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Supermarket Self-Checkouts and Retail Theft: The Curious Case of the SWIPERS

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Abstract

When self-service checkout (SCO) first launched in the United States in 1992 there was considerable scepticism and, perhaps not surprisingly, concern that huge losses would follow. Despite conflicting evidence on their impact on shrinkage, and customer theft in particular, consumer-oriented payment systems are an increasingly common feature of the retail environment. This paper reviews how the move to SCO has affected retail theft. Drawing on recent market research surveys suggesting that up to a third of customers regularly steal when using SCO in supermarkets, the paper outlines the aetiology of a new breed of shoplifter, 'the SWIPERS', and presents a typology of these offenders.

Keywords: Theft, retail crime, shrinkage, self-service checkout, offenders, opportunity

Introduction

They say computers are gonna take over the world; well, until they can tell the difference between a packet of ginger nuts and a *Bella* magazine I'll sleep quite soundly.

(Alan Carr, on self-service checkout)

In 2015 the *Telegraph* published an article entitled 'How I stole my shopping from Waitrose' (Brown, 2015). The author was not what many would consider to be a 'typical' thief or miscreant, but rather a middle-class national newspaper obituaries editor. His defence for leaving the supermarket with a trolley full of groceries that had not been paid for? The new self-scanning system at his local Waitrose had *caused* him to accidentally steal. On realizing (by being contacted by the store), he did of course return to pay for his groceries and make good his 'honest mistake'.

The story illustrates the self-checkout (SCO) hiccups and hitches that are regularly blamed for the misappropriation of goods. The key question raised by examples such as this

is whether SCO technology is inherently criminogenic. In other words, does the deployment of SCO, and the consequent reduced guardianship, *cause* theft amongst otherwise honest customers who would not steal in any other circumstances? Drawing upon the scant available sources of information, this paper seeks to answer this question and develop a typology of an apparently growing cohort of thieves.

Background

Since launching in 1992, Semi Attended Customer Activated Terminals, or self-service checkout (SCO), have become a familiar part of the retail landscape, particularly in supermarkets. Essentially, SCO refers to the use of technological interfaces allowing customers to pay for services or goods without direct employee assistance (unless required). The customer assumes responsibility for scanning items they wish to purchase and then paying for them using an interactive operating system. SCOs typically have a barcode reader, a weighing scale for loose purchases such as fruit and vegetables, a 'bagging area' (often also utilizing scales to validate the passage of items from scanning to bagging) and a payment system, usually accepting cash and card transactions, and increasingly also payments via mobile phone (see Taylor, 2016).

In many ways, SCO has revolutionized the relationship between customer and retailer by transferring responsibility for the checkout process to the customer, relinquishing control at the most crucial point of the shopping experience: point of sale (POS). Placing the onus for an honest and correct transaction upon the customer engendered considerable scepticism and concern that huge losses would follow. However, SCO has become an increasingly common

feature of retailing; some stores have even become fully self-service.¹ With predictions that the number of SCO terminals installed globally will increase from 191,000 in 2013 to reach nearly 325,000 by 2019 (Retail Banking Research, 2014), it is clear that self-service payment solutions are an enduring feature of the contemporary shopping experience.

Propelling the global proliferation of SCO is the promise of an enhanced, speedier and more efficient experience for the customer and, perhaps more pertinently, one that could simultaneously decrease costs for the retailer by providing savings on their most expensive outlay: staff (Orel and Kara, 2013). Illustrating this, Wal-Mart estimates it could save \$12 million for every second it can cut from the staffed checkout process (White, 2013). In addition to financial and efficiency savings, it has been claimed that there is 'a growing consumer desire for an omni-channel shopping experience, where the speed and personalization they receive online is delivered in an increasingly self-service manner in the store' (Cisco Systems, 2013). However, customer views on SCO are mixed. A survey for computer maker Ordissimo revealed that some customers rate the self-service checkout as one of the most irritating features of modern life (Simms, 2012) and some retail scholars have lamented that it is indicative of a slippery slope towards poorer customer service (Evans and Dayle, 2009). It is clear that the benefits and limitations of SCO for retailers, customers and thieves are complex; but a key area that requires further exploration is the impact that SCO has on shrinkage and, in particular, shoplifting.

