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The Regional Mall's Persona Wish List: The Hedonist, the Influencer and the Local Champion

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Abstract - This study investigates three consumer archetypes (hedonist, influencer, and local champion) and their potential to influence mall revitalization. Results show that a belief in the importance of the mall leads to a more enjoyable shopping experience, a subsequent willingness to pay more for locally owned stores, a greater propensity to spend more at the mall, and to engage in positive word-of-mouth. Findings suggest that local champions and influencers are vital for bringing patrons back to shopping centers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is argued that the mall and its tenants will benefit from co-marketing; the mall offering and promoting enjoyable settings and individual stores accentuating their unique experiences.

Keywords – Shopping centers, mall revitalization, retail experience, COVID-19

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners – Shopping malls and brick and mortar retail experiences are examined through a post COVID-19 lens. Changing consumer preferences after the pandemic and a shift toward e-commerce has challenged mall retailers and owners to create more appealing shopping experiences. This research aids in providing direction for the future survival and growth of regional shopping malls.

Introduction

The struggle of regional malls and the individual retailers that once occupied prime spaces in these shopping centers is well-documented. According to industry analysts, consumers are trending toward a desire for time-efficient trips to nearby stores as opposed to longer outings to shopping centers (Thomas, 2019). Indeed, regional mall properties are the most at-risk retail subtype according to Moody's Analytics commercial mortgage delinquency data (Chen & Li, 2022). It is unclear how the recent disruption to brick and mortar retail activity, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, will ultimately impact malls. On one hand, the pandemic has been argued to hasten the problems that already faced shopping centers as consumers were already turning to e-commerce at increasing rates (Felsted, 2020). On the other hand, it is argued that a post-pandemic environment is ideal timing for regional malls to provide consumers with an enjoyable in-person shopping experience (George, 2022). Despite these conflicting points of view, there is consensus that the pandemic has created a new retailing environment that requires stores to adapt to changing consumer preferences (Gardner et al., 2021).

If regional malls are to enjoy a resurgence, it is clear they must provide customers with an experience that merits their attention. It is argued that atmospherics, value-added services, a high-

tech in-store experience, and an integrated online/brick and mortar experience will all play a prominent role in successful brick and mortar retailing in a post-pandemic world (Lecointre-Erickson et al., 2021; Rao, Vihari, & Jabeen, 2021; Sheth, 2021). While these studies provide direction for what malls and their tenants should do to prepare their businesses for success, our research focus revolves around the type of customers that are positioned to provide the greatest benefit to regional malls.

This study seeks to determine whether a set of ideal customer characteristics exist that regional malls could leverage to positively impact their businesses. We examine the potential that opinion leaders, shop-local advocates, and hedonically satisfied customers can have on the future of regional malls. Specifically, the research described in this article examines mall shoppers' propensity to engage in positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) about the mall and to increase their spending at the mall as a function of a disparate set of predictors including the enjoyment of the mall shopping experience, a belief in the importance of the mall to the local economy, and a willingness to pay more for products sold at locally owned businesses.

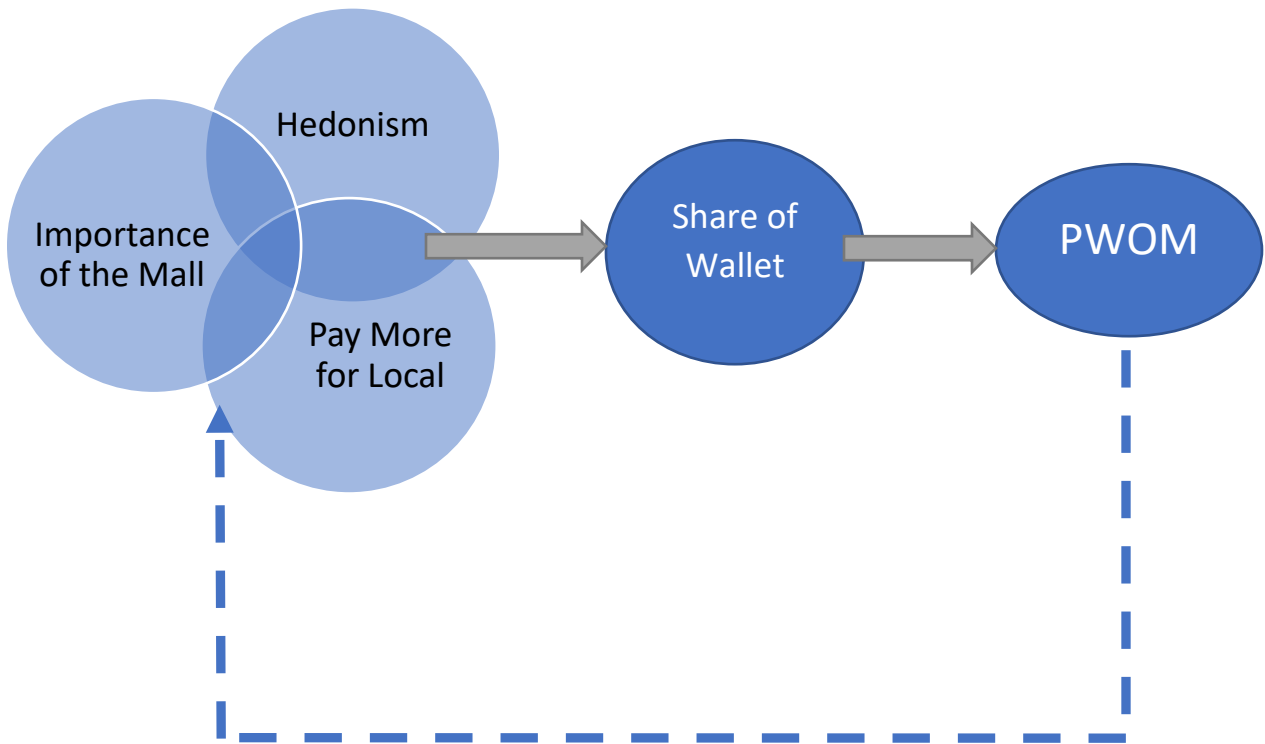
To investigate the potential of these consumer archetypes to strengthen the relevance of the regional mall in the modern retail environment, we draw on a distinct set of research streams. First, the extant literature regarding the importance of hedonic consumption is considered. Indeed, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) detailed the significance of hedonic consumption in their seminal paper regarding buyer behavior. They posited that consumer behavior includes a complex web of emotion-laden and sensory experiences. Intrinsically, the enjoyment that customers derive from shopping is thought to be of central importance to successful retailing (Kellett & Bolton, 2009). Complementary work demonstrated that outcomes of hedonic shopping experiences include PWOM, loyalty, customer satisfaction, and re-patronage intentions (Atulkar & Kesari, 2017). We extend these insights by demonstrating that customers who derive pleasure from mall shopping experiences report spending a greater share of their wallet at the mall across several important product categories.

