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Counting the pennies: the cultural economy of charity shopping¹

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ABSTRACT:

The Understanding Everyday Participation - Articulating Cultural Values (UEP) project is grounded in the belief that the current system for the support of culture promotes and privileges certain practices and activities, tastes, relationships and competences and that, crucially, this system has effects which extend outside of the cultural domain to the economic, political and social spheres. In order to challenge this dominance, UEP sets out to explore the meanings and values people attach to their 'everyday participation', with the aim of re-evaluating current understandings of cultural participation and cultural value (Miles and Gibson 2016). This article discusses UEP ethnographic research conducted within a charity shop in Manchester/ Salford. The charity shop is found to be a site fundamentally involved in the 'cultural economy', defined broadly to refer to the relations between the cultural and economic values of particular practices and institutions involved in cultural production and consumption. Existing research and theories on consumption have understood the charity shop as a place of cultural consumption, for certain subcultures that make informed or 'clever' choices regarding their identities (McRobbie 1989, Gregson and Crewe 2003). This article argues for an understanding of the charity shop as more than simply a place of consumption but as enmeshed within a set of relations between culture, economy and place which has effects in the social sphere. This research identifies a number of forms of participation, including consumption, but also extending to various production practices, volunteering and other forms of social interaction, which take place within and through the charity shop. We argue that these different types of participation are bound up in a differentially positioning cultural system which categorises people, places and values within and beyond the sphere of the charity shop.

KEYWORDS:

Charity shop, cultural consumption, cultural practice, cultural value, cultural economy, everyday participation

INTRODUCTION: SECOND HAND CULTURE IN THE UK

The *Understanding Everyday Participation - Articulating Cultural Values* (UEP) project sets out to explore the meanings and values people attach to their ‘everyday participation’, in order to re-evaluate current understandings of cultural participation and cultural value (Miles and Gibson 2016). The term ‘everyday participation’ purposively encompasses a broad range of activities, so as to allow for the types of activities and values people attach to them to emerge inductively from the empirical research. This inductive approach also enables a wider understanding of economically relevant participation than is generally referred to in creative industry or cultural economy debates. In such debates, ‘the term cultural economy is indicative of a particular subsection of economic activity that is concerned with cultural products and activities (such as music, film, and fine art) as opposed to say transportation or mining’ (Pratt 2009, p. 407). Or, as Maycroft has argued, discussions of the cultural or creative economy overly focus on the ‘consumption of the products, services and experiences that the creative industries supply’ (2004, p. 62). Instead, this article aligns itself with critiques of creative industry discourse by arguing that ‘effective cultural policy-making needs to be premised on ... the actual conditions of local cultural production and consumption’ (Gibson and O’Regan, 2002, p. 8, see also O’Regan, Gibson, Jeffcutt, 2004).

The first section of this article introduces the charity shop as a place which supports a number of forms of participation. It provides examples from UEP ethnographic research, conducted in a charity shop, to discuss the ways in which customers engage in a variety of processes as ‘active consumers’ (Pratt 2004, p. 122); for instance, using it as a library or to support crafting activities. The second part of this article will discuss charity shopping more widely as a cultural activity that is ‘concerned with the generation and communication of symbolic meaning’ (Throsby 2001, p. 4). In this way the charity shop is understood as a site for enabling multiple different types of identity and attendant social relations; including, for example, ‘retro style’ seeking youths participating in a particular fashion

‘scene’ premised on a ‘clever consumption’ (McRobbie, 1989, p. 24; Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 11). Evidence suggests that charity shopping is complex and steeped in a range of identity, spatial and cultural participatory politics. We argue that these different types of participation are bound up in a differentially positioning cultural system, which categorises people, places and values within and beyond the sphere of the charity shop.

SECTION ONE: A VIEW FROM THE CHARITY SHOP: THE CASE OF CHEETHAM HILL

In the UK today, there are around ‘9,000 charity shops, selling second hand goods’, ranging from books to clothes, furniture to games (United Kingdom Trade and Investment 2013). Whilst providing an affordable alternative channel to buying new, their primary purpose is to perform an important economic role for the parent charity. The perception people once had of charity shops was ‘that they are unorganized, dark, smelly, and dirty’ (Bardhi 2003, cited in Montgomery and Mitchell 2014, p. 4) but this has changed in recent years. As Croft (2003) suggests, charity shops have undergone a major reformation, which has included ‘the payment of management and staff, better locations (e.g. high streets in the UK), standardized merchandising displays (e.g. mannequins), higher quality store fixtures, and professional promotional strategies’ (Montgomery and Mitchell 2014, p. 4). According to Petrecca (2008, cited in Montgomery and Mitchell 2014, p. 4) a poll carried out by Harris Interactive and Ebay ‘found that 70% of adults said buying used merchandise is more socially acceptable than five or ten years ago’.

