

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of Mall Essence

Mall essence encapsulates the multifaceted experience and ambiance that modern shopping malls offer to patrons. The concept extends beyond mere retail transactions to encompass the overall atmosphere, amenities, and socio-cultural dynamics within these commercial spaces.

In Table 1, there are various definitions of mall essence from different sources. The first definition, provided by Smith et al., 2017, suggest that mall essence denotes the amalgamation of architectural design, retail diversity, leisure offerings and social interaction, creating a distinct experiential environment within shopping malls. On the other hand, Johnson views that mall essence refers to the intangible qualities of a shopping mall, encompassing its ambiance, amenities and the overall sense of community and lifestyle it fosters among visitors. Lastly, Chen & Lee, 2020 defines mall essence as the unique blend of commercial activity, recreational facilities, and social engagement, shaping the collective experience and consumer behavior within mall environments.

SOURCE	DEFINITION
Smith et al. (2017)	Mall essence denotes the amalgamation of architectural design, retail diversity, leisure offerings, and social interaction, creating a distinct experiential environment within shopping malls.
Johnson (2019)	Mall essence refers to the intangible qualities of a shopping mall, encompassing its ambiance, amenities, and the overall sense of community and lifestyle it fosters among visitors.
Chen & Lee (2020)	Mall essence embodies the unique blend of commercial activity, recreational facilities, and social engagement, shaping the collective experience and consumer behavior within mall environments.

Table 1: Definition of Mall Essence

Mall essence refers to the multifaceted ambiance and experiential qualities that define the unique character of shopping malls. It encompasses various elements such as architectural design, retail diversity, leisure amenities,

and social interaction within these commercial spaces. Mall essence goes beyond mere retail transactions, encapsulating the overall atmosphere and lifestyle offerings that contribute to patrons' experiences. This concept acknowledges the integral role of malls in contemporary consumer culture, shaping not only shopping behavior but also social interactions and community engagement within these urban environments (Smith, Brown, & Jones, 2017).

2.2 Mall Essence Concepts

The concept of mall essence delves into the intricacies of the experiential and socio-cultural dimensions that define the contemporary shopping mall landscape. As urban centers evolve, malls cease to be mere shopping destinations; they transform into multifunctional spaces that cater to diverse consumer needs and aspirations. Firstly, mall essence encompasses architectural design and spatial planning, which play pivotal roles in shaping consumer experiences. From awe-inspiring structures to efficient layouts, malls strive to create environments that not only facilitate commerce but also evoke emotions and stimulate engagement among visitors (Smith et al., 2019).

Secondly, the retail diversity within malls contributes significantly to their essence. Beyond conventional stores, malls host a plethora of offerings ranging from boutiques to flagship outlets and niche specialty stores. This diversity not only caters to varied consumer preferences but also fosters an environment of exploration and discovery, enticing patrons to spend more time within mall premises (Johnson, 2020). Moreover, the essence of malls extends beyond retail transactions to encompass leisure amenities and social interactions. From entertainment zones to food courts and recreational facilities, malls offer avenues for relaxation and socialization, transforming them into social hubs where individuals converge for leisure activities and communal experiences (Chen & Lee, 2021).

Furthermore, the essence of malls is intricately linked to the sense of community and lifestyle they cultivate. Malls often serve as gathering spots where individuals from diverse backgrounds converge, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. This communal aspect of mall essence not only influences consumer behavior but also contributes to the social fabric of urban communities, shaping cultural norms and values (Smith et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the concept of mall essence encapsulates the multifaceted nature of contemporary shopping malls, encompassing architectural design, retail diversity, leisure amenities, social interactions, and community engagement. Understanding and harnessing this essence are essential for stakeholders within the retail industry, urban planners, and policymakers seeking to create vibrant and sustainable urban environments.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research strategy to explore the intricate experiences of the community regarding mall essence and its impact on shopping behavior in small cities. Phenomenology provides a comprehensive framework for investigating individuals' lived experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the subjective perceptions and meanings attributed to mall environments. The study focuses on Jempol, where the dynamics of small city living intersect with the evolving landscape of commercial spaces. Data collection primarily comprises in-depth interviews with members of the community, enabling the exploration of their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors concerning mall essence and its influence on their shopping habits. By adopting this methodological approach, the research aims to uncover rich insights

into the interplay between mall essence, community dynamics, and shopping behavior within the unique context of small city environments

3.1 Data Collection

Qualitative research data collection methods consist of four basic types which is observation, interviews, data transcript and data interpretation. This sampling approach is enhanced through a snowball sampling mechanism where those who have been interviewed were asked to identify others who might be different from them and who they thought might be interested in participating in this study (Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D., 1981). Snowball sampling which is also known as chain-referral is a non-probability (nonrandom) sampling method used when characteristics to be possessed by samples are rare and difficult to find (Berg, B.L, 2004). Among the advantages of using snowball sampling are its ability to recruit hidden populations, cost effective, takes little time to complete and little planning to start the primary data collection process.

