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Profit generation or community resource? Studying attitudes to the operation of a post office by a charity

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Structured Abstract

Purpose: For the past decade sub-post offices in the UK have been subject to intensive pressures to marketise their business. Actual or threatened closures have led charities to become involved in projects to preserve community post offices. This research investigated the attitudes of the trustees and staff involved in six charity-backed post offices (POs) to answer the research question ‘Do those involved with charity-backed POs prioritise profit generation or community resourcing?’

Prior work: There are few peer-reviewed studies of the potential of sub-post offices as sites for social enterprise, and none (that we could locate) on the role of charities. In this study, we contest Liu and Ko’s view (2014, p. 402) that the key task is “to install market-oriented managerial beliefs and values into the charity retailer’s decision-making”. We offer a counter view that trading can represent a further diversification of the innovations used to support charitable endeavours.

Design / Methodology: This research adopted a neo-empiricist stance on the collection and interpretation of data. We treated ‘attitudes’ as real phenomena that are subjectively experienced and concretely expressed through activities in an objectively real world. Data was gathered from four or more people in each of six POs by sampling their services and conducting face to face interviews. The emphasis was on achieving *verstehen* – a rich understanding of a specific approach to social enterprise grounded in interpretations of human activity under conditions of naturalistic inquiry.

Findings: We found that charity-backed POs were focussed on preserving POs as a community resource but articulated this by framing *profitability* in three distinct ways: as a PO generating a surplus that can be gifted or reallocated to a (parent) charity’s other activities; as an activity that offsets a charity’s fixed costs or enables or promotes its public benefit aims.

Originality / Value: This is the first academic study to confront the complexities of differentiating ‘profitability’ from ‘profit generation’ in charity-backed POs. The subtleties in the articulation of this difference by study participants helped to account for the findings of the study and to make sense of the strong consensus that POs should be seen primarily as a community resource whilst responding to marketisation pressures.

INTRODUCTION

This research investigated the attitudes of the trustees and staff involved in six charity-operated post offices (POs) to answer the research question ‘Do those involved with charity-backed POs prioritise profit generation or community resourcing?’ In this context, the ‘operation’ of a PO means either that the charity owns the business or plays a significant role by ensuring it is able to operate.

The PO network in the UK is under growing pressure because many PO transactions previously done face-to-face can now be done online. A significant proportion of any community is disadvantaged by these changes, whether through lack of access to the Internet, ignorance or mistrust of modern technology (Choi and DiNitto, 2013). The proportion of people affected rises sharply in economically disadvantaged communities where a poor credit rating often limits access to online banking and financial services.

Nevertheless, the government has stated that “the [PO] is more than a commercial entity and serves a distinct social purpose” (BIS, 2013: 8), indicating a willingness to maintain the network, but without a strategy to facilitate this. Against this background, community-run POs operated by charities, social enterprises or co-operatives have begun to emerge in parts of the network where suitable commercial operators were not coming forward (Locality, 2014: 2). This research is limited to studying those that are run or backed by a charity organisation.

The article is structured in four sections: in the next section, we review the literature to provide contextual information on operating a post-office with charity support. This is followed by a section that sets out our methodology based on interviews with key informants and thematic analysis. We then report and discuss our findings before outlining the key contribution of this article. Study participants continue to see their post-offices as community resources but adapt to marketisation pressures by framing profitability in three distinct ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jennings (2013) notes the increasing pressure on charities to generate income and become more innovative in their approach to commerce, by fulfilling their primary purpose through trading activities. In this study, we contest Liu and Ko’s (2014, p. 402) view that charities must focus on “market-oriented managerial beliefs and values” when engaging in commercial trading or operating as ‘enterprising non-profits’ (Dees, 1998; Lloyd and Faure-Walker, 2009; Defourny and Nyssens, 2016). By studying innovations made by charity-backed POs, we consider whether or not the motive behind trading is to generate profits. We offer a counter argument that these innovations can be motivated by a commitment to charitable objects.

Broadbridge and Parsons (2003: 730) contend that “voluntary sector organisations can be competent without having to be business-like” by choosing to measure their success using criteria under-valued by private businesses (such as social capital generation). The dilemmas created by seeking different types of return have been noted not only in their study of charity retailing but also across the field of social enterprise (Doherty et al., 2014; Mason and Doherty, 2015). Much of the tension arises from the conflicting logics of altruism and commerce, or - as Broadbridge and Parson (2003: 746) frame it - between the desire to be a community resource or make a profit. The “professionalisation of the charity retail sector” (*ibid.*, 744) has undermined its voluntary and community sector roots and made it harder to distinguish from mainstream retailing.

A distinction must be drawn between retailers whose customers are always individual members of the public and those - like POs - where some over-the-counter services are being provided on behalf of other organisations. In this sense, all POs have similarities to other kinds of charity retailing because they offer services that support a public benefit objective. However, as Goodall (2000: 105) argues “the common sense view that the essence of trading is the sale of goods and services” does not always apply even in the commercial retail sector. Retailers can “provide a warm and happy place” for the lonely or socially isolated to gather demonstrating that retailers of all types can operate with “different mixes of values” (p.111). We suggest there is value in regarding POs in this way, as valuable ‘community hubs’, not just places of commerce.

