



Power Cuts and Crime: A theoretical exploration of routine activity theory in the context of load shedding in South Africa.

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Abstract

Load shedding has become a persistent and systemic challenge in South Africa, significantly disrupting daily routines and reshaping the environmental conditions under which crime occurs. This study examines the relationship between power outages and crime through the lens of Routine Activity Theory, which posits that crime arises from the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. It is argued that load shedding creates temporal and spatial conditions that heighten criminal opportunities by reducing visibility and weakening informal and formal surveillance. Adopting a qualitative, exploratory research design, the study draws on in-depth interviews conducted with retailers and community members to explore perceptions of the link between power outages and criminal activity. Thematic analysis of the data reveals that increased darkness, reduced guardianship, and disruptions to security systems during load shedding contribute to a rise in opportunistic crimes, particularly shoplifting and other forms of property-related offences. The findings highlight the broader criminogenic implications of infrastructural instability and underscore the need for adaptive crime prevention strategies in contexts characterised by recurring energy disruptions. The study contributes to ongoing debates in criminology and urban studies by illustrating how environmental and situational factors shape crime patterns. It further offers practical insights for policymakers, urban planners, and law enforcement agencies seeking to mitigate the unintended consequences of load shedding on community safety. This research aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by addressing urban safety and resilience, and with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) through its focus on crime prevention and the promotion of safer societies.

Keywords: Power cuts, Crime, Routine activity theory, shoplifting.

Introduction

South Africa has faced significant challenges in recent years due to frequent power outages, commonly referred to as load shedding. Load shedding in South Africa, which refers to planned power outages to prevent grid overload, severely affected and disrupted the regular flow of various sectors (Mabunda et al., 2023; Yende & Madolo, 2023). Power companies have planned these outages, which

have seriously disrupted daily life and raised crime rates, especially retail theft. Shoplifting, the act of taking items from a store without paying for them, has become a serious problem, particularly during load shedding when security is weakened, and criminal chances are increased.

Recent studies highlight the psychological and financial strains that increase shoplifting during load shedding. For instance, people take advantage of the vulnerabilities caused by power outages due to financial strains and the demand for goods (Peng & Li, 2019). This study examines the dynamics of routine activity theory in relation to load shedding in South Africa. It aims to identify the key factors contributing to shoplifting and provide insights that might inspire targeted interventions and legislative improvements.

The paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of how load shedding creates conditions that facilitate shoplifting. It investigates victimisation within the unit, the connection between load shedding and shoplifting incidents, the effect of load shedding on security measures, the factors contributing to shoplifting incidents, and mitigation strategies for the effects of load shedding, using qualitative research methods and criminological theories.

Furthermore, according to the rational choice theory, people balance the advantages of stealing products against the possible consequences of getting caught, which are thought to be lower during load shedding because there is less security and surveillance (Thomas, Loughran & Hamilton, 2020). This study aims to identify patterns, motives, and contributing factors that amplify or mitigate shoplifting incidents during loadshedding, offering valuable insights for crime prevention and law enforcement strategies. This study will help identify the severity of the load-shedding problem for retailers in an empirical, objective manner, providing imperative input for decision-makers and policymakers. The central research question guiding this study is: *How does load shedding in South Africa influence shoplifting and opportunistic crime in retail environments, and what factors exacerbate or mitigate these risks?* . This question arises from the documented problem that power outages reduce visibility and weaken security systems, creating opportunities for motivated offenders while socio-economic pressures increase the likelihood of shoplifting. It captures the core concern of the study: understanding the intersection of infrastructural disruption, routine activities, and crime. To address this question in depth, the study is guided by the following sub-questions:

- What types of shoplifting and opportunistic crime increase during load shedding, and how are retail stores affected?
- How do environmental and situational factors such as reduced lighting, malfunctioning security systems, and crowding contribute to criminal opportunities during load shedding?
- What strategies do retail managers, security personnel, and communities employ to mitigate the risks associated with load shedding?
 - Focus: Mitigation measures, community involvement, and policy/practical interventions.