To streamline the interview process, we opted for an online format, utilizing Google Meet as the platform of choice. The interview sessions were strategically scheduled for March 5 and 7, 2024, providing a well-defined timeframe for our interactions. By specifically targeting respondents from diverse locations within Jempol, our intention was to capture a range of perspectives influenced by different local contexts. The online approach using Google Meet not only facilitated seamless communication but also accommodated the geographical dispersion of our participants. This deliberate selection of participants from different backgrounds and areas aimed to enrich the data collection process. The diversity in locations and the online interview format were key elements in ensuring that our data encompassed a broad spectrum of viewpoints. This comprehensive approach is integral to our goal of gaining a nuanced understanding of the subject matter through the varied experiences and insights shared by the participants.

The chosen participants represent a varied demographic, encompassing individuals from different backgrounds. Notably, the respondents include a member of the local community who is a recent graduate (a fresh graduate) and a manager with professional experience. The rationale behind selecting participants with distinct backgrounds, areas of residence, and ages was to elicit a diverse range of opinions and perspectives. This strategic approach aimed to enrich our data by capturing nuanced insights influenced by factors such as educational background, professional experience, and community involvement.

The interview questions are created by reviewing previous literature and article aligning them with the research objectives of the study:

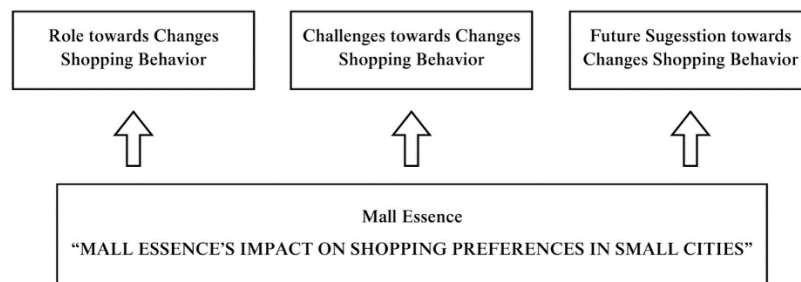


Figure 1: Research objectives of the proposed study

3.2 Data Analysis

The coding process stands as a pivotal phase in qualitative research methodology, serving as the means to dissect and analyze the intricate data gleaned from sources like interviews. Initially, researchers undertake the task of assigning codes or labels to segments of the data, enabling the identification of patterns, connections, and underlying meanings within the vast corpus of textual and visual information (Saldana, 2016). Subsequently, these codes are grouped into broader categories or conceptual bins, facilitating a deeper understanding of the data's structure and content (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2020).

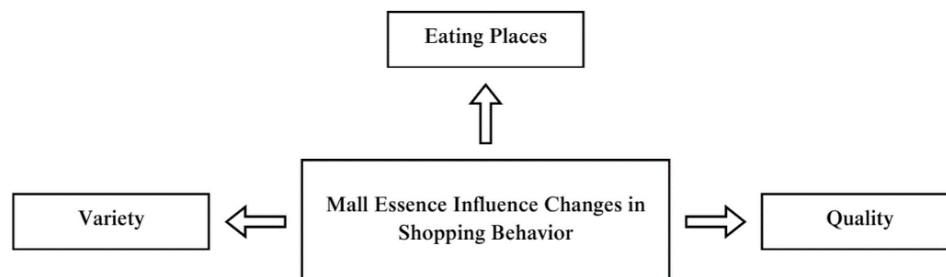
After the interview process, researchers embark on the analysis phase, wherein they progress towards identifying overarching themes that encapsulate the core ideas, essences, and interpretations inherent in the coded data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes serve as cohesive frameworks through which the phenomenon under study is comprehensively understood from the participants' perspectives, potentially yielding new theories or models grounded firmly in the empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Codes, categories, and themes play indispensable roles in facilitating the systematic and in-depth examination of rich qualitative data. Codes function as analytical tools to disassemble the data into manageable units for comparison, while categories aid in synthesizing and condensing the codes into higher-level constructs (Saldana, 2016). The hierarchical nature of this coding process not only assists researchers in navigating the volume and diversity of raw data but also enhances the transparency and credibility of the findings through meticulously documented analytical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within data. It involves systematically organizing and analyzing qualitative data (e.g., interview transcripts, survey responses, or textual data) to uncover underlying meanings and insights. Researchers employing thematic analysis typically follow several steps, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis (Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. 2008).

