The Effect of Social Exclusion on Consumer Shoplifting

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We examine the effects of social exclusion on shoplifting for shoplifters versus non-shoplifters. Results show that socially excluded shoplifters are more likely to shoplift than socially excluded non-shoplifters and that this effect is moderated by the nature of the product (hedonic vs. utilitarian).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer shoplifting, the theft of merchandise from retail establishments, is a serious problem for retailers, representing more than $16 billion worth of lost sales each year (Allen 2014; National Learning & Resource Center 2014). Surprisingly, shoplifting is quite a ubiquitous phenomenon: an astounding 60% of consumers admit to having shoplifted at some point in their lifetime (Baumer and Rosenbaum 1984). Most shoplifters are “non-professionals” without prior criminal record, who steal not because of financial need but because of social influences (National Learning & Resource Center 2014). It is these social influences on which we focus in this research to advance our understanding of shoplifting. That is, we investigate under which conditions, shoplifting intentions and actual shoplifting behavior may ensue from social exclusion – experiencing a lack of social connection because of being alone, isolated, or rejected (Baumeister et al. 2005; Twenge et al. 2001).

Shoplifting behavior usually begins when social influence has a particularly strong effect on consumers – in adolescence (Cox, Cox, and Moschis 1990; Mangleburg, Doney, and Bristol 2004), and adolescents frequently cite social influences to justify their shoplifting behavior (Cox et al. 1990; Forney, Crutlinger, and Forney 2006). Further, because social exclusion engenders negative affect, we expect that a driving reason for the effect of social exclusion on shoplifting is that socially-excluded consumers are motivated to engage in behavior to repair and escape negative mood through the theft of merchandise. Lastly, social exclusion is unlikely to have a uniform impact on the shoplifting intentions of all consumers alike. Instead, although socially-excluded (vs. included) consumers generally are likely to experience greater negative affect, it is only those socially-excluded consumers who have experienced shoplifting’s mood-enhancing properties (i.e., shoplifters - those who have shoplifted before) that should seek to repair their mood by shoplifting.

In this research, we argue that one way to cope with negative affect triggered by social exclusion is through shoplifting because of its perceived mood repair properties. The theft of merchandise has been linked with excitement and experiential properties (Kallis and Vanier 1985; Sarasalo, Bergman, and Toth 1997), with shoplifting providing both the pleasure from consumption and also from the acquisition of the product. Some shoplifters, for example, have self-reported experiencing hedonic pleasure from the act of successfully shoplifting (Fullerton and Punj 1993). When in a negative mood, socially-excluded (vs. included) consumers may be motivated to engage in deviant thrill-seeking in an effort to feel better, and shoplifting constitutes such a means (Fullerton and Punj 1998).

Study 1 was a one-factor, two level (shoplifting history: shoplifter versus non-shoplifter) between-subjects design. Participants arrived to the lab and were socially excluded using Cyberball (Williams and Jarvis 2006). Once the session was over, lab assistants counted the number of chocolates left in the bowl and the amount of money in the jar, so that we could examine if any chocolates had been taken without payment.

Participants who indicated that they had shoplifted before were defined as shoplifters, whereas those who had not previously shoplifted were defined as non-shoplifters. A single-factor (shoplifting history: shoplifter versus non-shoplifter) ANCOVA, controlling for age and gender, found that socially-excluded shoplifters (M = .64) shoplifted more pieces of chocolate than did non-shoplifters (M = .21; F(1, 80) = 3.99, p < .05).

Study 2 was a 2 (social acceptance: inclusion versus exclusion) x 2 (shoplifting history: shoplifter versus non-shoplifter) between-subjects design with social acceptance manipulated and with shoplifting history measured. Social acceptance was manipulated using the Cyberball game as in study 1. Next in an ostensibly unrelated study, all participants were instructed to imagine that they were alone in a department store with an opportunity to steal a pair of jeans worth about $150.

A 2 (Social Acceptance: Social Inclusion vs. Social Exclusion) x 2 (Shoplifting History: Shoplifter vs. Non-Shoplifter) ANCOVA on shoplifting intention, controlling for age, was significant (F(1, 69) = 4.41, p < .05). We also found a main effect of shoplifting history (F(1, 69) = 13.03, p < .001), such that those individuals who had shoplifted before reported significantly higher intention to shoplift the pair of jeans (Ms = 2.26 vs. 1.16). More importantly, planned contrasts revealed that the socially-excluded shoplifters expressed greater intentions to shoplift the jeans than did the socially-excluded non-shoplifters (3.08 vs. .99; F(1, 69) = 13.32, p = .001). However, shoplifting history did not impact shoplifting intentions among socially-included participants (1.85 vs. 1.30 for shoplifters vs. non-shoplifters; F(1, 69) = 1.45, p > .20).

The objective of study 3 was to test for the moderating role of product type on our previously found effect in study 2. Participants first completed the same social acceptance manipulation from study 2. Next, we presented participants with the same shoplifting scenario previously used which asked them to indicate their intention to shoplift; however, we manipulated whether the target option was a hedonic (6 pack of energy drinks) or a utilitarian (pack of pain relievers) product. After participants had indicated their intention to shoplift, we measured the extent to which shoplifting was perceived as a mood repair mechanism.

A 3 (social acceptance: exclusion vs. inclusion vs. control) x 2 (shoplifting history: shoplifter versus non-shoplifter) x 2 (product type: hedonic vs. utilitarian) ANCOVA, controlling for age, on shoplifting intention was significant; F(2, 595) = 5.08, p = .01. Planned contrasts revealed that socially-excluded shoplifters (vs. non-shoplifters) expressed greater intentions to shoplift the hedonic energy drinks (2.16 vs. 1.19; F(1, 595) = 10.94, p = .001). Next, we tested for moderated mediation with the mediator of shoplifting as perceived mood repair using model 12 from the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013). The index of moderated mediation was significant (95% CI: .17, 2.01) providing evidence for moderated mediation (Hayes 2015).

REFERENCES

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