



RESEARCH ARTICLE

## MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN PHYSICAL SHOPPING CENTRES: EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the drivers of consumer visitation behaviour to physical shopping centres, as well as the moderating impact of customer experience in South Africa. The study explores a pressing issue in modern retail: how to keep brick and mortar shopping centres relevant in an increasingly digital and competitive environment. An inductive qualitative research design was used with ATLAS.ti 26 to thematise using the Morse and Field approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine participants who recently visited shopping centres. The results show that visitation was primarily motivated by convenience, tactility, trust and therapeutic value whilst atmospheric, customer service, hygiene and safety influenced the customer experience. This, in turn, affects behavioural consequences that include return visitations and participatory interactions. This study details the interplay between motivational factors, customer experience and behavioural consequences in the physical retail context. The findings of the study equip shopping centre management and retailers with valuable insight regarding experience enhancement that can sustain their competitive appeal in the changing retail landscape.

KEYWORDS

Motivational factors, customer experience, shopping centres, South Africa, omnichannel retailing

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, characterised by an overabundance of product options where customers can now choose from a myriad of different items new and innovative technologies have reshaped the shopping ecosystem for both consumers and businesses (Sharma et al., 2024). Unique human experiences have been transformed by these technological advancements. Customer behaviour has drastically changed, underlined by the development in technology which resulted in a dramatic increase of online shopping (Singh and Soderlund, 2020).

However, in recent years industry experts and scholars have characterised a disruptive "retail apocalypse" with the mass closure of physical retail stores (Goldberg 2024; Helm et al., 2020). The study note that this is devastating to the economy. In the past few years, it has been noticeable that customers have changed their behaviour by shifting towards virtual shopping platforms; while the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the process of closing physical shopping centres (Rossolov et al., 2021; Sheth, 2020; Lee et al., 2022). According to even before customers were forced not to visit shopping centres as the pandemic started, these shopping centres faced numerous challenges competing with online stores (Asmare and Zewdie, 2022).

Retailers, large and small, were already in the process of shifting from physical stores to online before the pandemic. Indeed, online shopping has been a significant issue for shopping centres and retailers whose platforms have challenged traditional norms leading to conventional shopping centres needing to reposition themselves in the marketplace providing appropriate offerings (Pentz et al., 2020). The Research combination of well-designed marketing strategies and positive digital customer experiences related to shopping online is clearly a potential driver in determining the future of retail (Sharma et al., 2024).

This study investigates the motivations for customers to continue visiting


physical shopping centres, as well as customer experience within these environments. To that end, this study aims to explore what drives customers toward brick-and-mortar retail spaces and discuss how businesses can provide the relevant, engaging customer experiences needed to ensure physical shopping hubs stay strong in an increasingly fluid consumer marketplace.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Retail customer experience

Customer shopping experience is complex and multi-dimensional and cannot be easily defined. This analysis explain retail customer experience revolves around various sensory, cognitive and emotional aspects, embedded in the relationship between the customer with respect to the brand and to the product or service (Keyser et al., 2020). highlight how subjective and personal these experiences are to the consumer, making it difficult for businesses to standardise as modern consumers are diverse and complex (Meng et al., 2023). Researchers call for a more holistic approach where marketers must consider what happens before, during and after the customer's shopping trip. Such a holistic approach has become increasingly necessary as the ongoing development of technology introduces new variables, including digital personalisation, competitor experiences that are equal to or better than traditional physical retail experiences (Yliehto et al., 2021).

Technology has revolutionised the way customers shop, allowing retailers to provide omnichannel environments that surpass what physical shopping centres can offer. As study suggest, this transition has contributed to making the enhancement of the customer shopping experience a key strategic imperative for many organisations (Calvo et al., 2023; Suh and Moradi, 2023). The customer shopping experience has become a priority compared to standard product quality because this is considered to be the primary factor in achieving loyalty and satisfaction

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among consumers (Kim and Park, 2020).