Shrinkage, shoplifting and SCO

¹ In June 2010 a Tesco Express in Northampton became Britain's first self-service only store. It had five self-service checkouts overseen by a single member of staff and no staffed checkouts. Tesco described it as an 'assisted service store' (ASS), designed to increase efficiency.

Costing the industry an estimated USD \$119 billion annually, shrinkage has been defined as 'intended sales outcome that was not and cannot be realised' (Beck and Peacock, 2009). It is typically broken down into four main types: external theft, internal theft, internal or administrative errors, and inter-company fraud. There is little consensus on which of these accounts for the most loss (Chapman and Templar, 2006). The most recent Global Retail Theft Barometer (GRTB, 2015) found that shoplifting was the key cause of shrinkage in Europe, the Asia Pacific and Latin America in 2013/14 and 2014/15, while in North America, dishonest employee theft was the main contributor. This paper focuses on external (customer) theft, or 'shoplifting', defined as 'theft from the selling floor while a store is open for business' (Francis, 1979: 10).

The British Retail Consortium's (BRC) *Retail Crime Survey 2013* indicated that the annual number of customer thefts per 100 stores had increased by 5 per cent from the 2012 rate, and that 2013 had the highest number of shop thefts in the past nine years (BRC, 2014). Although the volume of offences declined marginally in 2014 (in part due to the elevated 2013 level), the average value of customer theft increased by 36 per cent, to £241 (\$367 USD)² per incident; the highest level in over a decade (BRC, 2015). While some may interpret this as an increase in the occurrence of customer theft, it could also be read as a growth in the number of offenders being prosecuted, and thus simply a greater uncovering of the dark figure.

As with the opacity that characterizes shrinkage composition, the exact impact of SCO on rates of shoplifting is unclear. There are anecdotal claims that SCO increases theft by up to five times compared to cashier-processed transactions (Krasny, 2012), whereas others assert that it actually has little 'discernible impact upon the overall rate of shrinkage' (Beck,

² Conversions as at December 2015.

2011: 205).³ Indeed, the rate of retail theft, more broadly, is unknown. Despite 'retailers being the most targeted victims of crime' (Bamfield, 2012: 1), shoplifting is perhaps one of the most abstruse crimes in terms of verifiable knowledge about perpetrators, motivations and *modi operandi*. Quite simply, only a small percentage of shoplifters are apprehended and prosecuted (for example, see Bamfield, 2012; Krasnovsky and Lane, 1998).

The UK Home Office's Commercial Victimisation Survey (CVS) included a section on SCO for the first time in 2014. It revealed that supermarkets with self-service tills were significantly more likely to experience shoplifting than those without, with 86 per cent of those with self-service tills being victims, compared with 52 per cent of those without (Home Office, 2015). The findings from the CVS suggest a strong correlation between SCO and higher levels of shoplifting; furthermore it does not appear to represent 'tactical displacement' (Repetto, 1976), whereby those of criminal intent simply steal by a different means. If this were the case, there would be no real net change in the amount of store theft.

There is some evidence, then, to suggest that SCO increases theft by customers, and particularly by customers who would not steal by any other means. Although exact figures on SCO's impact on absolute levels of theft are elusive, its introduction appears to have created a new type of shoplifter in supermarkets: the SWIPERS.

