

RISK AND RESISTANCE: AGEING IN THE CHARITY RETAIL SECTOR

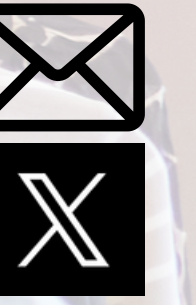


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BACKGROUND

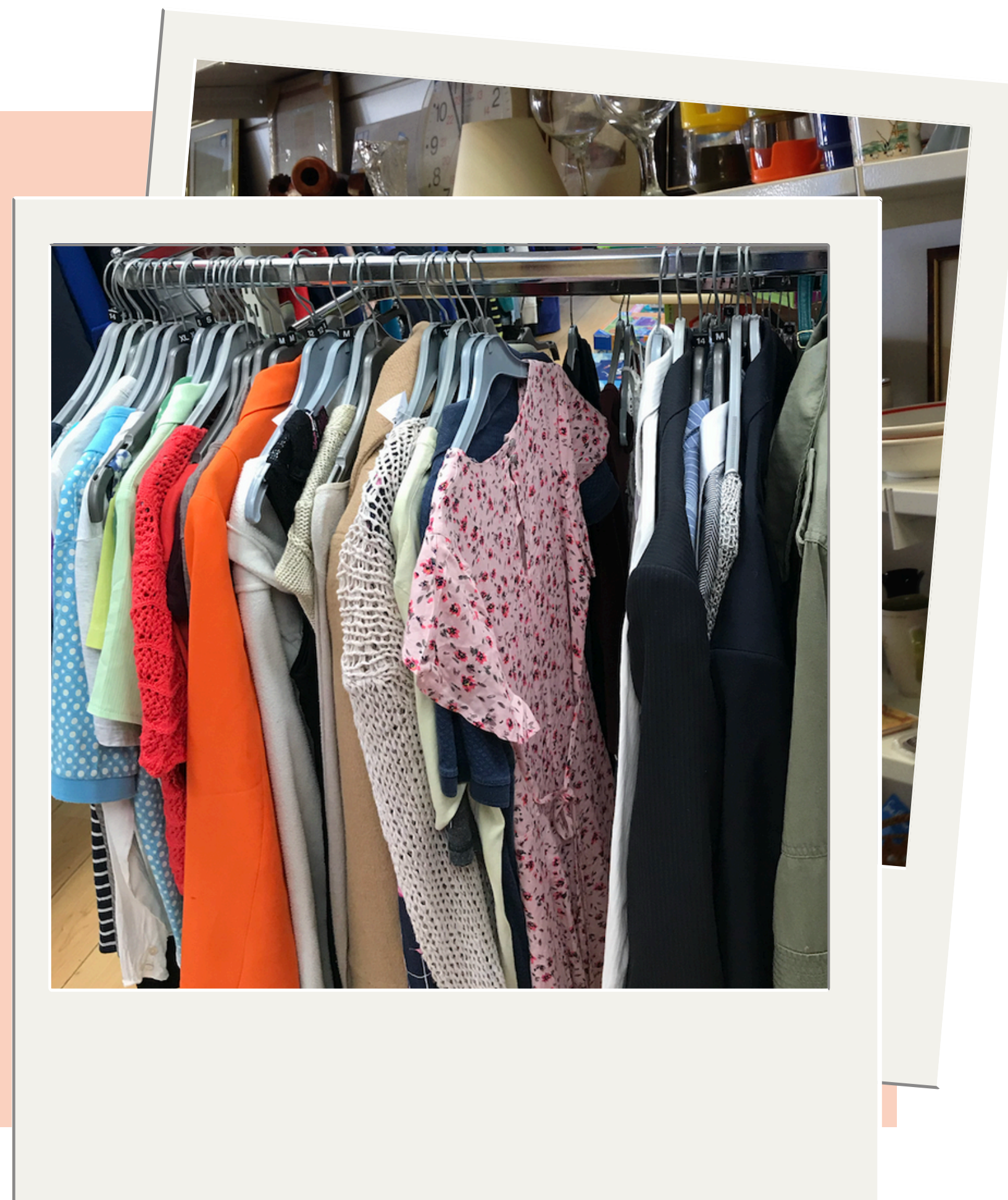
This research began from a desire to understand the everyday experience of older charity shop volunteers and explore how this experience might have been impacted by the ongoing professionalisation of the sector (Fitton, 2013). While many studies have highlighted the negative impacts of this trend on voluntary organisations (Owen and Kearns, 2006), the experiences and voices of older volunteers in charity retail have largely been overlooked, despite older women comprising the majority of the volunteer workforce. This gap is critical to address because:

- Organisational survival relies on volunteer commitment and retention.
- There is an assumption that the ubiquitous nature of sector-wide change leads to a uniform volunteer experience (Greening, 2021).
- The voices of older volunteers should be amplified in the development of age-friendly communities.

RESEARCH QUESTION



What is the lived experience of older volunteers working within the charity retail sector?



CONCLUSION

Charity shops are still spaces of joy, connectedness and collaboration for older people. It is also not as simple as suggesting that the charity shop was once a safe haven and is now a space of ageism - especially considering the volunteer experience varies considerably across different contexts and places. Nonetheless, age-related tensions are now more prevalent in the everyday. Older volunteer's are not passive in the face of such change and continually work to avoid exclusion and remain integrated in this space in diverse ways. This paper therefore highlights that more critical examinations of professionalisation and its impacts on older volunteers is necessary to address ageism and better support the inclusion of this population in society.

METHODOLOGY

- An ethnographic approach was utilised to address the research question. The study involved 17 months of participant observation, totaling 268 hours, across 3 charity shops. This was supplemented with 17 in-depth interviews with older volunteers and store managers.
- By actively participating and engaging with the group, I aimed to gain an authentic understanding of their experiences and dynamics.
- The 3 charity shops, all based in Greater Manchester, were part of one leading charity retailer but varied significantly in their structure and operation.

ANALYSIS

Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret key themes from the data. This iterative approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of the volunteers' experiences and the impact of professionalisation on their roles.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Joint reflexivity was utilised in order to prioritise the voices of the participants and ensure their perspectives were central to the research process.

FINDINGS

- Ageist discourses have been embedded into the sector and they can work to reconstitute older volunteers as a kind of 'risky subject'.
- Such discourses manifest in unique ways on the charity shop floor and comprise of a range of practices, both subtle and overt, that are driven by the organisations focus on an intensified form of productivity.
- This prompted diverse forms of resistance from older volunteers, which were underpinned by the aim to not only counter negative perceptions of ageing, but be just 'visible' enough in order to get by.

REFERENCES

Owen, S. and Kearns, R. (2006). Competition, adaptation and resistance: (Re)forming health organisations in New Zealand's third sector. In C. Milligan and D. Conradson (Eds.), *Landscapes of voluntarism: New spaces of health, welfare & governance* (p. 115-134). Bristol: Policy Press.

Greening, L. (2021). *The meaning of volunteering: An investigation into the experiences of volunteers in a changing organisation*. (Unpublished PhD Thesis), Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK.

Fitton, T. (2013). *The "Quiet Economy": An Ethnographic Study of the Contemporary UK Charity Shop*, (Unpublished PhD Thesis), The University of York, York, UK.

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“We're a force to be reckoned with! We have some fight left in us...”
[June]

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“Well, it's the same four walls, some of the same people, probably the same mugs in the cupboard [laughs], but it's a world away from how it was when I walked in the door. I do, I can feel a bit 'out of it' now, or like it's shoving us aside.”
[Sandy]

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