However, as Liu and Ko (2014: 390) set out, “successful charity retail operation requires distinctive capabilities” to enable it to be sustainable. An element of professionalisation is needed for things like ‘store image’ and ‘sales targeting’ (p. 391), even when the charity’s primary motive is to provide a community resource. They contend that successful charity retailers communicate their social value to staff (p. 395) and create social capital (p. 400) by ‘prospecting’ to raise awareness of services throughout the community (p.398). It follows that networking can turn a PO into a more successful community resource even if it does not generate greater profits.

Charity retail outlets can engage in "the sale of goods and services as part of the charitable activities of the charity... known as primary purpose trading" (Charity Commission and OSRC, 2014). This can include retail services provided for the purpose of regenerating a neighbourhood or sustaining vital local amenities, including access to banking and postal services that benefit disadvantaged communities. In these circumstances those involved with charity-operated POs must balance profit generation with providing a community resource.

The three main categories of charity retail outlet described by Home (2000) are: selling donated goods; selling a mix of donated and bought-in items; selling purely new merchandise. This description, however, is not exhaustive. Retailing can be offered as a community resource through village shops, pubs, community cafés and POs. Charity-backed POs fall into a special category of their own because alongside the conventional retailing of ‘attached goods’ (such as groceries or stationery) income is earned from providing PO counter services. Many sub-postmasters receive “a fixed ‘core tier’ payment,” often referred to as ‘the salary’, and also some commission based “directly on the [particular] products and services transacted” over the PO counter, (NFSP, 2012: 12). However, a new entirely commission-based pay structure is being rolled out. As core tier payments have (and will be further) eroded, it is important for this study to seek understanding of the impact of commission-based approaches in POs that operate primarily as a local amenity.

Some research on new community-run POs has been undertaken. First, a telephone survey in 2010 estimated there were 140 across the UK, with 70 participating in the research (Consumer Focus Labs 2010). Whilst all expected to be open in a year’s time, 25% were loss making. Second, a 2011 survey of 121 community-owned village shops found that 58% hosted PO facilities (Perry and Alcock, 2011). Whilst the community shops made an average net profit of £3,654, profitability of their PO counters was not investigated.

Third, Locality (2014) produced a case study for the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation about our first author’s PO. The study reported on the PO network’s “unique focus” for community life (Locality, 2014: 2) because nationally 32% of all customers use their PO every week, rising to 49% for over 65s, and 59% for small businesses. The report emphasised the importance of charity-operated community POs generating a profit because "anything less is likely to leave the host community group subsidising the service," (Locality, 2014: 5). Locality pointed out that operating a PO can have hidden costs because of the complexity and time consuming aspects of running them, and the challenges this poses in terms of generating net profits. Finally, the report advanced the idea that Post Office Ltd should support community hubs by identifying this concept as a flexible and exciting opportunity for charity-operated POs to offer “an infinite variety of services” (*ibid.*, p.7).

Last, a Post Office Ltd commissioned report (Dellot et al., 2014) emphasised the need for POs to generate profits because “they are small businesses that... [must] stand on their own feet”. However, it conceded that POs “generate both social and commercial value” by providing community resources. Two terms from the lexicon of social enterprise appear: "community enterprise" to describe “hubs” of enterprising activity in new-look POs (p. 6) and “socially entrepreneurial” to describe the attitudes needed to effect this change (p. 8). Furthermore, Post Office Ltd agreed to subsidise 3,400 marginal branches including many which are "the last shop in the community" (p. 14). Where this occurs, the act of subsidising trading indicates a willingness to protect a community resource (Piper, 2011).

There is an apparent paradox if charity-linked POs are also expected to “become a 'true business' and make a surplus to finance the costs of its working capital” (Williams, 2013: 27) so we paid attention to the underlying legal framework and to distinguishing PO services that are charity-operated from those that depend on a charity for premises and resources. In most cases a subsidiary company established by a charity will be founded purely to generate income for the charity. In some cases the trading activities of

the subsidiary may relate directly to the objects of the parent charity (Studd, 2012). As Charity Commission (2006: 3) advice highlights, where a trading activity is being operated partly as a community resource – in line with the charitable purposes of the parent organisations - the distinctiveness of the legal entities of the parent and subsidiary can be hard to maintain. Furthermore, where a charity includes purposes related to regeneration, trustees of a regeneration charity may see a PO as an ‘anchor business’ that generates footfall for the local economy, or see post-office services that relieve financial hardship as integral to their regeneration efforts. The Charity Commission point out that “the maintenance, improvement or provision of public amenities” is a charitable purpose in urban or rural regeneration (p. 43) because counter services are a public amenity in their own right. In short, POs may be operated as a community resource rather than a commercial opportunity.

Charity-operated POs are often structured as a "community benefit society" (CBS) regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA, 2015; Plunkett Foundation, 2016). According to HMRC, profits generated must be ploughed back into the business and are subject to an asset lock.¹ Local residents and well-wishers can provide share capital (which makes it a popular vehicle for raising some of the funds needed to reopen or purchase a village PO). A CBS cannot currently register with the Charity Commission even if it has charitable aims (Charities Act 2011, Section 3) but as an ‘exempt charity’ it can apply to HMRC for recognition as a charity for tax purposes.

