



Pricing up & Hagglng Down: Value Negotiations in the UK Charity Shop

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ABSTRACT

This article uses a micro-ethnographic approach to investigate the shop-floor presence of 'professionalisation' in the UK charity shop sector. Previous literature on charity retail has described how business-like, professionalising practices have invaded their operations (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 75). However, these arguments focus upon top-down processes, without observing how these are played out by actors within the physical space of the charity shop itself. A key component of second-hand culture is the variable nature of value within it – and value is all the more unpredictable in a time of global flux. Using the examples of price negotiation and haggling behaviours on the charity shop floor, this study concludes that professionalisation of charity retail is tempered by customer/worker interaction and social imperatives. Thus, charity shops house a hybrid of professionalised and non-professionalised actions and behaviours that demonstrate the value systems and humanity of shop actors. These 'participant-driven experiences' of value negotiation enable those on the shop floor to challenge the 'iron cage'-like characteristics (Weber 1977) that have infiltrated the 21st century second-hand world: bureaucracy, rationality and impersonality.

KEYWORDS

Charity shop, shopping, bureaucracy, haggling, price, secondhand, value

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INTRODUCTION

"I think charity shops and charities in general have become more professional, more business-like. They've had to. To cope. To survive in this world."

- Interview with Steve, volunteer

This article explores how value is arbitrated in the UK charity shop, contextualised within a

time of economic hardship. We are living in unprecedented times, where global threats to existence such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and ongoing political and financial upheaval add considerable uncertainty to the norms of everyday life—including how, where and why we shop. Increasing concerns about the impact of fast-fashion upon the environment has prompted many shoppers to return to charity shops in order to access cheap clothing. A survey by the British Heart Foundation found that one in three people believe charity shops are even more important to society following Covid-19, and 71% of those surveyed thought charity shops were an important source of affordable items for those on low incomes (Shepherd 2020). The implication within this is that in times of broader societal hardship, charity shops provide a lifeline by enabling their customers to purchase necessary goods at relatively low prices.

Charity shops have previously been celebrated for their ability to survive and even prosper following periods of social upheaval and recession (Horne 2000; Parsons 2002). They tend to promulgate on deserted high streets, filling in gaps where chain stores once traded, offering affordably-priced clothing, furniture, books and other household items. It is this aspect of pricing, and how subjective values are debated and agreed, that is of interest in this paper. The tendency for charity shops to adopt stricter pricing mechanisms (and increasingly higher prices) is argued to be one of many characteristics of the posited 'professionalisation' of the charity shop sector (Maddrell 2000; Goodall 2000a; 2000b; Parsons 2002; Broadbridge and Parsons 2003a; 2003b; Ganesh and McAllum 2012; Hwang and Powell 2009; Liu and Ko 2013), alongside the adoption of rules, processes and strategies more commonly used in the private sector.

Whilst other authors have examined pricing structures in charity shops (Horne and Maddrell 2002; Chattoe 2006) and how prices are decided between paid staff and volunteers (Parsons 2004), very few have explored the process of negotiation of pricing *with customers* (haggling) despite this being noted as being a key characteristic of other second-hand shopping spaces such as the car boot, jumble or yard sale (Herrmann 2004) (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Gregson and Crewe 1997). Using data collected from a micro-ethnography on the shop floor of two UK charity shops in the North of England in a post-recession economic climate (2011), this article seeks to shed further light on the cultural significance of this unexplored aspect of 'everyday' shopping experience (Edwards and Gibson 2017) during unsettled times, by examining various instances of haggling that took place, and their significance in relation to established charity shop professionalisation processes. Four forms of negotiation that are initiated by both staff members and customers, oriented towards specific objectives, are identified, and their relationship with professionalisation of charity retail will be discussed:

- Neutral orientation: where value is disputed based on wear and tear, and has neither a profit, social or mission orientation
- Profit orientation: where items are 'added for free' to a purchase, or additional items offered at lower costs, to improve sales.
- Social orientation: where discounts are either offered or asked for, and the participants' circumstances and jurisdiction play a role in the final sale price.
- Mission orientation: where customers opt to pay more (or haggle prices *up*) due to the fact the proceeds go to charity.

The article will proceed as follows: a literature review of the charity retail sector and its professionalisation, as well as its relationship to pricing, will be followed by a brief methodology which explains micro-ethnography and provides contextual information about the research site shops. The four forms of negotiation will then be presented and discussed in relation to sociological literature and reflected upon in terms of their role in everyday life during unsettled times. The article will conclude by summarising how collaborative value negotiations between shoppers and staff are a means for both parties to circumnavigate the more alienating aspects of professionalisation that disrupt perceptions of what a charity shop should be according to societal norms.

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Incremental growth of the charity retail sector has been taking place since the 1990s (Parsons 2002). There are currently an estimated 11,200 charity shops operating in the UK (Charity Retail Association 2022) selling mostly second-hand items in order to raise money for their parent charity. Although the charity shop has never been the most lucrative fundraising arm for charities having an 'awareness-raising' rather than 'money-making' role (Horne and Broadbridge 1995, p. 18), they have long been an income stream for charities that has experienced significant growth, with income from donated items rising by 10.9% between 2005/6 and 2009/10 across the top 500 UK charities (Pharoah 2011). Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and UK lockdown, charity retailers generated an estimated £330 million a year, and employed 26,000 staff and 233,000 volunteers across Britain (Charity Retail Association 2020). In spite of the recent monopolising of the budget clothing sphere by retailers such as Primark, and their online counterparts like Boohoo, MissGuided and Shein, charity shops have managed to retain their share of the marketplace for low-cost fashion. They have also persisted in their popularity in spite of the rise of peer-to-peer online second-hand resale sites such as Depop, Poshmark, and ThredUp.

