

Title: Attitudes towards shoplifting: a preliminary cross-cultural study of consumers

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Abstract: (200 words)

Shoplifting has a substantial impact on retailers, consumers and wider society, yet we know very little about people's attitudes towards this behaviour, especially from a non-Western perspective. A better understanding of consumer *mis*behaviour in Arabic countries would therefore be of particular interest as such societies represent a new market for global retailers. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore the initial results of consumers' attitudes towards shoplifting from a cross-cultural perspective. Preliminary analysis of 529 questionnaire responses from UK, US and Libyan consumers finds that attitudes towards shoplifting are broadly similar despite the different cultural and retail contexts. However, on closer inspection these findings suggest interesting disparities between the countries in relation to attitudes towards the consequences of shoplifting, the impact it has on the social networks of the perpetrator and whether the demographics of the shoplifter play a role in the decision to punish the offender.

Keywords: Shoplifting, quantitative, cross-cultural, consumer, Arabic

5000 words

Introduction

According to a recent study, shoplifting cost major retailers an estimated US\$51 billion globally and 34% of the retailers reported that actual and attempted shoplifting was more prevalent in 2011 than in 2010 (Centre for Retail Research, 2012). The impact of shoplifting is considerable and it is of little surprise that the literature, particularly from industry, is dominated by the effectiveness of tools to expose and prevent shoplifting such as CCTV, security guards and electronic tagging systems (British Retail Consortium, 2010; Tonglet and Bamfield, 1997). However, attitudes towards shoplifting, including what motivates and influences an individual to engage in consumer *mis*behaviour, are less clear since it is argued attitudes could relate to a complex range of factors (Fukukawa, 2002). Furthermore, the knowledge that does exist is dominated by studies drawn from developed economies in the West (see for example, Cox et al., 1990), thus reflecting a particular retail environment which may not be typical of other retail environments found globally where the cultural context is different. Indeed, research suggests that the interpretation, nature and management of consumer *mis*behaviour differs from one context to another (Rawwas, 2001; Fisher et al., 2003). A better understanding of attitudes towards shoplifting from consumers from different cultures would therefore be of benefit, particularly for international retailers intending to enter emerging markets.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to report on preliminary, exploratory findings of a cross-cultural study of Libyan, UK and US consumers which investigates attitudes towards shoplifting. The study also considers the extent to which these attitudes differ according to the country in which data

collection took place, that is a Western, developed context versus a non-Western, Arabic society. The paper begins by reviewing existing knowledge of consumer misbehaviour and shoplifting. The paper then explores the research design and presents the preliminary findings of the study and the implications these might have for retail theory and practice. It is the intention that if this paper is accepted, the findings reported here will be presented in further detail at the conference after more detailed analysis.

Background

Aberrant consumer behaviour is defined as “*behavior in exchange settings which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations and which is therefore held in disrepute by marketers and by most consumers*” (Fullerton and Punj, 1993, p. 570). Shoplifting is one of the most prevalent forms of aberrant consumer behaviour and refers to when a theft takes place from the selling floor while a store is open for business (Francis, 1979). Shoplifting, however, is not limited to simply stealing goods from a store; consumers employ different methods of shoplifting such as switching price tags for a lower price (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007). Consumers may also engage in ‘deshopping’ where goods are purchased and used conventionally but are then deliberately damaged and returned for a refund (Strutton *et al.*, 1994). Whilst shoplifting is most commonly referred to as *misbehaviour* in the academic literature (see for example, Cox *et al.*, 1990; Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007) it is, in fact, a form of illegal behaviour (Babin and Griffin, 1995).

Although most consumer theft refers to sporadic pilfering by individuals, the aggregate impact this behaviour has on society is significant (Centre for Retail Research, 2012). For the end consumer, the costs of shrinkage are felt in price increases and for the retailer, not only does shoplifting lead to monetary loss associated with stolen merchandise, it also impacts financially in terms of resources spent on personnel and equipment designed to detect and prevent shoplifting (Cox *et al.*, 1990; Tonglet and Bamfield, 1997). Research also suggests that shoplifting is prevalent on a global scale, making the task of preventing shoplifting even more problematic for international retailers, especially for those entering developing markets. As business becomes more global, understanding the ethical values consumers have across cultures has become an important tool for international business (Ford, Nonis and Hudson, 2005) as it can help to reduce consumer unethical activity and the costs associated with this (Mitchell, Balabanis, Schlegelmilch and Cornwell, 2009). However, studies indicate that consumer predispositions and attitudes toward unethical behaviours are different from one environment to another and can differ markedly between cultures (Rawwas, 2001; Ford, Nonis and Hudson 2005). This suggests then, that retail policies designed to prevent shoplifting in one country, may not necessarily be effective in another.

