# Tesco's AI self-checkouts stir debate amid soaring UK shoplifting rates



Tesco's recent introduction of AI technology at select self-checkouts has sparked a wave of reactions from shoppers, many of whom draw humorous parallels to the controversial Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system in football. The new system employs overhead cameras designed to reduce incidents of shoplifting by identifying when items fail to scan correctly. When such an error occurs, customers receive a live replay on the self-checkout screen, accompanied by a prompt to retry the transaction. This initiative coincides with a troubling rise in shoplifting incidents across the UK, with recorded cases reaching a staggering 516,971 in the past year alone—a 20% increase from the previous year. Retailers report even more alarming figures, with the British Retail Consortium citing over 20.4 million thefts in the year leading up to September 2024, costing businesses an estimated £2 billion.

While some customers have taken to social media to share their light-hearted takes—one Instagram user quipped, “VAR Decision – Tuna Disallowed”—others have expressed concern that this technology signals a troubling shift towards increased surveillance. Critics argue that such measures could lead to a chilling effect, prompting some shoppers to swear off self-checkouts entirely. As one user remarked, “What’s next? Drones to follow… you about the store?” This reaction highlights a growing unease among consumers regarding privacy and the extent of monitoring in retail environments.

Tesco's move to implement AI technology at self-checkouts follows a broader trend in the retail sector, as other major supermarkets also grapple with skyrocketing theft rates. Sainsbury's recently rolled out similar technology aimed at enhancing the checkout experience while thwarting theft, underscoring the industry's collective response to what has been dubbed a retail crime epidemic. According to statistics from Ipsos, approximately 13% of adults admit to having intentionally underpaid for items at self-service checkouts, facilitating a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the "banana trick." Such admissions not only illuminate the prevalence of petty theft but also reflect the increasing reliance on self-service systems, with the number of machines in UK supermarkets growing by 50% in recent years.

Furthermore, Tesco is not merely addressing theft at self-checkouts. The company recently opened a multimillion-pound security hub in Daventry, designed to analyse extensive CCTV footage around the clock to bolster security. This facility is part of a comprehensive strategy to combat rising retail crime, which has cost the industry approximately £1.8 billion annually. This technological arms race includes not only enhanced system capabilities at self-checkouts but also equipping staff with body-worn cameras and protective screens to improve safety in stores.

Similar initiatives are being seen elsewhere. The Co-op, for instance, reported significant losses due to shoplifting, amounting to £70 million in 2023. In response, the retailer is deploying advanced AI technology at its self-checkouts to curtail theft and increase overall security. With incidents of shoplifting, along with associated violence and anti-social behaviour, reportedly averaging around 1,000 occurrences daily, the urgency for effective solutions has only intensified.

As Tesco and its competitors adapt to changing consumer behaviours and escalating theft rates, the question remains: how will shoppers respond to an increasingly monitored shopping experience? The balance between deterring theft and respecting privacy continues to spark debate, leaving both customers and retailers to navigate this evolving landscape carefully.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20q5q92y2yo), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20q5q92y2yo)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20q5q92y2yo), [[5]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/21/shoplifting-self-checkout-stealing-research/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.gbnews.com/news/tesco-trolley-scales-shoplifting-epidemic), [[4]](https://www.retail-systems.com/rs/Tesco_Launches_High_Tech_Security_Hub_To_Combat_Shoplifting.php), [[6]](https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2024/04/the-co-op-shoplifting-ai/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://internationalsupermarketnews.com/archives/19002)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20q5q92y2yo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20q5q92y2yo> - Tesco has introduced AI technology to some self-checkouts, leading customers to compare it to football's Video Assistant Referee (VAR). The system aims to reduce shoplifting by using overhead cameras to identify scanning errors, displaying a replay of the unscanned item. While some customers mock the tech, others express concerns, with some stating they would avoid self-checkouts in the future. This initiative follows a record high in UK shoplifting in 2024, with police-recorded offences rising 20% to 516,971, and retailer-reported thefts reaching 20.4 million, costing £2bn.
3. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/tesco-trolley-scales-shoplifting-epidemic> - In response to a surge in shoplifting, Tesco is trialling giant trolley scales at its Gateshead store. The scales weigh trolleys to verify purchases made using the 'Scan as you Shop' service, aiming to identify unscanned or double-scanned items. Shoppers have mixed reactions, with some likening the process to 'border control'. The initiative follows a 2022 global study revealing that 43% of scan-and-go baskets had at least one error, highlighting the need for enhanced security measures.
4. <https://www.retail-systems.com/rs/Tesco_Launches_High_Tech_Security_Hub_To_Combat_Shoplifting.php> - Tesco has unveiled a multimillion-pound security hub in Daventry, Northamptonshire, to tackle the growing issue of retail crime. The 24/7 facility analyses extensive CCTV footage to target shoplifters and protect staff from violence. This initiative is part of Tesco's broader security strategy, which includes equipping staff with body-worn cameras and installing protective screens. The move comes amid a 20% rise in shoplifting offences in England and Wales, with retailers losing £1.8 billion annually due to theft.
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/21/shoplifting-self-checkout-stealing-research/> - A major poll by Ipsos reveals that 13% of adults have admitted to selecting a cheaper item on a self-service till than the one they were actually purchasing, a practice known as the 'banana trick'. This equates to approximately six million people in the UK using self-checkouts to underpay. The survey also found that 8% had taken an item up to the value of £10 without paying, and 13% had stolen something worth up to £1. The rise in such thefts coincides with a 50% increase in self-checkout machines in UK supermarkets.
6. <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2024/04/the-co-op-shoplifting-ai/> - The Co-op reported a £70 million loss due to shoplifting in 2023 and is now implementing AI technology to combat theft at self-checkouts. The retailer experienced a 44% increase in incidents of shoplifting, abuse, violence, and anti-social behaviour, averaging 1,000 incidents daily. The AI system aims to detect and prevent theft, enhancing security measures in response to the escalating retail crime epidemic.
7. <https://internationalsupermarketnews.com/archives/19002> - Tesco has introduced AI-powered checkout systems in selected stores to enhance the shopping experience by reducing wait times, minimising errors, and improving security. The system uses machine learning, computer vision, and real-time analytics to instantly recognise products placed on the checkout area, eliminating the need for manual scanning. It also integrates with Tesco’s loyalty programme, offering personalised promotions and automatic discounts, and can detect unusual purchasing behaviour to enhance security and reduce theft.