



EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OMAN SME BOOKSHOP PERFORMANCE, CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND EMPLOYEE PROFILES

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KeyWords

Bookshops, Employee Profiles, Customer Experience, Omani SMEs, Omani Bookshops, Bookstore Business Performance, Reader Preferences in Oman

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Despite popular sentiment about how the days of the brick-and-mortar bookshops are numbered, independent (SME) bookshops across the world are seeing a resurgence. However, bookshop owners tend to face challenges in managing operating costs, generating sales, and knowing what kind of people to hire to drive performance. This paper examines the possible relationship between employee profiles in bookshops in Muscat, the customer satisfaction at these bookshops, and the reported operational and financial performance at the bookshops. **Methodology:** The paper relies on structured interviews with 4 bookshop owners in Muscat, paired with a 30-question ECSI questionnaire to measure the customer satisfaction of 60 customers at 3 of the 4 bookshops. Finally, the paper examines possible trends between the operational performance, the customer satisfaction, and the preferred behavioral competencies the bookshop owners tend to seek out in hires. **Findings:** The customers reported significantly higher expectations in areas which are influenced by employees' marketing and sales competencies including friendliness, speed of assistance, and the ability to hold an interesting conversation. Similarly, the bookshop which reported a preference to hire sales-competent employees was able to demonstrate more consistent customer satisfaction and overall better financial performance. **Conclusion:** There is a relationship between employee profiles and customer satisfaction at Omani bookshops. However, the relationship between customer satisfaction and financial performance is less clear. **Recommendations:** Bookshops are recommended to hire readers between 23-27 years old with marketing backgrounds and specific face-to-face sales competencies. It is a plus if the employees tend to read the same genre the bookshop specializes in, though this should be researched further.

Introduction

The global book market was valued at \$107 Billion in 2022 (Dun and Bradstreet, 2022). Ever since the book behemoth Amazon entered the market, there was pressure put on both larger chain bookstores such as Borders and Barnes and Noble, as well as SME bookstores across the world. Some of the main challenges facing SME Bookshops include weak profit margins, difficulty in securing sales, and inventory challenges (Horder, 2019). Additionally, bookshops find it difficult to retain talented employees because of low wages (Raffaelli, 2020). Contrary to popular belief, however, starting from 2015 SME bookstores have actually had a resurgence across the world, with the number of bookshops in the US and elsewhere increasing.

Across the world, bookstores adopted a variety of solutions to survive their challenges. In the USA, Indie Bookstores fostered a sense of localism, hosted more physical events and began to curate customized inventories and activities. (Raffaelli, 2020). In Iraq's Kurdiatan region, the increase was primarily due to a larger embrace of community through clever social media usage (Algeji et al, 2021). In China, some bookstores have adopted a 'new bookstore' business model which involves selling different branded commodities to supplement bookstore earnings (Huang, 2021). In Lithuania, bookstores focused on consolidating the number of types of books they stock, in addition to adding new products on top of books. (Gaudunuvisius, 2020). In Australia, Li (2010) highlights a compound approach to successful bookshops, which includes location, design, curation of rarer books compared to chain bookshops, and customer service excellence. Addis (2016) similarly highlights multiple factors for success among bookshops in Italy, determining 3 aspects of fantastic bookshop experiences and 6 attributes to the ideal bookshop employee. In many cases, the key is delighting customers.

Research Problem

In the current climate in Oman, there is a limited number of bookshops, whether chain or SME. In addition, bookstores tend to have a difficult time in putting together viable strategies, partly because they don't know which paths to pursue and with which type of employees they should pursue them. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that most SMEs in Oman are owned by a single person, who often also holds a separate full-time job and may not have the right know-how related to managing a business. (Al Yahmadi and Ramachandran, 2019)

bookshops in Oman are struggling to be profitable under the current market condition. The last widespread chain of bookstores in Oman is Borders. There is a lack of SME bookshops in Oman that are succeeding. The lack of bookshops will make it difficult to fill the societal and cultural gap (Horder, 2019) and also symbolizes lost value.

Under the above conditions, it is difficult for bookshops to decide on the right type of person they need to help them grow. This includes options on attributes as well as skills and qualifications.

Research Statement and Questions

Considering the above, it is important for the study to focus on the relationship, if any, between employee profile, customer satisfaction, and business performance.

To address this problem, the research paper relentlessly addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the current Omani SME Bookshops performance?
2. What are the business goals and challenges of Oman SME bookstores?
3. What are the employee profiles in Oman SME bookstores?
4. What is the customer experience and customer perception of Oman SME bookstores?
5. What are the relationships between Oman SME bookstores performance, customer experience and employee profiles?

The main benefits of the paper come from advising owners of SME bookstores in Oman and people aiming to open bookstores on any ideal characteristics to be sought in employees. The paper will also reinforce existing research on the significance of customer satisfaction in bookshops, and will shed light on some important customer satisfaction expectations in the current climate in Muscat.

