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The Impact of Individualism and Collectivism on Shoplifting Attitudes and Behaviors

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Abstract

In addition to the critical thinking skills she gained by conducting research, JoAnne feels that she has also gained a valuable experience that will contribute to her success in law school and her goal of becoming a lawyer. JoAnne's interest in individualism led to the development of her project, which she describes as being a very gratifying experience that helped her gain a sense of "control over [her] academic destiny." She advises other students to get an early start in research and utilize university programs, faculty, and other students. She values her undergraduate research experience because the "skills [she has] gained through this project will be invaluable."

Key Terms:

- Collectivism
- Horizontal (individualism and collectivism)
- Individualism
- Shoplifting
- Vertical (individualism and collectivism)

This study explores the psychological motivations behind a specific and widespread type of crime: shoplifting. While some research has been devoted to this crime and its causes, little research exists to discover its psychological causes. Subjects completed a survey asking them to describe their shoplifting behaviors and attitudes. They also completed a value survey that included ten cross-culturally stable categories. These categories are part of the larger cultural constructs of individualism and collectivism. Subjects' self-reported values were analyzed with their shoplifting patterns. Results indicate that shoplifting subjects placed more emphasis on certain individualist values (Power and Hedonism) and less emphasis on certain collectivist values (Benevolence and Conformity) than their non-shoplifting peers.

Faculty Mentor



JoAnne Sweeney's project is most significant to me for its interdisciplinary nature—crossing the two large research domains of psychology and criminology. She found an interesting question that allowed her to read widely and independently in personality theory, cross-cultural psychology, and prior studies of criminal deviance. She then had the excellent experience of applying her prior course work on research methods and statistics to practical tasks ranging from seeking funding and human subjects clearance to asking professors for permission to survey their students, as well as creating computer work files from the resulting responses. In a way, such faculty-mentored research projects synthesize and sum up the whole college experience and prepare the student to step directly into graduate school without missing a beat.

~ David Dooley

School of Social Ecology

Introduction

The most problematic aspect of shoplifting is that shoplifters “do not conform to people’s typical notions of what criminals are supposed to be like” (Turner and Cashdan, 1988). Shoplifters, as opposed to other types of criminals, are neither lower class nor uneducated (Won and Yamamoto, 1968). Shoplifters do not exhibit mental illness (Moore, 1983), and they are typically not “kleptomaniacs” as defined by the DSMIV (Saraseo et al., 1997). Their crimes are not fueled by complex motives like other types of crime (Kraut, 1976). Shoplifting is also more commonly committed than other types of crime by a larger segment of the population (Klemke, 1982).

Because shoplifters are atypical criminals, they are more difficult to catch. It is difficult for retailers to distinguish between shoppers and shoplifters just by appearances because the two groups usually come from similar backgrounds. Besides being a problem for retailers, shoplifters have proven problematic for researchers. It is more difficult, if not impossible, to conceptualize shoplifters’ motives within classical criminological explanations. Therefore, researchers have worked to find other possible explanations. Much of the research that exists on shoplifting today analyzes both self-report surveys and store records in attempt to determine the psychological, social, and economic causes of shoplifting. Several possible causes of shoplifting among juveniles have been proposed and studied. Juveniles have been the most studied group (with regards to this specific crime) for the reason that teenagers, especially high school students, have the highest rates of shoplifting (Won and Yamamoto, 1968). However, while researchers have, for the most part, agreed that adolescents are more likely to shoplift, there is still wide disagreement among researchers on the shoplifters’ backgrounds, motives, incentives, and deterrents.

Surprisingly, most of the studies conclude that shoplifting is a “middle-income phenomenon” (Won and Yamamoto, 1968) and is unrelated to the amount of spending money available to the shoplifter (Kraut, 1976). However, shoplifting has been linked to the shoplifting rates of the respondents’ friends, their perceptions of dishonesty, shoplifting, and/or theft in general, the accessibility of the thing to be taken, and the likelihood of being caught or punished for shoplifting (Jones and Terris, 1983). There is still much disagreement within the literature as to the validity of these factors. Also, while the subjects’ “morality” has consistently been cited as a primary cause and deterrent of shoplifting, very little has been done to further delineate which specific “morals” affect people’s decisions of whether or not to shoplift (Turner and Cashdan, 1988).

