

# Analyzing "shopping for american culture" by james farrell essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Shopping](#)



## **Analyzing “ Shopping for American Culture” by James Farrell Essay Sample**

The United States has more malls than high schools and the number of shopping centers is increasing each year (378). It is clear that malls are a large part of our society. In “ Shopping for American Culture,” James Farrell claims that the 45, 000 malls in America define American values and culture because malls are the ideal environment for social interaction, aesthetic appreciation, and equality of consumerism. While Farrell talks through the majority of his essay about the benefits of the mall, his final two paragraphs complicate his own argument. Specifically, we see this in his brief treatment of commercialism.

In the introduction of his book “ One Nation Under Goods”, James Farrell explores malls and the effects they have on society. Farrell claims that shopping at malls is such a common part of our lives that we take it for granted and overlook what is really going on at the mall, a large-scale cultural interaction. When we go to malls, not only are we searching for items to purchase, we are also searching for an identity. Farrell even makes the claim that malls are similar to churches and museums; they’re places where we can figure out our values. He talks about how everything in the mall, from the product design to the architecture, is constructed to please the consumer. He says that there is a “ conspiracy of customer satisfaction” at the mall and that the workers genuinely want to please the shopper. Farrell’s main claim is that society as a whole gets it’s values and culture

from the nation's malls, yet he complicates his argument by briefly mentioning consumerism in his last paragraph.

Farrell says that there are many great things about the mall, such as equality, art, and social interaction. However, the one thing that he dislikes about the mall is the presence of commercialism. He states, " Still, my main complaint is not primarily with malls, but with a larger commercial culture that characterizes us mainly as consumers. My main argument is with an America that sells itself short by buying into the cluster of values expressed so powerfully in our malls" (383). In other words, he loves malls but he dislikes how stores will sell anything to make a profit, even if the product goes against the typical values of society. An example of one such item is the mini skirt. The majority of Americans associate the mini skirt with promiscuity; however, there is an abundance of mini skirts in the mall. If you go into Abercrombie and Fitch, American Eagle, or numerous other teen clothing stores, you will have a hard time finding a skirt that goes past mid thigh. Businesses will continue to sell these things as long as Americans want them because it is lucrative. Many Americans are materialistic and cause the trend of commercialism to continue.

Is it society that causes the stores to sell such items, or is it that the stores put the items out there to tantalize the consumer and convince them to buy it? Farrell says that Americans are being coerced into buying these items because the stores are offering them and advertising them effectively. On the other hand, in the film " Merchants of Cool", it shows how businesses and corporations pay people to go out and find trends. They bring these

ideas back to the boardroom and from there they incorporate these ideas into their products. They are saying that the people influence the values and trends, not the mall (Merchants). So who is right? Perhaps both the film and Farrell are correct. It could be that we influence the things sold in the mall and the mall influences the things we like.

Farrell claims, " In malls of America, consumption is not just happenstance. It's carefully planned and programmed" (380). Farrell says that everything in a mall is designed with the shopper in mind, from the structural design of the building to the art that is displayed. What it boils down to is that the shops in the mall want to make a profit and they put remarkable thought into making sure that people spend as much money as possible. Even the floor plan in a mall has tremendous thought put into it. It is designed to be labyrinthine so that shoppers have a greater chance to get lost and spend more money while they are trying to get out. The seats in the food courts are intentionally uncomfortable so that shoppers will not dally while eating and will quickly resume shopping. This idea contradicts the statement by Farrell, " The people who work in malls genuinely want to please the people who shop in malls" (383). Possibly the merchants do want to please the consumer, but it is also conceivable that pleasing the consumer comes second after making a profit. Farrell could have more thoroughly explored that claim, but he probably refrained from doing so to avoid farther complicating his argument supporting malls.

Farrell spends twenty paragraphs talking about how wonderful malls are, however, in the final two paragraphs of his introduction he complicates his

argument by contradicting many of the points he was trying to prove. He says, " But I also appreciate the ways that a shopping center can be a social trap, an institution in which the sum total of perfectly good behavior is not so good" (383). He is referring to the malls that he was previously praising as a trap where bad behavior, such as commercialism, usually prevails. Farrell could be trying to concede a point and acknowledge that he is aware critics will have attacks against his claims. If we believe that society gets it's values from malls then Farrell may be onto something, but if we choose to believe that malls get their values from society then Farrell is probably exaggerating his frustrations concerning commercialism.