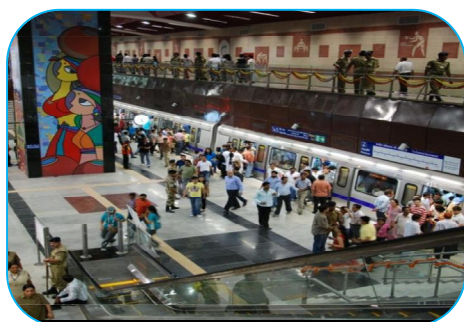




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IDENTITY FORMATION IN SHOPPING MALLS: A CASE STUDY OF INDIAN TEENAGERS

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ABSTRACT:

Children and youth are the future of a nation and hence form an important research topic in developing countries like India, China, Brazil etc where many societal changes are taking place in a faster pace. This paper is focused on teenagers and their leisure-time activities, concentrating especially on teenagers who spend the majority of their leisure time in shopping malls. The aim of the paper is to reveal how teenagers use the space of the shopping mall, how they socialise, and how their social identities may be produced through different practices in the mall space. The study focused on teenagers 'hanging out' in shopping malls of Kochi, the commercial capital of the southernmost state of India, Kerala, which is popularly known as 'God's own country'. The

data were collected by participant observation and informal interviews. The teenagers studied have ignored traditional public spaces used for leisure time and created their own identities in the specific space of the shopping mall. They have produced a microculture, through a combination of the personalities, locations, and events that they share in the mall. The final part of the paper draws implications from the study for the future research agenda in sociology.

KEYWORDS: shopping mall, leisure, identity, teenagers, hanging out, microculture, Kochi

INTRODUCTION :

After the liberalization of economy in the earlier 1990s, India has witnessed a very rapid process of retail development within a very short time. This has considerably affected the Indian society bringing forth various structural contradictions. It has also affected people's behavior, distorted by the previous lack of shopping opportunities. Teenagers are one of the groups most likely to adapt easily to all these changes in the retail

environment. International experience and research shows that a growing percentage of young people in large urban agglomerations of the 'developed world' spend their leisure time in shopping malls. The mall is, in principle, an ideal space for teenagers, whose access to many urban spaces may be limited, who have very few leisure places to go to without structured activities or adult oversight, and who are not sufficiently mobile and independent to decide about their leisure activities on their own. The shopping mall represents a familiar place, safely accessible by public

transport, protected from the environment and unfavorable weather conditions, offering many activities that are unrestricted to just the adult population (cafés, cinema, fast food etc), and it is also a space that is considered safe. What is more, shopping and 'fashion hunting' are 'musts' for the majority of teenagers and foster the socialisation process and the hoped-for belonging to a particular peer group (anticipatory socialization for inclusion in a reference group). Thus, some teenagers reproduce social identities by 'hanging out' in shopping malls. The research in developing

societies has focused on typical transformational changes and their consequences for society and the value systems of people in these countries. Studies of various social subgroups or even subcultures within the new, neoliberal environment have become very common. However, it is clear that there is still one group which deserves topmost priority, and that is children and youth. In the context of the decline of traditional values among young people, it is obvious that today's teenagers spend their leisure time in a different way than their predecessors did some twenty five years ago. For this reason it is of crucial importance to study what are the main changes in the leisure activities of contemporary youth in transforming countries like India.

This paper focuses on teenagers and their leisure time activities, with a special interest in the activity of 'hanging out' in shopping malls. After providing a theoretical background on the general features of lifestyles, the paper describes the notion of teenage microcultures. The paper then proceeds to discuss the methodology and results of study of teenagers in shopping malls of Kochi. The primary aim is to reveal how teenagers spend their leisure time in the mall, how they use the space of the mall, how they socialise, and how their social identities may be produced through different practices in the mall space. The paper also aims to identify the 'core kids' known from US studies [Kowinski 1985; Lewis 1989; Baker and Haytko 2000; Underhill 2004] and point out the most striking differences between Indian and American teenagers in the shopping mall. The paper ends with a discussion of the most important findings on the attractiveness of shopping Malls for teenagers and their norms and microcultures in this environment.