Significance of The Study

For the Omani government, this study provides informative insights about the main challenges facing bookstore owners. It can also provide information and suggestions for future legislation to support bookstores, including for example the need for bookshops to add coffee or additional products to their inventories, which requires special permits.

For academics, the research paper will provide valuable insights into the bookstore industry in Oman, and how it compares to different markets around the world.

Finally, the study has indirect significance to bookshop customers in Muscat, since the recommendations in the study will drive customer satisfaction in the future.

Literature Review

This section of the paper seeks to describe existing knowledge about business performance, employee profiles, and customer satisfaction.

History of SME Bookshops

Miller (2006) wrote about the progress of bookstores from the 1920s until around 2005 in the USA. Before the 1920s, the market was primarily split into either SME bookstores or libraries, where people could borrow books. SME bookstores were seen as intellectual havens and places of culture, but lacked in selection and customer service. In the 1960s onwards, mall strip bookstores and variety stores began to appear which offered convenience and a wider selection. After that, chainstores and superstores such as Crown and Barnes and Noble took the spotlight by offering hundreds of thousands of books, and most SME bookstores were unable to keep up with that challenge. Horder (2019) notes how the chain bookstores themselves were mostly driven out of the market by online retailing of books, most importantly Amazon starting 2009. Nowadays, Raffeili (2022) contends that SME Bookshops are in the middle of a resurgence thanks to a focus on community, curation, and convening, which will be discussed in the SME Bookshops operation and performance section.

Huang (2021) discusses how initially, most bookshops were centralized in Taipei Street nicknamed 'bookstore street'. In the 80's, Kingstones and Eslite began appearing, and chain bookstores forced the earlier, smaller business model out. (Meng, 2007) Over time, these larger chain stores came to be seen as too generic. Nowadays, awareness of SME Bookshop/Publisher hybrids is rising along with topicalization and a hunger for highly specific, relevant reading material. Huang (2020) explains how physical bookstores in China collapsed from 2002-2012 with the advent of online retailing, which brought a greater selection than ever before. Currently, a new model of bookstore thrives based on the idea of melding books with other consumer products, which takes advantage of what is known as 'symbolic consumption'.

In Oman, very little about the history of bookshops in the mid 20th century onwards is available to researchers. However, it should be noted that there is a wealth of authorship and readership dating to the 18th century and back, as evidenced by the National Records and Archives Authority (National Records and Archives Authority, 2022).

Business Goals of SME Bookshops

This research paper acknowledges that a significant portion of SME bookshops are founded upon cultural or personal satisfaction goals which go beyond the profit (Miller, 2006). However, this paper will focus on business goals rather than cultural ones.

Bookshops of all shapes and sizes aiming to make a profit will try to maximize their sales, since the price of each book is largely decided by the publisher, meaning that each book has a fixed, small profit margin that cannot be influenced by the bookshop (Horder, 2019). Raffeili (2017) conducted a qualitative study examining conferences of bookshop owners and speaking with these business owners. Out of this research, he observes "Starting in the mid-2000s, independent booksellers began to mobilize around shared collective identity claims associated with "localism," a network of small business owners, investors, policymakers and citizens focused on creating and sustaining local economies." This localism reinforced customer loyalty and helped maximize the amount of time customers spent at the bookshop, increasing sales. Addis (2016) identifies customer experience as a core differentiation tool to obtain a competitive advantage to secure a good market share.

Reducing costs is an important concern among many bookshops. Miller (2006) discusses in *Reluctant Capitalists* how some people view the importance of selection and curation. In essence, bookstores are able to carve out a niche for themselves through curation. Note that there are more books published annually nowadays than ever before. A bookstore which can efficiently curate only the books which its target market will enjoy will be able to reduce its overhead, maximize sales, and secure the highest profits possible. Raffeili (2020) explains how bookshops have even begun to purposefully change locations to reduce rent costs, which lowers overhead but also diverts funds towards hiring talented employees.

SME Bookshops Operations and Performance

Miller (2006) touches on the day-to-day operations of indie bookshops. At their core, bookshops are tasked with the sourcing, curation, marketing, and selling of books. A normal day will include dealings with vendors and publishers, stocking shelves, promoting and marketing the bookshop, and selling the books. Hill (2014) discusses bookshops in Turkey as an experience, where bookshops through décor and staff convey a message of 'readishness' which is more valuable to the customer than the book itself. In this case, part of the bookshop's main concerns are décor, lighting, ambiance, and customer relations.

When discussing the processes which lead to bookshops thriving, Raffeili (2020) expands on them as a framework of 3 C's: Community, Curation, Convening. In essence, bookstores first champion the idea of localism, then curate personalized experiences to their

new visitors, and finally gather those visitors together around the bookstore through events. The figure below explains in more detail.

