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Understanding the ‘Gift’ in the Post-Economic Downturn Charity Shop

Triona Fitton

Introduction

The modern British charity shop has served many purposes. For some, it has been a place of work or a volunteering opportunity. For others, a recycling hub for offloading unwanted goods, a community nexus for sharing chit-chat, or a low-cost shopping site. The shops have also provided a lucrative fundraising revenue stream for charitable organizations and a means of promoting the charity’s brand on the high street. Charity shops have been a core element of everyday social life for many people – not only those who clean, organize and sell items, but also for those who use the shops out of necessity or in the search for sartorial individuality. These shops have existed in multiple incarnations, from temporary vendors set up within churches or community buildings, to nationwide chains of multiple stores, causing Suzanne Horne to describe them as retail in an ‘untraditional distributive form’.¹

While research has explored the forms charity shops take around the world, as discussed in the opening chapter, the unique and colourful identity of the British high street charity shop, with its unique and colourful identity as a high street staple, is perhaps the most widely researched of all.² Selling goods for a charitable purpose in a relatively formal shop setting is a staple of the British high street, most often found in city centres and their backstreets rather than in suburbs, and distinct from the large airport-hangar-style warehouses favoured by comparative charitable retail ventures in countries like the United States in terms of their size and positionality. British charity shops are often small (rarely larger than two rooms) and closely in tune

with their surrounding community in terms of stocked goods, charitable purpose and volunteer cohort. As a result, they offer a compelling insight into how local communities navigate broader social changes, and how the shops themselves are required to evolve and respond to such change.³

The evolution of the British charity shop has been considered by Gosling in [Chapter 8](#) and the limits of its international adoption addressed by Field in [Chapter 9](#). This chapter adds to our historical understanding of British charity shops by focusing on a recent period of societal upheaval. I examine the use of terminology of the 'gift' within the context of the post-economic downturn charity shop. Using ethnographic research findings from a British charity shop, I explore how the idea of the charitable gift was subverted, primarily by the power and influence of the state and private businesses, through two national initiatives within charity shops that were primarily executed and negotiated at the local shop-floor level. Global economic crises can be most interesting when examined in terms of the minutiae of their impacts: the mundane interactions and exchanges that take place day in, day out. Under wider influences, these interactions can take on new meanings, and even the language used to define them can become problematic.

The ethnographic research undertaken consisted of six months of participant observation and interviews with shop workers in a British charity shop that raised funds for a national children's charity. This took place in 2010, as these two initiatives – Retail Gift Aid and Retail Gift in Kind – were playing out in what was at the time the charity's highest earning shop. The shop was in Manchester's bustling city centre, near a railway station that serves as an important cross-country transport hub. When the research took place, the site was representative of the 'demise of the high street'.⁴ Customary high street chain shops closed down and left vacant spaces that became occupied by pawn brokers, cash-for-gold shops, betting shops – as well as charity shops. This change was identified across the United Kingdom, particularly in places with high levels of deprivation, after the economic crash of 2008. Subsequent socioeconomic change at the macro level spurred a process of gentrification in Manchester city centre and 'the production of urban space for progressively more affluent users'.⁵ The charity shop that was studied has long since been swallowed up by chain coffee shops and commuter eateries, along with the greasy spoon café and betting shops that formerly surrounded it. This change can be seen in its infancy in the findings of this research, in the intrinsic co-dependency of public, private and charitable services.

The example of these local changes and specific developments in the practice of charity retailing can therefore be viewed in a wider frame through the impact the fluctuating global economy has had on the functions, identity and processes of the traditional British charity shop. In this way, the chapter uses micro-level analysis (ethnography) to understand meso (the shop and

its parent charity) and macro (global economic context) changes to charity retail in the 21st century.