Charity Street II, a report published by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF, 2016), found that more than ‘61 per cent of respondents have purchased something from a charity shop in the previous 12 months, with 84 per cent having done so at some point in the past’ (CAF, 2016, p. 15). Perhaps more surprisingly, this research found that charity shopping is more popular amongst people living in affluent areas of the UK (CAF, 2016). This finding calls for further research into charity shopping practices amongst different socio-economic groups and in locations of differing affluence. Using

examples from the ethnographic research in Manchester the following section (section 1.2) discusses the ways in which charity shops support a variety of cultural practices within areas with low levels of affluence.

1.1 METHOD

One of the ethnographic case studies for the UEP research in Manchester was based within a charity shop on Cheetham Hill Road, in an area to the north of the city. Hammersley and Atkinson (2006, p. 1) inform us that,

ethnography usually involves the researcher participating overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts - in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.

Unlike other ways of 'finding out' about culture and the social world, the complex history of ethnography makes it less definable as a standard methodology and more open to researcher and participant interpretation and application in particular circumstances and contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson 2006). It is the malleability of ethnography that makes it a useful method/ology for the UEP project. Ethnography has allowed us to explore some of the concepts and questions underpinning the UEP project in ways which are grounded within the nature of particular cultural ecosystems.

Cheetham Hill is within an area that is 'ranked amongst the 10% and 20% most deprived in England, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2015' (Hall, King and Finlay 2015, p. 4). It is also known as one of the UK's most multicultural areas with a great range of religions practiced and over forty languages spoken there (Dean, Dunn and Egerton 2010).² Cheetham Hill has been the subject

² See: <http://www.cles.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Cheetham-Hill-Community-Resilience-UF-logo.pdf>

of previous ethnographic research concerned with profiling urban multilingualism in Manchester. This research found that ‘responses to language diversity reflect a new emerging civic identity’ of Manchester (Matros and Robertson 2015, p. 1). Here, and in other nearby case study locations, Matros and Robertson found that language provisions were ‘local’ and aimed ‘primarily at ensuring equal access to public services rather than to safeguard or promote cultural heritage or even to cultivate language skills as a workforce resource that is vital to economic growth’ (2015, p. 1). Thus, language services were focused on addressing perceived immediate need rather than the more complex needs of belonging and identity through facilitating cultural participation. By contrast, our research into the cultural economies of consumption and participation in Cheetham Hill was able to uncover first-hand how participation in this marginalized area is shaped by space, place and locality. The use of ethnography helped us to identify both public and non-public sites and practices of cultural participation (see also Gilmore, 2017 for a discussion of other aspects of the UEP ethnographic work undertaken in Cheetham Hill); and it was the embedded perspective on the cultural ecology of Cheetham Hill which this method afforded that allowed us to identify the importance of the charity shop as a key facilitator of participation in the area.

Edwards spent a number of weeks scoping the Cheetham Hill area, walking around the parks and streets in the area and attending a variety of group activities both formal and informal. This work led her to identify a particular charity shop as of central importance to the cultural ecosystem of Cheetham Hill (from here on we will refer to this shop by the pseudonym- CH Charity). Edwards conducted a sustained ethnographic observation in CH Charity, as a regular shop volunteer during the months of September to November in 2013. During this time she was witness to a range of participation activities and participants in the shop as well as being a participator herself. Charity shop participants consisted of paid workers, volunteers, customers and donors, with each of these roles shifting and merging continuously. Edwards volunteered with people who were participating in order to learn new

social and interpersonal skills (such as practising the English language) and those whose participation was a stepping-stone to getting a job in a ‘real’ shop. She was able to see first-hand the spectrum of participation in such spaces. Her observations suggest that people shopping in CH Charity do so primarily because of their straitened economic circumstances. However, these economic challenges did not prevent the customers of CH Charity from creating a dynamic and individualistic shopping experience.