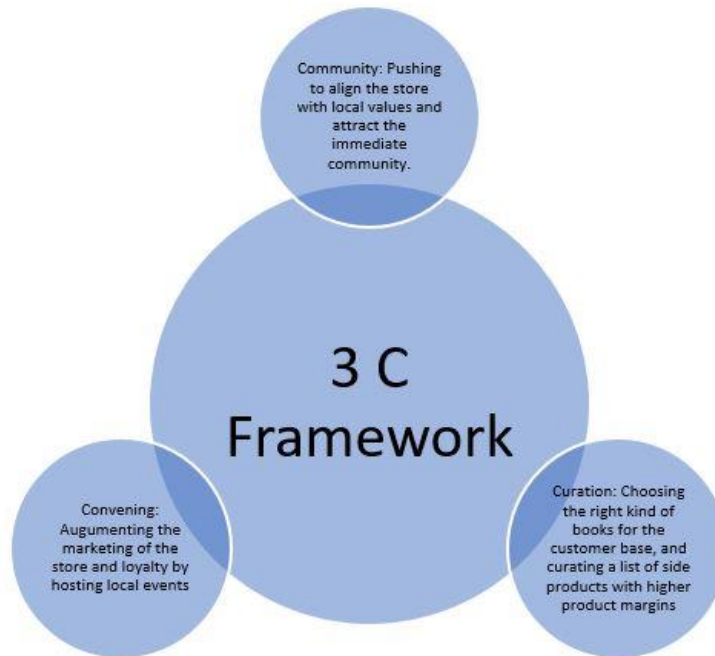


Figure 1 3 C Framework (Raffeili, 2020) replicated by Author

In terms of performance, most of the literature agrees that independent bookshops as a whole are not highly profitable. Part of this is an issue with the bookshop's practices, as explained by Miller (2006) in detail in reluctant capitalists. For example, the need to make a cultural impact and to provide a wide selection sometimes stops bookshops from utilizing rationalization techniques in curating its books. Similarly, the literature shows that pricing control is often not held by the bookshop, which means that profit margins are predetermined for each book. Horder (2019) also focuses in on the bookseller's perception of bookselling as a cultural act, rather than a profit-making act. Indeed, booksellers often define 'profit' as subsistence. This is a sentiment which is echoed in this paper's structured studies. However, Raffeili (2020) also notes a resurgence of indies starting 2010, and notes that the 3 C framework is helping indies survive. Huang (2020) notes that new-model bookstores, which use books as cost-leaders and sell other, high-profit products alongside the books, are also proving more successful in China.

Employees in SME Bookshops

As a rule, Bookshops are unable to pay high wages because of their low profit margins on the sale of books. Horder (2019) speaks with multiple booksellers who say that any other job would be able to provide a higher salary. Additionally, bookshop employees tend to describe their work as very similar to librarians, including having intrinsic knowledge about the books which they recommend. Finally, bookshop employees tend to be higher educated. Raffeili (2020) adds that bookshops face a distinct challenge in paying livable wages because great bookshop employees are relatively rare and highly trained.

Behavioral Theories of Employment

Jayawardhena and Farell (2010) discuss customer orientation and the Theory of Reasoned Action, which was first brought forward by Fishbein in 1979. In the Theory of Reasoned Action, it is assumed that actions are the result of intention. The theory states

that intentions stem from attitudes, subjective norms, and beliefs. They also add that customer orientation is a type of employee attitude orientation which puts the customer’s needs first. This goes beyond the idea that ‘the customer is always right’. Instead, it positions the service employee’s different processes through the lens of fulfilling the customer’s needs.

Horder (2019) and Raffeili (2020) both highlight that a high number of bookshop employees reported that they themselves are voracious readers. This could be potentially linked to Customer Orientation or the Theory of Reasoned Action, suggesting that readers will have orientations and intentions making them uniquely more suited to selling books. Miller (2006) contradicts some of the assumptions set by Horder. “But my interviews with and observations of bookstore patrons indicate that readers today have extremely limited expectations for bookstore employees’ knowledge about books, much less the world of ideas in general.” In some cases, the customers wanted to speak to a friendly person who knew where all the books were. In other cases, customers just wanted a store clerk. 1/6th of the customers mentioned the ability to recommend a book. However, note that Miller’s interviews came a full 13 years before Horder and Rafeilli. In the intermittent period, chain stores went out of business and Amazon came into the forefront, which means that customer preferences may have changed.

Addis (2016) researched the excellent customer experience in bookshops as well as the ideal bookshop employee. The ideal bookshop employee according to Addis is as seen below.

Role	Meaning
1) Competent and professional	They should know the book industry, the old and new titles, the writers, even the most recent, updated with the last news and trends regarding the overall society. They must be prepared, and trained
2) Engaging	They should have a strong passion for books, and they should be able to transmit such a passion so that customers get involved and fascinated by their stories. They should have an open attitude in order to make consumers feel at home in their company, at ease, and with someone trustful.
3) Psychologist	They should listen to the individuals, even when the latter do not know exactly what to ask. They should be able to understand consumers’ needs even if they are latent. Further, they should be wise.
4) Prepared members of a structured organization	They have to know the exact location of all the titles in the bookshop by heart without asking for the help of computers, and at the same time they should know the processes, the resources and the organizational aspects of the whole bookshop
5) Gentle	They should be friendly, cordial, informal but at the same time very respectful, and not intrusive. They should be serious, quite, tidy, and professional but also creative, smiling and cheerful, with a proper casual clothing.
6) Supportive	They must be of help and providing useful, precise and in-depth advice. They should make consumers grow up internally, and at the same time they should be fast and easily recognizable

Table 1 The Roles of Bookshop Employees (Addis, 2016) replicated by Author

Customer Experience and Satisfaction Theories

Biscacia et al (2016) discuss customer satisfaction and its relationship to customer loyalty, wherein they allude to customer satisfaction being “post-consumption evaluation” of the service in relation to either service-specific expectations or global expectations.