This study seeks to make a meaningful contribution at the intersection of urban security, retail management, and socio-economic resilience. By foregrounding the lived experiences of retail workers, security personnel, and community members during periods of load shedding, the research provides empirical insights into how infrastructural instability shapes crime opportunities in South African urban environments. The study contributes directly to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by highlighting how unstable energy supply affects safety in public and commercial spaces, and to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by emphasising the need for safe working environments that protect the livelihoods and well-being of retail employees. Understanding the impact of load shedding on crime provides evidence for designing practical interventions, such as enhanced security measures, community engagement programs, and technological solutions, which can reduce opportunities for shoplifting and improve public safety.

Literature Review

Global and South African Perspectives on Load Shedding and Crime

Internationally, power cuts often lead to increased criminal activity, including shoplifting, burglary, and theft (Welsch & Bazilian, 2013). For instance, Peng and Li (2019) discovered a link between increased crime rates in Mexico and power outages, emphasising how criminals take advantage of opportunities

created by reduced visibility and compromised security systems. Power cuts in rural areas of India have been linked to an increase in shoplifting and other serious crimes. A study by Singh et al. (2023), extended blackouts in Uttar Pradesh increased property crimes because of less police patrols and guardianship. However, the study also noted that community-driven initiatives such as neighbourhood watch programs mitigated some of these risks. Instead, opportunistic crimes such as shoplifting or organised crime have been linked to power cuts. Research by Oliveira et al. (2023) found that blackouts in Rio de Janeiro provided cover for drug trafficking operations and gang-related violence. Increased criminal activity has also been linked to Nigeria's electricity shortages. Power outages in Lagos create opportunities for robberies and vandalism, especially in densely populated neighbourhoods, according to a report by Adebayo (2022). However, the study found that socioeconomic factors, such as unemployment, contribute more to crime rates than power disruptions alone.

In the South African context, Load shedding is the intentional cutting off of electrical supply to specific regions to avoid widespread blackouts and system breakdowns. To balance the grid's supply and demand, the electrical supply is intentionally shut down (Prasad & Pathak, 2019). In addition to affecting businesses and customers, load shedding, or planned power outages, is used to control electrical supply and demand. It also leads to increased criminal activity, including shoplifting (Stander, 2020). Businesses and industries that rely on a steady power supply are severely affected by load shedding, even if it prevents widespread blackouts (Wood, 2023). Load shedding has become a recurring problem in South Africa, disrupting both daily life and economic activities. Beyond its economic implications, load shedding creates conditions conducive to criminal activities, as reduced lighting and compromised security systems provide opportunities for offenders.

To balance supply and demand on the grid, load shedding is the intentional shutdown of the electrical supply (Prasad & Pathak, 2019). In South Africa, this practice has significant implications for public safety. For South African businesses, loadshedding has become an unfavourable situation that significantly impacts profitability, efficiency, and productivity (Greenoverall, 2023). Load shedding is one reason the economy is unable to lift itself out of a low-growth environment. It is difficult for growth to occur without power. Shoplifting is more strongly associated with larger socioeconomic issues than with load shedding's short-term disruptions. According to Mabunda et al. (2023), regardless of power outages, poverty, unemployment, and financial distress, theft in retail settings is primarily motivated by these factors. Some scholars argue that, rather than increasing criminal activity, load shedding's psychological impact may actually reduce it. For example, a study that was published in the South African Journal of Science in 2023 highlighted how mental health issues brought on by extended power outages diminish social interaction and mobility, which may limit opportunities for crimes like shoplifting.

How Load Shedding Creates Opportunities for Crime

Studies in criminology have long explored how environmental factors, such as a power cut, can create opportunities for criminal activity. Load shedding is a specific case in which power outages facilitate crime. The retail environment is particularly vulnerable in South Africa, where power outages are frequent and persistent. Stores that depend on energy for security measures such as cameras, alarms, and lighting are prime targets for criminals because load shedding frequently affects businesses in urban areas (Banderker, 2022). Stores are more at risk of theft when these human and technological safeguards are lacking and when police presence is diminished due to increased demand on law enforcement resources (Nawaz, 2021). Research by Van Hiep and Tram (2020) also supports the assertion that power cuts increase criminal activity by reducing guardianship. In their analysis of crime during power outages in various contexts, they found that the absence of surveillance and lighting increased the likelihood of theft in both residential and commercial settings.