Next, we investigate the role of the buy local mindset, which has been shown to promote a willingness to pay more to support local stores (DeNardin et al., 2015; Jayasinghe & Wanninayake, 2019). To our knowledge, previous work has neglected to analyze consumers' perception of whether stores in malls are, in fact, locally owned. Moser (2013) demonstrates that locally-owned franchises are not necessarily perceived as being locally owned. Hence, an important research question is whether stores in malls are understood to be locally owned and how that determination translates into buyer behavior. We find that as the percentage of stores that are believed to be locally owned increases, spending at the mall increases.

Finally, our research builds on the impact of opinion leaders to drive PWOM. As previous studies suggest, these individuals are revered by retailers due to their expansive networks and ability to influence purchasing decisions (Brooks, 1957; Vernetto, 2004; Gnamb, 2019). Our findings amplify the importance of influencers by showing that opinion leadership moderates the share of wallet – PWOM relationship. Thus, opinion leaders who spend more at the mall have are more likely to spread positive news about the mall to their network of contacts.

The relationships of the key constructs studied are represented in Figure 1. The assumptions are that a high level of hedonism, a sense of the economic importance of the local shopping center to the community, and a sense of local devotion (willingness to pay more to support local firms) will increase shopping center revenue and will foster PWOM. The PWOM obtained is expected to create a snowball effect. The relationships will become even more important in the new environment generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and its aftermath, as businesses search for innovative ways to effectively communicate with their target audiences.

Figure 1: Flow of assumptions and reasoning



Hypotheses Development

Importance of the Mall, Hedonism, and Pay More for Local

Regional malls used to be considered popular destinations with large trade areas that made a significant contribution to their local economies (Wakefield & Baker, 1998). They provided jobs, local tax revenue, and a place for the community to socialize while supporting the region. Although malls still achieve those things, the decline in both the number and profitability of shopping malls is concerning. For decades, studies have routinely demonstrated supporting local business is important to residents and that some customers are willing to pay a premium to shop locally (Bennison et al., 2010; Darden & Reynolds, 1971; DeNardin et al., 2015). Even so, systematic inquiry into the importance of a mall to the local population is sporadic in the literature. An

exception is the research conducted by Bernat (2005) that estimated the importance of the mall to the local economy and the consequences of a potential decline in mall patronage by using a regional input-output model.

To communicate the importance of the mall to potential customers, it is crucial to go beyond the utilitarian aspects to include the experience, emotion, and excitement associated with shopping (Ailawadi et al., 2001). While not denying the utilitarian view, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) augmented the understanding of the value of shopping by focusing on the hedonic aspects of consumption to include its multisensory, fantasy, and emotive components. Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) complex model of experiential aspects of shopping show the hedonic component as related to cognition, affect, and behavior. Hedonic mental constructs led to a number of propositions related to the emotions, desires, and imaginative constructions of reality that the consumer might experience when shopping. For example, Babin et al. (1994) created a measure of hedonic shopping value that implicitly refers to the importance of the mall.