The theoretical backdrop: Lifestyles and Identity

Studies and research on children in the 1990s evolved around the notion of 'new social studies of childhood' [Ansell 2009], which was based on the perception of childhood as a social construct and children as social actors. By this approach, children and youth are social actors engaged extensively with the world around them. By 1999, the work of scholars in this area established the boundary between geography, sociology, and environmental or developmental psychology, etc. [Hart 1997; Matthews 1992]. The main objection was that the agenda of children's and youth studies were centred on different social groups defined by gender [McDowell 1999; Monk 1992; Winchester 1992], race [Bettie 2003; Jackson 1989], ethnicity [Hyams 2000; Sibley 1995], or different sexuality [Bell and Valentine 1995]. However, sociologists did not study the socio-spatial differences in the construction of childhood, nor the complex relations of childhood and space. Instead, the focus was on micro-scale studies of children and their immediate environments and studies of the behavior of children on a local scale [e.g. Wood and Beck 1994; Matthews, Limb and Percy-Smith 1998]. According to Ansell [2009: 194], this paradigm 'has predominantly emphasized agency over structure, concrete over abstract and local over global'. The need for joint efforts with sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural studies researchers became evident. While it can be stated that this effort has been successful and many outstanding contributions have emerged [e.g. Amit- Talai and Wulff 1995; Skelton and Valentine 1998; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Aitken 2001; Craig and Dyson 2008], this is not the case for the developing countries, where this type of research agenda has not been widely developed.

Ansell also claims that researchers leave untouched the issues of economic globalisation and neoliberal policies, which are transforming the lives of many young people. This is the case especially in the developing countries, where particularly the economy and consumer habits, distorted by previous modes of behaviour, evolved dynamically during the last three decades [Spilková 2008]. Placing the research of youth into the context of postmodern consumption would seem to be of critical importance. According to Giddens [1990], having a 'lifestyle' in today's postmodern society is an absolute necessity. Everybody has their lifestyle and everybody is forced to have one. Lifestyle for Giddens represented an integrated set of practices engaged by an individual, not for their benefit, but for the fact that they form the material image of the individual's identity. Lifestyle represents the personality of an individual. The values we appreciate, the clothes we wear, the food we consume, and the way we spend our leisure time express our lifestyle. Adopting a lifestyle is thus also a necessity for teenagers who can become lost

in the process of identity creation during pubescence and adolescence [cf. Deutsch and Theodorou 2010].

Our identity in the world is formed through our consumption [Petrušek 2006]. The consumer society we are living in changes the culture, its norms, and its values. The consumer society values mass consumption, where everything has its price, and everything becomes a matter of sale and purchase. The materialistic orientation of present day teenagers is its resultant product.

The mall attracts and offers society everything it wants and needs, and people are seduced by the mall. Seduction by publicity and advertising comprises a kind of invisible violence, which forces us to desire and then buy and gather things that we do not even need. This lifestyle, according to Petrušek [2006], is accompanied by an ethical and economic irresponsibility that motivates the individual to 'enjoy today and pay tomorrow'. Media and publicity have the prominent role in this process, telling the consumers what to do, buy, consume, and how to behave. Media and publicity enjoys an influence on people's minds, which, albeit invisible, is strong and dangerous. People are controlled and manipulated by fashion; fashion controls the lifestyle and also ascribes certain types of goods and activities greater prestige than others. This pressure may be especially strong among teenagers, where membership in a particular peer group (reference group) may be defined by the possession of certain goods and following a particular fashion or lifestyle [Elkind 2001].

Despite the fact that people as individuals spend their leisure time the way they each want, in the end they spend their leisure time in a manner prepared by others (TV, culture, sporting facilities, shopping malls, etc.). How leisure time is spent is also related to fashion. The entertainment demanded by the consumer society is made by entertainment industries. The consumer society consumes this entertainment and this culture. Nevertheless, there is also a negative side to the affluent, leisure society. Afflu- ence can be limited to a material aspect only and often is unaccompanied by a necessary level of responsibility (alienation), either to others or to the individual him/herself [Petrušek 2006].