Charity shop economics, circa 1990–2010

Researchers first identified the influence of global economic trends upon the British charity shop in the 1990s, when an extended period of affluence that began in the 1980s served to boost the supply of surplus used items available to charity shops.⁶ Over the course of a decade, the number of charity shops in the United Kingdom almost doubled from circa 3,200 in 1990 to 6,220 in 2002.⁷

Academic interest in charity retail mirrored this increase. Some of the earliest work specifically on charity retail was undertaken by Suzanne Horne and Adelina Broadbridge, who began exploring a classification of charity shops for a working paper in 1993. At this point, there had not been a great deal of research into charity shops, and much of their data was informed by statistics gathered from retail sector surveys and information from newspaper articles. Many other theorists refer to Horne and Broadbridge's early work as indicative of the period of growth and evolution charity shops experienced, reflecting their responsiveness to national and global socioeconomic change.⁸

Charity shop economics were scrutinized in the fields of retail management and non-profit organization theory, representing the development of charity from being seen as outmoded, to something modern, adaptive and potentially profitable that responded to changes in the economic climate. By becoming dynamic and responsive in a way that mimicked for-profit retailers, charity shops experienced increased competition; between themselves, and increasingly with budget retailers such as Primark and Poundstretcher. As a result, charity shops had to work harder to raise funds, sometimes by dropping prices, or by aesthetic investments such as shop-floor revamps.⁹

The global economic recession in the late 2000s resulted in a period of generalized upheaval, risk and rapid change. There was a sense of increased trepidation and cynicism about many areas of social life. The full force of the economic downturn was felt both on the traditional British high street, and in the public perception of charities and their role within society. Their practices were scrutinized heavily in subsequent years.¹⁰ Negative public attitudes towards charities grew, fuelled by reports of sky-high charity executive pay packets, soaring operational costs, the involvement of many charities in widely criticized government workfare schemes, the prevalence of aggressive street fundraising, and a general lack of transparency in how charitable funds were being spent. Public concerns about the British charity sector were exacerbated by austerity

measures brought in by the then newly elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government: in particular their political ideology of a Big Society which emphasized the importance of individual voluntary action to address social issues.

Despite the controversies, this was a momentous time for charity retail in Britain, as other high street outlets went bust and space emerged for a reimagined form of second-hand retail. Globally, the trajectory for the retail environment was not promising: job losses, a rising cost of living and an increase in personal debt converged to affect consumer spending, alongside the continued growth of online shopping impacting upon physical retail stores' profits. Formerly well-performing shops struggled, and popular British retail chains such as Woolworths and British Home Stores failed to survive the period. However, shops that were able to adapt to the crisis ended up benefiting from the economic downturn.¹¹ Charity shops had been previously lauded for emerging unscathed from periods of recession in the 1980s, and many of them moved into the vacant high street spaces provided by the closure of chain stores during this time.¹² Post-2008, retail markets were depressed because the average British citizen was 'trading down, staying home, eating in, and "making do"',¹³ and charity shops were thriving. Pamela Nickel paraphrased *The Economist* in stating that while austerity was in, so also was thrift, as shoppers gravitated towards second-hand chic as a style choice as well as a necessity.¹⁴

The resilience of the charity shop sector in this period can be partly attributed to the savvy way in which they adapted to serve local communities and help out suffering businesses. Cross-sectoral partnerships between charity and the for-profit sector began to emerge, partially to alleviate the burden of unsold stock as high street stores struggled to shift goods. Carrigan and de Pelsmacker described a partnership between Oxfam and Marks & Spencer (M&S) where clothing donors to Oxfam stores received a £5 M&S voucher, providing their donation contained clothing with M&S labels. The scheme increased donations to Oxfam at a time when charity shops were struggling for donations, as frugal former donors sought to make extra money from unwanted items via car boot sales or eBay. It resulted in £1.7 million in extra sales for the charity.¹⁵

Cross-sectoral partnerships at the meso-level were one way charity retail adapted and evolved to the post-recession economic landscape. However, partnerships were not only built between businesses and charities. The state has also played a significant role in charity retail success, even prior to the global economic crash. Charity shops received a statutory 80 per cent rate relief, which could be upped to 100 per cent at the discretion of local councils.¹⁶ They also were not required to pay Value Added Tax (VAT) on goods sold. Charity shops in Britain, much like the wider charity sector, operated co-dependently with government.