Part of this is due to their capacity to evolve to appeal in the marketplace, a process

described as 'trading up' by Suzanne Horne (2000). This involves having better quality, expensive shop fittings, improved range and quality of goods, better service and subsequently higher prices. Much of these developments can be attributed to a pervasive 'business paradigm' (Morris 2009) that has become integrated more generally in the operations of non-profit organisations to ensure their survival in an increasingly competitive and hostile third-sector environment.

Yet, the changes to charity retail, and charities in general, are "frequently exhorted to be more business-like without any clear framing of what this term means" (Dart 2004, p. 307). There has been a tendency for authors to use professionalisation as a "catchall phrase" to theorise about "unexamined changes" in charitable operations (Broadbridge and Parsons 2003, p. 729), without clarifying what the term means in this context, or problematising the concept. Often it refers to an increasing rationalisation and standardisation of organisational processes, and the tendency to 'adopt more methodical, bureaucratic procedures' (Hwang and Powell 2009, p. 268). Professionalisation processes put in place to garner higher profits serve to highlight the "inherently contradictory" (Goodall 2000a, p. 105) characterisation of charity shops within UK culture. They are seen, on the one hand, as providing an essential social service by offering low-cost goods to those with limited means (Williams 2002). But this can be oppositional to the aims of professionalisation—which are to enhance productivity through administrative procedures and routinisation (Mills 1956, p. 112) with the ultimate endgame of securing more profit. There is seemingly no place for welfare, social consciousness or care in this process. Professionalisation has been described as a "destructive influence" (Parsons 2002, p. 17) in charity shops, marginalising the culture that the charity shop had come to represent of responsiveness and care in the community (Parsons and Broadbridge 2007). Most importantly for this paper, professionalisation was also seen as discouraging sales by making the charity shop less 'user friendly' (Parsons and Broadbridge 2007, p. 562) and alienating to customers, volunteers and even paid staff.

If professionalisation can result in a negative effect upon sales, that would suggest that its deployment in the charity shop is somewhat irrational. Max Weber (1977) described how systems designed to increase efficiency, calculability and predictability to enhance productivity within a capitalist system (such as that of trading up, or professionalisation), often serve to limit potential and stymie productivity, as participants in the process feel dehumanised, trapped and helpless within it. This is Weber's 'iron cage' of bureaucracy, also described as the "irrationality of rationality" (Ritzer 2011, p. 26), whereby efforts to enact 'order' into disordered systems just serve to exacerbate further disorder.

A charity shop is the epitome of a disordered space, comprised of a jumble of heterogenous

items being sold by an equally heterogenous set of employees. In this setting, regulation of pricing, as a microcosmic element of wider professionalisation, is the 'rationalisation' process that will be examined for its 'irrationality' as shop participants navigate and co-create their own idiosyncratic systems of value.

Negotiating Value

According to Chattoe (2006, p. 154, 157), charity shops are traditionally like most second-hand vendors, in that they have "unique cost and price setting features"—and having flexible, negotiable prices is a key characteristic. Gregson and Crewe (1997, p. 246) follow Angela McRobbie's famous work on ragmarkets (1989) in arguing that second-hand sites lack the systems of "control, order and rationality", usually associated with first-hand shops. In particular, car boot, jumble and garage sales, antique fairs, auctions, flea markets and other 'informal' sites of second-hand sale—including charity shops—are commonly understood as locations where haggling over prices is an established part of any sale (Gregson and Crewe 1997 p. 249; Herrmann 2004). Such bartering over second hand items and their value has also become normalised in online consumer-to-consumer consumption spaces such as Gumtree, Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace and eBay. These sites, alongside other online re-selling platforms, highlight the role of the individual, their knowledge and their ability to 'story-tell' about an item in order to justify a price (Appelgren and Bohlin, 2015).

Charity shop prices are initially set at store level by a manager or volunteer (Gregson, Brooks and Crewe 2000; Chattoe 2006), who exercise a large degree of control over how an item is priced using their own knowledge and experience (Horne and Maddrell 2002, pp. 108, 113), or it can also be a collective, collaborative appraisal of the item from several workers. Yet, both charity shop workers *and* customers have tended to operate under the assumption that these prices are a starting point: they are unfixed and therefore could be haggled down—unlike most shops selling new goods (Chattoe 2006, p. 154). Horne and Maddrell (2002, p. 108) note that the more professionalised a shop is, the more likely it is that haggling will be (at least officially) prohibited. Instead, a process of 'price-lining' is often used—where each type of item sits within a small range of price points, dependent upon its condition (Berman and Evans in Horne and Maddrell 2002, p. 107). Any given item will have both a 'ceiling' and 'floor' price. A dress may have a 'ceiling' price of £9.99; when it is in very good condition, an expensive brand, or perhaps a contemporary or popular style. If the condition is bad, the dress is unbranded or an out-dated style, the price of the dress could go down to as little as £4.99—it's 'floor' price. If an item is deemed too low quality or damaged in some form, it may not even fall into these pricing categories, instead being relegated to the 'rag bin' or collected to be sent overseas before even reaching the shop floor. Elsdon et al. (2019, p. 107) describe this process of item valuation as "regimented and categorical" but with a certain

amount of flexibility due to the wear and tear inherent in second-handedness. This regulation of pricing is designed to pre-empt and circumnavigate attempts to haggle.