Shopping malls, which represent a new phenomenon in Kerala currently, serve as the most popular destinations for family outings. This new trend is called 'fun shopping' or 'experience shopping'. It is shopping combined with spending leisure time. Shopping centres are not just commercial points, but are also becoming social centres and they offer various entertainment activities (multiplexes, bowling, game rooms), relaxation opportunities (beauty salons, personal services), sporting activities (gym, swimming pools, courts), and so on. Much leisure time is now spent in shopping centre complexes that incorporate a big shopping mall, catering services or food courts, and multiplex cinemas. However, the million dollar question is whether this development represents a valuable leisure activity or not. The consumer behaviour of young people and their experiences of consumption spaces (mainly shopping malls) has been studied by researchers to answer this question. The pioneer works date back to Anthony's [1985] observation of young people hanging out in malls in California, in which the author acknowledged that it is in the mall where young people develop their own social life. Lewis [1989] identified the group of teenagers who are present at the mall on a daily basis, calling them 'mall rats' (boys) and 'mall bunnies' (girls), and he found that the mall was a strong social magnet for young people. Shields [1989], in his study of the West Edmonton shopping mall, described the spatial practices of young people trying to evade security guards and reclaim their place within the mall. Watt and Stenson [1998] studied the formation and dynamics of teenage groups in a Thamestown mall. The aspects researched in these studies are also the locus of the research presented in this paper. However, it must be stressed that none of the mentioned studies included the voices of the young people themselves as the narrators of their mall experience [Matthews et al. 2000]. From a methodological stand point, this paper aims to present young people and their individual stories and experience as the core data.

The methodological vintage: Microcultures

Studies in developmental psychology [Slater and Bremner 2003] shows that, for a pubescent, the peer group is extremely important, and it offers support for his/her still unformed identity. Peers share interests and anxieties. The peer group stresses the conformity of its members; the need for

conformity becomes obvious in the group's style of speech, dress code etc. In exchange for an individual identity, the group offers its members pride, confidence and acceptance. Thereby the process of identity formation highly correlates with the need to create a teenage microculture.

Now a days, the approach of particular developmental stages is being abandoned and scholars are looking for a more complex way of describing the individual's transition from childhood to adulthood [Valentine 2003]. But, some authors point out that the transition approach is problematic due to its understanding of adulthood and independence as destinations, and they instead tend to embrace the concept of 'vital conjunctures' [Craig 2009]. These authors advocate that the concept of vital conjunctures better describes the challenges of growing up, as it explores the particular and temporary context that is relevant in specific situations and it also offers a framework for learning across geographical boundaries [Horschelmann and Schafer 2005; Craig 2009].

From the methodological viewpoint, the research tools consist mainly of qualitative research methods, participant observation, ethnography, and focus groups. The present study, inter alia, aims to draw attention to the emergence of a particular group within a specific environment—teenagers in a shopping mall. The basic theoretical idea behind this research is that of microcultures, defined by Matthews, Limb and Percy-Smith [1998: 196] as a 'means to explain the territorial and social behavior of young people...'. This concept stemmed from a redefinition of the term 'youth culture' used by the works of the 'Birmingham School'. The works of the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies from the 1970s described youngsters as merely inactive subjects in the world of adult values, with very limited possibilities of activity or inclusion in adult spatialities. According to Matthews, Limb and Percy-Smith [1998], microculture provides an apt framework to make sense of different groups of young people and their behaviour in contrast to the more traditional view of 'subculture' that considers young people as a complex subgroup with the same qualities and characteristics.

'Microcultures are created by combinations of personalities, the locations they make their own and the events they share. Together, these provide common and unifying sets of experiences'. [Matthews, Limb and Percy-Smith 1998: 196] Similarly, we concentrated on the microcultures of mall teenagers who meet in the environment of a shopping mall and who share their experiences of the place and reproduce their spatial identities by 'hanging out' in a shopping mall. Moreover, this research also examines the theoretical notion of the 'fourth environment' [van Vliet 1983], which describes the public places beyond the teenager's home, school, and playground.

