

To Shop or Not to Shop: A Critique of Mall Culture

Bhanusree S. Kumar

(The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad

Email: bhanusreeskumar@gmail.com)

Abstract:

This paper delves into the complex interplay between consumer culture and commercial interests within modern shopping malls, using GVK One Mall in Hyderabad as a case study. Initially conceived as community hubs, malls have evolved into profit-driven entities, employing various strategies to manipulate consumer behaviour. The analysis encompasses spatial organization, amenities, promotions, and workforce dynamics to reveal how malls seek to shape consumer choices and maximize sales. Despite efforts to create an illusion of freedom and inclusivity, the underlying motive remains profit generation, often at the expense of consumer rights and worker welfare. However, the study also uncovers instances where visitors resist manipulation, appropriating mall spaces for leisure rather than consumption and challenging exploitative practices. Ultimately, while the culture industry wields significant influence, consumer agency persists, highlighting the limitations of commercial domination and the potential for resistance within consumer culture.

Keywords — commercial domination, consumer agency, consumer culture, shopping malls, workforce exploitation

I. INTRODUCTION

Victor Gruen, popularly regarded as the father of modern shopping malls, envisaged malls as community centres. They would host cultural, artistic and social events, thus providing “the needed place and opportunity for participation in modern community life that the Ancient Greek Agora, the Medieval Market Place, and our own Town Squares provided in the past” [4]. Yet, these centres soon turned out to be nothing more than “engines of commerce” whose profit motive undermined all other concerns [4]. Contemporary literature on shopping malls either depicts malls as ‘wonderlands of consumption’ where the consumer is manipulated through various mechanisms in order to facilitate consumption and enhance retail profits, or emphasises the consumer’s agency in creatively appropriating the mechanisms of manipulation to their advantage. Based on a field study of the GVK One Mall at Banjara Hills,

Hyderabad, as well as newspaper articles and online shopping guides, this paper analyses various elements that constitute mall culture such as space use and organisation, structure, facilities, taglines, offers, visitors’ and workers’ behaviour etc. Based on this analysis, I attempt to identify the ways in which the mall management tries to influence visitors’ and workers’ behaviours and how visitors undermine, or challenge, or appropriate to their advantage, the mechanisms of control..

II. CONSUMERISM AND MALL CULTURE

The tagline of GVK One, “set your spirit free”, depicts the shopping mall as a site where one is free. The shopping mall, with its dazzling array of goods and services, as the ticket to freedom, invokes the capitalist idea that you are really free, only when you are free to choose. (But, the rest of the discussion shows how the commercial establishment tries to influence visitors’ behaviour, thus attempting to limit the freedom of the

consumer to make a wise choice). The ambience of the mall, with its temperature-controlled environment and soothing music in the background, also enables visitors to literally achieve this state of ‘free-ness’ or ease. The mall also presents itself as an ideal civic space by maintaining cleanliness (to the point of immaculateness!), offering seating at every floor; providing wheelchairs, special parking facilities, restrooms and a customised hydraulic elevator to differently-abled visitors; and dedicating a parking level exclusively to women so as to ease their entrance to and exit from the mall. It also provides valet service to ensure hassle-free parking. An information desk inside the mall helps visitors find what they are looking for. Although these efforts are laudable, it should also be noted that those facilities which are inconsistent with the mall’s main agenda—promoting consumerism—are either not provided or offered to an insignificant extent. For instance, the mall has only a single water dispenser and has very few signs that inform people of its existence. On the contrary, nearly every sign shows visitors the way up to the food court that sells bottled drinking water and soft drinks. Thus the mall provides those ‘civic’ amenities that will enhance footfall and will keep visitors happy during their visit, but not those that adversely affect its larger motive of ensuring good sales. Further, even basic rights of consumers are denied in pursuit of enhancing sales and profits. For instance, the multiplex at the mall does not allow moviegoers to carry food and drink (including drinking water) brought from outside into the theatre. This in turn ensures good sales for the cafeteria located inside the multiplex.