The experience of price lining in situ is therefore a useful starting point for the assessment of professionalisation in charity shops. Ostensibly, in a professionalised shop, no haggling will take place as the rationalised pricing structure does not permit it. However in less-professionalised shops, which will not be under as much pressure to adhere to rationalisation strategies, it could still be an acceptable practice. The way that shop workers and customers respond to this professionalised pricing system in shops at different stages of the 'professionalising process' can then be used to indicate the efficiency (or lack thereof) of imposing rationalisation on the 'messiness' of second-hand shopping sites. The 'haggles' that take place illustrate the struggle between the economic and the social domains that are particularly contentious in times of uncertainty. They serve as an example of how shop workers and customers seek to "regain power" in the face of creeping capitalist imperatives by participating in a subtle form of resistance (Penazola and Price in Cova and Rémy, 2007).

METHOD

This study looked at two UK charity shops, both in the Greater Manchester area, in order to undertake a comparative micro-ethnography (Wolcott 1990) of price negotiation behaviours. Micro-ethnography (or ethnographic microanalysis) is the study of moment-to-moment interactions within a very specific locale. It tends to be a deeper examination of a specific aspect of a larger ethnography, or a "slice of everyday life" (Stokrocki and White 1995, p. 52), a form of Russian-doll 'ethnography within an ethnography'. As ethnography usually seeks to be holistic in nature (Boyce 1994), it is pertinent to note that this study is part of a wider participant-ethnography of charity shop activity at sites where the researcher was a volunteer (Fitton 2013; Fitton 2022).

The two shops were selected as comparative examples based on a typology by Elizabeth Parsons (2004). Shop One was a Multiple Charity Retailer, one in a national chain of over 100 shops. Shop Two was a conglomerate of the two other types within Parsons' typology: a Hospice Charity Retailer *and* an Independent Charity Retailer, as it raised money for a local hospice, but the charity only had one shop and was single-issue in its focus. Shop One will henceforth be known as the Multiple Charity Retailer (MCR); Shop Two will be known as the Independent Hospice Retailer (IHR). Both shops raised money for a similar charitable cause: the wellbeing and care of children. The MCR was located in the city centre, on a busy high street with a lot of footfall, near important transport links. It would be defined as 'professionalised' according to Broadbridge and Parson's (2003, pp. 744-5) definition of

professionalised charity shops, in that it had more paid, trained staff than volunteers; senior managers with a background in commercial sales, and a head office that centralised control across the chain of shops, alongside a general 'trading up' in terms of merchandising, displays, regular stock circulation and general shop organisation (Horne 2000). The shop was painted bright white and was relatively well-organised, with items coordinated into clear 'sections' (womenswear, jewellery, toys, bric-a-brac etc.). Within women's clothing, the items were organised by colour, offering an attractive visual aesthetic to shoppers entering the space. The signage and branding of the charity was clear throughout, including on the price labels and stickered around the mirror in the changing room.

The IHR was located in a relatively deprived suburb of Manchester, with the majority of its customers and volunteers coming from the immediate local community. It would not be categorised as professionalised—the manager was the only paid staff member and there was no marketing, merchandising or sales strategy in place in the store. There was no sign above the door to indicate which charity (a local children's hospice) the shop was representing; instead, a makeshift sign adorned the inside of the show window display, the edges slightly curled and writing faded by sunlight. Christmas decorations stayed in the window display throughout the duration of the ethnography despite it taking place in spring and summer. The shop floor comprised of two rooms, both relatively untidy and disorganised, with items cluttering the floor and toys piled high on tables. There was no changing room, due to constraints on space and "concerns about theft".

With the researcher working as a volunteer in the two charity shops, 345 hours of participant observation took place over a period of 6 months. Participant observation enabled a more reliable ethnographic account of the day-to-day processes taking place in the shop, allowing 'intimate and reciprocal involvement with community members' (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, p. 10). In this case, these were the other shop workers and the customers. Observing and participating in their pricing negotiations enabled me to get specific insights into how prices are settled upon at the transactional level. Following the participant observation, follow-up semi structured interviews were also held with paid staff members and volunteers to clarify emergent themes within the field notes.

FINDINGS

As a starting point, both case study shops had a rule that the researcher was informed about when commencing her volunteer role: they do not permit price negotiation. In the IHR, this was a rule set up by the manager, Derreck, in response to getting continual requests for money off.

"It's the price as asked, and that's it."

- Interview with Steve, IHR

In the case of the MCR this advice had come top-down from the head office:

"We don't do discounts. You'll get people asking "Will you take 4 pounds for this?" but just say no."

- Maria, MCR Field Notes

In both shops, the rule was staunchly enforced in some instances, but not in others. This led to a variety of negotiations that flouted pricing structures; at times these centred around profits, mission or social imperatives, and at times were seemingly neutral. These negotiations are organised below into four different categories, depending upon their orientation—i.e. what is driving the negotiation. It is important to note that the exchanges were not always exclusively one category—in certain instances several orientations were present. These are explored below, and discussed subsequently in relation the literature in order to demonstrate their significance in unsettled times.

Neutrally Orientated Value Arbitration: Wear and Tear

The first category of price negotiation is through the identification of wear and tear, a fault or a missing part. This is a common practice initiated by customers across most second-hand spaces, and the charity shop is no different. A price-lined item's value is often challenged when a customer identifies a physical defect. Such defects were common in both charity shops, but due to the prices being set higher in the professionalised MCR, the prices were more commonly challenged on account of wear and tear there. Below are two separate examples of this negotiation being attempted:

A lady brings a Dorothy Perkins GIK [Gift-in-Kind, an item donated from a business that is effectively 'new'] top to the counter and says "I wanted to buy this, but it has a rip in it." She shows me the tear, which is quite large, down the left-hand side seam. She asks "I don't suppose they could do anything about this could they?" I have a look at the top but I am hesitant to ask if it'll be cheaper since they generally price items according to their faults. I tell the woman this and she agrees to buy it full price anyway. [...] when she agrees to pay full price for it, she makes excuses like "Oh I could easily sew it up anyway." and the girl with her says, "Yeah you won't even notice it. It's only the seam."

