THE FIVE FINGER DISCOUNT: SHOPLIFTING AS A REPRODUCTIVE STRATEGY FOR INCREASING MATE VALUE

Catherine A. Bourgeois, Geneva Reid, Maryanne L. Fisher

Department of Psychology, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Canada

mlfisher.99@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Shoplifting, the act of taking an item from a store without paying for it, is prevalent on social media platforms. Shoplifters post photographs featuring their stolen items, often including the retail value of each item, and tag the photograph as either a 'lifting haul' or 'shoplifting haul' so that it may be found by others. We argue that the items targeted for shoplifting relate to one's desire to increase their mate value. In contemporary life, one has the ability to alter and manipulate their perceived mate value, via the aid of cosmetic, skin and hair care products, perfumes, and products that signal luxury and financial status. When viewed in this context, an evolutionary analysis of shoplifting via the specific items targeted for theft may shed light on intrasexual competition in terms of individuals competing to improve their relative mate value. Hence, we hypothesized that shoplifted items, as advertised via 'haul' photographs on social media, would be those relevant for increasing mate value (e.g., improve one's appearance or markers of financial status). A researcher blind to the study hypothesis coded the stolen items within the photographs and the coded items were then categorized into themes for analysis. Our hypothesis was supported. We discuss the use of social media platforms for effectively conducting human ethological research.

Keywords: *Social media, Mate value, Shoplifting, Luxury products, Intrasexual competition.*

INTRODUCTION

Shoplifting is undoubtedly a plight of the retail industry. Shoplifting cost the United States retail industry almost $17.6 billion in 2016 alone based on a survey of 83 retailers (Reilly, 2017). Many retailers have employed anti-theft tactics, such as anti-theft clothing tags, security guards, CCTV recording of expensive goods, and loss prevention departments. It is important to note, however, that it remains one of the most underreported or misreported crimes, and hence, self-reports on shop-lifting behavior tend to be the most common way to gather data (see Dabney, Hollinger, & Dugan, 2004).

A review of the literature reveals a very confusing and often contradictory image of who represents typical shoplifters, perhaps partly due to the fact that shoplifting suffers from reporting issues (see Dabney, Hollinger, & Dugan, 2004). There are, however, a few studies that rely on direct observation via use of CCTV cameras. Dabney, Hollinger, and Dugan (2004) observed shoppers in a drug store in Atlanta which revealed several interesting findings: proportionately, more shoplifters were men, middle-aged (35-54 years) individuals, or individuals visibly from a low socioeconomic class.

Shoplifting has found its way online via social media websites, such as Tumblr. Tumblr was launched in 2007 as a post sharing website, with users using 'tags' so that the posts can be found during user searches for specific content. As of 2016, it reports 230 million active monthly users, of which there is an equal proportion of men and women (Global Media Insights, 2016). Most users are young (23% aged 18-24, 27% aged 25-34, and 15.5% aged 35-44; Global Media Insights, 2016). According to the Pew Research Center (2015) approximately 10% of all Internet users (10% of men, 11% of women) use Tumblr.

There exists a sub-community within Tumblr, in which users post photographs of content that they claim to have stolen. These photographs are aesthetically arranged and posted under the tag 'lifting haul.' These public posts reveal which items are most targeted for theft, by those using Tumblr (i.e., predominately adults 34 years of age and younger). We argue that analyzing these stolen items from an evolutionary perspective can at least partially reveal the shoplifter's motives for selecting particular goods and not others. Thus, our goal in the current study was to analyse the items that were targeted for theft using the lens of an evolutionary perspective. We propose that one significant strength of the current research is that it does not rely on surveys or interviews with shoplifters, unlike much of the past work (see Dabney, Hollinger, & Dugan, 2004), but still provides information on what is stolen and a possible underlying motive.