CBSs – popularly referred to as Bencoms - are a phenomenon evidencing a shift to mutual forms of governance designed "to cater to a [whole] community's needs," (Mori 2014: 330). CBSs can be owned and democratically controlled by members, but cannot distribute dividends to them. The co-operative notion of member benefit is subordinate to the public interest (*ibid.* p. 336), but does not disappear completely. CBS members can earn (limited) fixed interest on capital contributions, access tax concessions and benefit by using their PO, regardless of whether they intend to generate profits or not.

Trustees’ attitudes to profit generation and community resourcing can be influenced by their perception of social enterprise. Ridley-Duff and Bull (2011: 189) identify a mission to create social value as one of the distinguishing features of social enterprise and the ICAEW (2011) lists “three key defining elements” as “trading, social purpose and [the] reinvestment of... the greater part of any profits” in a social purpose. Even in the context of ‘market failure’ and the desire to protect resources for the community, the emergence of social enterprise requires attention to sustainability. In the absence of grant aid, social innovations to create new “market based strategies” become important (Teasdale, 2011: 5-6).

Through our literature review, we affirm that charity-operated PO can seek to be a community resource and/or generate profits for regeneration activities. Our theoretical framework acknowledges the mixed motives and sometimes the mixed legal status of charity-backed PO services. Figure 1 sets out the dimensions of the theoretical framework we applied during fieldwork. Participants were assessed for their attitudes to generating economic and social value. We assessed whether they saw PO counter services as secondary trading to generate a surplus, or as primary purpose trading for public benefit. Where this primary purpose trading was loss-making or loss-mitigating, we characterised it as a community resource provided for public benefit.

We assessed whether PO services were being operated purely to create social value, relying on grant aid to cover losses without concern for profit generation, or whether – at the opposite extreme - those involved believed that a charity should only operate a PO to generate as much financial profit or surplus income as possible (perhaps to donate to a parent charity). Our primary concern was to investigate *attitudes*, to gauge actors’ motivations towards sustaining their PO services.

¹ HMRC - Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs Manuals – see provisions for societies at: <https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/company-taxation-manual/ctm40505>

Figure 1 - Theoretical framing of attitudes to charity-backed POs



METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a neo-empiricist perspective (Johnson and Buehring, 2006) by taking ‘attitudes’ to be real phenomenon that are subjectively experienced and concretely expressed through behaviours in an objectively real world. Our data gathering techniques, however, emphasis the goal of *verstehen* – a rich understanding generated from the dialogue that arises between actors with a shared interest. As a sub-postmaster who has been a subject of a study (Locality, 2014), our first author was in a good position to build rapport with charity supported POs and gather information using qualitative interviewing techniques (see Appendix A).

We obtained rich interview data from six charity-backed POs through an embedded casework strategy. All of the cases shared two common organisational frameworks through participation in the PO network and charity sector. However, the sample did show variations in the way POs engaged charitable support:

- one was an excepted charity belonging to the Methodist Church, (Charities Act 2011 s30(2b));
- three were charitable companies limited by guarantee (CLGs), two of which owned trading subsidiary companies operating the PO;
- one was a CBS;
- one was a CLG operating for public benefit with charitable objectives, but was not a registered charity.

The initial approach was made by email. Interestingly, participants often agreed to take part on the understanding that the findings would be shared. Four informants were interviewed in each branch to help triangulate data from the following stakeholders (Fitzgerald and Dopson, 2009: 328):

- At least one charity trustee or director

- At least one charity manager
- The person in charge of the PO
- A committed member / regular customer of the PO (who was either a current or former trustee, member or volunteer of the charity)

In Case 5, the person operating the PO was both a trustee and a volunteer. In all other cases the PO was managed either by a paid PO manager employed by the charity or by a sub-postmaster remunerated directly by the PO network. The volunteer running Case 5 was also the sub-postmaster, although he gift-aided² his remuneration to the charity. In Case 2 the sub-postmaster also provided some unpaid support to the charity outside her PO role.

PO trading is generally stronger in the build-up to Christmas, and weaker immediately afterwards. The research interviews were conducted in January and February, which was good because interviewees were under less pressure and had the heaviest period of trading fresh in their mind. Nevertheless, while we aimed to generate descriptions of the life-world of participants (Kvale, 1983), we used our theoretical framework to inform the structuring of the research questions and coding of transcripts (Appendix A). We became sensitive to topics linked to the concept of profitability: generating profits, generating income, discussing operating costs, talking of subsidy, talking of sales promotions, applying for, or expecting grants, planning enterprise, coping with competition. We coded accordingly. Similarly, we found language that acted as proxy indicators for community resourcing: motivations to act, adherence to community values, taking an inclusive approach, building a hub, which is friendly, and which acts as an amenity, that promotes networking in the community. We coded the interviews accordingly.