Retail stores become more vulnerable to shoplifting when load shedding disrupts security systems, such as surveillance cameras and alarms (Makgopa & Mpetsheni, 2022). This vulnerability is exacerbated by the lack of lighting during power outages, which reduces visibility and gives potential offenders greater confidence (Meyer & Louw, 2023). According to research, stores are particularly vulnerable to load shedding because of weakened security measures and chaotic environments (Van Hiep & Tram, 2020). Furthermore, load shedding-induced economic stress can exacerbate despair among those who have suffered financial losses, which in turn might indirectly increase criminal

activity (Arendse, 2023). While some researchers argue that load shedding makes it easier for criminals to commit crimes such as shoplifting and cable theft by disrupting security systems, others dispute this claim, citing methodological flaws, alternative explanations, and a lack of empirical evidence. Since no specific research has been conducted to measure this relationship, Police Minister Bheki Cele has criticised the notion that load shedding increases crime rates. According to Cele, load shedding is not a variable in South African crime recording systems, which makes it difficult to establish causality. He argues that a detailed examination using thoughtfully developed research methodology is necessary to determine how load shedding affects crime (Cele, 2023). Ram emphasises that other factors, such as socio-economic conditions and urban density, may play a more substantial role in shaping crime patterns than power outages alone (Ram, 2024). Critics argue that attributing increased crime to load shedding oversimplifies the issue. Mabunda et al. (2023) contend that poverty, unemployment, and economic strain are more significant drivers of criminal activity than temporary disruptions caused by power outages. They highlight how broader systemic issues contribute to crime, irrespective of environmental factors such as load shedding (Mabunda et al., 2023).

Economic Pressures and Crime Motivation

The socioeconomic environment in South Africa has a significant impact on the motivations behind crime, particularly shoplifting. Due to financial strains, a significant number of people are more vulnerable to committing crimes as a result of high unemployment rates, widespread poverty, and economic inequality (Banderker, 2022). These problems are exacerbated by load shedding, which undermines people's and businesses' ability to make a living. Many people who live in poverty may view shoplifting as a viable option to fulfil their basic needs, particularly during blackouts when there is a lower possibility of being detected. Economic hardship and social disorganisation can be exacerbated by load shedding (Tembe & Hlengwa, 2022; Umar & Kunda-Wamuwi, 2019).

Vulnerable Retail Targets During Load Shedding

Shoplifters target retailers during load shedding, especially small businesses without power backup. When security cameras, lighting, and alarms stop working, stores become extremely exposed. Merchandise that is easy to carry and has high resale value, such as cosmetics, clothing, and electronics, becomes an attractive target for offenders (Cardone, 2021). Motivated criminals can more easily take advantage of these weaknesses because of the stores' diminished operational capacity brought on by a shortage of employees and weakened security. Furthermore, during load shedding, retail stores may remain open despite the lack of power, thereby increasing their exposure to theft. As a result, there is an elevated risk of crime, which aligns with the RAT framework: a combination of motivated offenders and suitable targets, with little to no guardianship, creates an environment conducive to crime. Retail stores with poorly secured merchandise become attractive targets during load shedding because of the lack of functioning security systems (Chan & Gibbs, 2019).

Weakened Security During Load Shedding.

Load shedding reduces the presence of capable guardianship, a key element of Routine Activity Theory. During power cuts, retail stores are often unable to operate their security systems effectively. Surveillance cameras, alarm systems, and even basic lighting may not function, leaving the store more vulnerable to theft (Oliphant & Oliphant, 2021). In addition, many stores may operate with reduced staff during load shedding, further diminishing their ability to monitor customers and prevent theft. The absence of adequate guardianship increases the likelihood of shoplifting, as offenders recognise the reduced risk of detection or apprehension. This aligns with findings from studies on crime and guardianship, which show that reductions in security or surveillance increase the likelihood of criminal activity, such as theft (Van Hiep & Tram, 2020). Similarly, reduced visibility makes it harder for store personnel to observe suspicious activity, and the absence of electronic surveillance systems further reduces the likelihood of apprehending offenders. This situation is compounded by the stress and disorganisation caused by power cuts, which may divert staff members' attention from their security duties (Banderker, 2022).

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

This paper explores the shoplifting incidents during load shedding through the Routine Activity Theory. The study integrates routine activity theory to understand how load shedding in South Africa creates conditions conducive to shoplifting by influencing all three elements of the theory.

