



Megamalls as site for social interaction: A case study of Shoprite and Ventura, Ibadan, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks deeply into megamalls as site for social interaction; a case study of Shoprite and Ventura, Ibadan. Shopping as a commercial activity involves social dimension as well as consumption while mega mall changes local consumption and urban environments dramatically. People come to malls basically for consumerist fantasies and a common ground for sociability. In-depth interviews were conducted with fun seekers/patrons and mall authorities in the rank of managers in the organisations. The interview materials were recorded, thematically coded, transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. Findings shows that megamalls were found to provides four different social functions which includes the opportunities for social interaction, building and formation of social ties, social mixing and blending across social groups and divide as well as all inclusive society. Based on literature perused and information gathered through sight-seeing and interview, it can be concluded that Shoprite and Ventura in Ibadan metropolis are indeed sites for social interaction. It is therefore recommended that more megamalls should be made available to create avenue for enjoyment and recreations. There is need for public-private partnership to galvanize the maintenance of such platforms if owned by Government.

Key words: Megamalls, Social Interaction, Urban centers, Development

INTRODUCTION

Various commercial activities in terms of exchange of goods and services in history can be traced back to earliest period when human beings played the ancient forms of social life (Watson and Studdert, 2006). After the development of social organization and means of production, commercial activity began to develop. Most of the commercial buildings are located in cities, because regular and continuous commercial activity could be improved only in urban centers. Varieties of commercial goods at high quality could be produced only in an urban environment. However, through the change in life styles, megamalls which are the dominant examples of commercial buildings moved to suburban areas and turned out to be social arenas for chatting, buying, meeting new friends, exchange contacts etc. In fact, crime and other negative effects of daily living decrease the enjoyment of the use values of parks, plazas, and city public space, hence megamalls becomes the order of the day.

Shopping as a commercial activity modifies its meaning; it involves social dimension as well as consumption. It is an everyday activity and a social practice. It can be said that shopping is a reflection of life-style. Miller et. al. (1998) argued that “consumers gather around objects which define their identity and become centerpieces of particular routines of sociability”. Thus, the most important duty of shopping malls is to answer this identity need of people; because, otherwise they cannot become meaningful social spaces. Nowadays, although one of the main duties of cities is to provide public spaces for social interactions, they become intimidating environments due to the perceived “social fear” (Jewell, 2001). It is hard to live peacefully in public urban areas, so people have begun to look for substitute places where socialization can occur. Within such environment, people begin not to prefer socialization in a common public ground which was provided by the old city centre due to fear or inconvenience, public spaces are discarded. Therefore, the fully enclosed, climate controlled shopping areas known as ‘malls’ become the places where social communion occurs (Gürçel, 2003).

Megamalls clearly operate as key sites of sociability, but the form that this takes and people involved vary across different market sites, conditions and locations. It performs different roles for different social groups, their importance and use among the population varies. Megamalls provide opportunities for social interaction; building and formation of social ties; social mixing and blending across social groups and divide; as well as all inclusive society (). Social interaction ranges from a very minimal connection, such as greeting between acquaintances or between shoppers and traders, to extended conversations between those who have met up in the megamalls, or extended interactions between stallholders and the customers they serve. This engagement can lead to the formation of strong social bonding where friends and families trade together and form a particular community, or where traders and regular shoppers get to know each other over time. Social mixing refers more specifically to interactions across different socio-economic, demographic and ethnic/racial groups. Megamalls’ role as a site of social inclusion refers to the fact that it can operate well as a public space where marginalized groups come to spend time, thereby providing opportunities to escape isolation in the home or elsewhere, while also providing an economically inclusive space by offering cheap goods that may not be available elsewhere.

Watson and Studdert (2006) assert that megamalls provide a key site for the meeting and management of differences across cultures in the local community. In their study, the interviews

with both shoppers and mall managers revealed that the social atmosphere and vibrancy of a megamall will greatly be enhanced in markets where traders had strong connections between themselves. This could take various forms. For many shoppers, the daily or weekly interaction they had with traders was cited as a key reason for going to the market, even if they have reported no other social exchange on the market site. Many reported the pleasure of banter as a form of social interaction with market traders. In some markets, traders performed an exaggerated theatricality that appeared to contribute to their stalls' success as well as enhancing the shoppers' experience.

Mega malls show different recreational activities for shoppers. Buket (2010) states that... by affording opportunities for social life and recreation in a protected pedestrian environment, by incorporating civic and educational facilities, shopping centres can fill an existing void. They can provide the needed place and opportunity for participation in modern community life than the ancient. The basic function of the mega mall is to create an environment where business can take place, where patrons and shoppers can exchange money for the goods and services of the retailer as well as enjoy the ambience of a serene and relaxed environment. The patron does not just visit to shop, but also for social contact and other entertainment/recreation activities. In fact, some patron goes to the mall just for recreation without the intention of shopping.