POPULATION & DATA COLLECTION

The pilot research was conducted at Lulu mall. The mall opened in 2013, and is the largest shopping Mall in India, with 2,500,000 square meters of leasable commercial space and more than 250 shops. The mall has multiple levels and contains a food zone, shopping galleries, an entertainment zone, and a hypermarket. The location of this mall is very convenient, as it is set near a metro station and is also accessible by several bus lines and by car off two major highways. Wilhelm and Mottner [2005] claim that teenagers choose malls according to their 'trendiness'. Lulu mall is, in this respect, a good example of a 'trendy' shopping mall with all the brand-name shops that teenagers prefer and that are visited by most teenagers (e.g. Arrow, New Yorker, Nike Store, Puma Store).

In the second phase of the research, the study area was enhanced by another shopping mall in Kochi: Oberon Mall. For the purpose of comparative research, other shopping malls in Kochi city were also visited. These malls were: Gold Souk in Vytilla, Abad Nucleus Mall in Maradu and Centre Square Mall in M.G. Road.

The study sample consisted of teenagers aged 14–17 years who were 'hanging out' in the above mentioned shopping Malls. The data were collected by participant observation in two phases. Participant observation is a qualitative research method which aims to explain 'what' happens, 'why' it happens, 'when' it happens, and 'who' participates in the studied activity. The observer, however, does not act as an inactive participant in the activity, but enters the activity and interacts with the studied individuals. The observer's goal is to approach the studied subjects.

For the pilot study, I selected the method of participant observation together with interviews of the selected participants via semi-structured interviews. The interviewing process was often problematic because the teenagers were reluctant to communicate with the researchers, and even if they did cooperate their responses tended to be highly influenced by the presence of their peers. The pilot testing of the questions for the interview revealed that the majority of the respondents under study had problems with verbally expressing their motivation to come to the mall in their leisure time, or to explain clearly the attraction the mall represents for them. In many cases, the respondents tended to communicate ironically. From the pilot testing it was also crystal clear that the 'core kids' constituted a relatively reserved group and, for a researcher, it was very hard to gain their confidence. Finally, twenty five teenage mall visitors were approached during the pilot observation and interviews.

The pilot study was done in October 2018. The observation places were mainly around the food court on the top floor of the mall. When observing the young people at Lulu mall, the purpose was to find out how teenagers spent their leisure time in the mall, at what time of the day they came to the mall, and how they behaved.

After the successful piloting phase, the next round of the research was conducted. The observation and interviews were undertaken between November 2018 and March 2019. The interviewing consisted of two parts, the first part of the interview focused on the space of the shopping mall, the preferences for spending leisure time in this space, and the activities the teenagers engaged in during their stay in the mall. Respondents were asked why they visit the mall, when, etc. Their movement through the space of the mall was also studied, and similarly they were asked about their favourite shops and brands. They were also asked about their perception of the retail built environment of the mall, their feelings about and experience of the mall environment, and what draws them to spend their leisure time there. They were also asked to express themselves and comment on other ideas and issues not covered by the interview. The next part of the interview corresponded to the characteristics of the respondents, such as their family background and their other leisure preferences besides shopping and hanging out.

The research in Lulu shopping mall was conducted from November 2018 to January 2019, altogether 20 respondents aged 14–17 were approached. Oberon Mall was surveyed in December 2018 with 18 respondents aged 14–16 years; Gold Souk in February 2019 (10 respondents, aged 14–16 years); Nucleus Mall in January 2019 (12 respondents aged 15–17 years) and Centre Square Mall in February 2019 (15 respondents, aged 14–17 years).

OUTCOMES

The outcomes of the participant observation reveal that teenagers tend to move about in the space of the mall in small groups. These groups have a special and favourite table in the food court. The earlier they come to the mall, the better table they have. Peer-groups of teenagers then observe their surroundings and talk. When the groups I observed formed they were initially of one gender (groups of girls only, or boys only). After some time spent in the mall, a couple of boys joined the girls' group or vice versa. They usually came to the mall in the evenings.

'We come here to sit, to chat and so on....' (boy, age 16, Lulu)

'We come here together and we watch the buzz and wait for friends, we like it. For me it's fun and I also like talking and lookin4g around.' (girl, age 16, Lulu)

'We sit and watch people and so on. It's a good job. I like watching the girls especially.' (boy, age 16, Lulu)

The length of time they spent at the mall depended on their mood and situation (if they were enjoying themselves enough) and some of the respondents claimed (mostly girls) that it also depended on their parents (how long they could stay out).