[A customer brings over an item and] says "Hi. I know it's only £5 anyway but I was

wondering, would they knock anything off the price...it's missing a row of sequins just here." She shows me a line along the top of the shoulder of a jumper she's holding. I take it off her and examine it, then explain that both shoulders are the same and that we don't generally discount items for faults anyway. She says, "Oh, I must have been wearing it lopsidedly then, it looked different on one shoulder."

- MCR Fieldnotes

Value arbitration over things like object faults appeal to the 'customer is always right' ideology conventional to profit-making shops (Nykamp, 2001), where anything that affects the condition of an item deems it viable for a discount. However, in charity shops, there is an unspoken understanding that goods may well be soiled, damaged, tired-looking, or even faulty, hence why charity shops are sometimes treated with trepidation by those accustomed to first-hand goods (Williams 2002). Securing a cheap deal may mean forfeiting the level of quality expected from an item; as Parsons (2000, p. 148) quotes from a charity shop customer in Bristol, "In a charity shop for the price it is, it doesn't matter if it's not really right". Also consider the negotiation process below, where a customer who is interested in buying a branded item by leisurewear company Bench:

[...] She notices a stain on the sleeve (the stain looks faded, therefore not the kind that is likely to wash out.) On a white jacket it is quite noticeable. She asks me if we can do it 'any cheaper' due to the stain. I tell her I'll ask Maria, and phone upstairs. Maria tells me "I know it's stained, but it's the brand. It's Bench, so it's still £9.99 even with the stain."

- MCR Fieldnotes

Deterioration and the subsequent need to invest time either to repair or rejuvenate items are commonplace with second-hand goods (Hetherington 2004; Gregson et al. 2009); as is a 'pre-purchasing evaluation' by customers as to whether it's possible to fix or 'cleanse' an item (Gregson et al. 2000, p. 115). The customers in the first two excerpts above accept this, thus they minimise the importance of the faults when a discount is declined. These three exchanges demonstrate the 'narrative sociality' of second-hand things (Appelgren and Bohlin 2015, pp. 151-4), and how they encourage shoppers and sellers alike to tell stories to themselves and others about an item's origins, where it has been, and how its value came to be inscribed. Ultimately, the challenge to the authority of the professionalised pricing rules fails as a direct result of the conflicting stories told by the customer and shop workers.

Similar occurrences took place in the second shop, the IHR:

A lady brings a toy up to the counter. It [...] looks like some kind of Tamagotchi. [...] The lady says to me "Does this come with any instructions?" I tell her "No, it came like that without anything else, it's second-hand" She then looks disgruntled and says "It's a bit much for something with no instructions!" The item is £1. I tell her "Sorry, I'm not allowed to reduce the price." She buys the item anyway but leaves complaining about the price."

- IHR Fieldnotes

Erving Goffman's (1959) writing on facework and of impression management helps us to understand the performative nature of these kinds of interactions—in particular the desire to obtain a bargain whilst wishing to appear to others to be a conscientious and not obnoxious or demanding. Haggling over wear, tear or lack often takes place tentatively, with customers employing what Goffman (1967, p. 307) describes as 'poise'—the "capacity to suppress and conceal any tendency to become shamefaced during encounters with others". Using Goffman's terminology, the customer makes a polite 'challenge' to the price of the item, often without explicitly asking for a discount. Consider the language of the customer above: *"it's a bit much"*. If the challenge is not accepted (as is the case with the response *"Sorry, I'm not allowed to reduce the price"*, pointing out that faults are already incorporated into the price, or that the item is branded and therefore still worth the money) then the customer can acquiesce and make an 'offering' to re-establish a normal exchange following the awkwardness of the experience of haggling. The offering can be seen above in the customers' responses of *"Oh, I must have been wearing it lopsidedly then, it looked different on one shoulder"* and *"Oh I could easily sew it up anyway"*. Whilst haggling in any setting requires the confidence to challenge prices, and the risk of embarrassment for appearing to be 'cheap', haggling in a shop that is fundraising for charity adds to the potential of becoming 'shamefaced', due to an implicit understanding that the shop's mission is of the utmost importance [Elsden et al. 2019, p12] above and beyond savings for an individual customer.

One IHR customer expressed this to the researcher, after observing a customer trying to haggle down a price:

"I think it's terrible when people haggle. You wouldn't haggle with someone if you were giving them a donation. Or if you were sponsoring them for a sponsored run! You wouldn't say... 'Minimum donation £5.... Hmm, will you take £2.50?' It's for charity, for God's sake!"

- IHR Fieldnotes

The battle between the discourse of charity and the discourse of profit making therefore lend another facet to the social performance of haggling in the charity shop. The 'symbolic power' charity holds (Dean 2020) serves to uphold pricing rules and haggling bans, and consequently supports the professionalising processes that go on in the shops. These micro-interactions highlight the way acts undertaken on behalf of charity are treated as 'beyond reproach' for the average person. Charity in these spaces is understood as charity for others, not for 'us'. The prioritising of giving to an anonymous other despite personal hardship is interesting when considered in times of economic and social upheaval, where the need for low-cost items is likely to be more pressing.