1.2 THE CHARITY SHOP AND READING

One of the first observations made was that the shop was used as a library by a number of regular customers:

This regular customer returned whilst I was serving a customer at the till. This time she had brought a book (some romance novel mills and boon type book), wanting to exchange it for another one. ‘Can I give you this and choose another one?’ She asked. The acting manager at first seemed reluctant, but simultaneously was used to this request and allowed her to donate this book and choose another. ‘She will bring it back next week, wanting another one’ the manager told me. (Field notes, October 2013)

This particular customer visited the store on a daily basis. From regular interactions and anecdotes shared with Edwards, she made it clear that she was battling a severe mental health illness. The charity shop was a place where this customer was welcomed and where she could engage in the exchange of items and feel a sense of agency over her participation. Similar observations of the library-like use of charity shops have been made in other studies. Parsons (2000, p. 147) observed in a Bristol charity shop that ‘some regular customers use the shops almost as a library, buying books and donating them back after reading them’. In CH Charity, the customers who engaged in this form of exchange did not wish to make a monetary contribution to the charity by purchasing an item and subsequently donating it back. This system of exchange is built upon social ties and trust, rather than financial gain.

By providing alternative systems of exchange, this charity shop is enabling an exchange based economy as distinct to ‘the political economy of monetary transactions’ (Cheal 1988, cited in Giesler 2006, p. 284). This ability to access free reading materials, is of great significance for people who live in an area where there is no local library.³ The charity shop is enabling this cultural activity and by doing so is nurturing cultural participation outside of the formal library lending system and the economy of the commercial bookshop. Thus, in this example, the charity shop plays a role as an alternative support for cultural participation which exists outside the structures of state cultural support and of the commercial cultural economy.

1.3 THE CHARITY SHOP AND CRAFTING

Another common motivation for shopping in CH Charity was to support crafting activities. The ‘renaissance of the handmade’ has been widely discussed as part of the contemporary cultural economy (Luckmann 2015; Jakob and Thomas 2015). Such discussions have encouraged a shift away from focusing solely on the economic value of the ‘micro-enterprise’ of crafting, to recognising the pleasure and everyday enjoyment some people get from it and the social relations within which crafting activity sits. For many people, crafting is self-taught or an inherited interest and skill and is practiced at home. Crafting can also be an important component of an individual’s sense of identity (Luckmann 2015) and craft interests are vital to the desirability of particular shop wares (Jakob and Thomas 2015). As the following account, taken from Edwards’ field notes, illustrates, charity shops and the items they sell can provide alternative ways to enable crafting activity for people who cannot afford to visit niche or specialist craft shops often located within the city centre:

A lady and her young daughter came in during the afternoon looking for some fur they could use for the daughters fox costume. She was a fox in the school play. [...] the mum explained

³ The closest library is located across the local authority boundary in Salford or at the local high school, a tram ride away.

that they had made the fox suit, the ears and everything, but were looking for something for the tail. [...] We talked about costume making and she explained the thrill and enjoyment they had in making the costume together, rather than buying it ready-made. ‘Where’s the fun in that!?’ she exclaimed, but also such costumes are ‘very expensive’. She understands that many parents do buy costumes, because they don’t have the skills or time to make them, but also the cost factor, they can afford them. But she prefers to make them herself and hopes to pass this enjoyment onto her daughter. (Field notes, November 2013)

This customer’s ‘desire to do something well, for its own sake’ (Sennett 2008, p. 9) echoes Sennett’s (2008) proposition that crafting involves an innate pleasure in making and doing things well. This example also reveals that crafting is part of this customer’s identity as a mother. But simultaneously, and most significantly for our discussion, this example supports Luckmann’s (2015) argument that the craft economy is not solely for the middle-classes; CH Charity offers the opportunity for this customer to craft despite her lack of economic capital. Similarly CH Charity enables participation in crafting by those who are not mobile. A woman from the Orthodox Jewish Community, came into CH Charity looking for a broach that she could sew onto a new purple top. She felt the top was plain and wanted to embellish it. She informed Edwards that she had been to all the shops on the road, looking for something in the ‘right purple’. In one of the bric-a-brac bins she found a purple flower badge. She held it against the purple top, which she had brought in her shopping bag. It was a good match. She bought it, explaining that she would break off the catch and sew it to one of the corners of her top. A few days earlier, Edwards had been a guest at a community centre for the Orthodox Jewish Community, where she was told by one of the workers that many of their female service users are unable to travel outside of the immediate neighbourhood because of family reasons and time. Again, this example reveals the ways in which the charity shop is at the heart of a complex ecosystem of localised social dynamics and individual pleasures.