Past research on shoplifting has largely been from the field of Criminology, and thus, it has examined primarily the offenders, their motives, tactics, response to treatment, and recidivism rates (Caputo & King, 2015; Krasnovsky & Lane, 1998; Lasky, Jacques & Fisher, 2014). Much of the past corpus of research has included only proximate level theories, such as the Situational Action Theory (Hirtenlehner & Treiber, 2017), which looks to the situational factors that influence crime. Overall, an evolutionary perspective incorporating ultimate level explanations is much needed; it can shed light on the possible motivations related to shoplifting behaviour and the ways in which one's sex may impact on the type of items targeted for theft.

Mating competition to acquire a preferred mate is vital to one's reproductive success. Therefore, individuals must attempt, even unconsciously, to improve their value relative to those around them who may likewise be considered a potential mate. Mate value has been defined in many ways in the evolutionary social psychological literature (see Fisher & Fernandez, 2017 for a review). We rely on the definition offered by Fisher et al. (2008): "the total sum of characteristics an individual possesses at a given moment and within a particular context that impacts on their ability to successfully find, attract, and retain a mate" (p. 14).

Today, the perception of mate value has the potential to be manipulated through consumer products (Hudder, 2012; Hudder et al., 2014; Miller, 2009; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011), especially luxury brands (Griskevicius et al., 2007; Hudder, 2012; Hudder et al., 2014; Janssens et al., 2007; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Sundie et al., 2011), as these items can signal high status and/or be used to improve one's perceived physical attractiveness. Moreover, given that the sexes prefer different characteristics in potential mates, the composition of mate value also varies by sex. For example, men often use the conspicuous consumption of consumer and luxury goods as a means of signaling their financial and social status, as these align with female mate preferences toward wealth (Buss, 1989; Haselton, 2005). In turn, women display signals of fecundity and youth, which translates into observable qualities as clear skin, high cheekbones, voluminous shiny hair, and full lips (Buss, 1989).

Within the context of shoplifting, we argue that many of the items targeted for theft should have the potential to superficially increase one's perceived mate value. If so, then the act of shoplifting constitutes a behavior indirectly used for intrasexual competition, as one is attempting to improve their mate value relative to potential mating rivals. For example, men might shoplift a luxury watch or cellular telephone to augment their mate value via displaying status and wealth, while women might shoplift cosmetic products to increase their physical attractiveness and thereby, increase their mate value. This proposition assumes that individuals will use or wear the items they shoplift, such that they are self-promoting their appearance (Fisher & Cox, 2011) to be better than that of rivals.

It is critical to note that the type of shoplifting on Tumblr does not necessarily represent *all* variants of the behavior. That is, while some individuals presumably steal food due to poverty and the associated needs to feed themselves and their family, for example, these individuals are unlikely to post such goods on social media. People in the lowest socioeconomic class tend to try to hide their poverty (see Dordick et al., 2017), and hence, creating public posts that reflect their poverty is improbable. Instead, we propose that Tumblr posts reflect more luxury rather than *necessity* items; there should be an absence of items related to basic survival such as food or basic clothing.

In keeping with theories informed by evolutionary social psychology, we predicted *a priori* that woman shoplift to obtain items to increase their physical beauty and thereby their relative mate value. Women primarily compete via their physical attractiveness and consequently, increasing their mate value allows them to attract and retain higher quality mates who would otherwise be unobtainable (Fisher & Fernandez, 2017). Therefore, we predicted that the stolen items featured within the 'lifting haul' photographs would be relevant to increasing women's reproductive fitness by improving their mate value. Specifically, we predicted that items related to increasing the appearance of oneself,

which gives the illusion of higher mate value (such as cosmetics, skin care, lingerie, and perfume), would be stolen more frequently than items that are not directly related to increasing women's mate value (such as electronics, pet toys, home décor and school supplies). We note that when we performed our thematic analysis, many of these mate value related items were specifically listed by women as a way to self-promote their appearance to attract dating competition in earlier research (Fisher & Cox, 2011), and are in keeping with the principles of female attractiveness as argued by Buss (1989).

