

THE SHOPPING MALL: A TEENAGE HANGOUT

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ABSTRACT

Almost anywhere in the United States, large numbers of teenagers hang around suburban shopping malls. Though some scholars have written about this phenomenon, few have studied it empirically. This study investigated teenagers' use of the shopping mall as a "hangout." The setting for the research was the Puente Hills Mall in Industry, a suburb of Los Angeles, California. Methods included interviews with 51 adolescents (26 females and 25 males) using the mall, and 10 hours of behavioral observations. Results indicate that a significant number visit the shopping center once or twice a week, and that most (63%) consider themselves regulars. Most spend one to five hours at a time in the mall. They rarely go alone, but rather with others, usually friends. Few teenagers go to the mall regularly with their parents. Only about half say that shopping is the reason they frequent the mall. Other reasons include watching members of the opposite sex, playing video games, seeing friends, and people-watching. Behavioral observations reveal that most adolescents travel in groups of two or three through the mall, stopping around the central court. They spend little time on the edges of the mall. Moving groups are usually male-female, while stationary groups are of the same sex. The mall is analyzed as a type of "third place" for teenagers.

Almost anywhere in the United States, large numbers of teenagers hang around suburban shopping malls. This pattern is true not only in northern climates, where shelter inside the mall is desirable, but in climates where outdoor temperatures are usually more hospitable. Even in Southern California, where the climate is moderate year-round, thousands of teenagers flock to climate-controlled, enclosed shopping centers to spend their free time after school and on weekends.

A few journalists have described this phenomenon in popular magazines and newspapers. For example, Capaldi (1982, p. 1) has aptly written: "If Norman Rockwell were alive today and still painting scenes of youthful America, he would have to spend most of his time in a suburban mall. Video arcades, fast-food stalls, and great walls of retail stores are hangout, social center, and recreation for today's youth."

Capaldi focused on the Sherman Oaks Galleria, a shopping center in San Fernando Valley, just north of Los Angeles, and home of the famous "Valley Girls." He argued that for youths, the mall has replaced the old street corner. Talbot (1983), like Capaldi, reported on the Sher-

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man Oaks Galleria in light of the recent film "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," where teenage characters roamed from school to the mall and back.

Greene (1982) interviewed two 15-year-old boys as to why they "hung out" at a shopping mall. They explained, "When you don't have a car to go cruising in, you cruise the mall."

One of the more lively accounts of teenage life at the neighborhood mall can be found in the piece by Kowinski (1978), "The Malling of America." He noted that Americans spend more time at shopping malls than anywhere else outside their homes and jobs. "The mall is a never-never land . . . an absolutely vital part of the lives and lifestyle of the Me People, wherever they may be. . . . Adolescent denizens can remain hour after hour in the world of inescapable electronic panels right out of Star Trek. . . . They zip out now and then for a cheese stick and orange crush, cruising the continuous corridors past the TV screens in the store windows . . ." (Kowinski, 1978, pp. 41, 62). Amiel (1979) likens the teenage shopping center phenomenon to the somatose generation foreseen by Huxley.

Others have called attention to teenagers as a risk to shopping mall security ("Most Managers," 1976). Carpenter (1978) pinpointed older teens, aged 15 and up, as serious offenders, citing an above-average incidence of amateur shoplifting among the high school crowd. By contrast, younger teens present no special security problem. Rather, they simply become part of the scenery. "Suburban shopping centers, especially the larger ones, have frequently become surrogate baby sitters for children below driving age who live beyond bicycling range. Almost every manager of a regional center is familiar with the early Saturday afternoon phenomenon—cars unloading Junior, aged 8 to 14, with parting instruction to 'have fun with the other kids and be ready to be picked up at the usual place at five o'clock'" (Carpenter, 1978, p. 90).

Nonetheless, few scholars have published empirical studies about teenagers in shopping malls. In general, researchers who have investigated social processes at shopping centers have failed to study teenagers specifically.

For example, Adelberg and Shelly (1967) applied the constraint-reinforcement approach to the study of shopping center behavior. They demonstrated that people are more likely to go to shopping centers with at least one other person than by themselves. Their results indicate that pairs are likely to converse when strolling through the mall. Their findings also showed that people were most likely to watch other people rather than inanimate objects. Their sample was a mix-

ture of various age groups and not restricted to adolescents.

Timmerman (1981) discovered that temperature and music affected perceived density, which in turn impacted on the perceived levels of crowding and overt responses as to time and money spent at malls.

A wide body of literature is devoted to analyzing economic aspects of shopping malls, in order to understand how consumers spend their money. These generally fall under the rubric of marketing research (Urban Land Institute, 1981; Hirschman, 1977; Wenner, 1980). Meyer (1979) analyzed the types of consumer products to which teenagers are most attracted. He argued that malls are an excellent place to promote products aimed at the teenage market.

In contrast to previous research, the present study focuses specifically on teenage behavior in and attitudes toward malls, by empirically investigating their use as a "hangout."

