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Mall Culture Used to Connect Teens Podcast

For most of the last fifty years, the mall has been one of the most popular destination for teenagers all over America. It's a place where young people spend time with each other to connect and build relationships. In recent years, though, that trend has changed, as fewer and fewer teenagers are choosing to spend their time at malls and more shopping is done online. Listen to one young person's attempt to understand why teenage mall culture has changed so much recently.

KELLY MCEVERS: So if you were a teenager at any time during the last half-century, it's pretty likely you hung out at a mall or, maybe, even worked at one. These days, though, teenagers are doing a lot less of both. Youth Radio's Madeline Veira spent some time at her local mall in Atlanta and away from it to find out why the relationship between malls and teens is changing.

MADELINE VEIRA: I went out looking for teens in an unscientific search to see if they're hanging out at the mall. I didn't have much luck. I wound up at Urban Outfitters at a mall called Lenox Square. That's where I met Nicole Sullivan.

NICOLE SULLIVAN: It's my first job, but I really like it. I enjoy it.

M. VEIRA: The numbers show that not many teens are working in malls, but here at Lenox Mall, I didn't even see many teens hanging out. I asked Nicole - she's actually 20 - does she see many teens?

SULLIVAN: A lot of younger kids - maybe, just touching 13. They'll be in huge groups, and they'll buy stuff. But, you know, it's always just like, OK, where's your parents?

M. VEIRA: I got a similar response from Ashleigh Berglund - also in her 20s - who works in the juniors section of Macy's.

ASHLEIGH BERGLUND: I see a lot more pre-teens in the mall - teenagers not so much, actually.

M. VEIRA: OK, so maybe for tweens, this mall has some staying power. But teens are another story. My next stop - Atlantic Station. It's one of the newer malls in Atlanta, and its got apartments above the shops. I lived here for a few years, and my friend Maya Pines still does. She's 17. We used to hang out all the time with our friends in the mall, but that's changed.

MAYA PINES: Over time, it's, like, movies are probably the only thing that would make me want to hangout. And also, like, the officers - if they didn't know me, then after a certain time, they'd start asking me, like, oh, where's your parent? Are you going home? That would get pretty annoying. So I really wouldn't want to come outside.

M. VEIRA: Although I did find a few teens hanging out here, I also got asked to stop recording because a story about teens and malls didn't fit the company's branding. So where are the teens? Maya says her idea of fun with friends doesn't include malls.

PINES: It's usually, like, something simple like going over to their house rather than hanging out outside.

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M. VEIRA: Stop. That's not funny.

That's me with my friend Allison Rapoport on a Saturday night, joking around. We're just hanging out at my house after watching the movie "Monsters Inc." I spend a lot of my free time like this, and my mom, Renae Veira, says she prefers it that way.

RENAE VEIRA: As a parent, I, personally, don't like the idea of you going to the mall. And, certainly, the more time you spend at the mall, the more likely you're going to spend money at the mall. So I would much rather have your friends at the house. And I can keep an eye on you. I don't have to worry about predators out there.

M. VEIRA: I don't even really care for going to the mall with my friends. Do you think that technology has anything to do with it?

R. VEIRA: I would definitely say technology is probably the number one factor affecting the culture - mall culture, today.

M. VEIRA: It's true. My friend Allison and I both spend a lot more time with technology than at the mall.

ALLISON RAPOPORT: I definitely will sit in the house watching Netflix for several hours straight and just be like, I feel fat and I need to go move. But then again, Netflix is so wonderful.

M. VEIRA: Allison likes doing active things, too, like going to the park to play Frisbee or soccer with friends. But the stereotype of teens hanging out together while on their devices isn't totally off the mark.

RAPOPORT: We are all constantly on our cell phones. That's true. But that doesn't mean we don't speak to one another. We still talk to one another. And sometimes we about things that are happening on social media - like, for example, Twitter fights are very entertaining to observe and so are Facebook fights. It's great entertainment - free entertainment. I don't think it's laziness. It's just inconvenient to have to go to the mall. Like, why would you go to the mall? It's not necessary.

M. VEIRA: As for shopping, Allison does it online. Does that mean that malls are dying? Hard to say. I still visit the mall every once in a while to shop, and I'm not alone. Teens spend an average of $165 a month at malls. That's according to the International Council of Shopping Centers. I definitely made one mall visit before school started. I can't have a lame wardrobe my senior year. For NPR News, I'm Madeline Veira in Atlanta, Georgia.

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Listening Comprehension Questions

What does the first interviewee mean when she ends her description of the preteens at the mall by saying “Ok, where are your parents?”

Why is a story about teens and mall culture not consistent with a mall’s brand?

What are the things that Madeline Veira’s mother doesn’t like about her daughter going to the mall?

What does Alison Rapoport mean when she says “I feel fat”?

According to Rapoport , what is the difference between laziness and inconvenience?

Discussion Themes

In the audio story, Madeline’ Vieras mom mentions technology as the number one reason why teens aren’t going to malls as much. Do you think she’s correct? Why or why not?

As fewer teens are going to the mall to make connections with friends, what other ways can teens connect and bond? How are these other ways similar or different to hanging out at the mall?

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