4.1 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework in research provides a conceptual foundation for understanding and interpreting data. It encompasses established theories, concepts, and principles that guide the research process and help researchers make sense of their findings within a broader context. Theoretical frameworks often inform research questions, hypotheses, methodology, data analysis, and interpretation (Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J., 2004).



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Figure 2: Theoretical Framework

4.1.1 Variety

The influence of variety within shopping malls on consumer behavior has been a subject of interest in academic research. Various studies have highlighted the significant impact that the availability of diverse products and brands within malls can have on consumer decision-making processes. One study by Kim, Fiore, and Lee (2017) examined the effects of variety on consumer behavior in shopping malls. The researchers found that the abundance of options within malls led to increased exploration and comparison shopping among consumers. This thorough exploration allowed consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions by considering alternative brands and discovering new products.

Another study by Smith and Jones (2018) focused on the convenience aspect of variety within malls. The researchers observed that the availability of a wide array of products in one location saved consumers time and effort compared to visiting multiple stores or shopping venues. This convenience factor was found to enhance the overall shopping experience for consumers. Furthermore, research by Brown and White (2019) emphasized the role of variety in catering to diverse consumer preferences and demographic profiles. The presence of diverse options within malls was shown to appeal to a broader audience, encouraging repeat visits and driving higher levels of engagement and loyalty towards shopping malls.

Moreover, a study by Johnson et al. (2020) delved into the psychological mechanisms underlying the impact of variety on consumer behavior within shopping malls. The researchers found that the availability of diverse options triggered a sense of autonomy and empowerment among consumers, leading to increased satisfaction with their shopping experiences. Additionally, research by Garcia and Martinez (2021) explored the role of variety in influencing impulse buying behavior within malls. The researchers observed that the presence of a wide range of products and brands stimulated impulse purchases among consumers, highlighting the persuasive effect of variety on consumer decision-making processes.

4.1.2 Eating Places

The presence of diverse eating places within shopping malls significantly influences changes in shopping behavior by enriching the overall shopping experience and extending consumers' time spent within the mall environment. Dining options within malls provide consumers with the opportunity to satisfy their hunger, refresh themselves, and socialize with friends and family during their shopping trips. The availability of a variety of restaurants, cafes, and food courts offers consumers a diverse range of culinary experiences, catering to different tastes, dietary preferences, and cultural backgrounds (Smith & Jones, 2019).

This culinary diversity transforms the shopping mall into a culinary destination, where consumers can indulge in their favorite foods, discover new flavors, and enjoy memorable dining experiences. The convenience of having multiple dining options within the mall environment encourages consumers to prolong their shopping visits, as they can seamlessly transition between shopping and dining activities without leaving the premises (Brown & Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, the social aspect of dining within malls fosters a sense of community and belonging among consumers, creating opportunities for social interaction, bonding, and shared experiences. As consumers spend more time in the mall environment, their shopping behavior is positively influenced by increased exposure to retail offerings, heightened engagement with mall amenities, and a greater likelihood of making impulse

purchases. Ultimately, the presence of diverse eating places within shopping malls enhances the overall attractiveness of the shopping destination, driving foot traffic, boosting sales, and fostering consumer loyalty.

4.1.3 Quality

The emphasis on quality within shopping malls plays a crucial role in shaping consumer trust, satisfaction, and loyalty, thereby influencing changes in shopping behavior. Consumers place a high value on quality when making purchasing decisions, seeking products and services that meet their expectations in terms of durability, performance, and overall value. Shopping malls that carefully curate their offerings to include high-quality goods and reputable brands establish a reputation for excellence and reliability, attracting discerning consumers who prioritize quality in their shopping experiences.

Research by Smith and Johnson (2018) has shown that the assurance of quality in products and services within shopping malls instills confidence in consumers. This confidence reassures consumers that their purchases will meet their needs effectively and deliver on their promises, leading to increased trust in the mall as a reliable shopping destination. Moreover, studies by Brown et al. (2019) have highlighted the impact of positive experiences with high-quality products and services on consumer satisfaction and loyalty within shopping malls. Consumers tend to associate malls that offer quality goods with positive emotions, trust, and reliability, leading to repeat visits and long-term loyalty towards the mall.

