TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS: A STUDY OF CHARITY SHOP WORKERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Maria Burke, Jasmine Peters, Malin Petterson

University of Winchester (UK)

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a set of collected views concerning an exploration of tension between the retailing of old or vintage items in today's new digital age. In particular to consider the 'Digital Transformation' of the artefacts by exploring views and opinions of workers. This study explored the social perspectives regarding tensions and contradictions between the function of the charity shop whose primary purpose is to "recycle" pre-loved, pre-owned, memory laden products, often labelled as "vintage" within a 21st century setting where new digital technologies are accepted as part of our everyday life. This regional study of "Digital Transformation" took place in (pre-COVID) South East England, in the cities of Chichester, Salisbury and Winchester. These cities were chosen as each has a strong cultural identity, such as historical monuments, cathedrals, museums and a range of National Heritage sites, which make these cities popular and attractive to tourists. As a result, these high streets have become prime retail spaces for shops and cafes, - and ideal locations for charity shops, which provided the setting for the research. The research methodology needed to allow for cultural differences between the shops whilst still taking into account the similarity of their organisational purpose. In order to allow for, and yet explore this tension, an interpretivist approach was employed using semi-structured interviews to collect the empirical data. The contribution of the work is in terms of providing a previously unseen "body of opinion" that may act as a marker for future generations exploring the life and digital transformation of charity shop workers in the digital age. The work will also be useful for museums and heritage institutions who deal with vintage artefacts.

Keywords: charity shop workers; digital transformation; second-hand goods; cathedral cities; digital age; digital environment; digitalisation

INTRODUCTION

As a brief prologue prior to the main introduction to this paper, it is important to point out that the study was completed with students, during 2016-2018 and the literature in the paper reflects that. Whilst I could have looked over the paper and updated the work, as a 'snapshot in time' I decided to leave the paper as its original state. The reasons for this is that, the paper is now almost an important 'historical' document and any artificial changes made at this particular time, during the 2020 COVID pandemic, would perhaps take away from the flavour of the original work. Thank you for allowing us this liberty.

According to the Charity Retail Association, (2015a) the purpose of a charity shop is to generate money for their charity; as well as aiming to raise awareness of associated work. Charity shops in the UK raise over £290 million every year for a wide variety of causes. These causes include supporting homeless people, ill and underprivileged children, physically and mentally disabled people, the environment, overseas aid and funding medical (Charity Retail Association, 2015a). Donations account for 85% of the goods sold in charity shops, with some charity buying in some goods (ibid). The second-hand culture of charity shops has led to the many different descriptions and perspectives of goods such as "vintage, antique and gently used", which are often used interchangeably (Gregson and Crewe, 2003).

There are approximately 10,500 charity shops in the UK, 8,500 of these in England alone (Charity Retail Association, 2015a). Charity shops sell a plethora of goods that arise from a variety of situations and circumstances. For example, people who have cleared the houses of family members who have died or entered specialised accommodation often donate goods to charity shops with the hopes that they will be valued by new owners (Lovatt, 2014). Charity shops reduce waste, with 340,000 tonnes of clothing sold through charity shops every year. While the Charity Retail Association claim 90% of clothes donated to charity shops are displayed in the store, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (Wrap) estimate that over 70% of the clothes donated to charity shops are actually sent overseas for profit (Rodgers, 2015). Clothes which are deemed unsuitable for sale in shops or are unsold are then sent to countries with demand for secondhand clothing, such as Ghana, Congo and Zambia. Second-hand goods stores including charity shops have been doing well in recent years, growing by 1.5% annually since the year 2012 which was a time of economic difficulty for many (Doherty, 2016).

The UK in the 21st century is one of the largest economies in Europe, and is strong in terms of education and health (UK Country Profile, 2016). Despite this, more and more households find themselves in debt due to ever increasing house prices, and income inequality which continues to rise, with the average income of the wealthiest 10% being 10.5 times more than the income of the poorest 10% (ibid). Even though the UK is one of the strongest economies, it is also one of the top countries for inequality (ibid). According to CAF (2015) in terms of donating money to charity; the UK ranks fourth out of 145 countries in the World Giving Index. Additionally, the UK ranked 28th for full time volunteering; a significant change from donating money, but still fairly high in the rankings (ibid). Overall, the UK is a relatively generous country when it comes to charity. Between 2010 and 2014, customer spending in charity shops increased from £350 million to £529 million - almost a £2 million increase (Statista, 2017a). Charity shop spending increased dramatically between 2012 and 2013 in particular, from £378 million to £510 million, and spending continues to increase (ibid). Chalal (2013) writing for *Marketing Week* notes the increase in popularity of second-hand goods between October 2012 and 2013; 35% of women and 25% of men reported buying more second-hand goods than new goods in 2013 than the previous year.