Developing *verstehen* requires an interpretation of the data, based on ‘qualitative’, ‘non-statistical data collection and analysis’ in which sense is made of the subjective narratives and attitudes of the participants (Johnson and Buehring 2006, pp. 132-3). At the level of everyday conversation, individuals construct their own meaning when they interpret terms such as ‘charity’, ‘voluntary’ or ‘profit’. We focused on the range of linguistic expressions applied to discussion of profitability and community resourcing. The fluidity of meaning is bounded by the charity sector context as well as the PO network context: both are contexts in which there are attempts to fix the meaning of language by statute. Whilst acknowledging the value of our first author’s personal experience in interpreting this, we designed the study so that all views – including those within our first author’s own PO (Case 6) were gathered from other informants, and interviewees were given opportunities to affirm or correct their responses to limit the influence of our first author’s experiences.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded to limit the risks of imposing a dominant narrative on incoherent or contradictory data (Johnson et al., 2006). While attitudes (and the terms expressed) are highly individual, transcript analysis led to the emergence of eight codes to categorise statements about profit or loss and seven to categorise statements about community resourcing. Every code was triggered by informants making a reference to one of the two central themes (‘profitability’ and ‘community resource’) in a way that could be confirmed by searching for key words and phrases related to that ‘theme’ (Bryman and Bell, 2006: 637). While no statistical inferences can be drawn from this analysis, we regarded the frequency with which themes emerged as an indicator of their importance. Whilst the research team were aware of the potential for Post Office Ltd to foster values and meanings that incline participants towards the adoption of specific attitudes, in practice the interviewees appeared unconcerned about brand loyalty and did not seek to create a positive impression of the PO network.

The data was collected during extended visits to observe each setting and typically lasted about four hours. Ten questions guided semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A). They were presented to informants as ‘structured conversations’. Where the setting included a café, the researcher ate a meal with customers. In one setting (Case 3), an opportunity arose to go behind the counter and provide advice in the first author’s capacity as a PO mails’ consultant.

² Gift-aid is a provision in UK tax law that enables a charity to reclaim the ordinary rate tax paid by a donor on their donation.

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Six cases were studied. The range of charity-operated POs varied from an outreach PO operating three mornings each week (Case 1) to two main POs, one of which had several attached businesses. Table 1 shows the basic characteristics and this is followed by a short summary of findings from each case.

Table 1 - Case characteristics

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6
Charity hosts PO counter	X	X			X	
Charity owns PO counter			X	X		X
Charity provides attached retail 'offer'	X	X	X	X	X	X
Excepted charity	X					
Charitable company / social enterprise with charitable purposes		X		X	X	X
CBS (Bencom)			X			
Charity covers some / all PO overheads	X	X	X	X	X	X
Charity carries out some key functions for the PO	X		X	X		X
PO income depends on commission rather than a fixed payment			X	X		X

Case 1 is was an 'outreach' PO, run by the sub-postmaster of another branch and hosted, three mornings each week, by the Methodist church. A volunteer explained that the PO counter is run by the sub-postmaster and the refreshments are sold by church volunteers. The church provides the premises, a table, chairs for the customers and sells some second-hand goods. Generating profit is not important - it is run entirely as a community resource. PO goods and services were not promoted strongly to avoid putting customers under pressure. Sales promotion was seen as "pushy". All informants described the atmosphere as friendly, a hub of chatting customers in the church hall which the minister described as "a community meeting point, one of the important places that help maintain that sense of identity and community."

Case 2 was a permanent PO counter in a community-owned village shop run by a sub-postmaster as an independent business (a popular arrangement in community-owned shops). The presence of the counter depends on the goodwill of the shop but, by working closely with the shop manager, the sub-postmaster can manage the volunteers when the manager is absent and help with the accounts as an in-kind contribution to running costs. In this case, the shop was not technically a charity, and operated as a social enterprise CLG. The informants stated that it was probably accidental that the shop had not become a CBS as a culture of charitable trading for public benefit was dominant. The PO counter was important because it encouraged greater footfall. The volunteer co-ordinator said "having the post office there brings people in who spend money for the shop," but promoting PO sales was not, as the chair put it, "something that we would expect from our location." All the informants agreed that both shop and PO were primarily regarded as community resources. Interestingly, the shop had received a loan where the return on investment was delivered solely in social outputs. The PO counter was one of the social returns.

Case 3 integrated a PO counter into a village pub owned by a CBS. The pub ran a café, and a small shop during the day alongside the PO. Whilst there was agreement the PO should contribute towards the CBS's profitability, the 60 hour / week opening hours made this challenging because someone trained to handle PO computer-based transactions needed to be on duty at all times. The PO manager said customers used the counter "all the time" but not in sufficient numbers to cover costs prompting her to say that "if you were looking at it as a business it wouldn't be viable". One director described the PO as

“an emotional investment”. Nevertheless, the counter was considered an important strategy for boosting the charity’s income. Its ‘penetration rate’ – the PO’s measure of the effectiveness of upselling – was above the expected level of 25%. The PO manager said “for a small branch we do quite a lot” to earn good rates of commission. The CBS had not yet quantified the financial benefit from hosting a Royal Mail sorting office. Whereas the PO manager thought the PO counter “probably breaks even”, a director thought “the pub and the café subsidise the PO [because] we’re having to open for all these hours...” The pub manager agreed. The PO manager said she was encouraged to upsell, but in a sensitive way which did not exclude more disadvantaged customers and undermine the charity’s ethos. The pub manager said, “I think... the girls’ approach [is]... quite nice, ...quite astute.” Overall, there was a view that the motivation to keep the PO was as a community resource. The PO manager called it “the be all and end all.” A customer stated the charity was “bringing life back into the village,” echoed by the pub manager and a director who viewed the nexus of café, pub, shop and PO as “the hub” and “the heart” of the community.

