

Trend Alert: TikTok Shoplifting

If you're looking for evidence of the fact that people can justify anything, you need to look no further than a teen trend that has kids using TikTok to teach each other how to shoplift.

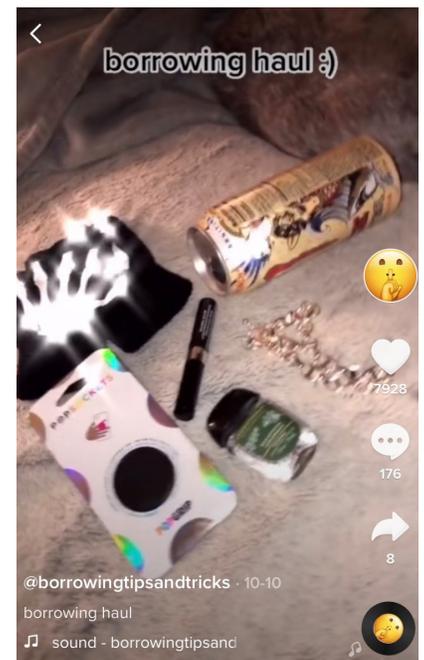
In recent months, the video-sharing social media app TikTok has seen the growth of anonymous accounts created by teens that use the hashtag #borrowingtips. These accounts feature tutorials on shoplifting techniques and strategies, tips on how to avoid getting caught, pointers on which stores are easiest to hit, and pictures of shoplifting "hauls" that serve to motivate viewers to give it a try.

None of this is surprising as shoplifting has always been both a temptation and activity for a significant number of teens. But this version of shoplifting has a couple of new elements to it that deserve our attention.

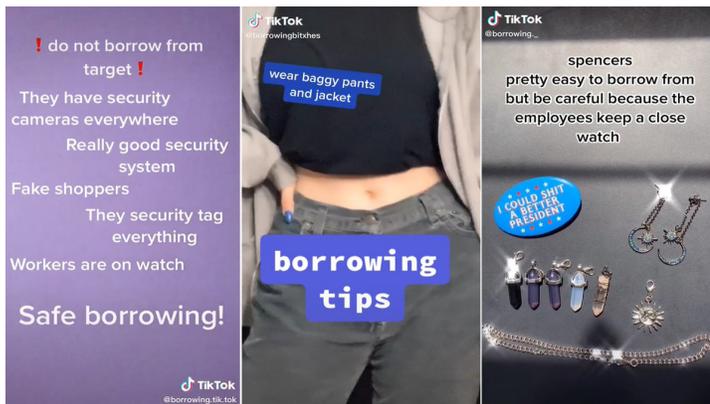
First, the term "shoplifting" is often replaced with the word "borrowing." Somehow the adoption of a softer term eliminates the fact that this is actually stealing. Kids are more easily influenced and seduced into giving it a try when it's labeled with something seen as less than criminal. And, in a world where morality is already relative, "borrowing" needs virtually no justification at all.

Second, in a youth culture where "social justice" is a hot topic among a growing number of kids, it seems that many in the #borrowingtips community justify and encourage shoplifting by making it a social justice issue. At first glance this seems ridiculous, but it makes sense to them. How are they doing this? Following the reasoning for this approach, flawed as it is, helps us understand why so many kids are being drawn in.

Proponents generally discourage "borrowing" from smaller independent retailers. Instead, they encourage the targeting of larger retailers and corporations that are believed to mistreat workers, discriminate against LGBTQ causes, or who are generally ripping off consumers. . . a belief held solely based on a corporation's size. "Borrowers" believe they are actually doing justice by stealing from the rich and making them pay for their capitalistic sins. There's even a saying in the community that "If it's a chain, it's free reign." For example, one "borrower" is said to have poached some pet supplies from a large chain store thought to mistreat animals. She turned around and donated those stolen supplies to a local pet shelter. By the way, this Robin Hood-like "re-gifting" is rare.



These TikTok accounts feature tutorials on shoplifting techniques and strategies as well as tips on how to avoid getting caught.



One of our great concerns with this trend is that it will continue to go viral as a kind of social contagion, feeding into what is already recognized as a problem with a host of contributing factors, this being just one more. And when promotion on TikTok coupled with matters of social justice joins with any combination of these other factors. . . well, the pull will be powerful.

Researchers have found that many kids who shoplift have money and lack little or nothing in terms of material possessions. The organization Shoplifters Alternative reports that these kids “steal for a variety of reasons, mostly related to common life situations and their personal ability (or inability) to cope.” Research indicates that these reasons include:

For some, shoplifting is a way to rebel against an adult-run system they see as constrictive and oppressive.

Thrill-seeking: Many teens say they love the “rush” and “high” that comes with getting away with it. Some research indicates that the serotonin-induced rush can actually become addictive, leading kids to want to steal again and again in order to get the high. Stealing the merchandise means little or nothing. It’s the rush that counts.

Beating the system: For some, shoplifting is a way to rebel against an adult-run system they see as constrictive and oppressive. If they can “outsmart” the system, they’ve pulled one over on adults. Sometimes the rebellion of shoplifting is aimed at parents.

Peer pressure: With so many kids shoplifting and talking about it, more and more feel the pressure to do it themselves. Some social groups even see shoplifting as a form of hazing. If someone refuses to shoplift, they are excluded from belonging to the group.

A Substitute for loss: A broken relationship, parents’ divorce, death of a loved one, etc. can all leave a teen feeling as if they were unfairly deprived. Some will shoplift to feel as if they are in control of their lives (even if only in a small way) and to place a sense of loss on another.

Relief: Many teens describe their lives as “boring” or “depressing.” The adolescent years are also filled with the anxiety associated with so much confusing life change. As crazy as it sounds, stealing becomes a way to find relief in the midst of the turmoils of the teen years.

Envy and Want: We live in a materialistic world where our kids are under a constant barrage from advertisers who convince the teen population that you are what you have and what you wear. The resulting desire for things can be a powerful force in leading teens to steal.

The “dis-integration” of faith: We live in a culture in which there is no objective standard of right and wrong. Everyone decides what’s right and wrong for himself and herself. This attitude increasingly effects even our children who profess faith. Yes, they profess faith in Christ. But that faith may not be integrated into every area of their lives. Consequently – and as crazy as it may sound – in their mind there’s nothing wrong with being a Christian teen and shoplifting.



By Walt Mueller

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There are some common threads that run among the parents of today's "non-professional" teen shoplifters. For the parents of those who haven't gotten caught it's the thread of ignorance and invulnerability. It's the thread that unconsciously says, "Not my kid." And for those whose kids do get caught, it's the thread that begins with the words, "I never imagined. . . ."

Now is the time to talk to the kids we are raising and ministering to about shoplifting. All of them know peers who do it and many do it themselves. We should start by reminding them of God's commandment, "You shall not steal." Warn them of this TikTok trend. Pray that they would get caught if they are bent on continuing on this path. And if they do get caught, let them suffer the consequences of their actions. Then, we can continue by addressing the needs and voids that our teen might be tempted to fill with the consequence-laden dead-end "thrill" of retail theft. . . even if it is justified as something that's not a vice, but a virtue.

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For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at www.cpyu.org.

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