'Weekends are the best, we like it best. People go to the cinema and so on. There are a lot of people and friends of course. We like Friday evening very much.' (two girls, ages 14 and 15, Gold Souk)

'I go there every day, if it is possible, because friends are there and I want to be with my friends very much.' (boy, age 15, Nucleus)

In the majority of cases, the teenagers stated they went to the mall every weekends regularly. This fact represented a certain norm for them, because only those who regularly went there were fully appreciated members of the group and had the respect of the group's other members.

The structure and relationships within the group represent interesting outcomes. From this study, it was clear that the groups were almost homogeneous as regards their age.

'We just go there with friends or only with some girls. I like to go there without friends some-times, because sometimes I like to talk just with the girls.' (boy, age 17, lulu)

'When I want to be with a girl only, we just look for some bench and sit down there.' (boy, age 16, Centre Square)

The age differences were usually no bigger than one year. The relations within the group were rather structured. Rivalry and envy, especially amongst the girls, were obvious. The same was true of the inter-group relations. They knew each other, but they hardly exchanged more than simple greetings. More often, they just observed each other and gossiped within their own group. Thus, the microcultures of mall teenagers had their own body talk and learned behaviour, which differentiated them from other groups within the mall.

This type of behaviour, however, is not typical for Indian contact culture and communication. It is obvious that, as Matthews et al. [2000: 280] note,

'children are becoming less child-like as links with parents have been weakened and through actions that contest parental control and responsibility'. They adjust their corporal performance and perform appropriately in order to resemble adults and in order to earn their place in the mall, while still being teenagers with the typical behaviour of this life stage. In this respect, 'studying adolescent body performances in commercial space adds to the understanding of adolescence, as it explores ... the transition from childhood to adulthood' [Valentine 2003 in Kato 2009: 53].

A testing ground

The composition of the groups of teenagers at the malls became changed slightly as teenagers often invited other friends known from Facebook or online chats. This is, of course, the result of the increasing popularity of social networks worldwide. However, as today's youth are informed about the possible dangers of internet communication, they have made the shopping mall a testing ground for the 'new friendships' created via virtual meetings on internet social networks. Many teenagers mentioned that the shopping mall serves as a (safe) place to meet new people previously known only from Facebook.

'Sometimes, we know some boys from Facebook and then, if they are nice, we invite them here ... then we wait and see if they come and if they recognize us or if we recognize them

... the others just stare ... who are they and you know ... it's fun.' (two girls, ages 14 and 15, Oberon)

'We agree on meeting via Facebook and we say that we'll be here on Saturday and then we wait and see who comes ... somebody sees us and says that he knows us from Facebook ... it's funny!' (two girls, ages 14 and 15, Lulu)

Spending time

The time at the mall was distributed between shopping and other activities. As regards shopping, girls usually went together; first they visited their favourite stores, but they did not necessarily buy anything (window shopping).

'We like to sit down near PVR ... we just talk and so on. Sometimes we go to the cinema and sometimes we go shopping.' (girl, age 15, Lulu).

'Sometimes we go to play bowling ... we just play and talk. It's good.' (boy, age 16, Lulu)

The interviews with the mall teenagers indicated that they bought food and drinks, but they rarely did other shopping. This observation represents the first substantial difference between the Indian teenagers and their US counterparts, who in their own right possess respectable buying power within the consumer crowd [Baker and Haytko 2000; Underhill 2004]. More expensive goods were usually purchased when the mall teenagers were there with their parents. In any case, the money they spent at the mall came from their parents.

'We like Westside very much ... they have good clothes there ... we go there with friends.' (girl, age 15, Lulu)

The boys tended to go to the shops even less often; the exception was when they accompanied a girl. After the 'walk' around their favourite shops, they moved to the food court on the top floor, where they met others who were already waiting for them and they joined them at their table. They spent the time talking and listening to music from mobile phones.