Kuria (1975) observes that whilst people shop, they meet, converse and make friends. An ideal shopping centre depicts awesome requirements for a community as well as fulfils cultural, social and recreational needs. This makes a significant contribution to better living. According to Barry Maitland in *Shopping Malls: Planning and Design*, the public space is the major marketing attraction for the retail areas it serves, if not quite a marketable commodity. People may not go out to shopping malls for the shopping itself, but rather to "hang out". The shopping mall therefore offers a space where people can relax as much as in they may want to shop. The experience that the buyers have is very important in determining whether such an individual will visit again or not.

Allison Arieff (2009) in the *New York Times* writes on "Rethinking the Mall", he observes that retail to the people is of an outstanding importance in the success of a shopping mall. Megamall is a social environment that is not one's home or office, but rather a "third place" in which to socialize, work or just hang out. A café in the shopping mall should not just

be a place to hang out and/or work from a laptop, but part of a self-sustaining, self-generating scenario of distributed shopping experiences.

In an interview conducted by the Henry Ford Foundation (2009), Alfred Taubman, who developed some of the most successful malls in the United States, talks on the success of shopping malls, and the factors that influence the same. He submits that ultimately, the success of a shopping mall is grounded in a profound level of insight into the shopper's experience. He argues that, people want to be closer to other people, just in the same way that a person doesn't want to sit home alone and watch a movie on their television, but rather goes to a movie theatre to pay for the same movie. People are "entertained" by just watching other people go about their business. One of the most important components of urban environment is diversity which gives its characteristics or identity. Mega malls are universal by means of values in the environment, because they do not offer any sign which belongs to a cultural identity of a society. Some authentic sitting places are organized. Jewell (2001) states "what we ultimately identify in the image of megamalls is not a place, but ourselves", which means that no matter where shopping mall is located, fantasies and inner joy derived from shopping is what makes mega malls unique.

Megamall and social interaction as part of life

Social identity and interaction is described as a social process that shifts according to social context and the way that identities can be expressed in relation to particular places and particular goods. Although mall cannot be thought as a totally public space, it is a quasi-public space which brings people together as it creates some sort of behaviours in the social context and "by creating a kind of urban ambiance in a quasi-public space, the mall enables a variety of behaviours not all of which are instrumentally linked to the purchase of commodities. These days, people come to the mall basically for two reasons; first, people are driven by consumerist fantasies and secondly to find a common ground for sociability in a society with limited opportunities for public interactions (Ferdman, 2018; Creel, 2006; Munich, 2004; Talwar, 2003).

Further research concentrates on megamalls as places that create a new kind of social space which is different from traditional markets. Past studies have established that shoppers view malls as a source of entertainment (Bloch et al. 1994). The main shopping motive of recreational shoppers is hedonistic shopping. This group of shopping mall visitors includes shoppers who are looking for fun, leisure and social interaction (Bellinger et al 1977; Bellinger

and Kargaonkar 1980). They are likely to spend more time in the mall as compared to the other groups.

Abdelghani (2013) asserts that an increase in the number of expatriates and foreign tourism leads to the introduction of megamalls which will provides global goods, the desire to consume global goods come from the local population, whose consumption patterns are affected by urbanization and cultural globalization. Apparently, immigrants with their culturally specific consumption behaviour and the increasing number of international tourists are driven by the feeling of being at home in a foreign land. Hence the need for a megamall which will depicts all round living irrespective of societies. Megamalls are characterized by the multiplicity of nationalities living there. It is being dictated by the conditions of the economic development and by population trends in the country.

Conceptual Review

Concept of megamall

Mega malls are not only the physical places but also gathering places which offer social relations. Jewell (2001) claims “by manipulating what we perceive as the threat of crime in the urban environment, and our insular state of passivity, the mall ruthlessly exploits our communal fears as the basis of its experiential ideas”. It offers environments resembling city centers with social relations in a new structure with the toga of *‘come and do shopping, then you will have a chance to have social interactions*. Miller et. al. (1998) sees malls as “places which perennially reconstitute social relationships through various practices of shopping and identity”. Moreover, a number of pathways leading to emotional satisfactions are felt by most subcultures of age, gender or class of amusement society, because these pathways converge in the mall (Langman, 1992).

Social interaction and recreation is man’s way of passing time in an exciting way. It is the refreshment of the mind and body after work, especially by engaging in enjoyable activities (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary). By defining recreational or social interaction centres as areas, structures, buildings or any other such places where recreation facilities are offered, shopping mega malls can then be seen as recreational facilities, since they offer exciting ways of passing time, e.g. shopping, entertainment etc. The concept of just “being in a shopping mega mall, seeing and being seen” is also a form of recreation. Nunnink (1993), states that among the factors

that may be credited for the success of megamalls is the emergence of malls as family activity centres that contain theatres, food courts and other enhancements. Therefore, for a shopping mega mall to be successful, it needs to have quality recreational facilities. It has to create an environment where shopping and recreation can be combined into one enjoyable exercise. Mega mall is indeed sites for social interaction.