We also predicted that men would primarily target items that would enhance their status and display their wealth in order to increase their relative mate value. Although we created this hypothesis for men *a priori*, we note that immediately upon data collection, we realised that none of the photographs contained masculine items. The photographs, as described in more detail below, always contained items related to feminine appearance although at times other items (e.g., pet supplies) were additionally included, thus, we were not able to test the hypothesis regarding males, which we will return to later in the Discussion section.

One reviewer suggested an alternative view to our prediction, proposing that commonsense would dictate that women should be *less* likely to post their 'hauls' but instead favour posting images of themselves after using the stolen items. This reviewer suggested women presumably do not want to advertise that the lifted items are required to improve one's appearance and be able to compete with other women. We agree to a limited extent, in that women posting photographs of themselves presumably tend to select the most flattering "selfie" possible. However, we counter that the success of the cosmetics industry and its prolific advertising indicates that the use of cosmetics is not perceived as something to hide, but instead is consumed conspicuously by women (see Chao & Schor, 1998). The ability to afford and use cosmetics, and the skill required to enhance attractiveness (Jones & Kramer, 2016), could arguably be a signifier of status among women.

METHODS

The social media platform Tumblr was used to collect data. The term 'shoplifting haul' was entered into the search feature with the search condition of 'photo'. The criteria for inclusion were photographs tagged as 'shoplifting haul', 'lifting haul', and 'lift haul'. We documented the items contained within each photograph, the listed item retail prices, and the total value of the haul included in the post. Note that it was not possible to determine the sex of the poster, so we decided to use the gender of the items to indicate one's sex (e.g., feminine clothing and cosmetics marketed to women indicate a female shoplifter).

A female researcher, blind to the hypotheses, then coded the contents of the photographs. Two separate female researchers performed a thematic analysis to group items into categories such as cosmetics, clothing, lingerie, skincare products, accessories, home décor, electronics, pet supplies, and miscellaneous. These categories were then

collapsed to be either mating relevant or not. Frequency (i.e., count level) data of individual items were collected for analysis.

Items categorized as mating relevant included: eye makeup, foundation makeup, blush makeup, lipstick, fragrance, lingerie, cosmetic applicators and personal care products. Items were categorized as mating relevant if they directly related to one's physical appearance or attraction through scent, such as cosmetics and perfume, or their sexual allure such as lingerie (see Buss, 1989; Fisher & Cox, 2011).

Items categorized as non-mating relevant include: electronics, sports equipment, pet supplies, school supplies, home décor, food, accessories, clothing, nail polish and miscellaneous. The items categorized as non-mating relevant were essentially everything that did not match the theme of mating-relevance, such as pet supplies, or food. We note that clothing other than lingerie was classified as non-mating relevant, as it was too subjective to determine the motivation to wear the items.

Nail polish warrants a special mention. It was categorized as non-mating relevant given we were unable to locate any literature to clearly indicate that it is used for mating purposes. Although we believe that women wear it for the purposes of self-enhancement within a mating context, we could not find any empirical support for this claim. We decided to place it as non-mating relevant so as to not inflate any resulting difference in the findings without sufficient support.

RESULTS

Our analysis of the reported observed frequencies demonstrated that out of 87 photographs featuring a total of 1956 'lifted' items (M= 22.20; SD= 19.73), 1376 items (70.3%) were mating relevant. Conversely, 580 (29.6%) of the 1956 stolen items were found to be non-mating relevant (Figure 1). A chi-square analysis was run to compare the number of mating versus non-mating relevant items, yielding $\chi^2(1, 714) = 807.82$, $p = .008$ (two-sided).