Case 4 is a neo-gothic parish church in a busy suburb of a large metropolis. The church accommodated four PO counters, a large retail area including a flower shop, a coffee bar and a soft play area. With the exception of the flower shop, these were church trading subsidiaries. A space for worship was maintained at one end of the building. The centre manager said, “We’re going back to the medieval model of church” when the church “was a meeting point [...] a bartering, trading post.” All informants believed that profit-generation was vital, particularly the centre manager who said “if the businesses don’t succeed then the charity hasn’t got a hope!” One member of the congregation talked about recycling profits into community work – confirmed by the vicar who described ‘attached’ businesses as earning “pure profit”, adding “I have no problems with upselling; ...it’s part of running a commercial business and... this is a fully commercial enterprise.” However, this attitude was nuanced by the centre manager and PO management who felt that PO staff were “not pushing products,” and were just letting customers “know how we can save them money.” Despite this commercial focus, there was a shared opinion that being a community resource was crucial. The centre manager said disadvantaged members of the community had benefited most, and described it as a “central” place generating a “community feel” that was “vital to a community” because “friendship starts” there. The vicar concurred when he stated that the church is “called to serve other people.” A congregation member described it a “community asset” where “some people... come in here... just to keep warm...”.

Case 5 is a building complex hosting a community project, café, pharmacy and part-time PO on the edge of a social housing estate. It was isolated from the rest of the city by a demolition project prior to repopulating gradually with new housing. The community project owned a café and premises housing the PO. One of its trustees became sub-postmaster to run the PO. The PO is not technically charity-operated but, as in many similar instances, the sub-postmaster maintains the PO counter for its host charity and donates his salary. The centre manager recognised that the charity was “instrumental in getting [the PO] off the ground.”

Profit-generation from the PO was considered to be unlikely by all informants. A charity staff member said she did not think that much money would be made. Referring to the nature of PO transactions, the sub-postmaster said his business was “pay-out all the time”. Added to the altruism of the sub-postmaster, the charity CEO commented that the PO was “totally unaffordable” based on income from Post Office Ltd. Despite this, the charity CEO regarded the PO as a strategic asset in a plan to host a new convenience store. The PO would move and - by its presence - help to generate profits. It would also attract people to a hub – variously described as an enterprise centre or zone. As the CEO stated, “[The PO is] a community hub...”, but will be only “one service out of twenty that will be here...” The PO supported the value of friendliness, prompting a staff member to state that the PO is “something that the community needs” as it was a contact point for people with special needs and the elderly. Charity volunteers saw the PO as part of their fight-back against Council assaults on the viability of their community; (previously, the charity had met the cost of a minibus to take residents to another branch).

Case 6 was the longest standing case, a charity-operated social enterprise that had won regional and national awards for social enterprise and PO sales. Even so, opinions were divided. The deputy manager said that the PO was draining the charity of funds and taking it down to financial ruin. The chair disagreed, being more optimistic about generating a profit but stating “we have yet to get there [...] we just need to increase [...] sales.” Opinions were divided about whether the PO met its own costs. A customer

thought the charity “supported the post office in every way it could” and the deputy manager said it was “helping keep open the PO rather than the other way round.” The deputy manager had expected the PO to help the charity, but did not think it was generating a net surplus. However, given that the charity had fixed costs it could not avoid, the PO made a contribution towards them. All informants were comfortable with upselling. The deputy manager said “every person [...] is different and they've all got different circumstances, so it's about trying to sell them... [the right] product.” All informants were convinced the PO was a valuable community resource. The deputy manager commented that when the PO opened “we had a lot of people saying 'thank you, we really needed this!'” She added that “it’s a service for the community and that's what [the Charity] is all about.” All informants commented on friendliness and relationship-building both in the context of essential skills for selling but also as important community values. Several informants regarded the PO as a community hub because it is “where the community meets” (customer), a community “connection point” (PO manager) and a “listening space [...] in the centre of the community” (deputy manager). The PO’s role networking the community prompted customers to think “it gives... kudos” to the charity.

Having briefly described each of the charity-back POs, we now turn to the sense we made of the findings. Firstly, we summarise the thematic analysis of our findings against the theoretical framework presented in the literature review. We then use these findings to comment on the social and economic value of the POs in our study, and relate our findings back to the literature discussed earlier.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 2 shows the number of informants whose interviews included at least one incidence of each thematic code. The table has no statistical significance and is presented to show the way we organised and interpreted findings. Where an informant talked in negative terms about one of the themes, this is represented by a negative value. Where opposing attitudes were expressed both positive and negative attitudes were noted to give a total number of positive and negative attitudes for each theme. Instances may exceed the number of informants. For example, in Case 4, the vicar reported hostile attitudes to income generation from local residents even though all of the respondents were positive about it resulting in a ‘score’ of 4/-1.

