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The Influence of Third Place Characteristics in Complex Shopping Malls on Retail Therapy and Consumer Quality of Life

Seong Ho LEE¹, Myoung-Soung LEE^{2,3}, Chun Han CHO³

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to investigate how the characteristics of complex shopping malls as the third place influence consumers' quality of life. To achieve this goal, the third place was conceptualized in terms of spatial characteristics and operationalized through four dimensions: concentration place, communication place, self-expression place, and relaxation place. The research sought to elucidate how these third-place attributes within complex shopping malls affect consumers' quality of life through retail therapy. **Research design, data and methodology:** To empirically test the proposed model, a survey was conducted targeting consumers who had visited a complex shopping mall located in the Suwon area of South Korea. The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. **Results:** The findings revealed that three third place characteristics—concentration, self-expression, and relaxation—significantly and positively influenced retail therapy. However, the communication place characteristic was not statistically significant. Furthermore, retail therapy was found to positively affect both the cognitive and affective dimensions of well-being, thereby enhancing the overall quality of life of consumers. **Conclusions:** This study underscores the importance of understanding complex shopping malls not merely as consumption spaces, but as psychologically and socially meaningful environments for consumers. By fulfilling various psychological needs and offering experiential value, complex shopping malls can play a pivotal role in enhancing consumer well-being.

Keywords : Complex Shopping Mall, The Third Place, Retail Therapy, Quality of Life, Well-Bing

JEL Classification Code : I39, L81, M31

1. Introduction

Complex shopping malls are not only places where consumers engage in transactions, such as acquiring and owning products (El Hedhli et al., 2013), but also environments in which they experience a range of emotions—including pleasure, excitement, joy, and fun—through shopping (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Beatty &

Ferrell, 1998; Oliver et al., 1997; Wakefield & Baker, 1998). In addition to facilitating commercial activities, complex shopping malls provide opportunities for consumers to interact with others, such as family, friends, and retail staff, and serve as venues for entertainment (El Hedhli et al., 2013). Furthermore, they function as social spaces where local residents gather, engage, and cultivate a sense of community (El Hedhli et al., 2013; Ng, 2003). Because

1 First Author. Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration, Hanbat National University, Republic of Korea. Email: lsh33@hanbat.ac.kr

2 Second Author. Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Gyeongbuk National University, Republic of Korea. Email: soung@gknu.ac.kr

3 Corresponding Author. Assistant Professor, Gyeonggi College of Science and Technology, Republic of Korea. Email: chcho@gtec.ac.kr

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complex shopping malls perform various functions for individual consumers and enable them to adopt diverse social roles, it is important to investigate how consumers perceive these spaces and what kinds of influence they exert.

Previous studies on complex shopping malls have made significant academic contributions but also revealed certain limitations. First, prior research on complex shopping malls has primarily focused on the factors that motivate consumer visits and the behavioral outcomes associated with these visits. Such studies have explored consumer activity patterns and interactions within these spaces (Bloch et al., 1994), examined mall attractiveness from the consumer's perspective (El-Adly, 2007), identified key elements shaping mall image and corresponding consumer responses (Chebat et al., 2010), and analyzed brand experiences in malls and their influence on consumer behavior (Kim et al., 2015). However, these studies have not explicitly addressed the influence of the place-based characteristics of complex shopping malls on consumers' quality of life. Since shopping fulfills fundamental human needs (Tauber, 1972), complex shopping malls—as spaces that meet these needs—can play a significant role in enhancing individuals' overall well-being (El Hedhli et al., 2013). Individuals' lives consist of multiple domains, including education, work, relationships, and consumption (Lee et al., 2002), and the specific actions individuals take are psychologically encoded in association with the physical spaces in which they occur. Therefore, the consumption experiences that take place in complex shopping malls are embedded within the consumer's psychological life space (Mohammad Shafiee & Es-Haghi, 2017). For these reasons, it is necessary to examine the influence of complex shopping malls on consumers' lives from a place-based perspective. Second, previous studies have confirmed that consumers can experience therapeutic benefits from shopping, which enhances positive emotions and psychological well-being (Lee & Böttger, 2017; Liu et al., 2023). Shopping has been shown to offer psychological benefits by alleviating sadness and stress while promoting positive affect (Kim & Chang, 2023; Rick et al., 2014). Thus, in order to better understand shopping well-being, it is essential to investigate the relationship between complex shopping malls and retail therapy from a place-oriented perspective. Nevertheless, previous studies on retail therapy have largely concentrated on consumers' emotional states, moods, and consumption behaviors (Atalay & Meloy, 2011; Liu et al., 2023; Rick et al., 2014), and little attention has been paid to the connection between complex shopping malls and retail therapy from a spatial perspective.