One of the major academic thrusts into the topic of cross-cultural morality has resulted in the concepts of individualism and collectivism. The research on individualism and collectivism primarily began as a cross-cultural effort to prove that a person’s view of the world and his general psychological make-up can be influenced by his culture in significant ways (Triandis, 1995). Individualism and collectivism have been lauded by researchers as a primary point of analysis for the most basic understanding of a culture (Triandis et al., 1988). Individualism is a multifaceted outlook on life that emphasizes, among other things, independence and self-reliance. In contrast, collectivism focuses on duty and obedience (Hart and Poole, 1995). Once researchers agreed upon these general definitions of individualism and collectivism, it became necessary to further define them in order to account for the observed differences within individualistic and collectivist cultures. One way that researchers accounted for variations within cultural variations was by creating subgroups within those two categories. Researchers discovered that “major distinctions among different kinds of individualism and collectivism [are] the horizontal and vertical species” (Triandis et al., 1998). Horizontal collectivists focus on in-group relations but do not feel subordinate to these groups. Vertical collectivists are willing to sacrifice themselves for their in-group. Horizontal individualists emphasize “doing their own thing” but are not competitive. Vertical individualists focus on comparisons with others. Not only do they have to be different from others, but they also have to be better or even “the best” (Triandis, 1995). Whether a culture is horizontal or vertical can also affect which aspects of collectivism or individualism are most prominent within it (Triandis, 1995).

Individualism and collectivism are related to other aspects of society. For example, workers in collectivist cultures report more overall job satisfaction than their individualist counterparts, even when the actual jobs were fundamentally found to be equal (Hui et al., 1995). On the other hand, research shows that collectivist cultures have higher rates of family dissatisfaction, low economic development, ineffective political behavior, and low gross national product (GNP) per capita (Triandis et al., 1988). Individualism has also been found to have quite a few negative correlates. Besides worker dissatisfaction, it has been found that individualist cultures have higher rates of homicide, suicide, crime, juvenile delinquency, divorce, child abuse, wife beating (Naroll, 1983), emotional stress, physical and mental illness (Triandis, 1988), rape, and drug and alcohol abuse (Cobb, 1976). While research has shown that crime rates are generally higher in individualist cultures, little research conclusively relates individualistic values to criminal behavior. In fact, these studies have only used aggregate data to prove their hypotheses, which cannot be generalized to individuals. This lack of focus on individuals has been a major limitation for these concepts until very recently.

Values and Individualism and Collectivism

At the individual level, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction are individualist values while benevolence, tradition, and conformity are collectivist values (Schwartz, 1994). Specific predictions have been made that vertical individualists would place higher value on power and achievement while horizontal individualists would place higher value on self-direction (Triandis, 1996). Likewise, it has been predicted that vertical collectivists stress tradition and conformity, while horizontal collectivists stress benevolence (Oishi, 1998). These predictions were empirically tested in a study that compared and correlated over 250 subjects' responses to a series of value surveys, two of which were the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) and the Individualism-Collectivism Scale (ICS) (Oishi et al., 1998). In that study, six of the SVS categories are significantly correlated with individualism and collectivism. Vertical individualism was positively correlated with power and achievement. Horizontal individualism was positively correlated with self-direction. Vertical collectivism was positively correlated with tradition, conformity, and security. Horizontal collectivism was positively correlated with benevolence, security, and universalism. Vertical individualism was negatively correlated with self-direction, universalism, and benevolence, while horizontal individualism was negatively correlated with power. Vertical collectivism was negatively correlated with self-direction, stimulation, and achievement, while horizontal collectivism was negatively correlated with power (see Table 3 in the Results section).

It has only been within the last few years that one can see any research devoted to the analysis of individualism and collectivism as they relate to the values and behaviors of individuals. This is a necessary step in the evolution of the concepts of individualism and collectivism. If these concepts can be used to predict individuals' attitudes and actions, the concepts will become infinitely more valuable research tools. In this project, individualism and collectivism have been applied to individual subjects' shoplifting behaviors and attitudes. One of the more primary and negative aspects of individualists is their focus exclusively on personal needs, as well as their lack of concern for others. This can lead to a type of selfishness, and could be a major cause of shoplifting behavior. This study has three goals: 1) to attempt to consolidate previous shoplifting research, 2) to apply the constructs of individualism and collectivism to individual-level behaviors, and 3) to find possible psychological or value causes for shoplifting.

