Gen Z at the Mall: Shopping Habits, Visit Patterns, and Winning Brands

Gen Z is going to the mall to shop, not just socialize. Discover what location analytics reveal about how young adults shop at malls – and which brands are winning their attention.

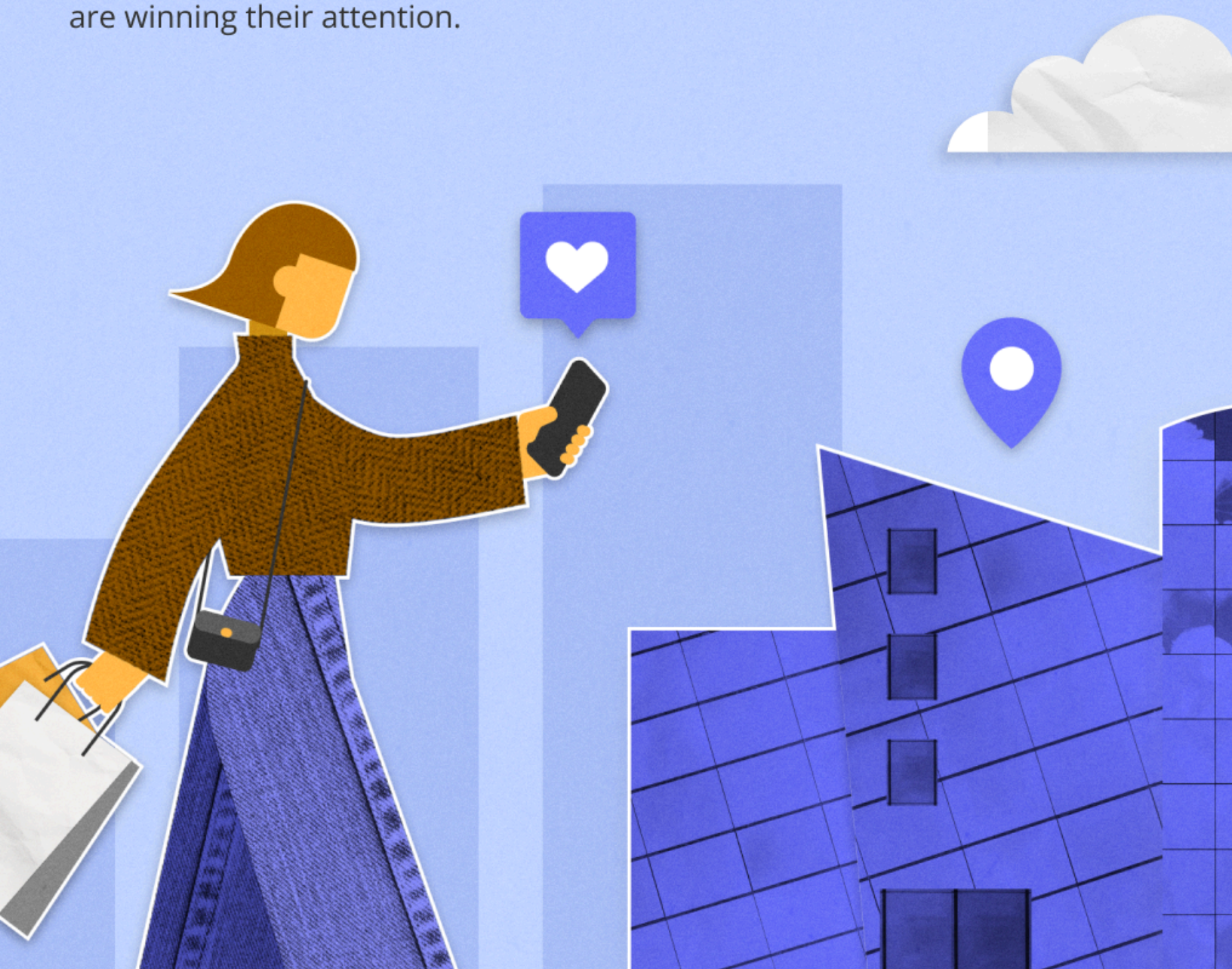


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Key Takeaways

Gen Z loves the mall. And despite much of the attention focusing on malls as social destinations for younger consumers, location analytics for January-September 2026 suggest they are also visiting to shop.