This study aims to examine how the place characteristics of complex shopping malls influence consumers' quality of life. To this end, the study adopts the concept of the third place to describe the spatial attributes of complex shopping

malls and to explore their relationship with retail therapy. The third place refers to informal public spaces outside of home and work where individuals can spend time, socialize, and engage in leisure activities (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Such spaces allow for concentration, communication, self-expression, and relaxation (Joo, 2020; Slater & Koo, 2010). Accordingly, this study categorizes third place experiences into four types—concentration place, communication place, self-expression place, and relaxation place—and analyzes their effects on retail therapy. Subsequently, the study investigates the influence of retail therapy on consumers' quality of life. Quality of life is assessed through individuals' subjective evaluations of their own well-being (Felce & Perry, 1995; Islam et al., 2024), which encompasses both cognitive and emotional dimensions of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Myers & Diener, 1995). This study, therefore, seeks to explore how retail therapy, as facilitated by complex shopping malls, affects both cognitive and emotional aspects of consumers' well-being. To achieve this goal, the study poses the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What role do the third place characteristics of complex shopping malls play in consumers' retail therapy experiences?
- RQ 2: What impact does retail therapy have on consumers' quality of life?

To address these questions, the study reviewed the literature on third places, retail therapy, and consumer well-being, and subsequently developed hypotheses and a research model. Furthermore, data were collected from complex shopping mall customers, and the hypotheses were empirically tested. Based on these findings, the study offers theoretical and practical implications for the spatial function of complex shopping malls in enhancing consumers' quality of life.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1. The Third Place

The concept of the third place, referring to spaces outside of home and work where individuals can enjoy leisure, relax, socialize, play, and rest (Joo, 2020; Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), was originally proposed by Oldenburg and Brissett (1982). They introduced the third place as a social space beyond home and work, in response to individuals becoming increasingly isolated and anxious due to a decline in opportunities for free social interaction. Specifically, they described the home as a highly personal place shared among family members, serving as a *sanctum sanctorum*, while the workplace, in an increasingly impersonal industrial

environment, is a space where people with similar capabilities and interests gather. To overcome the limitations of the two-stop model, they proposed the "third place" as a new social domain beyond home and work.

The third place refers to a public space that is open and easily accessible to individuals, equally available to everyone, purely social in nature, and accessible on a daily basis (Oldenburg, 1989; Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Since then, the concept has been expanded in various studies. Mikunda (2004) described the third place as a landmark that can be designed for shopping, contains conceptual elements and attracts people with a core appeal. Rosenbaum (2006) defined it as a place outside of home and work that fulfills individuals' practical, social, and emotional needs. Jeffres et al. (2009) argued that the third place not only promotes social communication and community but also enhances the quality of life of community members.

The third place is associated with unique characteristics such as sociability, playfulness, openness, comfort, and diversity (Joo, 2020; Mikunda, 2004; Oldenburg, 1989; Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), which support individuals in performing four functional activities: concentration, communication, self-expression, and relaxation (Joo, 2020; Slater & Koo, 2010). Based on these functional roles, previous studies have suggested various places as third places. Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) cited spaces such as coffee shops, pubs and taverns, popular bakeries or cafés, general stores, and hotel lunch counters. Waxman et al. (2007) proposed libraries, while Rosenbaum (2006) considered restaurants. Some studies have also recognized arts venues such as art museums as third places (Cantillon & Baker, 2022; Slater & Koo, 2010).

Complex shopping malls, comprising shops, restaurants, cafés, movie theaters, interactive entertainment venues, relaxation spaces, and social areas (El-Adly, 2007), have also been recognized as third places. In complex shopping malls, consumers engage not only in consumption but also in a wide range of social, leisure, and community activities (El Hedhli et al., 2013), implying that complex shopping malls can function as third places for individuals.

2.2. The Third Place and Retail Therapy

Retail therapy refers to the alleviation of negative emotions through shopping (Kang & Johnson, 2011). Consumers perceive consumption as a means of mood regulation and emotional healing (Kim & Chang, 2023; Malhotra, 2021). For example, consumers shop to reduce negative moods when experiencing stress, using shopping as a way to regain personal control in a chaotic environment (Kim & Chang, 2023; Rick et al., 2014). Consequently, consumers experience psychological healing, gaining benefits such as improved satisfaction and enhanced self-

esteem through shopping (Kim et al., 2020).