Motivation

What motivates youngsters to spend their leisure time this way and what is their motivation to spend their leisure time in the shopping mall? The outcomes of the present survey clearly show that most often it is a peer-induced activity; teenagers follow their friends and peers, who bring them to the mall. Some of the teenagers surveyed responded that for the first time they came with parents, and that they then just started to visit the mall with friends. The mall is a vital part of growing up, especially for girls. Among the girls, it was clear that a substantial amount of influence was exerted by their mothers. If the mothers were inclined to go shopping for fashions and frequently visited shopping malls, this tendency was apparent also in their daughters. The majority of girls approached stated that they also visited the mall a couple of times a week with their mothers. This phenomenon was defined as 'mother-daughter shop- ping' by Baker and Haytko [2000], who also state that this type of gender-specific 'family shopping' may present important incomes for the retailers.

The focus of the survey lies in the questions: What do they like here? What attracts them to the mall? What do they get out of the time spent at the mall? First, the vast majority of the respondents studied seemed to have great difficulty verbally expressing themselves on these issues. The most frequent answer was: *'I don't know...'* or the fact that the mall is where their friends, girls, and fun are. Another boy (age 16, Center Square) said: *'...why should I spend the time on the hot, sunny streets, when it is cold here and there are lots of pretty girls...'*

What attracted the teenagers to the mall was the fact that they felt free (mature) in the space of a mall, where, unlike at school or at home, there was nobody to tell them what to do and what they could not do. They liked the environment and they used the mall as a place for meeting other young people.

The girls mostly appreciated the shops, and also the presence of friends and meeting boys, who seemed to be their main motivation for going there. In some ways these observations almost resemble the situation described by Thomas [2005], who states that teen girls produce their own social and spatial niches as manoeuvres to respond to adult spatiality. However, in this manner they reproduce the gender ideals of adult society, where women like to shop and create their identity through the consumption of fashionable goods and other lifestyle products. The boys usually said that the mall is 'cool' and that their friends are there. Meeting girls in the mall is also very important.

'We just stand here and watch the people going to the cinema ... it's fun ... they're in line or just waiting for somebody ... I mainly check out the girls....' (boy, age 16, Nucleus)

'We come alone, only with friends, or I come with a girl ... I can talk to her and so on....' (boy, age 17, Gold Souk)

Thus, in accordance with Anthony [1985], a shopping mall is perceived nowadays as a special place of excitement and activity, where it is very pleasant to 'hang out' with friends, look around the shops, and enjoy the freedom of the place. It also fulfils the need for three of the four important parts of children's and youth micro-geographies as defined by Matthews, Limb and Percy-Smith [1998]: a place away from authority, a place to be with friends, and a place for adventure. This activity, while viewed from the adult perspective as passive and inferior, may, to the mall teenagers, represent its own form of a struggle for spatial identity and an important part of their learning and experience gathering. As Kato [2009: 54] claims, '[k]nowing where and how to situate one's body in a given space requires tacit knowledge of the spatial and the social opportunities and constraints'.

Mall junkies

A specific group, known as 'core kids' [Lewis 1989] or 'mall junkies' [Underhill 2004], is formed by those young people in the mall who are there almost every day, sometimes even during the morning hours. Such groups were apparently also identified during the participant observation in Lulu shopping mall. These teenagers comprised a group of 8–10 individuals aged 14–16. Their main activities in the mall consisted of sitting and talking at a table in the food court on the top level. If possible, they would sit at one particular table in the food court with a good view of both the escalators from the lower levels, and the favourite place was near the food court entrance. It is most striking how this specific feature resembles the behaviour of American teenage girls, described by Baker and Haytko [2000] and Kato [2009]. Obviously, the food court and a carefully chosen table represent a place where social aspects of mall visiting can be lived and expressed. It is the place where young people in the mall automatically gravitate to spend the majority of their 'mall time'. In the commercial space, where behavioural norms and spatial rules are adult-centred, the food court represents an important teenage prom-ontory.

The characteristics of the 'core kids' were very similar to the characteristics of interviewed teenagers in malls in general. The interesting difference, however, is that despite the fact that they obviously knew the other groups, they did not communicate with them at all. Through their behaviour they expressed their superior position. There is always a leading figure who is recognised as an authority by both boys and girls. Thus, it seems that the 'core kids' differ from the other groups in the mall by the fact that they do not go there to shop. They go to the mall to meet their peers, have fun, and flirt. They were present all the time during the survey, irrespective of the weather or day of the week. Malls thus form a central aspect of their life and are their frequent target destination [Baker and Haytko 2000; Thomas 2005; Vanderbeck and Johnson 2000].