Introducing the SWIPERS

Despite assumed benefits for retailers and shoppers, SCO undoubtedly presents a number of challenges in terms of controlling losses that may arise from its use, both malicious (for

³ One case study reported that, following the introduction of SCO, customers were 'much more likely to consistently scan items they are presenting for purchase than members of staff operating staffed checkouts' (Beck, 2011: 205). 'Sweethearting' – the unauthorized giving away of goods without charge to a friend, co-worker or family member – has been estimated to cost the industry nearly \$80 billion dollars annually. A survey of 800 customers and employees found that 67 per cent admitted to participating in sweethearting in the previous two months. Hence removing the employee from the transaction can actually reduce some losses (Brady et al., 2012).

example, customers deliberately not scanning items) and non-malicious (for example, incorrect prices accidentally being transacted or aborted sales due to customer frustrations). There is of course a blurring of the lines between malicious and non-malicious actions, with well-intentioned, otherwise 'honest', customers reporting that they engage in retail theft when using the SCO lane. This new breed of customer-turned-thief is referred to here by the acronym SWIPERS: 'Seemingly Well-Intentioned Patrons Engaging in Routine Shoplifting'.

A number of industry studies and market research, typically surveys of customers, supports the initial findings from the UK Home Office's CVS, revealing that SWIPERS appear to represent a growing cohort of store thieves. For example, an online survey hosted by the now defunct money-saving website Watchmywallet.co.uk elicited responses from 4952 participants, almost a third of whom admitted to stealing when using a self-scanning lane (cited in Furness, 2012; Harding, 2012). Similarly, VoucherCodesPro.co.uk, which surveyed 2634 adults about their shopping habits and use of self-service checkouts, found that one in five respondents confessed to stealing when using SCO; and, furthermore, more than half of these respondents disclosed that it was a regular activity (cited in Carter, 2014). The average value of goods was estimated to be £15 (\$23 USD) per month, adding up to £1.6 billion (\$2.44 USD) worth of items every year. An overview of the findings from the two main surveys focusing on theft and SCO is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

It is important to note that we cannot assume academic rigour in either of these surveys. They were conducted by private companies, for purposes of advertising and promotion, and their findings released to and reported by mass media outlets. Since the technical details of the surveys, such as sampling and weighting procedures, are unavailable, there is no means of ascertaining their methodological validity or reliability. In light of this,

the findings should be treated with caution and cannot be presumed to be representative.

Nevertheless, in the absence of academically generated empirical data, the results provide a useful and important departure point for examining the phenomenon of 'swiping'.

Table 1. Surveys of supermarket customers about self-service checkout theft

Survey administrators	Date	No. of participants	% of shoppers that admitted to stealing at the SCO	Items stolen	Main reasons given (in order of prevalence)
VoucherCodesPro.co.uk	2013	2,634	19%	Fruit & vegetables (67%) Bakery (41%) Confectionery (32%) Toiletries (26%)	Gave up trying to scan something that wouldn't register (57%) Less likely to get caught (51%) The machine is easy to fool (47%) Didn't have enough money (32%) At the time I didn't realise it hadn't scanned (6%)
Watchmywallet.co.uk	2013	4,952	30%	Fruit & vegetables Salad boxes (discount theft)	Not specified, although frustration with the machines is mentioned.

Newspaper headlines generated by surveys such as these imply that the introduction of SCO is the causal actor in an apparent increase in shop theft – 'How cheating at checkouts is turning us into a nation of self-service shoplifters' (Harding, 2012), 'Are we a nation of self-service thieves?' (Fedele, 2014) and 'The machines have turned Britain into a nation of shoplifters' (Cosslett, 2014). The articles conjecture that interacting and transacting with SCO influences the motives and behaviours of users. Synthesizing the findings across surveys, the reasons that respondents provide for theft via SCO can be broadly categorized into three: ease (theft at the SCO requires little skill or effort); low risk (perceived low chance of detection and apprehension) and frustration (for example, difficulty scanning the product or waiting for age-validation). These motivations reported by SWIPERS will be further interrogated below.