Charity shops have often been criticised in the media as expensive, and pushing themselves out of reach of poorer people. Those against the price increases argue that there are people who truly need the low prices of charity shops because mainstream retailers are also too expensive – over 50% of people on low incomes shop in charity shops (ibid; Downes, 2014). On the other hand, many who support the prices - including charity shops themselves maintain that the prices they charge are reasonable, arguing a number of justifications for high prices on some items (Downes, 2014). Reasons include charging higher prices for designer label items; higher prices in affluent areas where donations are of better quality; and the argument that the purpose of a charity shop is not to provide affluent shoppers with bargains (Downes, 2014). Charity shops receive some tax concessions due to all of the profits funding charitable causes - including 80% mandatory non- domestic rate relief (funded by the Government), and 0% VAT on sales yet they also pay rent and bills the same as other businesses (Charity Retail Association, 2015b). Charity shops can also claim Gift Aids on goods sold in the shop; Gift Aid is money from the Government to the charity, on top of the price of the good being sold (HM Revenue & Customs, 2016). Gift Aid can be claimed on donations made by UK taxpayers who make a Gift Aid declarations when donating goods, therefore maximising the profit made from a sale (ibid).

In today's digital age, where the Internet is available to almost everyone, this can be seen as empowering customers with the right to choose (Kucuk, 2016). Furthermore, Hagberg *et al.* (2016) suggest one of the largest effects of digitalisation is the use of mobile devices with Internet connections affecting consumer behaviour. In particular, many consumers might

choose to shop online, at their own convenience, rather than shopping in brick-and-mortar stores where they must abide by the stores opening times and be limited in variety (ibid). Therefore, it is curious why customers might choose to shop in charity shops, when arguably the digital age gives them access to everything.

Digitalisation refers to the rate of diffusion, or adoption of digital technology (Billon et al., 2010). While this varies depending on types of technologies, the United Kingdom is one of the most highly digitalised countries. The Global Information Technology Report (2016) showed that the UK is one of the top 10 countries for harnessing information technology; the use of social networks; and most technologically advanced governments. These indications, which are based on the Networked Readiness Index (NRI which measures ICT readiness, affordability, usage and impact (of technology) on society. Reportedly, the NRI suggests how prepared a country is to 'reap the benefits of emerging technologies and to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the digital revolution and beyond' (World Economic Forum, 2016).

A number of terms can be used to describe the types of people who use digital technology in different ways. These include digital natives, digital immigrants and digital refugees (Stockon, cited in Herther, 2009). While it has been suggested by Stockon (ibid) these categories are not age exclusive. Ransdell (2011) investigating 'digital nativism' shows that the "baby boomers" are more likely to be digital immigrants and "millennials" are more likely to be digital natives. Ransdell (2011) also suggests that the digital immigrant status does not necessarily put people at a disadvantage digitally; digital immigrants tend to be good at learning socially, while digital natives are better at self-learning.

For the purpose of this paper, the modern 21st century setting will be referred to interchangeably as the 'digital age' or the 'digital environment'.

The aim of this paper, then, is to is to present a set of collected views concerning the tensions between the retailing of old or vintage items in today's new digital age. The research explores the social perspectives regarding tensions and contradictions between the function of the charity shop whose primary purpose is to "recycle" pre-loved, pre-owned, memory laden products, often labelled as "vintage" within a 21st century setting where new technologies are accepted as part of our everyday life.

In order to fulfil this aim, the paper is organised in the following ways. First the literature is reviewed then the research methodology discussed with the subheadings research design, research data collection, research data analysis and verification; this is followed by evaluation, implications and limitations, the conclusion and suggestions for further work.

LITERATURE

There is considerable literature regarding charity stores sector in terms of consumption and in terms of broad literature relating to digitisation. Attempts are made to highlights the main sources of literature from both these areas. In addition, literature concerning information about the UK was sought - including the political and economic state, digitalisation and technology, and generosity levels. Information about media perceptions of charity shops was deemed relevant as interviews by journalists were conducted, thus these articles are also included in this review.

