

Latte Grande, No Sprinkles: An Exploratory Observational Study of Customer Behaviour at Chapters Bookstores

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ABSTRACT

While the dramatic growth of book superstores has been of great concern to public libraries, there has been little serious research about what people actually do in bookstores. How much are their behaviours like those that typically occur in libraries? To what extent are they different? To answer these questions an unobtrusive observational study is underway at three Chapters bookstores in two large Ontario cities. Emerging results suggest that behaviour at Chapters falls into six broad categories: reading; browsing for material; socialising; studying; purchasing items; and, drinking coffee. Overall, in contrast to the library's more serious purpose, Chapters seems to function more as an entertainment centre.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette communication présente une étude d'observation discrète qui est en cours aux trois librairies de Chapters dans deux grandes villes ontariennes. Les résultats naissants suggèrent que ce comportement au Chapters tombe dans six catégories larges : lire ; parcourir pour du matériel ; fréquenter les gens ; étudier ; acheter des articles ; et, boire du café. En général, par opposition au but plus sérieux de la bibliothèque, Chapters semble fonctionner plus comme un centre de divertissements.

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic growth of chain book superstores in the United States and Canada has been of great concern to public librarians. While many independent bookstores have been felled by the competition presented by such chains, some librarians have also voiced alarm as the superstores appear to encroach on their territory. A large selection of books

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and periodicals which customers can freely browse and even read at the store, a full calendar of author readings, educational workshops, and children's story-telling hours, and the provision of spaces in which community groups can meet and individuals can just hang out all make the for-profit bookstore resemble the public library far more than it ever has in the past.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the multi-function bookstore emerged at a time when Canadian and American public libraries had faced several years of public neglect. Indeed, the popularity of the superstores appears to be another example of the privatization of public space, the movement of publicly-used space into private (usually commercial) hands. Much of the positive commentary on the superstores has noted that they appear to fill a void in community life. The irony, of course, is that this void has occurred in part because genuinely public institutions have been treated as wasteful or anachronistic.

Yet, beyond the features that bookstores and libraries may have in common, it is not clear whether people are actually using the stores as public spaces, and more specifically, as substitutes for the library. To date, there has been little serious research into what people do while they are in bookstores. How much are their behaviours like those that typically occur in public libraries? To what extent are they different?

This paper reports the preliminary results of an ongoing study which seeks to answer these questions. By observing the activities of customers at outlets of Chapters, the largest chain of book superstores in Canada, we hope to provide a more informed account of how people use such stores. Our results suggest that while some behaviours are common to both public libraries and bookstores, there are substantial differences in the ways individuals use them as well. The results of this exploratory study will not only help public libraries make sense of their relationship to the new big-box bookstores, but will also contribute to our understanding of information behaviours in the context of a commercial bookstore.

BOOK SUPERSTORES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

The growth of book superstores throughout the 1990s has forced public libraries to reassess both their own role within their communities and that of their patrons. To date there has been very little serious research into the roles of bookstores and bookselling and their relationship with public libraries. Some scholars have examined book retailing in the context of book publishing (see for example Powell 1980; Stevenson 2000), but rarely is the role of the public library considered in this context. Laura J. Miller conducted research into the conflicted quest of American book superstores to build community while operating under market imperatives (Miller 1999). Also of relevance to our study is a growing body of research that examines social interactions in the context of shopping centres and malls. Jeffrey Hopkins' study of the West Edmonton Mall is a representative example of this field of research (1991). Nancy Duxbury (1995; 1996) focused on book marketing and the development of market profiles of readers/consumers in her analysis of

responses to a large survey conducted on reading by the Canadian federal government (Ekos Research Associates 1991). However, we have not been able to identify any sustained research on Canadian book superstores. One reason for this may include the relative immaturity of these retail institutions as the first Chapters store only appeared in 1995 (*Marketing Magazine* 1995).

Interestingly, there is a handful of ethnographic observational studies of adult bookstores where pornographic materials are bought and sold (see for example: Richard 1983; Tewksbury 1990). In his study of the behaviour of people in adult bookstores, David Karp found evidence of “silence norms” and self-isolation as patrons attempted to shield and protect themselves from stigmatization and association with deviance. The behaviour of patrons at “regular” bookstores was used for comparison. It was found that these patrons, unlike those at adult bookstores, do engage in conversation, polite social formalities, brief physical contact and a show of physical involvement with store materials (Karp 1973).