- Young adults ages 18 to 29 were overrepresented at indoor malls (21.8%), open-air shopping centers (21.6%), and outlet malls (20.9%) relative to their 20.3% share of U.S. adults – and their presence across all three formats has risen since 2019.

- Mid-tier centers led on young adult share at 22.7%, ahead of top-tier (21.3%) and premium properties (20.9%) – suggesting that proximity, convenience, and value matter at least as much as destination appeal.

- Younger consumers appear to use malls for quick trips woven into their everyday routines: Centers with the highest Gen Z concentration see shorter, more frequent visits, along with more nearby traffic and greater weekday and midday activity.

- Many young-skewing mall and shopping center chains posted positive year-over-year visit growth, suggesting that strong appeal among young adults can help drive overall traffic.

- Several chains – led by Trader Joe's and Target – attracted a higher share of young adults than the open-air centers that host them, offering a leasing signal for operators and a negotiating advantage for brands.

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Hanging Out… and Shopping

Gen Z's rekindled romance with the mall is usually framed as a story about hanging out – a generation craving in-person connection and reclaiming physical retail as a third place.

To be sure, the social narrative has plenty of support. But foot traffic data suggests that socializing, while an important part of the picture, is far from the whole story. Young adults are also going to malls in large part to… (gasp!) shop.

This report explores what location analytics can reveal about why, when, and how young adults visit the mall – and which properties and brands are best positioned to turn that demand into growth. It also points to practical levers, from tenant selection to visit-timing strategy, that operators can use to attract young adult consumers and capture more value from this growing opportunity.

Young Adult Mall Attendance Keeps Climbing

One thing commentators are getting right is that young adults are indeed going to malls – and in growing numbers. Although they were already overrepresented in malls' visitor bases in 2019, their share has continued to increase in the years since.

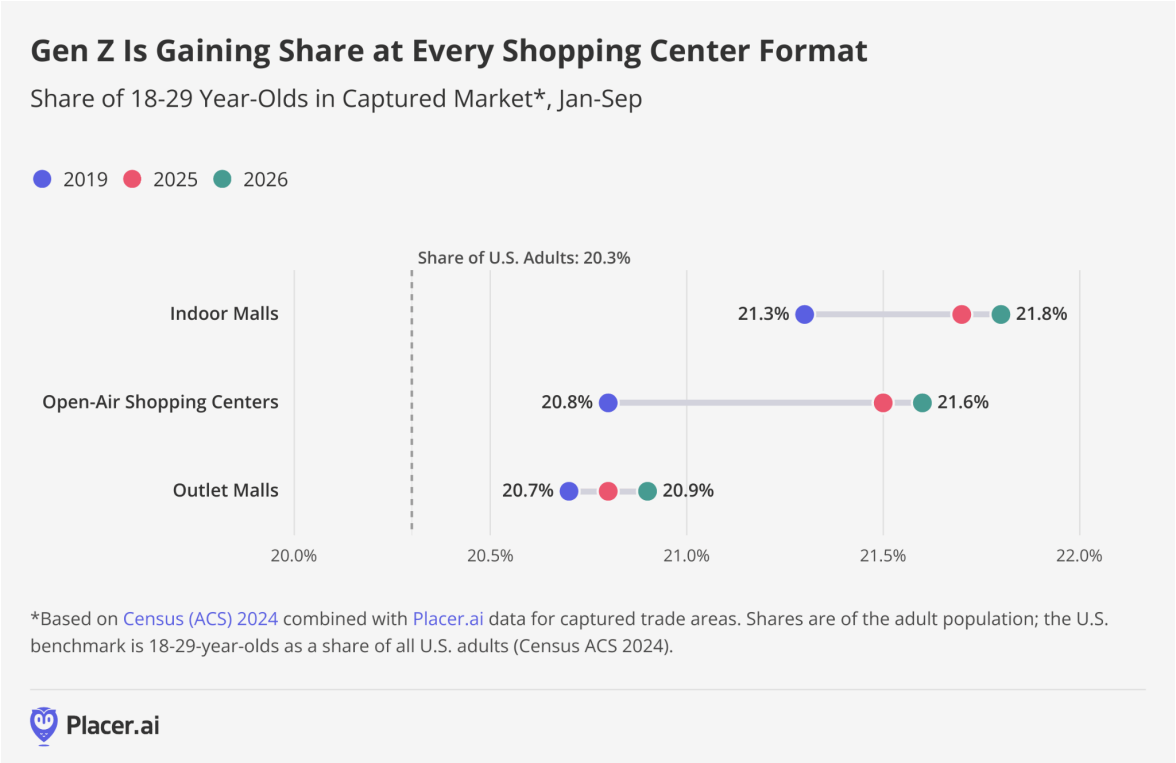
Young Adult Demand Is Growing Across Every Format