A striking characteristic of GVK is the multifunctional nature of its space, which is reminiscent of Gruen’s founding vision. Besides offering branded goods and services, it also organises a range of activities such as promotional events of books and movies, exhibitions of iconic brands, dance and craft workshops, magic shows, and games and contests, which play a major role in enhancing footfall. For instance, the mall hosted the book launch of Anand Neelakantan’s *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* on 11th August 2015 that was attended by popular actors, Akkineni Nagarjuna and Amala,

which predictably drew thousands of visitors to the mall [9]. It also organised an exhibition of HIDEDESIGN’s ‘Icon Collection’—which included the brand’s earliest designs—during 2nd-9th April, 2016 [2]. Every summer, it organises ‘The Summer Festival’ with various recreational activities for children, including interactions with cartoon characters [11]. Besides organising these seasonal activities, the mall also has a permanent source of attraction—a huge saltwater aquarium which is Asia’s second largest marine tank and boasts about thirty exotic varieties of fishes. The aquarium is perpetually surrounded by adults and children alike, eager to get their pictures clicked with the tank in the background. Visitors’ reviews on popular tourist destinations in Hyderabad also highlight the aquarium as a must-see [10]. Many individual outlets also configure their retail spaces to multiple uses. For instance, Hard Rock Cafe is not only a popular food joint, but also a venue for the country’s famous music bands. Customer reviews point out that it is the combination’ of great food and live music that draws them to the cafe on a regular basis [6].

Although these multifarious activities organised by the mall management have the potential to configure mall spaces as sites of considerable social intermingling, this possibility is stifled by its commercial interests that target a particular class. GVK One mall is located in Banjara Hills, India’s most expensive and exclusive residential address [3]. Yet, until 2006, the city did not have any shopping options that could capitalise on the prosperity of its residents. With about seventy premium brands, some of them internationally renowned ones like Charles & Keith, Kenneth Cole and Calvin Klein, and an impressive six-screen multiplex, complete with recliners and high-end acoustics, GVK One was the first of its kind in the city. The presence of these brands and the exorbitant prices of their commodities and services have led shopping guides to identify the mall as the “preferred choice for well-heeled shoppers” [1]. The exclusivity of its clientele has also been corroborated by the mall management. On its official website, the GVK group states that its “customer profile is predominantly SEC A and

above” [1]. Even within this elite space, a rough hierarchical organisation exists to distinguish the shopping destinations of the uber-wealthy from the moderately well-off. The highest priced brands in the mall are located in the ground floor, some of them being Charles & Keith, ALDO, Vero Moda, Superdry, MAC, Forest Essentials: Luxury Ayurveda, Apronix (electronics store dedicated to Apple products) and the food joint, Hard Rock Cafe. Unlike other retail outlets, most of these shops didn’t extend any special offers as part of the festive season (some like Vero Moda did have a Diwali offer), nor did they try to attract clients using glossy advertisements, bright lighting or elaborate decorations. For instance, MAC—which did not advertise any discounts or offers as part of the Dusshera-Diwali festival season— has grey and bare walls with subdued lighting, and displayed only a limited number of products. Its sales assistants do not usher in clients to make them feel welcome either. Thus, only a familiarity with the brand name would draw visitors into these stores. The high price range also explained the relative emptiness of these stores when I visited the mall. However, the saltwater aquarium, which is placed in the centre of the floor, draws hordes of people to this floor which would have otherwise remained deserted. The concentration of luxury brands in the ground floor could be attributed to the fact that the intended clientele of the mall (the elite residents of Banjara Hills) would not venture into stores that they identified as ‘beneath’ their status and means. Hence, if these brands were to be located in the upper floors, the allurements of medium or low priced outlets on the way up to the intended floor are unlikely to persuade them. In contrast, the first and second floors are occupied by brands that offer both medium and high priced goods like Reebok, Adidas, Pepe Jeans, Allen Solly, W, as well as outlets that exclusively sell low and medium priced goods like Bata, Specs World, Medicines and More, Apex Mobiles etc. These stores have very genial sales assistants and a wider range of goods, and also extended competitive offers and discounts. The location of these outlets in the higher floors grants the targeted consumer base, greater exposure to shopfronts at the different levels of the mall. Thus,

even if they might not ordinarily be able to afford the goods on sale at the lower floor, they could be lured in by seasonal offers and induced to make an impulse purchase. This would also explain the location of the food court—which has lower priced food options compared to the standalone food joints at the ground level and lower ground level— and the entrance to the multiplex at the third floor, both of which attract the largest number of mall visitors. The lower ground level however, has an assortment of stores and services that resist any kind of classification, be it on the basis of the type of goods/services they offer, or the consumer base they target.