Previous studies on consumer behavior have linked retail therapy to negative consumer behaviors such as hedonic shopping (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Chang et al., 2004), compulsive buying (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; Noh & Hasan, 2017), and impulsive buying (Nayebzadeh & Jalaly, 2014; Rook & Gardner, 1993). For instance, Chang et al. (2004) stated that the value consumers find in hedonic shopping includes not only escape from daily routine but also the pleasure derived from the act of shopping. Likewise, studies on impulsive buying have suggested that such behavior is a strategic response to escape undesirable emotional states (Rook & Gardner, 1993). However, because retail therapy emphasizes the therapeutic function of shopping, it is conceptually distinct from consumer behaviors such as hedonic shopping, compulsive buying, and impulsive buying (Kang & Johnson, 2011).

Retail therapy has been studied from two similar yet distinct perspectives. One approach examines retail therapy from a compensatory perspective (Woodruffe, 1997; Woodruffe-Burton, 1998; Yurchisin et al., 2008), while the other takes a mood-relief perspective (Kacen, 1998; Kacen & Friese, 1999; Luomala, 2002). The compensatory perspective views shopping as a response to psychosocial deficits such as anger, boredom, or low self-esteem. The mood-relief perspective, on the other hand, sees shopping as a mechanism for relieving negative moods. Among the two, the compensatory approach is generally considered a broader framework, as it includes not only mood-related deficits but also other psychological needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization (Kang & Johnson, 2011).

Among the characteristics of the third place, a concentration place allows individuals to immerse themselves in specific activities of personal intent. A physically and psychologically comfortable environment influences the quality of those experiences (Joo, 2020). Immersion in such activities has positive effects, including enhanced self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, and psychological recovery, and also alleviates negative psychological symptoms (Asakawa, 2010). When individuals immerse themselves in a specific activity, they experience pleasure that is both self-directed and intrinsically rewarding (Abuhamdeh, 2020). Ultimately, places for concentration can facilitate a compensatory approach to retail therapy.

Meanwhile, one of the primary activities individuals engage in within the third place is social interaction (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), and facilitating communication is a core function of third places (Sugiyama et al., 2015). Social interaction fosters intimacy and bonds among individuals, fulfilling social needs and reducing psychological burdens (Lee & Yoo, 2022). In doing so, it strengthens positive emotions and weakens negative moods

(Lee & Yoo, 2023; Lee & Han, 2020). Since social relationships alleviate negative emotions (Ibarra-Rovillard and Kuiper, 2011), the communication-related characteristics of third places can enhance retail therapy.

The third place also functions as a space for self-expression, where individuals can reveal their lifestyle and identity (Joo, 2020). People prefer environments that align with their self-concept and the social values they pursue, and such alignment contributes to the perceived meaning of the place (Sugiyama et al., 2015). The third place thus provides a suitable context for self-expression by offering a sense of unity between personal identity and the place itself (Joo, 2020).

Finally, one of the core functions of the third place is relaxation. Waxman et al. (2007) identified relaxation as a primary activity within third places. Individuals perceive these spaces as private environments for self-recovery (Sugiyama et al., 2015) and seek them out as restorative environments (Waxman et al., 2007). Relaxation helps individuals halt the depletion of personal resources through recovery, replenish psychological and physical capacities, and maintain overall health (Sonnentag and Zijlstra, 2006). Ultimately, complex shopping mall spaces designed to facilitate rest can enhance retail therapy.

- H1:** The concentration-related characteristic of the third place has a positive influence on consumers' retail therapy.
- H2:** The communication-related characteristic of the third place has a positive influence on consumers' retail therapy.
- H3:** The self-expression-related characteristic of the third place has a positive influence on consumers' retail therapy.
- H4:** The relaxation-related characteristic of the third place has a positive influence on consumers' retail therapy.

2.3. Retail Therapy and Quality of Life

Quality of life refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of the "goodness" of various aspects of life (Theofilou, 2013), and this evaluation reflects overall well-being and health (Islam et al., 2024). In the academic literature, the concept of quality of life has often been used interchangeably with well-being, with some studies using one term to define the other (Theofilou, 2013). Felce and Perry (1995) argued that quality of life encompasses an individual's overall well-being, suggesting that it can be assessed through a person's subjective perception of well-being. Happiness, as a universal human aspiration, is inherently subjective—each individual perceives and judges the quality of their own life (McDowell & Newell, 1996). Subjective well-being (SWB) captures this internal