Types of megamalls

There are generally two types of megamalls. Type I comprises of centres with a number of diverse shops (for food, clothes, electrical equipment, perfumes, pharmacies etc.). In addition, a number of restaurants, cafés and entertainment venues exist. Both international and local brands are represented here, including leading names in fashion, accessories, footwear and perfumes. Some of these types of megamalls have cafe and restaurants. The second type of megamalls is basically for shopping and noting more. It is usually a single large arena, shop or store which sells many items of food, clothing, electrical equipment etc. This type does not have a number of separate shops, and it is owned or managed as one unit by one company. It may not be really addressed as megamalls but a mini-shopping centre.

Ethnographic description of Shoprite and Ventura Malls in Ibadan

Description of Shoprite in Ibadan

Shoprite holdings limited is an investment company whose combined subsidiaries constitute the largest fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) retails operation on the African continent (Adebowale 2014). Shoprite remains the number one supermarket in Nigeria. Their philosophy is bringing customers with lower prices they can trust on their basic food and household requirements in a convenient shopping environment. Shop rite has two mega centres in Ibadan. First, the largest in west Africa- Ibadan Mall situated at opposite high court, ring road, Ibadan mall in Ibadan North West and the second branch is at Cocoa Mall situated at Bank Road Dugbe. Both centres portray a magnificent edifice with big stores, it has a large supermarket chain selling household goods, foodstuffs, provision, drinks, grocery and other assorted goods in one place. The meat market division offers prime cuts and top quality fresh meat. Its objective like other branches is to provide host communities and its environs with food and household items in a first-world shopping environment, at the lowest prices as well as to control its supply chain.

Shoprite in Ibadan has few years' worth of investment in infrastructure, software solutions, skills and knowledge delivered both a mechanism by which to sustain low price points for a longer duration than competitors, while at the same time maintaining a high level of product availability. This has been a winning recipe for maintaining customer loyalty and boosting sales growth at minimal cost. The Group's strategy to control the supply chain not only provides a distinct competitive advantage and an ability to manage risk, but it also has made sound business sense.

The branch manager, Fatai Oshungboye asserts that apart from providing employment opportunities, Nigerians now have the opportunity to buy goods and services at cheaper prices. A fair price system has helped the Shoprite stores led growth in value per transaction remaining below the food inflation rate. However, these savings also brought increasing numbers of consumers into Shoprite malls as Ibadan people loves averagely cheap items, goods and services. Shoprite focuses on markets with growth potential and rich natural resources, which drives future economic growth and therefore increased national wealth as well as consumer spending figures. Shoprite models its cross-border investments on its shopping centre developments in South Africa.

Description of Ventura, Sango Ibadan

The Ventura Mall is an ultra-modern shopping mall with offering a place for relaxation and entertainment with facilities such as shopping complex, children game arcade, film house and food courts. It was built by the former Accountant-General of the Federation, Mr. Jonah Ogunniyi Otunla on plot 5 and 6 old aerodrome road along Sango-UI road, Samonda GRA in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Ibadan, Oyo State Nigeria. The mall is mainly into Cinema Halls, Entertainment, Provision Stores and offering Provision Items. Ventura Mall is a very beautiful mall where people get almost all necessities from food to clothes to doing makeup, getting hair done or barbed, getting a professional picture, playing arcade games etc. A perfect location in a serene environment delivering unlimited fun opportunities, The Ventura Mall remains a one-stop spot in 'Ibadan city' for unwinding and merrymaking. There are facilities in place such as shopping complex, children game arcade, film house and food courts to guarantee an all-round access to fun. It is one of the coolest spots in Ibadan and great for indoor gathering as well as couple dates etc. There is also a film house cinema there with cool customer service.

The Ventura mall film house is the first cinema in the largest city in West Africa set up to develop and operate cinemas in Nigeria and West Africa. It is designed in such a way that its operation style incorporates complimentary multifarious features such as fame arcades, ice cream café, food concession, toys shop, digital cinema, 3D cinema, 'iScream' cafe brand, 'soul food' brand, Digital cinema, 3D, gold class cinema (in select locations), games arcade and kid's club. and a club for the kids. It is a cynosure of all eyes as people trouping in to watch one latest box office block buster movies and animations. With carriage, candour and serenity, the film house treats its visitors to a viewing pleasure of the latest Nollywood movies especially those having raving reviews. The cinema has a couple of facilities that makes it a perfect hangout destination in Ibadan. Film house's achievement is driven primarily by a strong experienced management team, innovative marketing activities and impressive guest service standards. Construction work is ongoing at a new eatery opening at the basement just beside the main entrance, Pixels Digital System is opening soon, Dayronan's Nail Bar will also be commencing operations; Teol's Place has a space, Lily Textiles has one too and europa is already doing business.