The rest of this chapter will look in detail at two schemes that illustrate these cross-sectoral partnerships in the charity shop, and the bearing they had upon the shop's identity at a point when the impacts of the global financial crisis were acutely felt.

Retail Gift Aid

Gift Aid – a UK government scheme that tops up donations to charity – has been around since the 1990 Finance Act, and initially it applied to cash donations only. By completing a Gift Aid declaration, a charity could claim back the basic rate of tax paid: 25p for every £1 donated.¹⁷ Gift Aid was worth over £1 billion to UK charities in 2009/2010.¹⁸ Following an amendment to the Finance Act in 2006, charity shops were also able to claim Gift Aid by selling second-hand goods as an agent on behalf of the individual. The donor completes a form agreeing to donate the proceeds from the sale, plus the additional Gift Aid amount earned from it, in a process known legally as Retail Gift Aid (henceforth Gift Aid).¹⁹

Gift Aid was generally embedded within other processes that indicated the increased professionalization of charity retail. For instance, the circulation of stock between stores was only possible for charity shops that had gone through a phase of professionalizing and expanded into a chain. The shop in this study was part of a chain of charity shops for a large national children's charity, and therefore regularly circulated unsold stock. It also had the infrastructure to offer Gift Aid as it had organized and formalized the transactional process of selling goods and the donation and sorting process too. Items were tagged with different labels to enable both prices and subsequent Gift Aid donations to be tracked.

In the shop processes observed in this ethnography, this process began at the point of the donation, when the donor was asked if they would like to Gift Aid their donation. If they agreed, they were given a form to complete with their details, which confirmed that the shop could act as an agent in the sale of their donations. It also confirmed that the donor was a UK earner and taxpayer, as this additional amount would be claimed as a taxable deduction. This form was then attached to the bag of donations; a small card was detached from the top and given to the donor. This allowed them to Gift Aid donations again and again without repeatedly providing their details, thus simplifying future Gift Aid transactions. The card, the form and donated items were then tagged with the same unique identifying number, meaning sales and Gift Aid earned could be traced back to the individual, and the total amount raised including Gift Aid could be calculated. For the donor, the card both resembled and to some extent operated as a loyalty card, encouraging them to donate items again, mimicking for-profit retailers. For the charity, the card represented

an additional bonus donation that came from the state, and thus the British taxpayer.

In the store, small green Gift Aid stickers adhered to the price tags were the only signifiers of this additional gift of donation top-ups by the state. The stickers remained on items that were circulated from other shops through stock rotation, when all other labels were replaced and items frequently re-priced according to the average unit price for that particular shop. Therefore the Gift Aid system superseded localized shop pricing systems, which tended to be more responsive to the needs of their customer base.

Gift Aid was not only a network that bridged state tax relief and the donor, it also related to an increased profit orientation in charities at the meso-level, and the professional ambitions of those running the shop. Consider this comment by the shop manager Maria, a paid employee, on the researcher's first day of volunteering in the shop: "We need to ask people who donate if they will Gift Aid their items when they give them to us. This is important, it can make me an extra £15–£20 grand per year if they do!" (Fieldnotes, 1 February 2010). Note the personal pronoun 'me' when Maria mentioned how much money the system can make. Gift Aid served as a tool to enhance the shop's earnings, but also the manager's own success in reaching her sales targets – again mimicking the for-profit sector. The terminology of the gift has been mobilized in relation to the pursuit of capital for the benefit of the individual, which is privileged over the charitable cause, its beneficiaries, or the needs of the local community. This is an identified tension of any gift relationship due to the intersection of market forces and personal relations.²⁰ In this instance, it shows the adaptive and subversive nature of how gift language is applied within the charity retail space.

The donors who completed the forms were also subject to this individualizing process. Their personal information was submitted into a database and the charity informed the donor how much money they had earned for the children's charity by sending letters headed 'Thank you for helping us to help them'.²¹ An imaginary link was constructed between the donor and the beneficiary group, encouraging donors to feel they are participating in wider communal social action alongside the charity.