Other price negotiations in the shops stem from an understanding that encouraging regular custom and additional purchases are essential to a successful shop environment. One such negotiation is the profit-orientated and worker-initiated upsell.

Profit Orientated Value Arbitration: The Upsell

Upselling refers to offering add-ons or bundles, and is sometimes described as "cross-selling" (Aydin and Ziya 2008, p. 2), where customers are offered additional or complimentary products to an item a customer already wishes to purchase. It has been shown to work well with frequent customers to a retail establishment (Marcus 1998, pp. 499-500), bolstering income exponentially with very little effort.

Although most common in the service industry (Weisman 2012), professionalised charity shops use established market techniques such as these to increase the money that can be made from each individual sale. In the fieldnote below, MCR manager Maria offers five pounds off a bedding set in order to secure a sale for the charity of over £60:

A woman who has come over from Ireland buys the Miss Sixty wedges, an Accessorize handbag and a bedding set worth £49.99 after lots of umming and ahing. She is only concerned about paying more on her luggage allowance on her flight back. [...] Maria knocks 5 pounds off the price of the bedding set, [...] Later, Maria says "It was good that that lady bought that duvet set eh? She comes in here now and again, I think she must be loaded."

- MCR Fieldnotes

Her remark: "*she must be loaded*" suggests that Maria did not offer the discount out of kindness or sympathy: instead it was a strategic decision. Maria acknowledges elsewhere in the fieldnotes that the customer is somebody who frequents the shop occasionally. Her motivation to discount the bedding came from a desire to close a sale, rather than to offer

a discount to someone who needs it. This customer is known to be somebody susceptible to 'the upsell'.

The upsell works most successfully when a manager is keen to get rid of surplus stock. In the extract above, Maria states that it is '*good*' that they managed to sell the aforementioned duvet set, as its high price may have proved a deterrent and that they ideally needed to shift it. This is an illustration of how the primary objective for shop workers in the MCR was to earn money for *the shop*, as opposed to for *the charity* (Parsons and Broadbridge 2007, p. 559), because the shops compete between themselves as part of a chain. Another illustration is shown in the fieldnote below. Shop manager Maria is on leave and being covered by Alex, a manager from another store. The shop had been having stock issues that had been compounded by Maria's absence, and Alex and assistant manager Emily were struggling to keep the overflowing stock room upstairs under control. Bin bags of clothing reached to the ceiling and filled much of the floor space. Below, Alex had just discounted a bedding set from £12.98 to £9.98, removing a valance sheet that the customer didn't want from the set:

"As I'm ringing it into the till, he [Alex] explains to me that they are all just going to 'go' [be sent back to the centralised stock sorting office] at the end of the day anyway, so the valance needn't be packaged back up to put back on the shelf. When she overhears this, the customer says "Well if you're going to throw it out, I'll take it anyway." Alex agrees, so the lady gets the set for only £9.98 despite the original price being £3 more. [...] When I go upstairs to get my things to leave, Alex stops me [...] and he says "She's always coming in and asking for pillowcases to match this or a sheet to match that. But to be honest with you: she can take it all if she wants. I'm not bothered about giving her a discount since after today it'll be gone anyway."

- MCR Fieldnotes

Alex's view demonstrates that any money earned from giving this discount would be revenue towards the budget of that particular shop in that particular week, which the shop would otherwise miss out on when the stock 'goes' back to be re-circulated. The 'bigger picture' of fundraising for the charity therefore loses precedence to the need for that shop to get the most money out of its allocated stock before it must be moved on to another store.

Instrumental contravention of the rationalised pricing structure and the 'haggling ban' in this way has an individualistic motivation. Individualisation (Beck 2000a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) describes how, due to technological advancements, globalisation, and the decline in reliable social roles (such as 'jobs-for-life') the onus is now on the individual to be in control of their own destiny, and socially-orientated endeavours are increasingly

undermined by an emphasis upon “individual blame and responsibility” (Beck 2000a, p. 167). This encourages endogenous competitiveness between actors within an organisation that can be observed in these upsell negotiations. In addition to the benefit to the manager who may gain individual reward for their sales, the shop becomes a conduit of individualisation, subject to new constraints and controls that it must solve through individual action (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 2)—as the blame for underperformance is generally levelled individually. For example, Maria at the MCR recounts the pressure she is put under by her area manager to over-perform:

“She said to me ‘Maria, you need to do extra £1200 because my shops, some shops are not performing that good, and I want to be [the] number one area next year as well [...]’ £1200! [...] So basically I’m carrying her area’s weight... and deficits.”

- Interview with Maria, MCR manager

In a risky and ‘unsettled’ market, the MCR is presented with few other options in order to remain afloat, and the manager is compelled to behave this way to retain her position and please her manager. Prioritising fundraising for the individual shop rather than the charity can help build social relationships on the shop floor (Parsons and Broadbridge 2007, p. 559), but ultimately it perpetuates the uncomfortable contradiction of profit-seeking within non-profit organizations (Guo 2006, p. 124). Pressure for shops to succeed in an inhospitable economic environment has made individualisation to some degree unavoidable. Prosperity for the shop is only possible at the “deficit of solidarity” (Godelier 1999, p. 209). and a deprioritizing of the previously-mentioned role of charity shops as a site of community care.