Additionally, Biscacia lay out a number of frameworks for measuring customer satisfaction, including the ECSI model, which Haafte (2017) explains as a variation of the ACSI model and is used in Europe as part of the Europe Consumer Satisfaction Index.

SME Bookshops are considered a market with a low switching cost. This is because without product differentiation, the most common books in stock and their prices are set by publishers and will be similar across bookshops (Horder, 2019). Mntande, Stiehler-

Mulder and y Roberts-Lombard (2022) write how retailers can secure delight and loyalty in such a market. They evaluate both Relationship Management Theory and Social Exchange Theory in this context, as well as discussing customer delight, a phenomena in exceeding customer expectations in such a way that the service provider gets an emotive response which partially reinforces loyalty. Additionally, Barari et al (2020) and Thomas (2018) hint that negative customer experiences have a more significant lasting impact than a positive customer experience.

In SME Bookshops, Raffielli (2017) discusses how SME Bookshops were able to distinguish themselves in the market by curating specific types of books under the 3C framework, creating a specialized customer experience to hand-sell each book. Horder (2019) spoke with 4 female customers in the greater seattle area, who reported that their main reasons for loving the bookstores they frequent are the coziness and familiarity of the store, which led to them building an emotional bond with the bookshop. Horder adds that the physicality of the bookshops has a special importance, since it impacts book number, availability, accessibility, and the symbolic value and feel of the bookshop. The hosting of specific authors and events also impact the customer experience. Li (2010) says that the customer’s experience depends on Location, Design, Inventory, and Service, which together define the type of bookshop and the customer’s experience.

Addis (2016) wrote an in-depth look into customer experiences and the customer journey in 11 bookshops in Italy including 168 customers. This paper established differences in mindset between planner and spontaneous customers, as well as chain bookshop and independent bookshop customers. Additionally, the paper identified that as retailers, bookshops need to map out the customer journey and delight their customers. Addis identifies facets of the great bookshop experience, as summarized below.

The Great Bookshop Experience	Explanation
Is Customized	Consumers expect the bookshops to not only understand them, but to use this understanding to tailor offerings, services, and experiences for them.
Makes People Feel Integrated	Customers aim at feeling themselves part of bookshops. Different touchpoints should be designed with the customer in mind such as Atmosphere, windows, storefront, events, booksellers, perceived control, environmental stimuli, the need to touch and browse the books, and the selection
Makes Customers Participate Actively	This is translated as socialization. Bookshop customers want to connect with people like them both online and offline. The bookshop, in this sense, is a platform.

Table 2 The Great Bookshop Experience (Addis, 2016) replicated by author

From the above sections, we see that SME Bookshops are currently in a resurgence, even while they still struggle with hiring the right people, selling enough books, managing stock and inventory, and being profitable. Bookshops currently either focus on a variant of Raffielli’s 3C framework, or focus on selling secondary goods to make a profit. Employee attitudes and psychological resources such as friendliness and knowledge about books can support the employee in securing customer satisfaction, which in turn is impacted by location, design, curation, providing the correct atmosphere, book selection, and the relationship between the employee and the customer. With this present information to rely on, this paper will attempt to examine The relationship, if any, between bookshop employee profiles, bookshop customer satisfaction, and customer financial performance to explore whether there are specific employee attributes which can prescribe success in the bookshops.

Research Methodology

The research paper relies on a hybrid primary data collection methodology involving structured interviews with the owners of 4 SME bookshops in Muscat, in addition to distributing ECSI customer satisfaction questionnaires to the bookshops, which in turn used whatsapp, an in-store QR code, and their Instagram Stories to distribute the questionnaire to their customers. The questionnaire was answered by 59 customers in total. 35 were from Al Hibr Bookshop, 15 were from Al Ain Bookshop, and 10 were from Al Waraqah bookshop. Note that the names of the bookshops have been fictionalized to protect the businesses, which shared sensitive information about their financial performance. This represented 37% of the research paper’s target sample population. The researcher then conducts a thematic content qualitative analysis of the interviews to identify key details including financial bookshop performance, sales, and whether the bookshops have target employee profiles. The paper finally maps out this qualitative data to the quantitative customer satisfaction results for each bookshop.