Although framed by the charity as a letter of thanks to donors, the letter was actually a legal requirement. The small print stated that the donor had the choice to donate the money and Gift Aid percentage or claim it back from the charity.²² It also performed a secondary role as a marketing technique. The letter served to remind the donor of their gift and its impact, with an aim of inciting them to donate goods more regularly using their Gift Aid card. These letters of thanks often included instructions on easier ways to donate, including ways to arrange doorstep donation pick-ups from the donor's home.

Often, the donation figures stated on these letters were inaccurate. Despite efforts to streamline the process, the system of collecting Gift Aid in store was fallible and open to manipulation. The fieldnotes of this ethnography note instances of the same Gift Aid stickers being recorded into the system more than once, and of fallen stickers being picked up off the floor and stuck onto random items. Since it was the number on the sticker, and not the item itself, that was tracked on the system, subversions of the Gift Aid process were common:

I bring some donations in to the shop ... [Maria] asks me "Do you have your Gift Aid card?" [I do not have one as I am not working and therefore not a taxpayer].

Maria says "It's OK. I have to get the form for these [she gestures to a bag of books on the side that another customer has just donated with Gift Aid] so I will just put those stickers on yours too". (Fieldnotes, 12 March 2010)

The act of using an unknown donor's Gift Aid status to earn additional profits improperly raised the question of the charity shop's moral responsibility in relation to the data they held about their donors. Misappropriation of this data was commonplace. The blithe way in which an anonymous donor's taxable status was exploited to claim additional Gift Aid on items donated by non-taxpayers meant that, like most bureaucratic systems, the Gift Aid process was open to contravention, and was manipulated through the contrived sense of communal identity that the charity fostered. This manipulation happened at the micro-level, in exchanges between local actors (such as shop volunteers and paid staff) who were responding in a relatively normative way to bureaucracy, and to broader endogenous and exogenous pressures upon the charity retail sector.

The Gift Aid process also removed one of the key appeals of charity shop donation: the distancing of an item from the individual when it is given away.²³ Historically, charity shop donations preserved the anonymity of the donor; once an item was donated, it could no longer be traced back to you.²⁴ However, Gift Aid donors were registered on a system where every penny earned on every item they donated was recorded and monitored. As the earlier excerpt illustrates, once the form was completed the donor had no knowledge of or control over what their Gift Aid tax relief was being used for. The assumption that charity was synonymous with accountability and acting in the public interest was taken for granted.²⁵ This was in spite of the profit-maximizing incentives that gained prominence as charity shops became gradually more professionalized and responded to the 2008 financial crisis.²⁶ Charity shops carry with them the symbolic power of charity as something that is regarded as unquestionably good, and acting in the interests of the

general community.²⁷ The improper use of personal data and manipulation of tax systems to make money do not sit comfortably with this perception.

While Gift Aid capitalized on state support and databases of donors to maximize profits, the second case study of the 'Gift' in the post-downturn charity shop describes another profit-maximizing strategy that collected goods from the private sector and created a database of business donors: Retail Gift in Kind.

Retail Gifts in Kind

A Gift in Kind is any non-monetary donation that benefits an institution or an individual. Academics have discussed some examples of these donations, such as book collections donated to academic libraries, and donations of art heirlooms, antiques and furniture to universities.²⁸ Charity shop donations as a form of Gift in Kind have not been academically explored. In this study, Retail Gifts in Kind (henceforth Gift-in-Kind) referred to large donations of new stock from for-profit companies. In the United States, these kinds of non-monetary donations have been described as 'product philanthropy'.²⁹

Gift-in-Kind deviated from the traditional heterogeneous stock of charity shops, in that they were often mass donations of similar items. This meant stock could be more rationally organized, distributed, monitored and sold. These large donations had significant impacts upon the stock make-up of the shop. Customers could select from different sizes and colours of the same item. Items were usually brand new, often with labels from the for-profit retailer still attached, occasionally from expensive brands. There were frequently more than one of the same item, reducing the opportunity for sourcing unique items (a hallmark of charity shops).³⁰ This homogeneity of stock resulted in a homogeneity of prices, and items were often labelled at a lower price to that on the original price tag. Gift-in-Kind items were clearly labelled in blue, distinguishing them from individual donations from the general public, which were labelled in purple. They were also recorded under a separate category on the itemized till.