METHODOLOGY

The paper was culled from unpublished master degree research work by the author. It is explorative in nature and based on survey method. Data were obtained through primary (interview schedule, observation) and secondary sources (different reviews of related studies from various published and unpublished records, reports, books, journals, and magazines). The researcher follows a purposive sampling technique in picking Ventura, Sango area and Shoprite, Challenge, Ibadan for this study. Also photograph of each sections in the organisations were taken during the research visits to capture how people were using the malls and to show key features of the events arena. In-depth interviews were conducted with fun seekers/patrons and mall authorities in the rank of managers in the organisations. The interview material were recorded, thematically coded, transcribed and analysed. Most of these were one-to-one interviews. Effort was made to interview them all for a lengthy period of 15-20mins which is based on gender, age and ethnicity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Items in the interview guide seeks response to the type of services, opportunities, and benefits mega malls offer that are essentially different from the small shops that are initially patronized. All the participants submit that there are many things that make them different, stand out and qualify as a megamall all over in Ibadan and by extension Nigeria. This same factor according to participant put at an advantage. A participant, (P1_M, Shoprite) corroborated the fact. In his words; “our mall offers some benefits that can’t be gotten in any other place. Knowing that you are coming to the mall alone is exciting. There is a sightseeing effect, the conducive and serene environment, safety. Everywhere in the mall is fully air conditioned. So coming to the mall exposed you to a lot of comfort, there are lot of facilities here that are not common outside the mall. In short, coming to the mall gives you a wow experience’. Participant three (P2_M Shoprite), in his words, “Well, the ambience here is breathtaking. When it comes to entertainment no other place can beat us in this town. Our services are unique and classic. More importantly, most of our facilities are imported. So we offer great entertainment that people can’t get in other places in town except here”. In the words of participant six (P6_M Shoprite); “This is a one stop destination where you can get all your goods in a single place at affordable prices”. Hence, megamall provides shoppers the opportunity to get all they need in one place

On megamall- Shoprite and Ventura continual patronage, all the six participants attest to the fact that they maintain good customer service. They affirmed that customers are their priority and are treated as such. They claimed to cherish every customer and offer promotional activities periodically especially in their film house and provided them with various platforms on social medium to relate well and get access to hot and fresh information about their products and services. They keep them abreast of happenings. In summary of their shared opinions, they specifically argued that “Good customer relations, quality of goods, services trust, effective service delivery, conducive and clean environment, safety of our customer and their properties and seasonal promotional activities keeps them coming back often. Hence, we treat customer well”. The 4th participant submits in addition “Our presence here alone is benefitted to the people. We also engage in certain corporate social responsibility like donating to schools and hospitals. We engage in street sanitation exercise”. Hence, children loves having and getting from megamalls, thereby announcing to their parents the need to take them their; to wine, dine and relate with other kids. A participant (P_2 F, Ventura) said, I have being coming here every

weekend for years. Another participant (P_5 F, Ventura) opined that “We are talking and telling, there is an affinity relationship between us as customers and even the managers of various sections of the mega malls. With the submissions and observations above, Shoprite and Ventura are indeed a part of social life.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study has provided leverage to mega malls as sites for social interaction making a case for Shoprite and Ventura in Ibadan metropolis. It discovered that mega malls intimate social relationships between among consumers. Social relationships are one of the merits of economies and markets in Ibadan metropolis. People tend to meet people for chatting, social storytelling and making purchase. This made people relate and share business idea without ruling out funs and shopping at the same place at the same time. In view of the findings of this study, it could be concluded that there is a leap or change in people’s personality in terms of urban living. Megamalls have influence people’s lifestyles and social relationship patterns. It has created public space which brings people together, to form some sort of behaviours in social context and even for various reasons. The mere fact that patrons find themselves in megamall seeing and being seen, is a form of fun-catching as well as social interaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hence, the following recommendations are made;

- i. Megamalls remain an avenue to unwind after daily, weekly or monthly activities. Government at all levels must ensure the acceptability of the building and construction of megamalls within and around their domain
- ii. Public private partnership policies and programmes must be arranged and employed to galvanise the erecting of edifice, stadia, amusement centres, transnational cities, galleria etc for recreational, sporting and social activities. When there are platforms to relate, psychological well being of people are technically being taken care off. The society will be free of mentally and emotionally challenged citizens.
- iii. There must be strong legislations and tax rebate for private organisations who wants to invest heavily in social interaction activities and event centres.

- iv. More of Shoprite and Ventura should be encouraged as it provide government with more money, stable and viable economy as well as platform citizen to wind, dine, shop and frolick with one another.

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