

BRUNCH

For 30-year-old Ang Wai Teng, the evening is the perfect time to catch up on her reading and to meet new people. "Our day is so fragmented with work and other things, leaving us with little time to read or meet others with similar interests," she says. It was her first time there this month – and it would probably not be her last.

Bookworm Banter is just among the many book clubs that have sprung up in recent years.

Industry observers credit social media for the reignited interest in reading among Singaporeans in recent years. But although people are reading more, it has not necessarily translated to higher book sales for some stores, because of changing reading habits, among other factors.

Solitary yet social

Associate Professor Loh Chin Ee of the National Institute of Education (NIE), who specialises in reading culture and libraries, says that book clubs are a way for like-minded individuals to meet and discuss their current reads or economic, sociopolitical, cultural or even personal matters.

Prof Loh, who is also the associate dean of partnerships at NIE's Office of Education Research, says: "This reminds us that reading is both communal and solitary."

Eventbrite, an event-management platform, notes that listings of Singapore-based book clubs grew by 58 per cent in the first five months of 2024 alone, compared with the same period last year. Between 2019 and 2024, their numbers grew by 26 times.

Another event-listing site, Meetup, reports that the number of book-club events doubled in May 2024 from the year before, hitting the highest level in the last five years. RSVPs to book clubs also more than doubled, also to the highest number over the same period.

For perspective, Meetup notes that these growth numbers were higher than those for general events and RSVPs for Singapore-based events during the period.

A spokesperson for the National Library Board (NLB) says there are now 70 volunteer-led reading communities under its LearnX Communities programme, an initiative that connects like-minded people to create a "modern kampung of communal learning". These reading groups account for more half of NLB's

LearnX groups.

These LearnX reading clubs span languages, interests and even age groups. There is, for instance, The Golden Circle, a bimonthly English book club for seniors; the monthly Singapore Literature Book Club, which focuses on local literature; and the monthly Little Avid Readers, a Chinese reading community for children aged four to six and their parents.

At each meeting, members of these reading communities – 15 to 60 participants show up each time – discuss trending topics and new book releases; sessions that include book authors as guests tend to draw more participants, said NLB.

A spokesperson for bookstore chain Books Kinokuniya highlights that social media book clubs – particularly those headlined by international celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon and Mindy Kaling – feed fast culture too, and gain traction among younger readers in Singapore.

Still, Prof Loh points out that reading has always been social, in some ways.

"We read books recommended by others, talk to others about books, and join physical book clubs," she says. "Technology has amplified the opportunities for socialising about books, which may be why more people engage in social activities around them."

Changing habits

More Singaporeans are also reading in their free time, partly thanks to technology.

NLB notes the steady growth in visitorship to libraries in the city-state in the last three years, after having plunged during the pandemic. In 2023, the libraries welcomed 19.8 million visitors, up around 20 per cent from the previous year's 16.5 million visitors.

The most-visited library last year was Punggol Regional Library, which opened in April 2023 and welcomed 1.3 million visitors that year.

The NLB spokesperson says: "More Singaporeans are enjoying our digital resources; electronic books now make up about one in three of our loans, up from one in five in 2019."

Rakuten Kobo, a Toronto-based company that sells e-books, audiobooks and e-readers, says there was a 21 per cent year-on-year increase in reading time among Singaporean readers on its platform in 2023. Per month, the average reading time among them was 8.7



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN, BT

Although book sales account for the majority of Book Bar's revenue, co-owner Alexander Chua (above) says that after deducting costs, the profit from books is typically about the same as that of other segments.



hours last year, a 4.8 per cent rise from 2022's 8.3 hours.

Besides those celebrity book clubs, the uptick in reading also coincides with the rise of BookTok, that corner of social-media platform TikTok which is now a digital book club

created by young people for other young people.

A Swedish study on reading habits published in March found that social media has become a global hub for young people to share book recommendations and to exchange reading experiences.

