The role of psychological ownership in shoplifting prevention: An exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

Despite increased expenditure on traditional approaches to the management and control of retail crime, it continues to increase globally at an exponential rate leading to calls from academics and practitioners alike to explore alternative avenues of retail crime prevention. Focussing on the role of psychological ownership, this study offers empirically generated insights into how employee based, non-technological factors may be developed to prevent and/or deter retail crime through employee intervention behaviours. Adopting a phenomenological approach, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 employees across two supermarkets. Findings suggest positive relationships between employees and employers may evoke feelings of possessiveness and psychological ownership towards their place of work among employees. This may have implications on employee propensity to intervene when witnessing deviant in-store customer behaviour. Consequently, retailers should consider identifying and strengthening factors that evoke psychological ownership amongst their employees.

1. Introduction

Global retail crime continues to rise with associated costs as a percentage of year-on-year sales similarly increasing (Guthrie and Mulder, 2017; Hayes, 2017; Sidebottom et al., 2017). Financial losses due to shoplifting are estimated to be an average loss of 6.6% of sales to retailers (Perlman and Ozinci, 2014). Indeed, many retailers now view management and control of retail crime as an inherent component of the industry (Ekwall and Lantz, 2015; Potdar et al., 2016). Preventative measures to date include technology based solutions encompassing such as CCTV, facial recognition, RFID and GIS tags, and burglar alarms or, intervention by security staff. However, given the apparent ineffectiveness of many of these traditional approaches, both academics and practitioners are increasingly calling for research that explores alternative avenues of retail crime prevention (Potdar et al., 2018). To this end, this research examines how the nature of employee-employer relationships may influence motivations for employees to proactively intervene to prevent shoplifting – which is a form of consumer misbehaviour (Potdar, 2015a, 2015b). Focussing on the role of psychological ownership and its significance in terms of employee-employer relationships, this study aims to offer empirically generated insights into how employee based, non-technological factors may be nurtured and developed in an attempt to prevent and/or deter retail crime

through the evocation of employee shoplifting intervention behaviours.

The paper is structured as follows. Initially and to set the study in context, there is a brief overview of relevant retail crime literature before employee-employer relational literature is examined with a specific focus on psychological ownership within the workplace. Next, the methodology adopted to address the research aim is outlined. Findings are presented in three key areas: the respondents, the nature of the employee-employer relationship and employee propensity to intervene in retail crime prevention. Findings are discussed before conclusions are drawn and directions for future research are suggested.

2. Literature review

An examination of the extant literature on retail crime reveals much of the focus to be on the perpetrators, their motivations and behaviours. Such research has produced a plethora of models and concepts including frameworks such as CRAVED (Concealable, Removable, Available, Valuable, Enjoyable, Disposable) model (Clarke and Webb, 1999) and the opportunity-motivation-justification model (Del Bosco and Misani, 2011). Deterrents such as surveillance and security guards are viewed as primary barriers to the perpetration of retail crime (Hagberg et al., 2017; Stavrova and Schlösser, 2015; Turco and Zuckerman, 2017). These encompass the use of tangible deterrents such

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as CCTVs, RFID tags, electronic shelf labels, burglar alarms, as well as uniformed or civil dressed (store detectives) security personnel to detect and deter shoplifting (Hagberg et al., 2017; Smith, 2016; Soutjis et al., 2017). However, as year-on-year losses through retail crime continues to rise (Kelkar and Emilus, 2016), the use and effectiveness of such measures is increasingly being questioned. Consequently, there are increasing calls among both academics and practitioners alike to investigate alternative, and potentially more effective avenues of retail crime prevention. In particular, the potential role that employees may have in retail crime prevention attracting such increased attention.

2.1. Employee-employer relationships

Within retail contexts, employees have long been recognised as key stakeholders. As a result, the nature of their relationship with their employer and the key factors that contribute towards this have been widely reached within the management literature (see Appendix 1). Key among these has been the nature of interpersonal interaction between employers and employees (For example, Banks et al., 2014; Kovjanic et al., 2012). In particular, culture and management style and their impact on the psychological empowerment of employees are posited as having a significant effect on employee-employer relational quality (For example, Dust et al., 2014; Kovjanic et al., 2012).

Organizations with a 'listening' and participative decision-making culture that is inclusive of employees frequently develop stronger bonds with employees (Barton and Ambrosini, 2013; Lee and Hyun, 2016). Management style has also been identified as impacting both organizational and interpersonal trust (For example, Frazier et al., 2016; Lau et al., 2014). Furthermore, Gupta et al. (2016) observe that an outcome of the presence of organizational trust is its impact on the performance of employees and the organization at large. The outcomes of organizational trust have been identified as the evocation of organizational commitment, notions of 'bonding' with the organization (Banks et al., 2014; Kovjanic et al., 2012; Pundt and Venz, 2017; Spitzmuller and Van Dyne, 2013), and employee engagement frequently manifesting in organizational citizenship behaviour or OCB (Malik and Dhar, 2017). Organizational behaviour literature increasingly identifies one potential influencer of organizational citizenship behaviour as the potential existence, nature and extent of psychological ownership (Chan et al., 2010).