However, challenge the traditional perspective of customer shopping experience as solely a reactive metric and propose it rather as an active outcome co-created by institutions, sensory information and material environments (Ruiz-Alba et al., 2023). Although more industry research is undertaken in the sector to understand customer shopping experience, suggest that there remains a great need for qualitative exploration of this construct and that insights be obtained from the customers themselves about their shopping journey, especially when exploring it through physical shopping centres (Poorrezaei et al., 2023).

**2.2 Motivational drivers of shopping behaviour**

Retail channel, shopper segment and contextual environment shape the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that underpin shopping behaviour. Intrinsic motivations are a personal reason consumers do something because the action is inherently rewarding; whereas extrinsic motivation means you participate in an activity for functional reasons that go beyond the activity itself (Fishbach and Woolley, 2022).

Research shows that these motivational forces work differently based on the context of the shopping experience. The analysis make the case that intrinsic gratification-oriented values and "need for touch" (NFT) are significant antecedents of physical shopping motivation (Kühn et al., 2020b). On the other hand, stress that in online shopping, extrinsic drivers like price, convenience, delivery efficiency and digital security are important (De Canio and Fuentes-Blasco, 2022). They also note segmentation factors, as frequent online shoppers had a larger range of extrinsic incentives they would respond to, meaning channel choice is an important consideration in motivational drivers.

Motivation is regarded as a crucial factor contributing to the establishment of customer loyalty. Discovered that intrinsic ideations are more impactful than utilitarian in binding patience to loyalty (especially ethical and hedonic) (Tena-Monferrer et al., 2022a). We value experiential enjoyment for us to offer a long-term consumer commitment more than practical and functional rewards. As a study similarly found that there is the possibility only of shopping apathy in physical stores, caused by insufficient intrinsic stimulation, thus emphasising the need for retailers to counteract disengagement through improving their experiential parameters (Makhitha and Mbedzi, 2024). Furthermore, it is noted that extrinsic factors such as fashion trends, brand impressions and price have a more pronounced impact on loyalty in brick-and-mortar retail compared to their prior findings (Makhitha and Mbedzi, 2023).

The analysis indicate that promotional activities, product assortment and store image are crucial pull factors for regional malls, as modern consumers now expect a synergistic retail experience between functional value and emotional stimulation (Calvo-Porrá and Lévy-Mangín, 2018). Hence, retail strategies should embrace both dimensions, aligning motivational appeals with channel and consumer segments to maintain retail performance.

**2.3 Shopping centres as experiential spaces**

Shopping centres are traditionally defined as physical venues where retailers sell goods. The research a core reason behind the historical development of shopping centres was human socialization (Pettersen et al., 2024). As months and years passed, these centres evolved into massive social centres for customers, friends and family. Nonetheless, the role of shopping centres has expanded well beyond the simple exchange of products and services (Dash et al., 2024). Table 1 provides a summary of different experience types sought by consumers when frequenting physical shopping centres.

Table 1: Experience types in physical shopping centres	
Experience Type	Description
Entertainment	Experiences designed to amuse or engage through fun and spectacle.
Educational	Experiences that inform or teach, adding value through knowledge.
Aesthetic	Visually immersive environments designed for beauty and sensory impact.
Escapist	Environments that fully transport the customer out of their everyday life.

Source: Ripple (2026).

While shopping centres continue to thrive operationally in many parts of

the world, they have been forced to undergo substantial refurbishment in order to meet shifting consumer demands (Krey et al., 2022). Shopping centres had created convenience when people first used them to shop at several shops under one roof, instead of going around the standalone stores (Krey et al., 2022). However, today the retail environment is undergoing a huge digital transformation that has put pressure on shopping centres to be exceptionally innovative. In retail, the trends do not stem from one direction; changing customer needs and technological improvements accompanying lingering effects of COVID-19 have altered how retailers serve their markets (Reformat and Opitek, 2021).

This has compelled traditional retailers to adjust their approaches in a way that is helping them realign their business models (Sun et al., 2022). Undoubtedly digitalisation is considered one of the greatest changes to be made to brick-and-mortar stores and proved as vital for their survival due to various global disturbances (Sheth, 2020). As a result, shopping centres have transformed from sites of merely transactional activity to experiential destinations where retail, entertainment and social interaction intertwine. The experiential factors have emerged as having significant impacts on consumer perceptions in places with a defined scarcity (store atmospherics, hygiene, service quality and safety) such that the relationship between the motivation and spatial experience is critical to their success in retail (Soelton et al., 2021b).