Methods

Participants

218 college-aged students were surveyed. Primarily, subjects were obtained through their enrollment in various criminology and psychology courses within the school of Social Ecology at the University of California at Irvine during the winter and spring quarters of 1999.

Procedure

Subjects completed a series of demographic questions assessing their shoplifting behaviors and attitudes along with the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS). The Schwartz Value Survey is used to not only link individualism and collectivism to shoplifting behaviors, but to also further define these wide constructs in terms of their applicability to specific acts of shoplifting committed by individuals. Depending on the class the survey was administered in, subjects were either instructed to complete the survey in class or complete it at home and hand it in during the next class.

Creating Shoplifter "Types"

A common tactic used by shoplifting researchers is to try to differentiate among the "types" of shoplifters in order to make corresponding attitude and behavior analyses more meaningful. This is usually done by categorizing shoplifters according to the reasons they give for their shoplifting behaviors (Turner and Cashdan, 1988). This method of categorization was ineffective for this study. The subcategories created using this method contained too few subjects to make any statistical analyses meaningful.

Instead, subjects were categorized by their patterns of shoplifting behaviors across time. The first group was called "Non-shoplifters." The second group, or "Early Shoplifters," was composed of subjects who shoplifted during fifth and sixth grade, or earlier, and then never again. These subjects were placed into their own group because it is assumed that these early shoplifting experiences were much more likely to be accidental or uncharacteristic of the subject because they were performed at such a young age. The third group was called "Later-Shoplifters" and included all other shoplifters. The frequency of subjects' shoplifting within these time periods was not investigated since, once again, these subcategories were too small to be reliably analyzed.

Measures

The shoplifting questions consisted of asking the subject his or her household income level and self-perception of available spending money. Subjects also indicated whether they, or anyone they knew, had ever shoplifted. They also indicated their own pattern (i.e., frequency) of shoplifting across different age brackets from grades five and six to college. The subjects' attitudes towards shoplifting in general and under certain circumstances were also ascer-

tained. Finally, subjects gave reasons for why they shoplifted or why they thought someone would, why they never shoplifted or stopped shoplifting, and when shoplifting would be an acceptable behavior to them. Subjects gave free response answers as to why they shoplifted. The responses were coded on an eight-point scale. Up to three answers were coded for each subject and no subject gave more than three answers.

SVS

The SVS contains 56 value items that are divided into two lists. The data was narrowed down to 44 cross-culturally stable categories (Schwartz, 1994). Subjects rated the values on the two lists according to a nine-point scale ranging from -1 (opposed to personal values) to 7 (of supreme importance). The values for each subject were grouped into the following categories: Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity, and Security. The mean for each category was tabulated across subjects and each subject was given a score for each SVS category relative to that mean. These categories can also be correlated with the broader constructs of individualism and collectivism (see Figure 1) (Schwartz, 1992).

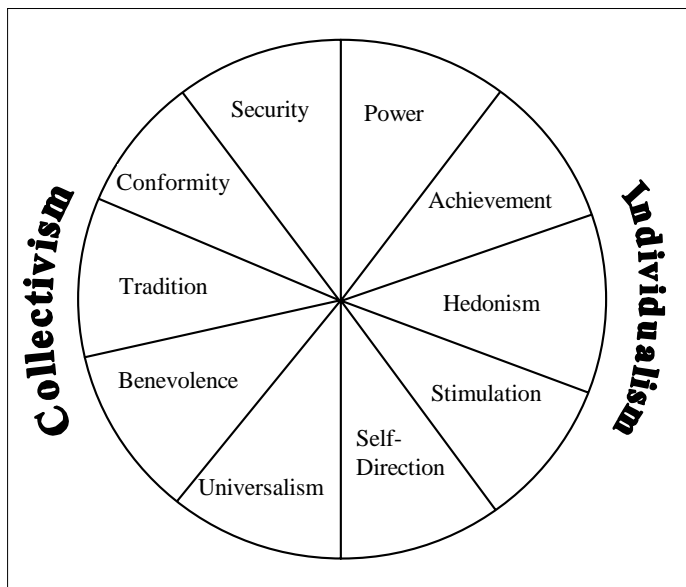


Figure 1
SVS Wheel

Results

Participants

Males constituted 38.5% of subjects, and 61.5% of subjects were female. A majority of the subjects were Social Ecology or Social Science majors (71.6%) and the rest of the subjects were Humanities or Arts (5.5%), Biology (8.7%), Physical Sciences or Information and Computer Sciences (6.9%), and other (5.5%). The racial background of the