Passive spending of leisure time in shopping malls may not be harmful for the development of a 'healthy' youth with a good value orientation. During the surveying process, I realised that teenagers in the mall express their spatiality in this way and it is an important part of the identity (and spatial identity) creation process. It is just a reaction to the adult spatialities and one of the possible ways in which teenagers try to create their 'own' world, community, peer groups, and territory. Gradually, it became clear that one must balance the question of identity, values, and motivations by critiquing consumer culture, and not the teenagers themselves, for being pathological.

This research is a good example of 'process-oriented' research [Flick, von Kardoff and Steinke 2004]. In this type of research, hypothesis formulation and concept testing occur simultaneously with data collection. The work of a field researcher in this type of research is exceptionally demanding, because he/she has to search for and analyse the information needed to answer the research questions. It is essential to be present in the field and meet new people and new facts that are substantial for the research. Thus, intensive and long-term contact with the field and researched groups or individuals is maintained. The researcher also aims to develop a complex insight into the issues under research and the researcher's personality becomes a crucial element of the whole research. However, it is the particular teenager who is treated as a specialist in his/her life and he/she is given the voice to narrate his/her own story in his/her own words.

Creating a microculture

Baker and Haytko [2000] formulated the term of the 'friendly' shopping mall from the teenagers' point of view. The equivalent of the 'friendly' shopping mall should comprise the following factors and amenities: (i) location, (ii) marketing mix, (iii) rich retail built environment, (iv) food court, and (v) the 'buzz' (the possibility of entertainment and relaxation).

Location seems to be the key factor when choosing a shopping mall for leisure activities, because many teenagers are not mobile and are dependent on public transport or walking. The location issue was perceived as a key attribute of a 'friendly' mall by nearly all the respondents in the survey.

Marketing mix is another important aspect of the mall, as there are certain brands which teenagers prefer and consider fashion. They like to wear these brands and frequent these brand-name shops. These shop visits and window shopping at these stores represent a vital part of the teenagers' experience at the mall. In this context, '[b]rowsing is not only the young people's attempt to be accepted by the adults ... but it also provides opportunities for them to explore and experiment with their roles as customers' [Kato 2009: 57]. In the competitive environment, teenagers strive to resemble their parents, and thus they may stress a materialistic view of the world (including using the 'right' brand). Teenagers are exposed daily to the images of successful adults via media and advertising, and the teenagers' own struggle to become achievers (professionally and personally), good-looking, and well-off then becomes even more accentuated [Craig 2009].

The architecture and image of the mall is the third factor. Young people like to dwell in modern environments with modern design, variety, and articulation. A multitude of galleries, sidewalks, and escalators is important for the teenage mall users, and they use these architectural elements both as a transport means and as observation spots. As Matthews et al. [2000: 286] notes, contest may lead to oppression, but it can lead to creative resistance as well. The teenagers thus concentrate in the parts of the mall with continual flux, lots of noise, and a rolling stream of people, which usually adds to the experience and fosters the attention to the lively surroundings [ibid. 2000: 286].

The food court represents a vital place for teenagers in any shopping mall. It is a place where one can consume the food or just sit. Teenagers enjoy food courts very much and engage in their leisure activities and social interactions there. It is also a place to learn the principles of territoriality. The seizure of a particular food court table is a perfect example of tertiary territory appropriation [Bell et al. 2001], which, although public, may sometimes be perceived as an important and personal achievement in the life of a 'core kid'. The 'core kids' occupy their tables, with the best view of the mall space. Adjusting the food court tables to improve the view, placing personal items on them, and other actions of the open space adjustment are 'ways to express their identity and define the meaning of space through the placement of their bodies' [Kato 2009: 54].