Exploration and self-expression, as hedonic benefits of shopping, have been the axis of several studies (Ailawadi et al., 2001; Prashar et al., 2015). Vilnai-Yavetz and Gilboa (2016) developed an interesting model and demonstrated that the level of sociability of the store strengthened the role that hedonism plays in the shopping experience. This suggests that stores can cultivate a stronger relationship with the customer through social interaction. Arnold and Reynolds (2003) lend support to this supposition by discussing the inclination for socializing with friends and family in local shops. Therefore, one can argue that local stores tend to have a higher level of importance to the customer because of the positive affect and hedonism generated through the sociability and overall experience provided by the local retailer. Further, the importance of local shopping and the corresponding enjoyment it provides is also manifested in the quest to bargain shop and save money (Jin & Sternquist, 2004; Sullivan & Heitmeyer, 2008). Indeed, the desire to patronize the local mall and the excitement the shopper gets from local shopping was specifically noted by Wakefield and Baker (1998) and Micu (2013). Cumulatively, shopping centers are armed with many ways to communicate the importance of their establishment to the local economy through the varied facets of hedonic consumption. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Customer perception of the importance of the regional mall increases customer hedonism at the regional mall.

Local retailers are under increasing pressure in conducting their business because of the presence of national chains, new technology, changes in the supply chain, and readily available delivery options. All of these offer new buying possibilities and challenges for the retailer. Therefore, local businesses cannot typically compete on price. They are, in general, smaller and do not generate economies-of-scale. Nevertheless, price represents an important factor in the customer buying decision (Baglione et al., 2016; Jindal & Aribarg, 2021).

Bennison et al. (2010) investigated the local shopping provision and the viability of *local ownership*. They found that local ownership, though under pressure, is not in rapid decline. Implicitly, they suggest that support from local consumers is strong for locally owned retailers. Shoppers' movements inside and outside their local retail area was examined by the seminal research of Herrmann and Beik (1968). The level of mobility depends on the experience the shoppers get while moving outside their local area and the cost of shopping at distant locations.

Lack of an adequate local selection, income level, and the need for a novel experience are common variables that determine the mobility of the shopper.

Despite these findings, the question remains if local patrons' willingness to pay extra is dependent on the perception of the importance of the local mall. DeNardin et al. (2015) examined the price premium clients are willing to pay to support local retailers. They found that local shopping loyalty is directly related to the willingness to pay more. Thus, local businesses should promote *keep your money in the community*. The idea is to communicate local ownership in the context of *our community*. The findings are in line with earlier results showing the importance of place in the mindset of the shopper (Bennison et al., 2010). Client engagement is critical to maintain the vitality of local business. The concept of supporting the local community should be emphasized in the context of *our community*, thus creating a unity between the retailer and the client. The relationship between local ownership and pay more for local was found to be stronger for clothing retailers (DeNardin et al., 2015).

The common thread in the extant literature is that customers have a willingness to pay more to support the community. Consequently, a customer belief that the mall has economic importance to the city should translate into the willingness to pay more to support local businesses. Indeed, local patronage loyalty, and therefore the importance of local shopping, was found to have a positive relationship with local ownership and the disposition to pay more at local stores (Young, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Therefore, the second hypothesis is:

H2: Customer perception of the importance of the regional mall increases the willingness to pay more for locally owned businesses.

Hedonism and Share of Wallet

As noted, the concept of hedonism and its relationship with the importance of shopping malls to consumers can be a critical. Hedonic consumption is often juxtaposed with the utilitarian aspects of shopping. This contrasts the experience of shopping, such as emotional aspects like excitement and social interaction, versus the functional characteristics of acquiring goods for practical reasons. However, this duality is often blurred, as shoppers may be driven initially by the utility dimension (e.g., I need a new shirt) and still be compatible with another emotive layer, such as the hedonistic satisfaction of searching and finding bargains (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006; Cox et al., 1993).

The shopping context, therefore, can play a critical role on the hedonistic nature of customers and their motivation to buy certain goods and services. The shopping experience can be influenced by both the consumer and retailer. Grewel et al. (2009) suggest that there are five retail drivers that can influence purchasing, consisting of promotion, pricing, merchandise, supply chain, and location. Other authors extend the interpretation of retail drivers to include less obvious elements such as décor, atmosphere, and interactions with staff as important in affecting the level of excitement of shopping (Esbjerg et al., 2012). Roederer (2012) suggests that an array of dimensions under the control of the retailer can influence hedonism, or so-called 'hedonic-sensory' dimensions that are associated with pleasure and displeasure during the customer experience. Indeed, (Steen, 2016) argues that the design of the retail space increases the pleasure associated with the shopping experience. Subsequent research intimates that the customer plays a prominent

role in determining the hedonic value of the shopping trip due to the unique set of experiences that each customer encounters (Antéblian et al., 2013). Although the role of the customer in the overall retail experience is still being defined, there appears to be consensus that the enjoyment obtained while shopping can shape purchasing behavior and, therefore, influence the customer's spending patterns.