BookTok, for instance, not only brings people together, it also motivates them to read for pleasure more frequently, without being "restricted by dominant reading discourses or school reading practices".

Researchers from Karlstad University in Sweden say: "In this digital community, there are no explicit pointers regarding good or bad books, or correct or incorrect reading, which they may encounter in more institutional reading communities."

"Instead, different readings, different books and different ways of reading are allowed to meet and mingle."

Falling sales

Some bookshops say that, although the renewed interest in reading and the growth in number of book communities has not translated to higher book sales for them, they remain hopeful for the reading landscape in Singapore.

Book Bar along Duxton Road, which focuses on local literature and Asian heritage, is an example.

Its co-owner Alexander Chua says the shop sells around 1,000 books a month – but revenue is supplemented by book launches and social events such as Bookworm Banter. Both activities drive up foot traffic.

Although book sales account for the majority of Book Bar's revenue, he says that after deducting costs, the profit from books is typically about the same as that of other segments, such as food and beverage or event ticket sales.

Some days, he and his co-founder Sara Ng worry about not making enough sales.

To be fair, he notes that it is now easier than ever for readers to borrow books in Singapore, and that could be a factor.

"NLB has done a very good job," he says. "Our libraries are great, and if people can (read) for free, why not?"

NLB members have at their disposal a large collection of books and magazines, thanks to the digital library app, Libby.

The board has also been working to make reading more accessible to the public through new initiatives such as Borrow-n-Deliver. Launched in June 2023, this book-delivery service lets NLB members choose items on its online catalogue and have them delivered to their homes for a small fee.

NLB says usage of the service has been go-



Punggol Regional Library opened in April 2023 and welcomed 1.3 million visitors that year. PHOTO: NLB

BRUNCH

ing up gradually; it is still monitoring the response.

Like Chua, Epigram Books publisher and chief executive Edmund Wee notes lacklustre performance at his store, which is located in the Singapore Art Museum.

Since the pandemic, it has been "five years of misery" with poor book sales, he says.

This is quite a difference from when Epigram Coffee Bookshop first opened in 2019. It performed "quite well" then, making around S\$20,000 to S\$30,000 a month, he says. "We didn't make a lot of money, but we still survived selling just local books. Now, I'm lucky if I can collect S\$5,000 to S\$7,000 a month."

"But that's the same for all businesses post-pandemic," Wee acknowledges. "The economy, in general, is not great."

Books Kinokuniya says customer traffic at its stores has been fairly healthy in recent years. It fell around 20 per cent during the pandemic, but since then, has been making a "steady but sure return" to pre-pandemic levels.

And although in-store book sales fell around 30 per cent during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, online book sales trebled in that period, peaking in early 2022, it says.

Kinokuniya notes that the relaxation of pandemic restrictions in 2022 nudged in-store sales back to near pre-pandemic levels by the end of that year.

The rise of BookTok generated some returns for the bookstore chain too. In October 2021, Kinokuniya carved out a section in its stores to feature BookTok recommendations.

This section was successful in attracting book club readers and raising awareness among the uninitiated, it says. "While the BookTok novelty has worn off, fiction books' sales grew about 10 per cent from before we created the section, and sales have remained relatively stable."

Eddy Teo, general manager and regional head at Times Distribution, reckons that sales of English-language books are still healthy in Singapore, although the avenue of selling them has moved to include more online options today.

He says revenue for the company – which is part of mainboard-listed Fraser and Neave's Times Publishing unit – is still "holding well", doing slightly better than it was 20 years ago.

"Apart from the two (pandemic) years, we've been pretty steady in running a sustainable business," he says. "The world economy is a little bit shaky, inflation is rocket high and interest rates high as well, but we're still able to make things meet."

Growth has flatlined to around 1 to 2 per cent annually.