Given the significant impact shoplifting can have on society, it is not surprising that shoplifting is the most widely form of consumer misbehaviour studied in the academic literature (Krasnovsky and Lane, 1998; Harris and Reynolds, 2004). However, there is a paucity of research which explores this from the perspective of the consumer. In particular, we know very little about attitudes towards shoplifting and why consumers engage in unethical behaviour, such as shoplifting, and consequently theoretical development in this area is limited (Fukukawa, 2002). Instead research in the field of marketing ethics has tended to focus on the activities of sellers rather than consumers (Fullerton and Punj, 1993; Vitell and Thomas, 2002). Studies into shoplifting have, for example, explored how the retail environment and layout impacts on pilfering (Tonglet and Bamfield, 1997). The limited research which has attempted to understand attitudes towards shoplifting and why consumers engage in ‘unethical’ behaviour, including an individual’s motivations to shoplift, indicates that decisions concerning this type of behaviour are complex, context specific and influenced by a number of different factors. Fukukawa’s (2002:114) UK study, for example, found that ‘...attitude..., social influence, perceived behavioural control and perceived unfairness’ influences a consumer’s decision to misbehave. In brief, attitude refers to how the individual views ethically questionable behaviour and how their ‘unethical’ actions may impact upon others. Social influence concerns the extent to which an individual’s behaviour might be influenced by peers or society and perceived behavioural control refers to, for example, whether an individual may benefit from their actions. Finally, perceived unfairness is when an individual might try to remedy an imbalance between themselves and the organisation by engaging in ‘unethical’ behaviour.

Fukukawa’s (2002) study provides a useful insight into the motivations for engaging in unethical consumer activity, including shoplifting, and for this reason is used to inform this study. However, a criticism of Fukukawa’s (2002) work is that it has been conducted in a Western setting. Indeed, few studies have explored shoplifting and the management and interpretation of this in non-Western cultures, such as in Arabic societies where attitudes are unlikely to be the same due to the different political, social, legal, and economic environment (Dabil, 2009; Rawwas, 2001). Moreover, the religious context in these societies is likely to shape attitudes since Islam, for example, provides a framework that controls and shapes the morals and behaviour of both individuals and society, so that all types of theft are forbidden according to Islamic law (Saeed et al., 2001). For international retailers a better understanding of attitudes towards shoplifting in these contexts would be beneficial as Islamic countries, for example, represent large, emerging markets. Furthermore, the small number of studies which have explored consumer misbehaviour amongst Muslim consumers suggests that consumer theft is in existence in Islamic societies (Al Awjili, 1988; Bakkar, 2005).

The aims of this study, therefore, are to address current gaps in knowledge concerning shoplifting by exploring:

- Consumer attitudes towards shoplifting and what may influence offenders to engage in such behaviour.
- The extent to which these attitudes might reflect cultural issues, including different retail contexts, associated with the country in which the respondent originates, specifically Western, developed societies compared to Arabic, non-Western societies.

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative approach to data collection and was conducted in two stages. The initial stage of data collection was conducted in Libya. Libya, an Arabic and Islamic country, was selected as one of the fieldwork areas because it can be considered as a developing and unknown market for international retailers. It is a market which has not engaged with global markets as a result of long sanctions and is thus under-researched (Jodie and Gorrill, 2007). Questionnaires were distributed in Benghazi city as it is the principal city of Eastern Libya, the second largest city in Libya, one of Libya's major economic centres being both an industrial and a commercial city and was also known to the research team. Questionnaires were collected through convenience sampling and distributed in public places such as shopping centres, colleges and restaurants. The extended contacts of the research team were also used to complete the questionnaire. In total 219 questionnaires were completed by Libyan nationals. All data collection in this first stage of the study took place in 2010, prior to the conflict in Libya experienced in 2011.

To replicate the initial study in Libya, the questionnaire was then translated from Arabic into English and adapted accordingly for the US and UK (for example, in relation to demographic questions such as level of education). The UK and US were selected because existing knowledge of shoplifting is dominated by Western perspectives and it was felt that respondents from these two countries would typify such views and thus act as a useful comparison to Libya. Furthermore, collecting data from outside of the US answers a call from Al-Khatib et al. (1997) for more studies that compare the ethics of US consumers with other, foreign countries. For this second stage, questionnaires were distributed in the same way as in the Libyan study and a total of 149 useable questionnaires were collected from UK nationals located in the Midlands (UK) and 161 from US nationals located in the Mid-West (USA). In both instances, these locations reflected the wider US and UK populations in terms of demographic profile and were fieldwork areas known to the research team which aided data collection. It was important that questionnaire responses were collected from the wider population in all three countries since a criticism of the consumer misbehaviour literature is that it has a reliance on student samples (Babin and Griffin 1995; Tonglet, 2002). Furthermore, research also suggests that shoplifting is common to all socioeconomic classes and ages (Glasscock *et al.*, 1988).