It follows that the more hedonic value that is generated when shopping at the mall, the more the customers spend. Indeed, Singh (2013) found that increased excitement results in more spending and thus, in the growth of retail shopping. Kim et al. (2015) empirically determined that the mall experience impacts satisfaction, loyalty, and the brand personality of the shopping center. These findings are in line with those of Bäckström and Johansson (2006). They noted that pleasurable experiences and memorable in store occurrences increase spending. Therefore, one may expect that as mall shoppers increasingly enjoy their experiences at the mall that they will spend a greater share of their overall spending at the mall across many categories of goods. Thus, the third hypothesis is:

H3: Increased hedonism at the mall increases consumers' share of wallet spent at the mall in the following categories: (a) clothing, (b) accessories, and (c) home goods.

Local Ownership and Share of Wallet

Buy local campaigns often increase sales and signal an advantage for locally owned businesses since shoppers perceive *buy local* as being associated with local ownership (Lyon, 2014). Parekh, et al. (2011) analyzed retail locations and found that local shopping and the perception of local ownership significantly helped increase sales. Antecedents of a buy local mentality include local patriotism, moral obligation, and ethnocentrism (Jayasinghe & Wanninayake, 2019; Zebal & Jackson, 2019). DeNardin et al. (2015) concluded that local shopping loyalty is positively related to the willingness to pay more. Hence, an opportunity is presented for regional malls to exploit. Indeed, inside the regional mall exists a steadily growing number of stores owned by local franchisees (Kaiser, 2017). Nevertheless, locally-owned franchises are not necessarily perceived as being locally owned (Moser, 2013). Therefore, it is not clear that malls will inevitably benefit from the reality of numerous stores being locally owned if they are not also perceived to be owned by entrepreneurs in the community. We suggest that malls will obtain a greater share of the customers' wallet as a product of their willingness to pay more to support locally owned stores, provided they believe the stores are locally owned. Thus:

H4: The increased perception that stores in the mall are locally owned moderates customers' willingness to pay more for locally owned stores and will result in an increased share of the consumers' wallet spent at the mall in the following categories: (a) clothing, (b) accessories, and (c) home goods.

Share of Wallet, Opinion Leadership, and PWOM

The role of word of mouth in buying behavior has been shown to have a strong impact on the decision-making process of other customers (Hickman, 2019; Waltenrath et al., 2022). As a result, companies place a premium on generating positive product reviews (Cort and Leak, 2022). For

brand loyal customers, it is expected that PWOM should be naturally motivated. In fact, increased spending with a brand has historically been viewed as an indication of brand loyalty (Fader & Schmittlein, 1993). Further, determinations find that both a positive attitude of the brand and positive experiences with the brand increase the odds that the customer will act as an advocate for the brand (Kim et al., 2016; Raajpoot & Ghiloni-Wage, 2019). This complements the work of Reichheld (2003) who conjectures that the best predictor of a brand’s growth is the percentage of its customers that will act as an advocate for the brand.

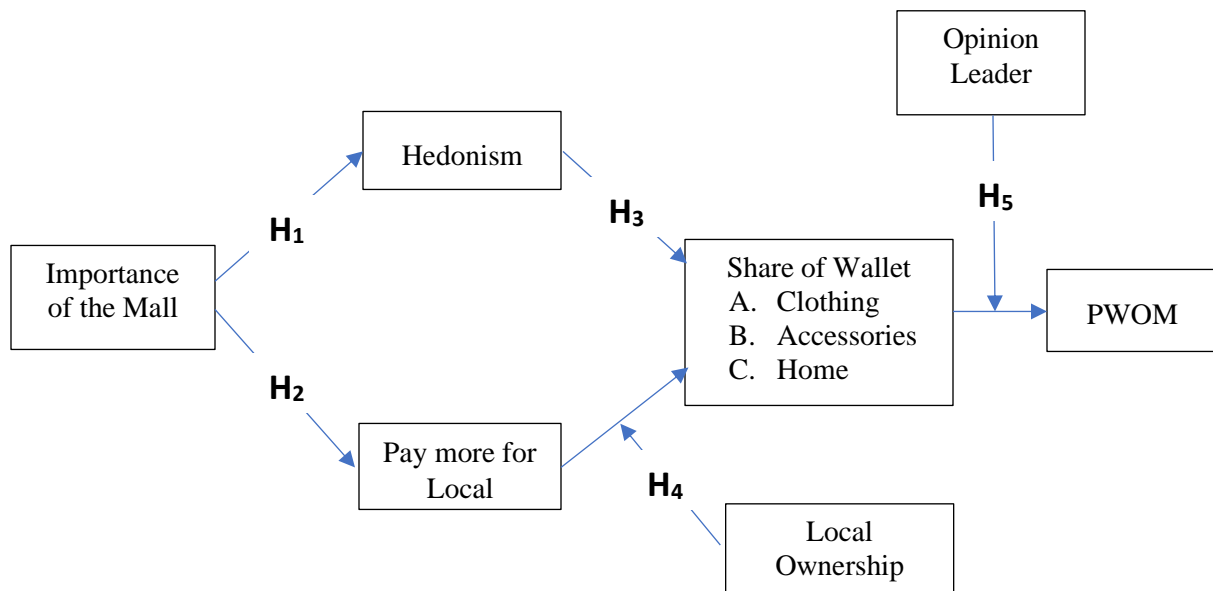
Opinion leaders are well positioned to be particularly valuable to the effort of firms to acquire PWOM and have long been valued resources to disseminate information, in large part due to their numerous connections (Nafees et al., 2020). They are conceptualized as individuals that possess a characteristic that allows them to influence friends, family members, and colleagues on a range of decisions and attitudes (Gnambs, 2019). Vernetta (2004) concludes that opinion leaders even have the ability to amplify the effectiveness of advertising because their point of view on a product or service is valued and represents an unbiased complement to brand messaging.