In the professional literature librarians respond in editorials and opinion pieces to the perceived threat of superstores in three main ways. Firstly, the institution of the public library is presented as unique, inimitable, and removed from the need to make a profit that controls the operations of book superstores (see Birdsall 1998; Fialkoff 1999; Kazdan 1998). The virtues of the library are described as free access to retrospective, local and diverse collections and the promotion of reading for reading’s sake. Super bookstores are seen to co-opt the role of public libraries by disguising their retail motives with comfy chairs, café lattes, author events and reader rewards.

The second way that librarians respond to super bookstores is to embrace the challenge posed by them in a spirit of cooperation and team work. For instance, at the 1997 American Libraries Association annual conference, young adult librarians met with chain booksellers and reported on the similarities between their work (Glick 1997; see also Campbell 1997). Another article presents the views of senior library directors and senior executives of large chain super bookstores and concludes that “cooperation between the public library and the private sector yields positive results. Rather than being competitors, libraries and bookstores can stimulate greater interest in books and reading and improve the quality of their programming and the impact of their publicity” (Sager 1994: 79). This notion of cooperation is apparent in an early article that describes libraries and urban mall bookstores as “happy mall fellows” (Singh 1985).

The third response to super bookstores by librarians declares that libraries should take cues from the service strategies used by bookstores to address patron needs and programming results – that libraries can learn from bookstores (Coffman 1998; Hicks 1994; Sannwald 1998). There is a sense in these kinds of articles that bookstores are winning the war, gaining ground over the territory that once was understood to belong to libraries. One need only browse the titles of such articles to find evidence of this: “Libraries battle bookstores” (McCormick 1998); “The revolution in bookstores: They look like libraries!” (Rawlinson 1990); “Meeting with the “enemy” (Glick, 1997) and “B & N: The new college library?” (Feinberg 1998).

The book industry has also addressed the proliferation of book superstores. In Canada, independent booksellers have raised their voices in a single note of consternation about the monopolistic, aggressive tactics deployed by Chapters as they maneuvered a majority share of the market (see for example Anderson 2000; Mandel 2000). The rhetoric of battle appears in this professional literature as well as seen in the title "Large-format independents challenge Chapters at its own game" (*Quill & Quire* 1996).

The Canadian business press, on the other hand, has praise for the innovative strategies of the super bookstore retailers (*Financial Post Daily* 1996; Silcoff 1998). Not only are super bookstores congratulated for providing a much needed boost to the book industry, they are also held responsible for satisfying the unmet needs of readers and consumers (see Dugan 1998; Olijnyk 1997).

The themes outlined above are also reflected in the mainstream general news press. Bookstores like Chapters are discussed in the context of customer demand for value-added book services such as club memberships and seminars (Lanthier 1998), even while this demand may support the commercialization of public space and the co-optation of community values (Klein and Mau 1999). The threats to both independent book retailers and libraries is another recurring theme (Holloway 1999; Sellers 1999; Shulgan 1999; Steward 1998). However, there are also recent reports of praise for libraries, declaring that they are meeting the challenges posed by super bookstores with typical library characteristics such as depth of selection, free access, trained information professionals and an array of services designed for diverse clientele (see Keenan 2000; Murphy 2001).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHAPTERS

The first chain book superstores, which appeared in the United States in 1990, were a hybrid of the mall-based chain bookstores, the large, full-service independent bookstores that developed in the 1980s, and the "category killers" that had developed in other consumer good fields, the prototype being Toys 'R' Us. The companies that owned the major mall-based chains poured massive resources into the superstore strategy, and saw their share of the retail book market rise accordingly. The chain book superstore arrived somewhat later in Canada, in the form of Chapters, which was launched in 1995. Similar to its American counterparts, Chapters was related to the largest mall-based book chains in Canada, SmithBooks and Coles. Those chains had been purchased in 1994 by Larry Stevenson who then created Chapters on the American superstore model. Indeed, Chapters' ties to the United States have been multifaceted. Barnes & Noble, the largest American bookstore chain, was a minority investor in Chapters, acquiring a twenty percent share of Chapters in 1996, though this was eventually reduced to a seven percent stake (Barnes & Noble 1997:11; "Chapters Reports..." 1999). Along with the financial links, some of Chapters' original top executives were former employees of Barnes & Noble.