Between January and September 2026, young adults ages 18 to 29 represented 21.8% of indoor malls' captured markets, 21.6% of open-air shopping centers' captured markets, and 20.9% of outlet malls' captured markets – above their 20.3% share of the U.S. adult population. The cohort's representation has also risen across every format since 2019.

Indoor malls attracted the largest share of young adult visitors in 2026, while open-air centers recorded the strongest growth in young adult representation compared to 2019. Even outlet malls – a format built largely around purposeful, value-driven trips

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and offering less of the hangout atmosphere central to the mall-as-third-place narrative – saw a modest increase in young adult share over the analyzed period.



Mid-Tier Centers Draw the Youngest Crowd

Gen Z's distribution across mall and shopping center tiers also suggests a cohort that values convenience and value at least as much as experiential appeal.

Mid-tier centers – roughly equivalent to Class B properties – led on young adult share in the first nine months of 2026, with 18-to-29-year-olds accounting for 22.7% of their captured markets. Top-tier centers (roughly equivalent to Class A) followed at 21.3%, while premium properties (Class A+) stood at 20.9% – all above the national benchmark.

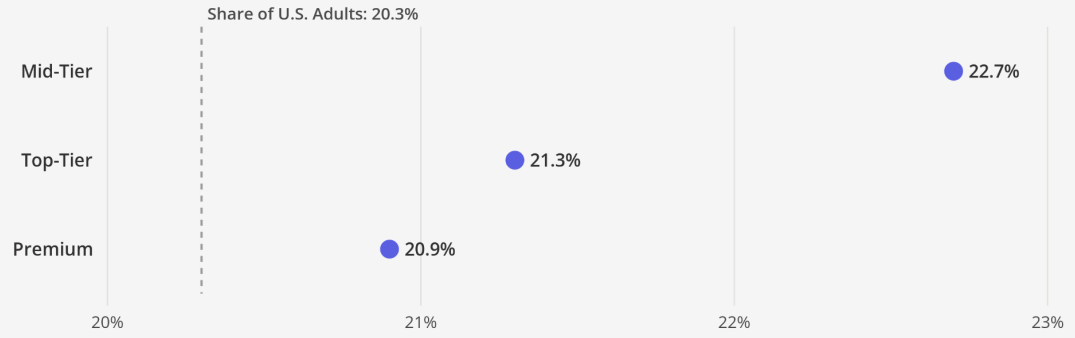
If atmosphere and experience were the primary draw, premium centers – with their destination tenant rosters and elevated dining offerings – might be expected to lead the ranking.