**3. METHODOLOGY**

This study aimed to develop qualitative insights into the underlying motivational drivers that affect customers' visitations to brick-and-mortar shopping centres in today's retail environment. The goal was to investigate what drove customers to these physical retail spaces and determine customer experience within physical retail environments. Human psyche and behaviour are instrumental in creating strategies to increase footfall and visitor engagement.

The study was designed qualitatively. A qualitative approach was the most suitable method to obtain rich data regarding detail about customers' perceptions, because the focus of this research was on subjective motivational factors and nuanced customer experiences (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). To identify potential opportunities for improvement to the physical shopping experience, the study followed an inductive approach and directly induced themes from participants lived experiences and desires.

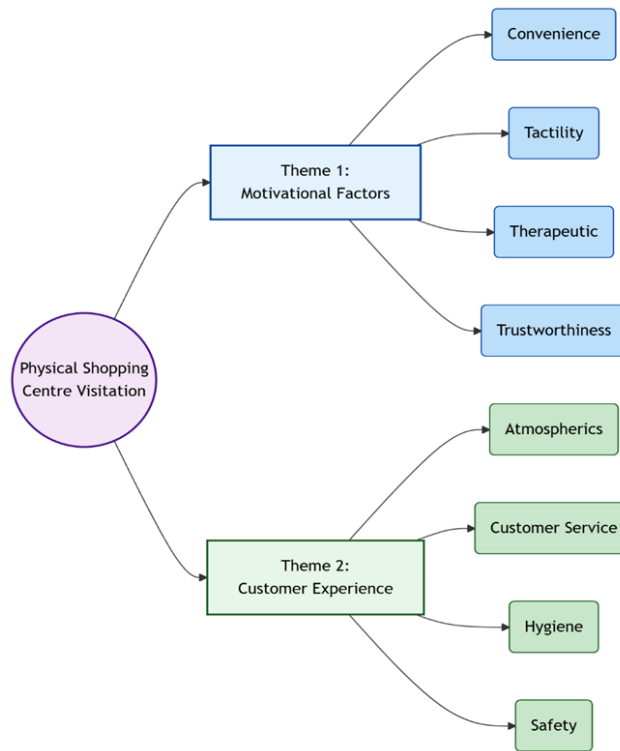
The study was conducted in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The Western Cape provides an ideal geographical sample, as it is the second most frequented province in South Africa after Gauteng with regard to shopping centres. The participants were aged 18 years and older who had visited a physical shopping centre in the past six months and resided in the Western Cape (Bell, 2020).

Table 2: Target population sample of the study	
Design elements	Application to empirical study
Sampling element	Participants aged 18 years or older who have visited a physical shopping centre in the Western Cape in the past six months and who reside in the Western Cape province.
Extent	Western Cape, South Africa
Sampling method	Non-probability purposive sampling
Sample size	9 participants (determined by data saturation)

Nine participants provided data through in-depth unstructured interviews. The interviews were conducted via online video conferencing platforms (Zoom and Microsoft Teams). An accredited language services provider was employed to transcribe the recorded sessions (Nayak and Singh, 2021). These were subsequently loaded onto ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software for coding, categorisation and thematic analysis using the Morse and Field approach. All transcripts were read through in an iterative manner, comparing them with the original audio to ensure reliability before finalising the coding process.

**4. RESULTS**

Using thematic analysis, the data from the in-depth interviews were coded and categorised, leading to development of two main themes. Below we describe the themes and their respective categories.



**Figure 1:** Thematic framework of motivational factors and customer experience identified in the study.

**4.1 Theme 1: Motivation for customers to frequent physical shopping centres**

In this section, the discussion is related specifically to what motivates consumers to visit physical shopping centres in South Africa. The emergent theme consists of four categories, which are convenience, tactility, therapeutic and trustworthiness.