Techniques used by SWIPERS

Shoplifters use many different techniques (see Gill, 2007; Hayes and Cardone, 2006 for an overview), 'limited only by the imagination' (Cardone, 2006: 305). SCO can be manipulated via many deliberate actions that result in a product being taken without payment or a reduced price being paid because the customer has deliberately switched the labels on a product or misrepresented the item. Many people admit selecting from the menu a less expensive item within a similar grocery category. For example, cooking tomatoes are often much cheaper by weight than vine tomatoes, peanuts are cheaper than pine nuts, and so on. Other techniques include: obscuring the barcode while mimicking the scanning motion; stacking items together so that only the bottom one is scanned; scanning items but not paying, or only partially paying; and entering the wrong quantity of loose items.

It has also been suggested that SCO increases the occurrence of 'walking', where a thief leaves the store with goods they have not paid for without any attempt to stop at SCO or staffed lanes to make payment (Bamfield, 2012). This relatively brazen shoplifting technique is facilitated by the fact that SCO aisles are often designed to enable the free flow of customers through them, often accompanied by a reduced staff presence. The self-service area may therefore permit thieves to exit more easily, particularly if employees are occupied with another customer. Research has shown that thieves will deliberately create a disturbance or distract store staff in order to facilitate an accomplice stealing items (for example, see Bamfield, 2012; Gill, 2007). At the SCO this is easily done by requesting help from the assistant, thus enabling a thief to walk out of the store (Beck, 2011).

Typologizing shoplifters

Attempts to typologize property offenders, including shoplifters, are well established within criminological literature; numerous typologies of shop thieves have been devised, usually

differentiating offenders according to the frequency of offences, the quantity and value of items stolen and the motivation underpinning the crime. Cameron (1964) simply dichotomized offenders into 'boosters' (professional thieves who resold the high-value items they stole) and 'snitches' (amateur thieves who typically stole low-value items for personal use). Hayes (1999) presented a more developed typology, which similarly starts with the division between professional and amateur, but subcategorizes several distinct groups according to factors such as motivation, sophistication, skill, level of planning and frequency of offence.

Within the professional category, Hayes establishes the 'true pro' (shop theft is a routine activity construed as the main source of income), the 'hardcore pro' (theft to generate money for drugs, alcohol, food, etc.), and the 'casual pro' (stolen items are either returned for a refund or sold on to generate extra cash). Within the 'amateur' group fall the 'primary household shopper', who steals in order to extend the household budget, and the impulse thief, who suffers a lapse in judgement or who steals to satisfy a sudden craving for the item or to avoid an embarrassing transaction. This category also includes two groups of juveniles: the 1–7 year-olds, too young to form criminal intent, and those aged 8–18, who steal due to peer pressure or because they can't afford the desired item. Then there are those considered to suffer from an impulse-control disorder; these comprise only a small proportion of offenders, according to Hayes (1999).

While many different typologies of shoplifters (see also Farrell and Ferrara, 1985; Schwartz and Wood, 1991) have been presented over the years, there has been little consensus on how to adequately explain the diversity of offender demographics. No archetypal shoplifter has emerged, due to the sheer prevalence of retail theft and because 'it is committed by so many people that no specific characteristic or pattern arises to make a

typology of an all-encompassing classification of the offenders' (Arboleda-Florez et al., 1977: 125–7). Hayes and Cardone (2006: 308) claim that the only 'agreed-upon generalizations are that most shoplifters range from young to middle age, are likely to be involved in other deviant behaviours, and to be with others at the time of the offense'. The key to understanding this particular cohort of shoplifters is that many do not classify their behaviour as directly criminal, so an exploration of motivation and technique might provide more explanatory power than typologies that attempt to categorize by broad demographic characteristics. Alongside the offender-oriented typologies, Hayes and Cardone (2006: 310) assert that analysis of motivation can 'facilitate a better understanding of *why* people steal' [emphasis added].