Like Gift Aid, the Gift-in-Kind process was a professionally managed system that operated throughout the shop network. A Gift-in-Kind Account Manager, Mike, worked in an office above the shop with two administrative employees who developed and sustained Gift-in-Kind links with local businesses. Mike preferred to treat the management of this process as a commercial endeavour, something he illustrated by employing business language during his interview (he spoke of stock, profits, growth, margin and budgets). Despite having the word 'gift' in his job title, the relationships Mike was in charge of were purely transactional. A disconnect between acts of charity and the process of maintaining lucrative Gift-in-Kind networks was evident:

'We approach businesses to donate stock ... it's almost like, I'm a supplier that [the charity] use to get stock, and it's almost like the shops are our customer. ... The charity, touchy-feely end is at the other end of the spectrum ... it's a good sentiment, but, it doesn't pay the bills.' (Interview with Mike, 21 April 2010)

The shop was aiming towards stocking 80 per cent Gift-in-Kind leaving only 20 per cent individually donated stock. This benchmark was being tested in the shop as it was the highest-earning shop in the charity's chain, and Gift-in-Kind played an important role in the day-to-day operations. Donations came regularly, usually several times a week, from large retailers. These included supermarket chains (Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco gave large clothing donations), popular fashion outlets from the time (Topshop, Miss Selfridge, Burton and Zara all donated clothes), department stores (Debenhams donated bedding), sports brands (Bench donated jackets) and also occasionally independent retailers who sold online or on market stalls (everything from phone cases to brand new lingerie). Every time a company gave a Gift-in-Kind, the contact was recorded as a donor in the Gift-in-Kind spreadsheets by Mike's administrative team, and then approached at intervals to see if, as Mike stated, they needed any more stock 'taken off their hands'.

The retailers involved participated in these partnerships through regularly donating, but they did not wholly encourage visible association between the business and the charity. The charity shop was required to arbitrate the image of the donor brand or company within their shop space. This role of arbitration sometimes included altering Gift-in-Kind goods through the removal or defacement of labels, to ensure the business would not suffer monetary losses through customers attempting to return charity shop purchases to the original store. At a point in time when many retailers were going bust, this sensitivity was acute. Mike explained that charity shops ought to 'flaunt' Gift-in-Kind stock 'a bit', but emphasized the importance of doing so subtly. He reasoned that this was due to the 'negative connotations' charity shops hold for some: their historical association with lower social status and as a site populated by the disadvantaged or socially excluded.³¹

'With the Bench stock ... you're relying on people paying £120 for that brand and that lifestyle ... when we got it, we splashed it everywhere, and we probably de-valued their brand, I think, they got a lot of negative feedback from their legitimate customers, their retail customers, you know, the JJBs [a large sporting retailer]. ... The story we were told is, the retail manager's got off the train ... came down, saw obviously Bench all over the window, half the price of current season stock. Obviously, he's trying to achieve his targets, his

objectives. They pretty much said that they won't be able to donate again.' (Interview with Mike, 21 April 2010)

Despite co-operative relations with businesses, the charity shops' association with the material constraints of poverty renders it as an abject space, somewhere that is risky for brands to associate with.³² In referring to for-profit shops that sell Bench items as Bench's 'legitimate customers', Mike's reflection categorized charity shops as illegitimate, as if these items were attained unlawfully or are something to be hidden or disguised. Procedures such as the removal or defacing of the original labels in clothes reinforced the impression that brands were keen to distance themselves from where their items ended up. Due to these uncertainties, Gift-in-Kind relations with companies remained relatively ad hoc and vulnerable to being severed at any time due to the way the gift relationship interacted with market forces.