Table 2 - Thematic analysis of interviews

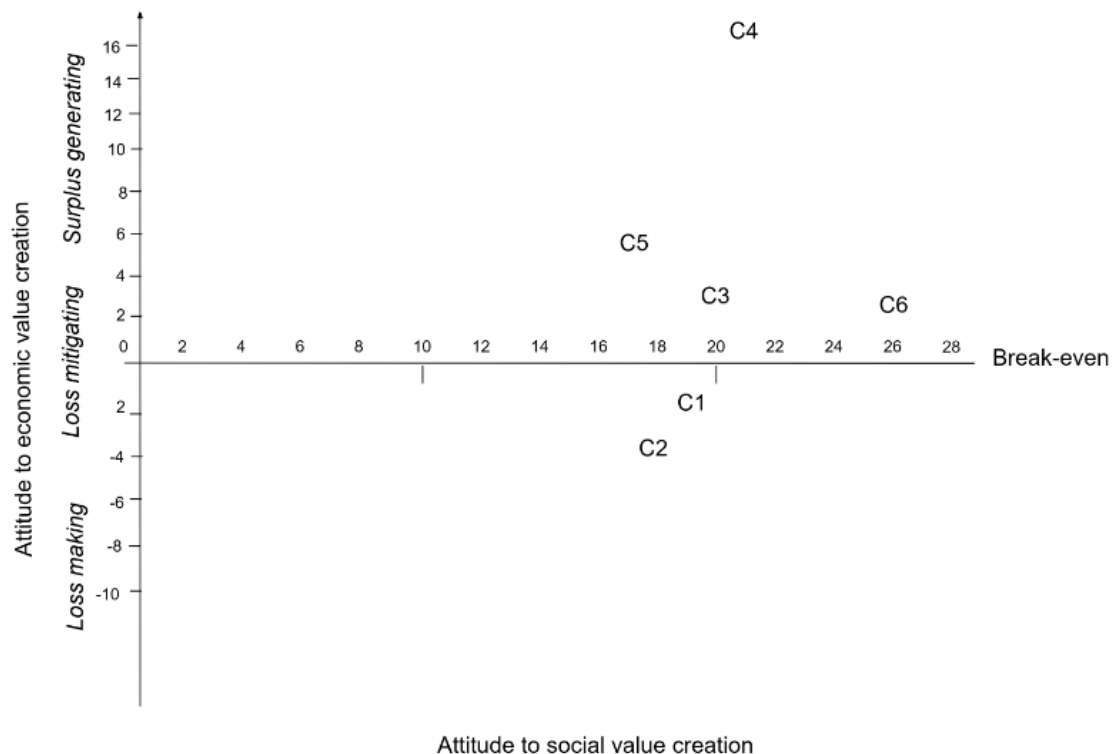
Number of positive or negative mentions of each theme

		Case Number					
Themes	Codes	C 1	C 2	C 3	C 4	C 5	C 6
Profit Generation / Loss (+/-)		4	4	4	4	4	4
	Generating profit	-1	1/-3	-2	3	4/-2	2/-1
	Generating income	1/-1	2	4	4/-1	2/-2	2/-3
	Operating costs	2/-1	-2	1/-1	2/-2	1/-1	-4
	Subsidy	-3	2/-1	-3	3/-1	2/-1	2/-2
	Sales promotion	2/-1	1/-2	3	4	3/-2	4
	Grants	0	-1	0	2	0	2/-1
	Enterprise	0	0	1	1	2	1
	Competition	0	0	0	2	0	1

Community Resource		4	4	4	4	4	4
	Motivation	4	3	4	4	4/-1	4
	Community values	2	3	3	4/-1	3	4
	Inclusive approach	2	3	2	2	1	4
	Hub	2	2	3	3	2	2
	Friendly	4	3	3	4	3	4
	Amenity	2	2	3	3	3	4
	Networking	3	2	1	1	2	4
Interviews where the two themes and their related codes can be referenced at least once							

All of the informants talked about profit generation in relation to their POs, although the term ‘profit’ itself was only mentioned ten times by the informants, seven of those incidents being related to Case 4 and two to Case 6. As in Case 1, informants might talk about profit generation in negative terms. We found people talked about ‘profit’ in both popular and technical ways. The research findings, therefore, involved identifying synonymous or corresponding terms used by the informants.

Figure 2 - Interpretation of the dominant attitudes to the PO counters



Attitudes to resourcing the community were easier to interpret. There was a high level of agreement amongst study participants that their PO was primarily a valuable community resource. Reinforcing this were frequent references to community values, friendliness, inclusivity and the POs’ role as a local amenity or social hub. Charity-operated POs were seen as social value creating activities through their

role as community hubs much more often than profit-generating social enterprise activities. Delloit et al. (2014) proposed the 'social enterprise hub' concept as a model for the future sustainability of sub-POs. All of the cases regarded themselves as social hubs or essential public amenities, but although there were cases (3 and 4) where the charity was functioning like an enterprise hub, only Case 5 expressed definite intent (with the PO as a strategic asset, even though it was hosting, not owning the PO). Whilst it is accurate to state that charity-operated POs expect to generate income (and profits) from their presence, they do not necessarily expect to generate profits directly from the PO.