Routine activity theory

Routine Activity Theory (Felson & Cohen, 1980) posits that crime occurs when three elements converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship. During load shedding, these conditions are often present in retail stores, where power outages create opportunities for motivated individuals to engage in shoplifting. Stores lacking backup power or proper lighting become vulnerable targets as electronic surveillance and security systems fail, and the reduced staff visibility decreases the likelihood of detection (Banderker, 2022). The absence of effective guardianship, whether through security personnel or technological monitoring, further amplifies the risk. When staff are reduced or unable to adequately monitor customers, motivated offenders can exploit these weaknesses (Van Hiep & Tram, 2020).

Understanding how motivated offenders, suitable targets, and inadequate guardianship interact during load shedding can help stakeholders develop strategies to mitigate risks. Effective interventions require collaboration between businesses, communities, and policymakers to strengthen security measures, improve surveillance, and implement preventative initiatives during power outages.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, a research design that aims to gain a deeper understanding of a problem or phenomenon by exploring it from multiple perspectives and collecting preliminary data, often through qualitative methods. It also allows researchers to generate new ideas and hypotheses about shoplifting in retail. According to Creswell (2013), it is often used in situations where little is known about the research problem and is a useful precursor to more focused research. It provides room for unexpected findings and new insights.

Data Collection

This study employed a purposive sampling method. Since purposive sampling enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of particular phenomena, participants with knowledge, expertise, or first-hand experience relevant to the research topic were selected. One-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants to investigate the meanings of their lived experiences. Purposive sampling strategies were used to ensure that specific kinds of cases of those that could possibly be included are part of the final sample in the research study.

Data Analysis

The researcher involved thematic data analysis as a qualitative method of analysis in accordance with the topics of the information received. Thematic analysis is flexible and can be applied to a variety of qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, and can provide comprehensive insights into the data by allowing researchers to analyse intricate relationships between themes (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The thematic analysis approach was applied in the study because it entails a thorough fact- and evidence-finding process for everything. To establish credibility and trustworthiness, member checking was conducted, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of the transcribed data and interpretations. Furthermore, peer debriefing allowed themes to be clarified and reduced potential researcher bias.

Findings

The study employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in qualitative data. Through systematic coding, key themes and point of contention emerged, offering insights into the prevalence of power cuts and crime and the factors contributing to such incidents. The following section presents identified themes alongside demographic and contextual data.

▪ Age and Experience

Findings revealed that retail workers lose income and time due to shoplifting incidents during

load shedding. The experiences and challenges faced by individuals in this age 26+ highlighted that non-functional surveillance systems during load shedding periods significantly increased shoplifting risks. Economic pressures were identified as a primary driver for shoplifting during blackouts. Also, the findings reveal that years of service have a strong impact on being involved in the risk of being attacked by shoplifters. These demographic findings suggest age as a factor in exploring variation in participants' attitudes and experiences of shoplifting. The table below summarises key participant characteristics.

▪ Gender

The presence of mixed-gender groups may suggest that individuals of different genders collaborate in these situations, possibly to share risks or responsibilities, or to leverage differing social perceptions of criminal behaviour. The findings reveal that the impact of power outages on crime extends beyond mere opportunity, revealing complex social dynamics where diverse gender involvement may influence the likelihood and nature of criminal activities during such events.

Floor assistants

Pseudonyms	Gender	Years of experience	Position
FA-1	Male	9	Floor assistant
FA-2	Female	7	Floor assistant
FA-3	Female	12	Floor assistant
FA-4	Female	5	Floor assistant
FA-5	Male	3	Floor assistant

Community members

A total of three community member participated in the study, representing their community. Their leadership roles provided a valuable perspective on community relations. Gender balance was ensured to capture diverse viewpoints.

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Community service role
CM-1	Female	44	Police Forum secretary
CM-2	Female	38	N/A
CM-3	Male	36	SGB member

Retail

managers

Retail managers were chosen based on their direct involvement in retail operations and their ability to offer valuable experiences. The sample consisted of two males and one female, aged 30-38, ensuring a mix of genders and a range of experiences. This demographic variety allowed the researchers to explore potential gender-related differences in management styles, decision-making processes, and experiences within the retail environment

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Position
RM-1	Female	38	Retail manager
RM-2	Male	36	Retail manager
RM-3	Male	30	Retail manager

Head of securities

The head of securities is selected for their direct involvement in overseeing security operations, making them the key informants who can provide valuable insights into the research topic. They were also selected based on a certain number of years to ensure the insights gathered are based on substantial experience.