The abject nature of the charity shop space was compounded by another type of donation that was labelled, and classified on the till, as a Gift-in-Kind, however was not sourced from a commercial retailer. These gifts were from state sources – police evidence, stolen goods and the products of prison labour:

[The assistant manager, Emily] brings down a couple of clear plastic bags, inside are brown police evidence bags, some of them still inscribed with the details of who they were seized from. We go through it all, Emily tells me "Watch out. Some of this stuff might have blood on it. Because sometimes it's removed from people who have been in a fight or whatever." (Fieldnotes, 26 March 2010)

Emily warned the researcher about the riskiness, or liminality, of these items due to their association with an anonymous, criminalized *other*.³³ However, once they were taken from the bags, checked over, cleaned up and tagged like other Gifts-in-Kind, the taboo was lifted and these goods took on a new life with the customer who purchased them. The cleansing of prior meaning and creation of new meaning and purpose – or 'revalorising' – of second-hand goods has been widely theorized about, with particular reference to the 'moral' role of the shops in removing the negative connotations an item may have picked up.³⁴ Charity shop processes cleansed ambiguous items, concealing their association with illegal activities or marginalized individuals, just as they protected a corporate brand's reputation by cutting a label out of a jacket before selling it.

Invisible labour was involved in processing these liminal Gifts-in-Kind, but who undertook the labour in producing them was also not made explicit. For example, at one point during a shift, the researcher noticed the dump bins next to the till were filled with hand-sewn cloth tote bags, labelled

with a sign that read ‘Bags For Life’. These were priced relatively cheaply and were also recorded on the till as Gift-in-Kind:

They are all mismatched, made from various swatches of materials. When I ask Emily about them, she says “Oh, we get them from the prison.” I ask her to elaborate and she says, “They make them for us. At the women’s prison. I guess it’s something to keep them occupied and to fill up their day.” (Fieldnotes, 19 April 2010)

As in the previous example, the past life of the item was completely hidden from the customer. There is a dark irony in the fact that prison labour produced something that was then labelled as a Bag For Life – the only subtle inference to the carceral origins of the item. Bags For Life, as with the Gift Aid loyalty cards mentioned previously, originated from the for-profit retail sector. However, the charity shop subverts the meaning of the terminology and plays with customers’ normative assumptions of what they expect to encounter within a retail space.

The Gift-in-Kind system emphasized the role charity shops played in repurposing costly waste by-products of consumer society.³⁵ For-profit companies provided Gifts-in-Kind so readily because it was an easy and cost-free means of disposal of unsellable stock, and the company can reclaim any VAT they paid on goods they did not go on to sell. As a result, companies’ Gift-in-Kind donations can be understood as merely a useful business deal, as opposed to a charitable act, or a gift. Items that were labelled as Gift-in-Kind, but originated from the criminal justice system, also enabled shop staff to achieve their high Gift-in-Kind targets. Gift-in-Kind therefore comprised of individualistic processes that disguised the origins and history of an item, rejuvenating it for future sale.

The charity shop ‘gift’: a subversive moral economy

At the heart of our understanding of gifts is the relationship between giver and recipient. Normatively, we equate gift giving with kindness or generosity – however social theorists understand the process to be something more than that. A ‘gift’ is regarded as being a process of exchange within non-market relations, a formal pretence according to the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, that it is fundamentally obligatory to return.³⁶ Gifts tend to be imbued with multiple meanings, and hold within them a history of the relationship between giver and receiver, as well as the identity of the giver and recipient themselves; in this sense they are unique, non-fungible and often irreplaceable.³⁷ For example, a jumper given by a mother to her daughter before she goes away to university is not the same as one purchased by the daughter for herself; alongside its practical utility it also represents

maternal care, family protectiveness and security, perhaps a sense of loss, the continuation of the relationship beyond this disjuncture. This means that the word 'gift' can serve to rebrand a commodity and take it from being generic to exceptional. There is a moral imperative within a gift relationship, meaning we habitually treat these items differently to those that are purchased simply as commodities.

This case study involved two instances of 'gifts' that relied upon the appeal of that moral imperative, while being somewhat removed from the personal (and in the case of Gift-in-Kind from the state, deliberately eradicating it). These illustrations support Mauss' assertion that the gift relationship is dependent upon obligation and reciprocation. Donors receive something in return for their donations, whether a thank you letter and a warm glow (Gift Aid), a VAT rebate and reduced disposal costs, or the cleansing of tainted items gleaned from the criminal justice system (Gift-in-Kind). The explorations in this chapter also support theorists such as Blau, Levi-Strauss, Emerson, Gouldner and Bourdieu, who argued that gift giving is governed predominantly by rational self-interest.³⁸ These perspectives can be explored further by understanding the participation in these exchanges as individualized rather than communal – thus raising questions about the community-centric role charity shops are expected to play on the British high street, a role that would be presumed to be ever-more important during a period of post-recession austerity.