When a customer initiates the negotiation with the intention of convincing the IHR shop manager into upselling them something, the results are not as successful, particularly in the below instance where a customer unfavourably compares the shop to discount clothing retailer Primark:

“I had a customer in the other day and I had a 50p box on here *gestures to counter * you know, full of items [of jewellery]. Nothing wrong with them. [...] she says “If I buy six items, I can have these for 20p each?” and I says “NO.” She says “Those are 50p each, I can go to Primark and get 6 items for £3.” I said “Well, go [to] Primark!””

- Interview with Derreck, IHR Shop Manager

The growth of low-cost first-hand retailers such as Primark has affected customer perceptions of value within the charity shop, in addition to lowering the number and quality of donations, as low-cost clothing items are often not as durable (Ruddick 2015).

Professionalisation, for fast fashion outlets, has a revised meaning. It means that stock turnover is increasingly rapid, items are sold for less rather than more, and the emphasis is upon demand, flexibility and agility in order to sell items in bulk (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2010, p. 762). Customer expectations have changed in response to the availability of these cheap fashion items, requiring an adaptability that charity shop's professionalised approaches struggle to keep up with. The upsell is one way the charity shop tackles this change.

Socially Orientated Value Arbitration: Seeking and Offering Reprieve

Another illustration of a situation where value is negotiated is when customers appeal to the kindness, sympathy or 'charitability' of the shop worker, seeking reprieve from paying the set price. This can be a customer or staff member-initiated negotiation. Customer initiated haggling has varying success:

[a customer] asks Maria for a discount at the till. Maria has already rung the items into the till and tells the woman that we don't do discounts. The woman tries to pester her to give her a discount, and Maria stands her ground. The woman then says that she only has £11 on her, at which point Maria gives in and accepts it, although she says "You're going to get me into trouble."

- MCR Fieldnotes

In this instance, the customer doesn't directly state that she can't afford the total for the items. Instead she rounds down the cost of the items to an amount she wants to pay, and Maria lets her off, albeit with the caveat that the parent organisation would likely disapprove. She permits the customer-initiated discount and flouts the rationalised pricing rules. Maria highlights how transgressive the act is with her comment about ending up '*in trouble*'; Klagge (1997, p. 66) describes how this fear of failing "to please the boss" is a common characteristic of the "iron cage of bureaucracy" metaphor—where professionalised rules stymie basic humanity and obstruct the "ethical behaviour" of individuals.

However, Maria is less 'ethical' or empathetic on another occasion when she is being pressed for a discount, as in the following extract:

"[a customer] is buying some books and other bric-a-brac. She asks Maria if she can have one of the hardback books (all of which are £2.99) for £2. Maria tells her no, and when she reads out the total on the till (£13.96), the customer hands her only £13. Maria tells her she needs another 96p. The customer laughs and says "Aren't you going to let me off?" Maria says, staunchly and quite loudly "*That's not the way business*

works, my love."

Then the lady tries to tell Maria she'll come back later and pay the extra change. Maria stands her ground, and eventually the lady pays and leaves. Afterwards [...] Maria says "I can't believe some people. I'd already told her she couldn't have the discount. *How are we supposed to make money with people haggling like that?*"

- MCR Fieldnotes, emphasis added

Here, Maria invokes the terminology of 'business' to defend her adherence to pricing rules. The meagre discount plus the subtle tactics employed to try and obtain it suggest that a customer is a seasoned haggler, thus unlikely to be a big spender in the shop if they return. Gregson and Crewe (1997, p. 249) describe how shoppers at car boot sales will often put on a performance in order to "read and/or outwit and outmanoeuvre" the person selling an item, and the process of surveying what is available, setting a price in their mind, clever use of timing and initially feigning disinterest (Gregson and Crewe 1997, p. 250) are all used to secure a bargain. This kind of negotiation and game-playing can be seen here, as a customer 'tests the water' to see if a discount is possible through attempting three different approaches—directly asking, neglecting to pay the full amount, and then requesting to pay it later. As a result of her performance, the customer is not viewed as viable for upselling. Economic principles take precedence over 'charitable' notions, as Maria directly points out that 'we' (the workers in the shop, and the shop itself) need to make money first and foremost.

In times of upheaval and societal uncertainty, as in the post-2008 economic downturn when this research took place, and again today, it's safe to assume that haggling behaviours increase, alongside a general propensity to engage in thrift (Nickel 2016). Equally, charities and their retail arms will feel the pinch, and will follow suit in terms of being stricter with their pricing rules. But what these haggling episodes involving Maria demonstrate is the unpredictability of haggling outcomes. In two remarkably similar encounters, the exchange ends differently. As recounted in the 'Upsell' section above, Maria was frequently put under pressure during meetings with her senior managers to earn more for the shop. Whether the haggles detailed above took place before or after such a meeting may impact on the success of the interaction. Of course, it is also possible that Maria's annoyance at being repeatedly defied in the second exchange played some role in her refusal to haggle. Thus, the presence of human interaction and the nuances of people's lives and jobs and emotions leads to unpredictability and ultimately, 'irrationality' in how prices are settled upon.

Discounts or offers of reprieve were also initiated by shop workers for those that they

perceive to be in need. This type of discount was not openly asked for, but offered with a degree of silent understanding that it is technically against the rules. This is often related to the dependence of charities upon their local community and the shop's responsiveness to local need (Parsons 2004, p. 34), as illustrated by the excerpt below from IHR volunteer Steve:

"Occasionally there are the regular customers who come in, and you know they are tight [short of money] and they've got three or four kids and... circumstances. So I go "Oh, alright, make it... so and so." Without making a big fuss about it."