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Community service role	Number of years in service
HS-1	Male	41	Head of security	17
HS-2	Male	3	Head of security	12

Emerged Themes

Analysis involves systematically examining data, behaviours, and social dynamics to understand crime and its underlying factors. This can include investigating patterns of criminal behaviour, the social structures that facilitate or inhibit crime, and the functioning of criminal justice systems (Walsh et al., 2021). By carefully examining participant responses, researchers can identify recurring ideas or themes. These themes offer valuable insights into the research objectives. They represent the key issues and reflect the experiences of both law enforcement officers and community members. The diagram below visually represents the thematic structure that emerged from the data analysis.



Figure 1: Summary of themes

Theme 1: Relationship between Load Shedding and Shoplifting Incidents

Regarding motivations and triggers, participants who engage in shoplifting during load shedding may have various reasons. Some individuals may perceive it as an opportunity to exploit the chaotic environment and engage in illegal activities without being easily detected. The absence of a stable power supply may make it difficult for businesses to implement their usual security measures effectively, increasing the likelihood of theft.

The following are some of the opinions expressed by most participants regarding shoplifting incidents that occur during load shedding.

During load shedding, our cameras and alarms are not functioning properly, making it difficult for us to monitor and secure our store. We've had instances where intruders have taken advantage of the power outages to break in and steal valuable items". (RM-1.)

There's a greater chance of decreased visibility and security systems being momentarily deactivated during load shedding, which gives shoplifters more cover to operate under". (HS-1.)

The research findings underscored a clear link between the timing of power outages and a surge in shop thefts. This connection can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, during load shedding, the reduced visibility due to darkness or dim lighting provides an advantageous environment for shoplifters to carry out their illicit activities without being easily detected. Additionally, temporarily deactivating security systems, such as surveillance cameras or alarms, creates an opportunity for thieves to exploit the lack of monitoring and steal merchandise.

The following are sentiments noted by participants:

“One issue that arises during load shedding is inadequate lighting. When parts of the store are dimly lit or completely dark, it becomes more challenging to keep an eye on the entire establishment and spot potential theft. (FA-1.)

Cameras and security systems often malfunction during blackouts, making it harder to identify shoplifters. Additionally, load shedding causes a surge of customers rushing to finish their purchases before power outages, making the area crowded and chaotic and making it easier for shoplifters to get away undetected. (HS-2)

The study found that load shedding challenges include insufficient lighting, making it harder to monitor the entire store and detect potential theft in dimly lit or completely dark areas. Another issue arises from the disruption of security systems and cameras during blackouts, making it harder to identify and prevent shoplifting when surveillance is compromised. Additionally, load shedding often leads to a surge in foot traffic and crowding as customers hurriedly complete their purchases before the power outage. The resulting chaos can provide shoplifters with opportunities to escape detection or successfully carry out their illicit activities.

Theme 2: Impact of Load Shedding on Security Measures

Load shedding has profound impacts on security measures, introducing vulnerabilities that compromise the safety of various establishments. The primary impact is the loss of electrical power, resulting in inadequate lighting on and around the premises. Diminished visibility hampers surveillance efforts, making it challenging for security personnel to monitor and detect potential security threats (Goldberg, 2015). Additionally, disruptions to electronic security systems, such as alarms and surveillance cameras, leave businesses and residences temporarily exposed. The unpredictability of load shedding schedules further complicates security planning, creating windows of opportunity for unauthorised access and criminal activities.

The following are some of the statements made by the participants:

Load shedding frequently interrupts alarms, CCTV cameras, and security systems, giving potential shoplifters a chance to take advantage of the situation. It is easier for criminals to commit shoplifting undetected when there is little or no monitoring. (RM-2.)

Theme 3: Factors Contributing to Shoplifting Incidents

According to participant responses, the chaotic environment and decreased visibility during load shedding create a sense of anonymity, encouraging some individuals to take advantage of the situation.

Participant highlighted that:

When load shedding occurs, stores become dimly lit or gloomy, providing shoplifters with cover to hide their activities. (RM-3.)