Typologizing SWIPERS

In the tradition of typologizing shoplifters, it is now pertinent to develop a subcategory of those who apparently only steal using self-service machines. In addition to the types sketched in Table 2 below, there is, in all likelihood, a cohort which utilizes the SCO for professional theft, targeting high-value items in relatively large quantities to sell on to illicit markets, increasingly through e-fencing. A fundamental differentiator between 'professional' thieves and SWIPERS is that the professionals would steal by different means if SCO didn't exist; they engage in purposeful theft and at no point could be considered 'well-intentioned'. There is, of course, considerable movement between the groups below, as well as the potential for overlap, but this initial typology is used to further expound upon, and theorize, the phenomenon of SWIPERS.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2. Typology of SWIPERS

Type of SWIPER	Motivation	Characteristics
Accidental	The shopper accidentally transacts an incorrect price for goods and the theft is non-intentional.	The taking of goods without payment is a genuine mistake, and one that the Swiper may or may not come to be aware of.
Switching	The shopper pays a reduced price by 'cheating' the machine.	The MO of Switchers is discount theft. This can be achieved by switching labels, selecting cheaper items on the screen, manipulating the scales or inputting an incorrect size (e.g., small instead of large salad bowl). Offenders see this as 'cheating' rather than stealing, largely due to the fact that they pay something for the item.
Compensating	The shopper compensates themselves for having to transact the sale, a slow process, problem with the purchase, or feels ideologically motivated by perceived reduction in employment or large profit-making corporations.	Theft occurs due to the shopper being required to transact the sale themselves, lack of service or a long wait. In addition, some compensators are ideologically motivated, viewing the automated machines as contributing to unemployment and poor customer service.
Irritated / Frustrated	The shopper encounters difficulty with the machines or is impeded in their ability to complete the transaction (e.g. requiring authorization for age-related products) and theft occurs to speed up the transaction or to make a point.	SWIPERS falling into this category are similar to the Compensators, but the key difference is that those who become frustrated are initially intending to pay for the goods and steal due to the difficulties encountered. May be motivated only occasionally in response to a particular event.

Accidental SWIPERS

Importantly for understanding the genesis of SWIPERS, 57 per cent of those admitting to theft in the VoucherCodesPro survey claimed that they first stole goods by accident or because they couldn't get an item to scan, but upon experiencing how easy it was, they continued to steal regularly. This supports Hechter and Kanazawa's (1997) claim that individuals who get away with stealing without punishment are likely to lower their risk assessment and continue to commit the crime, thus creating a symbiotic spiral of escalating criminality. As a commentator from VoucherCodesPro.co.uk stated in response to the survey findings, 'I'm sure most of those who now admit to stealing via self-service checkouts didn't

initially set out to do so – they may have forgotten to scan something and quickly realised how easy it could be to take items without scanning them' (cited in Carter, 2014: n.p.). It's not just the ease of stealing via SCO that the survey respondents reported, but also the perceived low risk of being detected and apprehended. According to Williams et al. (1987) the typical offender engages in approximately 95 offences prior to apprehension, while Griffin (1984) estimated that just 1 in every 20–40 shoplifters are apprehended.

Switching SWIPERS

In 2012, a large supermarket chain in Australia discovered that it had sold more carrots than it had, in fact, had in stock. Further exploration of the irregularity found that over 1000 transactions involving more than three pre-packed 1kg bags of carrots had passed through its SCO tills in one week. Similarly, an English supermarket discovered that its customers were transacting carrots at an incredible and improbable volume, with incidents such as 'a lone shopper scanning 18 bags of carrots' and seemingly nothing else (Harding, 2012). Further investigation of this curious phenomenon revealed that, rather than an international increase in the consumption of carrots, shoppers were transacting more expensive, lighter items (such as cherries and grapes), passing them off as root vegetables. Indeed, supermarkets have found that higher-value items are often passed off at the scanner as 'carrots and onions' (Silmalis, 2012). Of particular interest to this paper, it has been suggested that perpetrators of this kind of 'discount theft' would not ordinarily steal, would not consider shoplifting by any other *modus operandi* and do not necessarily even view their actions as theft. In fact, behaviour such as the 'carrot trick' is often referred to as 'cheating' rather than stealing; a means of gamifying an otherwise mundane and pedestrian experience (for example, see Robinson, 2011).