- Interview with Steve, IHR Volunteer

Here professionalised pricing structures are flouted by the shop volunteer Steve due to his personal knowledge of (and empathy with) his local community. Steve also describes the way he allocates discounts as '*circumstantial*' and '*not something I'm doing every day for everybody*'. Steve enjoys the empathetic 'warm glow' feeling (Andreoni 1990) of aiding his community and improving the well-being of those in it; meanwhile the charity enjoys the profits from the sales, and crucially, the community gain access to cheaper products. This is part of the mission of the IHR shop itself, as the charity's chairman states:

"We haven't chosen the best position [for the shop] from a profits point of view. It's really not a money-making thing at all. We could've chosen somewhere more like Wilmslow or Macclesfield if we wanted profits, and recycle posh people's throw-offs. Instead, we have the shop in a depressed area. It's more of a social outreach for local people, which is what we are about."

- Interview with Henry, IHR Chairman

This seems a direct contradiction to the motivations behind the profit-orientated discounts given in the MCR. An awareness of the local economic context has spurred a top-down 'social outreach' agenda, which is referenced regularly at the IHR, both during shop floor fieldnotes, and during the interviews. The manager of the more professionalised MCR, on the other hand, struggles with the conflict between being charitable and adhering to the professionalising, profit-driven rules from head office:

"[...] sometimes I think, [...] instead of helping... we are pushing it, you know what I mean? With the prices? If somebody poor comes and says "Oh, could you let me have that for two quid or three quid?" We're not allowed to do that are we? So it's very tricky one [...]"

- Interview with Maria, MCR manager

Maria identifies a charity shop here as a site of 'helping', rather than somewhere that is solely concerned with making money. The phrase she uses "*We're not allowed...*" is reminiscent of the bureaucracy described by Ritzer (2011 p. 25) where all individuals within a system must make the "same, optimal choice" in favour of the rationalised processes they work within, in spite of their own better judgement or views.

In the IHR, the majority of workers are volunteers, and therefore not as formally restricted as they are by top-down regulations imposed by their management. Volunteers also have more flexibility to offer discounts due to having a more legitimate authoritative voice (Fox 1971, p. 35) the longer they have spent in the workplace offering their assistance for free. Volunteer Steve explains, in relation to offering pricing discounts to certain customers:

"[...] I've been here so long, and he [Derreck, the manager] gets enough out of me, so he's probably not going to challenge me on that!"

The authority to offer socially-orientated discounts therefore depends greatly upon the perceived role of the volunteer within the shop hierarchy. Steve was a long-serving volunteer and therefore felt he had earned a right to autonomy in price negotiations, alongside his intimate knowledge of the customer base.

Notably, although discounts were talked about as being offered to customers due to a perception of them being 'in need', they were not directly observed by the researcher during this study. If Steve did give them to customers, this was a covert and subtle activity—perhaps to avoid the attention of manager Derreck, or perhaps because they were relatively irregular. These discounts may also have been done 'on the quiet' to avoid drawing attention to the vulnerability of the customers who needed them.

Mission Orientated Value Arbitration: Hagglng Up

There was one price negotiation observed that seemed to be unique to the charity shop. Instances of haggling prices *up* as opposed to down were identified within the research. To negotiate to pay a higher price is uncommon under general circumstances: one does not go into Argos and insist on paying £20 for an £18 kettle. However, in the charity shop customers are investing not only in the purchase itself, but in the charitable mission, and their own altruistic 'warm glow', which can sway judgements on value. On occasion, this would also be initiated by customers encountering items being sold for less than their perceived value.

"A lady brings a hat from the stand over to the till, and we discuss whether or not we believe it is real fur. [...] She goes to pay for it, and I tell her it's £1 (as all items on the

stand are £1). [...] The lady says "It is real fur after all, I think you should take £3!"

- IHR Fieldnotes

In this interaction, the researcher/volunteer and the customer work collaboratively on determining the value of the item. Then the customer insists that the price being asked is inadequate. Interestingly, the value of the hat is gauged relatively (compared to the prices of other hats in the IHR, all of which are priced very cheaply) rather than through assessing an accurate price by, for example, checking online (Elsden et al. 2019, p.14). The final price is contextually-specific to the charity shop and potentially a valuable item that has "slipped through the net" (Elsden et al. 2019, p.14).

Other examples of customers paying over and above for their items in the two charity shops included numerous cases of unsolicited 'rounding up' of payments, or customers leaving their change for 'the tin' (a fundraising tin that sat by the tills of both shops). A regular customer in the IHR always told the researcher to 'add a pound' whenever he bought anything, and a customer in the MCR told the researcher to keep the change from a large note after buying a small item, because he had a gambling habit and would prefer the money went to charity. These small exchanges offer unique insights into the lives of customers, and their sense of wider social responsibility. They also indicate the moral authority the shop holds as an everyday space of charitable action. In terms of shop professionalisation, the presence of people 'haggling up' clearly demonstrates the fallibility of shop pricing procedures. This was particularly clear in the IHR where, as previously mentioned, there is an upper limit within the set pricing structures that restricts the scope for pricing valuable items. Customer pricing challenges therefore occurred not only when they perceived prices to be too high, but also when they find them absurdly low. This demonstrates how a social narrative remains embedded within the discourse of shopping in the charity shop setting.

Discussion

In the four types of negotiation described above, an agreement must be reached between the customer and the worker who is setting the prices, in order for a transaction to take place. As has been noted previously, charity shop stock lends itself to value disputes due to the second-hand nature of the stock sold (Gregson et al. 2000; Gregson and Crewe 2003). These goods may have flaws, be soiled, damaged, missing parts—they are as irregular in their physical nature as they are in supply. This heterogeneity does not lend itself easily to the regulatory framework of routinized pricing that characterises retail professionalisation. Then throw into the mix an equally discrepant customer base, with some shoppers wheedling out bargains through finding faults and impressive performances (Goffman 1959;

1967), some benefiting from the pro-social impulses of shop workers, and others haggling prices up for the sake of the charitable cause.