Furthermore, their ability and desire to influence others is due to both their willingness to sway others and the position of stature they often hold in a social network or community (Nafees et al., 2020; Waltenrath et al., 2022). This raw transmission power, of course, is only desirable if the word of mouth is positive and not negative. While it is expected that an increased share of wallet obtained by regional mall tenants should increase PWOM, it is predicted that self-identified opinion leaders will magnify this relationship due to their interest in influencing the behavior of others.

H5: As share of wallet for mall tenants increases in (a) clothing, (b) accessories, and (c) home goods, the self-perception of being an opinion leader will positively moderate the share of wallet/PWOM relationship.

The model and the hypotheses are presented below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Model and hypotheses



Method

The regional mall associated with this study advised that the target market was 25 to 64-year-old females. This understanding of the target market is supported by findings that women are more frequent visitors of shopping malls than are men (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). A total of 410 target market shoppers were surveyed using a mall intercept technique consistent with the recommendations of Sudman (1980). The surveys were collected daily over a four-week timeframe. Mall management organized a drawing of five \$50 gift cards to the mall as an incentive for respondents to complete the survey.

Measurement

Mall management was particularly interested in the spending patterns in three distinct categories: clothing, accessories, and home goods. To calculate share of wallet, a process like that used by Hickman (2020) asked respondents to estimate the percentage of their spending that was completed in each of these categories at the mall. Measures used by Zhang and Li (2012) were used to assess the perception of the importance of the mall in the local community. Hedonism was measured from a scale created by Babin et al. (1994), a willingness to pay more to support local stores was measured with a scale adapted from Hozier and Stem (1985), and opinion leadership was determined by using measures from the opinion leadership scale created by Flynn et al. (1996). Next, subjects reported the percentage of stores within the mall they believed were locally owned and concluded the survey by reporting their predilection to engage in PWOM about the mall using measures from Zeithaml et al. (1996).

Results

The results for this study were computed using SPSS 27. Reliability analysis demonstrated that all the variables in the study exceeded the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978). A score of one to five was created for each respondent based on the average response to the measures associated with the respective five-point Likert scale. The mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha for each variable are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach alpha of measured variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Mall_Importance	4.29	.74	.79
Hedonism	2.89	.87	.85
PayMore	3.80	.75	.83
Opinion Leader	3.45	.60	.70
PWOM	3.17	.99	.84

It was hypothesized that the perception of importance of the mall in the community (Mall_Importance) would have a positive impact on both the enjoyment experienced at the mall (H1: Hedonism) and the willingness to pay more to support local stores (H2: PayMore). To test these hypotheses, Mall_Importance was dichotomized and respondents were categorized as either high or low in Mall_Importance. This process is consistent with other studies that have relied on median split analysis of measured variables (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2005). Respondents classified as Mall_Importance_{High} ($M = 4.85, SD = .23$) believed that the mall was significantly more important to the community than those labeled Mall_Importance_{Low} ($M = 3.65, SD = .59$); $t(407) = 27.73, p < .000$.

Table 2: Median split analysis (N = 410)

H	Predictor Variable	Dependent Variable	Predictor Level	Dependent M	Dependent S.D.	t	p
1	Mall Importance	Hedonism	High	3.10	.90	5.44	.000
			Low	2.64	.78		
2	Mall Importance	PayMoreFor Local	High	4.01	.72	6.40	.000
			Low	3.56	.70		
3a	Hedonism	Clothing Share	High	44.0%	25.90	7.45	.000
			Low	26.5%	21.27		
3b	Hedonism	Accessories Share	High	30.2%	26.30	6.38	.000
			Low	15.3%	19.97		
3c	Hedonism	Home Goods Share	High	22.9%	21.99	6.37	.000
			Low	10.4%	16.60		