Compensating SWIPERS

While rational choice theory is often used as a framework to examine shop theft and other property crimes, in the case of SCO, it could be argued that the true rational actors are the retailers themselves. Stores are reluctant to accuse 'paying' customers of theft if there is any doubt about intention. Returning to the newspaper editor at the beginning of the paper, a false positive is far worse for business than a gentle prompt to return and pay for the goods that had accidentally been misappropriated.

Furthermore, supermarkets may tolerate a higher threshold of theft in order to make savings on staff. Employees are one of the biggest outlays for retailers; it has been estimated that it costs USD \$1 to check out a USD \$100 spend (IBM, 2008). So losses through customer theft might still be cheaper than the costs of paying cashiers. For example, if one store assistant can effectively manage four or more SCO lanes, 75 per cent or more of that cost can be returned to the bottom line for each transaction completed (IBM, 2008).

Since SCO usually results in fewer staff and more profits for the retailer, this could, to some, provide justification for theft. Schwartz and Wood (1991) identified a cohort of shop thieves motivated to steal through a sense of entitlement and the construal of theft as a political act. These shoplifters believe that they have been treated unfairly in some way or they hold anti-corporation views,⁴ and justified stealing by defining it as deserved recompense rather than crime. In other words, there is evidence to suggest that some customers believe that it is befitting and just to be 'compensated' for the difficulties they have encountered during the transaction or for a broader ideological standpoint, supporting

⁴ This sentiment has been captured in the French film *Discount* (2014), in which workers at a supermarché are informed that all but one of them will be replaced by automatic SCO machines. In response, they begin to swipe produce from the store's shelves, eventually establishing an alternative community store selling on perishable fruit and vegetables that otherwise would have been destroyed.

Cameron's assertion that 'pilferers... generally do not think of themselves as thieves' (1964: 159).

It is well versed that justifications such as these made by Compensators can play an important role in the genesis of criminal behaviour. Individuals draw upon neutralization techniques to protect their self-concept while committing delinquent acts (Costello, 2000), enabling them to 'drift' (Matza, 1964) in and out of delinquency while maintaining a general commitment to the prevailing societal values of 'right' and 'wrong'. Although the original formulation of the rational choice perspective in criminology (Cornish and Clarke, 1986) contained an element of justifications and excuse making, while Clarke and Homel (1997) added 'rationalizations' as a fourth rational choice category (building upon Clarke's (1992) three categories), this aspect has not featured in more recent studies of shoplifting (although see Cromwell and Thurman, 2003).

Irritated/frustrated SWIPERS

Triggering the dreaded 'unexpected item in bagging area' or requiring a harried staff member to authorize the purchase of alcohol or validate that you have indeed brought your own bags can cause considerable frustration for customers, and has become the focus of much sardonic discussion. Indeed, as mentioned above, a survey of shoppers in Britain (Simms, 2012) found that SCO was considered to be one of the most irritating features of modern life. Another survey of 1017 adults in the UK identified precisely what was most annoying about the self-service machines, with 'unexpected item in the bagging area' and staff being slow to respond to problems leading the results (Arnfield, 2014) (see Table 3). This opens up avenues for the justification of theft for shoppers who attribute their actions to frustrations and technical errors.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 3. Most annoying issue when using self-service checkout

Most annoying self-service checkout issue	% of customers 'annoyed'
'Unexpected item in bagging area'	83%
Staff being slow to respond	73%
Other issues requiring staff	61%
Bar codes not scanning	60%
Wrong prices	52%
Person in front not knowing what to do	51%
Problems with bags	47%
Checkouts out of order	45%
Problems with payment methods	45%

Source: Arnfield (2014)

Like the Compensators, those who steal through frustration regard their behaviour as a justified response and draw upon a range of neutralization techniques to justify leaving the store without paying for goods. Such excuses often include: 'the item wouldn't scan', 'the barcode was damaged' and 'I couldn't find the correct fruit/vegetable so I selected the closest one'. It is difficult to know how far these are genuine difficulties and the customer originally intended to pay for the item or whether SCO has invited this type of post hoc excuse making, also found amongst other property offenders (see Taylor, 2014, for a discussion of neutralization techniques in relation to residential burglary).