2.2. Psychological ownership (PO)

Psychological ownership is frequently interpreted as an independent higher level characteristic of employee-employer relationship (see Appendix 2) that may influence employee decisions in relation to particular behavioural outcomes (Herzberg, 1964, 1965; Herzberg et al., 2011). Whilst the behavioural implications of the evocation of PO have long been recognised in disciplines as diverse as anthropology, psychology, social psychology, geography, history and philosophy (Ye and Gawronski, 2016), it is only relatively recently that it has emerged as a focus of research within the management literature (Gineikiene et al., 2017).

Jussila et al. (2015) refer to PO as "a *personal sense of possession an individual holds for a material or immaterial target (i.e. 'This is MINE!')*" (p. 121). Crucially, such a sense of possession may be disjunction of any legal right of ownership (Pierce et al., 2017). Widely recognised as comprising a cognitive dimension (Brown et al., 2014; Pierce et al., 2003) that is manifested through an individual's awareness, thoughts and beliefs about a target possession, PO also encompasses an affective component in terms of emotions and personal meaning that a sense of ownership of a target possession may evoke (Jussila et al., 2015).

These thoughts and emotions may be accentuated when individuals have a sense of responsibility and/or control of an object potentially resulting in an increased connection to that object (Fuchs and Edwards, 2012). This is particularly pertinent when individuals have actively participated in decision making related to an object and consequently perceive themselves as the cause of a particular outcome (Pierce and Jussila, 2011). PO is not dichotomous or prone to 'switching on' or 'switching off' (Jussila et al., 2015). Instead, research suggests it emerges over a period of time. Consequently, individuals are increasingly motivated to engage in behaviours that '*nurture, advance and protect the target of ownership*' (Spitzmuller and Van Dyne, 2013).

Within a number of contexts, PO has been demonstrated to play a pivotal role in facilitating positive behavioural outcomes (For example, Baer and Brown, 2012; Hulland et al., 2015). However, recent research questions the generalisability of such findings suggesting the context specificity of such results may play a pivotal role in the evocation and nature of behavioural manifestations of PO (For example, Anne Garretson et al., 2012). To this end, this research aims to offer empirically generated insights into the role of psychological ownership and its significance in terms of employee retail crime intervention behaviours.

3. Methodology

As this is an exploratory research and the nature of enquiry is qualitative, a phenomenological approach was applied and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection. Interviews focused on the lived experiences of the shop-floor staff of these supermarkets (the interview guide is shown in Appendix 3). The appropriateness, suitability, and intelligibility of the questions was confirmed using three experts within this field and consequently piloted using three interviews.

Using a phenomenological approach it is possible to explore and gain new insights to effectively address an existing real-life problem (Garry and Hall, 2015). A target of 25 interviews was set based on our initial literature review on qualitative studies in the area of organizational behaviour (For example, Cappellen and Janssens, 2010) with 26 interviews actually being conducted. Respondents comprised shop floor employees from two major national supermarket chains in a New Zealand conurbation (respondent profiles are shown in Appendix 4). Further, for analysis of these interviews, a semio-pragmatic method (Engberink et al., 2016) was used (the steps are shown in Appendix 5).

4. Findings

Findings are presented in three key areas reflecting the most important themes emerging from the data. Initially, and in order to fully comprehend subsequent findings, it is important to present broader information relating to the respondents and their backgrounds. Second, the respondents' perceptions of their working environment and the nature of their relationship with their employee is outlined. Finally, potential attitudinal and behavioural outcomes related to the first two sets of findings are outlined in relation to the prevention of retail crime.

4.1. The respondents

What was particularly striking about the profile of the respondents was the diverse range of cultures from which they were. Only four of the twenty-six respondents were originally from New Zealand. Three of these had been employed significantly longer by their respective employers than other respondents (15, 16 and 22 years). Of the remaining respondents, nine were from the Indian sub-continent, four from Southeast Asia, two from Europe, two from South America, two from Pacific islands, two from Africa and one from Australia. Hence, a number may be considered as being from lesser-developed countries and have experience of work cultures that contrast significantly with those of their new domicile residence. This is likely to have had a significant impact on their expectations of conditions of service and the nature employer-employee relationships and their perceptions of their current employer.