Apart from a price-based organisation, retail outlets are also selected and organised, based on several other considerations. For instance, the anchor store, Shoppers Stop, which draws a higher number of visitors compared to other smaller, specialty retail outlets, is placed farthest from the entrance to the mall, which in turn, maximises exposure to these latter stores. Further, similar types of stores tend to be placed in close propinquity. For instance, the second floor has a large number of ethnic wear Indian stores which are placed in close proximity. These included Kalanikethan, Mebaz, FabIndia, Neerus, BIBA, Global Desi etc. Similarly, men’s retail outlets are concentrated in the lower ground level stores, some of them being Arrow, Louis Philippe, Raymonds, Park Avenue, Zodiac, etc. The propinquity of stores that sell similar kinds of merchandise ensures that shoppers, who are dissatisfied with the prices or styles in one store, will move to the next store in search of clothes that they desire. This enhances the likelihood of visitors making a purchase before leaving the mall. Moreover, food joints are also carefully selected so as to cater to a wide range of tastes. For instance, standalone food joints like Hard Rock Cafe, KFC and Starbucks offer Western cuisine. These food options are balanced by a range of Indian and Chinese food outlets at Feastivities, the food court. For instance, the food court has DHABBA, a North Indian restaurant; Mr. Idly Dosa, a South Indian restaurant; Gongura, an Andhra specialty restaurant; Chinese Express, a Chinese cuisine restaurant etc. Further, some of the most infrequently visited

outlets like AMC (an electronics store that sells low-end mobile phones and accessories), Robo Touch, a recliner store, O2 saloon etc are located on the same floor as the food court and the entrance to the multiplex, which have the highest footfall in the mall. The presence of these popular spots beside the more or less vacant outlets would enhance the chances of visitors venturing into at least some of these latter kind of shops.

An analysis of the mall design also reveals strategies to direct attention of visitors in particular ways. For instance, the sheer distance to be covered across the length of a floor—that could dissuade disinclined walkers—is obscured by kiosks and temporary stalls which would distract visitors from their exhaustion. These kiosks sell both cheap brands (Colourbar cosmetics, Luxxuberance watches) as well as generic goods (flip-flops, sunglasses). Additionally, a few temporary stalls had also been set up that sold metal jewellery and kota doria stoles sourced from handicraft villages in Rajasthan. Although these kinds of stalls are usually amenable to price negotiations when they are located outside the mall, the stalls at GVK had boards hung that read ‘Fixed Rate’—a move, perhaps compelled by the high tenant rents of the mall. Other elements of mall design that attempt to (mis)direct attention of visitors are the escalators and elevators. At GVK,—as in most other malls—the up and down escalators are positioned at opposite ends of a floor to ensure that mall visitors walk the entire length of a floor before moving to the next one, thus maximising exposure to shopfronts. This is also achieved by the glass elevator that runs through the middle of the atrium, a less frequently used model when compared to the opaque ones that run through floor spaces. Attempts are also made to arrest the attention of the visitor as s/he cruises between floors, by dropdowns and banisters that advertise attractive offers. The dropdowns hung from the skylight at GVK announced ‘5% cashback on credit card spends this festive season’.

One of the primary ways in which mall culture (or consumer culture in general) seeks to manipulate the consumer is through obfuscation of real considerations pertaining to consumption and

generating new ones. For instance, a hoarding of Feastivities, the food court announces to visitors, ‘750 reasons to feast’, referring to the 750 delicacies that it claims to offer. Here, consumers are persuaded to partake of the fare not because they might be hungry and wish to satiate their appetite, but merely because the food joint has laid out an assortment of delicacies. Thus, the consumer’s need to consume is ‘externalised’. The food court’s promise of stimulating gastronomic innovations consistently attracts high footfall and it is also the busiest space in the entire mall. Feastivities has registered record turnovers ever since its inception, with certain months registering revenues to the tune of 10 million rupees [11]. Even more interesting was the advertisement of a gym next to the entrance of the food court. The insinuations to spend on mindless indulgence in food, and simultaneously, to spend on maintaining the body in health and shape, keep the capitalist system well-oiled.