subjects were as follows: 23.5% European American, 41.3% Asian American, 17.4% Latino, 1.4% African American, and 16.1% "other." The subjects' ages varied as follows: 3.2% were aged 18 or younger, 12.4% were 19, 25.7% were 20, 25.2% were 21, and 33.5% were over 21.

Shoplifting Behaviors and Motives

Of subjects surveyed, 51.8% indicated that they had shoplifted at least once. Of these shoplifters, only 26.1% were ever caught. Of the "Non-Shoplifters," 59.5% had thought of shoplifting. The number of those who stated that they knew someone who had shoplifted was 90.8%. This "shoplifting friend" was caught about 49% of the time and punished about 34.5% of the time. It was found that 12.5% of subjects shoplifted before fifth grade, 20.6% during fifth and sixth grades, 27.5% during seventh and eighth grades, 24.3% during ninth and tenth grades, 19.7% during eleventh and twelfth grades, and 16.6% in college (see Figure 2).

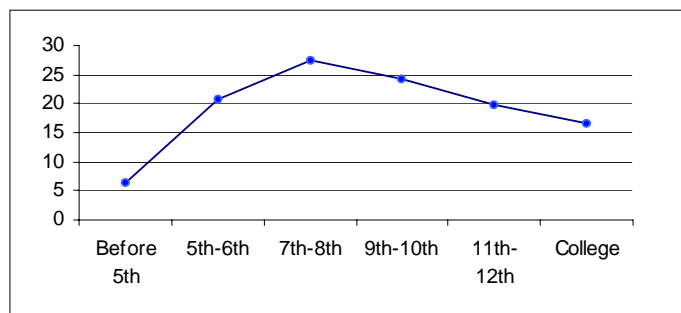


Figure 2
Shoplifting Across Age Groups

The subjects also indicated their reasons for shoplifting. Money influenced the decision of 40.9% of shoplifting subjects. The subjects' responses showed that 20.9% shoplifted for the "thrill," 18.1% did because of peer pressure, and 13.6% did because of immaturity. Non-shoplifters indicated the following reasons why they thought someone would shoplift: 1) 64% indicated money or need, 2) 47% the "thrill," 3) 25% peer pressure, and 4) 25% immaturity. It is apparent that shoplifting subjects' reasons for shoplifting are very similar (especially for the top three categories) to their non-shoplifting counterparts' hypothetical reasons (see Table 1). It is important to note, however, that the "money" category was referred to differently by both types of subjects. Shoplifters' typical "money" reasons included phrases such as "I wanted something and I didn't want to pay for it" as opposed to the Non-shoplifters' "money" answers which expressed their beliefs that shoplifters could not "afford to buy it." Shoplifters rarely indicated that they "couldn't" pay for something; they simply did not "want" to pay.

Table 1
Subjects' Reasons for Shoplifting

Reasons for Shoplifting	Shoplifters	Non-Shoplifters
Money/Need	40.9%	64.0%
Thrill	20.9%	47.0%
Peer Pressure	18.1%	25.0%
Immaturity	13.6%	--
Immorality	--	25.0%

Subjects also indicated either why they stopped or why they never shoplifted. For shoplifting subjects, 44.7% indicated "morality," 40.8% said "fear of being caught," 31.1% indicated "maturity," and 18.4% stated "money" as the reason(s) they stopped shoplifting. As for Non-shoplifters, 70.4% indicated that "morality" prevented them from ever shoplifting, 37.8% indicated a "fear of being caught," and 14.2% stated "money" as their reason for never shoplifting. Once again, Non-shoplifters' and Shoplifters' answers are highly similar (see Table 2). Therefore, there is evidence to suggest that non-shoplifting subjects are fairly accurate at predicting the motives of their shoplifting peers. This may be due to the fact that over 90% of all subjects knew a shoplifter.