The prior section demonstrated how Gift Aid and Gift-in-Kind were beneficial for both the donor and the shop worker – the actual recipient of the charitable gift (the beneficiaries) for this particular charity were mostly absent in the relationship. This echoes major gift fundraising, where beneficiaries become objects within the gift relationship rather than participants.³⁹ Reciprocity in gift relationships is often not related to charitability, empathy, kindness or care, but is more a response to self-culture and the increased individualization of society during times of increased uncertainty and risk.⁴⁰ The detached and bureaucratic way that donations were solicited, recorded in databases and managed in the Gift Aid database, linking the individual back to the monetary value of their donations, was unprecedented in charity retail history. David Cheal describes a characteristic of gifts in general: that they operate as demonstrations of 'continued attachment'.⁴¹ We give presents annually at Christmas or on birthdays to indicate our ongoing relationship with our loved ones. The Gift Aid and Gift-in-Kind databases represent ongoing relationships in an institutionalized form. They operated to encourage reciprocity and remind donors of their obligation to give, either through thank you letters, the Gift Aid loyalty card, or through solicitation by the Gift-in-Kind team, mimicking the way gifts are returned in Mauss' conceptualization. They also created and sustained an imagined, disparate, digital community of businesses and individuals that stretched beyond the local.

Charity shops have always maximized the potential of the leftovers of consumerism by reviving waste, in what O'Brien describes as the 'alchemist's dream' of turning useless products into gold.⁴² Theories of object histories or 'cultural biographies' of things here move away from the intriguing individual backstories of traditional second-hand donations to homogeneous mass gifts that deal with the issue of unsold stock and erase the negative associations that are their by-product.⁴³ By understanding Gift-in-Kind as an opportunity for the reuse of otherwise waste goods at a time of economic crisis, the 21st-century British charity shop can be seen as an important redemptive space. The tendency for these leftovers of capitalism to be hidden out of sight in the charity shop space highlights the discomfort we feel with the amount of waste our system produces. Charity shop donating has previously been found to make people feel better about their own consumerism.⁴⁴ Gift-in-Kind merely removed the middle-man.

The same can be said of the unusual Gifts-in-Kind that were donated by the police or were the products of prison labour: these items lost their moral ambiguity when they were reclassified as Gift-in-Kind alongside other shiny new Gift-in-Kind donations. This pursuit of moral redemption holds similarities to the waste populations of Darkest England workshops discussed by Ruth McDonald in [Chapter 6](#) of this volume, or Lucy Morris' discussion of the early charity ethos of religious reformation.⁴⁵ Transformative rituals of cleaning and relabelling serve to distance an item from its marginal roots. Importantly, many of these transformations, manipulations and adaptations in the Gift Aid and Gift-in-Kind processes happened behind the scenes, protecting customers and wider society from danger and risk. In doing so, they also shield the public from the uncomfortable reality that the charitable gift relationship obscures: a reality of predatory global capitalism, over-consumption, tax manipulation, waste and deviance.

What has emerged from this micro-examination of 'gift' terminology is a subversive moral economy of charity retail, based broadly on E.P. Thompson's, and David Cheal's, concept of moral economies in mass societies.⁴⁶ The ultimate aim of a moral economy is the obligation to provide assistance to your local community in some form, and it operates alongside political and exchange economies as a means of assuring order and balance. What is distinct about the moral economy in this setting is that the institutionalization of social ties (or professionalization processes that encompass Gift Aid and Gift-in-Kind) impacted upon the reliability of those ties, as was seen in manager Maria's manipulation of the Gift Aid system. The databasing of both Gift Aid and Gift-in-Kind donors provoked transgressions that revealed the 'irrationality of rationality' in charity shops. Efforts to rationalize, control and monitor the gift relationship had subtle perverse and counterintuitive effects.⁴⁷ These processes aimed to improve fundraising, but at the risk of destabilizing local ties, disrupting trust and damaging perceptions of what

charity is. Nevertheless, enduring relationships – not capital – always lie at the heart of gift economies.⁴⁸