Piper (2011) cited the 1955 Royal Commission to argue that an activity cannot "generally be trading" if it "can never be carried out at a profit." By this definition, the 3,400 'community outreach' POs that cannot operate without a government grant would not be trading (Delloit, et al., 2014: 14). In our sample, Case 1 is a clear example of this type of PO. Even in three other cases that were actively seeking to generate surplus income, only four of 12 informants expected it to cover operating costs. These informants were divided on whether their PO was, or soon would be, profit-generating.

We found three key variations in the way 'profit' was framed by informants to explain 'profitability'. The first meaning is used by informants who saw 'profit' as the surplus available to support a charity's other activities. This meaning of profit is a bottom line amount in an accounting statement that would trigger the gifting of monies to fund charity objects. The second meaning of 'profit' was evidence that trading made 'a contribution towards the charity's fixed costs'. In this case, any income lowering fixed costs necessarily incurred to operate the charity was regarded as profitable trading. Whilst this could not be regarded as profit in a profit/loss sense, informants regarded the trade as 'profitable' in a wider sense. Last, informants saw POs as profitable where they were 'a driver for increased footfall' that added to the profitability of another operation or contributed to the charity's wider public benefit aims, such as community regeneration or advancement of religion (Morgan et al., 2013). In this final case, the PO made a valuable contribution to profitability or effectiveness. Whilst none of the POs created profit in the first sense, a number were generating (or were expected to generate) profits in the second and all in the third sense.

Having established insights into the way charity-backed POs wrestle with the framing of the economic value, we now consider the issue of social value. Should charity POs proactively create social value at the expense of economic value? Informants felt they faced a dilemma. For Bourdieu (2011, [1986]), social and economic capital are not mutually exclusive and social capital is just one way in which economic capital can find expression. Broadbridge and Parsons (2003) argued that charity retail is increasingly commercial at the expense of providing social value, and that this creates a tension between being a community resource and maximising profitability. By trading up, disadvantaged clients and supporters may feel alienated from the charity. Goodall (2000) talked about "different mixes of values" and pointed out that many commercial retailers face a similar dilemma. His observation that customers often seek warm and happy places to meet, instead of setting out to spend money, resonated strongly with the findings from all the cases.

Some charity-operated POs are aware of - but untroubled by - this dilemma. In Cases 1, 2 and 5 the focus was largely on providing a community resource and those involved were not commercially driven. This attitude was most acute in Case 1, where no one was concerned about generating profit. In Case 2, the PO was useful in generating footfall, reinforcing the shop's role as a community hub, but still no one wanted the PO to 'trade up' lest this should alienate regular customers. At Case 5, the sub-postmaster's generosity in donating his income to the charity meant that no one was over concerned about the PO's commercial viability. In Cases 3, 4 and 6, informants were more acutely aware of the dilemma because they needed their POs to generate enough income to become sustainable. However, even in Case 4, where the informants had a uniformly up-beat attitude to profit generation, the vicar thought that the PO would struggle to meet its full share of the operating costs.

Where informants took the view that financial sustainability was essential, it was nevertheless agreed that a 'soft sell' approach was needed, which chimes with Post Office Ltd's official policy and the FSA regulatory framework. At Case 6, the PO manager summed up this approach as "being here to help". The attitudes to sustainability adopted in these three branches support the view that charity retailers must combine profit generation with encouraging customer loyalty, providing social value, and understanding and networking with their local community to sustain their business (Liu and Ko, 2014).

Interestingly, the three cases which down-played the need to combine generating financial profit with providing social value were all hosting, rather than operating, their PO. In contrast, all the POs expected to create social capital. The Charity Commission (1999) includes the provision of ‘public amenities’ as part of a strategy for urban and rural regeneration. As with ventures run by regeneration charities, charity-backed POs advanced their aims because of their clear benefit to the elderly and those facing ‘poverty... financial hardship or other disadvantage,’ (Charities Act 2011 c.1 (3)1). They are understood by those involved to be generating social capital even when they are not generating financial capital. Six informants thought that providing a community resource was sufficient reason alone for their PO, but 15 considered income generation to be equally important for sustainability. Half wanted it to generate profits that could contribute to other areas of the charity’s work (the first meaning attributed to ‘profitable’). Furthermore, all informants expected to turn the social capital they create into economic capital. They expected their PO to attract service users, commissioners and donors to the charity’s other work, thereby contributing indirectly to the charity’s income.

By way of examples, cases 4 and 6 raised grant income on the strength of operating a PO. Case 2 raised social investment partly on the basis that their PO would provide social returns.

Given these risks and complexities, running a charity-operated PO provides multiple opportunities for making sense of experience. It can be seen in terms of fulfilling the organisation's charitable purposes, in which case primary purpose trading need not necessarily generate a profit so long as secondary trading raises income for the charity’s core work. But where profit-generation in the strictest sense is unlikely, the PO will need to strategically use the social value created by its PO to justify applications for grant aid to sustain it, or must make the case for cross-subsidy from the charity’s other resources.