Table 2
Subjects' Reasons for Not Shoplifting

SVS Category	Non-SL	Early SL	Later SL	Non-Shoplifters
Power***	-1.97	-1.89	-1.22	70.4%
Morality**	.045	.177	.583	37.8%
Hedonism**	.170	.724	.457	--
Fear of Being Caught**	.357	.164	.004	--
Maturity*				
Conformity*				
Money		18.4%	14.2%	

Shoplifting Correlates

Four factors were statistically analyzed using a one-way ANOVA on the shoplifting categories. Shoplifting variance was analyzed with gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and the subjects' self-perceptions of the amount of their spending money. None of these factors significantly explained shoplifting variance, except for gender (p<.053); males shoplifted more than females. The subjects' attitudes towards shoplifting were also insignificant. Almost all of the subjects agreed that shoplifting was an unacceptable behavior in general (a few were unsure). Fewer than half of the subjects felt that shoplifting would be acceptable under certain circumstances, those circumstances invariably being "desperation" or "need." These shoplifting attitudes were insignificant when compared, on a one-way ANOVA, to the shoplifting groups. Shoplifting attitudes did not predict behavior.

Table 3
SVS: Individualism and Collectivism

SVS Categories	VI	HI	VC	HC
Power	.52**	-.21**	.04	-.27**
Achievement	.43**	.19*	-.18*	-.16
Hedonism	-.07	.06	-.05	-.05
Stimulation	-.07	-.05	-.20	-.10
Self-direction	-.23**	.33**	-.36**	-.11
Universalism	-.37**	.10	-.13	.18*
Benevolence	-.30**	-.00	-.00	.41**
Tradition	-.12	-.01	.25**	.02
Conformity	.23**	-.17	.37**	.05
Security	.08	-.12	.28**	.20*

Source: Oishi et al., 1998

NOTE: VI=vertical individualism, HI= horizontal individualism, VC=vertical collectivism, HC= horizontal collectivism.

*p<.05 **p<.01

Individualism and Collectivism and Shoplifting Behaviors

One-way ANOVA tests were used to compare the means of each SVS category for the three shoplifting groups. Four of the SVS categories were found to be significant. Later-Shoplifters valued Power and Hedonism significantly more than Non-shoplifters. Non-shoplifters valued Benevolence and Conformity significantly more than Later-Shoplifters (see Table 4). As previously discussed, Power is positively correlated with vertical individualism, Benevolence with horizontal collectivism, and Conformity with vertical collectivism.

Table 4
Significant SVS/Shoplifting Categories

NOTE: SL=shoplifter. All significant differences found were between the Non-SL and Later SL groups. *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Discussion

The goals of this study were met: 1) previous shoplifting research was consolidated, 2) the constructs of individualism and collectivism were applied to individual-level behaviors, and 3) possible psychological or value causes for shoplifting are offered.

Consolidating Shoplifting Research

This study generated data that confirms some previous shoplifting findings and disagrees with other findings. Similar to previous studies, these results indicate that Non-shoplifters are accurate in determining the possible motives for shoplifting. This indicates that studies asking subjects why they think someone would shoplift produce valid results (Cox et al., 1993). A previously noted and important distinction, however, is that while both Shoplifters and Non-shoplifters cite "money" as a reason, Non-shoplifters seem to give a disproportionate weight to the "need" element in this category.

This study also supports previous research findings that getting caught is a deterrent for shoplifters. For example, research has shown that shoplifters who are apprehended and punished are more likely to not shoplift again (Deng, 1997). However, the exact relationship between being caught and future shoplifting was not extensively examined in this study. This hypothesis is supported by the finding that a fairly large percentage of Shoplifters and Non-shoplifters indicated that a "fear of being caught" either deterred or prevented them from shoplifting.

However, these results do not agree with all previous research. For example, studies asking whether the subject knew someone who shoplifts and then compared that answer to the subject's shoplifting behavior found a strong correlation between the two (Lo, 1994). Data from this study indicated that subjects' associations with shoplifters did not predict the subjects' shoplifting behaviors. In fact, almost all of the subjects knew a shoplifter, which indicates that other factors must be determining the subjects' shoplifting behaviors. Because respondents in this study were all college-aged, the results are, for the most part, retrospective and may account for this discrepancy.