The most explicit strategies employed to enhance retail traffic are special offers which are usually extended to the public in the context of a festival season. Since 2014, GVK has been organising a month-long shopping festival that covers the Dusshera and Diwali festivals. This year’s festival that runs from 22nd September to 22nd October gives the customer who shops for over Rs.2500, the opportunity to enter a lucky draw. Of the numerous eligible participants, three lucky winners would receive a midrange car, a motorbike and an LED TV. Individual retailers also extend special offers on purchases made during festival seasons. For instance, HIDESIGN extends a Diwali special offer of a free mini bag on purchases worth Rs. 8000. NAUTICA similarly extends a Dusshera special offer of a gift pack worth Rs. 3598 on purchases worth Rs. 9999. Not only do these offers configure exorbitant purchases as lucrative deals, but they also configure commodities as gifts. For instance, TOMMY HILFIGER, that provides vouchers of Rs. 12,000 on purchases worth Rs. 34,999, exhorts people to celebrate the ‘Joy of Gifting’. Similarly, The Body Shop that offers 15% discount on all purchases, encourages people to ‘shower loved ones with gifts’. The retailer redefines hedonistic

consumption as obligatory giving to near and dear ones, thus freeing the consumer of any guilt over lavish expenditure.

These persuasions to shop became more direct and personal when I encountered sales assistants on the shop floor who attempted to convince potential customers about the benefits and popularity of a particular product. Besides presenting product information, they also tried to win over customers through pleasant demeanour and immaculate dressing. From receiving the customer at the entrance with a smile to finding multiple products that suit her/his needs and tastes, sales assistants go the extra mile to ensure that the customer is satisfied and makes a purchase. Apart from these established codes of conduct for sales assistants, some also employ their own unique methods to please customers. For instance, a sales assistant in a garments store at the mall praised my remarkable taste in clothes and enquired about my family, education and aspirations, all without sounding intrusive. As far as the outfits of sales assistants were concerned, most stores such as electronics, cosmetics and certain garments shops, had strict dress codes, with both men and women expected to dress in formal shirts and trousers, to convince shoppers of the brand's/store's commitment to professionalism. This dress code was not enforced only in those stores where formals would have looked out of place, such as in shops exclusively dedicated to ethnic wear and casuals.

The active conversation that the sales assistant struck up with me gave me an opportunity to enquire about her satisfaction with her job. She said that she was happy with the job as it gave her the opportunity to work with a high-end brand, under an approachable supervisor and at a fancy workplace. What is noteworthy here is that she made no mention about her pay or working hours—the most obvious parameters for assessing job satisfaction. Unlike sales assistants, those members of the workforce, such as the cleaning and security staff who were not expected to interact with mall visitors directly, appeared reluctant to answer my queries and were even suspicious of my intentions. When I asked a cleaner about her working hours, she hastily got up from her resting spot in the

restroom, replied that she worked from 7am to 4 pm, had two 1 hour breaks in between and had a day off on Wednesday, and quickly left. When I posed the same question to the security staff at the entrance to the multiplex, they insisted that I get my answers from their manager, despite my repeated pleas. They also enquired about my background and seemed only half-convinced by my reply that I was a student working on a project on mall culture. The non-reference to pay and working conditions, the reluctance to divulge details about working conditions and the fear of upsetting the manager, are all not surprising in a state infamous for rampant violations of labour laws in the organised retail sector. In 2016, when the Telangana government announced a proposal to keep shopping malls, shops and cinema halls open 24x7, Rajender Samala, former Deputy Commissioner of Labour, said:

“With this new law, the government wants to create an impression that there is a red carpet for investors to invest anywhere in the country. However, almost 90% workers are not paid as per industry standards. Payment of wages and working hours have been eluding the labour department for long now. The existing mechanism fails to keep a tab on violations in the city. Therefore, the new system can only be implemented if the existing laws are strengthened [7]”.