The category of mating relevant items was explored further, which revealed lipstick and cosmetics related to the lips as the most frequently occurring item that was targeted for theft (22%) of all mating relevant resources stolen. This category included items such as lipstick, lip gloss, lip liners and lip plumper, which arguably corresponds directly to male mate preferences relating to youthful and neotenous features (Buss, 1989) via making the lips appear larger and more full. Eye makeup was the second largest category (17%), and included items such as eye-shadow, mascara, false eyelashes, and under-eye concealer, which also corresponds to male mate preferences for neotenous features via large eyes (Buss, 1989). Lingerie items were the third largest category (16%) and featured bras, panties, garter belts, and sexy night wear. Cosmetic products that related to creating the appearance of smooth, clear and pore less skin was the fourth most common category selected for theft (12%), which again correlates directly to male mate preferences for youth (Buss, 1989). The results of the remaining proportions for the mating relevant categories are as follows: Blush/highlighter makeup (7%), perfume

(6%), skincare products (6%), cosmetic applicators/brushes (6%), scented personal care items (6%), haircare products (2%).
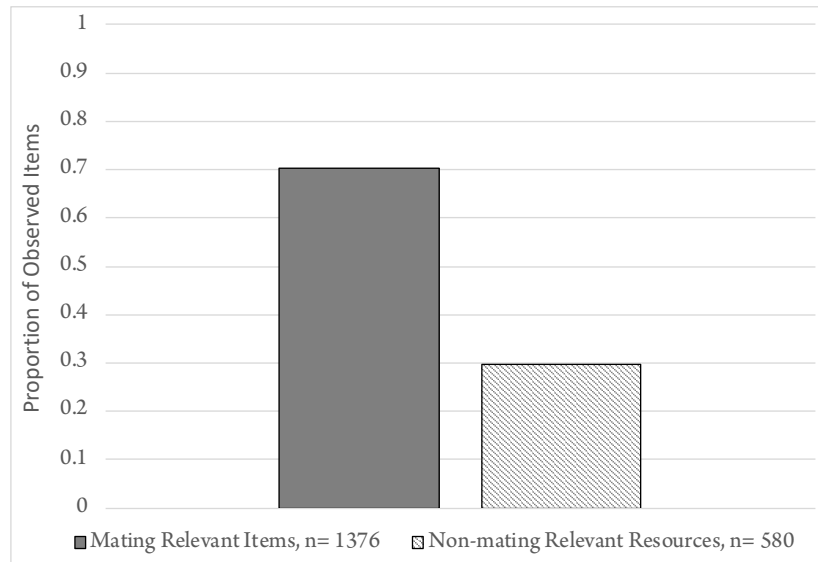
Note: Out of 87 photographs featuring a total of 1956 'lifted' items ($M=$ 22.20; $SD=$ 19.73), 1277 items (70.3%) were mating relevant (e.g., as cosmetics, lingerie, skincare products, and perfume), while 580 (29.6%) were non-mating relevant (e.g., home décor, electronics, pet supplies, and books).

Figure 1: Proportions of Mating and Non-mating Relevant Items Displayed in Tumblr 'Shoplifting Haul' Photographs.

Non-mating relevant items were also examined more closely, which revealed clothing to be the most popular non-mating relevant items targeted for theft (40% of the 580 non-mating relevant items). The types of clothing ranged from t-shirts and tank tops, to shoes and active-wear. Accessories comprised the second most commonly target non-relevant category at 18%, and includes items such as key-chains, wallets, cell phone cases, and hats. The third most commonly non-mating relevant category targeted for theft was nail polish at 14%. The results of the remaining categories are as follows: School supplies (8%), miscellaneous (6%), home décor (4%), food (4%), electronics (2%), books (2%), pet supplies (1%), and sports equipment (1%).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to use an evolutionary perspective to explore the shoplifted items included in photographs on the social media platform, Tumblr. Our results indicated that our hypothesis was confirmed, demonstrating that items relevant to increasing women's mate value were targeted for theft more often than items not related to increasing their mate value. That is, items related to enhancing one's physical appearance were more often shoplifted than items that were related to, for example, home décor, pet supplies, or electronics. We fully recognize that this work is preliminary, in that it generates many questions and requires additional research to fully comprehend issues such as the intended audience of the photographs, ensuring those posting the images are indeed women, and validating the presumed motivations of those posting the images.