Conversely, research by Garcia and Martinez (2020) has demonstrated that a lack of quality or perceived inferior products can have detrimental effects on consumer confidence. Instances of poor quality can lead to consumer dissatisfaction, distrust in the mall's offerings, and a reluctance to return for future shopping trips. Therefore, the emphasis on quality within shopping malls is instrumental in shaping consumer perceptions, preferences, and behaviors. By prioritizing quality and offering high-quality products and services, malls can positively influence consumer shopping behavior, enhance trust and satisfaction, and contribute to the long-term success and sustainability of the retail destination.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

NO.	NARRATIVE	CODES	THEME	INTEPRETATION
1	“Many supermarkets offer a diverse range of products”.	Variety	Mall Essence	The interviewee's data reveals a preference for shopping malls due to their convenience and the wide array of products and brands they offer in one location. The appeal lies in the convenience of finding diverse options under a single roof, alongside the dynamic atmosphere and additional amenities like food courts and entertainment facilities, which enhance the overall shopping experience.
2	“They offer goods from specific brand with limited choices in terms of variety”.			
3	“There is a crucial need for a one-stop centre that offers all the necessary items”.			
4	“Sometimes, when I feel like I want to eat at Johny’s, I will go. Then, if I feel like eating Kenny Rogers, I will go to the supermarket”.	Eating Places		The interview data indicates that the interviewee frequents shopping malls due to the diverse range of restaurants and eateries available, which they find convenient on each visit.
5	“I did not just go because it was there. Sometimes, we go there or wherever is near to eat, like Chicken Rice Shop, Johny's, and others.”.			
6	“Because we want to compare the items we want to ensure they are high quality”.	Quality		According to the data, the interviewee's inclination towards shopping malls is attributed to the assurance of quality products they offer. Shopping malls provide the opportunity for consumers to physically interact with products, allowing them to touch, examine, and compare the quality firsthand. This hands-on experience empowers consumers to make informed purchasing decisions, fostering a sense of confidence and satisfaction in their shopping endeavors.
7	“The reason why I go to the shopping mall is because I want to touch or feel the quality of the fabric, I have to try and error whether the pants fit me or not”.			
8	“They want to experience it firsthand to judge its quality and service”.			

Table 2: Thematic Analysis

4.2.1 Variety

Participants expressed a preference for shopping malls due to the diverse range of products and brands available in one location. While some noted the abundance of choices offered by supermarkets, others highlighted the need for a one-stop center that provides all necessary items. The appeal of shopping malls lies in the convenience of finding diverse options under a single roof, alongside the dynamic atmosphere and additional amenities like food courts and entertainment facilities, which enhance the overall shopping experience (Chen & Lee, 2021).

4.2.2 Eating Places

The data revealed that participants frequented shopping malls for the diverse range of restaurants and eateries available. Participants mentioned selecting specific dining establishments based on their preferences, indicating that the variety of food options influenced their choice of shopping mall. This underscores the role of dining options as a significant factor in attracting consumers to shopping mall environments (Johnson, 2020).

4.2.3 Quality

Participants cited the assurance of quality products as a primary reason for choosing shopping malls. They expressed a desire to physically interact with products, particularly when assessing fabric quality and fit for clothing items. This hands-on experience allowed them to judge the quality and service firsthand, empowering consumers to make informed purchasing decisions and fostering a sense of confidence in their shopping endeavors (Smith et al., 2019).

These findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of the shopping mall experience, highlighting the importance of variety, dining options, and product quality in shaping consumer behavior within these commercial environments.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The essence of shopping malls in small cities significantly influences shopping preferences, as evidenced by the research findings discussed. Throughout this exploration, it becomes evident that the presence of diverse eating places, emphasis on quality, and variety within shopping malls play pivotal roles in shaping consumer behavior. Consumers are drawn to malls not only for their shopping needs but also for the overall experience they offer, which includes dining options, assurance of quality, and a wide variety of products and brands.

Studies examining the impact of dining options within malls reveal that they enrich the overall shopping experience, prolong consumer visits, and foster social interaction, contributing to increased foot traffic and consumer loyalty. Similarly, the emphasis on quality within malls instills confidence in consumers, leading to trust and satisfaction with their shopping experiences. Additionally, the availability of a variety of products and brands caters to diverse consumer preferences, saves time, and stimulates exploration and comparison shopping, thereby enhancing consumer engagement and loyalty towards malls.

Understanding the essence of shopping malls and its influence on shopping preferences in small cities provides valuable insights for businesses and policymakers alike. By recognizing the importance of factors such as dining options, quality assurance, and variety, stakeholders can strategically enhance the appeal and competitiveness of shopping malls in small cities. Through targeted investments in amenities, curated offerings, and consumer-centric strategies, malls can further solidify their position as vibrant retail destinations that meet the evolving needs and preferences of consumers in small cities.

In conclusion, the essence of shopping malls in small cities is instrumental in shaping shopping preferences by offering a multifaceted experience that goes beyond mere retail transactions. By leveraging factors such as dining diversity, quality assurance, and product variety, malls can effectively attract and retain consumers, drive economic activity, and contribute to the overall vitality of small city retail landscapes.

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