perception of happiness and increases as one's quality of life is positively evaluated (Diener, 1984; Parks et al., 2012). SWB reflects both cognitive and affective dimensions: the cognitive component pertains to an individual's evaluative judgment of life satisfaction based on personal standards, while the affective component relates to the frequency and intensity of experienced positive emotions (Diener, 2012; Myers & Diener, 1995). Subjective well-being is associated with numerous favorable outcomes, including increased engagement in various activities (Dolan et al., 2008), enhanced work performance (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001), and improved ability to cope with life challenges through more positive interpretations of stressful experiences (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Retail therapy—defined as the act of shopping to relieve negative emotional states—has been shown to enhance consumers' well-being by increasing positive emotions and reducing psychological distress (Lee & Böttger, 2017; Liu et al., 2023). In particular, retail therapy not only alleviates negative affective states such as sadness, but also serves cognitive functions, such as restoring a sense of personal control (Rick et al., 2014). A strong sense of personal control is essential for achieving various life goals and fostering mental resilience (Gooding et al., 2018), whereas a diminished sense of control is associated with adverse emotional states including anger, anxiety, and depression (Folkman, 1984). Therefore, retail therapy experienced within complex shopping malls may enhance both cognitive and affective aspects of subjective well-being, thereby contributing to overall quality of life. Based on this theoretical foundation, the following hypotheses are proposed.

- H5:** Retail therapy has a positive influence on consumers' cognitive well-being.
- H6:** Retail therapy has a positive influence on consumers' affective well-being.

<Figure 1> presents the research model based on the proposed hypotheses.

3. Research Method

3.1. Measurement of Constructs

To empirically examine the proposed research model and test the hypotheses, measurement items for each construct were adapted from established scales in prior studies. The items were originally developed in English and subsequently translated into Korean for the survey administration. A back-translation method was employed to ensure the accuracy and equivalence of the translation.

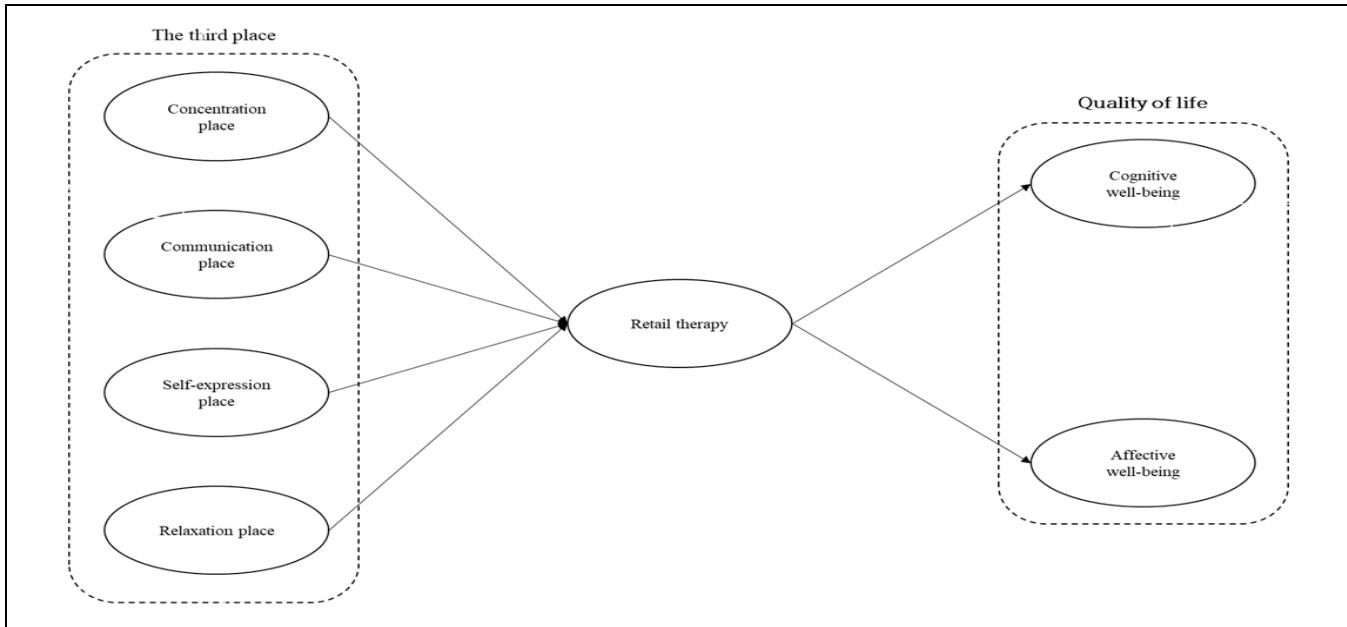


Figure 1: Research Model

To operationalize the spatial characteristics of complex shopping malls as third places, communication place and self-expression place were adopted from Joo (2020), while the relaxation place scale was sourced from Halvorson (2010). Specifically, the concentration place was measured using five items, whereas communication place and self-expression place were each measured using four items. The relaxation place was assessed with three items. Retail therapy was measured using five items adapted from Kang and Johnson (2011), capturing the extent to which consumers perceive shopping in complex malls as emotionally therapeutic and stress-relieving. To assess consumers' quality of life, the study separately measured cognitive well-being and affective well-being. Four items