**4.1.1 Convenience**

The first identified category represents a concern for maintaining the reason why customers would go to physical shopping centres and focuses on convenience. Regarding why people go to visit physical stores rather than shop online, most participants noted that their reason for frequenting a physical store or shopping centre was due to efficiency and being able to purchase and receive a product immediately without having to wait for delivery. Some participants noted that it was especially convenient to buy fresh produce from physical stores due to improved levels of freshness, as ordering such items online and having to wait for delivery, might spoil the produce before it is delivered.

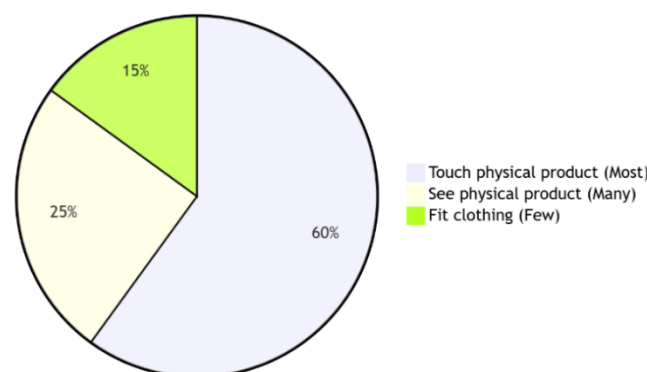
*"It is easier for me to go to the mall than the online shopping."* – Participant 1

*"I like to go in because if I was buying groceries, I want fresh green."* – Participant 4

*"You have to kind of take into consideration like having to wait for like so long until you even have that until they deliver the product. So, being able to just walk into a store and get it now that's always a good thing. You don't need to wait."* – Participant 6

**4.1.2 Tactility**

The second category emphasises the need for tactility. Participant's stated that shopping at a physical store allows them to touch, see and physically interact with products before buying them. The results reveal a clear preference for sensory engagement. The majority of participants reported that they wanted to touch a physical product before getting it, in particular, so that they could check the quality and size.



**Figure 2:** Qualitative distribution of responses regarding tactility preferences.

*"And with clothes last time I went shopping... and I just researched a bit online and the reason why I don't like to shop alone is because you can't feel something online that's how my mind works so for me if I go at mall then when I'm at mall then that's what I'm looking size and after that you wear it and after leaving the shop I'm 90% sure whatever item you're living with this exactly what you want and this even fits."* – Participant 1

*"I want to experience the products in real life. The texture; how the material feels and how it would feel on me and seeing it in real life."* – Participant 2

*"You can see what you're getting and the quality of the product that you're buying."* – Participant 7

**4.1.3 Therapeutic**

The therapeutic element is the third category of motivation identified. The study examined the hedonic value found by customers through visiting a physical shopping centre. "Escapism" was a motivating factor for most participants. Shopping around is a coping mechanism, as it draws them out

of their everyday life.

*"It gives me that feeling I am looking for a satisfaction okay I was at a shop, be it in a grocery store or clothing store as long as I am walking on the aisle and just checking what they have even if I pick it or not that makes me good."* – Participant 1

*"Most of the time when I'm feeling like meh, you know, I would go to the mall and be like, you know what, I'm going to go buy myself a dress. Or you know what, I'm going to go get myself a bottle of wine with some, you know, things that I am craving to eat at that moment. I mean, just being there, seeing other people as well and just leaving that space, you know, I find it very therapeutic for me too and some back in time as well also helps me forget everything so yeah. Maybe after you know 2 hour that I spend, 2-3 hours that I spent at the mall feel little bit better. I treated myself with something that I may or may not have, you know, wanted that made me go to the mall."* – Participant 3

*"I like the shopping experience, you know. Just the thing, I do. Yeah, just to help my mind."* – Participant 5

#### 4.1.4 Trustworthiness

Trust as motivation suggests physical shopping centres are still popular with participants to avoid the delivery angst prevalent with online retailers. In-person shopping gives them a sense of which quality, size and texture they are buying. Participants mentioned that they do not always receive the correct size or quality when shopping online and only discover this once the items are delivered. They then need to go through all the trouble to attempt to return the items. In addition, many participants mentioned that they do not feel comfortable to provide credit card details to online shopping platforms to complete a transaction due to the risk of fraud.