Poor illumination might make it more difficult for employees or security guards to spot suspicious activity and take prompt action, allowing shoplifters to take advantage. (FA-3.)

Unemployment and poverty can increase the temptation to steal, as individuals may not have the means to purchase essential or desired items. Limited access to basic necessities and financial pressures are considered driving forces for such behaviour.

Respondent noted that:

Unemployment can lead to a sense of hopelessness and frustration, which can manifest in illegal activities like shoplifting. (CM-1.)

In the insights provided by participants in this research, the concept of reduced surveillance emerged as a significant aspect. This encompassed actions such as scaling back video surveillance, reducing police patrolling, and restricting the collection and analysis of personal data. Aligning with participant perspectives, scholars in the field also emphasised the delicate balance that reduced surveillance aims to strike between respecting personal privacy rights and addressing the imperative for public safety and security.

Participant stated that:

In my opinion, many people worry about their personal information being tracked, and constant surveillance often creates mistrust in communities. Reducing monitoring could foster a more open society where individuals feel safer in their private spaces without fear

of being observed. (CM-3.)

These findings underscore the argument made by advocates, supported by both participants and scholars, that excessive surveillance practices can potentially infringe upon individual liberties and contribute to a pervasive culture of continuous monitoring and suspicion. The proponents of reduced surveillance argue that such measures can cultivate greater trust, freedom, and autonomy among citizens within a given community.

Theme 4: Mitigation Strategies for Load Shedding Effects

Engaging the community in awareness campaigns helps create a collective understanding of the challenges posed by load shedding and its potential impact on security. One effective strategy is to establish neighbourhood watch programs that encourage residents to be vigilant and report any suspicious activity during power outages. By fostering a community-oriented approach to security, individuals become active contributors to maintaining a safe environment, serving as additional eyes and ears to deter shoplifting.

Community member emphasised that:

We have worked together to create a comprehensive plan to mitigate the impact of power outages on the community and operations. (CM-2.)

Findings stated that participants collaborated with other companies and local agencies to address the challenges posed by load shedding. Through collective efforts, they have devised a comprehensive plan to minimise the impact of power outages on both the local community and our operational activities.

Discussion

Relationship between Load Shedding and Shoplifting Incidents

The findings of this study suggest a strong correlation between load shedding and shoplifting incidents, as criminals have more opportunities to take advantage of the chaotic environment that power outages create. Businesses are more vulnerable during blackout periods because vital security systems, such as CCTV cameras and alarms, don't work, which reduces oversight and makes it easier for shoplifters to act without fear of being caught. This aligns with Routine Activity Theory, which emphasises the convergence of suitable targets, motivated offenders, and the lack of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979). According to recent studies conducted in Gauteng, load shedding is associated with an increase in opportunistic crimes, specifically theft and shoplifting, because it reduces surveillance and increases crowding in retail establishments (Ram, 2024). Similarly, Mawanza and Chigbu (2021) argue that prolonged power cuts exacerbate economic hardships and frustration, which may drive individuals to resort to theft as a coping mechanism. More comprehensive analyses of South Africa's energy crisis show how social inequality and infrastructure instability combine to foster crime and erode community trust (Gwaka, 2025). Together, these results highlight how load shedding not only interferes with everyday activities but also increases susceptibility in retail environments, which helps explain why shoplifting incidents continue to occur.

Impact of Load Shedding on Security Measures

Load shedding significantly undermines the effectiveness of security measures. Essential systems such as alarms, CCTV cameras, and electronic locks often malfunction or fail entirely during power outages, leaving homes and businesses vulnerable to burglary. These systems are unable to identify or deter criminal activity in the absence of electricity, which raises the risk of theft and burglary (Twala et al., 2023). Additional safety risks to people and property may result from the compromise of emergency systems, such as lighting and fire alarms. Furthermore, during load shedding, the lack of operational surveillance and monitoring capabilities gives criminals the chance to take advantage of the situation. Undetected intruders can enter a building, and security guards struggle to respond quickly to breaches. Post-event inquiries are further weakened by the absence of video evidence from malfunctioning cameras. Furthermore, disruptions to emergency response systems increase the risks associated with power outages by making it more difficult to manage crises such as fires or medical emergencies (Sawalha, 2020). Moreover, access control systems, such as electronic locks, may fail, compromising the integrity of secured areas. Load shedding can significantly impair the ability to maintain a secure environment, making it imperative to consider

alternative security measures during times of power outages.