As reported in Table 2, H1 was supported since respondents classified as Mall_Importance_{High} displayed significantly higher levels of Hedonism ($M = 3.10, SD = .90$) than shoppers categorized as Mall_Importance_{Low} ($M = 2.64, SD = .78$); $t(406) = 5.44, p < .000$. H2 was also supported as customers characterized as Mall_Importance_{High} reported a significantly higher willingness to PayMore ($M = 4.01, SD = .72$) than Mall_Importance_{Low} ($M = 3.56, SD = .70$); $t(406) = 6.40, p < .000$. H1 was further supported with regression analysis that demonstrated the predictive ability of Mall_Importance ($B = 0.41$) on Hedonism, ($F(1,406) = 55.23, p < .000$, with an adjusted $R^2 = .118$). Likewise, H2 was validated using regression analysis as Mall_Importance ($B = 0.43$) was a significant predictor of PayMore, ($F(1,406) = 89.27, p < .000$, with an adjusted $R^2 = .179$). These results are displayed in Table 3.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the share of wallet obtained by mall tenants would be influenced by customers' enjoyment of shopping at the mall. Hedonism was dichotomized using a median split. It was documented that customers with higher levels of Hedonism_{High} ($M = 3.58, SD = .53$) reported significantly more enjoyment at the mall than did customers with lower levels of Hedonism_{Low} ($M = 2.17, SD = .50$); $t(407) = 28.01, p < .000$. H3a, H3b, and H3c were all supported because customers categorized as Hedonism_{High} spent a significantly higher share of their wallet than their counterparts described as Hedonism_{Low} in all three spending categories as seen in Table 2. Further support of H3 is found in Table 3 where regression analysis demonstrates that Hedonism was a significant predictor of share of wallet in each of the spending categories measured.

Table 3: Regression analysis for H1 – H3

H	Predictor Variable	Dependent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Adjusted R^2	F	p
			B	SD			
1	Mall_Importance	Hedonism	.41	.06	.118	55.23	.000
2	Mall_Importance	Pay More Local	.43	.05	.179	89.27	.000
3a	Hedonism	Share of Clothing	13.25	1.28	.207	106.61	.000
3b	Hedonism	Share/Accessories	10.79	1.29	.147	69.66	.000
3c	Hedonism	Share/Home Good	8.89	1.10	.143	65.55	.000

Hypothesis 4 predicted that a belief that an increasing percentage of stores in the mall were locally owned would moderate the willingness to pay more for goods sold by local merchants and the customer's reported share of wallet in each of the three spending categories (a) clothing, (b) accessories, and (c) home goods. The technique recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) was used and the analysis confirmed this relationship in all three categories. Indeed, the interaction terms are significant for all three categories and provide most of the explanation of the full model as demonstrated by the adjusted R^2 results in Table 4 below. Thus, H4 is fully supported.

Finally, H5 anticipated that a self-perception of being an opinion leader would moderate the share of wallet/PWOM relationship such that an increased level of PWOM would increase as a function of the proclivity to act as an opinion leader. The technique proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) was used and the results shown in Table 5 demonstrate that the interaction effect (opinion leader X share of wallet) captures most of the variance from the full model. For example, the interaction effect in the clothing category had an adjusted $R^2 = 0.164$, representing over 90% of the adjusted $R^2 = 0.187$ of the full model. This suggests that women are likely to use their tendency to act as an opinion leader in all three categories of goods.

Table 4: Determinants of share of wallet and positive word of mouth (H4 and H5)

H4: Share of Wallet Depends on Perception of Local Ownership

Predictors	Dependent Variable	Adjusted R^2	Interaction effect only	Adjusted R^2	Significance
H4 – A. Share of Clothing on Pay More for Local moderated by Locally Owned					
PayMoreforLocal Locally Owned Interaction effect	Share of Clothing	.157	PayMoreforLocal X Locally Owned	.147	0.000
H4 – B. Share of Accessories on Pay More for Local moderated by Locally Owned					
PayMoreforLocal Locally Owned Interaction effect	Share of Accessories	.117	PayMoreforLocal X Locally Owned	.111	0.000
H4 – C. Share of Home Goods on Pay More for Local moderated by Locally Owned					
PayMoreforLocal Locally Owned Interaction effect	Share of Home Goods	.177	PayMoreforLocal X Locally Owned	.151	0.000