Instead, mid-tier centers came out on top, likely because they are more geographically dispersed and often closer to where young people live, work, and study. For a generation that prizes value and convenience, the mall where shopping is easiest may hold more appeal than the mall where lingering is nicest.

And with Gen Z's global spending power projected to reach $12 trillion by 2030, the fact that young consumers are increasingly showing up where the shopping happens should command the attention of operators and investors across every mall format.

Mid-Tier Malls and Shopping Centers Draw the Largest Share of Gen Z Visitors

18-29-Year-Olds as Share of All Adults (18+) in Captured Market*, Jan-Sep 2026



*Based on Census (ACS) 2024 combined with Placer.ai data for captured trade areas. Shares are of the adult population. Segments include indoor malls and open-air centers and broadly correlate to Class A+, Class A, and Class B property ratings.

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Key Insights From This Section:

- Young adults never left the mall. They have been overrepresented across every format since 2019, and their share has continued to grow.
- Indoor malls attracted the largest Gen Z share in the first nine months of 2026, while open-air centers saw the strongest increase in participation.

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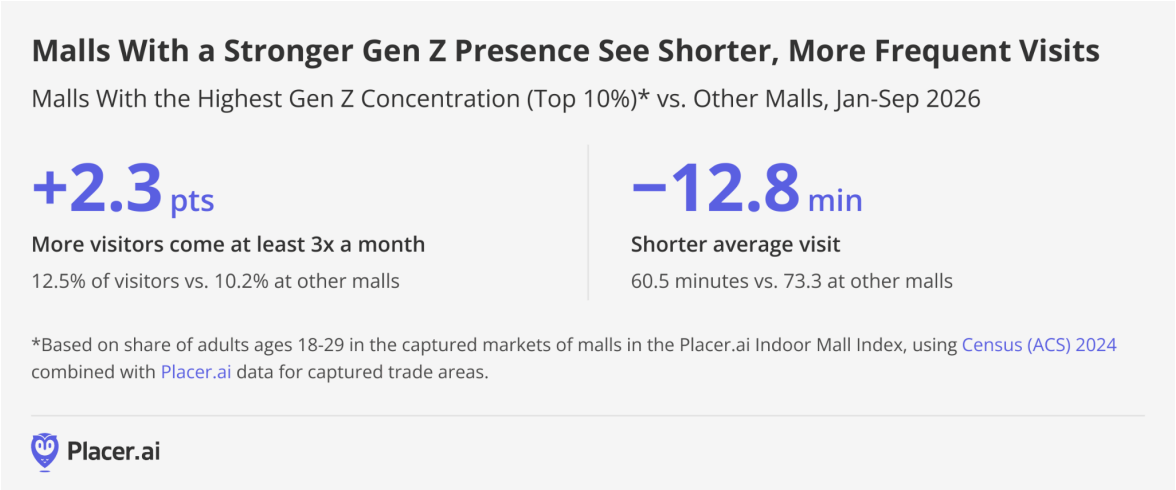
- Even outlet malls – purposeful, deal-driven, and relatively light on hangout atmosphere – overindexed on young adults.
- Mid-tier centers led on young adult share, ahead of top-tier and premium properties.
- For operators, the data suggests that investments in convenience – simplified parking, quick entry, and value-oriented tenants – may do more to attract young adults than experiential upgrades alone.

Behavior Signals Point to Shopping Missions

Visit patterns at indoor malls that attract the highest concentrations of Gen Z consumers – many of them located in college towns – provide further evidence that young adults may be frequenting the mall with specific shopping missions in mind.

Shorter, More Frequent Visits

Comparing the 10% of properties in the Placer.ai Indoor Mall Index with the highest shares of 18-to-29-year-olds against the rest of the index, for example, reveals a pattern of shorter, more frequent visits.



In the first nine months of 2026, 12.5% of visitors to these Gen Z-heavy malls made at least three visits in an average month, compared with 10.2% at other malls. They also spent less time on-site, with an average dwell time of 60.5 minutes – versus 73.3 minutes across the rest of the index.