The cases filed against violation of labour laws in the state are also rising. At present, over 10,000 cases filed against violations of Minimum Wages Act, Industrial Disputes Act, Employees Compensation Act, Shops and Establishments Act and many others are pending resolution [12]. Given such precarious work situations and inefficient labour laws, there are no safeguards to protect the workers at the mall from various kinds of exploitation, including sudden dismissal. Hence, despite demanding personality attributes and emphasis on ensuring customer satisfaction at all costs, sales assistants would find their jobs satisfying. Similarly, despite assurances of anonymity, the cleaning and security staff would refuse to divulge even details that could do no harm. Thus not only do shopping malls strive to mould visitors into ‘desirable’ consumers, but they also

fashion ideal workers characterised by self-disciplining.

While the analysis of workers' behaviour in the shopping mall reveals the successful manipulation of workers by the mall management, an analysis of visitors' behaviour revealed that the numerous solicitations that visitors encountered in the mall did not always elicit the desired results. I interviewed a middle aged couple who were about to leave the mall, who said that they had purchased a shirt as they intended to, following which they quickly went around the mall, and then decided to leave. In this case, we see consumers who are clear about the purpose of their visit to the mall, who proceed directly to the intended point of sale, and who are not (mis)guided by the numerous inducements to splurge. On the contrary, a young professional that I interviewed said that she had come to the mall not to shop, but to hang out with her friends. By appropriating the shopping mall as a hangout spot, and refusing to buy anything, these visitors are consuming space itself and not commodities. A few other groups that I followed in the mall seemed to be content consuming the sights around them, such as the products at the shop window and their advertisements. According to the sales assistant that I met earlier, it was a common practice for teenagers to take a number of clothes to trial rooms, where they would get selfies clicked in these clothes and leave the store without purchasing them. A few teenagers could also be seen clicking selfies against the backdrop of major brand names. All these instances show the various ways in which consumers appropriate mall spaces and products without generating profits for the commercial establishment. M. Pressdee refers to this kind of shopping as 'proletarian shopping'. A few groups that browsed the stores did not seem convinced by the prices of products or the offers on them. Two senior couples, who had come as a group and had gone into an ethnic store, came out aghast at the extortionate prices of designer clothing. Further, despite it being a holiday, and there being numerous offers to be availed, most of the shops were relatively empty. In all these instances, the visitors seem to exercise their discretionary powers and refuse to be carried away by the many inducements

to spend generously. These examples of the determined shoppers, proletarian shoppers, and shrewd shoppers show how consumers are not always ensnared by the mechanisms of manipulation employed by the mall management and are even capable of creatively appropriating these mechanisms to suit their interests.

There have also been instances when consumers have forthrightly challenged the strategies employed by the mall management. In June 2016, Vijay Gopal, who visited the INOX multiplex at GVK, filed a complaint against it with the Hyderabad Consumer Forum. He told the Forum that he was not allowed to carry his own water bottle into the theatre and was asked to purchase bottled water from the cafeteria in the multiplex. He was charged Rs. 50 for a bottle whose MRP is Rs. 20. In response, The Forum asked the multiplex to discontinue the unfair practice and even demanded all theatre managements across the city to provide free drinking water to its consumers [8].

III. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above discussion, mall culture can be seen as an example of the culture industry characterised by a relentless pursuit of maximisation of profit, which in turn necessitates enhancement of consumer demand for the goods and services they offer. The shopping mall stokes consumer demand using a variety of mechanisms already discussed, such as strategic mall design that enhances exposure to shopfronts and advertisements, advertisements that configure expenditure as necessity rather than indulgence, signage that points to paid rather than free facilities, etc. The emphasis on boosting sales and profits overrides all other concerns including respecting the rights and subjectivities of consumers and workers. However, as the analysis of visitors' behaviour revealed, strategies of the mall management are not always successful in disempowering, confusing and manipulating the visitor. Visitors often directly went to the intended point of sale, utilised the retail space for purposes they desired, derived vicarious pleasure from advertisements,

and even directly challenged the strategies of the mall management. In conclusion, though the culture industry might be powerful enough to influence certain consumers and choices, its domination is not absolute and is even vulnerable to being challenged and subverted by the consumer base it targets.

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