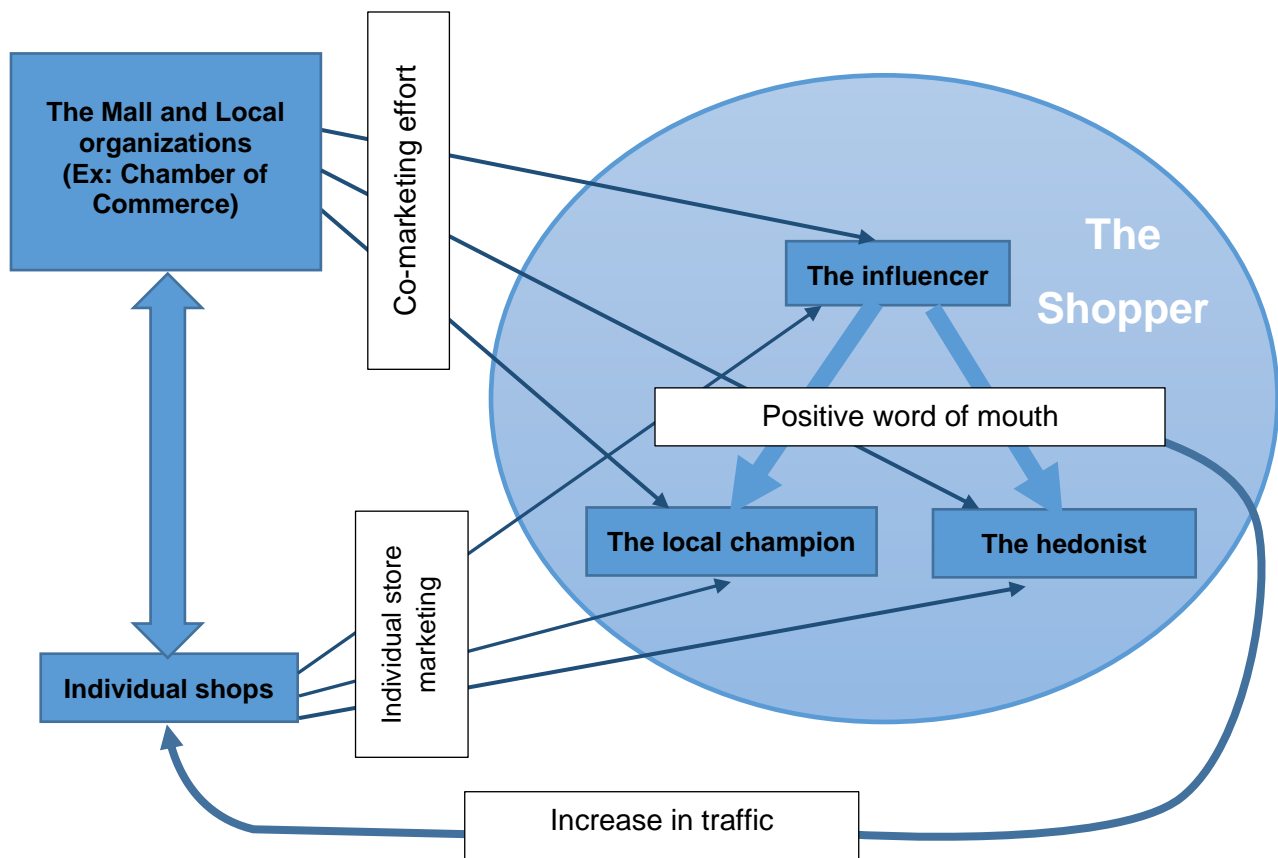
H5: Positive Word of Mouth Generated by Local Champions

Predictors	Dependent Variable	Adjusted R^2	Interaction effect only	Adjusted R^2	Significance
H5 – A. PWOM on Share of Clothing moderated by Opinion Leader					
Share of Clothing Opinion Leader Interaction effect	PWOM	.187	Opinion Leader X Share of Clothing	.164	0.000
H5 – B. PWOM on Share of Accessories moderated by Opinion Leader					
Share of Accessories Opinion Leader Interaction effect	PWOM	.107	Opinion Leader X Share of Accessories	.098	0.000
H5 – C. PWOM on Share of Home Goods moderated by Opinion Leader					
Share of Home Goods Opinion Leader Interaction effect	PWOM	.131	Opinion Leader X Share of Home Goods	.113	0.000

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that malls will be rewarded with increased business if they are able to provide an enjoyable shopping experience to key constituents. Figure 3 summarizes the conclusions of this study and provides a roadmap for mall management and individual stores to consider in reinventing their collective marketing strategy.

Figure 3: The influencer, the hedonist and the local champion: Their role in increasing retail traffic



Critically, opinion leaders must have a positive opinion about the mall or the risk is that these influencers will direct their followers away from the mall. Therefore, malls must provide a shopping experience that compels opinion leaders to spread PWOM throughout their expansive networks of other potential customers. In crafting a marketing communications strategy, malls should seek to educate customers on the local ownership aspect of their shopping centers.

The International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) reports that about 50% of all mall tenants are locally owned businesses and that particularly proactive malls are aggressively seeking local entrepreneurs to fill their spaces (Gustafson, 2018). If properly marketed, this strategy is poised to harness the power of customers' penchant to support small businesses in their communities and provide a much-needed boost to regional malls. The ultimate goal is to create a PWOM pandemic that leverages opinion leaders, appeals to local champions, and creates a hedonic shopping experience that cannot be ignored. Shopping centers, mall tenants, and key allies in the community such as the Chamber of Commerce must work synergistically to position the mall as a destination to support local business in a way that satisfies the customers' need for a pleasurable experience.

The broad conclusions of this study, depicted in Figure 3, complement and extend the insights from previous research. Huang (2010) finds that people, in general, are more inclined to spread PWOM about an experience as opposed to cognitive information. In addition, Leisen Pollack (2019) showed that the environmental friendliness of the service encounter amplifies the positive emotions experienced by the customer. Therefore, if an experience in a regional mall can be made positive and memorable, the highly sought-after opinion leader is even more likely to convey PWOM. This benefit is clear since opinion leaders are looked to by other consumers for their judgment and recommendations (Kuksov & Liao, 2019).