*"Sometimes it's different from what you see online to when you actually get it, so I like going in the stores to see if indeed they do sell what they say they sell online." And then I went there to check the material, you know, to see if it is going to fit me well, and then yeah. I ended up having to go and see it through, though."* – Participant 3

*"You never know what you're gonna get online, they can just package anything for you without ensuring the expiry date or even if the produce is fresh."* – Participant 4

*"Sometimes you order online and when you get the actual product that is online, it's completely different from what you what you what you saw on the web. So it's [much] easier when you go to a physical store."* – Participant 6

*"As online shoppers became more or started shopping online more rather, online hackers grew bolder. So, I am also a little bit sceptical with online shopping and you know putting your card details in."* – Participant 8

## 4.2 Theme 2: Experience when frequenting physical shopping centres

The next section describes the experience customers get when visiting a physical shopping centre. Theme 2 includes four categories: atmospheric, customer service, hygiene and safety.

### 4.2.1 Atmospheric

The first category contemplates retail atmospheric. Participants commented on a variety of sensory features influencing their experience. The vast majority of participants pay attention to the music being played, and several mentioned that pleasant music would increase their browsing duration. Scent and lighting were rigorously examined; pleasant scents lengthened the browsing time, while dissenting harsh lighting.

*"The music is what keeps me there forever like I could be sitting in a store and just when the song is about to finish I'll be okay another song finished let me go now they play my favourite song then I'm going to stand again and listen it for long, literally the music keeps me there forever. I'll pay whatever amount I want to buy, I'll purchase and then when the music plays as I'm about to leave and okay gave an idea of eye shopping just for the music. So, most new experiences makes shopping, like it makes it but gives an amazing experience I can say for sure."* – Participant 1

*"...it does like, have a significant effect on my mood like when I actually think about it because like it smells nice, it makes you wanna buy things."* – Participant 7

*"If it's stuff on the radio and pop music that I'm familiar with, then absolutely, it'll lift my mood and make me more excited about being there."* – Participant 2

*"Just so it smells better, and yeah, that makes the customers have a better*

*experience."* – Participant 5

*"Like sometimes one thing that stresses me with going at a shopping centre is like the lights are too bright, it's like very harsh environment I don't know just, if I'm making a sense, like it's harsh you know everything is in your face and harsh."* – Participant 7

### 4.2.2 Customer Service

The second category identified within this theme considers customer service. Good customer service and friendly staff interactions are expected by the majority of participants. On the negative side, long queues and unhelpful staff were cited as reasons not to return to a physical shopping centre.

*"When I went to last shopping it was month-end, payday you know so everybody waits in queues really long because everyone is buying groceries so that was a bit hectic."* – Participant 1

*"Whether store people treat me as a customer or not really matters. It also determines whether I will recommend the store to the next customer or recommend its products; in case of bad service I wouldn't recommend."* – Participant 8

*"The service delivery there is actually on point. I just love it. It's a place that I would highly recommend for all."* – Participant 3

### 4.2.3 Hygiene

This category reflects on hygiene. Unhygienic areas were perceived as extremely demotivating by participants and they closely noted the cleanliness of shopping centres, especially bathrooms.

*"It's untidy. Like, in a shopping centre, it demotivates you – like, demoralises you from even going into other stores because just already in your head you know: wow I can't deal with the amount of filth. So you know, and so it just kind of you lose motivation to you know to carry on with your shopping but when the shopping centre is clean the bathrooms are clean 'cause I'm actually very huge on like hygienic bathrooms 'cause I realise and it's in most shopping centres hygiene is a problem, especially in bathrooms."* – Participant 1

*"If the place is not clean, then you're obviously gonna question the hygiene of what you're buying also there what you are buying. Especially if it's food."* – Participant 5

*"When I go to a shop or a mall and it's not aesthetically pleasing or the tidiness is missing, then I think that's where I will turn around and leave."* – Participant 2

### 4.2.4 Safety

The final category identified within this theme is safety. A pressing concern among South African shoppers even before the pandemic relates to safety issues. The majority of participants want to see evidence of a safe shopping environment when visiting a physical shopping centre. Insufficient visible security presence was reported to be a negative experiential factor.