Edwards served many female customers in CH Charity who were looking for an item that they could turn into a costume or a garment they could alter, or simply a ball of wool for a knitting project. Many of these customers browsed in all the charity shops on Cheetham Hill Road, searching for the right item. What this research suggests is that the charity shop consumer is not a homogenous category, but made up of individuals who attach a range of values and meanings to their charity shopping practices and who negotiate their way through economic hardship to participate in a range of cultural practices. CH Charity's role in the cultural ecosystem of Cheetham Hill was to provide a place of support for cultural activity. The CH Charity customer, constrained by place and economics, can be expressive and meaningful in their consumption, and therefore their participation cannot be understood simply in terms of need based consumption.

SECTION TWO: SECOND HAND CULTURE: 'CLEVER' CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

The previous section of this article discussed the ways in which charity shops can support a variety of cultural practices. This section considers cultural consumption and the ways in which purchasing items from a charity shop is enmeshed in systems of cultural and economic value manifest through the dividing and combining work practiced through identity construction.

As Zukin and Maguire have argued, our individual identities have shifted from a 'fixed set of characteristics determined by birth and ascription to a reflexive, ongoing, individual project shaped by appearance and performance' (Zukin and Maguire 2004, p. 180). In other words identity is no longer considered as fixed and unitary, but fluid and multiple (Douglas and Isherwood 1996). The gap left by the disintegration of traditional identity structures, some have argued, has been filled by consumption and consumption practices (Beck 1992).

In their research on mass consumption and personal identity, Lunt and Livingstone (1992, p. 91) found that the use of second hand markets revealed ‘alternative conceptions of clean/dirty, old/new, spending/preserving, indicating an alternative ethic not always dictated by poverty, or, indeed, not always endorsed by those who used the second-hand market for economic reasons’. Moreover, McRobbie’s (1989) thesis of understanding second hand style through subcultural theory was seminal in positioning consumption, and particularly participation in second hand consumption, as a cultural activity. In this work McRobbie provided a vivid account of alternative retail as an inspirational, expressive and entrepreneurial set of activities. At the same time she argued that there was a link between consumption, class and identity formation. Williams has found that a wide variety of consumers participate in and use charity shops to experiment in ‘symbolic and metaphoric territories that (re)produce meanings and constitute identities’ about themselves (2003, p. 135). Thus, goods consumed in a charity shop are used to establish social status (Zukin and Maguire 2004) and are valuable in an economy where material culture and sign value is used to construct or reshape the self (Featherstone 1991). In this respect, in addition to McRobbie’s ‘cleverly consuming’ ‘retro youths’, there are a number of different games of social status being played out through the charity shop.

Online research into charity shops led us to a plethora of blogs that advise people on ‘how to’ shop/participate in the charity shop economy. On *The Guardian* website⁴ there was a blog which focused on designer clothing and accessories donated by David and Victoria Beckham to their local British Red Cross charity shop in London. According to *The Guardian* customers ‘queued up outside the tiny Old Church Street shop for a chance to buy their idols’ castoffs, and there was a frenzy inside for this one-time-only opportunity to buy into the celebrity wardrobe’ (Cochrane 2013). For the fashion industry, charity shops have become important intermediaries in the cultural economy, selling

⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/nov/22/beckhams-castoffs-red-cross-typhoon-haiyan>

second hand designer clothing and accessories to a wider customer base. In this role charity shops act as in-between spaces providing elite material culture, to a more diverse consumer market.

According to Williams, those ‘better off’ charity shop customers use charity shops for ‘fun, sociality, distinction display, the spectacular, the bargain and being seen to be buying the “right” things’ (2003, p. 237). For some ‘subcultural’ fashion consumers (for instance, the ‘hipster’ and the ‘indie’), charity shopping is a lifestyle choice rather than a necessity. Resisting participation in the mainstream cultural economy of fashion, in order to ‘embrace their own individuality while rejecting the cookie-cutter consumer culture that overwhelms society today’ (Nordby 2013 p. 52), ‘hipsters’ and other similar communities have created surrogate economies in spaces like charity shops.

2.1 THE CHARITY SHOP: CULTURAL CONSUMPTION AND THE STRATIFICATION OF PLACE

The various economies in which charity shops have become enmeshed are simultaneously stratifying through cultural, economic *and* geographical dimensions and effects. We have discussed how different types of charity shop consumption supports the assertion of cultural, economic and social status we turn now to considering the ways in which charity shops are also enmeshed in stratification through geography.