The final factor of mall preference is the 'buzz' in the centre. This relates to what happens in the centre, that is, what to do, what to see, and what to react to. The observation of people and activities in the mall is a favourite form of entertainment for the teenagers, as is the possibility of indirect and direct social interaction. Observing and learning how to navigate the space of the mall may instruct these teenagers on 'how to carry themselves properly among adults and prepares them for their future roles as adult consumers' [Kato 2009: 61].

Contemplating the above-mentioned factors and spatial strategies in sociological accounts, it come close to the notion of 'habitus'. 'Habitus is the embodied materialization of individuals' capitals, or internalized capital.' [Bourdieu 1984, Holt 2008: 233] During childhood it can be expressed rather subconsciously and create a frame for an individual's encounters with the world around. Bourdieu [1984] conceptualises habitus also as a 'way of being' or a 'habitual state'. It may also provide the basis for the generation and formation of individuals' practices within particular social fields [Holt 2008]. Habitus simply stems from daily experience and everyday practice. Thus, the teenagers in the observed malls clearly depict how they acquired their habitus (including social capital, practical knowledge, and social skills) through the subconscious acceptance of the specific rules of the game within the mall environment when negotiating unfamiliar social contexts [Bourdieu 1990].

CONCLUSION

Earlier studies have concluded that a growing percentage of youth in big cities in the developed world spend their leisure time in shopping malls. Scholars such as Underhill [2004] and Aitken [2001] have commented on this phenomenon in the United States, and they also formulate that teenagers may constitute a group with huge buying power in today's consumer society. Because teenagers are not allowed to enter many urban spaces, have limited mobility, and have limited ability to decide independently about where they spend their leisure time, for the teenager the shopping mall represents an ideal space. The ideal mall must have a modern design, and contain trendy shops, a food court or other meeting spots offering sufficient freedom and intimacy, and a variety of other entertainment facilities. It is a place where young people can, for the first time, experiment with their spatial identities and create their own mall microcultures.

The present study aimed to research a specific group of teenagers in a specific environment. These teenagers employ the most widespread strategy of identity formation, and they have thus adopted a model prefabricated by their parents and influencers in a postmodern, commodity-oriented world of consumption. In a fast developing society, social stratification quickly became apparent and people learned to demonstrate their status through material wealth and possessions. The teenagers studied have replicated this pattern and strive to maintain their position in peer groups based on consumption and use of particular brands and products. Furthermore, they seem to have abandoned typical public spaces used for leisure time (playgrounds, sport facilities, clubs, etc.) and they have gravitated to a space of consumption and commodification—the mall. However, they show a good grasp of this specific space and have produced spatial identities, rituals, and a socio-spatial order within this environment. Thus, they have mastered their habitus and they have created a true microculture by combining the personalities, locations, and events that they share in the mall environment.

Indian mall 'core kids' resemble their US counterparts in many respects. However, there are also some notable differences. First, Indian teenagers usually do not shop to the extent observed among American teenagers in malls. The majority of the 'core kids' in the India go to the mall mainly to spend time with friends, flirt, or just loiter. Nevertheless, in general, spending leisure time at shopping malls did not prove to be a negative activity. Usually, it is the mass media that are eager to present the behaviour of teenagers in a negative way. I observed that 'core kids' choose peer-group values which are not in direct opposition to their family values and they usually do not experience an 'identity crisis'. The 'core kids' make their own microcultures, in which they can form their identities and spatialities in a specific spatial context. Meeting friends and browsing at the mall becomes more than a leisure activity. Rather, it is a path to identity formation that takes place in the retail built environment.

The paper also aimed to raise specific research questions; which, however, require further study. The most interesting issues identified are the social facilitation that shopping and spending leisure time in the mall provides—creating specific peer groups and whole microcultures (the combination of personalities, events, and shared experiences). Another interesting aspect may also be seen in the use of internet social networks for the formation of relationships and then the meeting of new friends in real life, where the mall may serve as a secure 'testing ground'. Last but not least, social science scholars should devote attention to value orientations in youth and especially to the dimension of materialism/post-materialism among teenagers today and the role played by their parents in the process of identity formation. As regards methodology, social scientists should pay more attention to the individual stories of young people and their identities. Young people, and research on their perception and behaviour, can introduce a lens through which we can understand a range of current issues in the social sciences.

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