The issues regarding the "challenge of contradictory tensions" have been studied from a variety of perspectives, such as Bull, (2008) who looked at the practical perspectives of social enterprises; Cornforth, (2014) who studied the problems around the movement of the enterprise from the established mission (mission drift) and Doherty, Haugh & Lyon (2014) whose work explored the issues around structure and changing formations of organisational

hierarchies. The contribution of the work adds to the literature base in detailing a snapshot, a photo in time, of the tensions and contradictions of life for workers in charity shops during the digital age. This will add to the already established work on perspectives of social enterprises.

An IBIS World report (Doherty, 2016) was used to generate general background information regarding the second-hand good stores industry in the UK. This was very much a starting point in the literature search, as it only provided generic information but provided enough general information to establish the statistics and figures of second-hand good stores with particular regards to the UK. IBIS World is widely used to understand various UK industries. Whilst it does not focus on charity shops, it does mention them, providing just enough information to understand how charity shops are positioned in this industry.

Prior to seeking out the sample for this research, two journal articles, by Flores (2013) and Broadbridge and Horne (1994), were used to understand charity shop workers in depth. In particular, they explored who volunteers for charity shops and their reasons for volunteering. Though this is a separate area of research and not directly relevant to the topic, the literature was useful in terms of patterns concerning who works and volunteers in a charity shop environment and to put into context the gain an overview of the overall picture of charity retailing. It was also helpful in creating a profile of charity shop workers prior to start of the research.

Herther's (2009) research collated information regarding brain research and digital immigrants and digital natives. This work investigated the differences between digital immigrants and natives; revealing that the categories are not exclusive to any particular generation, as previously believed. This research suggested that digital natives and digital immigrants alike may have adopted technology as adults or developed skills during childhood years. The newer category of digital refugee was also identified i.e. Individuals who unwillingly use technology. However, whilst Herther's study was particularly useful to widen knowledge, it relied heavily on secondary research to draw conclusions.

Research by Ransdell *et al.* (2011) investigated a number of factors in four age groups: millennials, generation X, younger baby boomers and older baby boomers. The factors tested included digital nativism and online activity. This research was useful in understanding some of the behavioural and psychological differences, which are not necessarily generational, between digital immigrants and digital natives.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out over eighteen months during 2016-2018. As the research was primarily concerned with people and behaviour in a social setting, the most appropriate research approach was considered to be interpretivist and qualitative. The survey was chosen as the research instrument and semi-structured interviews were employed as the method of data collection.

Decisions regarding the location of the study were made in terms of region; then choices regarding specific cities and finally choices of charity stores in each location. The criteria for these decisions was based first on the researchers' location (South East England, UK); then the idea that Cathedral cities would have busy high streets and attract a high number of tourists and thus be ideal places for trading; and finally choices were made of a wide variety of different charity stores across the cities so that as far as possible the project included a wide selection of types charity stores.

Taking the criteria into account, the final decisions were the cities of Winchester, Chichester and Salisbury; each of which were within reasonable travelling distance, have a Cathedral and

a wide selection of charity stores on their high streets. In terms of participants, managers at all high street charity shops in all three cities were contacted, with the intention of gaining permission from at least three in each city. Permission was ultimately gained from two stores from each city. Informed consent was collected from all respondents, with the agreement that their stores would remain anonymous. In order to preserve anonymity, stores will be referred to as 'Salisbury Store A', 'Salisbury Store B', 'Winchester Store A', 'Winchester Store B', 'Chichester Store A' and 'Chichester store B'. Both the stores and the respondents were chosen to be anonymous by the researchers to protect the identity of the workers and the shops. Anonymity was considered to be appropriate and necessary so that any findings of the research would not affect the future of the workers or the shops in any way.