Chapters has adopted many of the design, marketing and organizational practices that characterize the major chain book superstores in the United States. These include in-store readings, performances and other events, selective discounting, and a reliance on sophisticated computer systems for inventory control, selection decisions, and targeted marketing campaigns. The classical music playing in the background, the comfortable chairs and tables scattered about the premises, and the attached café are also common to most chain superstores throughout North America, as is the vast selection of books and periodicals. The adoption of the superstore formula led to Chapters achieving a dominant position in the Canadian book industry. In 2000, Chapters was estimated to control about fifty percent of the retail book market (Arthur Donner Consultants Inc. and Associates 2000:50).

However, during the last year, Chapters has been in considerable turmoil. Several years of rapid expansion across most of Canada, the development of an unprofitable online arm, and an unsuccessful attempt to establish an affiliated wholesaling company left the chain with a difficult cash-flow situation. In an attempt to improve profitability, Chapters began to stock fifteen to twenty percent fewer books, and opened new housewares and greeting cards departments in its outlets (Crawley 2000:6). Then, in late 2000, Chapters was the target of a hostile takeover bid by Gerald Schwartz and Heather Reisman, the latter being the owner of Chapters' major rival, Indigo Books. Chapters fought the takeover, but in early 2001, the acquisition finally occurred. With Larry Stevenson now deposed, and Heather Reisman in charge, Chapters will no doubt face significant changes. But there is little question that it will continue the strategy of presenting its customers with a multitude of services.

METHOD

The research questions that shape this study are: What do people do when they are in book superstores like Chapters? How much are these behaviours like those that commonly happen in public libraries? How much are they different? To explore these questions we are using unobtrusive observation (Spradley 1980) to capture the naturally occurring behaviour of people while at three Chapters bookstores located in two large Ontario cities, including two suburban locations and one inner city store. In keeping with the practices of this method, we have adopted the participant observer roles of bookstore customers. Data collection sessions typically have lasted from one to two hours. Purposeful sampling is being used to uncover potentially different use patterns associated with both time of visit (day of the week and time of day) and the diversity of customers (e.g., gender, age). Data is being collected in all areas of each store and the immediate surroundings (e.g., entrance areas, parking lots). Data is being recorded in the form of brief field notes completed on site which are, whenever possible, fully written up within twenty-four hours of observation. As customers are routinely seen studying or making notes while at Chapters, our note taking has remained unobtrusive. We are observing individually and in pairs and intend to collect some data as a team. This approach allows for multi-researcher verification, peer debriefing and prolonged engagement, all strategies that help ensure the trustworthiness of the data. We are using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) with ongoing analysis of the data for emerging

themes associated with the research questions. To date we have completed about fifty hours of observation and will continue until redundancy is reached, in other words until we observe no new behaviours. We anticipate this will require an additional one to two hundred hours of observation.

EMERGING RESULTS

There are some consistent behaviours and patterns that were noticed during the observational sessions regarding who comes into Chapters and what they do there. During the day (11:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.), there was an even distribution of people throughout the store and the number of people did not significantly alter until the early evening hours (7:30 to 9:00 p.m.). We observed a fairly equitable distribution for both gender and age. Interestingly, the ethnic composition of the patrons of a particular store tends to reflect the general ethnic population of the area regardless of time of day.

During the evening period (9:00 to 11:00 p.m.), the number of people steadily increased reaching a maximum between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m.. There was also a noticeable drop in the average age of Chapters patrons during this period, with many appearing to be younger adults (in their twenties or thirties). Each section of the store became significantly busier, but the café was the most densely populated region by far. During this time, almost everyone in the store came or was with someone else. In contrast, families (adults accompanied by preschool, elementary school age children and/or younger teens) tended to appear during the afternoon on weekends and after the supper hour during the week.

The behaviour of people who were observed at Chapters can be divided into six broad categories: reading; browsing or searching for material; socialising, studying/homework; purchasing items; and, buying and drinking coffee.

Although reading may seem to be an obvious activity to take place in a bookstore, it is interesting to note that it only occurred in certain segments of the store: the café, in or near the fiction section, in the children's section and in seats along the "power aisle." It should be noted that this is where Chapters has placed large comfortable chairs, whereas in other areas the chairs are smaller with straight backs. People were more apt to read if there was someone that they knew beside them than if they were alone in an area. Additionally, people who were reading non-fiction in the power aisle displayed a tendency to share the information that they were reading with the person next to them. Conversely, fiction readers usually read quietly. There was a prominent decline in the incidence of reading during the observational sessions that occurred on Saturdays. The store was quite busy and more people appeared to be browsing. This increase in browsing activity may be attributed to the low number of available spots where one could sit and read. Many people were observed browsing through the shelves and selecting titles. If there were places nearby where they could sit, they would take a book and leaf through the pages; otherwise they would skim through the book while standing in front of the shelf and then move on to a new section after they had finished. Often people would gather together many books from either one or a variety of subject areas, and then find a

place to sit and go through each book. There were very few instances of people making notes or intently reading materials from the non-fiction section. It appeared as though people preferred to browse through these books rather than read them.

