

# Indies in Scotland: exploring the role of independent bookshops in Scotland's towns and villages.

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# Culture vs Commerce?

**Indies in Scotland:** Exploring the role of independent bookshops in Scotland's towns and villages

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# Research Context

Current project builds on previous work exploring:

**consumer behaviour in bookshops**

**bookshop as 'third place'**

**browsing in bookshops**

Current bookselling environment is one of digital disruption and economic challenge.

However, numbers of independent bookshops in the UK has risen for 5<sup>th</sup> year in a row (Comerford 2022)

# Research Context

Previous research suggests bookshops can be '*Social and cultural hubs*' (SCB 2012)

CEBR Report highlights '*creative spillover impact*' (2017)

Are booksellers '*reluctant capitalists*'? (Miller 2006)

Or have they become '*skilled capitalists*' (O'Brien 2017)

Backdrop of dying high street

Methodology: publishing contact, then snowball sampling of village and town bookshops

# Research Questions

What support/policy change would help your business?

What is your role in the local community?

What challenges do you face?

What relationship do you have with local stakeholders?

What do you do to survive and prosper?



# Findings – the challenges

Digital disruption - plateau and acceptance, but frustration re Amazon tax breaks

*‘we pay our taxes and we pay a living wage’*

*‘Amazon cannibalises and destroys’*

Business rates are inconsistent and council policies are centralised

Q: How do local councils support you?

A: *‘Crap. I would say they actually have a negative effect on the local area.’*

*‘they have no understanding of issues in rural areas’*

# Findings – more challenges

Breaking of connections with libraries and schools

*‘I’m not saying [the policy is] deliberate,  
but no-one’s ever thought it through...’*

Fallout from demise of the NBA

*‘If it’s cheaper in Tesco than from a distributor or publisher, something is wrong. It’s not a viable business model. I can’t think of another industry where a brand new product, what should be one of your best sellers, is so vastly discounted’*

*‘we are on the cusp of vulnerability’*



# Findings – the strength of indies

Community hub ‘socially connective retail’, supporting wellbeing (O’Brien 2017)

Enhance and support cultural activities (CEBR 2017)

Proactive, community drivers, cross pollination with the local community

Current growth in book festivals – worth over £11M to Scottish economy – often driven by indies

Intrinsic motivation and dedication of bookshop owners

*‘You wouldn’t be running a bookshop if you were only interested in the bottom line’*

*‘Did I have a customer yesterday...?’*

# Findings – more indie strengths

Geographically remote bookshops are often destination stores  
Central part of local and visitor mix

*'some people come in every day'*

*'it's a safe space'*

Often very seasonal

May need other products such as café for financial survival

Serendipity is important...



## Culture vs Commerce in summary:

Widespread governmental and local council failure to recognise *cultural and community value* of bookshops in towns and villages

Independent bookshops demonstrate considerable dedication, fortitude and imagination overcoming the challenges of location, tax, large powerful competitors and economic difficulties

Independent bookshops often play a central networking role in high street/ local village, identity and survival

Independent bookshops are hubs of activity, proactivity and philanthropy; safe spaces for communities, protectors and promoters of literacy and lovers of books.

# The Future High Street

There are many imaginative suggestions to deal with the ‘high street problem’ (Hospers 2017; Parker et al 2020)

Focus on the social, cultural, experiential

A perfect fit for bookshops

Alongside cafes, artisan stores and other destination venues, independent bookshops can be the serendipitous heart of the community

***‘a bookshop gives identity to a high street’***

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