Available Online: 16 October 2026 DOI: 10.54254/2753-7102/2026.37889

How humanistic spaces can survive: a study on balancing the social value and lightweight operation strategies of gender-themed independent bookstores

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Abstract. As online retail channels continue to squeeze the survival space of physical bookstores, small independent humanistic spaces have emerged as crucial offline spaces for intellectual exchange and social support. However, these spaces have a fundamental problem: their social mission and survival in the business world. This paper uses Daixuan bookstore in Shenzhen as a major case study, exploring the manner in which small independent bookstores are able to survive without sacrificing their cultural and social identity. The study, using field observations, semi-structured interviews, and comparisons with competitors, assesses focused lightweight operational plans of such spaces as such to keep on operating. Results indicate that small humanistic spaces can adopt commercial strategies without compromising their fundamental social values, demonstrating that lightweight operational strategies can be used to close the divide between social values and financial sustainability to guarantee long-term survival.

Keywords: gender-themed bookstore, independent bookstore, commercial sustainability, cultural space, community operation

1. Introduction

Independent bookstores with a gender theme are unique humanistic spaces. Urban areas have public spaces. In contrast to regular bookstores that only concentrate on selling books as a profit-making venture, they bring immense social value in community bonding, female empowerment, and urban cultural development [1].

However, such bookstores inevitably face structural tension between viable survival strategies in the ever-changing society and adherence to humanistic pursuits [2].

Standing out among other bookstores, gender-themed bookstores introduce a plethora of

characteristics contributing to the heterogeneity of the business landscape. They can cultivate local communities and encourage meaningful interaction between people, gathering those with similar values,

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thoughts, and opinions, and providing a safe space for people to exchange thoughts [3]. These species also play a vital role in empowering women. Many students and citizens lack

systematic gender education in mainstream schooling. By collecting books on women's literature, gender studies, psychological growth, and gender rights, the bookstore fills this educational gap.

Even so, conflicts between humanistic values and commercial operations are unavoidable. Niche publications and distinctive themes create great social benefits, yet they attract limited

audiences and thus generate little direct income. In comparison with larger chains, independent

Bookstores lack the financial scope to compete on low prices, bringing even larger operational pressure considering high rent and labor costs in urban areas [4, 5]. Yet, if stores blindly pursue popularity and commercial profits, they lose their distinctiveness and become homogeneous to numerous stores out there. In this case, in-depth gender discussions will be weakened, and the bookstore's original humanistic characteristics will gradually disappear.

Daixuan Bookstore, as a distinctive gender-themed independent bookstore in Shenzhen, does not carry out its gender theme through an exclusionary "women only[1]" policy. Instead, following the idea of "Woman for all, all for woman," it builds a woman-friendly space that is open to people of all ages[2]. The founder describes the bookstore as "an incubator of gender-friendly awareness." She stresses that a physical space can help nurture a sense of gender equality: "Boys and girls alike—in the end, it is about respecting every person. In terms of business, Daixuan Books shows typical features of "lightweight operation," which can be summarized in the following four aspects.

First, lightweight staffing. The bookstore has long been run by the founder alone, and she has creatively used a model of "unstaffed self-service plus remote door opening."

Second, lightweight products. Besides selling books in the usual way, the store has introduced low-cost products such as a Valentine's Day book blind box and an anniversary "mystery surprise blind box," without making heavy investment.

Third, lightweight promotion. The bookstore uses a WeChat Official Account, Little Red Book, and a WeChat Mini Program as its main online channels[3].

Fourth, lightweight activities. The events are mainly book-sharing meetings, film screenings, Tarot Day experiences, and community salons[4]. They mostly depend on the founder's academic resources and community volunteers, use the store itself as the venue, and require little extra spending.

2. Research Methodology 1

The first Research Methodology is a course that introduces students to the principles and practices of research.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the lightweight strategies mentioned above have managed to control the costs, they have not been transformed into consistent income. Since Daixuan Bookstore is situated on the edge of an urban village, it is important to learn about the community environment around it in order to identify opportunities and obstacles to its existence. The existing leisure and retail spaces which could be used as

[1] Daixuan Zhuren. (2023, January 26). Daixuan: The birth of a bookstore. Daixuan Books WeChat Official Account.