Value negotiations that demonstrate a social function, such as 'letting off' those who seek a reprieve from the cost of an item, reinforce the sense that charity shops are more inclusive spaces than other first-hand shopping spheres (Gregson et al. 2002; Chattoe 2006). But other forms of negotiation, such as upselling, are illustrative of the increasing pressure upon charity shops and their workers to compete individualistically within a market, in a manner that is strongly reminiscent of private-sector store operations. Parsons (2002, p. 11) has previously argued that the presence of trained, paid staff has made shops more savvy when setting prices, yet still pricing failures occur, allowing customers to 'profit from the ignorance' of charity shop staff (Horne and Maddrell 2002, p. 48). This is tempered by the act of haggling up, where a discourse of charitable responsibility overrides that of the excitement of discovering a bargain (Williams et al. 2001, p. 213).

What these different kinds of negotiations tell us are how shop workers and customers react to, and push back against, the restrictions professionalisation brings to the effervescent space of the charity shop floor. Efforts to make pricing more routine and predictable, such as price lining or banning haggling, can create a damaging fissure in the public perception of what a charity shop *is*: an open, inclusive, community orientated space that sells inexpensive goods. Disenchanted by the idea of the shop being otherwise, both workers *and* customers alike seek to subvert these measures through creative price negotiations. The presence of flexibility within the professionalised shop experience relieves not only worker frustrations with the top-down pressures and rules of their workplace, but also customer dissatisfaction when a charity shop seems to deviate from conventions they are expecting. Despite the one IHR customer in the findings who argued that people should not haggle in charity shops, and despite the attempts at regulation, the act of haggling was extremely commonplace. Such negotiations allow the "bubbles of humanness" (Cova and Rémy 2007, p. 52) to break through the otherwise alienating processes of professionalisation, resituating all the actors in the charity shop space as active and prone to idiosyncratic behaviour, which minimises the more dehumanising characteristics professionalisation works to encourage (Weber 1977).

Horne and Maddrell (2002, p. 119) described the breaking of 'professionalised' rules as a form of resistance demonstrated via "small acts of autonomy" by volunteers. I would develop this further and argue that professionalisation isn't necessarily resisted so much as it is absorbed, similar to a process described by Cova and Rémy (2007, p. 60) as 'intercommercialisation'. This is where non-commercial experiences interact simultaneously

with commercial experiences, “working around” the manipulation found within such processes in the for-profit sector and enabling them to co-exist harmoniously. These forms of intercommercialised exchanges are more authentic than those restricted by the ruthless pursuit of profit in the for-profit sphere, because they allow individual autonomy whilst still enabling shop operations that ultimately achieve profits: the presence of upselling alongside social- and mission-orientated negotiations illustrate intercommercialisation in situ. If the ‘commercialised’ experience of a charity shop were not absorbed or ‘worked around’ in this way, charity shops would risk becoming indistinguishable in their practices from cheap, first-hand outlets such as Primark, and likewise the plethora of negatives associations they hold in relation to low pay, poor quality, and exploitative working conditions (Buzzo and Abreu 2019).

Cova and Rémy (2007, p. 52) describe the interactions that form intercommercialised exchanges as “Consumer Driven Experiences”, which are essential in order to stave off alienation that results from the invasion of capitalism within spaces it is not expected. I suggest that a caveat to this—that the experience of negotiations described in this study signify “Participant Driven Experiences”, involving both shop workers *and* consumers in the “hybrid experiential context” (Cova and Rémy 2007, p. 54) of the charity shop. Price challenges or instances of haggling are often characterised by passion and drive (Cova and Rémy 2007, p. 60) but this derives not solely from the consumer’s interaction with commercial techniques, nor the worker’s disenchantment with them, but a nexus of the two, enabling—usually—a resolution in the form of a sale.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to reassess previous, now somewhat outdated, discussions of professionalisation in UK charity shops, using a micro-ethnographic account of how shop participants negotiate item values. Much has changed in the nearly 20 years since literature on charity retail first posited a “newly professionalised” sector (Broadbridge and Parsons 2003). The study has demonstrated that pricing of items in both shops is variable and responsive to input, in spite of ‘professionalised’ set pricing structures. It was clearly observable in the research how participants temper and moderate top-down rules for pricing and thus challenge the problematic presence of the ‘iron-cage’ of professionalised bureaucracy in the shop space, allowing both individualistic and pro-social motivations to prevail. The concepts of “intercommercialisation” and the “Participant Driven Experience” Cova and Rémy (2007, p. 52) are put forward as useful ways of understanding how shop workers and customers manage the situation of pricing in this particular setting.

Price negotiation and initiation of discounts, favours and haggling were common in *both* shops, in spite of the different levels of professionalisation they demonstrated. This indicates a need for future further research on the ever-evolving typology of charity shops, and further analysis of the increased competition between shops within a chain. This research has its own limitations: it is a case study analysis, which cannot be easily generalised. Nevertheless, it enables an insight into the minutiae of charity shop operations, and how the regulations, and their interpretations, play out in a contemporary shop setting.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Triona Fitton is a Senior Lecturer in the school of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent. She has a longstanding interest in charity shops (having worked in several), and in critical charity studies more generally. She is an ethnographer who also engages in historical and pedagogical research, particularly around issues of social justice.

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