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with a set of statements related to a shoplifting scenario rather than directly questioning respondents about their experiences of shoplifting. Scenarios have been suggested as a suitable approach for research in marketing ethics (Hunt and Vitell 1986) and many studies in marketing ethics have used such an approach (Fukukawa 2002; Callen and Ownbey 2003). The short scenario used in the questionnaire described how an individual takes an item of small value from an independent grocery store without paying. Themes explored in the set of statements which referred to the scenario were influenced by the findings of Fukukawa's (2002) research since this is a seminal study in the field and so included, for example, whether shoplifting was more likely to occur if the perpetrator in the scenario was accompanied by certain people (social influence), why the perpetrator might be engaging in shoplifting (perceived unfairness), how the store owner might respond to items being stolen (perceived behavioural control) and what consequences might arise as a result of the perpetrator shoplifting (attitude). In addition to these statements, respondents were asked a series of demographic questions such as their age, working status, gender and highest educational qualification. All data was analysed using SPSS. Data reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha and as a result one item was removed. The profile of the sample is provided in Table 1 (the results take account of missing data, hence not all categories total 100%).

	Libya	US	UK
Male	41%	50%	44%
Female	59%	50%	55%
18-27 yrs	43%	68%	27%
28-37 yrs	33%	8%	28%
38-47 yrs	13%	11%	19%
48-57 yrs	6%	12%	11%
58-67 yrs	4%	1%	13%
68+yrs	1%	0%	2%
Postgraduate Degree/ Professional Qualification	7%	13%	28%

Undergraduate Degree	56%	49%	31%
College Qualification	33%	3%	20%
Secondary School Qualification	2%	35%	21%
Junior School Qualification	1%	0%	0%
Student	36%	26%	11%
Not working	6%	1%	13%
Working	58%	73%	76%

Findings & Discussion

Preliminary findings from the analysis indicate that attitudes towards shoplifting across the three countries were broadly similar. In Libya (94%), the US (94%) and the UK (89%) the majority of respondents had, overall, a negative attitude towards shoplifting. This result was based on collated responses to questions concerning the impact shoplifting may have on, for example, the retailer and the perpetrator and how respondents evaluated the act of shoplifting and whether it was considered to be risky, troublesome or foolish behaviour. However, whilst overall there appears to be little disparity between the three countries, an initial investigation of responses to the individual questions relating to their general attitude towards shoplifting suggests some interesting differences which perhaps reflect the cultural and retail contexts of the sample. In response to the statement ‘If I did this then I would be in trouble’ which appeared after the shoplifting scenario, 63% of Libyans disagreed with this statement in contrast to 2% of UK respondents and 1% of US respondents. So, while Libyan respondents had a negative attitude overall towards shoplifting the majority felt that the consequences of this would not necessarily be problematic for the individual. In contrast, UK and US respondents overwhelmingly reported that shoplifting could lead to trouble for the individual. Such results may suggest that the penalties for theft are clearer in the UK and US than in Libya, where punishment for shoplifting is typically left to the perpetrator’s family, social network and the retailer to decide rather than the police or legal system. Indeed Mitchell et al (2009) argues that for some cultures, such as the West, concepts of harm, rights and justice are bound by laws and are universal whilst in other cultures, such as Libya, which are considered collectivist, fairness is determined by social roles and codes of conduct specific to that community. Analysis of the findings relating to the statement ‘Doing this is not very risky’ produced further interesting results. 82% of Libyans and 78% of US citizens

reported that they believed that shoplifting, as described in the scenario, was a risky activity. However only 51% of UK respondents believed this to be the case. This may suggest that while in the UK the penalties for shoplifting are clear, punishment does not necessarily pose a serious risk to the perpetrator. Recent research showing that the conviction rates for shoplifting have fallen in the UK would appear to support this finding (British Retail Consortium, 2010). A summary of these results is provided in Figure 1.