Even where operating or hosting a PO as part of the organisation’s charitable purposes, charity-operated POs face the same challenges as other charity retailers in terms of sustainability, competition, staff professionalism and balancing the value of providing a community resource against generating income from the community. The concept of operating POs as part of a social enterprise hub (Dellot et.al. 2014) is appealing, but vague in application. With the exception of case 5, respondents took the view that their PO is a community hub in its own right. Only in case 5 was the PO regarded as a strategic resource to help the creation of a larger enterprise hub.

Based on the discussion of our study findings, we now draw out our conclusions and make a contribution to knowledge. In the first instance, we answer our research question. However, having done this, we can provide additional insights into the way profitability is understood and community resources are developed in a PO context.

Conclusions

The research set out to answer the question, ‘Do those involved with charity-backed POs prioritise using them for profit generation or to provide a community resource? We can conclude that both are important to almost all informants. They gave thought to both and had formed an attitude about their desirability. All of the informants were in broad agreement that charity-operated POs are, and should be, a community resource. Some informants gave much higher priority to this than to generating financial profit, and some felt that focusing on profit generation could be counter-productive and limit their PO’s effectiveness as a community resource. Even profitability enthusiasts doubted whether their PO could make any kind of financial profit without strong attached offers, resulting in a view that POs were strategic resources for profitability, rather than contributing directly to an accounting profit themselves. Overall, there was considerable ambivalence about direct profit generation.

We could not see a pattern in the attitudes of those involved with a charity-backed PO and the ownership and governance models used. Respondents were often only vaguely aware of how their charity was constituted. Those involved with the four cases whose charitable purposes included urban or rural regeneration, and the social enterprise set up to run a community shop, saw their PO primarily as an anchor business for the local economy and a public amenity supporting those at greatest disadvantage. As with other charity retail outlets, respondents saw a conflict between the imperative to ‘trade up’ for greater profits and the provision of essential services for those in need. In four of the cases the informants kept these two dynamics in creative tension by seeking alternative ways of sustaining their POs (e.g. reducing unsociable opening hours or looking for innovative forms of ‘attached’ business). The

social value of operating a PO inspired respondents but - like the managers of successful charity shops - even cases committed to financial profitability remained open to a mix of values (Liu and Ko, 2014).

Finally, this paper outlines three rhetorical strategies for advocates of charity-backed POs to respond to demands about profitability. First, a conventional argument can be made that a PO is profitable if it generates a surplus that can be gifted or reallocated to a charity's other activities. Second, a PO can be presented as profitable if proceeds can offset (lower) a charity's fixed costs. In this case, the argument would be that the PO has a nett value to the charity that is greater than its additional fixed costs. Last, a PO can be presented as a driver of profitable footfall that enables other community activities to be sustained and/or which increases the profitability of other trading activities. In this last case, a PO is presented as a strategic resource for profitability or sustainability without necessarily generating an accounting profit itself.

Confronting the complexities of what it means to be 'profitable' supports a view that local POs must aim for 'profitability', but not necessarily for conventional 'profit generation'. This subtle difference accounts for the results of the study, and the strong consensus that all POs create hubs that add social value to a community. In this respect charity-backed post offices are not so different from their commercial counterparts, which can also generate profits in their own right, mitigate the fixed costs of the attached business and generate footfall for it. This helps to locate charity-based post offices within Post Office Ltd's frame of reference as well as within the theoretical framework of charity trading. On the basis of our findings, we contest Liu and Ko's (2014) view that charity management should focus on requiring staff and volunteers to adopt market-oriented management values in their decision-making. The act of charity retail trading, as well as encompassing a broader conceptualisation of "profitability", can include framed social innovations that support a charity's primary purposes.

About the Authors

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Name of Post Office and Community Centre or Community Shop

Name of Interviewee

- (1) Can I start by asking how you are involved with the post office (and community shop) here?
- (2) What do you know about the legal structure of the post office (and community shop)?

OR

What's the legal set-up for your post office (and community shop)? (What does its constitution say? What sort of organisation is it?)

- (3) Overall, how would you say things are going?
- (4) What do you see as the main motivation or reason for running your post office / community shop and post office?
- (5) I'm interested to know whether you think the post office and the shop help to keep the charity going, or whether the charity and the community help to keep the post office and the shop going. How does that work as far as you can see?
- (6) Does the post office cover all of its operating costs such as heat, light, rent, rates, staffing and so on, or is it subsidised in some way, perhaps by sharing a building, or by relying on volunteers, or borrowing staff from another organisation?
- (7) Sometimes post office staff are encouraged to sell customers products or services which will make more income for their branch. Do you see a conflict between trying to sell priority mails' services like special delivery, or finance products like insurance or savings bonds, and trying to help the most disadvantaged members of you community, like people who don't have a car or who rely on their old age pension to get by?
- (8) How do feel about the fact that everything you can buy in a post office can be bought on line, and how do you deal with that/how do (you and) the post office staff deal with that?
- (9) What are the values that inspire you when you're working in/with or supporting the post office / community shop?
- (10) What image are you aiming to create for customers and for the wider community? OR What impression do customers and the wider community get when they use this post office and community shop? Why do they think it's here?

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