During our research, we came across another blog in *The Guardian*⁵ which identified the best charity shops in England to find ‘high quality’ clothing; defined by the writer as designer clothing. The shops referred to in this online blog are located in areas of considerable affluence, such as Manchester’s Northern Quarter, and Chelsea in London. In Manchester, for instance, charity shops have been opened in the city’s cultural quarter⁶ as part of the area’s cultural ‘regeneration’. These shops are

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2013/nov/21/the-best-charity-shops-for-finding-celebrity-castoffs>

⁶ Shops include: Oxfam, Oxfam Originals, the RSPCA and the British Heart Foundation.

utilized, alongside galleries, coffee shops and other accoutrements of the ‘cool’ urban cultural economy, as part of the gentrification of areas defined as ‘cultural’. Charity shops in other areas, not designated as cultural quarters, are subject to different classifications of value, affecting everything from their presentation, to the stock they have to trade. During the ethnographic research Edwards witnessed this ‘ranking’ of the stock donated to CH Charity, as revealed in the following field note report of a conversation she had with the manager about the sorting practices for donations to the Cheetham Hill charity shop:

Having a chat with [manager] today she told me about which items were considered, from above [head office] as being ‘too good’ for Cheetham Hill. ‘Anything from M&S, Monsoon, places like that, we’re told is too good for Cheetham Hill and so it’s taken to a better store’, she told me. (Field Notes, October 2013)

Thus, there is in operation a hierarchy of value in which goods are distributed to different charity shops on the basis of assumptions about the cultural taste of the customers who shop there. It might be expected, and indeed welcomed, that the market provides what it believes its customers want to buy. However, what is made clear in the manager’s description of the movement of goods to a ‘better store’ is that this distribution is tied up with a negative valuation - in which some stores, and the cultural tastes they represent and the cultural consumers they attract - are thought as ‘better’ than others (Miles and Sullivan 2012). Thus, this same shop manager also told Edwards about another incident in which the Area Manager on a store visit noticed a crystal ornament on the bric-a-brac shelf and decided that it should not be for sale in the Cheetham Hill store because it was of a ‘high quality’, and could be aesthetically appreciated, and therefore sold at a higher price elsewhere in Manchester. During her first week volunteering at the shop, Edwards noticed that a Burberry trench coat had been donated. However, rather than being added to the stock of CH Charity it was sent for a price check, to be relocated elsewhere. These examples suggest that the consumption based

activities which can take place in a charity shop are circumscribed and unequally distributed across geographies and amongst socio-demographic classes. In addition, it suggests that identity formation and performance are being predefined for different communities in different areas, thereby feeding ‘continuing class divisions rather than the breakdown of structure’ (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992 p. 171).

CONCLUSION:

This article set out to understand the ways in which the different types of participation which take place within and through the charity shop are bound up in a differentially positioning cultural system which categorises people, places and values within and beyond the sphere of the shop. Drawing on ethnographic research we discussed some of the ways in which charity shops operate as alternative cultural economies. We argued that charity shopping is in and of itself a cultural activity that is valued for the various ways in which it facilitates the production of different kinds of activity and identity. Ethnographic method was seminal in making visible these processes of identity making. The observation of practices in situ also allowed us to identify and observe more closely and in depth how participation can be determined by location. Everyday participant observation allowed us to identify and observe systems of economy that would otherwise be taken for granted or go unnoticed, as they have done thus far in both academic and policy work. Existing research and literature that focuses on participation in second hand cultures has focused on second hand consumption as cultural consumption for subcultural groups who are ‘knowing’ in relation to their shopping practices. These consumers are understood to be making cultured decisions. This focus and discourse only helps to maintain the existing privileges and inequalities already inherent in the systems that determine the consumption of culture including, as we have seen, second hand shopping culture.

Charity shop consumption should no longer simply be read as consumption driven by poverty. Rather it is enmeshed in a variety of value based relations between culture and economy, which are played out through the (various) processes of identity performance and construction for which charity shops are used. Finally, we argue that understanding everyday participation, including activities such as charity shopping, offers cultural policy broader perspectives in terms of accounting for people's choices around their cultural participation, particularly within diverse and marginalised community settings. It is through taking account of the everyday practices of cultural participation in unexplored territories, landscapes and places that we will enable a broader and more inclusive understanding of culture and economy.

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