Searching for a specific title was a commonly occurring behaviour. During two observational sessions, one of the researchers sat near a terminal, which allows people to locate titles that are available through Chapters. Not unlike the others situated within the stores, this terminal was heavily used by employees and customers. Employees used the system to help locate titles for people who had called the store and for people in the store who had requested some help. If an employee was helping a person search on the terminal, s/he usually explained what s/he was doing so that the customer would be able to perform subsequent searches independently. Judging from their hesitant approach, about half of the individuals who used the terminal did so with some trepidation. Many people were heard to make comments, which would suggest that they were unsure as to how the system worked or what the results meant.

Chapters is used as a place to socialise throughout the day, but especially during the evening. There was a significant change in the appearance of the people sitting in the café which occurred mid evening. More patrons appeared "dressed up" and there was a detectable increase in the amount of perfume and cologne in the air. Also, more people from the night-time crowd were observed chatting with each other without the presence of reading material, whereas during the daytime, more people were either reading alone or with other people present at the table. Interestingly, there were some instances where solitary people approached others who were sitting alone in attempts to initiate conversation. The higher bookcases of the inner city store provide quieter, more private areas where couples in their late teens and early twenties several times were observed holding hands, kissing or engaged in other romantic behaviours.

As expected, the number of sightings of individuals studying or doing homework depended on the time of year. During the observational sessions that took place during the summer, a couple of university students were seen using Chapters as a study area, whereas during an observational session in spring, many public, high school and post-secondary age students were observed working on homework and assignments or studying.

The check-out area was monitored to see how many people were waiting in line to be served. The line was substantially longer in the evening than during the day, except for when Chapters was having a large sale on its books. Interestingly, the line was mainly composed of people who had been previously observed purposely searching for information and very few "browsers". The "browsers" tended to either leave their selected books on the table in front of them or attempted to put the books back on the shelves. A one hour audit of the main door of one of the stores indicated that only one out of seven people leaving the store had actually bought a book, magazine, or other non-food item while in Chapters.

By far the most commonly observed activity was the purchase and consumption of coffee and other beverages and snacks, as well over half of the individuals engaged in the aforementioned activities (except for purchasing items) also bought coffee. There does not seem to be a set pattern as to when a visitor to Chapters chooses to buy coffee as several customers were seen at the café before, during and after their visit to the book and magazine stock areas. In addition, a survey of the garbage cans placed throughout the store revealed that a significant portion of these receptacles was filled with empty coffee cups from the Starbucks café.

DISCUSSION

The data from our observations suggest that the superstores have fulfilled their goal of convincing people to treat these stores as multi-function establishments. Leaving behind the fast-food model that was characteristic of the mall-based chains, Chapters is a place in which people linger to read, drink coffee, and socialise. In this, it does bear some resemblance to the public library where patrons are (mostly) free to determine how long their visits should last. This is surely significant in an era when few institutions, public or private, allow people to loiter on their premises.

Another important similarity between Chapters and the public library is that individuals treat both venues as comfortable places in which to engage in reading and studying. However, compared to libraries, people appear less inclined to use Chapters as a reference source, a setting in which to seek information on specific topics. And people seem more inclined to use the store as a site for socialising: to gather with friends, to engage in interactions with strangers, and to people-watch over a latté. Thus, Chapters functions to a large degree as an entertainment centre in contrast to the library's more "serious" purpose. Certainly, the library is often utilized as an outing for children, but it is rarely identified with adult-centered fun (see Murphy, 2001 for one notable exception).

Thus, there are real differences between Chapters and the public library. This, however, does not answer the question of whether Chapters poses an actual threat to the library. These findings suggest that the library and the for-profit superstore are not direct competitors. But because of the surface similarities between the two types of establishments, stores such as Chapters may be changing people's expectations of what a library should be like. The superstore has been embraced as a setting where books, if not the sole source of entertainment, can provide a context conducive to having a good time. Perhaps future research should also examine the extent to which individuals now use libraries like bookstores.

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