Shopping centers understand the value in creating experiences and are beginning to move away from the more traditional utilitarian model of simply providing a wide assortment of goods under one large and comprehensive roof. In an investigation of trends in the usage of the square footage in malls, Thomas (2019) finds that at some shopping centers that square footage devoted to apparel is only about 25% compared to 60% in previous years. The article notes that The Mall of America, located in Bloomington, MN, is a prime example of understanding the importance of creating a shopping experience that taps into the hedonic needs of consumers. It is reported that only about half of the 4.2 million square feet are dedicated to retailing. The balance is comprised of a seven-acre theme park, restaurants, and numerous nightlife options. While consumer movement to e-commerce is undeniable and other local retailers also pose a threat to malls, the findings reported in this article provide guidance to shopping centers to better connect with consumers through hedonic experiences created by homegrown entrepreneurs. This claim is further supported by the conclusions of Bagdare and Roy (2016). These researchers determined that even visuals impact the overall shopping experience.

Managerial Implications

The perception of the importance to the local economy of malls, the understanding of the local ownership within the mall, and the pleasure derived from the shopping experience are the three main elements that drove customers to the mall as shown by the current study. These factors are also positioned to be the main drivers that will bring back the customer after the mitigation of COVID-19. The results suggest that the triad formed by the hedonist, the influencer and the local champion is vital for the survival of regional malls. The influencer will generate word of mouth based on the understanding that shopping centers are important for the local economy as local ownership spurs pride in the local community. This is in line with earlier results that show the

importance of creating a unity between the retailer and the client (Bennison et al., 2010; DeNardin et al., 2015).

The excitement the customer acquires from shopping, including the aesthetics and the emotions related to going to the store is crucial for the retailer's success (Ailawadi et al., 2001). We argue that in the context of the environment created after the COVID-19 crisis, the hedonic side of shopping is more important than its utilitarian aspects. Indeed, the utilitarian side of shopping is more relevant for e-commerce since the hedonic element of shopping faces obvious challenges in the online world (Jayasankaraprasad & Kathyayani, 2014). Therefore, brick and mortar shopping centers must maximize their hedonistic potential since the physical location is a sustainable competitive advantage versus the e-commerce giants. In fact, Bardhi and Arnould (2005) showed that even the hedonic value of thrift is satisfied in local shops. Further, Grantham et al. (2021) argue that meaningful interaction with store personnel gives customers satisfaction. Thus, regional malls have more latitude to determine ways to convey the hedonic experience.

A blend of individual and co-marketing efforts is necessary to bring the customer back to the mall in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. Mall management should stress the importance of shopping locally and pride in local ownership (Bernat 2005; Darden & Reynolds, 1971, DeNardin et al., 2015). Mall atmospherics and mall environment are also critical since the mall is part of metawrapping of products and services (Michon & Chebat, 2004). The impact of servicescape cleanliness on the customer experience, demonstrated by Vilani-Yavetz and Gilboa (2010), will only be amplified in a post-COVID-19 mindset. A co-marketing effort that is centered on supporting local business in an enjoyable setting stands to not only increase sales, but also to increase PWOM that is further intensified via opinion leaders. These practical implications of this study are summarized in Table 5.

Individual stores should accentuate hedonism by emphasizing their unique atmosphere, services such as consulting *in situ*, and other excitement generating experiences for the shopper. An interesting implication, revealed by Vilnai-Yavetz and Gilboa (2016), is that hedonism might have a two-way relationship with both the business context and the customer appearance. Aesthetics enhancement, given by the business context, combined with customer appearance might have a general increase in hedonism for a whole population of customers and thus an increase in traffic, creating a snowball effect. Moreover, individual locally owned stores should stress their homegrown roots to their customers by building and marketing their local flavor.

Our findings indicate that the belief that the mall is important to the local economy leads to more enjoyment experienced at the mall and to a subsequent willingness to pay more to support local stores. Interestingly, research on consumers' willingness to pay more for local food products has been associated with higher revenues for local restaurants, an industry where malls have many local tenants (Frash et al., 2015). We conclude that shopping center revival after the COVID-19 crisis lies in a cooperative marketing effort that includes community small business organizations, mall management, and the individual stores in the mall. Identifying the influencers and local champions followed by a customized targeted promotional effort is essential in generating PWOM. We contend that this coordinated effort has the potential to catapult regional malls from beleaguered to beloved.

Table 5: Promotional efforts and their implications

Marketing Source	Hedonism	Importance of local shopping	Local Ownership	Comments
Co-marketing (shopping center, mall, cluster of stores)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shopping center atmosphere • Shopping center amenities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taxes (Generate revenue) • Economic growth • Jobs • Urbanization • Sophistication • Increase traffic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local patriotism • Our community • Community pride 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop the mindset of the influencer (help the influencer understand the importance of the mall in the local economy) • Position the mall/shopping center in the mind of the local customer as important and enjoyable social and shopping opportunity
Individual store marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humor • Consulting • Socialization • Story telling • Offer a unique experience • Unique atmosphere 	<p><i>Not Applicable</i></p> <p>Individual stores should focus on promoting their own business</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local ingredients • Local parts • Local atmosphere • Local customization • Local flavor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attract local customers by highlighting and accentuating their individual store attractiveness. • Attract customers from different areas due to local specific of the offerings • Rethink the way the individual store could offer an enjoyable and unique local experience

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