Research Findings

In the interview component, the researcher reached out to 5 bookshops. Of those, two bookshops declined to participate since one of them was going out of business, and the other business owner was un-interested. The researcher was able to locate one alternative, bringing the total of bookshops down from 5 bookshops to 4. However, while the alternative bookshop approached by the researcher was willing to conduct the interview, it was only able to gather 1 questionnaire respondent. Therefore, it will not be considered in the

quantitative portion of the research.

Qualitative Findings

The owner of Al Qalam Bookshop has owned three bookshops during his lifetime. The first was in the late 1990s. The second was in the late 2000s, and the third was established in late 2019. The bookshop has around 200 titles with no genre specialization. Currently, the owner has no employees, down from 2 employees in 2021. The biggest expense at the moment is rent, which is around OMR 300 per month. The owner’s core community belief is raising the reading culture.

The owners of Al Hibr Bookshop purchased an existing store which had been in the market for nearly 10 years but which had almost gone out of business. This bookshop has around 500-700 titles on display, with no emphasis on genre specialization and a lack of specialized educational books and fantasy/sci-fi. However, the owners are currently considering specializing in self help and entrepreneur books, in addition to popular Arabic fiction novels. Currently the bookshop has 2 part-time employees in addition to registering themselves as employees as well. The bookshop’s highest expenses are the salaries and rent, which total around OMR 1000 in total.

The Owners of Al Waraqah Bookshop have been active for about a year, having opened their doors late 2021. The bookshop stocks around a thousand titles with no specific emphasis on genre specialization and a lack of fantasy/sci-fi. However, the owner said that they aim to provide culturally significant books, which are often literary and high-brow. The bookshop has 3 employees, two of whom are part-time employees. The highest expenses for the bookshop are rents are salaries, which are around 800 each totalling OMR1600. Al Waraqah also has a subscription service and organizes for-profit workshops.

Al Ain Bookshop is a partnership with an existing bookshop and publishing house in another GCC country. The bookshop has around 2000 titles on display, and is consciously focused on not specializing in terms of genre out of a belief in capturing the highest market segment possible. The bookshop has two part-time employees, and its total costs per month are around OMR1100 per month. The bookshop is not active in supplier relations, but trusts that the GCC branch is.

All of the bookshops rely on part-time work. Additionally, all of them have owners who believe in the goodness of providing books to the community. Lastly, all of the bookshops have said that books are not very profitable because of the low profit-margins and the lack of control on their prices. All of these factors are consistent with Horder (2019). However, note that none of the bookshop owners said that they actively specialize in a genre. This is not consistent with Raffeili (2019), who identified Curation, the act of stocking books and experiences that provide a specialized customer experience, as one of the key signs of independent bookshop resurgence and success.

In addition to the above general information, the bookshops volunteered a host of operating profit estimations, sales figure estimations, and their opinions on the ideal type of employee they target. This information is summarized below.

	Business and Operational Performance	Ideal Employees
Al Qalam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 50-100 books sold per month - OMR 250-500 in revenue in the best case scenario - Around OMR 300 in cost - Estimated OMR -100 in profit per month (owner says he is paying the rent out of his own pocket, and lost about OMR 1000 in the past year) - Not serving the customer well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Female - College educated - Around 25 years old - IT and social media proficiency - Should be a reader - No genre required - No personality requirement

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Estimated operating profit=-50% 	
Al Hibr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Monthly average book sales: 500 books - Monthly average income: Around OMR 2500-3000 - Monthly average cost: Around OMR 1000 in fixed cost, plus 60% COGS. - Monthly Average profit/loss: estimated OMR 100 based on OMR 2750 in revenue - Estimated Monthly Operating Profit/loss: 9.09% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No gender preference - College educated - Around 25 years old - Sales Competency including understanding the market - No need to be a reader - No genre requirement - Should be good at speaking and listening, able to resolve customer complaints
Al Waraqah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Monthly average book sales: Unknown - Monthly average income: Around OMR 40-60 per day (OMR 1250 per month average) - Monthly average cost: Around OMR 1600 - Monthly Average profit/loss: About – 300 per month in profit - Estimated Monthly Operating Profit/loss = -30% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Female - College educated - Around 25 years old - Should be a reader - Reads literary books - Creative and initiative seeker - Friendly
Al Ain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Around 200 books per month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Female - College Educated - Around 25 years old

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Around OMR 1000 in revenue per month - Break even at 0 - Estimated Operating profit= 0% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Should be a reader - No specific genre requirements - Should be good at organizing books and recommending alternative books to customers.
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Table 3 Qualitative Analysis Summary

As can be seen in the summary, the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th bookshops are performing better than the first bookshop, which did not have any behavioural requirements. At first glance, it would appear that Al Hibr is performing the best, followed by Al Ain, followed by Al Waraqah. However, note that financial performance includes a number of factors which are not related to sales or employees, as Horder (2019) notes. For example, rent and salaries, as well as book supply, are all factors influenced by the business owner more than by the employee.

Quantitative Findings

This section shows the aggregate analysis of preferences and expectations of customers in Muscat. First, the paper will display some of the demographic information.