Frequent, brief visits are the hallmarks of a habitual shopper – and while an hour-long average dwell time still leaves ample room to grab a bite or meet a friend, the data suggests that purposeful visits make up a larger share of the mix than the hangout narrative alone would imply.

Notably, many of the malls with the highest Gen Z concentrations sit near large universities, so some of this rhythm reflects campus life. But if any group could be expected to treat the mall as a third place, it is students – and even at the malls where they are most concentrated, the typical visit is short and the repeat visitor is common.

Midday and Weekday Traffic

Visit timing offers another indication of intentional shopping behavior.

Between January and September 2026, younger-skewing malls drew a larger share of visits during off-peak morning and midday hours, with 29.3% occurring between 9:00 AM and 2:00 PM, compared with 27.2% at other malls. They also received a greater share of traffic on weekdays – 62.8% versus 60.8% – when mall visits are more likely to involve errands and routine stops.

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Malls With a Stronger Gen Z Presence Draw More Weekday and Midday Visits

Malls With the Highest Gen Z Concentration (Top 10%)* vs. Other Malls, Jan-Sep 2026

+2.1 pts

Larger share of visits between 9AM and 2PM

29.3% of visits vs. 27.2% at other malls

+2.0 pts

Larger share of visits on weekdays

62.8% of visits vs. 60.8% at other malls

*Based on share of adults ages 18-29 in the captured markets of malls in the Placer.ai Indoor Mall Index, using Census (ACS) 2024 combined with Placer.ai data for captured trade areas.

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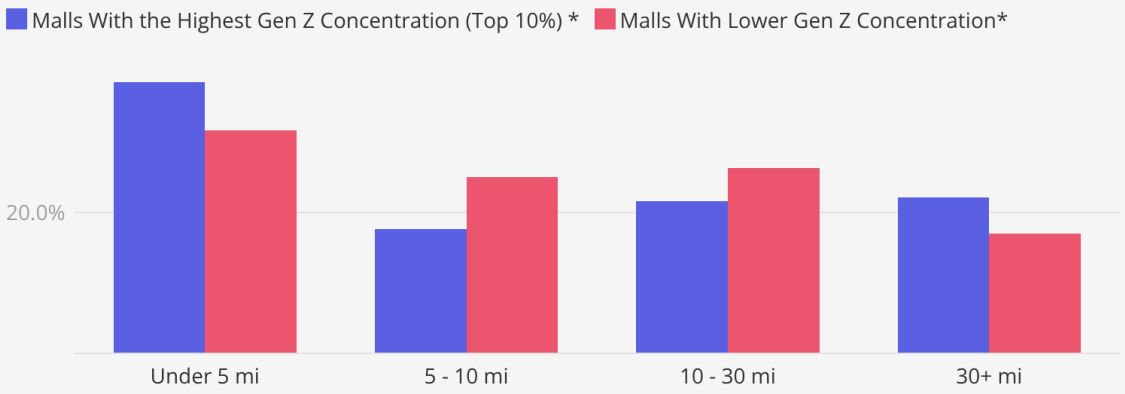
Closer to Home, With a Long-Distance Twist

The geography of visits to these malls also suggests that while social outings remain part of the Gen Z mall story, convenience plays an even larger role – with many young adults visiting properties close to where they live, work, and study.

In the first nine months of 2026, malls with the highest Gen Z concentrations overindexed on local visits, with 38.5% originating less than five miles away, compared with 31.7% at other malls. Although long-distance trips also overindexed, the higher local share – particularly when considered alongside the other behavioral signals discussed above – suggests that these properties function not only as destinations, but also as convenient, go-to shopping destinations for nearby consumers.

Malls With a Larger Share of Younger Visitors See Traffic Polarize Into Hyper-Local and Long-Distance Trips

Share of Visits by Distance From Home, Jan-Sep 2026



*Based on the share of adults ages 18–29 in the captured markets of malls in the Placer.ai Indoor Mall Index, using 2024 Census (ACS) data combined with Placer.ai captured trade area data.