from Islam et al. (2024) were used to measure cognitive well-being, reflecting individuals' subjective evaluations of life satisfaction and personal achievement. Affective well-being was measured using six semantic differential items from Campbell et al. (1976), which assessed emotional experiences in daily life by placing bipolar adjectives (e.g., boring–interesting, painful–pleasant, empty–full) at opposing ends of a continuum. All constructs were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), except for the affective well-being scale, which utilized a semantic differential format. <Table 1> presents the measurement items and their sources.

Table 1: Measurement Scales

Constructs	Scales	Sources
Concentration place (ConcP)	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can efficiently do what I want.	Joo (2020)
	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can do what I want without being interrupted.	
	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can focus on what I want without worrying about what others think.	
	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can freely do what I want.	
	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can comfortably do what I want.	
Communication place (CommP)	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can freely converse.	Joo (2020)
	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can comfortably chat with others.	
	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can enjoy conversations with others.	
	This complex shopping mall is a great space for communication.	
Self-expression place (SelfP)	This complex shopping mall fits my personal style well.	Joo (2020)
	This complex shopping mall reflects my lifestyle well.	
	I want to share my visit to this complex shopping mall with others through social media.	
	This complex shopping mall is a space where I can express myself well.	

Constructs	Scales	Sources
Relaxation place (RelP)	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can relax comfortably.	Halvorson (2010)
	This complex shopping mall is a place where I can enjoy relaxing.	
	This complex shopping mall is a great place to relax.	
Retail therapy (RT)	Shopping at this complex shopping mall makes me feel good.	Kang and Johnson (2011)
	Shopping at this complex shopping mall makes me happy.	
	Shopping at this complex shopping mall is a great way to change my mood.	
	The items I buy while shopping at this complex shopping mall help me change my mood.	
	When I'm feeling down, I often recall memories of shopping at this complex shopping mall to change my mood.	
Cognitive well-being (CogWB)	I am generally living a life close to what I want.	Islam et al. (2024)
	I am satisfied with my life.	
	I feel happy with my life.	
	I feel my life is generally healthy now.	
Affective well-being (AffWB)	Boring ----- Interesting	Campbell et al. (1976)
	Painful ----- Enjoyable	
	Useless ----- Valuable	
	Empty ----- Full	
	Disappointing ----- Hopeful	
	Disappointing ----- Rewarding	

3.2. Data Collection and Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

To empirically test the proposed research model and hypotheses, this study collected data from consumers who had recently visited a complex shopping mall located in the Suwon region of South Korea. This mall, which opened in 2024, is the largest in South Korea. Since complex shopping malls vary in concept, size, and vendor composition, collecting data from visitors to different malls could lead to varying perceptions of the characteristics of the third place. Therefore, this study selected one specific complex shopping mall and gathered data from its visitors. A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated measurement items from prior literature, and data collection was conducted using an online survey platform. The survey was programmed to accept responses only when all items were fully completed to ensure data reliability and completeness. Survey participants were recruited through a professional online survey agency that distributed the URL to a secured panel. Before proceeding with the survey, respondents were asked two screening questions: (1) whether they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, and (2) whether they had visited a complex shopping mall in Seoul or Gyeonggi within the past month. Respondents who answered "no" to any of these questions were automatically disqualified, and the survey was terminated.

Data were collected over a five-day period from December 16 to December 20, 2024. A total of 448 responses were initially obtained. After eliminating 31 responses due to quality concerns—such as uniform response patterns or incomplete answers—a final dataset of

417 valid responses was retained for analysis. The demographic profile of the respondents was as follows: 246 participants (59.0%) were female, and 171 (41.0%) were male. Regarding age distribution, 10 respondents (2.4%) were under 25 years of age, 97 (23.3%) were between 26 and 34, 155 (37.2%) were between 35 and 44, 117 (28.1%) were between 45 and 54, 33 (7.9%) were between 55 and 64, and 5 (1.2%) were 65 or older. In terms of educational background, 69 respondents (16.5%) had completed high school, 10 (2.4%) were currently enrolled in university, 275 (65.9%) had earned a university degree, 62 (14.9%) had completed or were currently enrolled in a graduate program, and 1 respondent (0.2%) reported "other" educational backgrounds. Annual household income levels were distributed as follows: 29 respondents (7.0%) earned less than 20 million KRW, 110 (26.4%) earned between 20 million and 40 million KRW, 114 (27.3%) earned between 40 million and 60 million KRW, 82 (19.7%) earned between 60 million and 80 million KRW, 39 (9.4%) earned between 80 million and 100 million KRW, and 43 (10.3%) earned more than 100 million KRW.