We hypothesized for men *a priori* that they would provide photographs of items that signaled status or wealth. However, as noted earlier, none of the photographs contained exclusively masculine items or led us to reasonably believe the post was made by a male. Half of Tumblr's users are men, so we have to deduce that they simply are not using this social media platform to exhibit their stolen items. We did attempt to find academic references to sex differences in shoplifted items, but there is seemingly no literature on this topic. The only topic that appears to be studied is from the 1970s: how sex impacts on one's decision to report shoplifters (e.g., Dertke, Penner, & Ulrich, 1973). More research is needed in this area.

It is important to note that the items in the photographs are only alleged to be stolen. In our opinion, the validity of the issue is moot, in that whether or not the items are stolen is arbitrary. What is informative is which items are targeted, or at least presented as targeted for theft. However, the ultimate reason to display these items remains to be determined; are women attempting to deter potential mating rivals by showing that they now possess these items and can compete more effectively for mates?

The increase of reality television has led to shows that revolve around shoplifting and the revealing of not only the items selected, but also how and where they are concealed. While it could be interesting from an empirical stance to study this sort of show, there are several potential issues to contemplate. For example, the individuals in these shows were allegedly caught after an unsuccessful shoplifting attempt. Moreover, television shows are aimed at sensationalism to satisfy a viewing audience, and thus, the items selected or the ways in which the scenario is presented is likely to be more of an exception than a typical case.

One factor that we did not consider in the current study was the influence of other sources of information on the items selected for theft. YouTube bloggers specializing in beauty and cosmetic tutorials may have a possible influence on which items are targeted the most, at least in terms of the cosmetics category. Some cosmetic items were targeted more than others such as, the Urban Decay naked trio eye palette, the Too Faced peanut butter and jelly eye palette, and the Benefit 'pore-fessional' face primer. Future research could include the influence that YouTube bloggers have on other members of social media.

Ideally, one would be able to stop shoplifters from a general style store (e.g., Walmart, or similar) and inspect the items they targeted. This sort of study would allow one to

examine sex-specific items, but also the influence of age on item selection. We propose that older women, for example, would target items that are thought to improve a youthful appearance, while younger men may specifically target status enhancing goods, as per Wilson and Daly's (1985) proposed "Young Man Syndrome". According to Wilson and Daly, young men with limited future prospects may engage in delinquent behaviors in order to improve their relative status.

A reviewer of this article suggested that we consider, in future work, the role of risk and how it may relate to shoplifting behavior. Men are widely considered to be more risk-prone (and women more risk-adverse), although significant individual differences do exist (Nelson, 2015). Theft may be a way to advertise one's risk proneness; perhaps expensive items with enhanced anti-theft security or items that are larger or more visible carry greater probability of detection and consequently are targeted by those who are more risk prone. Given that behaving in a more risk prone way might improve mate attraction (see Pawlowski, Atwal, & Dunbar, 2008), men should be more likely to engage in this type of behavior. However, there is the additional consideration of motivation. Campbell (1999) proposes that women commit theft for material gains to satisfy economic needs and to provide for children, while men tend to be more violent and attempt to gain status and extract resources. Future research needs to untangle the relationship between risk-proneness, motivations for shop-lifting, and mate attraction behaviors.

Nail polish represents another avenue for further study. Nail polish was the third most stolen from the non-mating relevant category, but as stated earlier, it was difficult to classify it in the absence of any research discussing nail polish as related to mate value. There are passing references, though; for example, Arnocky and Vaillancourt (2017) note that women self-report that they apply nail polish to enhance their physical appearance for the purposes of mate attraction. Empirical work in whether nail polish does improve women's perceived mate value is required, along with additional research on women's motivations to use nail polish.

This study indicates that an evolutionary perspective can be successfully implemented to understand the targeting of items by shoplifters. We examined photographs of 'hauls' on the social media platform Tumblr to determine whether the stolen goods would be those potentially used to increase women's mate value. Our prediction was supported, and several lines of future research were presented.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

These studies were conducted in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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