METHOD

The setting for this research was the Puente Hills Mall in Industry, a suburb of Los Angeles, California. This enclosed mall contains about 200 small shops, four major restaurants, about six fast-food chains, and one video-game "Sega" center. It is anchored by four major department stores: Broadway, Robinson's, Penney's, and Sears. It is arranged in a cross-like configuration, focused around a Center Court, and is composed of two levels. It is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The methods included face-to-face interviews with a random sample of 51 adolescents (26 females and 25 males) using the mall. Most of the sample (53%) were currently high school students, 30% had just finished high school, and 18% were in the eighth grade or lower. Each interview lasted between 10 and 20 minutes and covered a total of 22 items, 6 open and 16 closed questions. The research team also interviewed five merchants, two security staff members, and the mall's manager to seek their opinions about teenagers' use of the center.

In addition, the team spent a total of 10 hours observing teenagers' behavior. Team members used both person-centered and place-centered observation techniques. They followed several teenagers around the center, monitoring their behavior for 10-minute intervals. They also conducted a series of "spot checks" throughout the mall to see where teenagers were congregating.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of our interviews indicate that most teenagers (63%) consider themselves "regulars" at the mall. Almost half the teenagers in our sample (44%) visit the shopping center less than once a week. Many (40%) go once or twice a week; much fewer (4%) go every day.

On a typical trip, most spend three to five hours (44%), or one to two hours (40%) at a time. About one out of seven (14%) stay there for six hours or more, and only a small number (2%) stay for under an hour.

During the school year, the most popular times to visit the mall are weekend afternoons (38%), and weekday evenings (18%). During the summer, when school is out, teenagers are most likely to use the mall on weekends (29%) and weekday afternoons (20%). The least popular times to arrive during both the summer and the school year are the morning hours.

Teenagers tend to visit the mall with others, usually one (45%) or two or more (45%) people. They rarely go alone (9%). Only a fraction (2%) are accompanied by a brother or sister, and few (15%) by their parents. The vast majority (83%) go with their friends. When asked how often they go to the mall to meet friends, most said "some of the time" (42%).

The most popular way to spend money at the shopping center was on clothes (27%), followed closely by food (24%) and records (20%); next were drinks (13%) and video games (13%).

On a typical visit, very few (4%) spend all their time shopping. Just over half (54%) spend only some of their time shopping, and about a third (35%) spend most of their time shopping. A relatively small number (7%) do not shop at all. When they are not shopping, most spend their time looking around (29%), eating (17%), playing video games (15%), people-watching (12%), window shopping (10%), relaxing (7%), walking around (7%), talking (3%) and "having fun" (2%).

When asked why they go to Puente Hills Mall, only about half (53%) said it was for shopping. The next most common responses were: looking for members of the opposite sex (11%); playing video games (7%); having fun, seeing friends, and people-watching (all 6%); eating (4%); and just to have "something to do" (4%).

They said that what they liked best about the mall was being with other people (42%), and being near shops (2%). They noted high prices (33%), crowds (28%), and closing time (12%) as aspects they liked least.

Finally, when asked how else they like to spend their free time when they are not at the mall, most (25%) said they like to engage in some form of active recreation such as skating, going to the beach, or skiing. Almost an equal number (23%) replied that they like to spend their

time at a friend's house. Others prefer to visit video arcades (14%), stay at home (14%), or frequent other shopping malls (10%). The rest like to go to the movies (7%), spend time at school (3%), go to parties (3%), or visit relatives (1%).

Over three-quarters of the teenagers go to Puente Hills Mall by car (77%). About one in six go by bus (16%), and the rest either bicycle or carpool. Most live within one to five (37%) or six to ten (33%) miles of the mall. About one in six (16%) lives less than a mile away, and one in seven (14%) lives over ten miles away. Only about half had a driver's license (47%) or owned a car (47%).

Behavioral observations reveal that most adolescents travel in groups of two or three through the mall, stopping occasionally around the central court. They tend to lounge around the seating areas on the first floor of the central court or to lean on the second-floor railings overlooking the court below. They spend little time around the edges of the mall.

Stationary groups are usually of the same sex, while moving groups are usually co-ed. Several teenagers seem to enjoy watching the activity around them by riding up and down the escalators.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the more surprising findings of this study is that teenagers do not spend much money in the mall despite the large amount of time spent there. Though marketing researchers have argued that the length of time spent at a mall tends to increase the chances of one's buying merchandise, this does not seem to be the case for adolescents. For the teenage population, hanging around the mall is less a way to spend money than it is a way of passing time.

Most adolescents in this study admit to being regulars at the mall, verifying the phenomenon described by many of the popular writers (Capaldi, 1982; Talbot, 1983; Greene, 1982; Kowinski, 1978; "Most Managers," 1976; Carpenter, 1978). Their regular presence does not seem to embarrass them. On the contrary, many seem to take pride in their use of the mall, viewing it as what environmental psychologists call a "secondary territory" (Altman, 1975), or "a third place"—a respite from the treadmill between home and school, a place for enjoying social life. "At its best, a third place provides democratic friendship; a sense of belonging while yet retaining a distinctive personal identity; an opportunity for spontaneity, surprise, and emotional expression; a chance to stand aside from oneself and gain perspective on private idiosyncracies" (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1980, p. 82). One of the major