Even prior to the economic downturn, charities were keen to take part in intersectoral co-operation with business. Due to the trust charities tend to engender within a local community, they provided a natural space for these kinds of 'helpful partnerships' to thrive.⁴⁹ With government support offering a degree of financial stability to charities in Britain, and the subsequent impact of the recession and austerity policies, it is evident why the public, private and charity sector invested so heavily in gift relationships. However, the charity retail environment is heterogeneous and so was participation in these formalized gift schemes. Gift Aid and Gift-in-Kind were mostly limited to larger charity shop chains, due to the difficulty and cost of universal implementation.⁵⁰ They provided an avenue for increasing charity revenue through increasing quantity and quality of stock donations. This increased the opportunities for shop workers to hit targets and encourage repeat donations, but only for stores that were sufficiently professionalized in their practices. Professionalization of charity shops is not a universal process. Many shops for smaller, local charities were left behind, only able to engage with Gift-in-Kind in an ad hoc way, and not able to implement Gift Aid at all. These changes in charity retail represented a bifurcation of charity shop forms and the processes they were able to engage with in order to make money, a full exploration of which is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, these processes caused a Matthew Effect within charity retail, whereby advantage begets advantage.⁵¹ This enabled larger charities with chains of shops to raise more funds, while smaller charities raise less. Smaller charities with one-off shops tend to be focused upon local causes, but were not afforded the same opportunities to form gift relationships as national chains of shops. These national chains, with their highly professionalized operations, rely on individualization among staff and other mimicry of the for-profit sector.

The wording of the schemes studied here is important; as gifts are a means of asserting power within the system of capitalism.⁵² The analysis in this chapter suggests that the gift described by these two processes proved mutually beneficial to the charity and to first-sector businesses, while utilizing the flexibility of state tax allowances to maximize the money earned. Therefore power remained exactly where it was before – situated with those who already own the means within the capitalist system. The loss was on the behalf of the taxpayer, who indirectly footed the bill for the co-operations between charity and businesses. Also losing out were nearby small businesses such as second-hand junk shops and pawn shops, whose positions as the detritivores of capitalist surplus were threatened by the ubiquity of charity retail – another side effect of post-recession charity shops on their local community.⁵³

Conclusion

The case study examples of Gift Aid and Gift-in-Kind have been highlighted here as indicative of the wider sectoral networks that charity shops have become increasingly reliant upon. This chapter offers a reassessment of the claims of authors writing before the downturn that the charity sector operates relatively independently of governmental or corporate interests.⁵⁴ Instead, relationships between charities and private firms have led to the suggestion that charities are merely for-profits in disguise, particularly at times when the competition for resources becomes more severe.⁵⁵ These two applications of the terminology of gifts on the shop floor of this Manchester charity shop further complicate this assertion of independence when we reflect upon the site today. A city-wide project to rejuvenate run-down central shopping sites erased all evidence of this shop and replaced it with a gleaming, generic sandwich shop owned by a US company. The aims of Gift Aid and Gift-in-Kind to improve profits at a local level, therefore, were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the parent charity continues to thrive and operate many hundreds of national shops.

This chapter demonstrates that local, micro-level subversion of moral economies can become naturalized as part of social routines, such as shopping and donating. This operates hand-in-hand with our common sense understanding of what a gift is. The people who worked in the charity shop negotiated gift relationships and subverted the moral economy in order to retain the shop's position on the high street during a period of severe macro-societal flux. As is noted in Cheal's work, gift relations are 'powerfully affected by economic and demographic change, and by the hopes and fears of ordinary people faced with personal crises'.⁵⁶ The gift as observed in this shop in the early 2010s was, at least in part, governed by global market forces, businesses and the state, rather than a sense of local solidarity, empathy or charitable care.

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