*"I don't know like all of these weird things happen at shopping centres nowadays like it's not safe. Well, the last I was there before now, I don't really feel like I saw like security guards and shit, honestly..."* – Participant 7

*"I'm gonna think about my safety."* – Participant 4

*"It definitely needs to feel like a second home, you know? In terms of safety, like, you know what I mean? Is it going to be safe?"* – Participant 3

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When consumers choose where to shop, they balance the easy convenience of clicking "add to cart" with the rich, sensory experience of stepping into a physical store. Though e-commerce holds a clear advantage in terms of convenience, shopping centres have one distinct advantage which is to provide instant gratification and appeal to consumer senses in ways a screen can never match.

The results of the current study coincide with other suggestions that "need for touch" (NFT) continues to be an influential motivational driver (Aw et al., 2021; Kühn et al., 2020a). When purchasing high-involvement products like apparel or fresh produce, the ability to fit the clothing items and to touch the fabric and check for ripeness eliminates some of the risk and guesswork that occurs when buying blindly online. Physically interacting with a product creates trust that digital platforms are still unable to replicate (Kim and Park, 2020; Silva et al., 2021), which was echoed by participants in this study. Furthermore, the simple pleasure of retail therapy or engaging in shopping as an relaxing activity, shows that

consumers are taking the hedonic and emotional experience provided by physical shopping centres quite seriously (Tena-Monferrer et al., 2022b).

Beyond the products themselves, environmental influences shape the physical consumer journey. As study argue, the atmosphere in a store (that is music, welcoming scents and lighting) can incite consumers desire to remain engaged longer and create more emotional bonds with that space (Szocs et al., 2023; Soelton et al., 2021a).

What's more, the post-pandemic world has transformed customer expectations. Hygiene and corresponding safety measures, visible to customers, have gone from being a "nice to have" to non-negotiable. This analysis consumers are extremely sensitive to cleanliness in shared spaces as well as the presence of security personnel (Echoing Dash et al., 2024). In the South African context, where safety is a systemic concern in society, security at a shopping centre has a direct relationship with whether or not the customer even returns.

In the end, the notion that e-commerce will bring about a full-blown "retail apocalypse" seems extreme. Physical stores are not dying; their essential value proposition is merely changing. To thrive, retailers and centre management must evolve from pure discounting to feature and experiential shopping. By championing the tactile nature of their items, building trust, creating immersive sensory environments and employing meticulous efforts to ensure safety, physical stores can find ways to strategically harmonize with, rather than just compete against, the online retail landscape.

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Though this study highlights important qualitative insights of consumer motivations and experiences, some limitations should be considered. First, the study included a qualitative design with a relatively small sample of nine individuals. Although sufficient to reach data saturation in an exploratory context, the results are not statistically generalisable to a wider population. Second, the study was limited to a single geographic area: the Western Cape province of South Africa. Consumer behaviours and security concerns can differ widely between provinces, or rural versus urban demographics.

The implications of these findings lead to a number of recommendations for both further research and retail management. Future studies could employ quantitative methodologies and seek to statistically validate the extent of tactility, atmospherics and hygiene in predicting physical store loyalty through observation from larger, more diverse populations spanning multiple locations. Moreover, with the growth of omnichannelled retailing, research exploring the effect of Augmented Reality (AR) as a digital replacement for real-world haptic experiences would be valuable.

For retail practitioners and shopping centre managers, upgrading in the sensory and atmospheric design of physical spaces is highly recommended. Management must also implement extended hygiene protocols and visible security measures as the best way to overcome consumer anxiety. Then finally, retailers will have to implement unified omnichannel strategies which utilize the convenience of digital platforms for routine purchases whilst revolutionizing physical stores into immersive and tactile concept hubs that provide exceptional customer experience as a therapeutic leisure activity.

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