4. Analysis Results

4.1. Measurement Model Analysis

Prior to hypothesis testing, this study assessed the reliability and validity of the measurement scales used to evaluate the constructs associated with consumers' experiences in complex shopping malls. To evaluate reliability, both internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) and

composite reliability (CR) were examined. Validity was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which allowed for the evaluation of convergent and discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Nunnally, 1978). Specifically, convergent validity was verified by examining multiple indicators, including the overall model fit of the CFA, standardized factor loadings of the measurement items, their statistical significance, CR, and average variance extracted (AVE). Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the AVE for each construct with the inter-construct correlations, as recommended by Hair et al. (2010).

The results of the CFA demonstrated an acceptable model fit: $\chi^2 = 1,211.45$, $df = 443$, $p = .00$, $GFI = .848$, $CFI = .946$, $NFI = .918$, $TLI = .939$, and $RMSEA = .070$. All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant, and CR values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. Similarly, AVE values were above 0.50, satisfying the criterion for convergent validity. Internal consistency, as assessed by Cronbach's alpha, also exceeded 0.70 for all constructs, indicating high reliability.

Furthermore, discriminant validity was confirmed, as the square root of each construct's AVE was greater than its correlations with other constructs. These findings support the conclusion that the measurement scales used in this study were both reliable and valid for analyzing the research model concerning consumer experiences and well-being in complex shopping mall environments.

Table 2: Results of CFA

Constructs	λ^a	t-value	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Concentration place	0.816	-	0.967	0.855	0.940
	0.869	21.851			
	0.881	21.876			
	0.895	22.377			
	0.895	22.623			
Communication place	0.890	-	0.973	0.901	0.945
	0.947	32.203			
	0.923	29.620			
	0.876	25.998			
Self-expression place	0.900	-	0.944	0.809	0.896
	0.883	26.995			
	0.692	16.586			
	0.862	24.729			
Relaxation place	0.935	-	0.972	0.921	0.947
	0.946	38.649			
	0.898	31.737			
Retail therapy	0.921	-	0.960	0.827	0.909
	0.921	32.339			
	0.860	26.778			
	0.822	24.038			
	0.718	18.642			

Constructs	λ^a	t-value	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Cognitive well-being	0.748	-	0.948	0.820	0.909
	0.876	18.806			
	0.912	19.083			
	0.838	17.428			
Affective well-being	0.835	-	0.968	0.836	0.943
	0.831	21.092			
	0.859	22.089			
	0.868	22.692			
	0.894	23.480			
	0.851	21.534			

$\chi^2 = 1,211.45$, $df = 443$, $p = .00$, $GFI = .848$, $CFI = .946$, $NFI = .918$, $TLI = .939$, $RMSEA = .070$

Table 3: Results of Discriminant Validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. ConcP	.925						
2. CommP	.711**	.949					
3. SelP	.819**	.732**	.899				
4. RelP	.769**	.775**	.805**	.960			
5. RT	.768**	.697**	.806**	.772**	.909		
6. CogWB	.527**	.445**	.565**	.499**	.534**	.906	
7. AffWB	.428**	.325**	.443**	.375**	.407**	.788**	.914

**p < .01

Note : ConcP = concentration place, CommP = communication place, SelP = self-expression place, RelP = Relaxation place, RT = retail therapy, CogWB = cognitive well-being, AffWB = affective well-being

