

Shopping malls are back with a bang!

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While the pandemic years have accelerated online shopping and the current tough economic conditions have locked down consumer wallets, South African malls continue to thrive. Covering hundreds of thousands of square metres and costing billions of Rands, an extraordinary number of new shopping centres have popped up all over the country in 2022, more are planned for the upcoming year. And there is increasing evidence, from independent surveys and owners, that for many of the larger malls in the country, footfall is back to where it was before the Covid lockdown.



“It’s quite clear that despite a range of real and perceived adversities, shopping malls in South Africa are far from endangered,” says Brandon de Kock, director of storytelling for BrandMapp which produces a rich data-set based on an annual survey of more than 33 000 mid- to top-income earners who represent 100% of the country’s formal-sector consumer base. “The massive scale of investment in physical retail space is testimony to the strength of South Africa’s mall culture and shows that the increase in online shopping does not neatly equate to a decrease in mall footfall. It’s not an ‘either/or’ situation and BrandMapp 2022 seems to be showing us that the scope for online shopping will continue to grow without taking everything away from bricks and mortar.”

In the light of hefty interest rate hikes and high costs of food and fuel, how is that possible? De Kock says, “This speaks to the modern consumer’s desire to range throughout the physical spaces accessible to them as well as the digital realm. We don’t just want the best of both worlds, we need it. Of course, people like the convenience of ordering the things they know they need and want from their couch, using their phone, at any time. There’s no difference in the toothpaste and toilet rolls that get delivered and those you can buy at your local supermarket.

But there are a lot of things that are better to shop for in real life, from vegetables to hand-held power tools!”

But aside from practicalities, de Kock also believes there are very human drivers behind our desire to hang out at the mall. “Malls are an integral part of the South African lifestyle where poor public transport combined with vast swathes of high-

density suburban sprawl, make them valued hubs for community and in-person engagement. In the course of their day-to-day life, consumers also want to get out of the house to see and be seen. Shopping is still an aspirational activity, rather than a chore, for the vast majority of South Africans. There is immense scope to build on this and meet the growing trend for immersive, novel and entertaining in-person shopping experiences.”

BrandMapp 2022 reveals that in Gauteng, middle-class South Africans visit an average of almost four different malls on a regular basis. In Cape Town, it's 2.7 malls and in KwaZulu-Natal, 2.4 malls. The latest survey data also shows certain shifts in the popularity of iconic malls. De Kock says, “We see that the Mall of Africa is rivalling Sandton City as the Gauteng retail mecca. Canal Walk is indisputably Cape Town's centre of the shopping universe, taking the crown from the V&A Waterfront. Consumer choice is expanding with new mall developments that have opened in Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. In total, there's been around 200,000m² of regional shopping space developed over the past 12 months. So, while the consumer confidence index has taken a serious knock in 2022, the other side of the coin is revealing a significant confidence in both the resilience of South African consumers and a bright future for the shopping mall in South Africa.”

The data has relevance too for the online retailers considering their options when it comes to offering omnichannel experiences. De Koch says, “An excellent example of spanning the physical and digital worlds in the South African retail space is Yuppiechef which started as an exclusively online specialist retailer and is now about to open its 11th concept store in a top mall. It's the concept of 'clicks and mortar' coming to life. Consumers want to be able to discover brands or find their favourites wherever they happen to be. The challenge for brands and retailers is to meet the moment when consumers are thinking and experiencing in more expansive ways. What's clear is that the dominance of malls in the country is sturdy and robust. For the mall owners hoping for a festive season boom, this should put a smile on their faces.”

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