[2] Daixuan Books. (2023, January 31). Preview: Daixuan is about to open for trial operation. Daixuan Books WeChat Official Account.

[3] Dr. Ren. (2026, August 8). Daixuan turns three and a half | Daixuan is still here. Daixuan Books WeChat Official Account.

[4] Daixuan Books. (2024). Every city needs a women's bookstore | The 29th World Book Day 2024 | Five-city women's book joint exhibition "Seeing Countless Hers." Daixuan Books WeChat Official Account.

potential competitors were investigated through field observations. These were beverage shops, convenience stores, and commercial complexes that provide a diversified cultural consumption experience.

Moreover, semi-structured interviews were held with. neighbours in the neighbourhoods. These interviews were to be designed to explore three main variables: residents' awareness of Daixuan, their attitudes towards the need for an independent. bookstore, and habits that residents have concerning reading, leisure, and community participation, thus allowing for evaluating unmet needs. Needs that Daixuan can be placed to fill.

3. Findings

The results indicate a significant gap between community and institutional visibility.

First, there are limits of location and customer flow. The store sits in a suburban community,

surrounded by non-cultural businesses such as tire shops, so it has few passing customers, and nearby residents have little desire to spend money at a themed bookstore.

Second, the profit model is weak. Books, cultural products, and drinks have not produced

large-scale income, and the founder has clearly stated that profit maximization is not her goal.

Third, there is the energy limit of running the store alone. The founder cannot put all her effort into the bookstore while also doing her academic work and psychological counseling.

Most importantly, a considerable proportion of younger residents reported no prior awareness of Daixuan's existence, despite articulating a clear demand for community-based reading spaces [6] and even gender-related educational sources. This disconnect suggests that the bookstore's survival challenges extend beyond financial sustainability toward a deeper issue of community embeddedness [7], which refers to how much the space has been integrated into its specific location or network [8].

Through the research, we also established the bookstore's special strengths.

First, it has deep community attachment: teenagers see the bookstore as a "second home."

Second, the founder has a strong professional advantage: her dual identity as a gender studies PhD and a psychological counselor gives the bookstore's book selection and services a quality that cannot be easily replaced .

Third, it has low-cost resilience: the founder's personal book collection, self-service operation, and mutual help from the community allow the store to keep running even with very low income . Fourth, it has a rare brand position: as "Shenzhen's first feminist bookstore," it has received media attention beyond what its business scale would normally bring[5].

4. Research Methodology 2

To make clear where Daixuan Books stands in the ecology of independent bookstores in Shenzhen, this study chooses two representative independent bookstores in Shenzhen—Yuedao Bookstore and Old Heaven Books—for a side-by-side comparison through field observation. These bookstores were chosen as all three are local Shenzhen independent bookstores and all share the feature of "spatial experience plus cultural activities," but they differ clearly in theme, location, customer structure, and profit model, so they form a meaningful comparison.

[5] Nanfang+. (2023, October 23). Dialogue with Shenzhen women's bookstore founders during Reading Month: Go find answers in books. https://static.nfapp.southcn.com/content/202310/23/c8222120.htmlThe Paper. (2023, November 14). Starting from women's bookstores, diverse connections, solidarity and mutual help.

Yuedao Bookstore is known for the sharp contrast of "going upstairs to read and going downstairs to buy vegetables[6]."Customers are asked to take off their shoes before entering, and a sign at the entrance states that children under 14 are not allowed in, in order to create a quiet, home-like reading environment[7]. Its business hours are 10:00–22:00. Yuedao is not a feminist bookstore but a general independent bookstore that sells itself as "a reading space like home."

Old Heaven Books mainly sells humanities books and independent music. It started from an eight-square-meter stall in Huaqiangbei and later moved to OCT-LOFT[8], where it grew into a mixed space of about 200 square meters. A wall divides the space into a bookstore area and an activity area, and the activity area has a bar that sells drinks. Old Heaven Books is also an independent music label: it releases records, organizes music festivals and independent music performances, and holds cultural salons and poetry readings from time to time.