4.2. Hypotheses Testing

To test the hypotheses proposed in the research model, this study employed structural equation modeling (SEM). The results indicated an acceptable model fit: $\chi^2 = 1,481.41$, $df = 422$, $p = .00$, $GFI = .825$, $CFI = .927$, $NFI = .899$, $TLI = .920$, and $RMSEA = .074$. Hypothesis 1 posited that among the characteristics of the third place, the concentration place would have a positive effect on consumers' retail therapy. The analysis results confirmed that the concentration place positively influenced retail therapy ($\beta = 0.227$, $p < .01$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 suggested that the communication place would positively influence retail therapy. This hypothesis was rejected because it was not statistically significant in the analysis ($\beta = 0.077$, $p > .05$). Hypothesis 3 proposed that the self-expression place would positively influence retail therapy. The analysis revealed that the self-expression place had the strongest positive influence among the third place characteristics ($\beta = 0.386$, $p < .01$), thus supporting Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 4 predicted that the relaxation place would positively influence retail therapy. The findings confirmed this relationship ($\beta = 0.232$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 4. In the next stage, Hypothesis 5 proposed that retail therapy would positively affect

consumers' cognitive well-being. The results confirmed this prediction ($\beta = 0.568$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 5. Finally, Hypothesis 6 posited that retail therapy would positively influence consumers' affective well-being. The analysis results confirmed this relationship as well ($\beta = 0.443$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 6.

Table 4: Hypotheses Test Results

	Path	Standardized estimates	t-value	Conclusion
H1	ConcP → RT	0.227	3.608**	supported
H2	CommP → RT	0.077	1.459	rejected
H3	SelP → RT	0.386	5.439**	supported
H4	RelP → RT	0.232	3.648**	supported
H5	RT → CogWB	0.568	10.762**	supported
H6	RT → AffWB	0.443	8.900**	supported

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, $\chi^2 = 1,481.41$, $df = 422$, $p = .00$, $GFI = .825$, $CFI = .927$, $NFI = .899$, $TLI = .920$, $RMSEA = .074$

Note : ConcP = concentration place, CommP = communication place, SelP = self-expression place, RelP = Relaxation place, RT = retail therapy, CogWB = cognitive well-being, AffWB = affective well-being

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how the characteristics of complex shopping malls as the third place influence consumers' quality of life. To achieve this goal, the third place was conceptualized in terms of spatial characteristics and operationalized through four dimensions: concentration place, communication place, self-expression place, and relaxation place. The research sought to elucidate how these third place attributes within complex shopping malls affect consumers' quality of life through retail therapy. To empirically test the proposed model, a survey was conducted targeting consumers who had visited complex shopping mall located in the Suwon area of South Korea. The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The findings revealed that three third place characteristics—concentration, self-expression, and relaxation—significantly and positively influenced retail therapy. However, the communication place characteristic was not statistically significant. Furthermore, retail therapy was found to positively affect both the cognitive and affective dimensions of well-being, thereby enhancing consumers' overall quality of life. These findings underscore the importance of understanding complex shopping malls not merely as consumption spaces but also as psychologically and socially meaningful environments. By fulfilling various psychological needs and offering experiential value, complex shopping malls can play a pivotal role in enhancing consumer well-being.

5.1. Implications

Complex shopping malls are not merely spaces for transactional consumption—such as acquiring and owning products (El Hedhli et al., 2013)—but also environments where consumers can experience a wide range of emotions, including pleasure, excitement, joy, and fun through shopping (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Oliver et al., 1997; Wakefield & Baker, 1998). Because complex shopping malls perform various functional and psychological roles for individuals, it is critical to understand how consumers perceive these spaces and how such perceptions influence their experiences and well-being. In this context, the present study broadens the research perspective by analyzing complex shopping malls through the lens of the third place. The study offers several theoretical and managerial contributions to the literature on complex shopping malls.

The theoretical contributions of this study are as follows. First, this study extends the theoretical framework of shopping mall research by conceptualizing complex shopping malls as the third place. The third place refers to spaces outside of home and work that allow individuals to relax, socialize, play, and rest (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982; Joo, 2020). Previous research has explored various types of third places, such as coffee shops, pubs, cafés, general stores, and hotel counters (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), libraries (Waxman et al., 2007), restaurants (Rosenbaum, 2006), and even art venues (Cantillon & Baker, 2022; Slater & Koo, 2010). However, no prior studies have explicitly conceptualized complex shopping malls as third places or examined them in terms of third place characteristics. This study fills that gap by identifying four core third place dimensions of complex shopping malls—concentration, communication, self-expression, and relaxation—and empirically validating their effects.