Pleasure-seeking and hedonic SWIPERS

Not all crimes are driven by instrumental motives; some are committed for more 'existential' reasons, such as the pleasure derived from illicit behaviours or the adrenalin evoked through transgression. It could be argued that, given the low likelihood of being apprehended and, if apprehended, the ability to easily claim a genuine error, SCO presents a relatively 'safe' way for SWIPERS to derive illicit pleasure from shop theft. As Presdee (2000: 5) asserts, 'the

buzz and excitement of the act of doing wrong itself, of living on the “edge” of law and order, are all emotions that many seek out in the daily performance of their lives’.

In addition to the pleasure derived from transgression, emotional responses to paying a lower price through ‘discount theft’ could be similar to the hedonic reactions found amongst bargain hunters. For example, Holbrook et al. (1984) found that paying a reduced price for a particular item might lead a consumer to feel proud, smart, or competent. Others have reported that, if a customer believes they have obtained a bargain, it ‘can provide increased sensory involvement and excitement’ (Babin et al., 1994: 647). It has been suggested that this type of aberrant consumer behaviour is not abnormal, but rather ‘an inseparable part of the consumer experience’ (Fullerton and Punj, 1993), to the extent that some claim the shoplifter is simply the ‘ultimate frugal consumer’ (Tuck and Riley, 1986).

Seeing theft as pleasurable helps us to understand why it is that shoplifting is not solely the preserve of economically and socially disadvantaged groups. Aberrant hedonic shoppers are often middle class and clearly not stealing for subsistence (Klemke, 1992). These middle-class debaucheries can be explained, to some degree, by the pleasure elicited from transgression and/or bargain hunting. Furthermore, amongst this cohort there are pre-packaged rationalizations ready to slip off the tongue, and perhaps even a secondary wave of pleasure in divulging the intricacies of a transgression well executed. As Karstedt (2015: 60) outlines in relation to the crimes committed by the middle classes:

[S]hared moral intuitions among the public allow for widely held justifications of such actions, for an array of techniques of neutralization, and in particular for uninhibited discussions of such actions among relatives and friends, amounting to requests for collusion in shady practices and outright illegal acts.

Indeed, returning to our hapless newspaper editor, one can easily imagine the story becoming a humorous dinner-party anecdote, but one that sees rapt listeners furtively looking around for assurance that surely everybody from time to time has a little dalliance with cheating at the SCO.

Discussion: Opportunity, SCO and crime precipitation

‘Opportunity makes the thief’, and in doing so causes crime, profess Felson and Clarke (1998). This premise has underscored a number of criminological theories since Mayhew et al. (1976) first published *Crime as Opportunity*. While postulating that criminally disposed people will commit more crime if they encounter more criminal opportunities, the opportunity doctrine also advances the view that ‘people without pre-existing dispositions can be drawn into criminal behaviour by a proliferation of criminal opportunities’ (Clarke, 2012: 6). Similarly, Lo (1994) contends that, ‘like shopping preferences, the key in shoplifting behaviour [is] accessibility to opportunity’. The implication here is that the ease and seeming impunity with which SCO can be manipulated presents such an enticing opportunity for SWIPERS that they engage in this illicit activity but, crucially, most would not steal via any other *modus operandi*. Perhaps, as Meyers (1970: 296) asserts, ‘there is a little larceny in everyone’, but it is only with the right crime precipitator that it is activated.