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Key Insights From This Section:

- The most Gen Z-concentrated malls saw more frequent visits in the first nine months of 2026 – 12.5% versus 10.2% coming at least three times in an average month – and shorter dwell times of 60.5 versus 73.3 minutes.
- These malls also skewed toward midday traffic (29.3% versus 27.2%) and weekday visits (62.8% versus 60.8%) – periods associated with errands and routine stops – and drew a disproportionate share of visits from less than five miles away.
- Operators can cater to Gen Z's routine-driven visits with midday and weekday promotions, easy in-and-out navigation, and loyalty programs that reward frequency – while weekend events can still serve the long-distance social crowd.

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The Brands Bringing Gen Z In

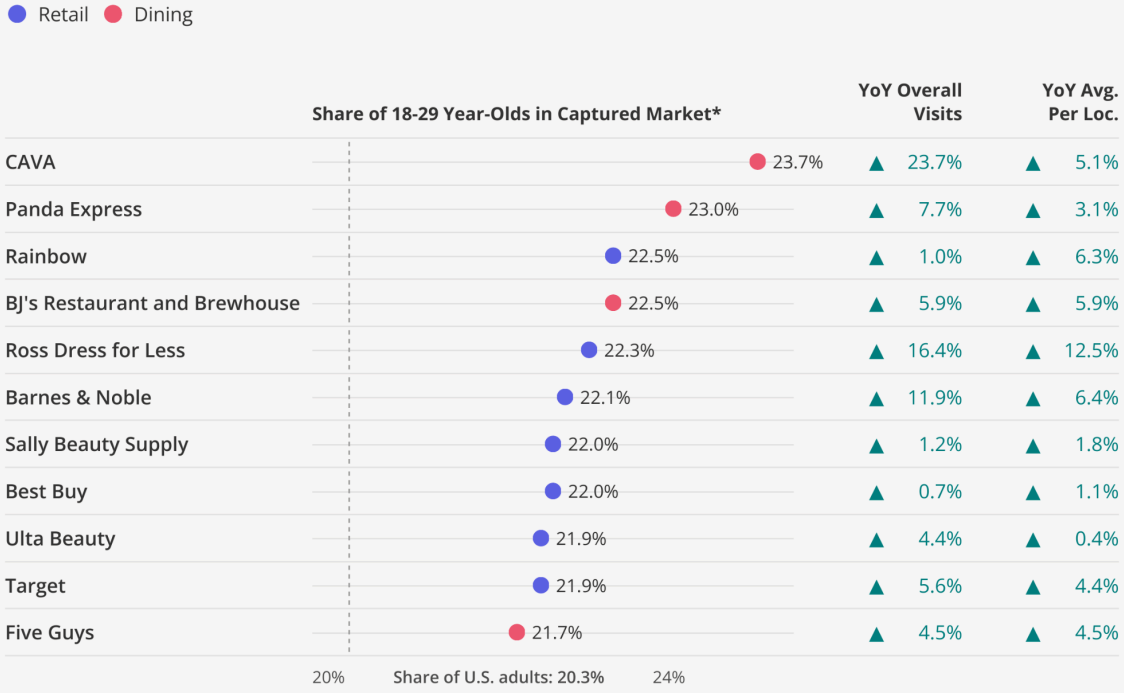
If Gen Z is visiting malls to shop, the brands young consumers favor should be benefiting – and they are.

Young Adult Favorites Are Thriving

A wide range of mall and shopping center chains that attracted outsized shares of young adults in the first nine months of 2026 also posted year-over-year overall and per-location visit gains.

Growing Mall and Shopping Center Brands That Skew Young

Jan-Sep 2026



*Based on Census (ACS) 2024 combined with Placer.ai data for captured trade areas. Shares are of the adult population. YoY compares Jan-Sep 2026 with Jan-Sep 2025.