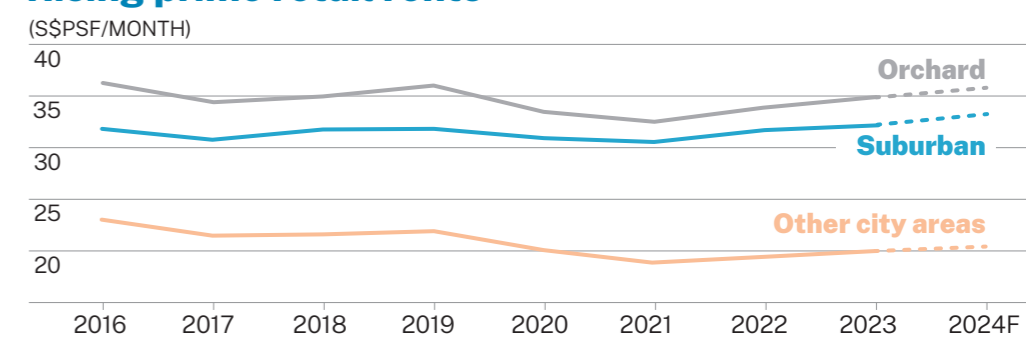
He adds that the company's rate of growth could be around 5 per cent in stronger years, and then shrink by a similar margin during downturns. This makes the book industry a "very boring business", he quips.

Main killers

Teo counts off the several "good businesses" that have folded in recent years. These include MPH Bookstores, which closed its last two local outlets in 2019, and Times Bookstores, which shuttered its Plaza Singapura and Wa-



Book Bar's revenue is supplemented by book launches and social events such as Bookworm Banter, its monthly book club. PHOTO: KEZIA KOO, BT

Rising prime retail rents

SOURCE: CUSHMAN & WAKEFIELD GRAPHIC: TEOH YI CHIE, BT



PHOTO: EPIGRAM BOOKS

"It doesn't matter why you read or what you read... you may eventually read something that changes your life."

Edmund Wee, chief executive and publisher at Epigram Books



terway Point branches this year.

The general manager says the biggest killers for most bookstores are the cost of labour and retail rents.

Figures from the Department of Statistics released this month indicated that overall unit labour cost rose 20.8 per cent between Q2 2018 and Q2 2024. In the retail trade, unit labour cost surged by 42.8 per cent over that same period.

Unit labour cost is a measure of how much it costs a business to pay its workers to produce each unit of a product or service.

A retail market report by property consultancy Cushman & Wakefield shows that prime rents now range from S\$20.30 per square foot (psf) per month to S\$35.48 psf per month, depending on the region.

Prime retail rents are projected to rise by 2 to 4 per cent for the whole of 2024 due to limited new supply and high demand, amid shifts in consumer shopping behaviour and a growing population.

Nonetheless, retailers that *The Business Times* spoke to emphasise their determination to carry on, given their love for books and desire to share the joy of reading in Singapore.

"The more you read, the more you gather knowledge, the more you grow your empathy and develop self-confidence," says Wee of Epigram. "It doesn't matter why you read or what you read... you may eventually read someth-

ing that changes your life."

Reading can also be a form of relaxation, or for personal growth and well-being, helping people to expand their thinking, Prof Loh says.

Furthermore, research has shown that reading for pleasure can aid in building social connections and relationships with others. Regular reading breeds important life skills too, which translate into greater opportunities in life and higher chances of social mobility.

Teo from Times Distribution says: "In a perfect world, shopping malls would have a balanced mix of attractions and shops."

His hope is for landlords in Singapore to be "more understanding and supportive" of book retailers, instead of focusing solely on profits and rental income.

Taiwanese chain Eslite Bookstore, for instance, opened its first store in Kuala Lumpur's The Starhill mall in 2022, paying a subsidised rent. The owner of the mall also guaranteed the shop a longer tenancy, believing in the innate value of bookshops to differentiate its mall from other luxury brands.

Teo says: "Bookshops in Singapore are surviving and doing well for now. But how long can they keep doing well? At what point do they call it quits and say it's no longer worth fighting?"

limmin@sph.com.sg