This study also presents research discrepancies concerning shoplifting attitudes. Previous research has indicated that not only are shoplifters more likely to believe that shoplifting is acceptable, but they see and accept themselves as shoplifters. For example, subjects who shoplift are more likely to describe themselves and "a shoplifter" as being similar when given a list of adjectives (Kraut, 1976). Once again, the survey used in this study did not probe as deeply into the subjects' attitudes about shoplifting. However, subjects' attitudes about shoplifting in general and under certain circumstances were not significantly related to shoplifting behavior in this study. This may also be due to subjects reflecting on past shoplifting activity. Kraut's study was conducted with high school-aged students who were writing about more recent activities.

Individualism and Collectivism for Individuals

It has been shown that individualism and collectivism have functioned quite well when comparing both values and behaviors across cultures. However, it is a common occurrence for significant aggregate effects to become insignificant when studied at an individual level. While this study did find evidence to support the hypothesis that the constructs of individualism and collectivism may be related to an individual's likelihood of shoplifting, these constructs were also shown to be too broad for individual application. The vertical and horizontal subcategories of individualism and collectivism were also not specific enough. Not every "individualist" trait was related to shoplifting (nor was every "collectivist" trait related to not shoplifting), and both horizontal and vertical collectivism values were more important to the Non-shoplifting group. Therefore, while individualism and collectivism and their subgroups may be adequate when comparing cultures or groups, they are not sufficient in examining individuals. Other, more specific value measures, like the SVS, are necessary to analyze individuals and their values within and between different groups and cultures. As evidenced by this study, specific value measures are important when looking at subjects' values with respect to a specific behavior or phenomenon. Clearly, such broad concepts like individualism and collectivism will be even less relevant in this situation because certain aspects of these constructs will be less, or not at all, influential for individual subjects.

Psychological Causes of Shoplifting

Although it may not be possible to say with complete certainty that individualists are more likely to shoplift, this study has shown that a person's general set of values can be significantly associated with a specific behavior. In this study, Later-Shoplifters placed significantly higher value on Power and Hedonism (individualist values) while Non-shoplifters placed significantly higher value on Benevolence and Conformity (collectivist values). Almost all the demographic values studied were found to be insignificant. Subjects' attitudes towards shoplifting were also insignificant. Therefore, subjects' overall value schemes were found to be most relevant in determining who was, and was not, a shoplifter. Furthermore, the relative importance that a person places on individualist values, versus collectivist values, might predict his or her tendency to shoplift.

Methodological Concerns

While significant results were found in this study, future research in this area could improve upon the methods currently used. First, the sample taken in this study was a convenience sample of students at a single southern California public university who were overwhelmingly in the major of Social Ecology. This fact may have influenced the results, and future research should attempt to obtain a more generally representative sample to maximize sam-

pling reliability and external validity, as well as to minimize group threats to internal validity. Also, because college students were used in this study, most subjects had to report on past activities, which increases the likelihood of error in reporting. Subjects may not have accurately remembered if, and when, they shoplifted because it had happened long ago. Finally, subjects were reporting on past activities, and at the same time, they were asked to report their current value systems. This may have also confounded this study's results because the subjects' values may have changed over time. It is important to ascertain the subjects' values while they are engaging in shoplifting to avoid this internal validity time threat. An alternative method would be to survey early high school students and ask them about their current shoplifting patterns and their current values.

Conclusion

This study shows that individualism and collectivism, in their currently defined forms, are too broad to effectively categorize individuals. More specific measures like the Schwartz Value Survey are needed to meaningfully understand how individuals' personalities and values affect their behavior.

On a more practical note, this research could be used to find new methods of deterring shoplifters. In the past, the only useful deterrent for shoplifters was to catch and punish them. It has been shown repeatedly that if the threat of being caught is real or pronounced, shoplifters will be deterred. However, since a large majority of shoplifters are never caught, society has been forced to choose between becoming more strict or letting the shoplifters "grow out of" their shoplifting phases. This study may present an alternative approach. Due to "morality" being the most common answer as to why subjects never shoplifted, it is plausible that targeting their value systems could deter potential shoplifters. Now that these possible value systems have been shown by this study to be more specifically defined, it is possible that new tactics be developed to target these "power-hungry" and "hedonistic" shoplifters, showing them the downside of shoplifting.

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