Row Labels	Count of Gender
Female	31
Male	24
(blank)	
Grand Total	55

Table 4 Gender Information

Row Labels	Count of Age
o 11-20	16
o 21-30	18
o 31-40	14
o 41-50	4
o 50-60	2
o 60 فما فوق	1
(blank)	
Grand Total	55

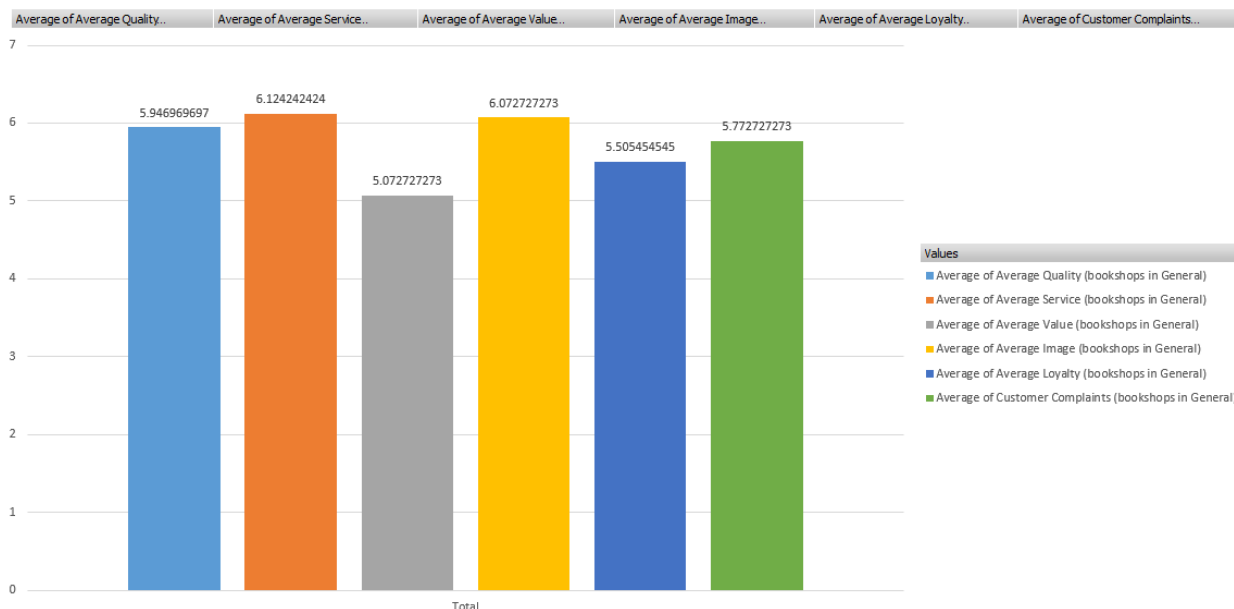
Table 5 Age information

Row Labels	Count of Academic Degree
(blank)	
o High School Diploma	9
o Bachelors Degree	26
o College Diploma	9
I am still a school student	9

Table 6 Education

Row Labels	Count of How Many Books Do you Normally Purchase per Year
o 1	2
o 10-6	11
o 15-11	10
o 20-16	7
o 30-21	7
o 3-2	8
o 5-4	6
o 30 or more	4
Grand Total	55

Table 7 Number of Books Purchased Per Year



As we can see from the table above, there were 55 respondents after filtration as. The majority of them is female, which is consistent with qualitative comments from the bookshop owners. In addition, a small majority of the customers were between 21-30 years old. However, almost all of the respondents were between 11-50 years old. Lastly, almost half of the respondents bought between 6-15 books per year. At an average cost of OMR 5 per book, that puts each customer's value per year at around OMR 30-50 per year. the bookshop customers on average had the highest expectations in the customer service category, at 6.12 out of 10. This is followed by Bookshop Image at 6.07 out of 10, and then by the Bookshop Quality at 5.94 out of 10. This shows that on average, the bookshop customers cared about the customer service more than anything else. This is consistent with Biscaia et al (2017) who mentions that common consensus in the retail industry is that customer service is more important than the quality of goods in securing customer satisfaction.

After looking at all categories from all bookshop respondents, the paper identified the customers' top 10 highest expectations for each category and set them as priorities.