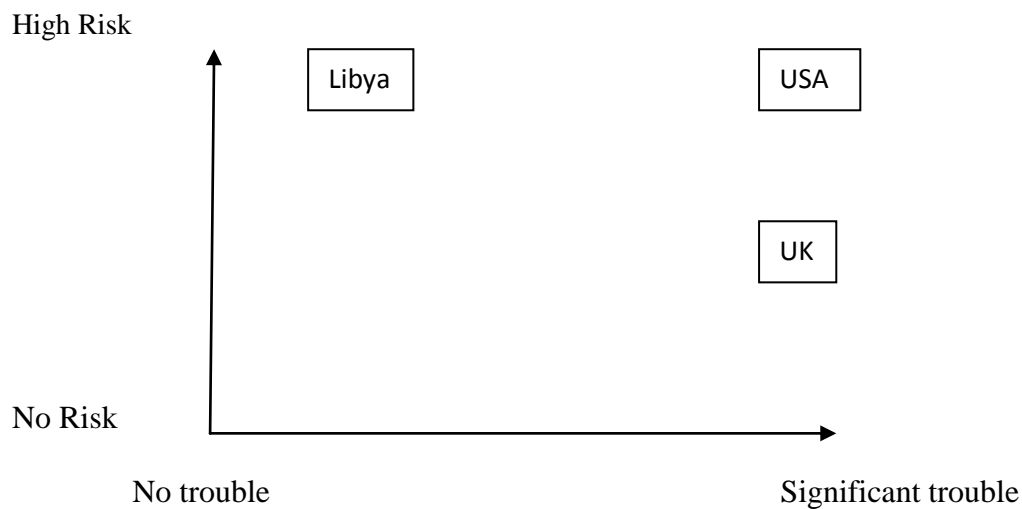


Figure 1: Cross-cultural comparison of attitudes towards shoplifting

Whilst the results indicate that all three countries had a negative attitude towards shoplifting, analysis of attitudes towards the types of individuals who engage in shoplifting indicate that the demographics of the perpetrator play a role in the punishment decision. Respondents were asked whether a retailer should apprehend the shoplifter in the scenario if they were elderly. Both the UK (72%) and US results (78%) show that the majority of people felt that the offender should be apprehended, even if they were elderly. In contrast, only 52% of Libyans felt elderly shoplifters should be punished. These results perhaps reflect the fact that elderly individuals are respected members of society in Libya and that Western legal systems attempt to treat all perpetrators in the same way, irrespective of their demographics. Interestingly though respondents in all three countries felt that the gender of the offender should not prevent them from being apprehended.

Respondents were also asked whether they could imagine circumstances where they might engage in the same behaviour as described in the scenario. In all three countries, the majority of respondents disagreed with this statement (Libya (72%), UK (70%), USA (67%)). However when asked if ‘anyone might do the same in the same circumstances’ there was a greater disparity in the results. Libyans (63%) and UK citizens (71%) disagreed with this statement compared to only 52% of US

respondents. It is unclear why these results have occurred and thus further analysis is required, although it may suggest that the US sample perceive that there are individuals in their society that do not necessarily share their ethical standards.

When considering the social consequences shoplifting might have, findings from all three countries show that if respondents were to shoplift like that described in the scenario, their friends and family would be embarrassed. Given that collectivist societies like Libya place great importance on social networks it might have been expected that the results would be higher for the Libyan respondents than for the US or UK but this proved not to be the case. In fact, for the US the impact this behaviour might have on friends was both higher than the results from the Libyan respondents and higher than the impact this behaviour might have on their family. Results for these questions are shown in Table 2.

	Libya	UK	USA
I agree that if I acted like the individual in the shoplifting scenario, my friends would be embarrassed	89%	79%	95%
I agree that if I acted like the individual in the shoplifting scenario, my family would be embarrassed	94%	95%	85%

Table 2: Comparison of the impact shoplifting has on friends and family

Respondents were also asked if they thought the shoplifting behaviour in the scenario would be more likely to occur if the offender was accompanied by someone else. Results from the US (83%) and the UK (86%) indicate that most people believed that this behaviour was more likely to occur if the perpetrator was alone, in contrast to only 65% of Libyans. If the shoplifter was accompanied then both the US and UK respondents believed that they were most likely to steal if they were with friends or spouse rather than relatives. For Libyans, friends were most likely to be present if shoplifting occurred.

Conclusion

The findings reported here are the result of an initial, exploratory analysis of consumer data gathered from 529 questionnaire responses taken from Libyan, UK and US citizens. This initial analysis indicates that there is consensus in relation to overall attitudes towards shoplifting, however on closer inspection these attitudes differ but not necessarily in ways that might be anticipated given our knowledge of Western and non-Western, Arabic cultural and retail contexts. This research therefore reinforces the view that ethical behaviour is culturally bound (Rawwas, 2001) and that the consumer theft literature, dominated by studies from the US and UK, only has limited application to non-Western, Arabic contexts. It also suggests that attitudes towards shoplifting are complex and context specific (Fukukawa, 2002) making it particularly problematic for international retailers to implement universal shoplifting preventative measures.

It is acknowledged that further analysis is required and if accepted, results from this more in-depth analysis will be presented at the conference. Such analysis would also take into account limitations of the study, such as the extent to which the results have been affected by the sample demographics and the extent to which these results reflect the different cultural and retail contexts of the countries involved in the study. Further analysis would also enable the results to be compared more closely to the work of Fukukawa (2002) which highlighted that factors such as social influence and perceived unfairness play a role in consumer theft.

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