Second, this study contributes to the retail therapy literature by identifying the third place characteristics within complex shopping malls that significantly influence consumers' retail therapy experiences. While prior research has focused primarily on emotional and behavioral aspects of retail therapy (Atalay & Meloy, 2011; Liu et al., 2023; Rick et al., 2014), few studies have examined how the spatial characteristics of consumption environments contribute to retail therapy. This study addresses the gap by confirming that three spatial and experiential characteristics of the third place—such as those found in complex shopping malls, namely concentration, self-expression, and relaxation—enhance retail therapy. The lack of influence of the communication dimension is interpreted as a result of consumers' perception that interacting with others is not a core function of complex shopping malls. In complex shopping malls, consumers not only "concentrate" on the

activity of shopping and "express themselves" through shopping, but also "relax" by escaping the repetitive routines of daily life. Therefore, while the three elements of third place characteristics—concentration, self-expression, and relaxation—are considered core functions of complex shopping malls, the spatial characteristic of communication is perceived as an additional element, which contributes to its insignificant impact on retail therapy. This study confirms that retail therapy is shaped by the spatial and experiential functions of complex shopping malls as third places. Given that shopping can alleviate negative emotions and enhance psychological well-being (Kim & Chang, 2023; Rick et al., 2014), approaching retail therapy from a place-based perspective offers important theoretical insights.

Third, the study enhances our understanding of how complex shopping malls affect consumers' quality of life. Previous studies have largely focused on the utilitarian and hedonic factors driving consumers' mall visits or behavioral responses. However, they have seldom addressed the broader impact of the mall environment on individual well-being. Since shopping meets both utilitarian and psychological needs (Tauber, 1972), complex shopping malls—as spaces that fulfill these needs—can be considered influential in enhancing consumers' quality of life (El Hedhli et al., 2013). This study thus expands the conceptual scope of consumer well-being research by linking place-based characteristics of complex shopping malls to quality of life outcomes.

The managerial implications of this study are as follows. The findings of this study may offer strategic insights into the spatial design and operation of complex shopping malls. First, the identified functions of concentration, self-expression, and relaxation offer a framework for creating mall environments that promote therapeutic shopping experiences, thereby enhancing consumers' overall well-being. According to servicescape theory, both the interior and exterior physical environments of commercial spaces significantly influence consumers' perceptions and experiences (Joo, 2020). Accordingly, it is essential for complex shopping malls to embody third place characteristics in their servicescapes. Complex shopping malls, as the third place, should be designed to allow consumers to concentrate on shopping and leisure activities in a comfortable and relaxing environment. They should also provide opportunities for self-expression, such that the mall environment reflects consumers' personal styles, lifestyles, and self-concepts (Joo, 2020). Moreover, complex shopping malls must offer diverse spaces for rest and relaxation—not only universally accessible rest areas that resemble public parks, but also commercially operated leisure spaces specifically designed to offer comfort. These design strategies will support the mall's role as a third place, helping to facilitate retail therapy and enhance consumer

quality of life.

Second, among the characteristics of the third place in complex shopping malls, the most influential factor in retail therapy was found to be the self-expression place. This suggests that consumers most fundamentally expect the spatial function of complex shopping malls to be the opportunity to shop for a variety of products. In other words, it can be inferred that consumers value having a diverse range of brands within complex shopping malls that allow them to express their individuality. Therefore, when developing management strategies for complex shopping malls, it is crucial to prioritize offering products and services from diverse and distinctive brands.

5.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it focused on four specific functions—concentration, communication, self-expression, and relaxation—as core characteristics of the third place in the context of complex shopping malls. However, third place attributes may encompass a broader range of dimensions beyond those identified in this study. Future research should explore a wider spectrum of third place characteristics relevant to complex shopping malls and investigate whether these spaces exhibit unique third place features that distinguish them from other public or commercial environments.

Second, the effects of retail therapy and consumer quality of life may vary according to individual characteristics such as age, gender, income level, personality traits, or consumption values. However, this study did not incorporate such individual-level differences into its research model. Future studies should consider examining the moderating effects of diverse personal factors on the relationship between consumers' experiences in complex shopping malls and their perceived well-being.

Third, while this study proposed retail therapy as a mediating mechanism linking third place characteristics of complex shopping malls to consumer well-being, it may not fully capture the underlying psychological processes. There is a need for more in-depth investigation into the psychological mechanisms through which spatial characteristics influence consumers' perceptions of life satisfaction and emotional well-being. Future research should identify and empirically validate more specific mediators—such as emotional attachment to place, perceived autonomy, or flow experience—that help explain how the environment of complex shopping malls enhances consumers' quality of life.

Finally, the sample used for the empirical analysis consisted of consumers who visited a complex shopping mall in the Suwon area. This sampling limitation restricts the generalizability of the findings. Given that complex

shopping malls differ in concept, scale, and vendor composition, data collected from individual visitors may reflect varied perceptions of their role as the third place. To address this, representative complex shopping malls across South Korea were selected, and data were collected from their visitors. While this approach aimed to enhance the validity of the study, it still presents limitations regarding generalizability. Future research should therefore include complex shopping malls from diverse regions to further assess the robustness of the findings.

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