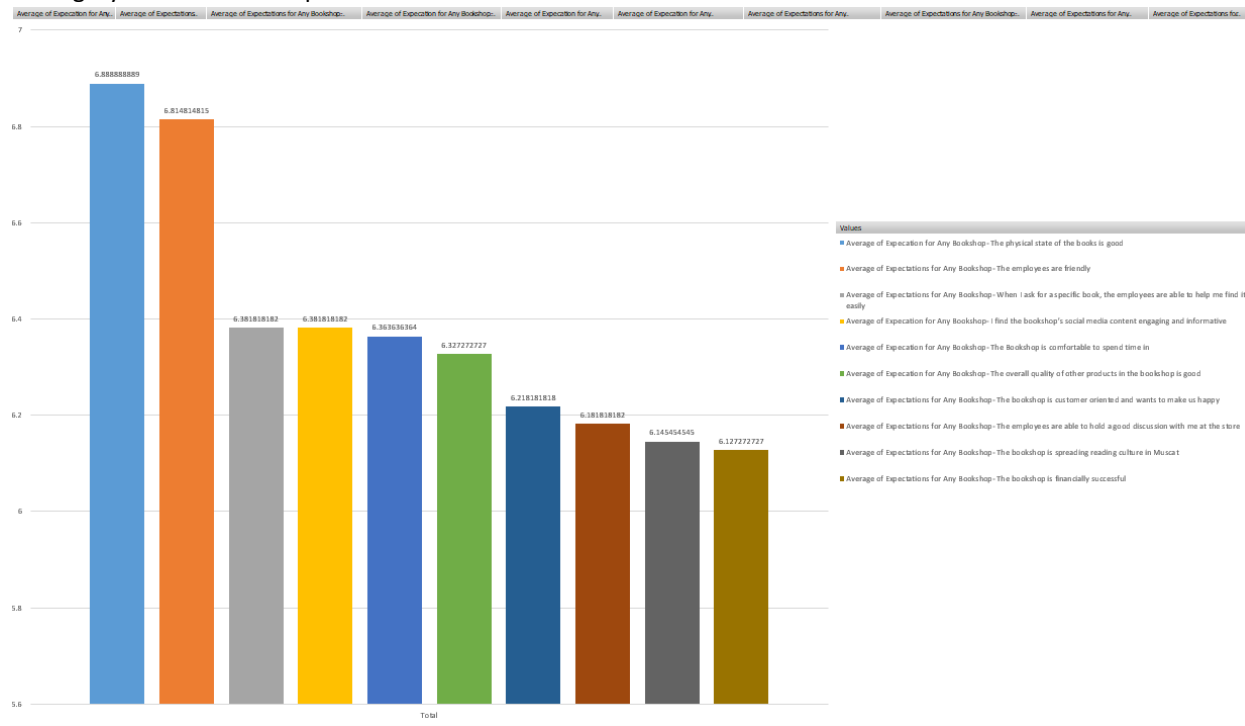


Figure 2 Average expectations for any bookshop

Priority factor	Goal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical state of the books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.89 out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendliness of Employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.81 out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employee Ability to help the customer find specific books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.38 out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging and Informative Social Media Content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.83 out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comfort Level at the bookshop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.36 out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall quality of non-book products at the bookshop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.33 out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Viewing the bookshop as customer-oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.22 out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employee Ability to hold a good discussion with the customer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.19 out of 10

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The bookshop image as spreading the reader culture in Muscat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.15 out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Viewing the bookshop as financially successful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.13 out of 10

Table 8 General Bookshop Priority Factor Expectations

Within these priorities, each bookshop’s scores were mapped out in a graph to visually represent their ability to meet customers’ expectations in the priority factors.

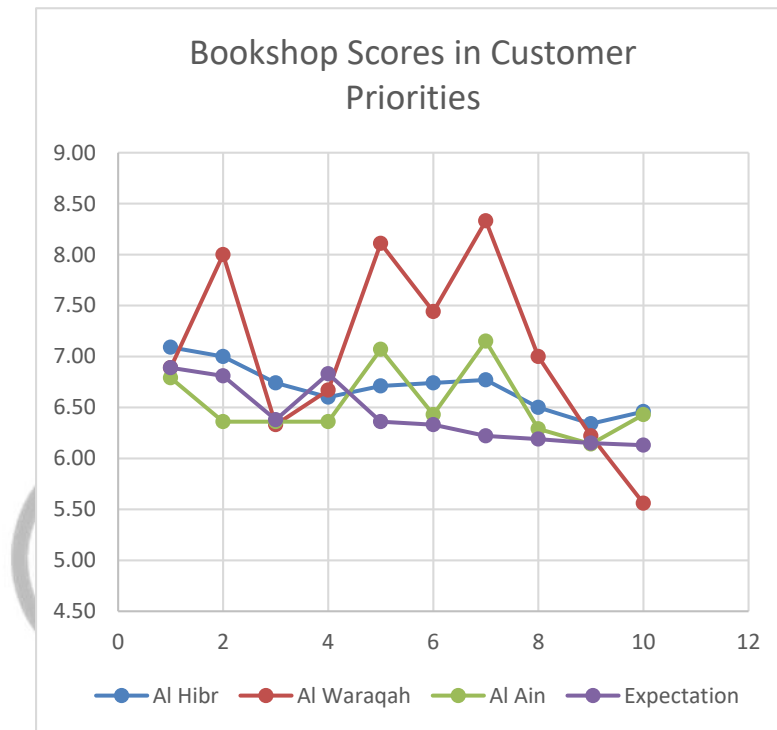


Figure 3 Bookshop Scores in Customer Priorities

Finally, the paper mapped out the scores of each bookshop, comparing their scores to the goal while showing their business performance and their ideal behavioral competencies. Individual bookshop scores which are below the average customer expectations were highlighted in red.