The extent to which SCO presents greater opportunity for theft, a perceived diminishing of the likelihood of getting caught and an affordance of manipulability goes some way to explaining the occurrence of shoplifting using this particular approach. But if opportunity and affordance are accepted as *causal* factors, then why don’t all people steal when the opportunity presents itself? The answer in part lies in what Shover (1971) describes

as 'an alert optimism', whereby the criminally disposed see opportunities in situations where others might not. Similarly, drawing upon behavioural ecology, Bernasco and Nieuwbeerta (2005) conceive of property offenders as 'optimal foragers', maximizing revenue potential that emphasizes lack of effort, elevated reward and reduced risk of apprehension and detection.

SWIPERS and hot products

If SWIPERS are indeed a new breed of shoplifter utilizing the SCO for theft – and there is evidence to suggest that they are – then their *modi operandi* could undermine some well-established concepts in criminology. For example, Clarke (1999) identified six elements that make products attractive to thieves: 'CRAVED' – 'hot products *must be* concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable and disposable' and 'how much they are stolen may depend critically on just one attribute – the ease of disposal' (Clarke, 1999: vi, *emphasis added*). However, the *modi operandi* of SWIPERS appear not to be concealment of the goods, but rather manipulation of the weighing scales or passing items through without scanning. Furthermore, fruit and vegetables, the items reportedly most stolen, are not necessarily particularly valuable. Moreover, although some professionals may well steal via the SCO, SWIPERS are not stealing to sell the goods on, and so the Disposable element is less relevant.

A research agenda

While this paper has drawn upon the scant literature available to illustrate that SCO does appear to increase theft in supermarkets (for example, Home Office, 2015), the key limitation to the survey data presented is their non-academic nature. While they do provide some much-

needed insight into a phenomenon that has received curiously little academic attention (particularly in view of the rapidly increasing use of self-service POS globally across multiple channels), a more systematic approach to capturing the prevalence of SWIPERS, their motivations, *modi operandi* and experiences would provide a fruitful avenue for future research. It has been suggested that larger supermarkets are more likely to have SCO; it could be store size that influences levels of theft rather than SCO (Home Office, 2015), and so future research should seek to isolate the use of SCO from other variables that could facilitate crime. Furthermore, applying Cornish and Clarke's (2003) 'Twenty-five techniques of situational prevention' could provide some important indicators as to which aspects of supermarket shopping encourage or deter 'swiping' (effort, risks, rewards, provocations and excuses).

Furthermore, mobile commerce is diversifying the sectors in which customers are responsible for ensuring that they pay for goods and services (see Taylor, 2016). Research involving sectors other than supermarkets would provide a much-needed comparison. For example, contactless transport payment, such as the Oyster card in London and the Opal card in Sydney, might similarly be attracting a new breed of aberrant customer who routinely fare dodge. Comparative analysis between countries would be particularly interesting in order to assess the degree to which 'swiping' is a cultural phenomenon.

Conclusion

There are emerging indicators to suggest that SCO increases the occurrence of theft in supermarkets (Home Office, 2015). Overall, low risk, ease of explaining minor thefts, the gamification of beating the machine and the seductive quality of getting a 'bargain' or flirting with transgression all contribute to the elevated level of theft at the SCO. 'Swiping' has

become so overt a topic, capturing the imagination of individuals from comedians to newspaper editors to film makers, that it now teeters on the edge of moral acceptability. This is a matter of concern. Rebranding stealing as 'cheating' may remove its stigma to the extent that patrons could perceive theft via the SCO as minor, harmless fun, an appropriate alleviation of their frustrations with the machine or even compensation for a problematic transaction. It is in danger of becoming a routinized, almost playful, activity for some – illegal yes, but not deviant. The SWIPERS could be perpetuating a shoplifting culture that justifies and normalizes aberrant customer behaviour and theft. While it appears that retailers will tolerate a certain amount of theft so long as their bottom line remains favourable, there is the risk that, once normative and habitual, this behaviour will disperse into other consumer-oriented payment systems.

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