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Several were dining chains, confirming malls' appeal as social destinations. But retailers – from value brands like Ross Dress for Less to everyday staples like Target – were also well represented. Their strong performance offers further evidence that Gen Z's interest is not limited to trend-driven or experiential concepts. Stores that combine affordability, convenience, and relevance to everyday needs are also well positioned to benefit from younger consumers' mall visits.

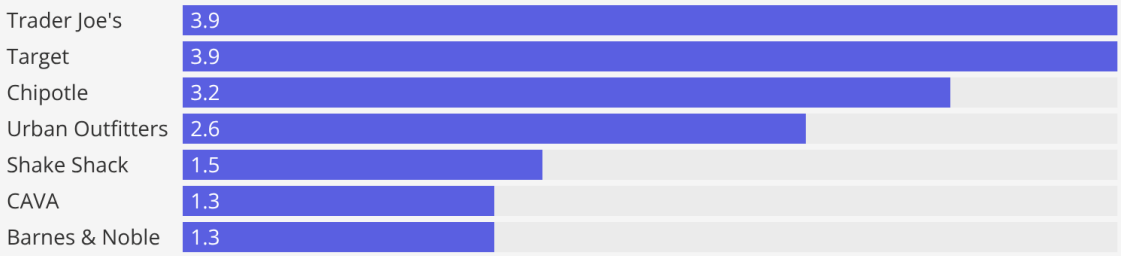
Finding the Tenants That Outdraw Their Hosts

For operators and investors, the actionable question is how to capture this demand. One answer is to identify brands that attract more young adults than the properties that host them. And comparing the visitor bases of several popular shopping center chains with those of their host centers reveals a number of brands doing exactly that.

Within the Placer.ai Open-Air Shopping Center Index, for example, Trader Joe's and Target outdrew their host centers on 18-to-29-year-old share by 3.9 percentage points each in the first nine months of 2026. Chipotle (+3.2), Urban Outfitters (+2.6), Shake Shack (+1.5), CAVA (+1.3), and Barnes & Noble (+1.3) also attracted a higher share of young adults than the centers in which they were located.

Which Brands Draw Young Adults to Open-Air Centers?

Brands Whose Captured Markets Include Higher Shares of 18-29-Year-Olds* Than the Centers That Host Them, by Percentage-Point Difference



*Based on Census (ACS) 2024 combined with Placer.ai data for captured trade areas, January-September 2026. Each brand's locations within these centers were aggregated and compared with the aggregate of the open-air centers that host them. Shares are of the adult population.

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Tenants that attract a higher share of young adults than their host centers may help strengthen a property's Gen Z profile. And a chain that overindexes relative to its host centers can demonstrate its appeal to young adults – a useful point of leverage in lease negotiations and site-selection decisions.

Key Insights From This Section:

- Many young-skewing mall and shopping center chains saw YoY visit growth in the first nine months of 2026, both overall and per location.
- Several brands – topped by Trader Joe's and Target – drew higher shares of 18-to-29-year-olds than their host centers, offering a leasing signal for operators and a negotiating card for brands.
- When filling vacancies, operators can favor brands that consistently attract younger crowds.

Visiting the Third Place… With a Shopping List

Malls are undeniably Gen Z hangouts – but the data shows they are shopping destinations too.

Young adults' share of mall visitors is climbing across every format and is highest where shopping is most convenient. Malls that draw the most Gen Z visitors see shorter, more frequent, midday trips from nearby shoppers – the hallmark of routine, convenience-driven shopping.

Many of this cohort's favorite brands are also thriving, and tenants that draw younger crowds than their host centers offer operators a roadmap for capturing more of that demand.

Ultimately, the opportunity lies in malls that fit into both Gen Z's routines and their social lives: making the routine trip effortless while leasing toward the brands young adults already seek out. The properties that cater to both errands and outings will be best positioned to capture Gen Z's growing spending power.

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