Priority factors	Goal	Al Hibr Score	Al Waraqah Score	Al Ain Score
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical state of the books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.89 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7.09 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.89 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.79
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendliness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.81 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7.00 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.36
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to get specific help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.38 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.74 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.33 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.36

• Social Media Content is Engaging	• 6.83	• 6.60	• 6.67	• 6.36
• Level of Comfort	• 6.36	• 6.71	• 8.11	• 7.07
• Quality of non-book products	• 6.33	• 6.74	• 7.44	• 6.43
• Viewing the bookshop as customer-friendly	• 6.22	• 6.77	• 8.33	• 7.15
• Ability of employees to hold a good discussion	• 6.19	• 6.5	• 7	• 6.29
• viewing the bookshop as spreading the culture of reading	• 6.15	• 6.34	• 6.22	• 6.14
• Viewing the Bookshop as financially successful	• 6.13	• 6.46	• 5.56	• 6.43
OPERATING PROFIT		9.09%	-30%	0%
KEY EMPLOYEE COMPETENCIES		Sales Competencies	Drive, Initiative and Creativity	Organizational Skills

Table 9 Summary of Results

Discussion

As can be seen above, the factors where the respondents had the highest expectations were:

- Physical state of the books
- Friendliness
- Ability to get specific help
- Social Media Content is Engaging
- Level of Comfort
- Quality of non-book products
- Viewing the bookshop as customer-friendly
- Ability of employees to hold a good discussion
- viewing the bookshop as spreading the culture of reading
- Viewing the Bookshop as financially successful

Within those priorities, Al Hibr bookshop had the most consistent scores and it was also the bookshop which scored above customer expectations most often. This indicates that there could be a wide set of expectations which customers bring into modern bookshops, and it is not enough to score remarkably high in some aspects and plummet in others. This is consistent with Thomas (2020), who highlights that negative customer experiences could have a more significant lasting impact than positive customer experiences. It is also consistent with Addis (2016) who highlights that the excellent customer experience at a bookshop should be customized to the customer's preferences. Al Hibr was also the most successful in terms of reported operating financial results. Finally, Al Hibr was the

bookshop with the most customer-oriented employee skillsets.

The research found that none of the participating bookshops were profitable. Al Qalam was in danger of closing due to a loss of around OMR200 per month, Al Waraqah was operating at around 28% operational loss, Al Ain was more or less breaking even, and Al Hibr operated at around 9% operational profit on most months. Within this framework, Al Hibr can be seen as the most successful. All of the business owners complained of high supply costs, high rents, and a difficulty in attracting enough sales to make a profit. Of the four bookshops, most did not have a formalized Vision, Mission, and Values.

The results from this investigation showed that the bookshop which focused on sales skills, customer interactions and had a clear verbalized customer orientation was able to secure the most consistent customer satisfaction scores, and also had the highest financial performance among the surveyed bookshops. This is consistent with Addis (2016) as well as Raffeili (2020) and Jawardhena and Farell (2010).

In investigating the relationship between behavioral competencies, customer satisfaction and financial performance among SME bookshops in Muscat, Oman, the paper concludes that there is a relationship between sales behavioral competencies in bookshops and between the customer satisfaction at the bookshop. However, the relationship between customer satisfaction and financial performance is more complex and should be studied further. The paper also notes that all the bookshops surveyed tended to hire college-educated women between 23-27 years old.

Recommendations and Future Research

The paper recommends to the legislature allowing bookshops to pair their licenses with coffee-shop permits, since the two tend to go hand-in-hand. The paper points out both Raffeilli (2020) and Huang (2022), who demonstrate significant success for bookshops which go into different products to supplement their incomes. This is important because it allows the bookshop to sell low-profit books alongside different goods which are higher-profit. This can include coffee or even book-related merchandise such as hoodies with book characters on them, etc.

For existing bookshops and entrepreneurs seeking to open bookshops, the paper recommends hiring college graduates who read and have sales competencies. The paper tangentially expands this to suggest college graduates who majored in either sales or marketing, or have existing sales experience. Importantly, the paper recommends following the Raffeili or Addis methodologies. Raffeili (2020) discusses that the resurgence of bookshops tends to be driven by the 3 C methodology, namely Community, Curation, and Convening. Addis (2016) highlights Customized, Integrated, and Participatory customer experiences, as well as 6 integral Attributes for bookshop employees, namely: Competent and professional, Engaging, Psychologist, Prepared members of a structured organization, Gentle, and Supportive. Lastly, the paper recommends a strong customer orientation, as was highlighted by the expectations of the customers in this study.

The paper identifies the need for more research in the following areas: The Omani readership, the benefits of specialization vs. differentiation in the curation methods within bookshops, whether specific university majors make for better bookshop employees, whether being a reader aligned with the bookshop's genre leads to better sales conversions, and the benefits of hosting events at Omani bookshops. There is also a need for research covering bookshops which specialize in English books in Muscat, although such bookshops are rare. Lastly, there is a need for research which looks at different cities in Oman where the reading culture might be different, as well as research into chain bookshops.

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