5. Findings

From the comparison above, the following three findings can be drawn for reference in the chapters on operation strategy and social value.

First, location and customer flow are basic factors in running an independent bookstore, but they are not the deciding factors. Old Heaven Books makes a profit by relying on the large crowds and cultural consumption atmosphere of OCT-LOFT; Yuedao gets a steady flow of customers through its contrasting position as a bookstore in a downtown urban village; Daixuan, located in a suburban community, has a serious lack of passing customers.

Second, how many income sources a bookstore has is directly related to the size of its operating team. Old Heaven Books can build a mixed income structure of "70% books plus vinyl records, drinks, and performances[9] "because it has team-based operations and the professional resources of a music label. Yuedao maintains a 300-square-meter space and light food and drink service through a husband-and-wife team. Daixuan, run by one person, can hardly copy these operation-heavy models.

Third, there is no simple positive relationship between a bookstore's theme and style and its commercial sustainability. Old Heaven Books, with its cool attitude of "not trying to please customers," has still built a highly loyal community and healthy income. Yuedao protects the reading experience with its rule of not allowing children in. Daixuan, with its open policy that "children matter more than business," has given up some of the commercial value of a quiet reading space but has gained social value instead.

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[8] Sina Finance. (2022, August 6). It is a miracle that it did not close down in Shenzhen. https://finance.sina.cn/2022-08-06/detail-imizirav7042533.d.htmlTencent News. (2023, January 31). Swimming against the current (Old Heaven Books). https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20230131A015OB00Old Heaven Books. (n.d.). Official site. Address: No. 120, Building A5, Northern District, OCT-LOFT, Nanshan District, Shenzhen.

[9] Xunmiwang. (2025, October 29). How much can a bookstore earn in a year? An analysis of the transformation models and profits of physical bookstores in 2025.

6. Conclusion

The study proposes a lightweight operation plan suitable for small-volume cultural spaces for Shenzhen Daixuan Bookstore, a gender-themed micro-community bookstore. It can be seen in the financial calculation that this kind of bookstore faces multiple structural contradictions: low gross profit on books, high pressure on site rent, a large amount of unpaid labour for the owner, and the social benefits brought by public welfare services are spilled out, but it is difficult to directly transform into operating income; even if the optimistic business scenario is reached, it can only cover cash expenditure. It is still difficult to compensate for all the labour of the owner because of the depreciation of the equipment.

Therefore, the store should not give priority to expanding the store and setting up more full-time positions.

Operation level: 1 Space to promote time-sharing reuse, distinguishing between daytime reading, after-school service for teenagers, evening salon screening, and other scenes. Book stocking focuses on gender research, women's literature, and other core tracks, relying on personal book collections, publisher consignment, and booking modes to compress inventory pressure; 2 Flexible configuration is adopted in manpower. The main management people control the core work, such as product selection, community, cooperation, and negotiation, activate self-service during low-peak hours, hire part-time workers on demand, establish a working time ledger, and avoid overdrawing the personal energy of the owner; 3 Jump out of traffic thinking in product communication, online dissemination of key tracking registration, store conversion, and other practical indicators, and the development information is completely disclosed. The theme is to choose schoolbags, abide by the norms for the protection of minors, and avoid blind box marketing.

In terms of business model: implement layered activity design, retain public welfare/low-fee activities to ensure public accessibility; reasonably price workshops, including materials and lecturer costs; export standardised services for communities and schools, and strive for government purchase income; members carry out small-scale experiments, and focus on priority registration and product discounts , refusing to exchange large discounts for one-time cash flow.

Landing rhythm: first build a basic ledger of passenger flow, sales, and working hours, test the effect of products and activities, and then expand external project cooperation; only after continuously improving the cash situation, expand business resources; simultaneously implement risk control such as issue review, safety protection of minors, taking into account business sustainability and gender-sensitive spatial ethics.

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