Factors Contributing to Shoplifting Incidents

Psychological drivers play a significant role in shoplifting incidents. These drivers include factors like impulsivity, thrill-seeking behaviour, addiction, and kleptomania (Chhatwani & Mishra, 2021). Individuals who shoplift often experience a feeling of arousal or excitement through the act of stealing, providing a temporary sense of power or control. Psychological factors such as low self-esteem, depression, or the need for peer acceptance can also contribute to shoplifting incidents (Chhatwani et al., 2022). Economic influences play a crucial role in shoplifting incidents. Financial pressures or socioeconomic factors such as poverty, unemployment, or low wages can push individuals to steal (Chhatwani & Mishra, 2021). Some shoplifters may perceive shoplifting as a way to meet their basic needs or fulfil unmet desires. Economic factors can also include the cost and availability of products. For instance, high-priced items or limited availability may drive individuals to shoplift out of a desire to possess something they cannot afford or get elsewhere (Chhatwani et al., 2022). Environmental factors also contribute to shoplifting incidents. Factors such as store layout, inadequate security measures, or understaffing can create opportunities for theft. Easy access to merchandise, poorly placed surveillance cameras, or ineffective loss-prevention strategies can all increase the likelihood of shoplifting incidents. Additionally, the social environment, such as peer pressure or witnessing others shoplift without consequences, can influence an individual's decision to engage in theft (Smith, 2023).

Mitigation Strategies for Load Shedding Effects

In response to the challenges posed by load shedding, the research suggests several effective strategies that local retail stores in East London can adopt to mitigate the negative effects on their operations and minimise the risk of shoplifting incidents. These strategies include implementing backup power sources, enhancing staff training on crime prevention measures during power outages, and collaborating with local law enforcement agencies to intensify security patrols during scheduled load shedding. According to routine activity theory, increasing guardianship, such as employing additional staff, using mobile security units, and installing backup power systems for surveillance, is an effective approach to reducing crime opportunities (Groff, 2021). Furthermore, fostering community awareness and engagement can help create a collective responsibility for preventing shoplifting. Implementing visible deterrents, such as increased signage and security personnel presence, can act as preventive measures during load shedding periods.

The current study found that, by implementing proactive measures to improve guardianship and reduce crime opportunities, East London's local retail establishments can reduce the likelihood of theft during load shedding. Important steps include working with law enforcement to increase patrols during planned blackouts, improving staff training on crime prevention during outages, and providing backup power sources to keep surveillance equipment running. These results are consistent with Routine Activity Theory, which highlights that enhancing capable supervision reduces criminal opportunities through the use of mobile security units, increased staffing, and visible deterrents (Groff, 2021). Ram (2024) shows that obvious deterrents such as signs and security presence help reduce opportunistic theft during blackout periods, whereas Khumalo (2022) highlights that community participation and awareness programs encourage communal responsibility in preventing retail crime. Similarly, Gwaka (2025) underscores how socioeconomic inequality and infrastructure instability heighten vulnerability to crime, highlighting the need for emergency preparedness and government assistance. Together, these results demonstrate that stores can maintain resistance against shoplifting during load shedding by implementing a mix of technology, human, and community-based interventions.

Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between power cuts and crime through the lens of Routine Activity Theory, focusing on how load shedding alters everyday patterns and creates opportunities for offending. The findings indicate that power outages increase crowding in public and retail areas while also

disrupting guardianship mechanisms such as lighting and surveillance systems. These circumstances increase the likelihood of crimes such as opportunistic theft and shoplifting. However, the consequences are often transient and closely related to the frequency and timing of load-shedding plans. Additionally, participants noted that crime may change by location, with criminals focusing on the most vulnerable areas during outages.

The study contributes to criminological scholarship by providing South Africa-specific evidence on how infrastructural instability intersects with routine activities to shape crime opportunities. It highlights the role of systemic challenges, such as unreliable electricity supply and limited policing resources, in undermining crime-prevention efforts and eroding community trust. The research calls for urgent government investment in stabilising power infrastructure and strengthening SAPS operations in affected communities. Addressing these structural issues is critical, particularly in townships and urban centres where high unemployment and low education levels exacerbate vulnerability to crime during load shedding

Declarations

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