With regards to the charity shop workers who took part; there were eight overall respondents, one respondent each from six of the stores (Salisbury and Winchester), and two respondents from two stores (Chichester). 75% of respondents were store managers, the remainder consisted of volunteers. All respondents were female; this was purely coincidence. At the time of the data collection (2016- 2018) researchers observed there were very few males working at the stores. Volunteers in the UK then consisted generally of more females than males; as in 2015/16, 25.3% of adult volunteers were female, compared to 23.4% of males (Statista, 2017b). This pattern of the percentage of male volunteers being lower than female volunteers has been consistent for the last decade at least (ibid). 25% of the respondents were in the age group 45-54, 50% were 55-64 and 25% were over 65. It was noted that this was a very specific age range and that the views may not therefore be indicative of charity shops workers overall in the UK. However, it could be argued that digital natives, immigrants etc. has no specific age limit, suggesting natives and immigrants can be of all ages; but rather the categorisation depends on an individual's adoption of technology (Stockon, cited in Herther, 2009).

This suggests it is possible some of the respondents could be considered digital natives. However, (at the time of the study) this sample was in fact representative of typical charity shop workers in terms of gender. Flores (2013), undertook research which involved volunteers from a range of different UK based charity shops who classified themselves as working or middle class. Broadbridge and Horne (1994) writes that working in a charity shop is an activity with an overwhelming number of females in the age groups 55-64 and 65-74, with only one-quarter of the workforce under the age of 55.

RESULTS

A generic analysis process was used to analyse the qualitative data. The structure of the interview questions was used to create the initial categories for coding, for example, 'opinions on importance of technology in today's society'. Corresponding discourses from responses were placed in categories. This allowed responses to be compared with one another; category descriptions were reviewed and re-coded regularly based on emerging themes. One unexpected theme was the use of eBay. Either the shops used eBay themselves to find information regarding the pricing of items, to sell items or in many cases only the HQ/ Head Office used eBay on a regular basis. Respondent profiles were attached to their discourses to identify how the responses differ between participants. Discourses, which were similar or differing, were highlighted to visually present the pattern.

A particular pattern of interest, highlighted below in the table below, emerged from the key question, under the category description 'views on contradictions of selling second-hand/vintage goods in a digital environment'. Whilst most discourses were similar and agreed with the basic premise that the selling of second-hand goods and the digital environment work well together, one respondent did consider that the two issues do not contradict each other but are two different things that exist separately. Despite saying this, the respondent reported that

eBay was used to sell items which are of too high a value to sell in the shop.

Five respondents reported the use of eBay within their work. 80% use eBay to value items - they might be working with unique goods all day but there was a comment made that "they cannot be expected to know the value of everything". 60% reported Head Office or 'a certain department' using eBay to sell items on behalf of the charity. Two respondents expressed negative attitudes towards eBay; one respondent considered it unsafe and stated, 'all the power is at the buyer'; the other respondent said they tried to sell on eBay in the shop but it 'became difficult to manage'. As most of the respondents find eBay a useful tool which helped them value items, this reinforced their comments of the digital environment supporting the selling of second-hand goods.

Additionally, 50% of respondents admitted that they check their personal digital technologies (smartphones, iPads, computers) every hour, 12.5% say they check several times a day. However, despite agreeing the extent of digitalisation being high, 37.5% only check once a day, which arguably is a contradiction. However, there were respondents who did consider that technology acceptance was sometimes an issue. For example, one participant noted that whilst she had a friends who are very "present" on social media, she personally "felt uncomfortable" as it was viewed as "an invasion of privacy". Several respondents reported seeing more young people in the stores (from the descriptions of respondents, it is estimated that the respondent's perception of young people were as millennials). As millennials are generally digital natives; the fact that the workers noticed an increase in younger people reinforces the idea that there is little contradiction. between selling second-hand goods in digital environment. Indeed, more and more digital technology is used as a natural setting for pre-owned goods.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to present a set of collected views concerning tensions between the retailing of old or vintage items in today's new digital environment. Results show that charity shop workers consider that there is no tension between selling second-hand/vintage goods and the digital environment. Respondents agreed that society is highly digitalisation, and generally did consider that the digital environment facilitated the selling of second-hand goods (via the use of online marketplaces). Although the voluntary use and recognition of the advantages of digital technology defined the respondents as digital natives most of the respondents identified themselves as digital immigrants.

To conclude I should like to make certain points. This was a student project but carried out quite successfully. If it was redone today, it is likely that there would be very different results. This is for two reasons. First this project was centred on only one single criteria – the use of technology – and there are many other variables which need to be taken account of, and impact on, a true picture of 'life in charity stores'. Second, the project was completed prior to the COVID Pandemic and many changes to donations, staffing and to 'digital transformations' have taken place recently. The time is therefore ripe for Phase 2 of this project to report on these changes.

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